

Special Issue Place Branding

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*Guest Editors*

**Paola de Salvo**

Università degli studi di Perugia

**Marco Pizzi**

Università degli studi di Perugia

**Pablo Gómez Iniesta**

Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha

**Juan Luis Manfredi-Sánchez**

Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha



Direttore Fabio Corbisiero  
Caporedattore Carmine Urciuoli

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# University, Peripheral Neighbourhoods and Social Innovation: the Case of 'Rete 3B' in Milan<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction

This study aims to address the issue of social innovation by focusing on the role played by universities as activators of social innovation. The long tradition of urban studies has highlighted the importance of spatial and environmental dimensions in influencing social outcomes, highlighting the role played by the uniqueness of each territory. As suggested by a substantial body of literature (MacCallum, Moulaert, Hillier Vicari-Haddock, 2016; Moulaert, 2009; Nuvolati, 2018; Ramella Trigilia, 2010; Van Dyck, Broeck, 2013; Vicari Haddock, Mingione, 2017), even social innovation phenomena can be framed within a spatial framework, favouring a broadening of the interpretative framework as a result of the inclusion of the spatial-territorial dimension.

Here, the concept of social innovation is defined as the development and implementation of new ideas that can satisfy social needs by creating new relationships and forms of collaboration, and enhancing existing alternatives (Howaldt, Schwarz 2010; Murray *et al.*, 2010; Busacca, 2013). Social innovation is a context-dependent (Montanari 2014), path-dependent and place-based concept (Baker, Mehmood, 2015; Kagan, Hauerwaas, Holz, Wedler, 2018; Moulaert, Martinelli, González, Swyngedouw, 2007). It depends on previous experiences and the sociocultural background of the context in which it develops (Caroli, 2016).

Territorial dimension, social innovation, and quality of life, in their interrelationships, shape the guidelines that articulate the reinterpretation of the role of a cultural actor such as the university. The theoretical framework this article starts from is the work of Benneworth and Cunha (2015), who theorised the increasing centrality of universities in the diffusion of a knowledge-based approach to urban development. Busacca (2018, p. 114) states that

«the University occupies a privileged position to contribute to social innovation practices as a provider of knowledge [...], material resources [...] and experiences setting up a scenario in which it plays three roles: producer, certifying actor and disseminator».

By considering the research perspective proposed by Bagnasco (1992), who considers Italian cities as local societies (and therefore analysable in terms of models that allow for the connection of different levels of society), we examine the role of the university as an activator of social innovation and potentially an engine of territorial development. More specifically, we adopt the scale of the urban neighbourhood since it constitutes the basic unit of the city and the first engine of development of sociality and proximity in the urban context. The case presented in this article, 'Rete 3B', focuses on three neighbourhoods in Milan, considered 'peripheral' and decentralised, to which little attention has been paid by urban populations.

'Rete 3B' constitutes a legacy of the 2019 edition of URBANA, an initiative promoted by the Department of Sociology and Social Research of the University of Milano-Bicocca, to stimulate scientific and public debate on various sociological urban issues: welfare, mobility, quality of life and local identity. The first edition in 2017 aimed to bring Bicocca University closer to the central areas of Milan, bringing the 'peripheral' university to the inner city. The 2019 edition instead adopted the polycentric approach, increasingly typical of the city of Milan (Dell'Agnese, Anzoise,

1 Luca Bottini, Department of Sociology and Social Research, University of Milan-Bicocca, luca.bottini@unimib.it; Monica Bernardi, Department of Sociology and Social Research, University of Milan-Bicocca, monica.bernardi@unimib.it.

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2011; Zajczyk, Mugnano, Borlini, Memo, 2005) and involved universities with similar experiences to Bicocca in a joint reflection on the role of the university in the territorial dimension. Starting from its peripheral positioning in the urban tissue of Milan, Bicocca University, the promoter of the initiative, involved Politecnico di Milano and Libera Università IULM within the event since they are located in two traditionally peripheral areas of the city, Bovisa and Barona, respectively. The sharing of the same territorial experiences led to the birth of a network between the three universities. This experience, which is now at the embryonic stage and further slowed down by the COVID-19 pandemic, took the name 'Rete 3B', recalling the three initials of the districts involved (Barona, Bicocca and Bovisa).

## 1. Neighbourhoods as a field of social development

Neighbourhoods can be considered as urban subsystems, something extremely similar to the cells of an organism that make up the structure of a tissue. They are the smallest spatial dimension of scientific relevance for study as portions of the territory endowed with their own identity and urban features. This aspect of specificity that neighbourhoods bring with them represents perhaps the most relevant aspect that has always inspired urban sociological research. A neighbourhood is distinguishable through two essential elements: sociophysical morphology and usually well-defined and recognisable identity. On the relationships that exist between different populations within cities in their neighbourhoods, urban sociology has adopted an ecological paradigm that allows us to better frame the types of social interaction between different groups of individuals who share urban space (Mela, 2018; Osti, 2010). There are many phenomena that sociologists can observe at the neighbourhood level, such as phenomena related to types of consumption, mobility styles or, again, residential and housing satisfaction. In urban studies, the neighbourhood's vitality is traditionally considered as a key aspect of urban community life (Jacobs, 1961). The vitality and socioeconomic innovation that takes shape within the neighbourhood is, of course, conveyed and stimulated by a variety of factors, but at the base of all the premises, there are substrates and actors that, more than others, possess a peculiarity necessary to push society towards innovative practices and phenomena. The topic of urban social innovation is very present in the literature. In particular, some authors associate this phenomenon with the dimension of cultural production and the attractiveness of cities (García, Eizaguirre, Pradel, 2015). Other scholars place more emphasis on the purely social dimension and transformative capacities of the individual and collective level of urban social innovation practices (Wagner, Wilhelmer, 2017). Still, other researchers focus on the role of territories with a strong vocation for technological and economic innovation as a substrate to foster practices of social engagement and urban regeneration (Corbisiero, Esposito, 2020; Esmaeilpoorarabi, Yigitcanlar, Kamruzzaman, Guaralda, 2020). The typical vitality of urban centres represents the ideal spatial context in which to study social innovation practices, how they evolve and which forms they may take over time (Pradel-Miquel, 2017; Wittmayer *et al.*, 2019). The degree of vitality and sociality of a neighbourhood urges the formation of micro-social initiatives because of the high population density and presence of services and functions. This microenvironment is suitable to solicit the exchange of information and experiences among individuals; in this sense, the role of proximity in neighbourhoods is fundamental as a driver of innovation (Ganesan, Malter, Rindfleisch, 2005; Osti, 2010). These factors are certainly relevant to increase the likelihood that social innovation initiatives will occur at the neighbourhood level, but it is worth remembering how a more general look at the health of this urban territorial portion is an unavoidable element to make a more complete analysis of the phenomenon. The social vitality and the climate of cultural ferment that may be present in a neighbourhood are associated with certain levels of quality of life. Extensive literature has been devoted to the theme of urban quality of life, focusing on the neighbourhood dimension (Marans, 2012; Sirgy, Cornwell, 2002).

Quality of life, whether related to residents' socioeconomic conditions or in terms of subjective residential satisfaction, is not a negligible factor in the construction of a psychological climate of widespread social vitality. Finally, attachment and the community participation contribute to increasing familiarity with the neighbourhood, in fact making it a natural extension of one's own home. In addition to these factors, both contextual and individual, there is also the role played by the institutions (Piva, Vivarelli, 2005), in particular those involved in research and education and especially universities, which, by their mission, also have a vocation for territorial development through various training and public engagement initiatives. The so-called Third Mission presents one of the objectives that Italian university institutions are supposed to pursue, formally documenting which and how many activities they carry out to foster ties with the territory and, in the final analysis, stimulate processes of local social innovation.

A further aspect to be considered concerns the declination of the territorial dimension at a peripheral level. As mentioned above, the object of investigation concerns an experiment in social innovation born from cognitive actors located in the suburbs of the city. And the suburbs, today, as Maurizio Carta (2012) states, have gone from being carriers of marginality and criticality to new components of urban polycentrism. Where peripherality existed today, new centrality is experienced (Bucci, 2003); centres are multiplied in a patchwork (Petrillo, 2018) that makes the city polycentric, shifting it from its primary centrality (Kloosterman, Musterd, 2001; Slach, Ivan, Ženka, Sopkuliak, 2018).

## **2. Universities as drivers of local development**

As mentioned in the introduction, university campuses are not only centre for the production of knowledge and training separate from the territorial reality in which they are inserted, but exactly because they are in a socio-physical environment, universities are also strictly connected to the space and local stakeholders. This peculiarity, together with their role as producers of new knowledge, increases their interest when we discuss the interrelationship between social innovation, urban development and cognitive institutions. In this triangulation, the university assumes a crucial role in the process of territorial social innovation.

This is a field of study that has recently begun to attract the interest of scholars and recognise in this triple interaction the crucial role of the university in activating processes of knowledge production that contribute to territorial development (Huggins Johnston, 2009). We are in the context of the so-called knowledge-based urban development (KBUD) models, to which the university seems to be able to contribute with growing force (Benneworth Cunha, 2015; Benneworth, Hospers, Jongbloed, Leiyste, Zomer, 2011; Perry, 2008). As such, over the years, the university has seen its involvement in the socioeconomic development processes of the territories' growth, often operating as a bridge between science and society, fostering the emergence of new networks and supporting local knowledge, learning and innovation (Colasanti, Frondizi, Huber, Bitetti, 2017). As anticipated, the reference is to the so-called Third Mission, which envisions the engagement of universities, in addition to the traditional missions related to teaching and research, in other activities capable of facilitating relations with civil society, the public and businesses and giving new inputs to production processes (Boffo, Moscati, 2015). According to ANVUR, the Italian National Agency for the University System Evaluation, the Third Mission indicates 'the set of activities by which universities enter into direct interaction with society' (ANVUR, 2013, p. 559). In the literature, Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff (2000) frame the Third Mission within the so-called triple-helix model, according to which businesses, universities and the state interact to create an innovative environment that includes university spin-offs, trilateral initiatives for knowledge-based economic development and strategic alliances between businesses and university research groups. According to Busacca (2018), universities manage to hold a privileged

position in nurturing social innovation practices, as they act in the triple role of producers of knowledge, material resources and experience; certifiers and disseminators. Third Mission activities, therefore, not only foster new relationships with the territory (Carlesi, 2016) and enter the widely studied dimension of urban regeneration but also strengthen the role of the university as a social actor. Universities also act as mediators, facilitators and activators of social innovation processes on the territory (Colasanti *et al.*, 2017), promoting actions in favour of social integration processes (Savino, 2015). The Third Mission also reduces the contrasts which emerge in the local community, supporting the construction of best practices, appropriate public policies and projects useful for the resolution of situations of social emergency (Secchi, 2013).

### **3. Case Study: URBANA and 'Rete 3B'**

#### *3.1 Methodology*

The case of the 'Rete 3B' network is now proposed as a way to explore the process leading the three universities to be partners for a common territorial innovation project. The network was the result of an official agreement resulting from the URBANA 2019 event. The project is now on hold because of the pandemic. Since data are not available to make an ex-post evaluation of the project, we chose to focus on the analysis of the process that led first to the interaction between the components of the triple helix and then to the birth of the agreement between them, generating a new form of social innovation. To carry out this analysis, we have analysed the documents that emerged from the working tables which took place during URBANA 2019. It is believed that this way allows for an account of some elements to investigate how the actors involved in the event have related to each other and subsequently reached a concrete step of realisation of a new social product. The discussion between the universities started by focusing on three social phenomena which could connect all territorial contexts: local identity, urban mobility and quality of life. These three strands of research have guided the work of interaction between the actors who were involved in the working tables, the outcome of which will be presented below. The neighbourhoods Bicocca, Bovisa and Barona are three neighbourhoods that have undergone vast historical changes. Although they are located in the marginal areas of the city, they have played an important role in the industrial history of Milan. Bicocca and Bovisa, in particular, have had, more than Barona, an identity strongly associated with the manufacturing sector and heavy industry. Pirelli's settlements within Bicocca and the many factories present in Bovisa have instilled in people's minds the idea that these two districts were the spots of Milan devoted to manufacturing activities, that is, the daily destination of thousands of workers who came to Milan to work in large manufacturing companies. Barona, meanwhile, constitutes a different experience compared with the two neighbourhoods mentioned above since its location at the southern side of the city and in close contact with the beginning of the Parco Agricolo Sud Milano has allowed the neighbourhood to preserve a green soul with a strong presence of greenery and waterways. This way, Barona has had a history of industry and work, but it is linked to the agriculture sector. Three neighbourhoods, or Nuclei d'Identità Locale (Local Identity Nucleus), take up the zoning provided by the Municipality of Milan, in which the concepts of innovation, production and work have crossed for over a century the spaces, the culture and the entire imagination of the neighbourhood. This deep identity marked by work, which has been stratified over the decades, has, however, had to reckon with the change of socioeconomic paradigms of the Second World War, the effect of which was that of an inexorable transition from manufacturing to services. It was the global post-Fordism revolution to push the divestments of large factories and a radical change in the urban landscape. The physical and visible legacy of this transformation has resulted in disused areas, often characterised by degradation and abandonment, which have been followed by obvi-



ous problems of deviance and security. The initiative was to develop in these areas new university campuses: in 1989, the Polytechnic of Milan in Bovisa was built followed by IULM University (1993) and University of Milan-Bicocca (1998). The opening-up phase of three universities in less than a decade was a factor that contributed to triggering a process of redefinition of the neighbourhoods, urging a new identity, social and cultural development.

### 3.2 The *URBANA* initiative

URBANA was based on the stimulus of the Department of Sociology and Social Research of the University Milano-Bicocca bringing the activities of the department closer to the territory of Milan.

The 2017 edition, titled 'Quality of Life and Social Innovation in Milan', represented the first important opportunity to consolidate the relationship between the university and the city, physically bringing the knowledge produced by the social scientists of the university to the citizens at the city centre. Four days and more than 20 appointments open to the public, in iconic locations at the centre of Milan, enabled important discussions on welfare, innovation, territory and society. These topics had been limited to specific issues, such as health, mobility, security, sustainability, domestic violence, public safety, new professions, food and more, using different languages (theatrical, musical and artistic performances; photographic exhibitions; seminars and debates) with a focus on the most vulnerable groups of the population in terms of gender, age group and social condition.

The very title of the initiative has an interesting symbolic meaning: 'urban' refers to the territorial dimension, to the study of social phenomena that concern Milan and its metropolitan area. 'Quality of life' entails the current objectives of public administrations in responding to the primary as well as the secondary needs of the population. Finally, 'social innovation' emphasises the need to address urban challenges by adopting novel solutions and strategies that pass through new practices of reciprocity, participation, collaboration and cooperation between civil society and public administration to raise the overall liveability of the city (Nuvolati, 2017).

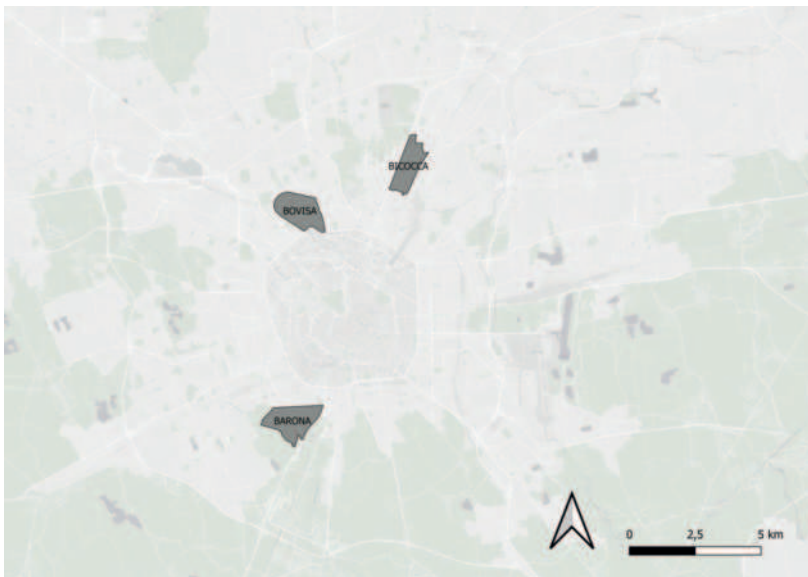


Fig. 1 – The map shows the peripheral positioning of Barona, Bicocca and Bovisa within the city of Milan (Source: Authors' elaboration on Open Data Comune di Milano)



In order to have a look at the social structure of these urban areas, the following table shows some sociodemographic data and indexes useful for this goal. As can be seen, the gender composition of residents is fairly balanced except in the case of Barona where the female population significantly exceeds the male. The elderly population index (EPI), which measures the percentage proportion of the elderly (over 65 y.o.) on the young population (0-14 y.o.), is below the level recorded for the entire city of Milan, while in the case of the Barona it is possible to note a value well above the overall urban figure. In all three neighbourhoods, however, the youth population index (YPI), which measures the percentage proportion of young residents (0-24 y.o.) on the total population living in the neighbourhood, is a few percentage points higher than the value measured for the city. Finally, Bicocca University and Milan Polytechnic University had the largest share of enrolled and prospective students present in the neighbourhood as of 2019, presenting several tens of thousands of enrollees. These populations are a considerable factor both in increasing the offer of local shops, amenities and services and in rejuvenating the neighbourhoods and enhancing the vitality of the local communities.

<i>Neighbourhood</i>	<i>Total Population</i>	<i>Males</i>	<i>Females</i>	<i>EPI</i>	<i>Milan's EPI</i>	<i>YPI</i>	<i>Milan's YPI</i>	<i>Male students</i>	<i>Female Students</i>	<i>Total Students</i>
Bicocca (Università Bicocca)	8691	4437	4254	106,9	179,7	23,7	17,5	20253	12885	33138
Bovisa (Politecnico)	14145	7263	6882	132,6	179,7	21,6	17,5	14857	29789	44646
Barona (IULM)	16842	7920	8922	288,7	179,7	20,5	17,5	4454	1797	6251

Table 1 – Population data and number of enrolled students at the three neighbourhood Universities  
(Source: Authors' elaboration on SISI Comune di Milano and USTAT Miur data - 2019).

Barona, Bicocca and Bovisa not only share a location that is in some way decentralised from the inner city, but all these cases have also undergone a process of redevelopment over time that has led to a transition originating from an industrial past to immerse itself, finally, in contemporary society based on services and knowledge. Among the drivers of development, to solicit a general social change, there was the opening of three university campuses: IULM University at Barona, Università degli Studi di Milano-Bicocca in the homonymous district and the Bovisa Campus of Politecnico di Milano.

In these three areas of Milan, the relevance of the KBUD model takes shape as a key to the interpretation of territorial development driven by the presence of cognitive institutions. In the case of Bicocca, the 'Bicocca District' was established as an initiative which connects the university to other local private companies to develop joint projects for the sociocultural development of the neighbourhood. The Bicocca District is a plastic example of the KBUD model in action since all the institutions involved (university, government and industry) interact with each other. The initiative has been able to leverage already vivid attention to the relationships with the territory and on an already active network of relations, and from this, it has been able to open itself to the city. At the macro level, it has been able to consolidate the relationship between the university and the city, get closer to citizens and share knowledge to bring back to the centre a territory often perceived as peripheral. At the micro level, instead, it has represented an opportunity for collaboration and cooperation between the teachers and offices of the department and between these and the institutional actors of the university, embodying in this way an important innovation also of an institutional nature.

The 2019 edition, 'University and Peripheries', instead focused on contexts that we would define as 'peripheral', namely, the neighbourhoods of Bicocca, Bovisa and Barona; also involved in the initiative were Politecnico di Milano and the Free University of Languages and Communication IULM. Like many other European cities, Milan is gradually developing an urban configuration less rigidly dependent on the 'centre-periphery' scheme and more towards a 'polycentric' model. Although this has been the emerging trend for several years now, also as a result of the major urban regeneration interventions that have involved the city since the end of Expo 2015, the centre-periphery model is not yet completely outdated. It is from this evidence that the URBANA 2019 edition has moved its steps, that is, placing at the centre of the debate the state of health of the neighbourhoods of Bicocca, Bovisa and Barona where the three universities are located, to investigate the role that these institutions can play in the processes of social innovation in the area.

The 2019 edition was held in two days: a full workshop day and the second day dedicated to 'urban exploration'. On the first day, reflections on the role played by the universities were guided starting from three typically urban social phenomena: local identity, urban mobility and quality of life. Through the tool of the working tables, the different representatives of the three neighbourhoods, not only academics but also free citizens, representatives of associations, businesses and the municipal administration were able to interact with each other. All the participants to the tables were encouraged to ponder on the relationship between universities and their neighbourhoods and were also asked to make an effort to identify and describe how the three universities have contributed to changing the neighbourhoods in terms of local identity, quality of life and mobility. This made it possible to explore the role of the universities in the processes of socioterritorial innovation, highlighting both elements in common or new ones. The first day ended with a plenary session in which the results of the tables were presented and a final debate was opened in the presence of the institutions. Meanwhile, the day of territorial exploration saw the realisation of guided walks that made it possible to immerse oneself in the neighbourhoods in the face of the reflections that emerged and visualise the potential and problems of each territory, starting from its 'university fulcrum'.

### *3.3 The process of interaction among the universities: the work phase at the technical tables*

As anticipated, the heart of URBANA 2019 was the collective work that involved 10 actors for each of the three working tables. The topics covered were: Milanese suburbs and local identities, the role of mobility in peripheral contexts and quality of life in the suburbs. The participating actors came, in addition to the university world, from the three neighbourhood civil society, and from the institutional world (representatives of the administration of the NIL<sup>3</sup> involved). The choice of these figures made it possible to select the main souls of the three Milanese neighbourhoods and thus encourage interaction and a lively debate that would lead to the emergence of relevant issues on which the three universities can contribute to improving local development and foster processes of social innovation. We will address in three subsections what emerged from the work at the tables.

3 NIL are the Local Identity Units introduced in Milan by the PGT (Territory Government Plan) as a set of areas, connected to each other by infrastructures and services for mobility, greenery. They represent areas that can be defined as neighbourhoods of Milan. They are systems of urban vitality: concentrations of local commercial activities, gardens, meeting places, services. For more information: [www.pgt.comune.milano.it/psschede-dei-nil-nuclei-di-identita-locale/nuclei-di-identita-locale-nil](http://www.pgt.comune.milano.it/psschede-dei-nil-nuclei-di-identita-locale/nuclei-di-identita-locale-nil).

### *3.3.1 The role of the universities in the development of local identity*

In the first roundtable, the discussion focused on residents' perceptions about the presence of universities in their neighbourhoods in terms of local identity development. What emerged in the three urban areas, Bicocca, Bovisa and Barona, is the existence of potential improvement in the connection with citizenship; often this connection is perceived only near the university, for example, the Bovisa neighbourhood for the Polytechnic but not the Dergano neighbourhood not far from the university. Since all three campuses are located in former hard-manufacturing places, citizenship has perceived strongly the symbolic passage from a Fordist economy to one based on knowledge and services through vast urban renewal. This was particularly significant in Bicocca, where the extensive process of urban redevelopment, which took place between the late 1990s and early 2000s, helped replace the economic actors present in the neighbourhood, giving rise to a completely renewed area of Milan. For Bicocca and Bovisa, the presence of the universities has helped initiate a process of change in the urban landscape, from being characterised by factories, heavy pollution and huge flows of workers to a panorama of new buildings and flows of employees, city users and students. Regarding Barona and its relationship with the Free University IULM, the table showed that, in this case, the university has been able to fit into an urban context with a predominantly green and agricultural character without affecting the landscape but rather integrating harmoniously. The presence of the university in the case of Barona has also allowed for the renovation of some infrastructures typical of the landscape of this neighbourhood, such as some farmhouses traditionally linked to Milanese agricultural life. All the actors involved at the table agreed on the richness of associations and social activities in the neighbourhoods. Universities act within the neighbourhoods as an additional factor that can give vitality and energy to the local system. Since culture and creativity are two fundamental factors in the development of the contemporary city (Zukin, 1995; Semi, 2015), the university institution fits in as an actor capable of strengthening the presence of expert knowledge by helping to influence the very identity of the neighbourhood.

The strong bond among residents provides an ideal working ground to generate and constantly regenerate the link with the three universities. At the same time, citizens also requested a greater dialogue between university and territory regarding the exploration of the possibility of creating new forms of collaboration and interaction to further increase their sense of belonging to the place (among the others: Cognetti, 2013; Pasqui, 2021).

### *3.3.2 The role of universities in local mobility*

The second working table was an opportunity to stress the positive and negative sides of urban mobility within the three neighbourhoods. The role played by the universities is to be a driver in the spatial transformation of the neighbourhoods. The regeneration interventions that have been involved, especially in Bicocca and Bovisa, have not only changed the urban landscape but have also brought with them an increase in the attractiveness of the places and therefore an increase in the daily flow of people, either as city users or as businessmen (Martinotti, 1993). This meant a transformation of the availability of mobility infrastructure and a change in vehicular traffic and public transportation onsite. The universities, therefore, have been an engine of change for the neighbourhoods, going on to modify mobility practices and citizen perceptions. From the discussion, issues emerged that tied all three contexts together, namely, the need, perceived by all players at the table, for greater public intervention to improve the quality of existing transportation infrastructure and an increase in local mobility offerings. An issue perceived as relevant to the three contexts is the presence of rail infrastructure that produces real fractures within the neighbourhoods, disconnecting the different internal areas and creating

spatial divisions between residents and therefore making free mobility within the neighbourhood less fluid. Universities, in this sense, strong in their role as drivers of urban regeneration processes, can play an important role both in proposing solutions, being careful also with the necessary and gradual energy transition, and urging local governance to take virtuous measures in the field of mobility within the neighbourhoods.

### *3.3.3 The role of universities in influencing quality of life in the neighbourhoods*

In the third and final table, the debate focused on the role of the universities in improving the quality of life of the residents. The most critical aspect that emerged in the interaction between universities and civic representation was the perceived distance between them. The actors highlighted the need to open the universities more to the public, providing a tangible sign of presence and closeness of such a culturally relevant institution to the citizenry. The lack of participation of the universities in the life of the neighbourhood, along with the rigid scanning of the daily rhythm of opening–closing for staff and students, does not help reduce the distance between citizens and universities. On the contrary, in this sense, the universities are perceived as promoters of the ‘emptying’ of the neighbourhoods beyond working hours, when students and staff return to their homes and their areas of residence. In this sense, the comparison brought out a limited role played by the universities in improving the quality of life. Meanwhile, the very possibility of bringing out these issues in the work conducted at URBANA 2019, placing universities and representatives of civil society face-to-face, has helped unlock a latent need present among the residents of the neighbourhoods that otherwise would have been extremely complex to do. On this issue, therefore, a general dissatisfaction emerges, and the universities are asked for a greater presence, interaction and attention to neighbourhood life so that their presence is not limited to being a passive actor but also an active one on the territory to improve and facilitate social welfare in the citizenry (Bordogna, 1975; Benneworth, Cunha, 2015).

### *3.4 The final output: the birth of the 3B network*

The working tables have made it possible to bring the three universities face-to-face with each other, opening up a constructive dialogue that has brought to light crucial issues related to the peripheral dimension. Moreover, these have also allowed for a demonstration of the potential for social innovation inherent in the indirect interaction itself. The reduction of the distance between universities and territories has taken the form of an agreement involving the three universities. Starting from the work of interaction between universities and citizenship at URBANA 2019, the intention of Bicocca University, the Polytechnic of Milan and the Free University IULM is to give life to a network of collaboration. The network, called ‘Rete 3B’, aims to improve interaction in the reference neighbourhoods and serve as a model that may be replicated in other areas of Milan; it also represents a pilot social innovation project that starts from these three universities in Milan established from peripheral urban contexts. The network will be configured as a stable form of cooperation inspired by the principles of promotion and enhancement of free initiative and fair synergy. The interventions which, at the moment, the three universities intend to work on are

- organising exploratory walks in the neighbourhoods of reference of the three universities to strengthen the link between the universities and their neighbourhoods;
- consolidating the link between the university libraries and the local area through ad hoc initiatives aimed at citizens to make the universities more present in the neighbourhoods;

- promoting specific events;
- promoting common research paths.

Regarding the first point (implementation of exploratory walks in the three neighbourhoods of the universities involved), on the second day of the same event, the three neighbourhoods saw the implementation of three walks guided by experts to explore the territory. In the context of 'Rete 3B', the activity related to the walks will be configured as a training course offered to students of both bachelor's and master's courses, in a coordinated but differentiated way, to provide ad hoc knowledge related to the neighbourhoods based on the specific approaches that characterise each university. This type of training can directly affect territories, such as the approach of the Milanese population towards the knowledge of the neighbourhoods through guided explorations. The initiatives coordinated by the three universities through the library structures will allow the sharing of university spaces and know-how with the citizens, reinforcing the active presence of the universities at a local level and restoring value to the social role of the universities. The ultimate goal is to improve the quality of life of residents in the three districts through the transformation of university libraries into multifunctional facilities that can respond positively to the needs of different local audiences without losing their institutional function as a place intended to support research and university teaching (Bordogna, 1975; Cognetti, 2013).

#### 4. Discussion and conclusions

The work has highlighted the crucial nature of the relationship that universities have with the territories in which they operate, especially in terms of social innovation. More specifically, the 3B network embodies a dual level of innovation. It can be considered a form of social innovation itself, the result of the involvement of the three Milanese universities mentioned, with a strongly peripheral connotation. At the same time, the network has the potential to foster the development of social innovation ecosystems in the peripheral areas where the three universities are located, as literature on the topic suggests.

This contribution has first framed the role played by territorial factors in influencing social phenomena, highlighting how the proximity typical of the neighbourhood dimension favours the stimulation of innovative microinitiatives. The neighbourhood unit, by promoting territorial attachment, sense of identity and participation phenomena, becomes an extension of one's own home, a known and knowable space, where vitality and socioeconomic innovation are naturally conveyed and stimulated as a result of the interaction of many different territorial players (Ganesan *et al.*, 2005). The URBANA initiative, in particular the 2019 edition, has highlighted the importance and peculiarities of the neighbourhoods in which the three universities are located, certainly peripheral units but within the framework of the new polycentrism that is characterising the city of Milan. The areas of Bicocca, Barona and Bovisa, described in section 4.2, with their industrial past, have welcomed the settlement of the university complexes, allowing themselves to be redefined by their presence, which has prompted a new development of identity both social and cultural. Among the various social outcomes found, we have identified the practices of social innovation specifically conveyed by the universities. Because of the Third Mission initiatives they carry out, they have transformed themselves into new actors of local governance capable of promoting local development processes within the model defined as KBUD. The usual reference to the triple helix as a regulatory practice of innovation processes in cities, typical of this model, however, immediately appeared reductive. In previous research, Busacca (2018) highlighted how university initiatives similar to the one presented here, based on the triple helix approach, had to deal with several limitations. These include the difficulty of defining the quality of the actions and relationships between the various actors involved; the fragmentation of the initiatives that, although focusing on the relationship between research, knowledge production and social impact production, fail to promote homogeneity and the lack of attention to the ac-

tors and the context. URBANA and its outputs open a possibility to overturn the considerations about the limits. The extension of the initiative to three other universities, in addition to assuming a dimension from the department to the university, foresees a synergic and prospective work of three important Milanese universities ready to reason and act together in the face of the local development of the territories in which they exist. The second important aspect is the polycentric dimension duly considered by the three universities, which refers to the need to provide broader governance, in which organised civil society and the non-organised public (Rose, 1986) become new elements of the model. The theme of governance becomes crucial in the definition of innovative processes that can benefit the territories. Recent studies (Iaione De Nictolis, 2016) have proposed an expanded model, the so-called quintuple helix, in which the role of universities remains crucial along with the enabling role of public actors and the presence of business. But other drivers, in this case, organised civil society and the so-called unorganised public, which includes all those who act collectively to share and/or collaborate around a common resource and are willing to contribute to local economic and institutional development, actively come into play as subjects capable of promoting, stimulating and accompanying innovation processes (Ibid.). Considering this approach, it should be underlined that the working table adopted inside the event, have allowed to engage all the five helices here mentioned, confirming the importance of expanding mainstream models and putting universities inside extended networks.

The case study we have presented, although a preliminary analysis because of the lack of data, has made it possible to confirm what has already emerged in the literature on the increasingly important role assumed by universities in their ability to 'make the city'. The methodology of the working tables has allowed for a reduction in the distance between university institutions and citizens, creating the ideal terrain for the activation of forms of collaboration among the universities. The outcome of the initiative was the commitment made by the three universities to start a collaboration between universities and different local stakeholders. All the five helices mentioned above were therefore represented although it was clear what Busacca (2018) defines as the role of 'leavening agent' of university institutions in social innovation processes. The resulting sharing allowed three different urban realities to come together within a container of thought that would otherwise be difficult to achieve and to bring out common values, criticalities and aspirations among the different interlocutors. The result was the mutual commitment to the foundation of a university network between the three universities to apply practices of territorial innovation to the neighbourhoods of reference. The outcomes that emerged from the working tables of the 2019 edition of URBANA thus represented a propaedeutic substrate and indicated the future orientation of the network. In particular, in terms of local identity, the main indications to follow are: strengthening the dialogue between university and territory, in order to create new forms of collaboration and interaction that reinforce the sense of belonging to the place. In terms of local mobility: identifying and proposing solutions to make greener and more fluid the mobility in the neighbourhood, advancing virtuous measures. In terms of quality of life: as university becoming more present, interactive, open and inclusive, making spaces and resource available to the public, thus reducing the "distance" and improving/facilitating social welfare in the citizenry.

However, the case study presented here had to deal with the spread of COVID-19, which slowed down the processes and initiatives planned within the network; therefore, this study, while representing a potentially interesting experimentation in the framework of what was presented, could not yet provide evaluable outcomes. At this stage, therefore, we are not able to offer a concrete evaluation of the real effects that this initiative has produced on the territories of reference, precisely because the project has not yet found a space of full manifestation. Furthermore, only starting from autumn 2021 have Italian universities been able to return to carrying out teaching activities in presence. Only an evaluative analysis of the network would make it possible to trace the outcomes envisaged upstream and the organisational processes imagined to understand whether or not they confirm the network's capacity to create/strengthen a local ecosystem of



social innovation. A possible development of this pathway could provide more robust quantitative and qualitative data to evaluate over time the actual effectiveness of the project on the three Milanese neighborhoods in triggering processes of social innovation, improving quality of life and strengthening local identity.

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