C’ Sim’ Angóre (We’re Still Here)

Resisting and Reimagining Taranto through Bottom-up Regenerative Placemaking

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the complex challenges and emergent grassroots responses in Taranto, Italy. Taranto is presented as a post-industrial city profoundly marked by the environmental and social costs imposed by the ILVA steel plant, often described as a sacrifice zone. Despite pervasive urban decline, devastating environmental damage from toxic alloys, and a negative narrative linked to industrial monoculture and political failures, residents are actively engaged in acts of resistance and reimagination.

The central question guiding this study is: To what extent do practices of bottom-up regenerative placemaking in Taranto foster residents' resilience? *Resilience is framed not merely as survival or passive adaptation, but as an active process of surviving, adapting, and resisting the structural harm inflicted by extractive urbanism. Drawing on a theoretical framework that combines regenerative placemaking, affective atmospheres, and resilience as transformation, the thesis posits that urban regeneration is not simply a physical process but is deeply emotionally embedded and collectively navigated.*

Employing a multi-modal qualitative methodology, including semi-structured interviews, one focus group, and two participant observations with diverse residents – activists, artists, students, and workers – the research gives voice to how regeneration is lived and imagined amidst the city's rusted ground.

Findings, conceptualised through the metaphors of Steel, Fire, and Water, reveal how the legacy of ILVA has created a forged dependence and landscapes of grief, yet also ignites acts of collective 'fire' through cultural initiatives and flows into the 'water' of sowing common futures. These grassroots cultural and civic initiatives – such as the Comitato Cittadini e Lavoratori Liberi e Pensanti (CCLLP), CREST, Post Disaster Rooftops (PDR), Taranto Futura, Mercato Nuovo, and Casa Viola – function as quiet insurgencies and critical cultural infrastructures of resistance. They actively challenge dominant narratives, foster profound affective belonging, and empower residents to imagine and work towards alternative post-ILVA futures. This bottom-up agency generates a sense of affective ownership, enabling residents to reclaim their right to the city, health, and unpoisoned ground through collective acts of care and repair that defy institutional distrust.

The thesis contributes to broader debates on post-industrial urbanism by highlighting the potential of grassroots agency in fostering emotional, political, and ecological resilience in cities scarred by structural harm. It emphasises that regeneration involves dwelling with brokenness, reclaiming wounded spaces, and weaving new relational fabrics, rooted in local lifeworlds and continuous engagement.

Keywords: *Taranto, Placemaking, Affect, Resilience, Post-industrial cities*

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Preface

When I began this research, I knew it would be a transformative experience for me, first and foremost. When I wrote my thesis proposal, I was deeply focused on ILVA – so much so that I initially framed the narrative as *Children of Taranto, Martyrs of ILVA.* I had described the people of Taranto as kind souls with sad eyes. But that wasn't the full picture. The pain is certainly present, but those eyes also shine with anger, determination, passion, and love.

I encountered stories of resistance – of those who fight, who protest, who devote sleepless nights to building a better life for themselves and for the people of Taranto. Children of different generations who breathe the same air and swim in the same seas. Just as steel is not scratched by water, so too do the people of Taranto refuse to let tragedy cool their spirit. Warm and passionate souls, they fight for health, culture, the sea, faith, food, and traditions. It is a geography of emotions.

I am grateful to the city for welcoming me with open arms. Reconnecting so deeply with my parents' hometown has been a true gift. I am especially thankful to my friends, both near and far, my classmates, teachers, and all those who supported me along the way – for believing in this research and standing by me when emotions flowed so strongly that words failed.

I thank my parents, who cared for me and shared their stories with me. I am grateful to everyone in Taranto who offered their time, experiences, thoughts, dreams, and homes. I am thankful that I happened to be in Taranto to mourn the passing of my aunt Lucia. I dedicate this modest research to her and to her family, who welcomed me like a daughter and sister even in the darkest times.

Last, but by no means least, I want to thank Dr. Donagh Horgan for believing in me and in this research throughout the process. Your guidance has been truly inspiring and an honour.

I end my academic journey (for now!) with a piece of work that moves me deeply and brings together all of my interests. I hope it sparks something in you, who are reading this thesis now.

.

1. Introduction

Eppure amore mio/ Non si è mai spezzato/ Questo sogno fatato/ Che ci tiene legati con tutto l'amore alla terra/ Che non abbiamo difeso/ Ed ora è un campo minato/ Su cui crescono fiori bellissimi. (Diodato, *La mia terra*, 2023)	And yet my love/ It has never broken/ This fairy dream/ That keeps us tied with all our love to the earth/ That we have not defended/ And now it is a minefield/ On which beautiful flowers grow.

When I was eight years old, we were learning the different provinces of my region, Puglia, by colouring them in different bright colours. "Let's colour Bari in green, as it is the colour of the olive trees and the *cime di rape*" said the *maestra*. "Let's colour Taranto grey because of the polluted fumes of its factory". I was shocked when the teacher suggested that. For me, someone who visited Taranto often because my parents' families lived there, Taranto was blue, colored by the vivid shades of its sky and its two seas. To me, Taranto was so much more than the factory. I wanted my classmates to look beyond that grey cloud.

Taranto is a city that breathes – but not without effort. It coughs iron dust and marine salt, suspended between ancient waters and poisoned winds. Here, the soil carries the memories of olive groves and industrial waste. Taranto breathes heavily; its breath caught between resistance and resignation, between steel and sea. Straddling the Mar Grande and Mar Piccolo, the city was once a flourishing outpost of Magna Grecia, "a military, economic, and cultural power" (Jokela-Pansini & Militz, 2022, p. 745). Today, it is far more often evoked as a paradigmatic "sacrifice zone," where the ruins of imperial dreams and industrial promises still cast long shadows, and where industrial ambition has come at the unbearable cost of human and environmental health (Bianchi, 2024, p. 357).

Once hailed as the southern jewel of Italy's economic salvation, Taranto now lives in the shadow of Europe's largest steel plant – originally named Italsider, then ILVA, then ArcelorMittal Italia S.p.A, now Acciaierie d'Italia; herein ILVA, for clarity reasons. The ILVA complex does not simply dominate the skyline – it saturates every corner of civic and psychic life. The red dust that settles on balconies and playgrounds is not only toxic – it is archival. It speaks of an extractive modernity that promised prosperity while poisoning the air, soil, and bodies of its citizens. This legacy is etched into the city's atmosphere: material decline, institutional neglect, and emotional residue coalesce into what some will call a "post-disaster condition".

Yet the dreams of industrial salvation soon began to darken. Since its establishment in 1964, ILVA has contributed significantly to the local economy, employing thousands and generating 75% of the province's GDP (FIDH, n.d.). However, already by the early 1970s, local health reports documented the first signs of environmental collapse (Benetti, Gamba, & Grasso, 2023, p. 4), as ILVA's operations have inflicted devastating consequences, including toxic emissions, environmental degradation, and alarming public health crises, with elevated cancer rates and respiratory illnesses plaguing the local population (BBC News, 2019). Still, the political narrative clung stubbornly to the ideal of steel-fueled prosperity, while the realities of pollution and precarity were dismissed, deferred, or buried (Jokela-Pansini & Militz, 2022, p. 745).

And yet, Taranto resists. In the cracks left by industry and abandonment, something profound is taking root. Grassroots cultural and civic initiatives – festivals, murals, co-designed spaces, reanimated rooftops – have emerged not only as acts of cultural production but as gestures of "insurgent citizenship" (Horgan, 2020, p. 150). These are practices of urban healing, born from collective care and affective investment. They are slow, local, and resilient. They do not simply restore; they reimagine.

This thesis explores these acts of bottom-up regenerative placemaking. It asks: *To what extent do practices of bottom-up regenerative placemaking in Taranto foster residents' resilience?*

To explore the research question, I employ a multi-modal qualitative methodology rooted in semi-structured interviews, a focus group, and two participant observations. The analysis is shaped by a multidimensional framework that attends to spatial, affective, participatory, resilient, political, and cultural dynamics. Voices of residents – activists, artists, students, workers – form the backbone of this research, offering grounded insights into how regeneration is lived, resisted, and imagined.

This thesis contributes to broader debates on post-industrial urbanism by highlighting how grassroots agency can foster emotional, political, and ecological resilience in cities marked by structural harm. While much has been written on cultural regeneration as policy (Evans, 2005; García, 2005) or economic strategy (Florida, 2002), fewer studies focus on what it *feels like* to live through these processes in contexts of long-term harm. By bringing together the concepts of affective atmospheres (Anderson, 2009), regenerative placemaking (Cerreta et al., 2018; Hes & Hernandez-Santin, 2020), and resilience (Davoudi et al., 2012; Harvey, 2008), this thesis proposes a framework for understanding regeneration not as a top-down intervention, but as an emotionally embedded and collectively navigated process.

By centering Taranto, it sheds light on how residents of marginalised, polluted territories are not merely victims of history but agents of urban healing and reimagination.

Practically, this work aims to offer insights for policymakers, urban planners, artists, and activists working in other post-industrial or environmentally burdened cities. It asks: What does it mean to create space for life – livable, breathable life – in places once designed to extract it? By focusing on bottom-up initiatives and lived experience, this thesis suggests that regeneration should be evaluated not only by economic indicators or surface beautification, but by its ability to restore dignity, connection, and imaginative capacity.

The thesis unfolds as follows: firstly, the theoretical framework is developed, combining concepts of regenerative placemaking, affect, and resilience. Secondly, the methodology and research design are presented, offering insights on all participants of this research. Thirdly, findings are discussed thematically, drawing from interviews and observations to trace how placemaking contributes to resilience. Finally, the thesis concludes with reflections, implications, and recommendations.

In Taranto, every breath is a reckoning – but also a refusal. This thesis begins with that breath: heavy, layered, and still hopeful. *C' Sim' Angóre* – we're still here.

Figure 1

Illustration for the bid of Taranto as Italian Capital of Culture 2022, consequently won by Procida (Naples).

Turi, G. [@gianvito.turi]. (2020, August 1). *Illustrazione per la presentazione della candidatura di Taranto a Capitale della Cultura 2022.* [Illustration]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CDWp12QhwSH/?igsh=MXFlYmR5MGNxazNubQ==

2. Theoretical Framework

This theoretical framework constructs a lens through which to understand how cultural practices in post-industrial cities, especially those marked by environmental harm, contribute to processes of resilience and reimagination. Rooted in the case of Taranto, a city suspended between steel and sea, the framework draws together three conceptual pillars: *regenerative placemaking*, *affective atmospheres*, and *resilience as transformation*.

Regenerative placemaking provides a foundation for exploring how urban space can be reclaimed through bottom-up interventions that are ecological, cultural, and collective. Affective atmospheres offer a lens to interpret the emotional, sensory, and symbolic dimensions of space – how people live, remember, and relate to the places they inhabit. Finally, resilience is treated not as passive recovery, but as a form of situated resistance: the capacity to adapt, endure, and imagine otherwise.

Each section of this chapter moves between theory and context, locating Taranto within wider debates on post-industrial urbanism, community participation, spatial justice, and emotional geographies. In doing so, it proposes an affective framework for understanding cultural regeneration in cities marked by industrial abandonment and environmental grief.

While this framework moves fluidly across scales, it draws on macro-level urban theory, meso-level reflections on Southern Italian spatial politics, and micro-level insights from everyday experiences in Taranto.

2.1 Framing Taranto: Breathing Marine Salt & Iron Dust

To understand the dynamics of regeneration and resilience in Taranto, one must begin by breathing with the city itself – inhaling the heavy air that carries both marine salt and iron dust. Taranto is a city of suspended contradictions: straddling two seas yet choked by smokestacks, steeped in cultural memory yet scarred by extractive modernity (Romeo, 2019). Its dual identity as both the ancient capital of Magna Grecia and the site of Europe's largest steelworks has shaped its urban evolution in ways that are as material as they are symbolic.

The steel plant, first established as Italsider in the early 1960s, was imagined as a national project of industrial salvation – a southern flagship of post-war economic recovery and territorial equity. In the immediate post-war period, "Taranto found itself having to face a state of deep economic crisis, having lost, with the end of a colonial and imperialist period, its geopolitical and economic centrality" (Barletta, 2019, p. 2). Steel was meant to bring "magnificent and progressive fortunes", and as Italy entered the European economic market

in 1957, dirigiste and meridionalist policies aimed to correct regional imbalances by placing strategic industries in the South (Barletta, 2019, p. 2).

Yet this vision rested on a spatial imaginary in which the South was blank, available, and ultimately disposable (Doria, 2021, p. 263). The establishment of steelworks in Taranto was intended to "invest in economically depressed area[s]" (Barletta, 2019, p. 2), but failed to "provide sufficient answers to the promotion of an autonomous local economy independent of the fate of the steelworks" (Barletta, p. 2). Coppola & d'Ovidio (2018) similarly argue that Southern territories were seen less as future-bearing and more as buffers for national-scale economic experiments. Taranto became a testing ground: its ports, lands, and bodies offered up for the promise of progress (Romeo, 2019). The factory came to dominate not only the skyline but also the social, political, and environmental fabric of the city (Benetti et al., 2023). Yet this vision, built on promises of growth and modernity, soon revealed its deeper costs. What emerged was not simply an industrial economy, but a landscape of exposure, dependency, and grief.

Figure 2

ILVA complex in Taranto seen from the sky (March 2020), as it appears as a dark spot in the industrial area of the city.

Reproduced from *Irpi*, by PlaceMarks. (2020).
https://irpimedia.irpi.eu/ex-ilva-taranto-transizione-verde-impossibile/

2.2 Landscapes of Grief: Living in the Shadow of ILVA

Until the early 1990s, "the alteration of the landscape as an ecological system was undisputed and voluntarily underestimated" (Benetti et al., 2023, p. 4). ILVA appears in aerial maps as a red and black stain – a cancer-like sprawl across the city's southern periphery (figure 2). The use of this metaphor is not incidental: *cancer* appears frequently in everyday speech, murals, and local narratives, shaping a "collective imagery of death and loss of hope in Taranto" (Benetti et al., 2023, p. 13). As Muntéan & Plate (2023) imply in Plate et al.'s introduction to *Materials Matter* (2023), metaphors are not just descriptive tools but cultural technologies that can frame how space is lived and understood. In Taranto, to call ILVA a *tumour* is to interpret the city itself as a suffering body.

What emerged was a space where memory and toxicity coexist. The red dust that settles on balconies and schoolyards is not just particulate matter – it is a material archive of Italy's uneven development. While the presence of ILVA catalysed "growth of the urban population and incomes, the large gains in land rent, [and] the affirmation of lifestyles and consumption increasingly similar to those of northern cities" (Doria, 2021, p. 266), this transformation remained structurally fragile. It was embedded in what Bricco (2016, cited in Benetti et al., 2023, p. 1) calls an "unsustainable model of development," promoted through "unquestioned top-down public policies based on the promotion of heavy industry and widespread new housing developments," resulting in a "sprawling and unfinished city" (Benetti et al., 2023, p. 4).

These contradictions are not abstract. For many Tarantini, the factory is both provider and killer – a presence both intimate and oppressive (Doria, 2021). They manifest in cancer rates, forced emigration, silences passed down through generations, and an ambivalent emotional attachment to place. Public health data have long revealed the toll of this arrangement: Mangia et al. (2013) and Mataloni et al. (2012) found strong correlations between ILVA's emissions and respiratory and reproductive illness. The emotional damage is harder to measure, but no less present. Bonelli (2014) describes ILVA not only as an ecological hazard, but as a site of collective trauma. D'Ovidio (2021) underscores that physical decay is mirrored by "rampant petty crime and widespread social unease" (p. 2278), particularly in neighbourhoods adjacent to the plant.

The violence of this model is sustained not just materially, but discursively. In 2018, the Italian encyclopedia Treccani added the term *Salva-Ilva* to its online edition, defining it as a "provision aimed at preventing the closure of the Ilva factory in Taranto" ("Salva-Ilva", 2018). As Scocca (2019) and Laforgia (2022) show, this term, originally a legal shorthand,

evolved into a powerful symbol of institutional complicity and public resignation. Nicoli Aldini (2024) builds on this by tracing the "symbiotic relationship" between ILVA and the Italian state, which has enabled harmful corporate behaviour through legal immunity and delayed environmental action.

As Jokela-Pansini & Militz (2022) point out, these material and symbolic conditions shape how people live and feel in highly polluted post-industrial cities. Taranto's case is emblematic: "The toxins in the air, soil, and water have severe impacts on the residents' health and have led to a higher risk of early mortality, reproductive problems, and respiratory diseases" (Jokela-Pansini & Militz, 2022, p. 742). Already by the 1970s, local health authorities had sounded the alarm (Benetti et al., 2023, p. 4), but the political narrative clung stubbornly to the ideal of steel-fueled prosperity. Ecological devastation was not only tolerated, but often *beautified*, as in the case of the so-called "ecological hills" in the Tamburi district, built from toxic waste and disguised as recreational green buffers for children (Jokela-Pansini & Militz, 2022, p. 748).

Having traced the contours of this affective-industrial landscape, it becomes essential to locate Taranto not only within global debates on post-industrial urbanism but also within the specific Southern Italian context: a geography shaped by broken promises, top-down speculation, and systemic sacrifice. Here, the South is not simply lagging behind: it has been continuously produced as peripheral, as exploitable, as afterthought. It is a space where political economy, cultural heritage, and lived experience converge in often violent ways.

Taranto breathes in marine salt and iron dust – but it also breathes in rage, pride, memory, and longing. It is in these breaths that regeneration must begin.

2.3 The Post-Industrial Condition: Between Decline & Regeneration

Post-industrial cities are often defined by what they have lost: manufacturing industries, working-class stability, collective purpose, and faith in the future (Ringel, 2018). Their landscapes bear the marks of deindustrialisation – abandoned factories, underutilised ports, depopulated centres, and crumbling infrastructures – while their communities grapple with unemployment, shrinking public services, and identity crises (Cumbers et al., 2010). Although the causes of decline vary, post-industrial cities across Europe and North America often share certain structural features: a rapid shift from manufacturing to services, high dependency on a single sector, persistent socio-spatial inequality, and environmental degradation as an industrial legacy (Cumbers et al., 2010; Ringel, 2018; Till, 2012).

In many cases, these conditions have prompted ambitious urban regeneration programmes, particularly in the cultural and creative sectors. Flagship projects, often led by public-private partnerships, have sought to rebrand former industrial cities as hubs of innovation and creativity (Florida & Adler, 2020; Chen, 2025). As Salone et al. (2017) observe, "the practice of cultural production in peripheral urban neighborhoods can contribute to a sense of place, community belonging, and local collective actions" (Salone et al., 2017, in Chen, 2025, p. 7). The rise of the "creative class" (Florida, 2002) and the promise of culture-led growth (Evans, 2005; Landry, 2012) have become central to these efforts. Iconic examples include the project-based approach to planning and regeneration in Bilbao in 1990s, which carried out the redevelopment of "opportunity zones", such as Abandoibarra on the riverfront, now worldwide famous for the landmark Guggenheim Museum (Plöger, 2013, p. 202); or the transformation of Torino's industrial heritage into cultural infrastructure through the "increasing involvement of local bank foundations in regeneration projects" (Pinson, 2002, in Plöger, 2013, p. 197). These cases suggest that, under the right conditions – strong institutions, strategic investment, global visibility – industrial decline can be followed by a managed, symbolic, and economic rebirth (Plöger, 2013, p. 207).

However, the replicability of such models is increasingly questioned. As scholars note, many so-called "best practices" in regeneration have masked processes of gentrification, displacement, and symbolic erasure (Zukin, 1996; Muehlebach, 2020). Moreover, they often depend on resources and governance structures not available in more marginalised territories. In Southern Europe, and particularly in Southern Italy, industrial decline has been compounded by weak institutional capacity, entrenched clientelism, and uneven state investment (Simonazzi & Ginzburg, 2015; D'Amato et al., 2015). In these contexts, regeneration is less a linear recovery than a fragile, fragmented, and deeply political process.

Taranto exemplifies this disjuncture. Its decline is not "post-" industrial in any neat sense, as the ILVA plant continues to operate, even as its economic and social legitimacy erodes. The city embodies what Plöger (2013) and Chen (2025) hint as a regeneration where the material decline of industry outpaces the emergence of sustainable alternatives, and where regeneration efforts are haunted by unresolved environmental and emotional legacies. Benetti et al. (2023) exemplify this issue by pointing out three central problems of Taranto: "social immobility, the unsuccessful expansion of the urban plan, and the absence of cohesion and social participation in an immature and unprepared local civil society" (Benetti et al., 2023, p.

4). At the same time, Taranto's marginality within the Italian urban system, both geographically and politically, means it is rarely afforded the full attention or investment such transformation would require. As d'Ovidio (2021) remarks, "there have been no real interventions of urban regeneration" (d'Ovidio, 2021, p. 2278) despite the interest of some international private groups in some areas of the city.

Understanding Taranto within the broader narrative of post-industrial urbanism therefore requires attention to both common patterns and specific ruptures. Like many deindustrialised cities, Taranto faces the challenge of reimagining its future amid economic precarity, polluted soil, and social fragmentation (Jokela-Pansini and Militz, 2022, p. 751). But unlike many celebrated regeneration cases, its recovery is neither institutionally orchestrated nor symbolically unified (d'Ovidio, 2021). Instead, it emerges in partial, often grassroots forms: in murals, festivals, rewilded spaces, and collective memory work (d'Ovidio, 2022; Till, 2012). These gestures suggest that regeneration, in cities like Taranto, is not an event but an ongoing negotiation between what was, what endures, and what might still be possible.

2.4 Top-down or Bottom-up? Understanding Participation

At the heart of urban regeneration lies a crucial tension: who decides what regeneration looks like, for whom is it intended, and who pays for these changes? The contrast between top-down and bottom-up approaches to spatial transformation is not merely procedural: it is political, emotional, and deeply tied to questions of power and legitimacy (Benetti et al., 2023, p. 4). Sherry Arnstein's (1969) seminal "Ladder of Citizen Participation" remains a foundational reference point in this discussion, offering a gradient of participatory practices from tokenism and manipulation to genuine citizen power (figure 3). As more recent scholars have argued (Natarajan & Short, 2023; Nursery-Bray, 2020; Rausch et al., 2022), this framework still helps reveal when participation is symbolic rather than structural, especially in contexts of urban inequality.

Figure 3

Ladder of Citizen Participation.

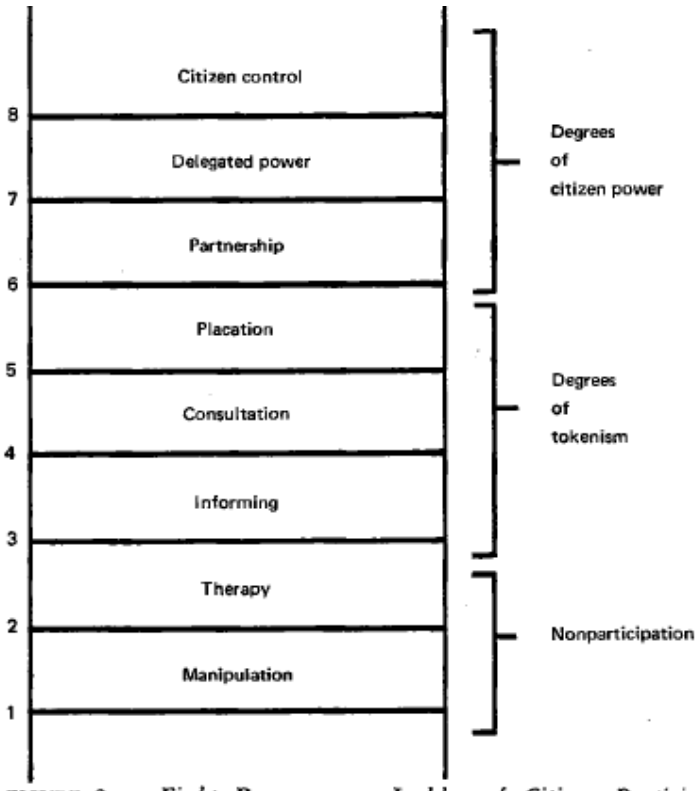


FIGURE 2 *Eight Rungs on a Ladder of Citizen Participation*

Reproduced from "A Ladder of Citizen Participation," by S. R. Arnstein (1969), *Journal of the American Institute of Planners, 35*(4), p. 217.

Top-down regeneration, often led by governmental or corporate actors, tends to prioritise economic return, aesthetic transformation, or reputational gain. Such projects may offer the appearance of renewal while reinforcing pre-existing power dynamics (Benetti et al., 2023; d'Ovidio, 2021). As Fernández Agueda (2014) and MacGregor (2010) note, speculative regeneration can result in the sanitisation of space, the erasure of local memory, or the displacement of vulnerable groups. Participation, in these cases, is often instrumental: residents are consulted late in the process, if at all, and their role is limited to passive approval rather than co-creation (Hes et al. 2020, p. 5-6). However, when suitable regeneration strategies are applied, "the past, traced in the territory, is no longer representing a set of constraints, but it has become a potential for the region's future" (Fernández Agueda, 2014, p. 5), but this process is usually undermined by the "dominant mode of production" – constant growth (Fernández Agueda, 2014, p. 3).

By contrast, bottom-up regeneration begins with community needs and is driven by local knowledge, affective ties to place, and social cooperation (Horgan, 2020; Mateo-Bibiano & Lee, 2020; Natarjan & Short, 2023). These initiatives often emerge in response to neglect or harm, and as such, carry a different emotional and political weight. Scholars such as Lavanga (2013), Krasny et al. (2014), and Ozenc and Hagan (2019) highlight how participatory placemaking can foster not only functional improvements but also social cohesion, pride, and resilience. Community-led efforts, from urban gardens to cultural festivals, frequently operate in what Mommaas (2004) calls "self-managed and emotionally charged urban environment" (Mommaas, 2004, p. 516), where the emotional labour of place is central.

In this context, the theory of commons provides a powerful lens to interpret participatory regeneration as collective stewardship. Ostrom (1990; 2000) argues that common goods – whether forests, fisheries, or urban space – can be managed sustainably through shared norms, trust, and decentralised governance. Borchi (2020) extends this idea to the city, framing urban commons as spaces where value is produced socially rather than speculatively, and where the right to participate is not a gift from above but a practice embedded in daily life.

Understanding whether regeneration is top-down or bottom-up in Taranto – and how these forces intersect – is crucial for analysing its affective and political meaning. For the "dream" of regeneration to take root, "the city as a whole needs to be involved, otherwise it is unlikely that the dream will take root" (Richards & Duif, 2019, p. 15). Participation is not just a procedural choice; it shapes the atmosphere of regeneration itself: whether it feels imposed or empowering, extractive or restorative, alienating or intimate.

2.5 Regenerative Placemaking: Transforming Spaces, Empowering Communities

If post-industrial cities are *scarred* landscapes (Storm, 2014), then regenerative placemaking is a form of urban *healing* (Nursey-Bray, 2020): slow, local, and driven by memory, desire, and collective care. Unlike conventional models of urban regeneration, which often operate from above – driven by capital, aesthetics, or rebranding strategies – regenerative placemaking grows laterally, like roots seeking water through cracked asphalt. In fact, placemaking

> *places people at its core, either by employing a participatory process to public space design, gaining an understanding of residents' perceptions and*

> *aspirations or responding through projects/programmes, which generate positive relationships in/to/with place.* (Mateo-Babiano & Lee, 2020, p. 15-6)

Placemaking does not simply aim to restore what was lost, but to "create the capacity for people to invest space with meaning" (Mateo-Babiano & Lee, 2020, p. 16). In fact, Richards & Duif (2019) define placemaking through three broad elements: *resources* (tangible and intangible), *meanings* (symbolic, ideas, aspirations), and *creativity* (innovation) (Richards & Duif, 2019, p. 17). It is a way for communities to imagine what could flourish when reclaiming their right to shape the spaces they inhabit – it is "a mundane way of asserting our claim on everyday life" (Lefebvre, 1996 in Hes & Hernandez-Santin, 2020, p. 2).

Horgan (2020) identifies placemaking as "an inherently political process" (Horgan, 2020, p. 150), describing an "insurgent citizenship" of communities taking power to "highlight inequalities and achieve spatial rights" (Horgan, 2020, p. 150). This approach sees urban space not as a void to be filled but as a living archive of "the relationships that occur within the locality, including the socio-economic reality, ecological conditions and political standpoint" (Mateo-Babiano & Lee, 2020, p. 15). In this sense, placemaking is not a project but a practice, "a collective exercise to reshape space" (Harvey, 2003, in Hes & Hernandez-Santin, 2020, p. 2). It attends to ruins and residues, transforming marginalised spaces into sites of encounter, expression, and resilience (Palazzo, 2020, p. 130). As Fernández Agueda (2014) notes, the regenerative gaze does not erase decay, it listens to it, revealing "the importance of local action and the possibility of guiding and easing decline" (Fernández Agueda, 2014, p. 2), proposing a "new vision for the future" (Plöger, 2013, p. 198).

To remake a place is also to remake a future, or as Jokela-Pansini & Militz (2022) say, to "breathe new futures". In Taranto, where formal regeneration has often stalled or been deferred, it is local communities that have taken up the task of imagining otherwise. D'Ovidio (2021) captures this beautifully in her exploration of the Old Town, where artisans, activists, and cultural workers repurpose abandoned churches, rooftops, and workshops – not only as sites of work, but as anchors of belonging. These actors do not simply generate economic value; they craft what Gibson-Graham (2008, in d'Ovidio, 2021, p. 2277) would call diverse economies: ecologies of care, ethics, and conviviality that disrupt dominant development narratives. As one interviewee tells d'Ovidio, "Our work is an excuse to build social relations" (d'Ovidio, 2021, p. 2283).

These efforts – part craft, part politics – resist the gravitational pull of gentrification and speculative erasure (d'Ovidio, 2021, p. 2287). Instead, they plant seeds of urban possibility. For d'Ovidio, placemaking, "as an embedded practice of producing space, is always a political action, as it produces relations, therefore intervening in the geometries of power." (d'Ovidio, 2021, p. 2280). She identifies power "in the extent to which one hegemonic subjectivity impedes the expression of others, or when a specific trajectory of transformation is imposed on others" (d'Ovidio, 2021, p. 2280). Therefore, placemaking not only challenges power, but also rebalances it (d'Ovidio, 2021, p. 2280).

By refusing both decay and top-down spectacle, regenerative placemaking in Taranto becomes a quiet insurgency: making space for voices long silenced, for subjectivities long ignored, for futures yet unwritten. In this light, regeneration is not about saving space but staying with it, even in its brokenness.

2.6 The Emotional Architecture of Place: Exploring Affective Spaces

If regenerative placemaking reclaims space through collective action, then its emotional resonance unfolds in the *atmospheres* it generates. The word *atmospheres* is not accidental; it resonates what Böhme (2019) defines as "characteristic manifestations of the co-presence of subject and object" (Böhme, 2019, Chapter 2). Atmospheres exist as a result of the presence of subjects and objects in a space. Atmospheres are tied to emotions. As Ahmed (2014) writes, emotions are not simply internal states that exist *in* subjects or objects, but rather they are dynamic processes that actively shape and are shaped by spaces and bodies (Ahmed, 2014, p. 4). Therefore, atmospheres are emotions situated in a space. Atmospheres *affect* spaces and vice versa. Here, affect is not reducible to personal feeling, but circulates transpersonally, diffusing between bodies and environments (Ahmed, 2014, pp. 8-12). Atmosphere and spaces can be affective.

Anderson (2009) defines affective atmospheres as "collective affects" that press upon life like weather: ambient, elusive, yet powerfully shaping how spaces are inhabited and perceived (Anderson, 2009, p. 78). These atmospheres are in-between states – simultaneously present and absent, individual and collective, definite and vague (Anderson, 2009, p. 78). They arise from the assembling of bodies and materials but exceed them, haunting the built environment as a kind of sensorial memory.

Architecture, in this light, becomes an affective agent. De Matteis (2021) suggests that built forms resonate with and shape the living body, not through explicit messages but through atmospheres (De Matteis, 2021, pp. 80-83). Drawing from phenomenology, he insists

on a first-person, embodied understanding of space, one that recognises how we do not merely move through environments – we are moved by them (De Matteis, 2021, p. 129). In his reflection on the affective city, De Matteis explores urban atmospheres, moving and perceiving in the city, walking, urban situations, intimate urban spaces, and the city's memory (De Matteis, 2021, pp. 97-108). His considerations, applied to Taranto, create a thought-provoking approach to the city: if memory is "the permanence of affective states that are corporeally bound to certain situations and environments" (De Matteis, 2021, p. 107), then the collective experience of the heavy hair, the crystalline seas, the ruined buildings in the Old Town, is already framing Taranto as an affective space.

Taranto offers numerous examples of this affective charge. When walking through the city, haunting murals – "L'ILVA ha ucciso mia madre" (*ILVA killed my mother*); "ILVA is a killer" (figure 4); "Seminiamo morte" (*We seminate death*; figure 5) – and decaying yet beautiful buildings speak a language of pain. These walls are emotionally charged not because of what they contain, but because of what they remember, transmitting the trauma of environmental violence while gesturing toward possibilities of healing. The murals are not just political messages but atmospheric triggers – conduits of sensory memory and collective grief.

Figures 4 & 5

Recurring murals in the Old Town: ILVA is a killer; We seminate death.

Photographs taken by author, May 2025.

Taranto's atmosphere, as the breathed air, contains carcinogenic gases, including benzene (C6H6) and sulphur dioxide (SO2) (*Aria Pulita*, 2024). Here, breathing must be understood as an "embodied, entangled, and emotional" practice of survival and renewal (Jokela-Pansini & Militz, 2022, p. 742). Breathing is a form of affective resistance; it marks the body's entanglement with the environment: to breathe is to survive, to feel, to hope. Engelmann (2015) writes that breath is both biological and symbolic, a reminder of porousness and interdependence. In Taranto, to breathe becomes a political act in itself, given the air's toxicity and the city's long struggle against ILVA's pollution.

Therefore, affective atmospheres do not just shape how space is felt: they shape who has the right to feel, to breathe, and ultimately, to belong in the city. It is precisely through this entanglement of emotion, space, and power that the struggle to reclaim the right to the city in Taranto begins.

2.7 Whose Rights? Reclaiming the Right to the City

If affective atmospheres shape who belongs in a space, then the right to the city must be understood not only as access to urban infrastructure, but as the right to shape space emotionally, culturally, and politically. The Right to the City is a concept articulated by Henri Lefevbre (1974) and further developed by David Harvey (2008), and it is framed as "a right to change ourselves by changing the city" (Harvey, 2008, p. 23). It is a "common" right as the transformation of the city "depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanisation" (Harvey, 2008, p. 23). The right to the city is a human right (Harvey, 2008, p. 23).

In cities like Taranto, where systemic pollution has severed bonds between people and place, reclaiming this right becomes an urgent, ongoing act. As Narotzky (2016) and Pusceddu (2020) argue, the right to the city in post-industrial contexts is deeply entangled with histories of marginalisation and uneven development. It is a right long withheld, particularly in Southern European territories treated as zones of extraction and externality, as "sacrifice zones" (Pusceddu, 2020, pp. 850-855).

Lefebvre's (1974) theory of the trialectics of space, "spatial triad" – conceived space (spatial practice; planning and representation), perceived space (representational spaces; use and practice), and lived space (representations of space; experience and imagination) – offers a useful framework here (Merrifield, 2006, pp. 108-111). When looking at Taranto, claiming the right to the city involves asserting spatial practice and creating alternative representational

spaces in opposition to the dominant representations of space. This can involve urban social movements, municipal and local actions, bottom-up initiatives like tactical urbanism, counter-projects, and fighting for recognition and exercise of political and social rights to influence city policies (*Fearless Cities*, 2022). In this picture, *Fearless Cities* (2022) provides an inspirational example. It is an informal global movement of activists, organisations, councillors, and mayors, which constituted an international municipal movement with the purpose of working to "radicalise democracy, feminise politics, and drive the transition to an economy that puts care for people and planet at the centre" (*Fearless Cities*, 2022, p. 16). Therefore, they offer an intersectional perspective to the right to the city, which becomes also the right to feminist policies, and the right to a people- and nature-centred economy.

Therefore, the residents of Taranto are not only navigating conceived and polluted geographies; they are also reimagining lived space as a site of care, refusal, and future-making. As Harvey (2008) later suggests, the right to the city is not just a demand for access but for "democratisation" – for the power to shape urban life according to collective need and desire (Harvey, 2008, p. 40).

In this light, rights in Taranto must be considered beyond legal or infrastructural terms. The right to health is inseparable from the right to clean air, soil, and water. In a city where carcinogenic gases linger in the atmosphere, and where soil is often too toxic to cultivate, the very conditions of daily life have been compromised. Scholars like Jokela-Pansini & Militz (2022) have pointed to the need to expand urban rights frameworks to include ecological rights: the right to breathe safely, the right to unpoisoned land, the right to swim in clean seas, and even the right to co-exist with urban wildlife. These are not abstract concepts: they are material, sensory, and affective realities, deeply embedded in how people experience space.

Reclaiming the right to the city in Taranto therefore involves more than policy reform. It involves reshaping urban space as a "commons" (Ostrom, 1990): a shared terrain where collective memory, ecological justice, and emotional belonging converge. It requires reimagining the city not as a territory to be fixed or branded, but as a space to be lived in together with dignity, reciprocity, and the right to breathe.

2.8 Building Resilience: Surviving, Adapting, Resisting

Reclaiming the right to the city is not only a spatial or political act – it is also a resilient one, grounded in the everyday practices through which communities survive, adapt, and resist. In the context of (culture-led) urban regeneration, resilience can be understood as

the capacity of urban systems and communities to withstand, adapt to, absorb, and recover from “disasters and crises” (Kapucu et al., 2021, p. 10).

In post-industrial cities like Taranto, resilience is not merely about enduring hardship or bouncing back from crisis, but about surviving, adapting, and resisting in conditions shaped by long-term structural harm. Heath et al. (2017) show how higher levels of resilience and community cohesion are found in community-centred, bottom-up, or culture-led approaches to regeneration, which are thus inclusive of community dynamics, compared to top-down approaches (Heath et al., 2017, pp. 861-862). Moreover, Pratt (2015) views resilience through the lens of the cultural economy within a specific locality, suggesting that a more productive strategy for resilience involves “local capacity building” applied to the particularities of the cultural economy and place (Pratt, 2015, pp. 63-65).

Broader urban resilience frameworks include a social and human dimension that recognises the importance of the knowledge, skills, symbolism, and belief systems of a city’s citizens. While urban resilience research has focused extensively on human and institutional aspects, the integration of cultural and social factors into resilience planning remains an under-researched area (Kapucu et al., 2024, p. 172). This suggests a need to better understand how cultural dynamics contribute to the overall resilience of urban areas facing regeneration.

As mentioned earlier, resilience is intricately connected to the concept of surviving, adapting, and resisting. *Surviving* in the context of a city like Taranto means confronting the toxicity of the air, the soil, the built environment while sustaining a basic sense of place (Walker & Salt, 2006, in Kapucu et al., 2021, p. 12). It means remaining in a space that has been materially damaged and emotionally wounded, and still insisting on everyday life (Cutter et al., 2008, in Kapucu et al., 2021, p. 12). Cultural practices play a key role in this survival: they offer tools for coping, for expressing grief, and for making visible the otherwise silenced histories of *disaster* (Cutter et al., 2008, in Kapucu et al., 2021, p. 12).

Adapting refers to how communities respond creatively and collectively to these conditions. Here, resilience is an open perspective that does not resist but embraces change in a collective process (Pratt, 2015, p. 62). Culture-led urban regeneration, when rooted in local needs and shaped by participatory processes, becomes a vehicle for adaptation – not by forgetting the past, but by working through it. Through placemaking, adaptive reuse, and the reanimation of public space, residents reinterpret the meanings of contaminated or neglected environments. These acts can be considered *affective resilience*: the capacity to live emotionally and symbolically within and beyond damage.

Resisting, finally, refers to how cultural and spatial practices can challenge dominant logics of extraction and abandonment. Hence, regenerative efforts are also refusals of speculative development, of invisibilization, of the idea that some cities and lives are disposable. Affect is central here. As Ahmed (2014) and Anderson (2009) suggest, emotions and atmospheres are not apolitical; they are ways of being in and with the world. In Taranto, murals, community festivals, and reclaimed spaces are not only expressions of identity; they are modes of dissent.

Thus, resilience in Taranto cannot be separated from cultural expression, spatial politics, or affective life. It emerges not as a singular act but as a rhythm – of staying, remaking, and imagining. It is through this rhythm that new urban futures, grounded in justice and possibility, begin to take shape.

2.9 Synthesis: Toward an Affective Framework for Regenerative Urbanism

Finally, to breathe with Taranto is to inhabit a city shaped as much by iron dust as by longing. This theoretical framework began with that inhale – heavy with contradiction, grief, and memory – and traced how cultural practices in post-industrial cities become exhales of resistance and reimagination. Drawing together regenerative placemaking, affective atmospheres, and resilience as transformation, this synthesis offers an affective framework for regenerative urbanism (table 1).

Such a framework insists that regeneration is never just about infrastructure. It is about atmosphere – about how space feels, how it remembers, and how it might begin again. Participation, in this context, becomes affective: it is not only about who decides, but about who feels they belong. In Taranto, to stay is to resist. To imagine otherwise is already to begin. Regenerative urbanism, then, is not a fixed model but a situated practice – iterative, emotional, insurgent – and always in relation with the ground it emerges from.

Table 1

Affective Framework for Regenerative Urbanism

Dimension	Description
Spatial	Regeneration as the reclaiming of space through place-based, embodied practices
Affective	Atmospheres charged with grief, care, memory, and hope
Participatory	Bottom-up and commoning practices that generate affective ownership of space
Resilient	Rhythms of surviving, adapting, and resisting rooted in local lifeworlds
Political	Reclaiming rights to space, health, and imagination through situated struggle
Cultural	Placemaking through rituals, stories, and everyday acts of meaning-making

3. Methodology

3.1 Beginning the Research

This thesis investigates the extent to which practices of regenerative placemaking in the city of Taranto foster residents' resilience. From this, several sub-questions emerge:

- What emotional and affective connections do residents have with their city?
- What forms of bottom-up action are shaping a future beyond industrial identity?
- To what extent are Tarantini involved in these placemaking acts?
- How do affective dimensions, such as belonging, pride, or nostalgia, influence perceptions of placemaking outcomes?

These questions are informed by existing literature on culture-led urban regeneration, affective spaces, and resilience. As a qualitative project, this research pays particular attention to how participants express and frame key themes, identifying patterns and divergences in their narratives.

To explore these questions, I conducted semi-structured interviews with residents. Semi-structured interviews allow researchers to follow a flexible interview guide, ensuring consistency across participants while also enabling spontaneous follow-up questions based on interviewees' responses (Bryman, 2012, p. 471). Initially, I did not have a specific target group in mind. As I developed the interview guide (Appendix A), I became increasingly interested not only in the voices of those actively involved in placemaking but also in how a broad range of residents spoke about Taranto. Wandering through the Old Town, between seas and salt-worn buildings, I observed how people moved through space, whether strolling through narrow alleys or speeding past the *ringhiera* on the Mar Grande. Conversations with locals – from old women on buses to young people in the library, vendors, and partygoers – became entry points into the fabric of the city. Many of these encounters led to formal interviews, others enriched the contextual grounding of the study.

Figure 6

The Old Town leading to the ringhiera.

Liv [@llavieboheme]. (2023, August 21). *Vita lenta in Taranto, Puglia.* [Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CwNuebUMU7I/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link.

3.2 Ethical Considerations

3.2.1 Consent and Interview Setting

All participants gave explicit verbal consent to record the conversation and to use their contributions in this thesis before the interview. Although no written consent form was signed – based on the mutual understanding that the information discussed was not of a confidential nature – the participant agreed to the recording and to the inclusion of their statements in this work. They were also given the choice to be identified by their real name or by a pseudonym of their preference.

The conversations were conducted in informal settings, with the deliberate intention of fostering a sense of mutual trust and ease. My approach prioritised establishing a human connection before engaging in the more formal role of researcher, in order to allow for open, fluid, and reflexive dialogue.

3.2.2 Positionality

As a researcher with personal connections to Taranto, my position is both insider and outsider. This duality informed my interpretations and allowed for a reflexive engagement with the data, with reflexive being defined as having “an ongoing conversation about the

experience while simultaneously living in the moment" (Hertz, 1997, in Finlay, 2002, p. 533). I acknowledge how my background, affective ties, and research intentions shaped both the data collection and analysis processes.

While Italian is my native language, I had never conducted interviews on these topics in Italian before, which introduced subtle challenges in navigating vocabulary, emotional tone, and academic discourse. Moreover, the ways participants spoke, the *argot* (Bryman, 2012, p. 494) – through regional expressions, shifts in *registro*, or phrases in slang or dialect – often carried connotations that defied straightforward translation, making interpretation a layered and context-sensitive task.

3.3 Whose Voices Are Heard?

Lacking relevant prior contacts in Taranto, I relied on snowball sampling, which consists of accessing relevant participants by starting with one person or a small initial group and expanding the sample through their social networks (Bryman, 2012, p. 202). I ultimately interviewed seventeen individuals, each offering distinct yet interconnected perspectives. The table below outlines the participant profiles.

Table 2. *Participants Profiles*

	Respondent	Age	Gender	Place of residence	Occupation	Organisation	Material collected
1	Alessandro	26	Male	Taranto Studied in Lecce and Venezia	Master student in Archival and Library Sciences	-	Interview
2	Donato	65	Male	Taranto	Retired vascular surgeon	-	Interview
3	Serena	~50	Female	Taranto	President CCLLP	Comitato Cittadini e Lavoratori Liberi e Pensanti	Focus group, website, (online) newspapers, social media
4	Dalila	44	Female	Taranto (originally from	Beautician Member		

				Torino)	CCLLP		
5	Emanuele	42	Male	Taranto	ILVA worker (on redundancy since 2014) Member CCLLP		
6	Riccardo	54	Male	Taranto	ILVA worker (on redundancy since 2018) Member CCLLP Writer		
7	Valerio	~40	Male	Taranto (originally from Sicily)	Retired sailor Member CCLLP		
8	Nicola	~40	Male	Taranto	ILVA worker Member CCLLP		
9	Lorenzo	~40	Male	Taranto	ILVA worker Member CCLLP		
10	Aldo	~70	Male	Taranto	Retired ILVA worker Member CCLLP		
11	Carolina	~70	Female	Taranto	President CREST	CREST	Interview, website, (online)

					Theatre actress and producer		newspapers, CREST book
12	Pietro	41	Male	Taranto	Co-founder PDR Designer	Post Disaster Rooftops	Interview, website, (online) newspapers
13	Umberto	23	Male	Roma (originally from Taranto)	Public and corporate communication student Co-founder TF	Taranto Futura	Double interview, social media
14	Ruggero	23	Male	Taranto	Physiotherapy student Co-founder TF		
15	Stefano	~40	Male	Taranto	Co-founder MN President MN Merchant	Mercato Nuovo	Interview, (online) newspapers, website, social media
16	Manolo	~30	Male	Taranto	Co-founder Casa Viola Responsible of T.R.U.St. project Project writer	Casa Viola	Interview, social media
17	Federico	58	Male	Taranto	President Taranto25 Insurance agent	APS Fondazione Taranto25	Interview, (online) newspapers
18	16 people	Between	10	Taranto,			Participant

		25 and 65	Female 6 Male	Libreria Mandese			observation
19	30 people	Between 25 and 50	~12 Female ~18 Male	Taranto, Casa Viola		Radio Galattica Nodo Taranto	Participant observation

My first interview was with Alessandro, a master's student in Archival and Library Sciences, whom I met at the civic library Pietro Acclavio, an emblematic space in itself. Housed in the renovated *Palazzo della Cultura*, the library has redefined perceptions of a formerly stigmatised neighborhood. Alessandro introduced me to his uncle Donato and suggested I connect with the association *Comitato Cittadini e Lavoratori Liberi e Pensanti* (CCLLP).

Donato offered a rich historical perspective on Taranto, linking contemporary civic character to ancient roots. A long-time activist, his engagement spans community gardens and anti-mafia initiatives. Like Alessandro, he highlighted CCLLP and also referred me to CREST, *Collettivo di Ricerche Espressive e Sperimentazione Teatrale*.

The Comitato Cittadini e Lavoratori Liberi e Pensanti (CCLLP) was founded in 2012 to advocate for environmental health and fair employment. Composed of ILVA workers, students, unemployed citizens, and professionals, it resists formal political integration and instead operates in an anarchist structure. Among its initiatives is *Uno Maggio Libero e Pensante*, a free, grassroots music festival held annually on Labour Day. The event features activist panels and concerts from high-profile artists performing *pro bono*, asserting that culture and resistance must remain accessible. During a site visit to their headquarters for that week in the Archeological Park of Greek Walls, I conducted an impromptu focus group with seven members (Dalila, Emanuele, Riccardo, Valerio, Nicola, Lorenzo, Aldo), facilitated by their president, Serena. The focus group added valuable collective reflections on systemic harm, political resistance, and cultural mobilisation. This format allowed for the identification of shared strategies of resistance and the articulation of a collective voice around lived experience and spatial injustice. The group's strong critique of industrial complicity and its alignment with cultural resistance efforts provided a powerful lens through which to interpret other data.

CREST (Union of Expressive Research and Theatre Experimentation), located in Tamburi neighbourhood, the closest to ILVA's soaring chimneys, combines theatre production

with community outreach, youth education, and expressive research. Carolina, its president, hosted me for an interview and introduced their vision of theatre as a tool for social dialogue.

Searching Instagram for additional contacts, I discovered Post Disaster Rooftops and Taranto Futura.

Post Disaster Rooftops is a critical spatial practice working on Taranto's rooftops to interrogate global production systems and Mediterranean ecologies. Before arriving in Italy, I reached out to them, receiving a candid critique of my research approach. Initially discouraged, I later embraced this critique as validating the diversity and complexity I hoped to capture. Later on, co-founder Pietro agreed to be interviewed, offering one of the most valuable perspectives on the topic of bottom-up regeneration. As he is a designer for culture, visual arts and social innovation, and he is deeply intertwined with the cultural life in Taranto, I consider him an *expert* in his field.

Taranto Futura, founded by Umberto and Ruggero, is a youth-driven initiative aimed at building community through music, zines, and social spaces. Their enthusiasm reaffirmed my commitment to documenting diverse local experiences.

Both organisations are acquainted with APS Fondazione Taranto 25, a philanthropic foundation aiming to "invest in the happiness of civil society," as stated on their LinkedIn profile. Through partnerships with over sixty-five companies and studios, it funds cultural and social initiatives, especially sports-related. I interviewed its president, Federico, whose polished discourse contrasted with other, more grassroots interlocutors.

During the same evening I met Taranto Futura, I attended a jam session at Mercato Nuovo, a cultural hub repurposing a former warehouse. Founded in 2019, it offers a space for artistic performance, community gathering, and inclusive nightlife. There, I had an insightful conversation with its co-founder Stefano. We spoke about Mercato Nuovo's role in revitalising the neglected area of Porta Napoli. That night, the street was filled with young people reclaiming public space, transforming a derelict area into a vibrant urban commons.

At Mercato Nuovo, I met Sara, a 28-year-old trying to return to Taranto after living in northern Italy. She invited me to an event she organised: the *Permanent Urban Laboratory*, a public dialogue on staying in or returning to Taranto. Held at Mandese bookstore, it attracted sixteen participants from various backgrounds. I decided to include this event in my method as an exercise of participant observation (Bryman, 2012; Guest et al., 2013). In this open setting, I was involved fully in the activities as an "overt full member" (Bryman, 2012, p. 441). The event happened over three hours and I took notes on people's experiences about the perception of their city. We were asked to place sticky notes with one word describing our

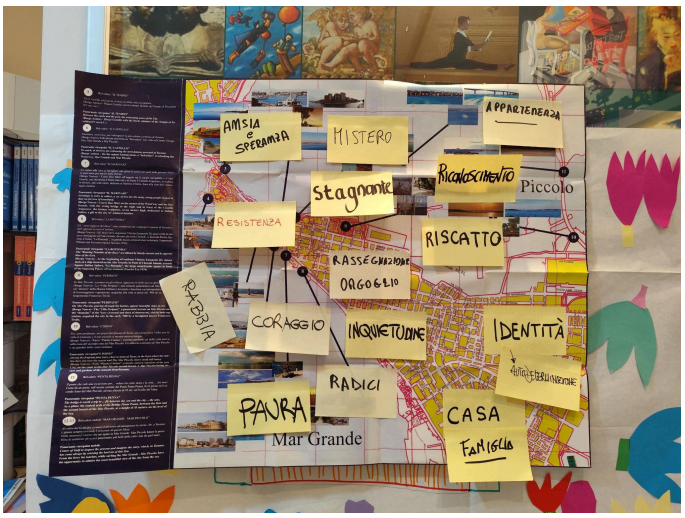
feelings about Taranto on a map (see Figure 7). Words included: *anxiety*, *hope*, *mystery*, *belonging*, *resistance*, *pride*, *resignation*, *redemption*, *fear*, *identity*, *roots*, *home*. These expressions will inform my coding and thematic analysis.

At the event, I also met Manolo from Casa Viola, a *casa di quartiere* inspired by models from Bologna and Torino. Founded in 2024, it serves as a neighbourhood lab for co-creation and civic engagement. After an informal conversation with Manolo, also responsible for the permanent urban street art festival (T.R.U.St.) project, I participated in a co-design workshop for the project *Radio Galattica* (facilitated by Pietro from PDR!), which engaged thirty locals in imagining community radio programs. This was a second instance of participant observation and revealed residents' collective aspirations for social change. This setting was useful to "discover and analyse aspects of social scenes that use rules and norms that the participants may experience without explicitly talking about" (Guest et al., 2013), as it delved into the needs and desires of Tarantini in this specific setting. Here, I acted as a covert full member (Bryman, 2012, p. 441).

These two instances of participant observation were also integrated into the analysis, as these initiatives enabled direct observation of how participants co-articulate affective and political claims on the city. Rather than serving as stand-alone data, these observations were used to triangulate the findings from interviews and the focus group. They helped contextualise themes around belonging, participation, and future-making as performative and embodied practices.

Figure 7

What does Taranto evoke in you?



Photograph taken by author, May 2025.

3.4 Which Questions Were Asked?

I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews that encouraged participants to guide the conversation and narrate their experiences in their own terms. The interview guide followed three thematic clusters:

1. Perceptions of Taranto and its transformation
2. Community dynamics, regeneration, and collective experience
3. Personal reflections, emotions, and future visions

Although I followed these general topics, I adapted the flow to each interview, depending on the respondent's engagement and perspective, to see "what the interviewee sees as relevant and important" (Bryman, 2012, p. 470). This flexibility was especially helpful when participants were not directly involved in regeneration projects but still expressed meaningful emotional or cultural connections to the city.

When inviting participants, I introduced the research as follows:

> *I am exploring how cultural, artistic, and urban regeneration projects are transforming the city and strengthening the resilience of Taranto's residents. I'm collecting interviews with people who experience the city in different ways – those who participate in cultural initiatives, those who work in the area, and those who simply live in Taranto.*

The conversational structure ensured that participants were comfortable and able to reflect freely, even when unfamiliar with academic terms related to urban regeneration and placemaking. This approach still yielded rich and relevant data to address the central research question.

The interview guide is presented in English and Italian in Appendix A.

3.5 Towards the Analysis

The analysis of this research is grounded in a thematic approach informed by the spatial, affective, participatory, resilient, political, and cultural dimensions outlined in the theoretical framework (table 1). In total, eight semi-structured interviews, one focus group (comprehending eight people), and two instances of participant observation (for a duration of three hours each) formed the core of the empirical material. These were systematically coded to reveal recurring patterns and emotional registers related to regenerative placemaking and residents' resilience in Taranto.

All transcripts were first transcribed verbatim and then carefully read to ensure immersion in the material.

Following Bryman's (2012) guide to thematic analysis, I identified themes and subthemes, "recurring themes in the text that are then applied to the data" (Bryman, 2012, p. 579) after thoroughly reading the interview transcripts and participant observation field notes. This framework is then "applied to the data, which are organized initially into core themes, and the data are then displayed in terms of subthemes within the matrix and for each case" (Bryman, 2012, p. 579). While themes were partially informed by existing theoretical constructs – such as placemaking, affective atmospheres, resilience – the coding process remained open to emergent meanings from participants' narratives. A codebook was developed (Appendix B) to classify key themes across seven core dimensions: urban decline and exposure, affective belonging, everyday resilience, participatory practices, institutions and power, cultural infrastructure, and imaginative futures. Once the input from the interviews was manually coded – using an Excel sheet – based on the different themes, the narrative took the shape that will be exemplified thoroughly in the next chapter.

Through this multi-modal analysis, the thesis aims to trace not only what residents say about Taranto but also how they inhabit, resist, and reimagine its spaces emotionally, culturally, and politically.

4. Results and Discussion

This section explores how residents of Taranto navigate, endure, and reimagine life within a city shaped by industrial harm and collective resilience. Structured around the metaphors of Steel, Fire, and Water, the analysis unfolds as a choreography of constraint, resistance, and regeneration. Using materials as channels of this message echoes the growing "materials turn" (Munteán & Plate, 2023, p. 14) in cultural studies, which sees even seemingly mundane materials are "intimate character[s] in our lives," profoundly influencing our daily existence and identity (Miodownik, 2014). The chosen elements do not represent separate phases, but interwoven rhythms – of living with damage, pushing against imposed narratives, and cultivating alternative futures. What emerges is not a singular voice, but a polyphony of gestures, attachments, and refusals. At its core, this chapter traces how care and repair become not only survival strategies, but modes of place-making and political agency.

4.1 Steel: Clearing the Rusted Ground

Steel is the backbone of Taranto's modern history, and its deepest scar. This section explores how ILVA, once a symbol of progress, became a corrosive force shaping the city's economy, environment, and collective psyche. Like rust spreading through soil, steel here stands for constraint, dependence, and loss. Yet to care for a place is to name what wounds it. In clearing the rusted ground, this chapter excavates the harms embedded in Taranto's industrial monoculture, while also tracing the cracks through which new imaginaries may begin to take root. The overarching themes informing this section are *urban decline and exposure*, and *affective belonging.*

4.1.1 Rusted Skin

The industrial presence of ILVA is not merely a site of production – it is a wound around which daily life has long been forced to grow. Alessandro describes ILVA as "a decomposing corpse in the middle of the city." It rots not only in the material landscape, but also within the public imagination and emotional life. In the garden of Taranto, this is not a weed that can be pulled easily; it is a root system that corrodes possibilities for different paths.

The city's very name has been overwritten by the factory. "The city of ILVA" is the phrase that follows almost every mention of Taranto by outsiders – a denotation for a place known nationally for its environmental devastation and public health crises. For locals, this has become an uncomfortable norm. This norm reflects a "broad sensitivity to materials and

their diverse meanings" (Lehmann, 2012, in Muntéan & Plate, 2023, p. 16). Steel, like Miodownik's (2014) omnipresent materials, becomes a familiar yet corrosive presence. The fumes from the steelworks become "intangible agents" (De Matteis, 2021, p. 123) shaping how space is sensed and experienced.

Alessandro reflects, "we're used to it." It is such a normality that, when I told people I was writing my thesis about Taranto, someone asked me: "Are you researching about ILVA or more beautiful things?" Hence, there is a shared need of reimagining Taranto beyond the factory. For instance, after finishing the interview with Umberto and Ruggero, I asked them how come they did not mention ILVA at all in their narration of Taranto Futura. They said that to them, it is not relevant to talk about the factory because it is already an integral part of their lives; it has always been, long before they were born. Therefore, they aim to construct a community through culture that creates an alternative to the already-existing relational patterns that Tarantini have. The same view appears in Stefano, who believes that "when you come in [Mercato Nuovo], you should forget about [ILVA], even though you have it around you." The following sections will unravel the tapestry of possibilities that Tarantini are creating to change the image of their city.

However, the normalisation of harm does not imply acceptance – it is a form of adaptation in a context where exposure and endurance are constant. Participants reported a sense of resignation, of anxiety, of eeriness, of fear, of anger towards the city, as to this day, some areas, like the Tamburi neighbourhood, are particularly burdened by mineral dust and gas fumes from the plant. Lorenzo shivered when mentioning a plaque placed in 2001 under the window of a man who died because of ILVA's toxicity:

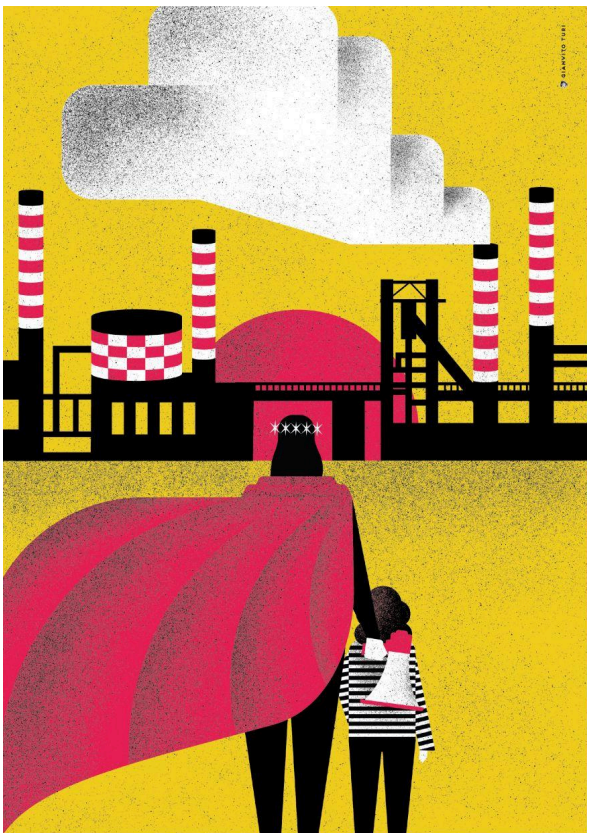
> *On days of North/North-West wind, we are buried by mineral dust and suffocated by gas fumes coming from the ILVA industrial area. For all these, [we] curse those who can do and do nothing to repair.*

Lorenzo comments that "in that period *only* the employees of that plant died of lung diseases". On this note, Donato warns that "the projection in a few years is really worrying, with frequent tumors that do not appear in certain age groups in the [rest of] the world, which instead are present here". Section 4.1.3 delves into the health crisis, and the perceived sacrifice of workers.

Taranto is, as someone called it, "an abandoned land in the middle of the sea". Are there more layers to Taranto's decay? How many identities did the city carry before ILVA?

Figure 8

'Super Jesus' holding a child and a megaphone while looking at the ILVA complex.



Turi, G. [@gianvito.turi]. (2022, July 29). *Cover of short film by Vito Palumbo 'Super Jesus'.* [Illustration], Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CgmrjvwosHi/?img_index=1

4.1.2 Forged Dependence

The foundations of Taranto's dependence on heavy industry were forged long before ILVA, set in motion by a series of historical and political decisions that narrowed the city's potential for growth. As Donato explains, after a defeat,

> [Taranto] went from being called *Taras* [after Poseidon's son] to *Tarentum*, a neutral name, and from being a worthy political subject, through the humiliation of the name change, we became a city that perhaps never recovered afterwards, *because we went from domination to indomination, wrong choices, wrong allies*.

Thus, this trajectory – of being shaped by others' interests – did not begin with steel. For instance, a Byzantine edict, centuries ago, prevented the city from expanding beyond the

boundaries of the Old Town, curbing both spatial and symbolic development (Donato). Later, the *unification of Italy* would mark another turning point. “After that,” Donato notes, “we became very poor.” These layered constraints hardened over time, forming a rigid frame of economic and territorial dependency that persists to this day.

The arrival of ILVA did not rupture this pattern; it reinforced it. Alongside the Navy and the Arsenal, the steelworks became part of a *monoculture* of employment that left little room for diversity or autonomy. It is the “*miracolo economico*”, explains Alessandro, the economic boom that saw Italy protagonist between 1960 and 1970. Work was concentrated in these massive, private-owned, male-dominated institutions, which shaped not only the economy but also the city’s social expectations. “You all have to end up in ILVA,” they teach at school, Nicola says, “that’s *our* culture.” In this model, to desire something different is to step outside the system. As Donato puts it, “whoever wants to do something different . . . is seen as a foreign body to this *ecosystem*.”

This monoculture functions like a rigid alloy: strong in one direction, but brittle when pressure is applied from another. The promise of secure work has proven to be a double-edged sword. Generations of Tarantini have migrated in search of alternatives, not because they want to abandon the city, but because its economic structure does not make room for them. “You don’t leave because of your choice, but because you’re forced to leave” (Dalila). And more: “Sometimes the city is unable to escape from this *narrative of negativity* and this does not help the younger generations in particular” Federico continues, “and maybe a youngster can think *Why should I stay here?*” Hence, the outflow of talent, creativity, and initiative becomes a form of silent corrosion, weakening the city’s social fabric from within. In fact, “industry should not kill people and it should not cause kids to leave this city” agree Riccardo and Dalila.

In such a context, care is not only about protesting what is broken, but it is about recognising what was never given space to grow. Repair, then, begins with naming this structural rigidity, and with tending to the possibility that new forms of work, belonging, and imagination might be forged from something other than steel. In Taranto, the task is not simply to dismantle what has been imposed, but to soften what has long been hardened, to make space again for flexibility, for movement, for life. To be able to question what this sacrifice of life and health is for.

Figure 9

The two myths of the creation of Taranto: Taras & Falanto.

Turi, G. [@gianvito.turi]. (2016, December 28). *Illustrazione per la città di Taranto. Capitale della Magna Grecia. / Illustration for Taranto city.* [Illustration], Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/BOj3nqOAKRt/

4.1.3 Toxic Alloys

If the promise of steel once stood for strength and progress, in Taranto it has come to represent fragility – the kind that settles in lungs, in bloodstreams, in family histories. The health consequences of ILVA's presence are experienced in everyday life, in the bodies of workers and residents, and in the empty chairs at kitchen tables. "Even though we are ILVA workers, we are in favour of closing the plant," says Riccardo, with the clarity of someone who has seen too much. Lorenzo stands with him: "As an employee with four children, I tell you that if ILVA closed, I would be happy." For him, the stakes are not theoretical. The *ricatto occupazionale* – the coerced trade-off between work and health – is no longer tolerable. The steel that once promised dignity now delivers danger. As workers observe, "It's useless . . . not even for washing machines" (Serena) or for "forks and pots" (Nicola). Hence, by merely producing the raw material, workers are alienated from their labour, they do not

recognise its value as well as the rights, “rights that each of us has and doesn’t even know it . . . they don’t want us to open our eyes, so they hide reality” (Nicola). It is the same alienation that Marx describes as the worker no longer finding themselves in what they produce, for “the object that labour produces . . . confronts it as something alien, as a power independent of the producer” (Marx, 2007/1844, p. 71).

Furthermore, the industrial harm is not only physical; it is institutional. It lives in the silence of unshared data, in the refusal to make public the results of toxicological analyses, and in the absence of accountability from those in power. Riccardo recalls being denied access to information about the presence of heavy metals in adult residents. Nicola adds that workers were sent to handle hydrochloric acid “with unsuitable masks,” kept in ignorance even as they were put at risk. “It seems that workers are bound to get sick,” Riccardo states. This is not hyperbole. It is a reflection of lived experience, of a system that tolerates illness as collateral damage. An illness pervading not only workers, men, women, and children living in the area, but also flora and fauna. Over the years, nearly three thousand livestock within a twenty kilometres radius of the plant were killed after excessive dioxin levels were detected in soil and food products, such as cheese (De Giorgio, 2024). Farmers were displaced even further, after the building of the factory had already cleared acres of land and olive trees, covering an area almost three times the size of the city of Taranto itself (De Giorgio, 2024).

The logic at play aligns with what Mbembe (2019) defines as *necropolitics* – “the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die” (Mbembe, 2019, p. 11). In Taranto, that decision is rarely spoken aloud, but it is embedded in every layer of the system. Carcinogenic dioxins have been found in everything from drinking water to breastmilk. They are linked to several forms of cancer, and in Taranto, the incidence of certain cancers is up to 70% higher than the national average. Children are particularly affected, with childhood lymphoma rates in Taranto recorded at twice the national rate between 2012 and 2019 (De Giorgio, 2024). Nearly every family has a story to tell of a relative lost to illness, of a diagnosis that came too late, of a neighbour who no longer speaks out for fear of consequences.

And yet, silence is structurally enforced. Serena points to the immense economic and political interests that protect ILVA from scrutiny: “The interests are so enormous that perhaps we don’t even know much about them.” Workers speak of bonuses offered to those who report colleagues who criticise the plant, institutionalising division and complicity.

In such conditions, care becomes the act of breaking silence. Repair begins with making harm visible. The weight of steel is not only in the infrastructure; it is in the absence

of transparency, in the erosion of trust, and in the fear that telling the truth may cost you your job, your health, or your place in the community. To care for this city is to insist on naming what corrodes it, and to light a fuse to ignite change.

4.1.4 Conclusion: From Cold Steel to Fire

This section has traced the cold hardness of steel, with its weight in the ground, in the lungs, in the psyche of Taranto. It has shown how ILVA's legacy corrodes not only the environment, but also trust, possibility, and dignity. Yet steel, once forged, can be melted. Beyond denunciation lies ignition: the fire of refusal, of storytelling, of communal breath reawakening. Tarantini are not only resisting what was imposed; they are tending to what still burns, clearing ground for new forms of care, and preparing the city for futures forged differently.

Figure 10

Aragona Castle and the Navy.

Turi, G. [@gianvito.turi]. (2016, December 29). *Illustrazione per Taranto. Storie di guerre, castelli e principesse. / Illustration for Taranto City.* [Illustration], Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/BOmeCofAWvE/

4.2 Fire: Tending What Still Burns

Where steel corrodes, fire persists – sometimes in protest, sometimes in warmth. In Taranto, fire is not only destruction but renewal. It burns in the choices to return, in collective defiance, and in the slow work of rebuilding from below. This section traces how acts of care, cultural resistance, and civic imagination keep the embers alive, forging solidarity and igniting new possibilities within a city too often left to smoulder. The overarching themes informing this section are *affective belonging, everyday resilience, participatory practices,* and *cultural infrastructure.*

4.2.1 Lighting the Fuse

In Taranto, acts of resistance are not always marked by confrontation; often, they begin with the decision to *stay* – or to *return*. Amid a context where outward migration is framed as necessity rather than choice, this gesture carries significant political and emotional weight. As it emerged from the interviews, leaving is rather a forced decision. Returning, then, becomes more than a biographical detail: it is an affective, place-based commitment that reclaims *agency* within a city long cast as unlivable. Ahmed (2005) conceptualises *orientation* as a political act – choosing to turn towards what is difficult or painful – and this is precisely the kind of reorientation that many returnees to Taranto embody.

In fact, such returns are often motivated by a desire to participate in collective transformation. Alessandro describes his own decision to stay as grounded in "a sense of community, this sense of *redemption*, which in my opinion can only be collective." The collective desire for redemption through shared action underscores placemaking as a "transformative process" that encourages citizens to act to "strengthen their sense of place" (Hernandez-Santin, 2020, p. 16). This engagement is framed by a critical "pedagogy of place" (Mateo-Babiano & Palipane, p. 36), which aims to contextualise social reality by understanding underlying socio-political forces and power structures at play.

Though precarious and uncertain, residents' commitment is emblematic of what Tronto (2013) describes as *care-as-practice*: an active, responsible mode of engagement, particularly relevant in spaces characterised by abandonment or institutional neglect. Tronto suggests that "To care well requires the recognition that care is *relational*: no judgement about whether care is good can be accomplished from a singular perspective, not that of caregivers or care receivers" (Tronto, 2013, p. 140). In this framework, presence itself becomes a form of care, as an assertion that the city is worth tending to, even when structural support is absent.

For others, returning is shaped by temporal distance. Umberto reflects that, “For me, moving away was understanding that Taranto is a fantastic city.” Such retrospective appreciation often fuels a renewed political investment in place. For instance, Pietro moved back to Taranto in 2012, in the midst of the protests fuelled when ILVA hot plants were seized, following an investigation for environmental disaster, food poisoning, manslaughter, and corruption, leading to the arrest of managers and owners of the company, including Emilio Riva (Romeo, 2019). Pietro shares:

> That demonstration broke a bit the social patterns that concerned the narration of the factory as the symbol of an *idyllic relationship between the city and the steelworks* . . . there was a powerful rupture there, which pushed me to return to Taranto, because it seemed like the right time to continue my socio-anthropological research on the city of Taranto.

Di Gregorio and Merolli (2016) frame this as *affective citizenship*: a non-formal, embodied relationship to place and people that challenges institutional exclusions by foregrounding emotional proximity and situated responsibility. A responsibility felt also by Emanuele, whom before 2012 favoured ILVA to stay open, and now part of the *Comitato Cittadini e Lavoratori Liberi e Pensanti*, after a protest where “something clicked in me . . . that made me come to my senses and take the *right* side”.

Who stands on the *right* side? The *Comitato Cittadini e Lavoratori Liberi e Pensanti* (CCLLP) was “born [in 2012] as a workers’ force,” Riccardo explains. “We united with the citizens and we want this closure of the plant. And so we go around Italy to tell the truth.” This *truth*-telling is not always welcome, and seems to be still relative to some. Federico retells that the catastrophic “environmental situation is no longer there. Taranto no longer has that pollution. And we need to say it clearly.” By doing so, Federico reclaims a “narrative of positivity” in which “Taranto has more than ILVA”. In the interviews, it emerged that this is not a question of who is right or who is wrong, but rather a question of perspective and action, of who decides to stay and fight.

And yet, as Dalila puts it, “it is a collective fight. Us against everything and everyone.” Such militancy is not a performance of opposition; it is a form of care. The same way it is for Federico to imagine new concrete futures for Taranto and its residents. To hold ground is to tend to the city’s *dignity*. However, when constant opposition leads to complete distrust in politics, it may lead to an abstention from voting, as Donato fears. “If people like

CCLLP don't vote, do you know what that means? If that multitude goes to vote, it can shift the balance," and if they do not, their protest remains in vain from a municipal political perspective.

On the other hand, *Uno Maggio Libero e Pensante*, the collective's annual grassroots festival organised by CCLLP, has become one of the city's most powerful symbolic forges, their "right and duty" (Aldo), as a cultural and political gathering where voices long silenced are amplified (Serena). "Maybe a hundred have a message for us," Serena says, referring to the thousands who attend. That hundred matters. One voice multiplied, one story shared, is part of an ongoing work of narrative reconstitution. However, some, such as Alessandro, Donato, and Umberto , do not share the "direct" (Serena) militancy of the CCLLP. Donato identifies a "mere vent" in their words; Umberto defines theirs as an "anarchist activism," lamenting that on Labour Day there was no mention of safety at work: "there is a minefield of tombs, of people working on cranes without helmets". On the other hand, CCLLP conceives the festival not only as a protest – it is "a *megaphone* to spread the protests and good practices of all the territories that otherwise would not have a voice"; it is placemaking and a reclaiming of civic space; it is a way to reclaim a right to the city.

Theatre, too, becomes a form of welded care. CREST, *Collettivo di Ricerche Espressive e Sperimentazione Teatrale*, a long-standing theatre company (1977) based in the polluted Tamburi district, continues to stay and operate despite official warnings to leave because of the toxicity of the air. "Either the neighbourhood is evacuated," says Carolina, "or evidently there is also a need for structures like this." Their presence is deliberate: a cultural anchor in a place often reduced to its proximity to danger. Although CREST was founded in Pistoia, near Florence, Carolina recounts that "then came the choice to try to create a professional reality in Taranto [where all the founders are from], a political choice in the sense of committing ourselves to the growth *of* the city and *in* the city." Their main mission is fostering a "relationship with the territory" (Carolina): workshops with schoolchildren, performances for local families, and experimental forms of storytelling all function as slow forms of healing – creative oxygen in contaminated air, in a city that "has not decided whether it really wants the closure of ILVA or not" (Carolina).

Therefore, within this context, the act of staying or returning is not passive nostalgia; it is a generative political decision. It signals a desire to reforge relationships with place, to resist narratives of inevitable decline, and to initiate processes of care that are both symbolic and practical. In Taranto, these decisions light the fuse for broader resistance, grounded in reconnection with the place and its people.

4.2.2 Forging Collaborations through Culture

If staying or returning lights the fuse, then the forging of *cultural* alliances keeps the fire alive. There emerges a strong, almost defiant commitment among people to stay, to build, to contribute. Umberto mentions younger generations feeling a heightened sense of responsibility towards the city, maybe more than previous ones. It is a commitment that takes many forms, but the one observed the most throughout this research is *grassroot* organising, described as a collective fight, resistance, resilience. In this fight, the role of arts and culture is prominent.

The interviews revealed that in Taranto, arts and culture are not just vehicles for expression but infrastructures of resistance: spaces where care takes form, solidarity is rehearsed, and the city is reimagined through everyday acts of collaboration. These initiatives do not operate in isolation. Rather, they form an ecology of practices that blur the lines between artistic work, social action, and civic repair. Repair here is neither quick nor complete. As Sennett (2008) writes, to repair something is to understand its structure – not to erase the damage, but to work with it. Taranto's cultural initiatives function precisely this way. They do not pretend the harm of ILVA or abandonment does not exist. Instead, they forge continuity where there is rupture, building what Mattern (2018) might call *infrastructures of care* – spaces, routines, and collaborations that hold people together when formal systems fail.

In Taranto, rooftops become stages of repair. Empty buildings become workshops. What is ordinary becomes political – fires lit in abandoned corners. As Gross and Wilson (2018) suggest, cultural production in such contexts functions as a form of spatial justice, offering residents new ways to relate to one another and their environment in the aftermath of extraction. Hence, these gestures are not only theoretical. At Post Disaster Rooftops, the rooftop becomes a platform, literal and symbolic, for gathering life: storytelling, performances, and imagination. Why rooftops? Pietro pictures the rooftop of his house, where Post Disaster Rooftops (PDR) began "very spontaneously" during rooftop dinners, where discussions about Taranto emerged. From the rooftops, one could see the two seas, industrial and military sites, and "the fumes from the steelworks," revealing "the whole ecosystem that insists on the city". This elevated view made it possible to "perceive its complexity" (Pietro).

PDR is a "project that links architecture and contemporary art in a cross-disciplinary discourse to urban and territorial planning issues," Pietro continues, "everyone is always very

happy to contribute to the process of building a community of intent." That intent is not utopian, as it is grounded in trust, shared labour, and the need for light in a city too often cast in shadow. "We have seen people choose to participate in a very free way . . . it's a chain of values that allows people to increasingly understand the work we are doing" (Pietro); it is a means to democratise participation and creation processes. Moreover, PDR taps into the global and the local, aspects that will be explored in section 4.3.2.

Throughout my journey in Taranto, I discovered a tapestry of initiatives motivated by the same reimagining effort towards the city. Between these grassroots realities, I stumbled upon Casa Viola (opened in 2024) and Mercato Nuovo (inaugurated in 2019, a few months before COVID-19 outburst), which transform everyday spaces into civic laboratories. Casa Viola, established in a formerly inaccessible building, uses its "unscalable wall" (Manolo) logo as a symbol of what has been reclaimed. The neighbourhood house is a place of *community welfare*, and it promotes co-responsibility: sixty to eighty percent of activities aim to be community-led, with initiatives such as Radio Galattica co-designed with local youth to amplify grassroots voices, highlighting the quiet insurgency of spaces that invite active presence over passive consumption.

Similarly, Mercato Nuovo has reanimated the marginalised district of Porta Napoli, using a do-it-yourself ethos to create what one co-founder described as a new "social fabric" (Stefano). Created by four friends in their late thirties, passionate about live music and cultural programming, the space emerged from the desire to host original concerts and artistic events that otherwise had no outlet in the city. Built entirely by the founders, including the stage and bar, Mercato Nuovo has grown into a vibrant venue for concerts, theater, film screenings, workshops, and social gatherings. People come from all over Puglia to hang out in Mercato Nuovo. Despite limited institutional support and sporadic municipal collaboration, the venue now hosts up to four events weekly and has welcomed acclaimed artists, including international acts. Here, friendships, romantic connections, and creative partnerships have emerged organically. "We've seen groups that didn't know each other meet here and then become something." (Stefano) It is in this becoming, not prescribed by institutions, but forged through encounter, that Taranto's cultural resistance and repair takes root.

All these spaces' ethos aligns with Chatterton's (2010) notion of *autonomous spaces* – settings where creative practices foster new subjectivities, solidarities, and political imaginaries. This network of initiatives is held together by a shared affective orientation toward the city. As Ahmed (2004) writes, orientation is not just about direction but about alignment, thus how bodies come together around common purposes and shared hopes. In

this light, Taranto Futura, youth-led cultural initiative born in 2023, embodies this idea. Founded out of the frustration that "there's nothing in Taranto," it creates opportunities for connection, celebration, and dialogue between locals and fuorisede. "We do our part . . . the real help is the community that believes in us," says Ruggero, emphasising the role of trust and care over institutional backing.

This vision of collective agency is further extended by Taranto 25, a philanthropic civic foundation that channels returnees' success into tangible contributions through the *Due Mari di Talenti* award. Their "Bridge Projects" reframe return as investment – not only financial, but also relational and structural. By supporting sports clubs and grassroots initiatives, they attempt to build what Lefebvre (1974) calls *differential space* – urban environments shaped by participation, care, and shared ownership, rather than commodification. Taranto 25 aims to become a "social network of active citizenship that addresses the issue of common good" (Federico), because they claim to deny neoliberalist ideologies that favour individualism. As McRobbie (2016) notes, cultural programmes can transmit neoliberal values by framing precarity as an individual challenge, to be overcome through innovation and passion. In this light, Taranto 25's model of civic return risks aligning with a broader narrative that ties cultural value to entrepreneurial performance, even as it seeks to serve the common good. The next section will unravel disputed choices that the organisation takes to maintain its status.

Even informal public life participates in this quiet reoccupation of space. The Acclavio Library and its surrounding square have become everyday hubs of encounter. Alessandro stresses the importance of such "small places" – parks, streets, rooftops – as symbolic lungs of the city (Xing & Brimblecombe, 2020).

These alliances, whether improvised on rooftops or coordinated in neighbourhood hubs, are not just responses to loss. They are propositions. They suggest that culture, in its most radical sense, is not decoration but infrastructure. Such instances represent "stances of vital urbanism" shaping a "collective imagery of an alternative city" and providing "alternative spaces for action and creation" (Morea & Sabatini, 2023, p. 2-3). In Taranto, artistic and cultural practices resist the logic of extraction not by mirroring its violence, but by refusing its terms. They offer warmth, form, and vision. They are the embers that remain when the old structures cool, and they are what might ignite the next beginning.

4.2.3 Conclusion: From Fire to Water

The fire that fuels resistance in Taranto does not only rage – it sustains, connects, and warms. It flickers in the quiet acts of care, the forging of alliances, and the creation of spaces where new imaginaries take root. But fire alone cannot sustain life. What follows is water: the fluid, connective force of regeneration. If resistance is what keeps the flame alive, it is water that allows it to spread not destructively, but as nourishment. The next section explores how Tarantini are sowing futures in common, imagining new relations to space, community, and possibility through fluid acts of placemaking and repair.

Figure 11

The New City: The sailors, the Concattedrale, and the Admiralty.

Turi, G. [@gianvito.turi]. (2016, December 31). *Illustrazione per Taranto. La città nuova. / Illustration for Taranto city.* [Illustration], Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/BOroudAgGw9/

4.3 Water: Sowing Common Futures

While fire resists and ignites, water carries, connects, and transforms. This section traces how Taranto's residents move from rupture to regeneration, imagining and enacting futures beyond industrial dependency. Through cultural practice, grassroots organising, and

civic experimentation, they cultivate fluid forms of care and community. These efforts do not aim to erase the past, but to redirect its flow toward solidarity, toward sustainability, and toward a city that belongs to those who live, imagine, and repair it together. Water, here, is the medium through which shared futures begin to take shape. The overarching themes informing this section are *institutions and power, cultural infrastructure* and *imaginative futures*.

4.3.1 Tributaries of Actions

Taranto's regeneration efforts flow through a network of tributaries – diverse, sometimes conflicting streams of imagination and action. These waters do not always run in the same direction, but together they form the sediment of the city's contested future. This subsection explores the tension between bottom-up, culturally rooted visions and top-down institutional strategies, revealing how different actors – activists, artists, foundations, and citizens – negotiate the right to imagine Taranto otherwise. Although some arguments have already emerged in the rest of the sections of the results, it is fundamental to gather all perspectives in one place, in order to create an overview on all the different placemaking initiatives and grassroot activism in Taranto.

On one bank of this terrain stand initiatives like the Comitato Cittadini e Lavoratori Liberi e Pensanti (CCLLP), which articulate a stark and unequivocal demand: *the total shutdown of ILVA*. Riccardo describes the group as a "weapon" against misinformation. Their critique is not abstract. "If industry kills people, it is no longer progress," says Dalila, rejecting the long-standing logic of the *ricatto occupazionale*. For many within the committee, care for the city begins with refusal: refusal to accept partial reforms and narratives that obscure the scale of environmental and social harm. To them, "environmentalization does not exist, decarbonisation does not exist," (Riccardo) because a transition to a greener ILVA is not possible with the current physiognomy of the factory, as its integral cycle of production is not convertible while it is in action.

CCLLP's alternative is radical but rooted: a city "without ILVA," where human life is prioritised over productivity. One week after talking to CCLLP, on May 7, 2025, there was a fire in the blast furnace that, according to the company, had been caused by "a sudden anomaly" in the cooling system. As a result, the plant's production has halved due to the seizure of blast furnace 1 by the Taranto prosecutor's office (Il Post, 2025). And still, the government wants to avoid ILVA's closure because it would have considerable high social and economic costs, as at the moment, it is controlled 68% by the French-Indian company

ArcelorMittal and 32% by the State, which is looking for a buyer to take over from ArcelorMittal, without results (Il Post, 2025).

Now more than ever, workers advocate for the closing of the factory. CCLLP members mention several steel plants that have been already closed, mainly during the period of privatisations and economic difficulties in the steel sector. Today, in Italy, only few factories remain in operation, with Taranto being the only one in the South (Redazione, 2022). However, the long-term nature of change – "always talk about 20 years, 30 years" – and the lack of consistent action from different governments "always going back to year zero" lead to frustration. Residents feel that "local politics is truly a torment" (Donato), that progress is "too slow" (Donato) and that "they don't even have the capacity to do what they say" (Nicola). In these waters, frustration swells with each cycle of reset and regression.

However, not all actors follow this path. Federico advocates for going "beyond ILVA," embracing dialogue with national and international partners such as Eni Joule and Zurich, that offer "important economic contribution." While some regard this pragmatism as strategic, others – especially within CCLLP – view it as betrayal. "Everyone thought they were allies of this city, but in reality they are not," says Dalila, evoking a recurring pattern of opportunistic alliances. Federico, however, defends the approach: "We did not want to have an ideological attitude . . . we tried to have a more constructive one for the city."

Nevertheless, Taranto 25 is also aiming to rebrand Taranto as a "Mediterranean hub" of culture, innovation, and soft power. Their initiatives foster symbolic returns that become material interventions, turning nostalgia into civic participation and self-entrepreneurship. Federico mentions the upcoming *Giochi del Mediterraneo 2026*, a multidisciplinary sports competition inspired by the Olympic Games, which takes place in various cities around the Mediterranean basin, as an opportunity to project Taranto outward, beyond its industrial shadows. This aspect will come back in the next section, when discussing images of collective Mediterranean identities.

Yet this optimism is not without friction. Many interviewees, especially younger activists, express deep skepticism toward institutional projects, citing a long history of neglect and opportunism. Promises are made, then reset. Support is offered, then withdrawn. The municipality is largely perceived as absent in supporting culture, a situation described as consistent over time, meaning culture primarily arises from grassroots efforts (Alessandro). Even practical barriers persist; despite being a recognised entity throughout Italy and abroad, CREST's rapport with local institutions "remains difficult" (Carolina), as it faces daily challenges due to municipal issues like public transport, infrastructure, neglected urban

policies, and community events left unfunded (Carolina), also encountered by Manolo and Stefano.

Hence, this pervasive lack of genuine municipal partnership forces grassroots organisations to operate independently and fosters a deep-seated distrust in local politics (Donato). In this context, grassroots actors build continuity from below, weaving "chains of value" (Pietro) that do not depend on political cycles. In fact, more grassroots actors like CREST, Post Disaster Rooftops, Taranto Futura, and Casa Viola refuse the binary of resistance or complicity. They occupy a middle ground, tending to cultural commons as spaces of encounter, experiment, and care.

These tensions are symptoms of a city in transition. As Stavrides (2016) writes, commons are not fixed spaces but processes of negotiation. They are always in the making, held together by shared use, relational time, and ongoing contestation. In Taranto, what is being negotiated is not only the city's economy or identity, but its capacity to imagine. What futures are thinkable? Who is authorised to speak them into being?

In essence, the established power structures, dominated by the legacy of heavy industry and often perceived as characterised by political neglect and self-interest, create a challenging environment for grassroots efforts in Taranto. These initiatives often operate in a context of limited resources, institutional indifference or obstruction, and pervasive distrust, while also grappling with the deep-seated socio-economic impacts of industrial decline, such as employment blackmail. However, these grassroots efforts persist as crucial sites of resistance, community building, and the imagining of alternative futures. As these tributaries continue to diverge and intersect, what emerges is not a singular vision but a hydrosocial terrain – a living landscape shaped by care, struggle, and the persistent refusal to let steel and smoke define what the city can become.

4.3.2 Tides of Imagination

As the tributaries of action shape Taranto's present, the tides of imagination begin to chart its futures. These are not utopian blueprints nor grand political programmes; they are situated, affective, and materially grounded efforts to imagine life beyond ILVA. In the wake of extraction, creativity becomes a method of recovery, and a compass pointing toward alternative ways of living with the city.

"One can imagine anything, even a Taranto without ILVA," Alessandro continues, "the same way there was no ILVA before the industrialisation of the South, there can also be a post-industrialised Taranto without the factory." This deliberate shift in narrative agency is a

recognition, as feminist theorist Donna Haraway (2016) suggests, that "staying with the trouble" requires more than survival; it demands speculative commitment to different ways of world-making.

This is the ethos embraced by Post Disaster Rooftops (PDR), whose speculative practice enacts what Pietro calls a "post-disaster condition," where culture and sociality might generate new forms of community. From the rooftops of Taranto's Old City, one can see both the literal and symbolic debris of collapse. But from that same vantage, new futures come into view – unfolding between the ruins, in the gaps between what is and what could be. "We imagine Taranto 2049," Pietro explains, "a dystopian city where the factory still produces – less and less – but where life insists, through artistic and social dimensions."

This project resists easy narratives. It plays with "a change of *scale*" (Pietro): Taranto is not just Taranto, but a lens through which to view "global flows" (Pietro) – of capital, pollution, possibility. Situated in the Mediterranean basin, the city becomes a node in a wider cartography of contested urbanisms. Manolo echoes this, naming Mediterranean culture as a terrain of shared symbols – landscapes, holy cards, still lives – through which belonging is imagined and performed.

Drawing on Lefebvre's (1974) notion of space as a social product, PDR's rooftop gatherings constitute more than symbolic gestures, as they actively produce space through embodied, collective practice. Participation here becomes a form of spatial agency: a way of reclaiming the city not just in rhetoric but in lived rhythms and sensory experience. "I think today the 'we' is more visible," says Pietro. "A shared, if unspoken, purpose to rebuild the city without getting disillusioned again. To move beyond the disaster" (Pietro).

This mode of imagining is shared by Taranto Futura, whose response to stagnation is simple but radical: "There's nothing in Taranto. So we decided to create it" (Umberto ; Ruggero). Through DJ sets, self-published zines, and relational events, Taranto Futura produces cultural life where stagnation once reigned. "Our events are not entertainment, they're community," claims Umberto, with the mission of creating "cultural hubs" where creative ideas and local identity can flourish. Their efforts reflect what Appadurai (2004) calls the "capacity to aspire" – a collective orientation toward a future that becomes actionable through culture, not capital. These initiatives prioritise building social relations and community over purely economic gain (D'Ovidio, 2021).

While these efforts are led largely by youth, imagination is not the sole property of the young. CREST continues to cultivate resilience through theatre, particularly in the Tamburi neighbourhood. "Small miracles" occur when theatre becomes a site of transformation, a

language for belonging and reflection. CREST resists the commodification of culture – it is not a "theme park" (Carolina), but a lived city. Through creative dialogue, it fosters territorial development, supports youth, and sustains local memory.

Nevertheless, there are visible tensions between romanticisation and actionable hope. Envisioning a post-ILVA Taranto, and focusing on culture as a foundation for the future are not the only feasible ways. Two additional forces – education and entrepreneurship – emerge repeatedly as crucial scaffolds for imagining otherwise.

Education, in Donato's words, is the "only salvation of the territory." More powerful than hospitals, it saves generations, cultivating critical thinking and emotional sensitivity. Stefano laments that "Taranto lacks the help of university students' communities" and feels that "the city is empty without them, the fuorisede." Manolo observes that young people who have lived elsewhere often feel more empowered to organise, to initiate, to claim space. A strong university presence would not only diversify opportunities but activate cultural infrastructure, fostering a participatory ethos among the city's youth.

Entrepreneurship is similarly positioned as a form of hopeful pragmatism. Federico notes that entrepreneurship helps intercept new economic flows and build "a social network of active citizenship." Through programmes like *StarTAp25*, Taranto 25 provides grants, mentorship, and visibility to young innovators. These opportunities counteract a perceived lack of "networking capacity" and a tendency towards individualism in Southern Italy that impede the collective action necessary for entrepreneurial ecosystem development through a "social network of active citizenship" (Federico). These interventions begin to assemble an ecosystem that resists both resignation and isolation. At the same time, as Gill and Pratt (2008) note, cultural entrepreneurship increasingly models the neoliberal subject: flexible, self-reliant, and constantly self-improving, yet also precarious and individualised. While Taranto 25 seeks to cultivate civic-minded innovation, its emphasis on entrepreneurial initiative may inadvertently align with broader neoliberal values that shift structural responsibility onto individuals.

In a different way, while not explicitly "entrepreneurial" in their core mission, cultural initiatives like Mercato Nuovo and Post Disaster Rooftops demonstrate how local entrepreneurs (e.g., vendors, restaurateurs, B&Bs) benefit economically from the cultural activities and community projects (Pietro; Stefano). This highlights a "circular economy" where economic benefit is derived from community-activating dimensions, contrasting with more "extractive" models (Pietro; Stefano). As Gu (2015, p. 246) notes, "cultural development entails a strong relationship between the regeneration of post-industrial cities

and the development of cultural/creative industries through place branding and local economic development." In this context, culture circulates not only meaning, but material sustenance, by rooting regeneration in everyday practices and relationships.

All these drivers highlight that community building and creative expression in Taranto are not merely artistic or social activities, but forms of repair, of regenerative placemaking. They are political acts that challenge power dynamics and rebalance them, creating space for voices long silenced and subjectivities long ignored. It is a process of staying with the city, even in its brokenness, and finding ways to live, resist, and imagine otherwise through culture and collaboration.

4.3.3 Currents of Participation

If imagination gestures toward what could be, and action begins to materialise it, participation reveals who is invited to shape the journey, and who remains at the margins. In Taranto, participation is uneven and contested. It flows through aspirations for autonomy, but is constrained by entrenched political and institutional asymmetries. Rather than a clean ladder of engagement, what emerges is a fractured civic ecology, where gestures of inclusion often mask deeper exclusions.

Arnstein's ladder of participation (1969) helps trace how residents engage, from full control to symbolic consultation. At the top, initiatives like the Comitato Cittadini e Lavoratori Liberi e Pensanti (CCLLP) and Casa Viola reflect *citizen control*, with residents setting agendas and claiming civic space. Yet even these models carry limits. CCLLP's radical stance can alienate more moderate actors, risking ideological closure. Casa Viola's co-designed structure depends on sustained volunteerism and cultural fluency, which may exclude less-embedded residents. Access, in these cases, is still shaped by class, education, and symbolic capital.

Further down, *delegated power* and *partnership* describe projects like Taranto Futura, Mercato Nuovo, and Post Disaster Rooftops. These cultivate cultural infrastructure and civic presence, but often operate through small leadership cores. Participation is encouraged, yet not always structurally co-creative. Demographics skew young, mobile, and culturally engaged, leaving other publics underrepresented. Even PDR, with its emphasis on speculative co-creation, may orbit around the already culturally literate. Yet its model complicates neat divisions between active and passive publics. Participation emerges not only through formal roles or visible activism, but also through embodied presence, spontaneous engagement, and collective atmospheres of encounter. Local collaborators include youth in precarious

conditions, small-scale entrepreneurs, and residents who interact with performances without prior intent – what Pietro describes as "unaware participants." These layered forms of inclusion challenge conventional hierarchies of authorship, reframing participation as a shared inhabiting of possibility rather than a fixed position on a ladder. Still, symbolic inclusivity does not always translate into structural transformation, and PDR too navigates the tensions between openness and curation.

In the realm of *consultation* and *placation*, efforts such as CREST, Taranto 25, and its *Due Mari di Talenti* award show sharper tensions. While CREST fosters community dialogue through theatre, it retains institutional authority in shaping narratives. Taranto 25 and *Due Mari di Talenti* promote youth engagement and diasporic return, but participation is framed through entrepreneurial logic. Those unable to "pitch" ideas in marketable formats may find themselves left behind. In these cases, participation becomes conditional – tied to performance, access, and alignment with institutional priorities.

Taken together, these cases reveal that participation is not inherently empowering. It can entrench inequalities even as it claims to address them. It can offload responsibility for regeneration onto communities, while institutions retain control of funding and framing. The emotional labour required to maintain participation is often overlooked – a hidden form of unpaid governance sustained by care.

And yet, the current does not stop. Participation in Taranto is also about holding space: for encounter, for resistance, for imagining otherwise. Residents engage not only in structured programmes but in the everyday labour of connection – building relationships, telling stories, and sustaining place. Participation here is not a policy tool but a practice of staying. To make it meaningful, it must be supported with structural resources and rebalanced power. Otherwise, it risks becoming a tide that carries some forward, while leaving others behind.

4.3.4 Conclusion: Beyond the Water

Water does not erase fire or corrode steel – it carries their memory forward. In Taranto, the slow, fluid labour of regeneration emerges not from forgetting harm, but from weaving it into new forms of life. The initiatives explored in this section remind us that imagination is a material force, and that futures are not found but made – carefully, collectively, and often against the current. As tides rise and tributaries converge, Taranto's residents are not just reclaiming their right to the city; they are composing its next chapter, not beyond damage, but through it. Repair, here, is a practice of possibility.

Figure 12

The Three Bridges of Taranto: Ponte di Pietra, Ponte Girevole, and Ponte Punta Penna.

Turi, G. [@gianvito.turi]. (2017, January 3). *Illustrazione per la città di Taranto. I ponti. / Illustration for Taranto city. Bridges.* [Illustration], Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/BOzW4I2AIYP/.

4.4 Conclusion

Across steel, fire, and water, Taranto's residents reveal a city in motion – not through grand transformations, but through iterative acts of survival, care, and resistance. The legacy of ILVA may still weigh heavily, but it no longer holds the only blueprint for the future. What unfolds instead is a fragmented, yet resilient landscape of alliances, imaginaries, and quiet insurgencies. People stay. People return. They forge, tend, and flow. This chapter has traced not a resolution, but an ongoing process where damage is acknowledged, narratives are challenged, and futures are cautiously, collectively sown.

Ultimately, Taranto's journey is a testament to the fact that "placemaking is not done to a place or community, it is co-created, co-managed and shared" (Hes et al., 2020, p. 11). Through iterative acts of "dwelling, counteracting, and being creative" (Morea & Sabatini, 2023, p. 8), and by continuously engaging with "place-specific local knowledge" (Palipane et al., 2020, p. 110) and fostering "meaningful relationships" (Hes et al., 2020, p. 280) within its

unique material and affective landscapes, Taranto's residents are actively crafting a "more just and sustainable city" (Morea & Sabatini, 2023, p. 2), ensuring that despite its wounds, it continues to "pulse and adapt to changes" (Morea & Sabatini, 2023, p. 2).

Next chapter traces a *roadmap to collective redemption*, sketching recommendations for a foundation of more organised action for bottom-up culture-led regenerative placemaking.

5. Recommendations: A Roadmap to Collective Redemption

Beneath the dominant narrative of harm, Taranto lies another one: a collective, slow-burning work of redemption. This roadmap seeks not to overwrite the city's wounds but to offer a practical and hopeful direction, grounded in bottom-up regenerative placemaking, that enables Taranto to move from its "rusted ground" through fire and toward futures seeded in care, repair and resilience.

This roadmap identifies five interconnected recommendations. Each builds from the premise that transformation in Taranto will not come from above, but through collaboration, persistence, and shared imagination – practices already visible in the city's cultural and civic actors.

5.1 Fostering Collaboration and Mutual Support

Taranto is already rich in grassroots organisations – CREST, Casa Viola, Taranto Futura, Post Disaster Rooftops (PDR), Mercato Nuovo, and CCLLP. However, these initiatives often operate in isolation, sometimes even in quiet competition. To build lasting change, these tributaries of action must flow more deliberately together.

A fundamental step towards deeper collaboration would be to facilitate regular "commoning" sessions – informal and semi-structured meetings where groups share tools, ideas, and struggles. As Pietro suggests, "we should invite those who have learned the language of the collective to create new ones, therefore not to find other pre-existing collectives, but to become generativity for new collectives."

As observed by residents and confirmed in interviews, one of the South's persistent challenges is a tendency toward individualism, which risks "clipping the wings" (Ruggero) of promising projects. By fostering cooperation between groups with different focuses (e.g., CCLLP's activist voice and Taranto Futura's community-building energy) Taranto can develop a stronger, federated cultural ecosystem. Post Disaster Rooftops already models this by involving residents in producing cultural content that doubles as urban critique. Echoing the Fearless Cities movement, this approach recognises cities as sites of democratic experimentation, where coalitions of civil society can push systemic change through relational work.

Moreover, to strengthen collaboration across Taranto's fragmented civic landscape, actors should embrace a model of *coopetition* – balancing collaboration and strategic differentiation (Richards & Duif, 2019). Local initiatives should also consider how their positioning within the urban ecosystem can generate *network value*, becoming central to the

city's regeneration narrative while maintaining their distinct identities (Richards & Duif, 2019, p. 88). Clarifying common goals and investing in connective leadership could help bridge ideological divides and foster more inclusive, coordinated forms of culture-led regeneration.

5.2 Bridging Generations and Supporting Returnees

Many young people in Taranto grow up internalising a sense of defeat. Opportunities are limited, and leaving the city often feels like the only path toward a viable future. However, among those who leave, many carry a lasting emotional bond with the city, one that sometimes draws them back with a desire to contribute. Harnessing this affective energy requires more than symbolic gestures; it calls for concrete structures of mentorship, dialogue, and inclusion.

Sandbox Studios, guided by the 5P Framework – People, Process, Product, Programme, and Place (Figure 13) – provide an adaptable structure for this work (Hernandez-Santin, 2020, p. 17). These studios operate as co-creation labs that emphasise place leadership and participatory design. They can bring together young people, returnees, and older activists to imagine and prototype projects grounded in local realities.

This mirrors the ethos behind *Manifesta*, the European nomadic biennial, which in cities like Palermo (2018) has modelled how local knowledge and creative infrastructure can be woven into broader civic development when the process is done with, not to, residents.

Figure 13

The 5P framework for placemaking

	Characteristics include
People	Including leadership (allowing the people to become active agents of place), deep engagement (who is engaged), and their needs (an exercise to understand the different ways in which people relate to the place by understanding their needs, aspirations, experiences, culture, and relationships).
Process	A 'design-with' exercise where the key role of the placemaker is to create a good environment for communication and empowerment. The process should give agency to the community, use local knowledge, respond to local perspectives, and have a clear purpose driving the project.
Product	The tangible outcomes of the project including temporary or permanent changes in the urban fabric (i.e., art exhibition and redesign of the main street respectively) or meaningful soft products (i.e., walking tours).
Program	Place-keeping mechanism used as 'glue' for the ongoing emotional connection to place. It includes maintenance, management, and place activation initiatives. Activities should be meaningful based on local needs and interests to enhance the experience of place.
Place evaluation	Process to monitor and evaluate the intervention and understand the outcomes and legacy of a project. It should incorporate relationship building outcomes and document social, ecological, and economic benefits.

Reproduced from "Head, Heart, and Hands Model for Placemaking Learning: The Sandbox Studio Approach" by C. Hernandez-Santin (2020), *Placemaking sandbox: Co-creating spaces for community resilience*, p. 15.

5.3 Demanding Accountable and Constructive Institutional Engagement

A common theme across interviews is the deep distrust in Taranto's political institutions. Many residents feel that the municipality either hinders grassroots efforts or instrumentalises them for political gain.

Rather than accepting this dysfunction, grassroots actors in Taranto might consider forming a civic platform to make collective demands for transparent and consistent public support. These demands could include improved transport to cultural venues, basic lighting and services in event areas, and public funding that is long-term, fair, and non-partisan. While CCLLP's stance of radical independence is historically grounded, greater coordination among grassroots organisations could shift the political landscape from a site of frustration to one of accountability and co-responsibility.

This is not an abstract idea. Across Italy, examples such as the Collettivo GKN (Insorgiamo, n.d.) show how civic movements can evolve from protest into proactive, system-oriented proposals, with tools of "adaptive governance" (Bush et al., 2020, p. 46). In Florence, former factory workers built an alliance that fused labour rights with climate action

and cooperative governance. Taranto's grassroots sector has the moral credibility to act likewise.

5.4 Investing in Education and Cultural Entrepreneurship

Interviewees consistently pointed to education as a pillar for the city's long-term renewal. Yet many noted the lack of local university infrastructure and the dominance of industrial or military careers in the city's economic imagination. Without strong alternatives, youth either emigrate or disengage.

Expanding the university's presence in Taranto – especially in disciplines like design, urban studies, digital culture, or environmental science – would offer pathways out of this monoculture. At the same time, entrepreneurship programmes like *StarTAp25* can help cultural and social projects gain financial stability and independence. Linking these efforts to the cultural sphere could create a circular economy, where local business and grassroots initiatives mutually reinforce one another, and creative labour is treated as a profession, not a hobby. Platforms for resource pooling and open-source sharing, such as those promoted by the Placemaking Europe Network (2019), would further reinforce this ecosystem.

5.5 Forge a New Affective Narrative of Taranto, Beyond the ILVA Legacy

Finally, any roadmap must address the narratives that surround and shape Taranto. Too often, the city is reduced to its proximity to ILVA and the health crisis it represents. While these realities must not be erased, they do not define the totality of the city or its people.

A more nuanced narrative that emphasises resilience, care, and creative resistance can be told through magazines, podcasts, exhibitions, and public art. Taranto Futura already offers one such counter-narrative through cultural journalism, while Post Disaster Rooftops' speculative work asks residents to imagine Taranto otherwise. These efforts help reclaim the city as a space of value, possibility, and shared authorship. As Federico puts it, this is about "giving people the vision of the stars" without denying the rusted ground beneath. As *Manifesta* has shown in its itinerant model, art can open new public conversations, especially when rooted in social realities and not parachuted in from above. A narrative of pride and potential, grounded in everyday acts of resistance, can make staying in Taranto feel like a meaningful choice, not a burden.

5.6 Conclusion: Redemption as Collective Work

This roadmap does not suggest that Taranto can, or should, be saved through culture alone. But it insists that culture, care, and collective action are already building the conditions for change. From mentorship labs to civic alliances, from shared storytelling to demands for justice, these acts represent a slow, deliberate form of urban healing. This roadmap invites those fires to burn brighter, together.

Figure 14

Entrepreneurial ideas and innovative solutions of young people in the Mediterranean area.

Turi, G. [@gianvito.turi]. (2024, May 25). *Visual del CIHEAM Youth Innovation Award 2024.* [Illustration], Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/C7YxXVxodCj/?img_index=1.

6. Conclusion: C' Sim' Angóre

Io non ci credo/ A chi mi dice che non serve a niente/ A chi mi dice che non può cambiare/ A chi mi dice che c'è solo gente troppo disillusa, troppo indifferente/ A chi mi dice: *"È solo un'utopia"*/ E mi vorrebbe zitto e a casa mia/ A chi mi dice: *"È inutile gridare"*/ Ma il silenzio è loro/ Io non ci credo più.

I don't believe/ Those who tell me it's useless/ Those who say it can't change/ Those who say there are only people who are too disillusioned, too indifferent/ Those who say: *"It's just a utopia"*/ And would rather see me silent and at home/ Those who say: *"It's pointless to shout"*/ But the silence is theirs/ I don't believe it anymore.

(Diodato, *Non ci credo più*, 2025)

Tracing back to the beginning, this thesis has explored grassroots responses to complex challenges in Taranto, Italy. The central question guiding this study was: *To what extent do practices of bottom-up regenerative placemaking in Taranto foster residents' resilience?*

Resilience was framed not merely as survival or passive adaptation, but as an active process of surviving, adapting, and resisting the structural harm inflicted by extractive urbanism. By drawing on a theoretical framework that combines regenerative placemaking, affective atmospheres, and resilience as transformation, the thesis has underscored that urban regeneration is not simply a physical process, but is deeply emotionally embedded and collectively navigated. What emerged is a portrait of a city negotiating not only physical and economic challenges, but deep emotional and historical entanglements – a place where survival cannot be separated from meaning-making, and where transformation often begins in quiet, local acts of care and repair.

This negotiation of identity is evident in the practices of cultural actors, community organisers, and everyday residents who actively participate in shaping their city through grassroots initiatives. These include reclaiming public and marginal places, encouraging intergenerational discussion, and articulating counter-narratives to Taranto's prevailing image as a post-industrial city profoundly influenced by the environmental and social costs imposed by the ILVA steel mill. Residents participate in what Hes and Hernandez-Santin (2020) refer to as regenerative placemaking: a type of spatial intervention that is not just ecological and participatory, but also deeply affective and situated.

Affective atmospheres, as theorised by Anderson (2009), are central to understanding how residents experience, interpret, and reconfigure the urban environment. In Taranto, these atmospheres are dense with grief, memory, anger, and care, and are shaped as much by the residues of industrial harm as by the presence of community solidarity and cultural reanimation.

Moreover, this study has illustrated how the right to the city – understood in Lefebvrian terms as a right not only to access space but to shape and transform it – is claimed through these practices. Residents assert their right not merely to remain, but to belong, to participate, and to imagine otherwise. These bottom-up interventions serve as instances of spatial justice, in which everyday acts of care, expression, and collaboration challenge extractive urban logics and make tangible an alternative model of urban citizenship.

Methodologically, the study has privileged qualitative, situated, and affectively attuned inquiry, aligning with the processes it aimed to understand. Through semi-structured interviews, one focus group, two participant observations, and reflexive engagement, the research has foregrounded the *lived* experience of regeneration, revealing how political agency and emotional life intersect in the making and remaking of place.

The journey through Taranto's landscape, interpreted through the metaphors of Steel, Fire, and Water, has revealed a city in constant motion, marked by both profound wounds and persistent hope. The red dust settling on the city is not only toxic, but serves as an archival record of an extractive modernity that promised prosperity while poisoning the air, soil, and bodies of its residents, human and non. This industrial presence has created a 'forged dependence' and led to 'toxic alloys' of physical and institutional harm, manifesting in alarming public health crises, including elevated cancer rates and respiratory illnesses. The pervasive influence of ILVA has often overwritten the city's identity, leading to a normalisation of a harm that, while adapted to, does not equate acceptance. The collective impact includes feelings of resignation, anxiety, eeriness, fear, and anger.

Nevertheless, acts of resistance and reimagination persist, embodying the 'fire' that sustains the city's spirit. The decision to stay or return to Taranto carries significant political and emotional weight, signifying an affective, place-based commitment to collective transformation and a refusal to abandon the city. Bottom-up cultural and civic initiatives such as the Comitato Cittadini e Lavoratori Liberi e Pensanti (CCLLP), with its annual *Uno Maggio Libero e Pensante* festival, CREST (Collettivo di Ricerche Espressive e Sperimentazione Teatrale), Post Disaster Rooftops (PDR), Taranto Futura, Mercato Nuovo, and Casa Viola, function as quiet insurgencies and cultural infrastructure of resistance.

These initiatives challenge dominant narratives, foster affective belonging, and empower residents to imagine and actively work towards alternative post-ILVA futures. They operate as infrastructures of care, forging continuity where formal systems often fail.

The tributaries of actions in Taranto demonstrate diverse, sometimes conflicting, streams of imagination and action. This includes the unequivocal demand for ILVA's shutdown by CCLLP, rejecting the *ricatto occupazionale* (coerced trade-off between work and health), contrasted with the pragmatic approach of organisations like Taranto 25, which seeks to rebrand Taranto as a "Mediterranean hub" through dialogue with national and international partners.

Despite pervasive distrust in local politics and institutional neglect, grassroots actors build continuity from below, fostering "chains of value" that do not depend on political cycles. The tides of imagination involve speculative practices, like PDR's "post-disaster condition" and Taranto Futura's efforts to create cultural life where stagnation once reigned.

Education and cultural entrepreneurship are consistently identified as crucial for long-term renewal, helping to diversify opportunities and foster a participatory ethos. The currents of participation are uneven, ranging from citizen control (CCLLP, Casa Viola) to more cultivated engagement (Taranto Futura, Mercato Nuovo, PDR), yet they collectively contribute to a shared inhabiting of possibility.

Nonetheless, some limitations of this study must be acknowledged. While the multi-modal qualitative methodology provided rich insights into lived experiences, the use of snowball sampling may limit the generalisability of findings to broader populations within Taranto or other post-industrial contexts. The research primarily captured voices already embedded in cultural and civic life, potentially overlooking the perspectives of more marginalised groups, non-participants, or those who have left the city.

Future studies could explore these experiences in greater depth, as well as examine how different generations – particularly those who emigrate and later return – navigate, bridge, or contest the city's historical and future narratives. A longitudinal approach would also be valuable in tracing how grassroots placemaking efforts evolve over time, and whether their impacts are sustained or contested, especially in relation to institutional engagement and policy change amidst prevalent local distrust.

Additionally, investigating the potential for formalising collaborations among grassroots organisations could offer practical insights into strengthening Taranto's collective regenerative capacity. Finally, it would be fruitful to apply the proposed affective framework for regenerative urbanism to comparative studies of other post-industrial cities facing similar

struggles, thereby contributing to a broader understanding of how bottom-up cultural and affective practices shape urban resilience across contexts.

In conclusion, Taranto does not offer a linear narrative of decline and recovery, but rather a textured landscape of care and repair – a city shaped as much by its scars as by the hands that tend them. Regeneration here is not a finished product, but a process of dwelling with brokenness, reclaiming wounded spaces, and weaving new relational fabrics. It is a slow, collective, and affective labour: one of staying, remembering, mending, and reimagining. In painted walls and rooftop gatherings, in festivals and workshops, in every protest and every quiet act of maintenance, residents are not simply resisting harm; they are composing new rhythms of life together. Taranto teaches that resilience does not emerge in spite of adversity, but through the shared insistence that damaged places remain worthy of love, of breath, and of a future.

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Appendix A

Interview guide

	Question	Sub-questions
0	**Potresti presentarti?** ***Could you introduce yourself?***	Come ti chiami? *What's your name?* Quanti anni hai? *How old are you?* Qual è la tua occupazione? *What's your occupation?*
MACRO – Percezione di Taranto e dei suoi cambiamenti ***Perception of Taranto and its changes***		
1	**Che rapporto hai con Taranto?** ***What is your relationship with Taranto?***	Da quanto tempo vivi qui? *How long have you lived here?* Come descriveresti la città a qualcuno che non la conosce? *How would you describe the city to someone who doesn't know it?* Ci sono ricordi o momenti che per te rappresentano Taranto? *Are there memories or moments that represent Taranto for you?*
2	**Secondo te, com'è cambiata la città nel corso degli anni?** ***In your opinion, how has the city changed over the years?***	Quali sono i cambiamenti che hai notato di più, positivi o negativi? *What changes have you noticed most – good or bad?* Hai notato differenze nei quartieri, nelle persone, nei luoghi? *Have there been differences in neighborhoods, people, or places?* C'è qualcosa che ti manca della "vecchia Taranto"? *Is there anything you miss from the "old Taranto"?*
3	**Cosa ti viene in mente quando pensi all'ILVA?** ***What comes to mind when you think about ILVA?***	È qualcosa che senti ancora presente nella vita quotidiana? *Is it still something you feel in your daily life?*

		Ci sono emozioni particolari che provi legate all'ILVA? *Are there any specific emotions tied to ILVA for you?* Pensi che abbia influenzato il modo in cui le persone vivono la città? *Do you think it has influenced how people live in or perceive the city?*
MESO – Dinamiche al livello della comunitá, rigenerazione (urbana), ed esperienza collettiva ***Community dynamics, (urban) regeneration, and collective experience***		
4	**Hai mai sentito parlare o partecipato a progetti di rigenerazione o iniziative culturali in città? Com'è stata la tua esperienza?** ***Have you ever heard of or taken part in any regeneration or cultural projects in the city? What was that like?*** **Può raccontarmi del suo coinvolgimento nei progetti di rigenerazione o culturali a Taranto? Di che tipo di attività si occupa e cosa l'ha spinto/a intraprendere questo percorso?** ***Can you tell me about your involvement in regeneration or cultural projects in Taranto? What kind of activities do you do and what inspired you to take this path?***	Cosa ti ha colpito di questi progetti? *What struck you most about those projects?* Come li hai scoperti? *How did you find out about them?* Ti sei mai sentito coinvolto/a o rappresentato/a? *Did you feel involved or represented in any way?* Quali sono gli obiettivi principali del progetto o dei progetti a cui partecipa? *What are the main objectives of the project or projects you are involved in?* In che modo vi relazionate con la comunità locale attraverso il vostro lavoro? *How do you relate to the local community through your work?* Quali sfide o opportunità ha incontrato nel realizzare queste iniziative? *What challenges or opportunities have you encountered in implementing these initiatives?* Secondo lei, quale impatto ha avuto (o spera possa avere) il suo progetto sulla città e sui suoi abitanti? *In your opinion, what impact has your project had (or hopes it will have) on the city and its inhabitants?*
5	**Secondo te, questi progetti (ad esempio murales, aree verdi, riuso di spazi industriali) che effetto**	Hai notato se le persone usano di più quegli spazi? *Have you noticed if people use those spaces more?*

	hanno sulla città o sulle persone? ***In your opinion, what kind of impact do these projects (like murals, green spaces, reuse of industrial sites) have on the city or its people?***	Hai mai sentito qualcuno parlare di questi cambiamenti? *Have you heard anyone talk about those changes?* Ti sembra che abbiano cambiato l'atmosfera del quartiere? *Do you think they've changed the atmosphere of the neighborhood?*
6	**Hai notato cambiamenti nel modo in cui le persone vivono o si relazionano con la città, grazie a questi spazi rigenerati?** ***Have you noticed any changes in how people relate to the city or to each other because of these regenerated spaces?***	Vedi più persone uscire, stare insieme, partecipare? *Do you see more people out and about, socializing, participating?* Pensi che queste trasformazioni abbiano aiutato a creare un senso di comunità? *Do you think these transformations helped create a sense of community?* Ci sono esempi che ti vengono in mente? *Can you think of any specific examples?*
7	**Che ruolo pensi abbiano la cultura o gli spazi condivisi nella vita quotidiana dei tarantini?** ***What role do you think culture or shared public spaces play in the daily lives of people in Taranto?***	Pensi che ci siano luoghi dove le persone si sentano davvero parte della comunità? *Are there places where people really feel like they belong to a community?* La cultura per te è solo "arte", o anche altro? *Do you think culture is just about "art," or is it something broader?* Hai mai visto la cultura aiutare qualcuno a superare momenti difficili? *Have you ever seen culture help someone through a difficult moment?*
MICRO – Riflessioni personali, reazioni emotive, speranze e soggettivitá ***Personal reflections, emotional reactions, hopes and subjectivity***		
8	**Ci sono luoghi in città a cui ti senti particolarmente legato/a? Perché?** ***Are there places in the city that you feel particularly attached to? Why?***	Cosa provi quando sei in quel luogo? *What do you feel when you're in that place?* È cambiato nel tempo? *Has it changed over time?*

		Lo frequenti spesso? Con chi? *Do you go there often? Alone or with others?*
10	**C'è qualcosa che vorresti che più persone capissero o sapessero su cosa significa vivere a Taranto? *Is there anything you wish more people understood about what it means to live in Taranto?***	C'è qualcosa che ti fa arrabbiare o ti dà orgoglio, quando si parla della città? *Is there something that makes you proud or angry when people talk about the city?* Se potessi mandare un messaggio a chi non è di Taranto, cosa diresti? *If you could send a message to someone who isn't from Taranto, what would you say?* Cosa speri per il futuro della città? *What do you hope for the city's future?*

Appendix B

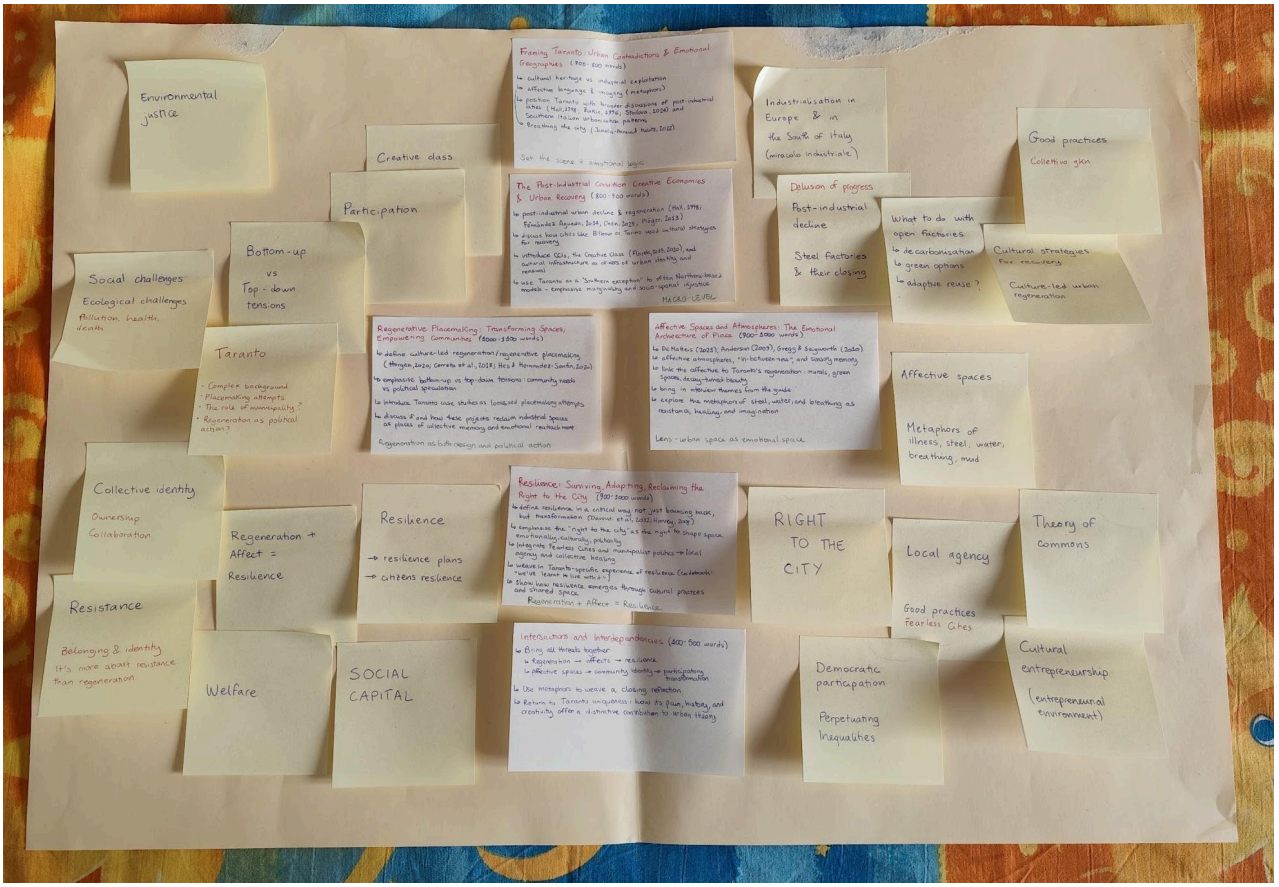
Codebook

Theme	Code	Definition / Description
Urban Decline & Exposure	industrial harm / ILVA	Mentions of ILVA, pollution, illness, grief, decay
	loss / mourning	Emotions tied to loss of place, health, people, opportunities
Affective Belonging	attachment to place	Expressions of love, rootedness, family ties, "feeling Tarantino"
	emotional geographies	How people feel space - nostalgia, fear, pride, longing
Everyday Resilience	surviving	Coping, staying, managing health or scarcity
	adapting	Changing practices, attitudes, finding new ways to live
	resisting	Critique of institutions, grassroots organising, refusal to comply
Participatory Practices	commons / shared care	Collectively maintained spaces, mutual aid, informal networks
	bottom-up placemaking	Informal initiatives, community projects, reclaiming space
Institutions & Power	top-down failure / distrust	Distrust in government, disillusionment, lack of policy impact
	politics of recognition	Representations of Taranto, marginality, media narratives
Cultural Infrastructure	spaces of culture	Libraries, theaters (CREST, Mercato Nuovo), festivals (Uno Maggio), rooftops
	culture as resistance	Cultural expression used to challenge dominant narratives
Imaginative Futures	alternative imaginaries	Visions of a different Taranto, post-ILVA future, reimagined identity
	youth agency / return desire	Feelings of wanting to stay/return, generational aspirations

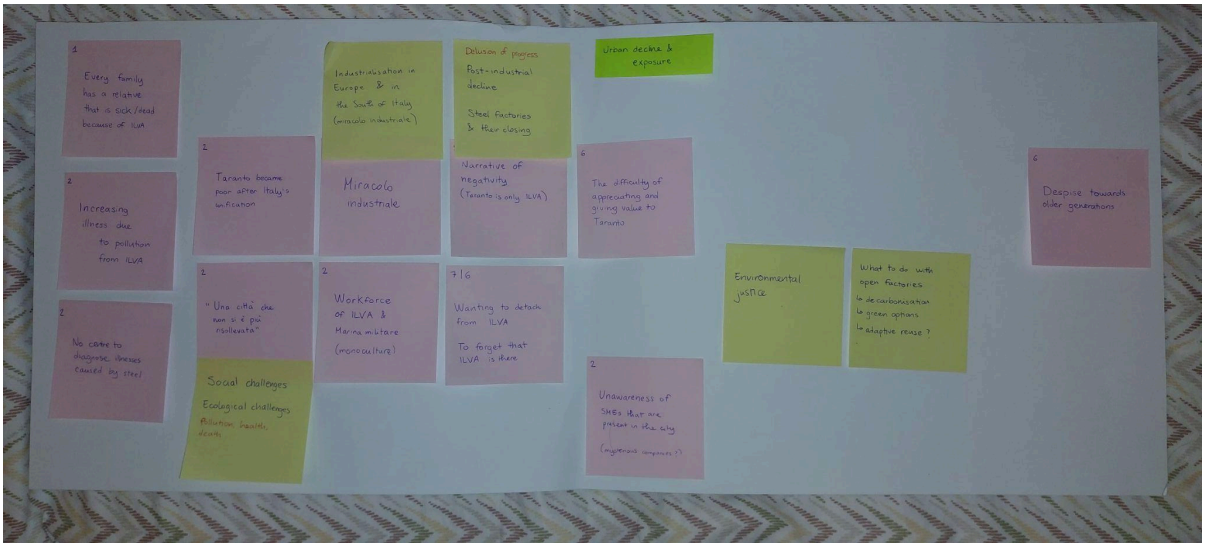
Appendix C

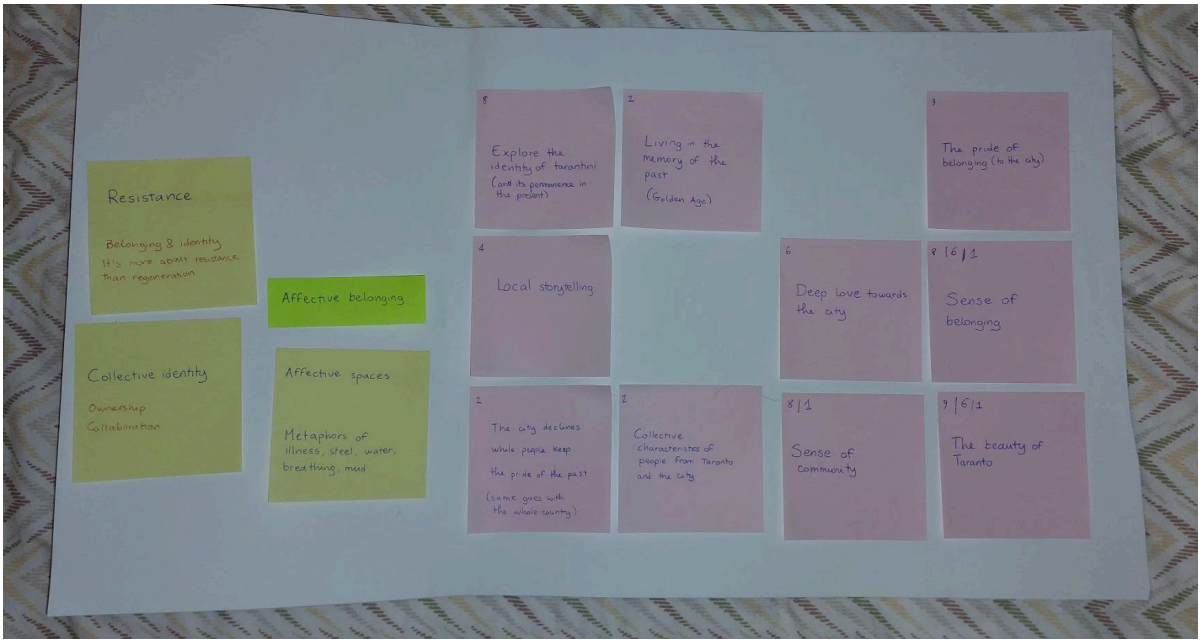
Concept mapping

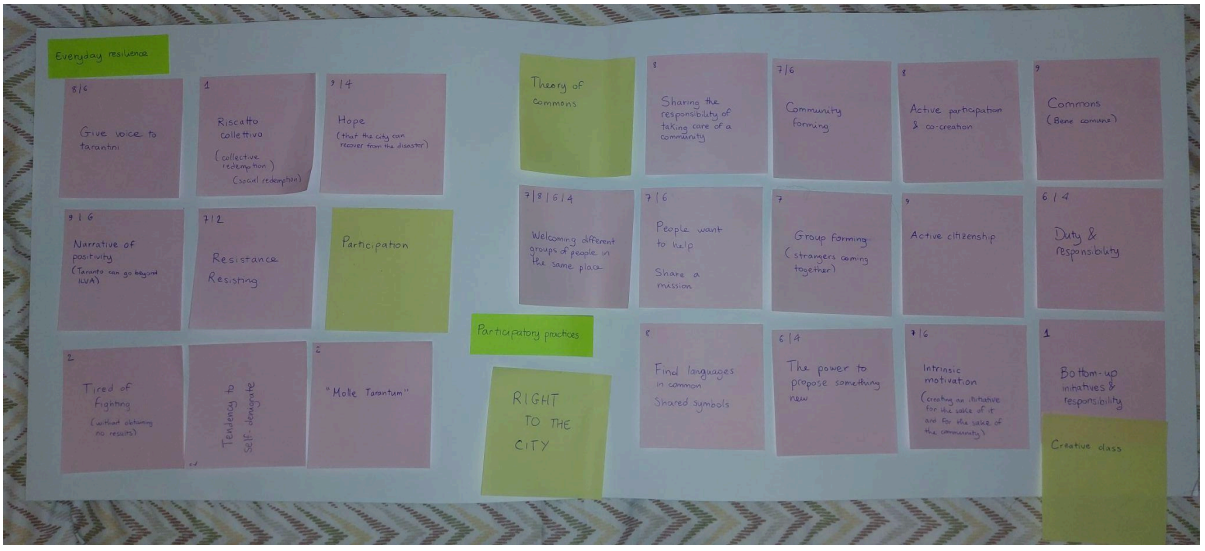
Theoretical framework

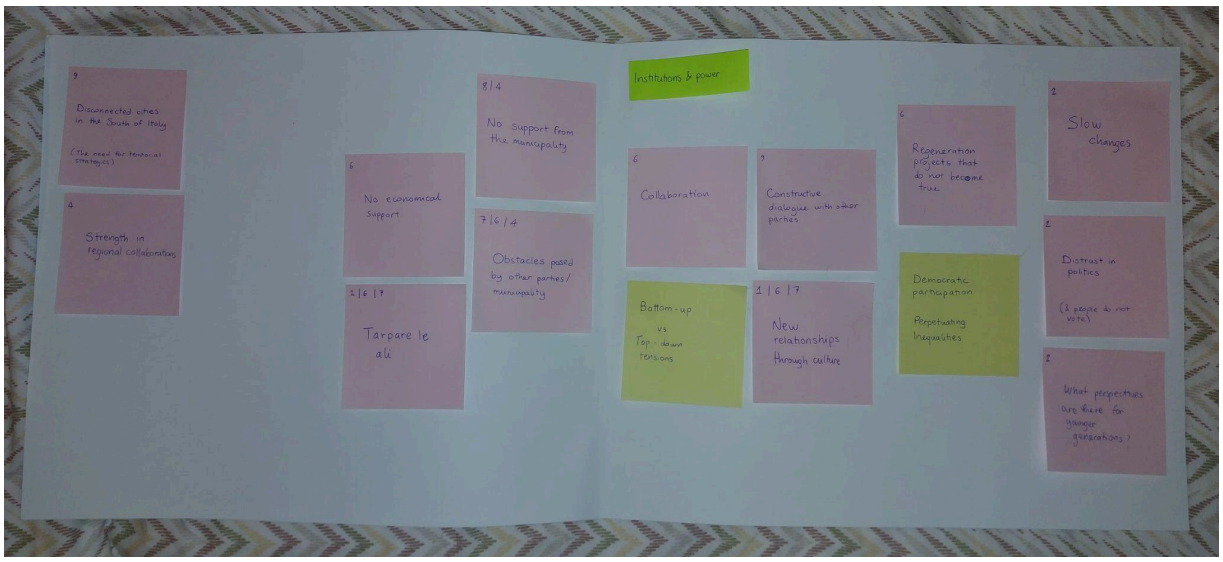


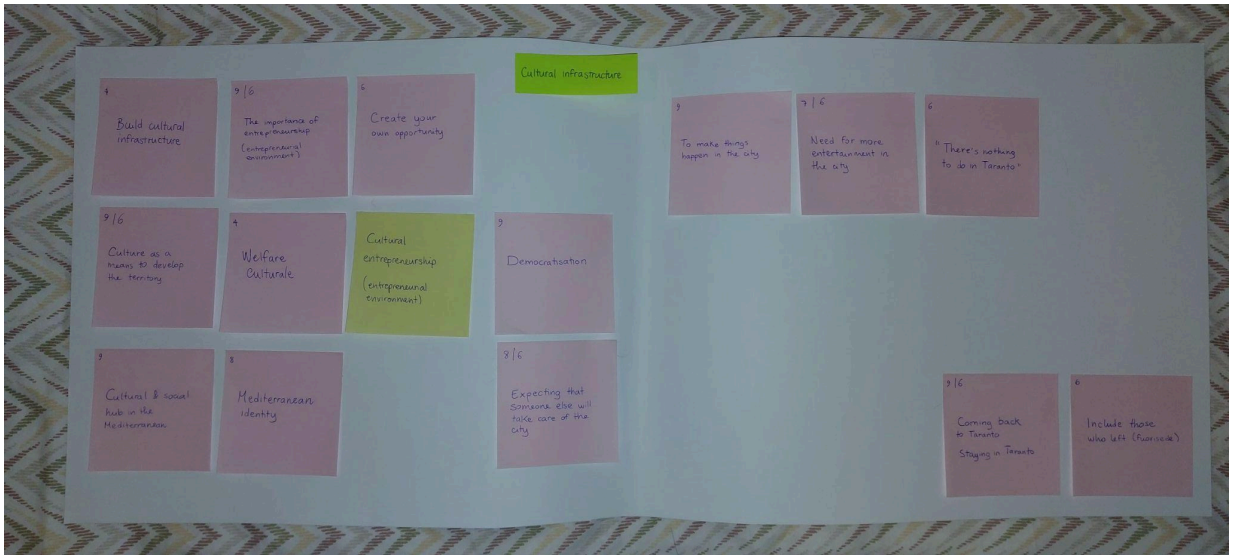
Coding interviews

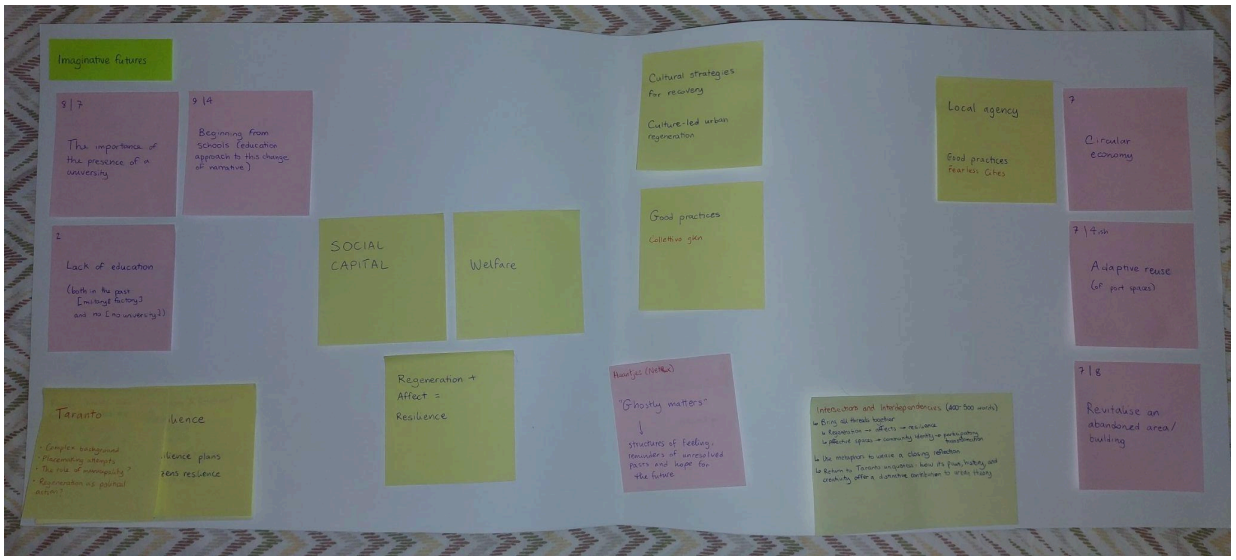




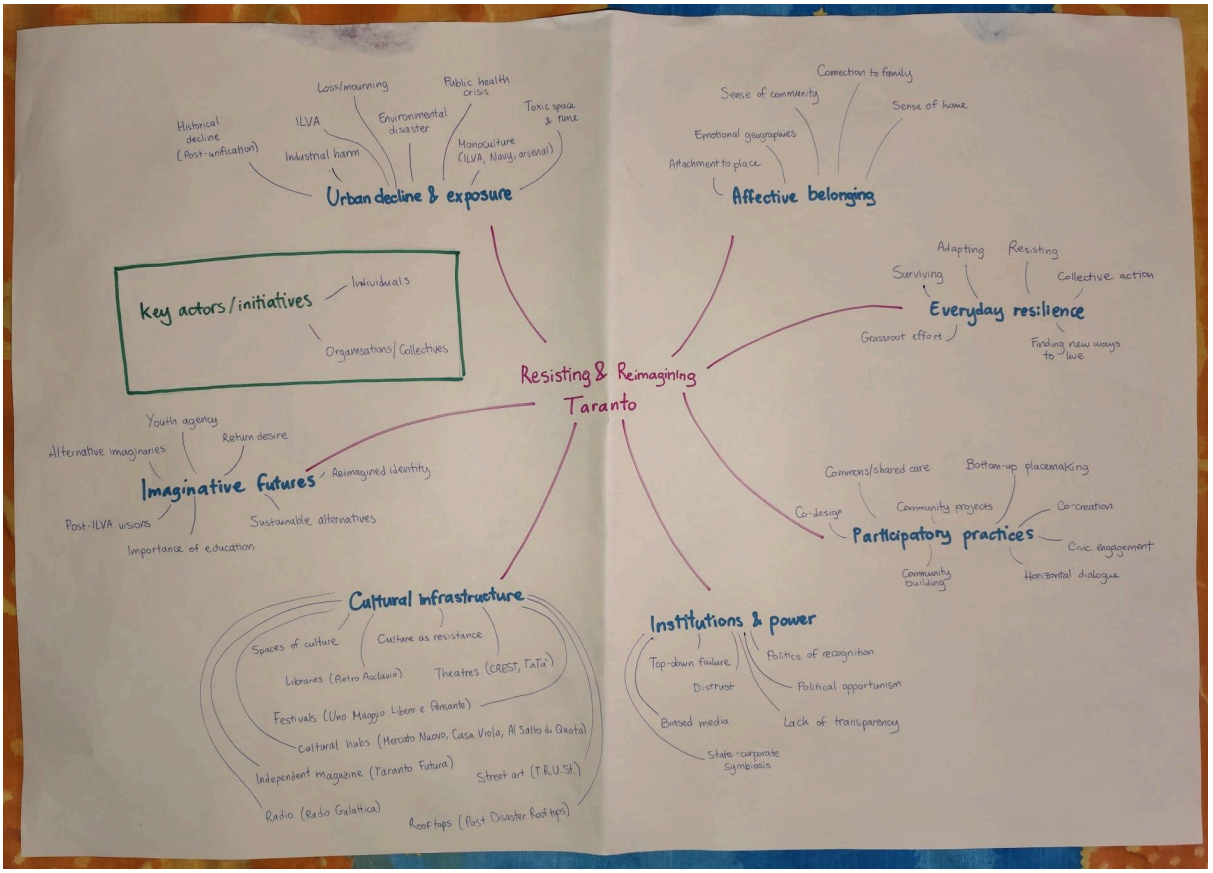



Institutions & power
Disconnected cities in the South of Italy
(The need for territorial strategies)
Strength in regional collaboration
No economical support
8/4
No support from the municipality
7/6/4
Obstacles posed by other parties/ municipality
2/6/7
Tarpare le ali
Collaboration
Constructive dialogue with other parties
Bottom-up vs Top-down tensions
1/6/7
New relationships through culture
Regeneration projects that do not become true
Democratic participation
Perpetuating Inequalities
Slow changes
Distrust in politics
(& people do not vote)
What perspectives are there for younger generations?


Cultural infrastructure
Build cultural infrastructure
9/6
The importance of entrepreneurship
(entrepreneurial environment)
Create your own opportunity
To make things happen in the city
9/6
Need for more entertainment in the city
"There's nothing to do in Taranto"
9/6
Culture as a means to develop the territory
Welfare Culturale
Cultural entrepreneurship
(entrepreneurial environment)
Democratisation
Cultural & social hub in the Mediterranean
Mediterranean identity
8/6
Expecting that someone else will take care of the city
9/6
Coming back to Taranto
Staying in Taranto
Include those who left (Fuorisede)


Imaginative futures
9/7
The importance of the presence of a university
9/4
Beginning from schools (education approach to this change of narrative)
Lack of education
(both in the past [Ilva/steel factory] and no [Eno university])
SOCIAL CAPITAL
Welfare
Regeneration + Affect = Resilience
Taranto
Cultural strategies for recovery
Culture-led urban regeneration
Good practices
Collective skin
"Ghostly matters"
structures of feeling: reminders of unresolved pasts and hope for the future
Local agency
Good practices
Fearless Cities
Circular economy
Adaptive reuse
(of port spaces)
Revitalise an abandoned area/ building

Results


Resisting & Reimagining Taranto
Urban decline & exposure
Historical decline (Post-unification)
Industrial harm
ILVA
Loss/mourning
Environmental disaster
Public health crisis
Monoculture (ILVA, Navy, arsenal)
Toxic space & time
Affective belonging
Attachment to place
Emotional geographies
Sense of community
Connection to family
Sense of home
Everyday resilience
Surviving
Adapting
Resisting
Collective action
Grassroot effort
Finding new ways to live
Participatory practices
Co-design
Commons/shared care
Community projects
Bottom-up placemaking
Co-creation
Civic engagement
Horizontal dialogue
Community building
Institutions & power
Top-down failure
Distrust
Biased media
State-corporate symbiosis
Lack of transparency
Political opportunism
Politics of recognition
Cultural infrastructure
Spaces of culture
Culture as resistance
Libraries (Pietro Acclavio)
Theatres (CREST, TaTa)
Festivals (Uno Maggio Libero e Pensante)
Cultural hubs (Mercato Nuovo, Casa Viola, Al Salto di Quota)
Independent magazine (Taranto Futura)
Street art (T.R.U.St.)
Radio (Radio Galattica)
Roof tops (Post Disaster Roof tops)
Imaginative futures
Youth agency
Return desire
Alternative imaginaries
Reimagined identity
Post-ILVA visions
Sustainable alternatives
Importance of education
key actors/initiatives
Individuals
Organisations/Collectives