

# Community development via performing art: considering a community theatre intervention

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**Abstract** This paper contributes to a reflection on the relationship between community development and performing art. It discusses the possible effects of a community theatre with regard to social and cultural capital, social inclusion, and audience development in Turin (Italy). This form of artistic production can promote social ties and participation in cultural activities and increase social and cultural inclusion, key values in community development. We examine audience characteristics, development, and appreciation as the primary indicators of success, as perceived by selected stakeholders, within the context of a single case study. The intervention involved a heterogeneous audience of people who usually do not participate in neighbourhood activities and/or attend artistic-theatrical performances. As stated by the stakeholders, the project was appreciated and its impact on the citizenry was positive, particularly for the cognitive and emotional involvement and the heightened awareness of often hidden or unknown problems and resources. Limitations are also discussed.

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## Introduction

In exploring how the performing arts can promote community development in a complex and multidimensional process, this paper focusses on the potential effects of a community theatre activity project. Our aim was to retrace the process of community development through the community

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theatre project and to discuss its potential as regards: (i) promotion of social and cultural capital, which play an important role in community development (e.g. Roberts and Townsend, 2016); (ii) audience development achieved through raising awareness of non-attendants of the theatre and local museum, social purposes achieved through participatory artistic projects, and extended marketing with financial and artistic purposes (e.g. Kawashima, 2006); (iii) social inclusion developed by bringing people in the community closer together (bridging social capital; Putnam, 2000).

Because community-based artistic performances have been shown to contribute to community development (Kay, 2000; Grodach, 2010; Stein and Faigin, 2015), we present a community theatre intervention and its evaluation. The aim is to describe the audience profile and audience development (step 1) using an *ad hoc* questionnaire, and to assess stakeholders' perceptions of the project's effects (step 2) through interviews, which were subjected to content analysis. The results indicate that this intervention has the potential to contribute to community development, but it would be important to replicate the project to assess its efficacy over time.

This article is structured as follows: a literature review on the performing arts and their correlates; a description of the implemented project; two studies examining the project's effectiveness, one quantitative and one qualitative; and a conclusion in the final section.

## Theoretical background

### *Promoting community development through the performing arts*

Community development processes take a proactive orientation toward local social problems by supporting values and principles such as equity, promotion of quality of life, participation, and empowerment of individuals and communities (see Perkins et al., 2002). It depends on the participation of citizens, since it 'cannot take place if there is no participation by the community' (Zadeh and Ahmad, 2010, p. 13). Community-based artistic initiatives can promote community development by fostering participation (e.g. Kay, 2000; Grodach, 2010; Stein and Faigin, 2015).

**Social and cultural capital** Social capital involves *bonding*—strong ties based on trust and closeness; *bridging*—strengthening weak ties that join separate and distant individuals, groups, and organizations (Putnam, 2000), propagating new information (Granovetter, 1973) and perspectives (Aldrich and Meyer, 2015); and *linking*—creating ties between citizens and authorities (ibid.). Interpersonal bonding affects social participation and commitment, whereas network bridging affects empowerment and community-focused attitudes and behaviours (Perkins et al., 2002) as well as social inclusion

through connections between heterogeneous people (Putnam, 2000). Community art facilitates social connection (Williams, 1996; Madyaningrum and Sonn, 2011) by promoting social capital, which constitutes an essential, factual or potential collective resource embedded in social networks (Coleman, 1988; Lin, 2001).

Cultural capital comprises values and behavioural patterns within the specific culture of belonging (Bourdieu, 1986); as such, it influences social capital (DiMaggio and Mohr, 1985). The concept of cultural capital exists in different states: the *objectified state*, i.e. cultural goods and means of cultural expression; the *institutionalized state*, i.e. educational level and academic qualifications; and the *embodied state*, i.e. internalized, lasting dispositions that become an essential part of the person such as habitus (ibid.). The embodied state represents the core of cultural capital: it is based on taste-related components as the objectified state and on cognitive and experiential components as the institutionalized state, thus increasing cultural behaviours and, hence, education and cultural goods (Kraaykamp and Van Eijck, 2010). Embodied cultural capital is acquired through socialization, beginning with primary relationships, and represents ‘the best hidden form of intergenerational capital transmission’ (ibid., p. 210). The challenge is to diminish symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1986), which dominant cultural capital might foster, and to present opportunities for empowerment and development (Perkins et al., 2002; Sonn et al., 2015; Stein and Faigin, 2015).

**Audience development** Audience development refers to the strategic and dynamic process of enlarging and diversifying the public and improving the overall conditions of access to cultural/artistic events. Also referred to as ‘cultural participation’ or ‘active spectatorship’, it has not only financial, artistic or educational purposes but also promotes a personal experience of the arts and breaks the barriers between people and arts (e.g. Scollen, 2009). According to Kawashima (2006), we can also recognize the social goals of audience development, insofar as it addresses the most fragile segments of a population by fostering social inclusion through the use of a territory’s resources, such as a museum which can reveal its social utility. This does not mean merely increasing the number of spectators but rather it indicates a way to promote participation in sociocultural activities (Connolly et al., 2001).

**Social inclusion** Social inclusion means having the resources to act, to achieve better individual and social conditions and to change negative conditions beyond social differences. As milestone of the welfare state (e.g. Feldman, 2019), social inclusion gives voice to excluded and marginalized individuals, allowing them access to resources and participation in

social life at formal and informal levels (educational, organizational, and relational). Conversely, social exclusion results in non-participation in life-shaping activities (Hine and Mitchell, 2001). Not always associated with a lack of interest, non-participation can be due to a lack of accessibility to resources, which limits participation (Farrington and Farrington, 2005). Social inclusion is favoured by sharing a common space, a sort of ‘protected space’, that increases a sense of belonging (concerning the ‘spaces of inclusion’, see Hall, 2010). Among the indicators of social inclusion (e.g. employment, education, community services, etc.), there is also participation in leisure activities (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister [ODPM], 2004 *cit. in* *ibid.* p. 186). Long et al. (2002, *cit. in* Barraket, 2005, p. 4) identified various dimensions of social inclusion (e.g. participation, public health, social cohesion, and reduction of social isolation) that can be promoted through culture.

**Role of art in community development and the role of the theatre** Community art offers an opportunity to develop relationships between individuals and groups (Madyaningrum and Sonn, 2011) and promote social participation. By participating in cultural/artistic events, people can increase cultural and social capital (Jeannotte, 2003) and social inclusion as well (e.g. Madyaningrum and Sonn, 2011). In this sense, art gives voice to suffering (Levine, 1997) by communicating the unexpressed and promoting knowledge and awareness (Cline and Taylor, 2015). Social artists focus their performance on contemporary change and social problems through the use of local spaces and resources (Pasquinelli and Sjöholm, 2015), exploiting the flexibility and dynamism of art for the community. Creative projects can also enhance accessibility to local spaces, both physical and symbolic, which become ‘spaces of possibility’ (Kagan et al., 2018), spaces in which people can experience inclusion (see Hall, 2010). In order to develop the tools and methods to facilitate participation by the population, unconventional forms of art and theatre have emerged in which the theatre has become an instrument for social change (Sloman, 2012). Community theatre can be effectively used to achieve a variety of objectives: conflict and violence prevention (Sonn et al., 2015) and the development and education.

Theatre based on a participatory approach provides a useful tool for community development and social change (Sloman, 2012). Unlike conventional theatre, participatory theatre engages the spectator in what is being realized for and with him/her and with the entire audience (*ibid.*). Through this bottom-up approach, disadvantaged community members are actively involved in the artistic performance, becoming the protagonists of the action and fostering increased participation. This is important because barriers (e.g. ticket prices, appropriate dress, and formal traditions) and

inequalities often limit attendance at performances (Barrett, 2015), thus hindering audience development. But since the absence of inequality in art attendance—educational level, social status—does not necessarily ensure participation in art (Bunting et al., 2008), it is necessary to engage the community. If the artistic narrative concerns the entire citizenship and the performance presents personal and community stories, the audience becomes an indirect protagonist of the narration. This form of community art fosters understanding oneself and others and reduces the oppressive status quo (Sonn et al., 2015). While the audience can intervene directly during the performance of some types of participatory theatre (Sloman, 2012), direct audience intervention was not foreseen in the present project.

### **The present community project: ‘Barriera is my project’**

The case study described here examines a community theatre intervention titled ‘Barriera is my project’ [Barriera è opera mia] in Barriera di Milano, a working-class neighborhood in Turin, Italy. The area has been experiencing significant urban, economic-occupational, and sociocultural transformations. The official estimated population of the neighbourhood was 13,626 (whereas Turin had a 2017 population of 872,367) (ISTAT, 2017). As reported on the website of the Municipality of Turin (2015), Barriera is characterized by a high number of foreign residents: the whole district has the highest number of foreign nationals, making up about 18 percent of the total number of foreign residents (138,076 people). The neighbourhood is home to young families with children (44.7 percent foreign-born minors vs. the city average of 21.4 percent) (Zangola, 2019). The number of elderly people is growing in line with current sociodemographic trends, although at a slower rate than the average for the Turin population. Interestingly, Barriera has the highest percentage of people under 24 years of age (24.4 percent compared to the city average of 20.6 percent) (ibid.); the unemployment rate is relatively high (13.1 percent vs. the city average of 9.8 percent), with a high incidence of families at risk for economic hardship (ibid.); the social and material vulnerability index is slightly higher than for the general population (101.2 vs. 99.7) (ISTAT, 2017). Equally important is that Barriera di Milano has many non-profit associations, private groups and social organizations engaged in social assistance, educational, social and cultural promotion, and community development<sup>1</sup>. For this project, artists staged the history of the Barriera neighborhood as told to them by local citizens. The community theatre intervention provided a social and creative tool that

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.vivoin.it/associazioni-cerca?\\_sft\\_dt\\_portfolio\\_category=barriera](http://www.vivoin.it/associazioni-cerca?_sft_dt_portfolio_category=barriera)

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT	SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CAPITAL	Both informal (participation in neighborhood initiative) and formal dimension (associations/groups membership)  Embodied cultural capital (concerning intergenerational capital transmission)
	AUDIENCE DEVELOPMENT	New audience who attends artistic-theatrical performances as well as the museum (MEF)
	SOCIAL INCLUSION	New social connections among different, heterogeneous people

**Figure 1** Variables involved in the community development process.

engaged individuals in narrating their community, as the performance was based on storytelling. The aim of the project was to promote knowledge of the neighbourhood and audience development as a way to enlarge public attendance at art performances and to involve citizens in community life, and ultimately increase the neighbourhood's social and cultural capital. Moreover, knowing more about the neighbourhood, its initiatives, social support activities, and entering into the community physically (territory and museum) and symbolically (local history), people were offered the choice to participate in the cultural and social life of the neighbourhood, thus increasing social connection and inclusion. On a more private, personal level, the project can be viewed as a way to enhance awareness of the neighbourhood through the narration staged in the theatrical performance. [Figure 1](#) illustrates the essential points on which our discussion will focus in an evaluation of the project in relation to community development. The project was designed to promote social and cultural capital by attracting a new audience as a way to promote participation in sociocultural activities (see [Connolly et al., 2001](#)). In addition to the cultural benefit, we will discuss the increase in audience attendance as a possible promoter of new social relations at the basis of social inclusion.

The social activity here described did not directly involve people during the performance as in classic participatory theatre but rather they were directly involved at an earlier stage of the project in which the social artists collected the personal experiences and knowledge of local residents through a bottom-up process ([Sloman, 2012](#)). The performance was given at the Ettore Fico Museum (MEF), a collective, creative space in the *Barriera*. Above all, the MEF offers a space for educational activities, reducing costs for students. The MEF has an area called MEF ART which promotes relationships with the community and public institutions; this is where the present project was carried out. The MEF provides a space for expressing

possibility and giving voice to the community; it also forms a framework for this community project and provides ‘a cultural service for public benefit’ (Cerquetti, 2016, p. 32).

### *The phases of the project*

The project was carried out in four phases (September–December 2016): in the first three, stories about the neighbourhood and its citizens were collected and the artistic performance was realized. In the fourth phase (see below) the possible effects of the project were analysed. The first phase (i) entailed mapping and observing the neighbourhood, cooperating with institutions, local services, and residents (2 summer months). This stage constituted a preliminary approach to the neighbourhood and led into a second phase (ii), during which a team of social actors spent three days *with and within* the neighbourhood, exploring the community, meeting with local residents, stakeholders of local associations and organizations during community activities and events, visiting the neighbourhood with the residents. The social artists collected stories about the community metaphorically entering the neighbourhood through the eyes and experiences of its residents. Citizens could freely (they could choose *if and what* they told the artists) narrate the experiences that linked them emotionally with the neighbourhood (e.g. migration from to the new neighbourhood, as children; economic crisis; encounter with local associations and their support, deciding to become volunteers; social change with the arrival of people from abroad). From all the stories, a strong and positive emotional connection emerged between the residents and the neighbourhood. In essence, the stories are *genuine* and rooted in the daily experiences of life; as such they depict a heterogeneous neighbourhood which, despite its problems, manages to offer a support system for the local residents. In the third phase (iii), the actors represented the history of the neighbourhood (2 performances in the autumn period, approximately 3 months apart). Trying as much as possible to use the same language as the residents, the artists staged the stories—adapted and transformed for the audience by interweaving the narratives into a sort of tapestry—at the MEF. The story was staged in two community theatre performances developed using theatrical improvisation techniques without following a script. Improvisation reduces the time between community-artist encounters and performance, while keeping the audience engaged. The aim was to stage the local memory and reinforce the relationship with the neighbourhood by sharing sociocultural knowledge and experiences, improving social ties and participation in cultural activities (Cauchi-Santoro, 2016). Although indirect, this form of community theatre can foster interaction between people and community. In doing so, it allows participants

(including non-residents and new residents) to create local relationships and transfer knowledge about their neighbourhood. The narration does not hide problems but rather it helps to shed light on critical issues and tap into strengths, resources, and potentialities that are often concealed and unknown. About one month after the first event, another artistic community event was held with direct involvement of the local residents who had met previously. It was a multidisciplinary event in which everyone was able to participate and collaborate through diverse art forms: besides the theatrical performance, the residents' thoughts and wishes were exhibited inside the museum through the sharing of personal photos taken around the neighbourhood.

### The current research

The 'Barriera is my project' project, considered here as a case study, was evaluated using quantitative and qualitative methods. The two steps are presented in the next two paragraphs: the first—quantitative—centred on the audience profile and the second—qualitative—focused on the stakeholders.

The quantitative assessment (Step 1) allows reflection on the effects of the project in relation to social and cultural capital, social inclusion and audience development. Information about audience characteristics was collected via a brief, anonymous questionnaire. The assessment sought to determine whether the project involved:

- residents who did not usually visit the museum (MEF) or use cultural products; analysis of the potential of cultural capital in audience development and increase of knowledge about the neighbourhood;
- mainly local residents who played an active role in their community and/or attended local initiatives; analysis of the potential of both social and cultural capital.

The aim of the qualitative assessment (Step 2) through interviews was to understand the general value of the initiative and the degree to which it was appreciated by participants according to stakeholder perception. Content analysis of the stakeholder interviews (e.g. members of neighbourhood associations and groups provided material for qualitative assessment) was performed using a statistical software program (T-Lab). It employs a text-driven automatic approach that enables meaningful patterns of words and themes to emerge ([www.tlab.it](http://www.tlab.it)).

#### *Step 1: Audience profile and audience development*

**Method: Procedure and measure** A questionnaire was distributed to the audience before the beginning of the two artistic performances; it was



**Table 1** Neighbourhood residence vs. non-residence and participation in neighbourhood initiatives

	Participation in neighbourhood initiatives (%)		
	No	Yes	Total
Non-resident	20.8	27	47.8
Resident	10.2	42	52.2
Total	31	69	100

collected at the end of the performance (participants could complete the questionnaire at either the beginning or the end of the performance). The questionnaire was voluntary and anonymous. It investigated:

- General information about the audience: sex, age, residency/non-residency in the Barriera di Milano;
- Indication of embodied cultural capital: participants were asked to indicate if and how often they attended the theater;
- Indication of audience development: the reasons for participation; previous visits to the MEF;
- Indication of personal interest and attitude toward the neighbourhood as an informal dimension of social capital and expression of social inclusion: participants were asked about their attendance at local neighborhood initiatives and the frequency of their attendance;
- Organized participation as an expression of the formal dimension of social capital: membership/non-membership in a local association or group;
- Information relevant for social artists regarding event advertising: modality through which the participants had heard of the events.

**Results** A total of 236 participants completed the questionnaire (60 percent female; percent by age group: 7.2 percent <18 years; 14.5 percent 19–30 years; 15.3 percent 31–40 years; 23 percent 41–50 years; 11.9 percent 51–60 years; 28.1 percent >60 years). About half were local residents, and residence in the neighbourhood was associated with an interest in local initiatives ( $\chi^2 = 15.23$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ) (Table 1). There were also some who did not participate in neighbourhood activities and/or did not live in the neighbourhood.

70.5 percent of responders stated they attend theatrical performances. There was no statistically significant difference ( $t(228) = -.45$ ,  $ns$ ) in average intensity (from 1 rarely to 3 always) with which participants attended neighbourhood events ( $M = 0.69$ ) and theatrical performances ( $M = 0.70$ ). Furthermore, 38.5 percent stated they belonged to a local neighbourhood association or group in the Barriera (34.2 percent of the total) or in another neighbourhood (65.8 percent). While they tended to participate more in

**Table 2** Comparison between membership in a local association/group and interest in neighbourhood initiatives/theatrical performance

	Member of an association/group	<i>M</i>	<i>ds</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>P-value</i>
Neighbourhood initiatives	No	.53	.50	-6.69	215	.001
	Yes	.93	.26			
Neighbourhood initiatives (intensity)	No	1.39	.55	-2.17	78.67	.05
	Yes	2.30	3.64			
Theatrical performance	No	.67	.47	-1.61	217	ns
	Yes	.77	.42			
Theatrical performance (intensity)	No	1.50	.57	-1.28	127.04	ns
	Yes	1.62	.58			

neighbourhood initiatives, there was no difference in participation in theatrical events. The same trend also emerged with regard to participation in different types of events and intensity of attendance. Table 2 presents the statistical significance of the difference between members of an association/group and non-members.

Regarding the motivation to participate, 75 percent were interested in or curious about cultural events; the rest of the sample was divided equally between people who participated for work-related reasons, people who participated because friends with the artists, and people who looked for entertainment. Thanks to the project, the MEF admission rate rose considerably: 57.2 percent stated they visited the MEF for the first time in order to attend the community theatre.

Finally, concerning advertising of the event, participants heard about the events through their friendship network (18 percent of non-residents; 14 percent of residents), the social artists (11 percent non-resident; 13 percent resident), social media (3 percent non-residents; 11 percent residents) or relatives (10 percent non-residents; 9 percent residents). Correlation analysis (Table 3) showed positive associations between interest in theatrical events and neighbourhood initiatives and MEF attendance; members of an association/group were more interested than non-members in neighbourhood initiatives.

**Discussion** The results showed that the participation of resident and non-resident participants were motivated by curiosity to know more about the neighbourhood, promoting audience development: both people not interested in the theatre and people who had never entered the MEF attended these events. It is possible to consider an impact in terms of embodied cultural capital as well as social capital dependent on a greater interest

**Table 3** Correlations between selected variables

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.
1. Sex	—	.025	.07	.12	-.11	.02	.00	.09	.01
2. Age range		—	.245**	.18**	-.12	-.01	.03	.12	.05
3. Neighbourhood resident			—	.26**	-.09	-.05	-.11	.15*	-.09
4. Participation in neighbourhood initiatives				—	. <sup>c</sup>	.20**	.07	.415**	.09
5. Frequency - Neighbourhood initiatives					—	-.15	.35**	.17*	.13
6. Attended theatrical performance						—	. <sup>a</sup>	.11	.02
7. Frequency—Theatrical performance							—	.11	.22*
8. Member of local association/group								—	.21**
9. MEF									—

Note. <sup>a</sup> = Analysis not performed because one of the variables is constant. Sex: 0 = Male; 1 = Female; Resident: 0 = Non-resident; 1 = Resident; Neighbourhood initiatives: 0 = Non-participation; 1 = Participation; Theatrical performance: 0 = Non-participation; 1 = Participation; Member of association/group: 0 = No; 1 = Yes; MEF ('Have you ever visited the MEF?'): 0 = No; 1 = Yes. \*\*  $P < 0.01$ ; \*  $P < 0.05$ ;

in participating in the life of the community through greater awareness promoted by the project. Attendance at the theatrical events was not associated with membership in a local association/group; this latter form of social participation correlated positively only with a personal interest in one's own association and community. Integration of the social and the cultural dimension increases the possibility to participate in the community and the arts. The community theatre approach seems to foster access to specific cultural spaces, which can stimulate personal and social interests, enhancing a future participation in the community (Pasetto and Malini, 2022). A brief comment on the role of the MEF is necessary, providing a space for public action, "developing the content which, instead of being *about* something or *for* someone, results in interaction *with* visitors" (Karaulić, 2016, p. 258), and becoming a "spaces of inclusion" (ibid.; Hall, 2010).

### Step 2: The stakeholder perspective

**Method: Procedure** Six selected stakeholders, members of local associations or groups, were interviewed to assess the effects of this community theatre project. The interview included a specific section with questions about cooperation with the social artists, assessment of the intervention with regard to the participants, strengths and weaknesses of the project. All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed for analysis. Content analysis of the interviews identified the conceptual framework and thematic structure, two fundamental tasks in qualitative research. To reach these aims, a computer-assisted method based on T-Lab software was used (Lancia, 2004). Before the analysis, grammatical errors were corrected and the words were assigned to superordinate language categories, including within-the-same category synonyms, disambiguating the same words with different meanings, and joining composite words. Significant thematic contents were investigated using cluster analysis, a comparative technique based on

factorial analysis of the interviews. Cluster analysis showed a hierarchical representation of interview content and identified specific thematic nuclei (the clusters) and the correspondence factorial analysis. Each thematic nucleus is composed by keywords that define its content and has a weight given by the percentage of occurrences that characterizes it.

**Results** The analysed corpus includes 1282 words; we defined keywords with a threshold frequency of four from a list of 49 keywords. Our analysis<sup>2</sup> identified three thematic nuclei. The first cluster (32 percent), ‘Consequences’ includes keywords associated with the effects of the community theatre on the neighbourhood and among the citizens: *citizenship* (35 occurrences), *to engage* (20 occurrences), *to participate* (9 occurrences), *to help* (6 occurrences). Some extracts from the interviews referring to this cluster are: “*The participation has been large; the citizenship felt engaged and, for some individuals, this engagement means feeling part of an important reality . . .*”; “*The citizens are involved, protagonists... they are direct beneficiaries*”; “*The people involved are activated to do other things ( . . . ). It [the project] is a territorial inheritance*’.

The second cluster (3.6 percent) ‘Museum’ (MEF) regards the cultural space of inclusion in which *Barriera di Milano* was presented to the audience. Despite its small weight, this cluster takes into account implications for the role played by this physical symbolic space, as well as audience development. The keywords in this cluster are *museum* (6 occurrences), *friendship* (3 occurrences), and *impact* (2 occurrences). Some participants focused on the museum and the performance: “*The space is pleasant; the MEF is a beautiful museum . . .*”; “*The MEF is nice and accessible ( . . . ), open<sup>3</sup> and full of people from the neighbourhood*’. Other statements underlined the connection between the theatre and the community related to this project: “*Their [of the social artists] performance has had an important impact . . .*”; “*They [the artists] brought to the museum a large public slice that otherwise would not have come. Their performance was impactful. The museum has become a box, which contained - for a day - unusual contents for a museum*”; “*The MEF benefited from it [the project]; it is important to host these interventions*’.

Finally, the third cluster (64.4 percent), ‘Assessment’, includes the main keyword *positive* (43 occurrences) that describes the intervention: the initiative was perceived by the interviewees as being relevant and important for the *Barriera di Milano* and its residents. Respondents said, for example:

2 Ward’s method. A partition criterion is fixed at a 50 percent threshold of the inter-cluster and total variance ratio. Lexical units were used.

3 The interviewee described the museum as ‘*aperto*’, literally meaning ‘open’ but meant to say that admission to the MEF was free and accessible for everyone.

*'[The project is] Positive... people saw themselves in a mirror... without a perceived heaviness... [the project is] sensitive<sup>4</sup>... positive... a look in the mirror without considering themselves an ugly, abandoned suburb: there is something beautiful [concerning the neighbourhood], something beautiful to which you are attached'; 'A moment of aggregation, pleasant, irony, history, information ... memories, which help people to recognize themselves as a community'; '250 people at the first performance (...) bottom-up involvement of people (...) positive'. The work of the social artists was also highly appreciated: 'They [the social artists] were very kind, capable operators, good, patient, they listened to everyone (...) associations and groups. Very good, good, good. They deserve 10/10'. The other keywords support this general assessment of the interactions that engaged the social artists, the neighbourhood, and the associations/groups since the beginning of the project: *communication* (23 occurrences), *Barriera di Milano* (21 occurrences), *association* (20 occurrences). Concerning this latter aspect, the respondents said, 'We liked the performance very much ... *Barriera di Milano cannot be abandoned*'.*

**Discussion** A positive assessment emerged from the interviews. Bottom-up engagement of the citizens was considered essential for the project, as it gave voice to the local residents (Levine, 1997). The stakeholders appreciated and recognized the importance of this initiative because it revealed a more complex image of the neighbourhood: difficulties and problems exist, but there are also cultural and social spaces, essential social networks, participation and interest in community life. The MEF is a symbol of social renaissance, of improvement that the neighbourhood deserves. This project provided a chance to enhance knowledge of the territory and accessibility to a cultural space. The stakeholders stated that the project promoted participation and engagement not only among local residents; it had a positive impact on community knowledge and cooperation between the local residents, the social artists, and the neighbourhood associations and groups. This form of creative sociocultural process appears to have the potential to foster cooperation, participation, and development of social networks, regardless of generational or cultural differences and personal interests (Korza et al., 2002).

## Conclusion

This study focused on the importance of a community theatre initiative that promoted community development. Concerning the impact of this community theatre project in terms of community development, we argue that it

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4 The Italian word 'leggero' literally means 'light'; the closest English equivalent is 'sensitive'.

could favour growth of social and cultural capital, social inclusion, and audience development. Citizen appreciation, perceived by stakeholders, is an important indicator of success. The community theatre may have favoured social participation, increasing awareness of the sociocultural resources, as well as the possibility of social change by giving a voice to citizenship and involving a wide range of people, which is an essential aspect for participatory processes (Boehm and Boehm, 2003).

Our findings show that the idea of narrating a neighbourhood through cultural/artistic activity attracted a heterogeneous group of people. The sociocultural events engaged neighbourhood residents and non-residents alike, individuals who do not share a personal interest in theatrical performance or never visited the MEF before or participated in neighbourhood activities.

The project attracted individuals who, as a habit, did not typically participate in theatre performances. The fact that about a third of the participants stated that they do not attend theatrical performances, and that more than half of them had never visited the MEF underscores the power of a social and creative intervention approach to drawing people closer into the cultural sphere. The MEF provided for interaction with its visitors (Karaulić, 2016), becoming a place of interaction between the neighbourhood and its citizens, inclusive and barrier-free.

The social artists integrated the community's social and cultural dimensions, strengthening the project's potential. They successfully utilized art to promote connections within the community and generate overall interest in the neighbourhood: the primary motivation for participation was the fascination and curiosity about the neighborhood, its history, and its spaces. The project was successful in raising awareness and knowledge of the Barriera and people had the opportunity to deepen their knowledge about this neighbourhood. They were able to re-discover an interest in the neighbourhood by telling stories about it and seeing themselves and their community on the stage.

The cultural implications are crucial, especially when cultural capital fosters the development of social capital (DiMaggio and Mohr, 1985). Indeed, cultural participation supports connections between citizens and the social sphere (Jeannotte, 2003). Participation in neighbourhood activities is an informal dimension of social capital (Perkins et al., 2002) and an expression of social inclusion. Social inclusion works by sharing common spaces in a sense of belonging (Hall, 2010), participating in leisure activities (ODPM, 2004 cit. in Lloyd et al., 2006, p. 186), and promoting participation and social cohesion (Long et al., 2002, cit. in Barraket, 2005, p. 4). The present project has attracted non-residents and people who generally do not participate in neighbourhood initiatives were able to join a project that enabled them

to feel accepted, involved, and valuable. A current challenge for these community projects is to be able to involve above all those who are distant from the territory, on the one hand, and from the cultural sphere, on the other.

A large part of the audience was already active in neighbourhood life; however, the community theatre managed to attract a part of the citizenry that does not usually attend the theatre. This change reflects the project's ability to bring the nodes of the city's social network together. The project may have fostered the creation of new, formal and informal relationships by embracing a heterogeneous segment of the population and engaging local associations and groups. The link between participation in neighbourhood initiatives and association/group membership indicates a virtuous circle in which a mere interest in neighbourhood activities can feed into formal support through membership in an association active in that community.

The project was widely appreciated by the local population. The idea of narrating the neighbourhood caught the curiosity of many people. This could provide an incentive for the development of future sociocultural projects, especially those dealing with problematic realities.

The present study has several limitations. First, social and cultural capital were inferred from a brief ad hoc questionnaire. The absence of longitudinal measures does not allow for predicting a future increase in capital and social inclusion. Nonetheless, our analysis shows that the project has cultural and social potential and provides for reflection on its strengths. Finally, the small size of the corpus limits the validity and generalizability of the analysis. Future artistic interventions may be able to develop in-depth research to evaluate the consequences of such projects over time.

In conclusion, community theatre is a pleasurable and accessible initiative, with broad and long-term outcomes for participants (Sloman, 2012); it encourages the community to actively engage in effective citizen-centered interventions. The project 'Barriera is my project' is a versatile and creative intervention that, through a culture of narration, enhanced the community's understanding of the neighborhood.

The major limitation of this intervention is that the project was not developed over time, which is necessary to foster and sustain social relationships within the community. It remained an isolated experience, thereby limiting the effectiveness of this type of intervention. However, through this narrative and cultural approach, it was possible to develop and sustain cultural and social relationships in the community.

This study does not allow for a long-term assessment; instead, it provides a snapshot of the immediate impact of an art intervention within the community. It has described the 'potential' of a specific project, demonstrating its

feasibility impact. Future research can build upon this foundation to conduct more in-depth longitudinal studies.

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