

Four universities and an urban living lab. Problematism community engagement in a public housing neighbourhood in Milan

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Abstract

Public and community engagement (*Terza Missione* in Italian) encompasses the various ways in which higher education institutions interact with and contribute to their surrounding communities. This engagement operates within a complex and often ambiguous landscape, shaped by both top-down institutional imperatives that seek to standardise and measure territorial activities and bottom-up practices that resist such categorisation. However, public and community engagement also creates an intermediate space for negotiation – one that enables a critical perspective capable of addressing social issues that frequently remain inadequately addressed by institutional frameworks. Our contribution describes a process of collective reflection that spanned over a year (from December 2023 to February 2025), undertaken by four research groups from four Milanese universities currently involved in the 'Off Campus San Siro' urban living lab. The main result of this process is a Manifesto that describes our detailed idea of academic work in marginalised contexts, and tries to problematise, both epistemologically and methodologically, some elements traditionally linked to an extractivist and objectifying approach to teaching and research.

Il *public/community engagement* (Terza Missione in italiano) comprende i vari modi in cui le università interagiscono con i territori e contribuiscono alla loro trasformazione. Esso si realizza all'interno di una cornice complessa e spesso ambigua, modellata sia da imperativi istituzionali dall'alto che cercano di standardizzare e misurare le attività territoriali, sia da pratiche dal basso che resistono a tale categorizzazione. Tuttavia, il *public/community engagement* crea anche uno spazio intermedio di negoziazione, che consente di applicare una prospettiva critica in grado di affrontare questioni che spesso rimangono inadeguatamente affrontate dai quadri istituzionali. Il nostro contributo descrive un processo di riflessione collettiva che si è svolto nell'arco di oltre un anno (da dicembre 2023 a febbraio 2025), intrapreso da quattro gruppi di ricerca di quattro università milanesi attualmente coinvolte nell'*urban living lab* 'Off Campus San Siro'. Il risultato principale di questo processo è un Manifesto che descrive in dettaglio la nostra idea di lavoro accademico in contesti marginalizzati e cerca di problematizzare, sia su un piano epistemologico che metodologico, alcuni elementi tradizionalmente legati a un approccio estrattivista e oggettivante all'insegnamento e alla ricerca.

Key words: public/community engagement, urban living lab, Milan.

Parole chiave: public/community engagement, urban living lab, Milano.

Introduction¹

Public/community engagement encompasses the various ways in which higher education institutions interact with and contribute to their surrounding communities (Boyer, 1996). This includes teaching, research, and service activities that address societal needs and foster mutual benefits between universities and the public. However, public/community engagement operates within a complex and often ambiguous landscape, shaped by both top-down institutional initiatives that seek to standardise and measure territorial activities and bottom-up practices that resist such categorisation (Benadusi and Altin, 2022).

Rather than considering these dynamics through a simple dichotomous lens, with our contribution we would like to show how public/community engagement can also create an intermediate space (Cellamare and Ostanel, 2024) for negotiation between the university institution itself, individual researchers and local territories. Under certain conditions, this space allows for the development of critical perspectives that can tackle social issues that often remain inadequately addressed by institutional frameworks. This does not mean denying the ambiguity inherent in public/community engagement, but somehow trying to 'co-opt' it.

To demonstrate this, we will describe a process of collective reflection that spanned over a year (from December 2023 to February 2025), undertaken by four research groups from four Milanese universities currently involved in the 'Off Campus San Siro' initiative.

San Siro is one of the city's largest public housing estates, with around 6.000 homes occupied by 12.000 people, half of whom are young and have a migrant background. On the one hand, San Siro is a poor neighbourhood, which is experiencing a process of stigmatisation and marginalisation common to other suburban areas, characterised by poor housing conditions, unmet basic needs, and a lack of employment opportunities; on the other hand, San Siro has considerable social capital in the form of networks

¹ We would like to express our special thanks to all the research groups involved in the process and all those who have reflected with us on the meaning of our work in the public housing district of San Siro. We would also like to thank our colleagues Francesca Cognetti, Ida Castelnuovo, Rossella Ferro and Alice Ranzini for their valuable inputs during the meetings and the drafting of the manifesto.

of residents and local organisations capable of addressing these challenges. This social capital sometimes struggles to articulate itself and to materialise in long-term projects that can have a structural impact (Cognetti and Padovani, 2018; Grassi, 2022). Off Campus San Siro is a space belonging to the Polytechnic University of Milan that has been active since 2019 in San Siro as part of the university's 'Social commitment and responsibility programme' (*Programma di impegno e responsabilità sociale* in Italian). Over the years, it has taken the form of a 'socially-oriented' urban living lab, i.e. an ecosystem based on user co-creation approaches that integrates research and innovation processes (Aernouts *et al.*, 2023). Off Campus San Siro is configured as an accessible space, open almost every day of the week, and has become a point of reference for many associations and residents in the neighbourhood. Off Campus San Siro was the function and mediation space in which the process we are about to describe was able to develop. The four research groups involved have animated or continue to animate the Off Campus space with different projects and methods, from varied disciplinary perspectives.

In the following pages, firstly we will focus on the meaning of public/community engagement, justifying our critical position in this regard, fuelled by our respective disciplinary perspectives, those of cultural anthropology and critical urban studies. Secondly, we will describe in more detail the four research groups, their competences and the perceptions that some local actors and students have expressed regarding their role in the San Siro neighbourhood.

In light of the analytical issues that have emerged from these interlocutions, we will then present the main results of the process, including a Manifesto that describes a possible strategy to academic work in marginalised contexts. The document tries to problematise, both epistemologically and methodologically, some elements traditionally linked to an extractivist and objectifying approach to teaching and research. As engaged scholars, we aim to counteract these trends by making scholarship more publicly accessible and relevant. We advocate for collaborative knowledge production, where the public actively participates rather than being passive consumers of academic expertise (Barker, 2004).

The ambiguity of public/community engagement

The ambiguity of the public/community engagement field is also linked to its semantic instability. In different contexts and historical periods, the category has referred to dissimilar practices, often supported by weak theorisations (Dougnac, 2016).

The concept of public/community engagement developed in the US and the UK starting in the 1990s, following the publication of the 'United Nations World Declaration on Higher Education for the Twenty-first Century' (1998) and the so-called 'Dearing Report' on the future of higher education in the United Kingdom published in 1997 (*Ibid.*). One of the first theorist in the US was Ernest Boyer (then president of the Carnegie Foundation), who, as early as 1990, initially suggested expanding scholarship beyond research to include teaching, application, and integration, and then emphasises reciprocal, collaborative relationships between scholars and the public to respond to the social needs of the territories (Boyer, 1990; 1996).

Despite being inspired by similar anti-positivist philosophies and pragmatic pedagogical assumptions (Freire, 1975), this Anglo-Saxon tradition does not dialogue with the older Latin American one based on the similar concept of *extensión universitaria* (Tommasino *et al.*, 2006). In fact, since the end of the 19th century, many Latin American universities have been founded with the explicit mission of promoting «the development of the new independent republics», therefore considering research and teaching in relation to a wider process of democratisation (Dougnac 2016: 5). Some authors have recently developed the notion of *extensión universitaria crítica*, leveraging its counter-hegemonic and antagonistic potential (Medina and Tommasino, 2023).

Italy is a hybrid case in some respects. The term referred to is *Terza missione* (Third mission), a concept that in the US and the UK denotes a more direct relationship between universities and industries, while in Italy it indicates a field with fuzzy boundaries that goes from the application of teaching and research to their dissemination. On the one hand the *Terza missione* can refer to the impact of research on socio-economic development, and on the other hand to the more general transfer of knowledge to the local territories (Perulli *et al.*, 2018). Within this field,

direct references to public/community engagement are numerous, while those to *estensión universitaria* are rare and usually connected to the experiences of individual researchers or exchanges between institutions (through, for example, the vice-chancellorships – *Prorettorati* in Italian – for international relations).

The *Terza missione* finds fertile ground in our respective disciplines, anthropology and urban planning, in which growing attention has been dedicated to the applied and public dimension of teaching and research. Applied anthropology is increasingly focusing on issues such as migration, healthcare, and cultural heritage management, reflecting a growing integration of anthropological insights into policy and social services (Severi and Tarabusi, 2019). Urban planning today is evolving to address challenges like gentrification, climate adaptation, and social inequality, with researchers engaging in interdisciplinary and community-based approaches (Reardon, 2019), working also as social organisers or social planners (cf. Saija, 2015; Cellamare and Montillo, 2020; Caruso *et al.*, 2022; for some Italian recent examples).

In Italy, the *Terza missione* gained increasing importance since 2022, when it was for the first time assessed by the government through the establishment of a specific interdisciplinary evaluation group within the VQR – Evaluation of Research Quality – procedure². Partly as a result of this evaluation process, Italian researchers have found themselves having to declare and categorise the activities of the *Terza missione* they have carried out, making them more transparent and visible on the one hand, but also more quantifiable and monitored on the other.

According to some scholars, due to this anxiety for performance and quantification, the *Terza missione* and its evaluation process therefore risk establishing another step along the neoliberal reform of Italian academy, going against its own principles of democratisation and diffusion of knowledge (cf. Boffo *et al.*, 2024). Nowadays, the *Terza missione*, to use the words of anthropologists Benadusi and Altin, appears to be suspended between «entrepreneurship and collectivisation», between

2 The VQR is the exercise through which ANVUR (National Agency for the Evaluation of Universities and Research Institutes) analyses and measures the quality of scientific output at universities and research institutes, with the aim of promoting a competitive research system.

«productivism and participation» (Benadusi and Altin, 2022: 24). This highlights the tension between two contrasting visions of the university's role in society: on the one hand, an orientation toward the economic value driven by market logic, and on the other, a commitment to civic engagement, knowledge sharing, and active community involvement.

As researchers who have been active for years in the public neighbourhood of San Siro, we found ourselves suspended in the same web of contrasting meanings. In what direction is our work moving? Can our research and teaching always be framed within the scope of the *Terza missione*? Or, to put it differently, what kind of *Terza missione* are we actually contributing to through our activities?

Teaching and research in San Siro, as in other marginalised contexts, present epistemological, ethical, and moral challenges that must be explicitly acknowledged, critically examined, and discussed. As members of the university, we recognise that we represent an institutional entity often perceived as a third-party in relation to other institutions and local organisations. While this third-party status can serve as an advantage, it also carries the risk of unintentionally supplanting local actors, a scenario that must be strictly avoided. Conversely, in certain instances, our role may be appropriated by local institutions, effectively being utilised for purposes that extend beyond our intended objectives.

Facing these contradictions, we decided to develop a collective reflection process to understand the strengths and critical issues related to our 'staying' in the neighbourhood on the one hand, and our institutional and professional roles on the other. This process, structured around four meetings and two focus groups with local associations and students, lasted for more than a year, from December 2023 to February 2025.

Beyond top-down and bottom-up interpretations: a case study

Four research groups in one neighbourhood

The process was coordinated by CURA Lab, an inter-university research laboratory linked to the Polytechnic of Milano (Department of Architecture and Urban Studies) and the University of Milano Bicocca (R. Massa Department of Human Sciences for Education). The other groups involved belong to

three different Milanese universities. They all contribute to the Off Campus San Siro space and develop action-research and workshop-based educational projects in the neighbourhood. These are the Legal Clinic of Bocconi University (Department of Law); the Musa Project of the University of Milano-Bicocca (R. Massa Department of Human Sciences for Education); the Human Hall project of the University of Milan (Department of Italian and Supranational Public Law)³.

The first three meetings (on the 26th of February 2024, the 22nd of April 2024, and the 29th of May 2024) had the specific aim of defining and sharing the teaching and research activities of the four groups and the respective governance. The four groups implement all the forms of engaged scholarship identified by Derek Barker, among others (Barker, 2004): Public Scholarship, Participatory Research, Community Partnerships, Public Information Networks, Civic Literacy Scholarship.

More specifically, CURA Lab is an interdisciplinary laboratory for territorial research that investigates the issues of inequality and the processes of marginalisation in contemporary society. The laboratory was created out of the need to develop a critical perspective capable of investigating the complexity that characterises the territory, as a result of the interaction between macro-social dynamics, policies, daily practices and their consistency in space (Grassi, 2023). The Legal Clinic of the Bocconi University operates in the field of law and, through a low-threshold office open one day a week and managed by teachers, researchers and students, guarantees legal

³ Below are the group compositions updated in May 2025: CURA Lab is coordinated by Prof. Francesca Cognetti (Polytechnic of Milan) and Paolo Grassi (Assistant professor – University of Milano-Bicocca), with the collaboration of Ida Castelnuovo (PoliSocial Manager), Alice Alessandri, Stefano Pontiggia and Alice Ranzini (Post-doc researchers), Maria Elena Ponno (IUAV PhD student), Rossella Ferro (Columbia University PhD student); the Bocconi Legal Clinic is coordinated by Prof. Melissa Miedico, with the collaboration of Prof. Paola Mariani, Lucia Ventura and Ludovica Oliva (researchers) Maria Dellagiacomma (PhD student and lecturer); the Multifunctional Centre for the Prevention and Fight against Early School Leaving (Action Musa, Spoke 6, 3.1.3) of the University of Milano-Bicocca is coordinated by Prof. Luisa Zecca, with the collaboration of Claudia Fredella (Assistant professor), Valeria Cotza (Post-doctoral researcher), Rebecca Coacci, Petar Lefterov and Lisa Sacerdote (PhD students), Nagua Hussein (mediator); the Human Hall project at the University of Milan is coordinated by Prof. Alessia Di Pascale with the collaboration of Cristina Delli Carri (PhD student) and Serena Greco (intern).

assistance in various fields to vulnerable individuals (Miedico *et al.*, 2024). The MUSA project of the University of Milan Bicocca operates in the educational and pedagogical field, formulating and implementing educational projects in relation with schools and families in the neighbourhood (Zecca *et al.*, 2024). The Human Hall Project of the University of Milan has set up an advisory service for young people and adults, working in the field of international law, migration, and European policies.

Beyond these specific initiatives, the four groups share a common objective: enhancing the quality of life of residents in San Siro, while also ensuring their access to fundamental rights. Each group brings distinct yet complementary interdisciplinary expertise, encompassing a focus on vulnerable populations, institutional learning, lifelong learning, action-research, as well as territorial and network-based engagement. One aspect that should be emphasised in order to understand their presence in San Siro is that their activities stem from different research paths, some of which are rooted in the personal life experiences of their coordinators, who were previously active as volunteers or residents near the neighbourhood.

After clarifying the governance structure of the single groups, two focus groups were conducted with local stakeholders and students (on the 18th of September 2024 and on the 21st of January 2025), aimed at understanding their point of view on the role of universities in the neighbourhood. The results of these meetings were compared with those of sixteen in-depth interviews carried out as part of a research project launched in 2024 by the Polytechnic of Milan⁴ at all four Off Campus spaces in the city of Milan.

Local actors and students: some critical stances

What emerged from the focus groups and the interviews offers valuable insights into the external perception of Off Campus, taking into account the points of view of both local communities – including associations, cooperatives, inhabitants, institutional

⁴ Polytechnic of Milan promoted a research process aimed at evaluating the Off Campus Program five years later the opening of the first space, Off Campus San Siro. As part of this research, sixteen in-depth interviews with key informants of Off Campus San Siro and Off Campus Nolo were conducted in order to reflect on the territorial impacts of the initiative and get some insights concerning the perceptions of these spaces by local communities.

representatives and trade unions – and students who undertook internships or thesis projects within this setting. As highlighted by Rossella Ferro (member of CURA Lab and former post-doc researcher at the Polytechnic of Milan) in an internal report, the outcomes of these research activities can be interpreted across five key dimensions of change and perception.

The first dimension concerns *competencies*, a term understood here as both the ability to act effectively in a specific context and the capacity to actively participate in social and institutional processes (Cognetti and Maranghi, 2023). According to the interviews, Off Campus is recognised as a site of – often informal – learning where skills are developed through interaction, mutual exchange, and engagement with real-world situations. This learning occurs on multiple levels. At the individual level, participants report acquiring soft skills such as public speaking, the ability to build trust and to interact with diverse actors. For students in particular, it often translated into personal growth through tackling practical and urgent issues, working within interdisciplinary research groups, and engaging in experiential learning processes. Likewise, through joint initiatives – such as initial projects carried out in collaboration with local schools – several organisations reported developing or strengthening competencies related to report writing, project communication, and drafting funding proposals. These experiences proved valuable opportunities for the groups involved to become more familiar with project methodologies and tools, which were later applied in other contexts, even independently of the academic actors. The involvement of the university as a new project partner also prompted some institutions and organisations to adopt, or at least reflect on, more strategic and flexible approaches to their territorial work, integrating multiple perspectives and interdisciplinary methods. It is also worth mentioning the competencies gained by beneficiaries of the activities promoted by or within Off Campus. In some cases, these initiatives influenced individuals' life trajectories: beyond acquiring specific – at times highly technical – skills (e.g. in coding, through courses run by an association hosted and supported by the Off Campus), participants reported being able to imagine alternative futures for themselves. For example, some young residents of the neighbourhood who attended the aforementioned coding

courses went on to pursue higher education, while others were able to transform latent abilities into employable resources. A notable case concerns a training course on access to rights for women, which enabled participants to strengthen their leadership skills and take on roles as community leaders.

These learning processes share common features: they are situated, emerging through continuous interaction between people, knowledge and disciplines (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Butcher *et al.*, 2022), and grounded in concrete, context-specific problem-solving (Morton and Enos, 2002; Allen *et al.*, 2022). Among the competencies developed, the 'capacity to aspire' (Appadurai, 2004) and to envision new accessible futures (Allen *et al.*, 2022; Cognetti and Maranghi, 2023) for inhabitants of marginalised areas stands out as a particularly significant outcome.

The second dimension concerns *relationships*. From this perspective, Off Campus emerges as a meeting ground where new connections and projects take shape, enabling encounters and exchanges between different people. In terms of territorial relations, it has assumed a coordinating role, contributing to the formation and consolidation of local networks, and enabling actors to recognise themselves as part of a collective. The Sansheroes experience (a local network promoted by Mapping San Siro, the former group from which CURA Lab originated) stands out as a salient example of a university-supported process that led to the emergence of what has been described as 'a community of planning' (Maranghi, 2023), even though in recent years it seems to have lost its strength. When Mapping San Siro established a more solid presence in the neighbourhood, one of the main expectations expressed by local actors was that university's involvement might help re-establish institutional engagement in an area that had long been out of the administration's sight. In this regard, Off Campus and the universities it represents are often seen as possible mediators, capable of facilitating and fostering dialogue between institutions and local actors around territorial needs. For instance, many mention the fact that the arrival of the Prefecture (*Prefettura* in Italian) in the neighbourhood was facilitated by the universities' role in narrating local dynamics, and fostering communication, even if the actual benefits of this specific collaboration remain

controversial within the neighbourhood. In some circumstances, Off Campus support has proven useful to institutions – even when not initially requested – thanks to its in-depth territorial knowledge and perceived neutrality. This helped to bridge gaps between communities and institutions, although not all interventions produced the expected outcomes. One of the most recognised results by interviewees is the progressive establishment of a collaborative service network, centred on but not limited to Off Campus, which works jointly to address complex issues by pooling diverse competencies. This cooperation, rooted in mutual trust and recognition, enables actors to direct individuals to the services best equipped to support them. This dynamic is particularly evident in the case of the legal clinics which – having been active in the neighbourhood for several years – have built strong connections with other actors such as social workers, schools, and tenants’ unions. These relationships are characterised by mutual exchange: sharing experiences, and, depending on people’s needs, seeking advice from those with greater expertise on specific issues such as housing, education, or legal procedures.

Such a mediating or broker role (Maranghi *et al.*, 2020; Butcher *et al.*, 2022) along with the gradual attempt to mend relationships between territories and institutions (Cognetti, 2023) are key features of Off Campus’s relational work.

Narratives form the third area of focus, relating to the production of knowledge and discourses about the territory. From this perspective, Off Campus has come to be seen as an accessible point of reference. However, this perception has evolved over time. In some phases, the university was viewed with suspicion, particularly when it initiated activities – such as educational services – that overlapped with those already provided by other actors, who feared being substituted by a more powerful institutional player. More generally, the research revealed that Off Campus has played a significant role in trying to reshape the narrative surrounding the neighbourhood – moving away from one rooted in stigmatisation and dependency towards a more nuanced understanding of its complexity, with a situated nature (Haraway, 1988) and supported by the collection and analysis of robust data, even in opaque contexts such as public housing estates. Moreover, students who engaged with Off Campus

reported discovering a new dimension of the university: one that takes a position aligned with responsibility and service to communities in need, transitioning from theory to practice.

The fourth dimension involves *transformative practices*, particularly in relation to accessing social or civic rights. Two key features were identified. First, Off Campus, as an open space within the neighbourhood, fosters participation by hosting activities and supporting local initiatives. Second, it is widely known by inhabitants for its legal clinics project, which not only assists individuals in exercising their rights but also raises awareness of those rights.

Finally, the fifth dimension pertains to *policies* – arguably one of the most difficult aspects to assess in terms of impact. Nonetheless, Off Campus is acknowledged by interlocutors for its role in influencing and promoting transformations in public space, supporting institutions in the use and development of some planning tools⁵. These experiences have also prompted reflection among local actors on the challenges associated with managing newly transformed public spaces, regardless of their scale.

These last two dimensions are those that raised the most doubts regarding the extent to which the university can effectively promote access to fundamental rights and influence policies, given that such practices often engage with broader frameworks and structures that are not easily accessible.

To make a university you need a city

The process summarised here has produced two main results. The first is an evaluation form that attempts to measure the impact of our work in the neighbourhood. The second is a Manifesto, i.e., a policy document summarising the main conclusions we have reached.

The evaluation form reflects a monitoring tool used at a national level within the VQR procedure described above (ANVUR, 2021). Almost paradoxically, the use of this tool reflects our critical position towards the *Terza missione*. On the one hand, by filling out this form, we accept the categorisation of our actions

⁵ An example of this is the role of Off Campus Nolo in supporting the institutions in developing a second level collaborative pact (*Patto di collaborazione di secondo livello*), realised and ideated all together.

within this field, providing that our work is recognised first and foremost by our universities. However, on the other hand, by doing it collectively we challenge the competitive logic that underlies it.

Our mutual and combined engagement in San Siro generates social, cultural, and economic impact. From a social perspective, we have developed new research and teaching methodologies (workshop and practice-based, and locally-focused), as well as innovative models of intervention and community engagement. The four groups have fostered an ethos of social responsibility, manifested through novel forms of university-community collaboration that emphasise interdisciplinary approaches and the valorisation of local knowledge (expressed, for example, in small exhibitions on local history or co-design activities). Off Campus San Siro has emerged as a collaborative platform that facilitates engagement with a broad network of social actors (such as residents, associations, institutions) who often face challenges in establishing connections with the university. By providing a more accessible point of contact, Off Campus enables the development of long-term relationships grounded in concrete projects. On an economic level, the four groups have participated in competitive proposals with a direct benefit to the involved departments in terms of research development financed by public or private entities. At the same time, the groups have attracted resources to San Siro, benefitting local actors who have received direct resources as project partners or indirect resources through the results of the projects.

The second result is a Manifesto, titled *To make a university you need a city*. This document is a provisional product aimed at clearly and effectively communicating the significance of our actions and our positionality, representing our idea of teaching and research in San Siro.

We believe that shared, critical, and transformative knowledge emerges from an epistemological stance that prioritises relationships and the process of knowledge construction over academic competition (Reardon, 2019). Consequently, we advocate for inclusive and participatory research and teaching programmes that engage diverse stakeholders, including individuals, organisations, local communities, and institutions. This approach fosters an exchange of both expert and local

knowledge, thereby bridging the gap between universities and society. Central to this process is the cultivation of relationships and the knowledge they generate, adhering to a non-extractive model founded on mutual recognition among all participants (Point 1).

We underscore the urgency of establishing direct and meaningful relationships between universities and local communities. In this regard, we perceive our institution as a key actor capable of leveraging its autonomy and stability to support the consolidation of local networks and enhance the quality of integrated local initiatives. Through the provision of material and intellectual resources, as well as spaces for dialogue, constructive conflict, and synthesis, we seek to contribute to the strengthening of these collaborative efforts (Point 2).

Building enduring, trust-based relationships within local communities necessitates a sustained process of mutual engagement and discovery. We favour immersive pedagogical approaches over ad hoc activities such as thesis supervision and internship facilitation (Freire, 1975; Tommasino *et al.*, 2006). Similarly, our research methodologies emphasise prolonged field engagement, allowing for deeper contextual understanding. We advocate for a university structure that accommodates slower, more deliberate temporalities and well-defined intellectual horizons, in contrast to the urgency and fragmentation imposed by projects and grant-based funding mechanisms that often constrain social interventions (Point 3). As described above, we do not reject planning logic and systems, but we try to incorporate them, as far as possible, into broad and lasting visions.

We maintain that the study and comprehension of complex issues require diverse disciplinary perspectives and methodological tools (Severi and Tarabusi, 2019). A transdisciplinary approach enables the identification of nuanced dynamics that become more discernible through hybrid and multilateral modes of inquiry. By fostering collective reflection within an intergenerational group of scholars from diverse academic backgrounds and professional domains, we cultivate an environment that encourages creative problem-solving and the innovative recombination of theoretical and practical approaches (Point 4).

We assert that teaching and research are deeply interconnected,

constituting mutually reinforcing dimensions of the university's mission. This interrelation facilitates continuous opportunities for reciprocal learning, enabling both students and researchers to critically reassess preconceived notions and established interpretations (Point 5).

Our pedagogical model is grounded in experiential, hands-on learning, which emphasises discovery through active engagement with the world (Zecca *et al.*, 2024). By situating students' learning within real-world contexts, we encourage them to collaboratively analyse and address concrete cases, practices, and everyday projects. This process unfolds within a safeguarded learning environment that promotes both critical inquiry and the activation of students' unique intellectual and practical resources through informal learning pathways (Point 6).

We can conceive of responsible research as an instrument that amplifies, deepens, and disseminates the perspectives and needs of local communities (Cognetti, 2023). Rather than treating local contexts as mere objects of study, we engage in research with local actors, employing collaborative investigative methods and co-planning processes. These approaches ensure the active participation of both community members and students throughout all stages of the research process (Point 7). Access to knowledge, information, and culture is essential for ensuring and understanding how to exercise one's social or civic rights (Miedico *et al.*, 2024). The university has a responsibility to safeguard citizenship rights and advocate for equitable access to them. By maintaining a strong presence in local communities, it can bring attention to local challenges, especially those involving invisibility, discrimination, and racialisation. Through its initiatives, the university supports the realisation of rights in complex contexts that demand close cooperation with community organisations. This involves implementing shared, multi-faceted strategies, providing sustained support, and maintaining ongoing dialogue with institutions responsible for recognising and upholding individual rights (Point 8).

We uphold the principle that research should serve a public function and that its dissemination is of paramount importance. The outputs of research extend beyond tangible products to include intangible contributions aimed at fostering

empowerment and recognising the diverse skills embedded within local territories (Point 9).

Our aspiration is to create spaces for the emergence of pluralistic visions of the future scenarios that reflect the perspectives of diverse communities (Appadurai, 2004). The university has the potential to play a crucial role in facilitating this process, provided that it undergoes a radical transformation in its approach to engagement with local territories and knowledge production (Point 10).

Recognising the interconnections between teaching, research, and public engagement, we acknowledge that our conceptualisation of these activities aligns with the objectives of the *Terza missione*. However, we find it challenging to interpret our work in San Siro exclusively through this framework. Rather, we view teaching, research, and community engagement as interdependent dimensions within a hermeneutic cycle (Gadamer, 1983). Their reciprocal interactions not only reshape our methodologies but also challenge dominant epistemological paradigms in the social sciences – particularly those predicated on objectivity and objectification (Cognetti and Laino, 2025).

Conclusion

The collective reflection process critically examines the ambiguity of public/community engagement, within which the Off Campus San Siro experience is situated. In a context marked by epistemological, moral, and ethical challenges, the four research groups shared and systematised their activities while reflecting on their positioning and roles within the neighbourhood.

In addition to laying the groundwork for an inter-university governance model, this experience produced two complementary outputs. The first is a critical reflection on the VQR model – the national research assessment framework – which is reinterpreted here (assuming the risks of an over-evaluative approach) to highlight the significance of non-quantifiable impacts. This self-assessment tool becomes a shared resource, capable of systematising the overall impact generated by Off Campus, overcoming institutional fragmentation across universities. At the same time, it serves as a collective tool – already in use within academia – that can be leveraged to

advocate for stronger institutional recognition.

The second output – the Manifesto – is a guiding document that sets out the theoretical, relational, and political approach adopted to inform teaching, research, and community engagement in marginalised contexts such as San Siro. The perspective adopted is mainly that of the four groups involved. As illustrated, the opinions of local actors have been used for comparative and evaluative purposes (despite the fact that they constantly and daily influence the practices and reflections of the researchers involved). In this sense, we also recognise the limitations of the process described, which, at a later stage, could lead to the rewriting of a new document that more directly integrates the views of local actors and residents (see Reardon, 2000). However, we consider what has been analysed as a preliminary and ‘necessary’ phase within a workspace – that of Off Campus – in which the four groups had not previously had the opportunity to set up such a dialogue.

Overall, this shared experience among the research groups contributes to defining a possible trajectory for a ‘critical’ Third Mission (evoking the concept of *extensión universitaria crítica* developed in Latin America, see Medina and Tommasino, 2023), conceived not merely as a transfer of knowledge but as an intermediate space for epistemological negotiation and social transformation, where teaching, research, and community engagement are deeply interwoven.

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