

# Co-designing neighbourhood identities. How to share memories and experiences towards a common sense of belonging.

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## Abstract

Participatory Design (PD) has expanded the field of Design in developing new ways of social engagement in the public sphere. The approach always aims at co-designing inclusive and shared solutions starting from a disarticulation and rearticulation (Mouffe, 2013) of different points of view freely expressed by individual people in a community. When applying PD in transformative processes for the public realm, researchers in Design have to deal with a complex but rich social party made up of pluralities (Manzini, 2015), enlarging the democratic arena and embracing all the participants and the different viewpoints (Björgvinsson et al., 2010). In this sense, PD is an effective way to deal with transformative processes in neighbourhoods as it gives the community a tool to democratically discuss together social, environmental, and cultural issues affecting the community. To design there – though aiming at an urban bottom-up renewal – means in the first instance to touch upon (shared or contested) meanings for the community, and possibly help the citizens to identify them, question them and re-assess them from multiple perspectives (Tassinari & Vergani, 2023). This is the case of Nolo, a neighbourhood in the city of Milan characterized by a proactive “creative community” (Meroni, 2007), where the research team the authors belong to fostered over the years social cohesion and innovation interventions through tailored-made PD activities. In this process – currently undergoing – specific attention is paid to address various points of view from the marginalized community of the neighbourhood such as immigrants, elderly, citizens with physical and cognitive impairment, children but also those agents coming from the non-human realm like plants, insects and others. In this framework, the paper presents a specific co-design session organized with some inhabitants of the neighbourhood to articulate a shared and inclusive *sense of belonging*, collecting, and comparing the viewpoints of the inhabitants. To map the neighbourhood’s different identities – and understand the specific places to be redesigned together with the community using a bottom-up approach – we invited young and old people to join the co-design session, asking them to share their memories, tell their personal experiences and dis-

cuss cross-generational issues. The co-design session helped us to envision together future scenarios for their neighbourhood, while letting emerge the importance of preserving memories for the future of the community.

## Author keywords

Participatory Design; Design for Social Innovation; Situated Knowledge; Sense of Belonging; Community of Care

## Introduction

Participatory Design (PD) has expanded the scope of Design by introducing new forms of social engagement in inclusive processes and projects. The approach has been successful in creating inclusive projects and dialogues by engaging with diverse communities, such as neighbourhoods, and allowing for the co-design of solutions that consider the perspectives and needs of all members (Manzini, 2015). The process aims to generate a discourse, a cultural artefact, developed by that specific community, and can help citizens to re-assess shared or contested meanings (Mouffe, 2013). However, dealing with these diverse communities requires designers to step outside traditional dichotomies and engage with multiple epistemologies (Coccia, 2021; Latour, 2018). In this case, the authors looked to Donna Haraway’s work on situated knowledge as a framework for counteracting power dynamics, engaging with diverse world-making projects, and embracing vulnerability and open-endedness (Haraway, 1988). According to Haraway’s teachings, instead of fearing vulnerability, we should engage with it and explore its potential. The authors of this project used this approach by embracing their own vulnerability as designers and engaging with a specific form of situated knowledge in their PD process. This helped them to recognize the partiality and vulnerability of different perspectives in the community. In this context, it is important to recognize that participation in public discourse is not just about individuals, but about communities as well. Participation in PD practices risks being limited, and not including a diverse group of people (Reyes-García et al., 2012; de la Cadenena & Blaser, 2018). To address this issue, the experimentation described in this paper explores a way to involve a diverse



perspective and experience, putting it in communication with other ones, still belonging to the same setting, in order to work on the concepts of historical memory and sense of belonging to a place.

### The context

The experimentation presented in the paper was conducted in the context of Nolo, a semi-peripheral neighbourhood of the city of Milan (Italy) in which the research group Polimi DESIS Lab - the research lab of the Politecnico di Milano the authors belong to - is active since 2016. After several years of engagement with community actors through educational activities, the research group subsequently physically established in the context in 2020 with Off Campus Nolo, a living lab located in the area's historic covered market (Fassi & Vergani, 2022). Off Campus Nolo (an initiative from Polisocial, the social engagement and responsibility programme of the Politecnico di Milano) not only hosts research projects and community-making practices, but also events, volunteering activities and meetings organized by the Polimi DESIS Lab as well as the neighbourhood citizens. When the research team entered the neighbourhood, a vibrant process of urban transformation and regeneration was already in development, mainly thanks to the proactive community of newcomers coming from different parts of the country. In fact, the area in which Nolo is located was historically involved in various migratory flows - both national and international - that contributed to create a rich context in terms of a variety of cultures, traditions, behaviours (Fassi & Manzini, 2021). Today, newcomers with different cultural backgrounds represent over 34% of the local population (made up of about 25,000 inhabitants), compared to an average figure of 19% throughout the city of Milan (ibidem). The proactive community of Nolo - here defined as a "creative community" (Meroni, 2007) - have already fostered over the years a process of urban and social transformation that led to the opening of new citizen-centered services, but also the spontaneous aggregation of the inhabitants around different initiatives, activated both online and offline. These initiatives have taken up both formal and informal forms of association such as the "Nolo Social District", a "social street" managed by the inhabitants themselves through a Facebook group with more than 12,000 members, helping the socialization process between neighbours (Fassi & Vergani, 2022). The process triggered by the people involved in the "social street" led to the creation of a new identity for the neighbourhood, which is partially overlapping with other identities established in previous decades. In this sense, the authors are trying to uncover the different "overlapping geographies" (De Rosa et al., 2020) of the neighbourhood - intended as "physical portions of the city linked to social, cultural, and human identities which manifested over time and space" (ibidem) - by collecting past narratives lost in time.

### Methodology

One of the main research projects that were developed in Off Campus Nolo (and still ongoing) is the Nolo *Situated Vocabulary*, a neighbourhood vocabulary whose aim is to help the community of Nolo to map the district both in its spatial and social features by including its wide network of "situated stakeholders" (citizens, shopkeepers, neighborhood associations as well as local administrators and the Municipality) (Fassi & Vergani, 2022). The *Vocabulary* is managed by the

professors, researchers, PhD candidates and interns of the Polimi DESIS Lab that become curators, content creators, and volunteers when working at Off Campus Nolo) (ibidem) who are currently exploring ways to generate conversations around 9 keywords (*Public Space, Degradation, Common Good, Sense of Belonging, Memory, Change, Fun, Commitment, Nolo*) chosen by a group of members of the "Nolo Social District" Facebook group as hot topics experienced daily by the inhabitants. At the heart of the project lies the concept of using the *Vocabulary* as a physical prompt that evolves into an agonistic space or a "collaborative platform" (Huybrechts et al., 2022) to bring to light unexpected similarities and revealing potential divergences among the Nolo community (Vergani et al., 2023). Specific attention is paid to the *Vocabulary's* potential to include (ontologically) different "voices" (human as well as non-human such as plants, animals and others), bringing them in dialogue to envision common matters of concern and new courses of transformative actions (ibidem). This collection of "voices" of the inhabitants - as well as those of writers, linguists, artists, designers, local activists, scientists (etc.) - takes place during co-design activities, workshops and interviews, both in the physical space of Off Campus Nolo and on online platforms and social media. The "voices" are collected in the *Vocabulary* and then spread in the community of the neighbourhood in several modalities, such as specific exhibitions, booklets and a podcast developed in collaboration with Radio Nolo, the neighbourhood web-radio created and supported voluntarily by local citizens, based in the Off Campus Nolo space. Through this approach, Off Campus Nolo and the surrounding neighbourhood transform into a physical "agorà" (Huybrechts et al., 2018), a space in which reflections on the *Vocabulary* can be shared, conversations can take place, and new courses of action can be envisioned (Vergani et al., 2023). In the case of the activities described in this paper, the authors focused on the word *Sense of Belonging*, choosing the elderly inhabitants of Nolo as the main target to work with. This decision was made as they represent the ones who own the memories of the location and, ideally, have a strong sense of belonging to the neighbourhood in which they have lived for a long time.

### The activity

The workshop took place in the city of Milan, in an old-fashioned bar in the Nolo neighbourhood, called "Lido Bar". The location is a popular gathering spot for both old and young locals and it is known for its friendly owner, a long-time resident of the area. The activity - a one hour and a half-long co-design session - involved a group of elderly inhabitants of Nolo. The objective of the activity was to assess the perceived sense of belonging to the neighbourhood by comparing the opinions and personal stories of the participants through various phases (Figure 1) using several tools. In the first ice-breaker activity, participants were asked to pick three places that give them a sense of belonging, highlighting the memories and significant aspects associated with those.

Subsequently, the participants sketched those places on cards, telling their personal memories to the other members of the group in order to foster a confrontation to understand whether there were some common features assessing a shared sense of belonging (Figure 2). Another dimension that was mapped, apart from the one linked to the physical asset

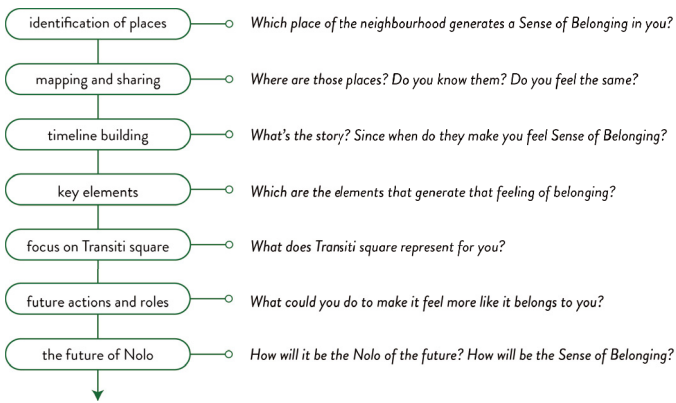


Figure 1. Workshop's phases (Diagram by the authors).

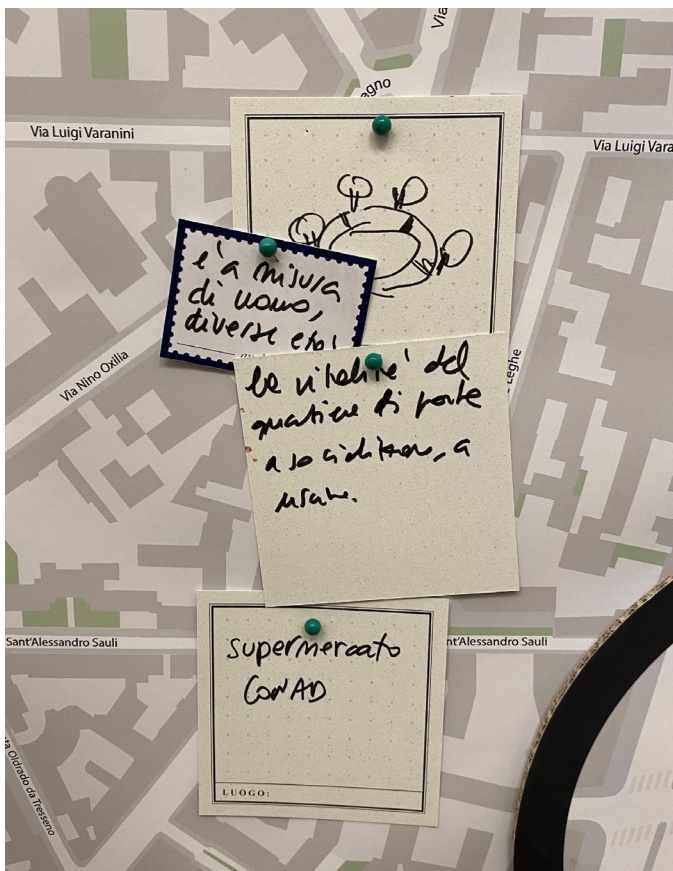


Figure 2. Interactive mapping (Picture by the authors).

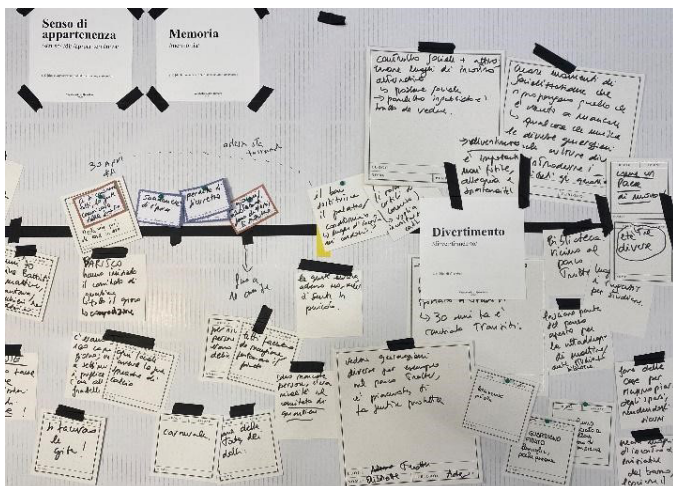


Figure 3. Interactive timeline (Picture by the authors).

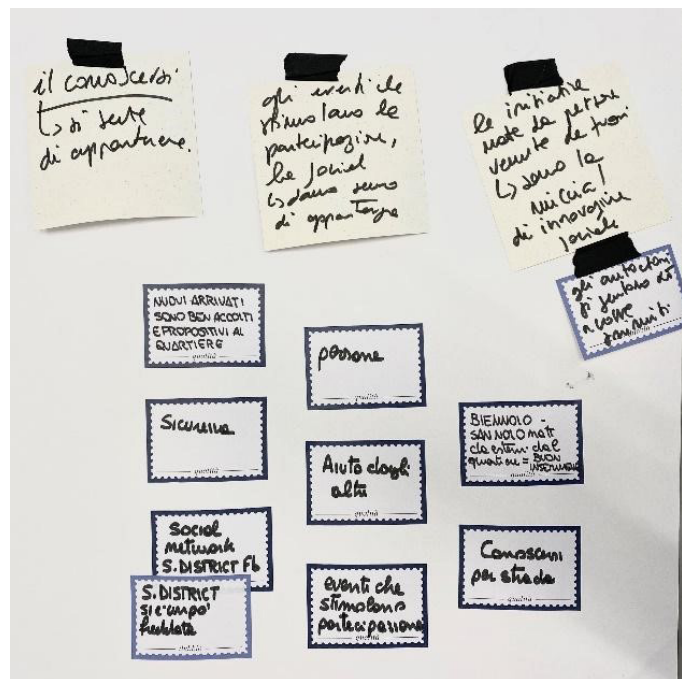


Figure 4. Activity to delineate the qualities and doubts about the neighbourhood (Picture by the authors).



Figure 5. One of the participants showing the neighbourhood old soccer team (Picture by the authors).

of the places identified by the participants, was the historical one. Cards were placed on a timeline, and participants were asked if they felt a sense of belonging from the start or if it changed significantly as time passed (Figure 3).

Participants hypothesised chorally the critical features and fundamental characteristics that generate a sense of belonging to a place based on the chronology that evolved, before distinguishing the qualities and criticalities of each significant place (Figure 4). After the mapping and sharing of "personal" places, a focus was done on a specific critical "spatial node" (Fassi & Vergani, 2022) in the neighbourhood identified by the community of Nolo during a previous co-design activity linked to the first word of the *Vocabulary (Public Space)*. With the help of some cards, this part of the activity aimed at identifying qualities and criticalities as well as envisioning future potential initiatives and actions for the benefit of Nolo, as well as the inhabitants' responsibilities to foster the development of a shared sense of belonging through the local communi-

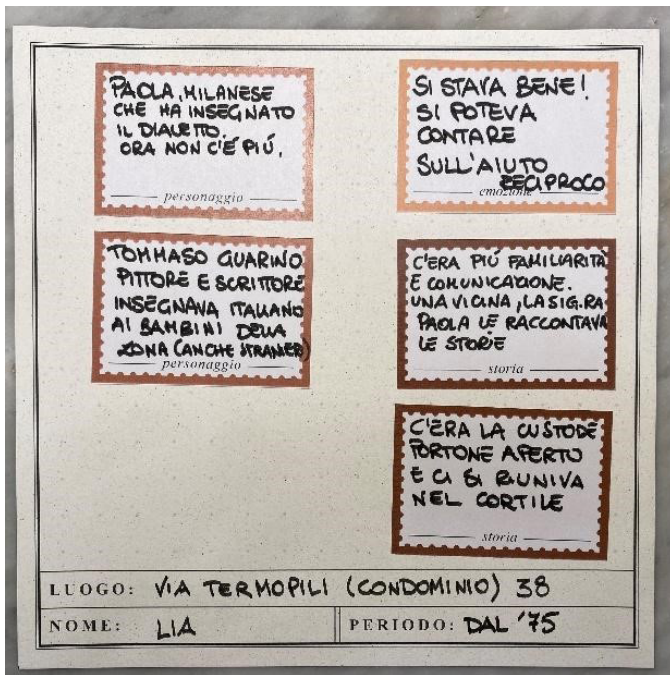


Figure 6. Activity to delineate the key elements of the places that generate a sense of belonging (Picture by the authors).

ty (Figure 6). The activity ended with a collective reflection about the future of the neighbourhood, taking into consideration all the aspects that emerged during the session.

## Results

After the activities, which were successful in involving the participants proactively, some general emerging aspects were identified. As far as public squares and green spaces are concerned, it can be stated that some of Nolo's squares and parks, which have recently been revitalized, have emerged as attractive places for the whole community, encouraging frequent use. Many of these spaces are transformed during the day - or with specific events -, embracing different contexts and groups, and therefore different levels of belonging. However, sometimes this vibrancy manifests in forms of disturbance to the public peace, disorder, or littering, which generates dissent and outrage.

The second category of places that were mainly identified and discussed concerns private homes and buildings. It emerged that usually the entrance of private houses, and therefore the last steps towards one's apartment, convey security and protection. Therefore, the apartment building is perceived as an extension of one's own home, representing the first protective architectural element that precedes that intimate and familiar place where comfort can be found. Especially in the past, life in the apartment building was lively. Solidarity, mutual care, and inclusion marked the relationships between neighbours. Today, however, this kind of relationship often no longer arises spontaneously among apartment dwellers and must be rebuilt elsewhere, such as in public places to gather near home like bars, shops, schools, and parks. Afterwards, new hybrid gathering places that echo the old neighbourhood shops alternate with historical neighbourhood businesses, becoming a familiar part of residents' daily lives. A sense of familiarity and, therefore, the development of a sense of belonging to these places, is the thread that unites old and new, past and present.

Finally, cultural places such as schools and libraries are not just thought of in terms of education, but also as opportunities

for stimulation, exchange, and comparison. They are references for approaching civic sense, inclusion, and respect, which, in a growing and increasingly diverse community, risk being lost, resulting in criminal actions and mistrust.

The participants of the activity let emerge an overall dimension of nostalgia for past times, especially related to the fact that a sense of "spontaneous humanity" and welcoming was widely characteristic of the neighbourhood. This was especially connected to the migratory socio-economic situation that characterized the area during the post-World War II period. At that time, inhabitants promoted a spontaneous grassroots social innovation phenomenon. This dimension, from what emerged from the activity, was deeply connected with the world of fun, pleasure, and conviviality. There were lots of parties, dances and music, food, sports, local championships, and open-air activities. These aspects are crucial and worth to be deeper explored, also in response to the sense of exclusion that the elderly inhabitants reported from the social innovation's processes activated by the newcomers. And in this sense, it's also worth mentioning that there are two different clusters of newcomers in the neighbourhood: the ones with a migratory background, and the ones that belong to the young and creative class, attracted by the social and creative vocation of the district. The sense of belonging is very personal, and it may be connected to completely different ideas. The frequent need among the participants to refer to past events in order to explain the present, confirmed the importance of the temporal aspect for the development of a sense of belonging, and therefore the stratification of personal and shared experiences and memories.

Thanks to the result of the experimentation, some useful and interesting questions emerged, and, starting from these interrogatives, the research group envisioned future scenarios in order to open new design possibilities for the neighbourhood regeneration process. These new and desirable narratives for the inhabitants and spaces of Nolo were shared on the neighbourhood's social street Facebook group and in the Off Campus Nolo spaces, in order to open up the imagination of citizens - from different points of view - and develop related actions to transform the neighbourhood in a collaborative manner, making it more inclusive, sustainable, innovative and resilient.

The 4 scenarios envisioned were:

- » Condominium initiatives.  
Recover neighbourhood relations, encouraging greater involvement through sharing gardens, terraces, equipment, knowledge. Encourage moments of aggregation such as shared lunches, reading groups, bookcrossing, courtyard cinema (Figure 6).
- » Neighbourhood shops.  
Set up a network of initiatives to transform even more the local businesses such as bars, restaurants, and shops into symbolic places of confrontation and dialogue, fostering moments of conviviality between different generations. For example, connect historic and new businesses by involving them as local sponsors for the formation of neighbourhood cultural and sports teams and competitions (Figure 7).



Figure 6. Condominiums initiatives (Picture by the authors).



Figure 8. Neighbourhood heroes (Picture by the authors).



Figure 7. Neighbourhood shops (Picture by the authors).



Figure 9. Neighbourhood "Agorà" (Picture by the authors).

- » Neighbourhood heroes.  
Involve citizens to periodically award a prize to prominent figures in the neighbourhood who have given an example of trust and social responsibility, solidarity and activism, to celebrate the development of neighbourhood initiatives in favour of the community and the environment, thus promoting the spread of good practices among resident (Figure 8).
- » Neighbourhood "Agorà".  
Restore an active neighbourhood network by fostering a form of participatory democracy with meetings run by the citizens themselves. The objective is to empower the area to develop actions against vandalism

and bad practices, overcoming insecurities linked to the neighbourhood, recovering critical areas or spots, but above all fostering solidarity and the emergence of new local public events.

## Conclusions

As for the *Situated Vocabulary*, the experimentation proved to be useful for collecting those unheard voices such as those of the elderly inhabitants. The work conducted let emerge the importance of preserving the heritage, the wisdom and the past memory of the neighbourhood and its elderly inhabitants by creating a link with the modern social innovation and regeneration processes undergoing in Nolo. This led the research team to focus next on two words of the

*Situated Vocabulary: Memory and Fun.* In fact, another interesting takeaway from this activity is the dimension related to a lost dimension of pleasure, conviviality, and fun around the concepts of care and social innovation. The pleasurable dimension, looking at it in relation to the dimension of slowness, quality, tradition, memory and conviviality, as Carlo Petrini wrote in the Slow Food's Manifesto, in the opinion of the authors should be recovered and inserted in the social innovation modern processes: "We believe that everyone has a fundamental right to pleasure and consequently the responsibility to protect the heritage of food, tradition and culture that makes this pleasure possible" (Petrini, 2016).

To conclude, this experimentation represented a good occasion for Off Campus Nolo in developing a participatory, inclusive, and care-based neighbourhood culture, this time from the point of view of the more mature people, intended also as a "bridge" to bring such concepts into the world of the younger newcomers.

A common thread needs to be (re)built, that can connect the older community of the district with the new ones: there's the need to recover those lost traces (there has been a big gap during the 80s and 90s) of spontaneous and pleasurable social innovation, care and sense of belonging.

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