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**Building on decay: urban regeneration and social entrepreneurship in Italy through culture and the arts**

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## **Abstract**

This paper focuses on urban regeneration practices based on adaptive reuse projects in culture and the arts, where new forms of social entrepreneurship emerge. Through in-depth qualitative research, we develop three case studies in three different urban contexts in Italy: Turin, a large and highly industrialised city in one of the country's north-west regions; Terni, a medium-sized city in central Italy; and Favara, a small town in the province of Agrigento on the island of Sicily. Building on the case studies, we outline a possible taxonomy of urban remains, entrepreneurship, and adaptive reuse models, reflecting on the role of social entrepreneurship and its peculiar governance and business models, the specific features of adaptive reuse and urban regeneration processes, and the relationship between art and urban regeneration. Some closing remarks focus on how social entrepreneurship in the cultural field challenges both scholars and decision-makers.

## **Keywords**

Urban regeneration; adaptive reuse; social entrepreneurship; art; Italy

## **1. Introduction**

Transformations in declining or post-industrial urban areas are commonly associated with revitalisation processes that integrate physical rehabilitation of the industrial legacy, embellishment of public spaces and injection of new economic activities - mostly cultural and creative industries. In this context, the relationships between art and urban space have been thoroughly investigated by many scholars (Cooke & Lazzeretti, 2019; Markusen, 2006; Paddison, 1993; Scott, 2000; 2006; Zukin, 1995). Literature has further broadened the analytical spectrum, including the dimensions of culture

and art as key factors in regeneration processes that are examined from different perspectives. Cities have been viewed as ‘laboratories’ in which the boundaries between production and artistic and cultural consumption are defined and redefined in a continuous process, creating the conditions for general urban prosperity (Glaeser, 2002). Alternatively, from a more critical perspective, it can be said that cultural initiatives are immersed in rhetoric and an aesthetic directly connected to the dominant regime of financial and cognitive capitalism that induces cities to invest in public art programmes and cultural facilities to reinforce their competitive advantage (Gibson & Kong, 2005).

‘Ordinary’ regeneration processes take place in large urban areas affected by the post-industrial transition, and they are driven by real estate players in collaboration with a public sector-oriented towards market solutions. This paper takes a different approach. Investigating three urban cases in Italy it aims to investigate the relationship between urban regeneration needs, adaptive reuse practices, and the emergence of forms of social entrepreneurship in the wider context of the increasing centrality of social innovation practices. The peculiar situation of many Italian cities, which are still dealing with fiscal austerity and difficult shrinkage processes, allows us to add a neglected dimension to the debate on urban regeneration: small-scale interventions led by social entrepreneurship initiatives in cooperation - and sometimes in conflict - with government organisations.

The article is structured as follows: section 2 outlines the theoretical background of the study; section 3 briefly describes the contextual, methodological and analytical framework; section 4 presents the three case studies in detail; section 5 discusses the findings from the empirical inquiry; section 6 concludes with some general remarks.

## **2. Urban regeneration, social innovation, adaptive reuse and social entrepreneurship**

It may seem ‘old hat’ to be discussing urban regeneration. Indeed, the term is in danger of being conceptualised and trivialised. Many studies in international literature seek to offer a broad interpretation of the issue, including Leary and McCarthy (2013), who recognise two pillars on which urban regeneration experiences are based: firstly, the Enlightenment tradition underlying the Keynesian consensus of the capitalist West after World War II, which preaches the centrality of public sector intervention in overcoming economic and social inequalities in urban environments; secondly, the increasingly imposing forms of urban entrepreneurialism since the 1970s (Harvey, 1989) that have involved large amounts of private capital in implementing local public policies, in line with the neoliberal agenda. These two approaches have been combined differently over the years to provide the regulatory foundations for intervention policies in cities, according to a mechanism that has progressively seen the latter replace the former in urban planning and governance practices.

At the centre of these regeneration policies, cultural assets and processes play a crucial role in driving public and private investment and as the basis for discourse justifying radical transformations of urban spaces (Paddison & Miles, 2020). Investments in cultural facilities and cultural districts (Santagata, 2002) are considered crucial for sustaining the economic prosperity and social wellness of urban areas in post-industrial transition (Scott, 1997) and are seen to promote many aspects of the urban structure from various points of view (Cuesta, 2004; Gibson & Stevenson, 2004; Tornaghi, 2008): the city image, the attraction of new activities, the material rehabilitation of urban spaces, and social cohesion. Nevertheless, many critical points have been raised by numerous authors: uneven social distribution of symbolic contents (Belfiore & Bennett, 2007; Sharp et al., 2005); installations and public art events, which increase real estate market values and gentrification (Mathews, 2010); and ‘Disneyfication’, due to the proliferation of stereotyped playscapes (Chatterton & Hollands, 2002). A further critical assessment addresses a potential blind spot from the Anglo-Saxon perspective by examining ‘other’ fields of practices, such as the experiences of southern European cities (Rabbiosi et al., 2020).

Since the 2007 global financial crisis, the widespread effects of the financial collapse of urban real estate markets and, at the same time, of public sector capacity to fund urban development policies led to further lacerations of the material fabric and to demographic and economic impoverishment (Knieling & Othengrafen, 2016). In these circumstances, ‘new’ practices, such as community-led initiatives inspired by the social innovation framework (McCallum et al., 2009), seem to provide fertile soil for the surge and proliferation of adaptive reuse experiences in many cities. Social innovation has conveyed “an alternative view of urban development, focused on satisfaction of human needs (and empowerment, i.e. social economy) through innovation in the relations within neighbourhood and community governance” (Moulaert et al., 2007: 196) and in the way of “using, producing, and exploiting tangible and intangible cultural assets” (Tricarico et al., 2020). Its approach is inter-sectoral and embraces several facets of urban life: (re)use of spatial assets, promotion of new entrepreneurial initiatives, and policy-making processes. Within such a framework, governance tools also reflect in many experiences the change of perspective, dismissing the form of pro-market public-private governance that structures neo-liberal urban policies, and embracing more or less shared governance arrangements (Iaione, 2016), to the point of being based on the initiative of citizens (Pradel, 2021).

Public institutions make increasing reference to social innovation and are encouraging experiences in this direction. However, as for other fashionable concepts that have arisen in planning debates over recent decades, there is a risk that this set of values may be translated by public decision-makers into “flanking mechanisms” (Brenner and Theodore, 2002) which weaken their transformative potential (Bragaglia, 2021). Anyway, two main interspersed families of practices descend from this perspective, offering to urban scholars a promising field of investigation: on one hand, material interventions on the physical fabric of the city dubbed as ‘adaptive reuse’ of abandoned spaces and, on the other, an ample range of economic initiatives gathered under the umbrella of ‘social entrepreneurship’.

According to Douglas (2006), adaptive reuse refers to a significant change in function of an existing building or space when its previous function has become obsolete. Although several approaches to adaptive reuse can be distinguished (Pleovets & Van Cleempoel, 2011), the most relevant cases go beyond simply preserving the external elements of a building in order to satisfy a physical purpose, and include enhancing the history of a site and its surroundings to maximise its environmental, social and economic benefits. Thus, investigating adaptive reuse models through cultural projects implies understanding the relative weight of different goals, including the market revaluation of assets, the achievement of social effects, and the fulfilment of artistic ambitions.

Recent forms of adaptive reuse involve the temporary use of empty buildings by the community, through a bottom-up approach (Németh & Langhorst, 2014). As such, various forms of social entrepreneurship emerge, revealing an often ambiguous relationship with both public bodies and official policies. Very broadly, social entrepreneurship involves society as a whole taking a new entrepreneurial approach oriented towards the satisfaction of social needs. Despite being seen differently by different authors (Peredo and McLean, 2006; Dees 1998; Sullivan Mort et al., 2003; Short et. al, 2009, Mair and Marti, 2006), all approaches recognise that it includes the co-presence of both ‘entrepreneurial’ and ‘social’ elements (Peredo and McLean, 2006). Being “entrepreneurial” implies the presence of innovation and financial risk (Schumpeter, 1980; Hagedoorn, 1996, and Dees, 1998), requiring particular attention to economic sustainability and financial flows within the business models of organisations (Baden-Fuller and Mangematin 2013; Shafer et al. 2005). The ‘social’ component, on the other hand, requires entrepreneurs to incorporate the achievement of social goals (Peredo and McLean, 2006; Montanari and Mizzau, 2015). However, the opposite can also be true, meaning that social players - other than profit-seeking investors - might take a new entrepreneurial approach. In this regard, in order to investigate governance forms of social entrepreneurship, we must ascertain the role of civil society in the achievement of collective goals, understanding its

relationships with public bodies and the production sector from a network perspective (Rhodes, 2007).

As the borders between the state, the market and the third sector become blurred, specific literature on social enterprises (Borzaga and Defourny, 2001), benefit corporations (Hiller, 2013), hybrid organisations (Doherty et al. 2014; Secinaro et al 2019) and social business models (Yunus et al. 2010) is emerging. However, social entrepreneurship models and their links with urban regeneration processes are less frequently studied when investigating cultural initiatives. Some valuable analyses have definitely contributed to the construction of influential frameworks in the US and the UK (e.g. Kleinhans et al., 2017; Varady et al., 2017; Imrie and Raco, 2003; Tallon, 2013). Yet, documented experiences outside the Anglo-Saxon context still remain rare and fragmented (exceptions include Garcia et al., 2015 and Tremblay and Pilati, 2013, whose analyses are focused, respectively, on Barcelona and on Montreal). Despite this paucity, we believe that the European - and specifically Italian - context could be an interesting field in which to investigate the relationship between adaptive reuse projects and social entrepreneurship.

### **3. The contextual, methodological and analytical framework**

Over the past decade, Italy has experienced a wide proliferation of adaptive reuse initiatives, mostly initiated by bottom-up processes<sup>1</sup>. This phenomenon was influenced by three major factors. Firstly, the presence of a very high number of disused buildings and spaces across the country - over one million vacant units/buildings (Campagnoli, 2014; Campagnoli and Tognetti, 2016). Secondly, the overall stalling of real-estate values in the country, discouraging private investors (although, after a lengthy crisis and the slowdown caused by Covid-19, the residential property market seems to be

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<sup>1</sup> For an extended overview, see [www.riusiamolitalia.it](http://www.riusiamolitalia.it) (last access: 6/12/21)



recovering: Nomisma, 2021). Thirdly, the financial weakness of the public sector, dating back at least to the 2008 sub-prime crisis and also reflected in the public building stock vacancy (Mangialardo and Micelli, 2020; Micelli 2018).

As a result, adaptive reuses are mostly undertaken by third-sector organisations, driven both by the need for low-cost spaces and by the desire to recover the socio-material fabric of specific urban neighbourhoods, inspired by social innovation ideals. This process is also cultivated by public administrations, interested in involving the third sector as a source of complementary funding and in coming up with innovative ideas to solve collective problems. In this regard, public support is ensured both by making material assets belonging to the State available to third sector organisations and by financially supporting reuse projects at these sites. The recent third sector reform approved by the Italian government in 2016 (Law 106/2016) is moving in this direction, introducing fiscal incentives for such initiatives.

While an academic debate on urban regeneration and social innovation in Italy is fairly well-established (Ostanel 2017; Billi and Tricarico 2018; Cottino and Zandonai, 2012; Battistoni and Zandonai 2017; Calvaresi 2018), studies of social entrepreneurial initiatives in the cultural field are still few and far between. The most salient experiences include the cases of *ExFadda* in San Vito dei Normanni (Apulia) and *Periferica* in Mazara del Vallo (Sicily) (Scaffidi, 2019), representing what Tricarico et al. (2020) call “Platform Spaces”, based on multi-player cooperation. Rodighiero et al. (2019) propose an organisational model for planning and managing creative and collaborative spaces in urban contexts. Fruitful insights have also been developed on community enterprises as new infrastructural assets bearing local development (Tricarico, 2016, Tricarico and Pacchi, 2018). The creation and reinforcement of “community assets” via the reuse of vacant properties and the co-design of activities with marginal people have been successfully explored (Tricarico, 2016; Ostanel, 2017).

In this context, our inquiry investigates three Italian cases in which artistic and cultural revitalisation concerns small-scale groups of buildings. The case studies are at the centre of two

highly qualitative research projects we conducted from 2015–2018, which share a common methodological design: in-depth desk analysis of documents, scientific papers and newspaper articles; field visits to conduct observations and semi-structured interviews<sup>2</sup>; and re-construction of cases in a preliminary summary format. The first research project was conducted between 2015 and 2016 and focused on ‘Barriera di Milano’ in Turin (Salone et al. 2017). Favara and Terni were part of a second research project conducted in 2018, focused on the conditions for activating reuse of abandoned urban spaces (Bonini Baraldi and Salone, 2020).

The material we collected subsequently aroused our curiosity about the connection between urban regeneration, adaptive reuse and social entrepreneurship models. To build upon this analysis, we looked at the related literature and, in the spirit of iterative dialogue between ideas and evidence that characterises case-oriented research (Ragin, 1987), we constructed an analytical framework and attempted to make sense of the data. We chose these three case studies as they are located in three very different urban contexts: Turin, a large and highly industrialised city in a north-western region of Italy (Piedmont); Terni, a medium-sized city located in central Italy (Umbria); and Favara, a small town in the province of Agrigento (Sicily). These differences allowed us to posit a taxonomy of urban remains and adaptive reuse projects. The remaining four cases developed within the second study (Toolbox in Turin, Factory Grisù in Ferrara, Officine Zero in Rome, and ex Fadda in San Vito dei Normanni) were briefly used to broaden the perspective of the taxonomy and to open further issues.

While the three case studies used for this analysis differ in many important aspects, in the next section we examine them within a common framework. Firstly, we focus on how these urban vacuums came to exist (the *urban context*, and the need for urban regeneration). These ‘urban relics’ grew from the industrial crisis in the western world after the 1960s: the collapse of the car industry in Turin, the sulphur industry in Favara and the iron industry in Terni all brought about profound urban changes,

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<sup>2</sup> The number of field visits varied according to the complexity of the case. We spent two days in Favara and Terni, and made 18 part-time visits to Turin. Each interview at the three sites was recorded and transcribed by the authors.

with consequent economic and social impacts on specific areas of the cities. Secondly, we focus on the development of *adaptive reuse* projects (through culture and the arts): in all three cases, abandoned spaces are chosen as sites for developing artistic and cultural projects. Thirdly, as a specific contribution from our disciplinary approach, we outline the governance and business models used in the different initiatives. Although very different, the three stories demonstrate that *social entrepreneurship* plays an important role in adaptive reuse and urban regeneration processes, and that these players have complex - if not ambiguous - relationships with public bodies and policies.

## **4. Findings**

### **4.1 FARM Cultural Park – Favara**

- *Urban context*

Favara is an Italian municipality located in an inland area of Sicily in the province of Agrigento, with about 30,000 inhabitants. Although enriched by the presence of one of the most enchanting Greater Greece archaeological sites (Valley of the Temples, a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1997), Agrigento Province is one of the poorest areas of southern Italy, with high levels of unemployment, crime and urban disarray. Favara itself is a neglected city, where urban settlement has developed chaotically, and there is little respect for public assets:

“We have a strange mentality in Favara: what belongs to everyone doesn’t belong to anyone, this is a rule. We have sumptuous, fantastic, more or less tasteful homes ... you

can see that a lot of money has been spent on the interiors, but the façades are left raw”  
(interview with town council member, November 2018).

The old town in particular has suffered significant abandonment, leading to progressive decay of the historical fabric. Following a crisis in the sulphur industry, from 1960, the old houses of the original settlement - an intricate network of streets and courtyards typical of the Islamic tradition - gave way to more modern, often unauthorised buildings in newly-established neighbourhoods. The deterioration reached its height in 2010, when two buildings collapsed, causing the death of two children<sup>3</sup>. Since then, the municipal administration has been forced to intervene, eventually carrying out preventive demolition of a large portion of the old town.

- *Adaptive reuse*

At this point, Andrea Bartoli (a notary and art enthusiast) and Florinda Saieva (a lawyer and architecture lover) enter the story. A cosmopolitan Sicilian couple with strong Christian values, they returned to Favara to create a sound, warm and stimulating environment in which to raise their daughters. To do so, they quickly realised they needed to intervene in the city:

“It wouldn't make sense for me to give my daughter a lot of incentives, if she was the only one to be stimulated: she would always find herself feeling misplaced. So we quickly realised that we had to aim for growth of the city in general. We were regular visitors at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris ... so we said to ourselves: what is in Favara - the relationships, the family, our traditions - we cannot bring to Paris, but what is in Paris we can try to bring here” (interview with a representative of FARM, November 2018).

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<sup>3</sup> [https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2010/01/23/news/favara\\_crollo-2047962/](https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2010/01/23/news/favara_crollo-2047962/) (last access: May 2021).

Investing large amounts of their own capital (around a million Euros in total, including a mortgage loan), they purchased and renovated a series of buildings within a specific area of the old town and transformed them into a contemporary art centre: FARM Cultural Park. The initial idea was to undertake a participatory process. However, the urgency to stop the decay and the demolition meant the couple had to accelerate the process:

“We wanted to start in 2012, because we were aiming to complete the purchase steadily in an attempt to give some stability in the territory, to implement a participatory process. But we had to completely bypass this phase, as the municipality received many notices of investigation and started demolishing much of the old town” (interview with a representative of FARM, November, 2018).

Today, FARM is one of the most outstanding contemporary art and urban regeneration projects in southern Europe. The area activated by the project consists of a series of small historic buildings and adjoining gardens in Arabic style located around seven courtyards (*i Sette Cortili*). The heart is *FARM XL*: a major building that hosts a large exhibition space, a small bookshop and a reception, as well as *Sou*, the only children's school of architecture in southern Europe. Other buildings around the courtyards are home to artistic residencies, installations, a co-working space, a children's museum, a small restaurant, a shared kitchen and other multifunctional spaces, covering a total of about 4,300 square metres indoors and 13,200 outdoors. Since 2010, FARM has attracted an increasing number of artists, architects, designers, politicians, researchers and visitors from all over the world (Faraci, 2017).

Thanks to FARM, the local economy is experiencing new development opportunities: firstly, within the seven courtyards, where private owners have taken advantage of the new interest in the area and have developed their own businesses, including B&Bs and restaurants; secondly, in the old

city and the surrounding areas, where hospitality offerings (B&Bs and hotels) have gone from zero to 150 within five years, and are likely to increase (tourism inflows - never really previously known in Favara - now number about 120,000 per year). All in all, FARM seems to have achieved huge economic and social impacts, although they have not been measured precisely:

“... if you put together the seven or eight interventions that have been carried out, dozens and dozens of B&Bs that have been generated and numerous premises that have been opened and try to come up with an average, in these eight years it seems that about 20 million Euros have been spent around FARM. (...) There are also more intangible indicators: the child of the seven courtyards who was a fierce stray cat and today has become a lamb; the girl who has opened up about her homosexuality and probably would not have done so” (interview with a second representative of FARM, November 2018).

- *Social entrepreneurship*

From its early years, FARM had a difficult relationship with the municipality. In 2017, following an objection from a private citizen, an order was issued by the municipal police against FARM for illegally occupying public space with an art work. There was a risk that FARM would be closed, but public opinion, and the involvement of Parliament's Culture Commission, led to the administration backing down. Today, FARM's relationship with the municipality is positive, although the impression is that FARM is seen merely in terms of its impact on economic development, without being actively supported:

“Thanks to FARM, we have seen that the key element of economic development is tourism. With FARM, it has been proven that you can do tourism; nobody thought this was possible in Favara” (interview with a town council member, November 2018).

Indeed, FARM is completely privately funded (belonging to the Bartoli family) and managed by a private association (FARM Cultural Park Association). It finances its activities through revenues (entrance tickets to the exhibition and fees for special activities) and the Bartoli family’s personal contributions. It is supported by a cooperative of private citizens who believe in the project, and is made possible thanks to voluntary contributions of artists, intellectuals and businessmen all over the world.

While the original aim of the project has mostly been achieved - to redevelop an area of the old town through art and culture - the Bartolis’ dream has grown bigger: to create a company (*Società per Azioni Buone* - Company for Good Actions) to manage an experimental fund in which everyone can invest in the old city of Favara, in a ‘common’ perspective:

“If we have the ability, to make the citizens of Favara understand that by investing (not donating) even only 10 per cent of their savings in good actions, we could redesign this city, we could realise a multi-year development project that would benefit children, the elderly, and integration. It would improve everyone’s quality of life” (interview with a second representative of FARM, November, 2018).

## **4.2   Barriera di Milano - Turin**

- *Urban context*

Barriera di Milano is a large neighbourhood in the north-east of Turin - once one of the most industrialised areas of the city - founded in the second half of the 19th century. Its rapid development, together with the presence of large factories linked to the growing car industry, attracted thousands of inhabitants - especially in the period from 1950 to 1970 - coming both from the countryside and from southern Italy. After a population peak of around 110,000 in 1975 (Beraudo et al. 2006), the area lost most of its residents over time, with many industries left abandoned. In recent years, immigration flows from Africa and Eastern Europe have led to a repopulation of the neighbourhood (currently around 47,100).

Over the years, the municipality of Turin has made great efforts to regenerate Barriera, especially from 2007 to 2013. The Integrated Urban Development Programme (PISU) played an important part in this. Its main objective is to improve the quality of public spaces and mobility in an extremely densely populated area of the city (about three times the city's average). Simultaneously, large social housing projects have been developed, with little attention to green spaces and other environmental amenities (Armano et al. 2016). Finally, the municipality recently proposed another urban regeneration project called 'Variante 200', planning to use the impending construction of a new subway line to attract investment for new housing, retail and leisure facilities.

- *Adaptive reuse*

The effects of these types of policies take time to develop, and thus to be measured. In the meantime, Barriera has spontaneously become a beacon for cultural activities and initiatives, so much so that it has earned the nickname of the 'Chelsea of Turin'. Without being exhaustive, we have analysed 18 of these initiatives, ranging from architecture to design, to visual arts to cinema and more, mostly located in abandoned spaces (see Table 1).

Insert table 1 here



Our interviewees moved to *Barriera di Milano* primarily because of the cheap availability of appropriate spaces for developing cultural projects. Indeed, all initiatives were transferred to *Barriera* after 2007, when the financial crisis began.

“The buildings in the neighbourhood are easy to buy or rent. They have particular architectural characteristics: lofts, low buildings, workshops offering expressive places for the creativity present in the city at advantageous prices. [...] We noted that many artists have decided to settle here to take advantage of the economic convenience” (interview with MEF Director, January 2015).

However, many initiatives are also implemented to achieve positive social impacts:

“In this neighbourhood around 70 per cent of the children registered with primary schools are children of immigrants. I was interested in working with them and for them” (interview with *Atelier Heritage* representative, March 2015).

- *Social entrepreneurship*

Apart from two university projects, private interests drive the transformation of the neighbourhood. Indeed, the various initiatives all have a high degree of independence. As such, most of them are not reliant on public funding: some are fully independent, while others use public funds for specific projects but not for their day-to-day operations. In many cases, public support comes in the form of a non-financial benefit, such as free or discounted use of spaces. However, many of our interviewees clearly saw their independence as a choice:

“To remain independent, we never applied for funding. This was an explicit desire right from the start, which remained part of our everyday action” (interview with Spazio211 representative, March 2015).

At the same time, very few of them rely on private grants: while the public sector seems to have withdrawn, it has certainly not been replaced by private patronage. Indeed, to achieve financial sustainability, most organisations undertake commercial or entertainment activities (bars, courses and events). In short, instead of seeking external funding, those involved in Barriera seem to have chosen the road of entrepreneurialism.

### **4.3 CAOS – Terni**

- *Urban context*

The history of CAOS in Terni, a medium-sized city located in Umbria (a central region of Italy), intersects with the long process of de-industrialisation affecting many large-scale industrial centres in north-western countries over the past century. The urban area in which CAOS is located is close to the historical centre and constitutes a modern addition to the city, known as the Garden Town. It is a remarkable example of industrial archaeology, with its combination of canals and late-19th century industrial factories. Historically, the site was one of the first industrial initiatives promoted by the Papal State, the pre-unitary state ruling many regions of central Italy, and officially inaugurated in 1793. Iron and chemical production continued from the 19th century until 1985, when the site was closed, which led to a decade of abandonment and physical decay.

- *Adaptive reuse*

In the mid-1990s, the municipality decided to reclaim the area, reinventing its role within the changed, post-industrial economy of the city as a location for new cultural functions. This was funded by EU structural funds available for old industrialised regions and some national urban regeneration programmes which the central government launched in the same period:

“This space was established thanks to the municipality's decision to use EU structural funds for the restoration of an industrial archaeological building” (interview with Indisciplinarte representative, December 2018).

The properties had been bought partly by the municipality and partly by a private firm, Coop Centro Italia, operating in the large-scale distribution sector. In 2007 Indisciplinarte - a cultural association that promotes contemporary culture at national level, but with strong roots in the city - was granted permission to use part of the area temporarily to organise a cultural festival. Thanks to the success of the initiative, the local administration's vision shifted from a conventional project for museum facilities to a more advanced proposal for a cultural district:

“Initially, in the municipality's vision, the site was to host the city museum with archaeological collections. Then, a council member had the idea of creating a cultural district [...] and decided to choose the contemporary as an investment priority” (interview with Indisciplinarte representative, December 2018).

As a result, Indisciplinarte decided to return to Terni, and started consultative and planning activities with the municipality. The end product of this collaboration is CAOS, which promotes cultural

production in various artistic sectors from archaeology to modern and contemporary visual and performing arts, and uses the industrial legacy of the old factory district. The centre covers approximately 44,000 square meters, including 12,000 square meters (6,000 indoors and 6,000 outdoors) of former industrial sites. It currently includes two museums (for modern and contemporary art), spaces for temporary exhibitions and workshops, a theatre, a video room, a fab lab, artistic residences, a guest house, a bookshop, a cafeteria and other spaces hosting a range of cultural services.

- *Social entrepreneurship*

From the governance point of view, CAOS is based on a triple partnership involving a public administration (the municipality of Terni), a large private company (Coop) and other private profit and non-profit entities (including Indisciplinate) working in the cultural or social field. In just a few years - and thanks to the artistic direction of Indisciplinate - it has become a reference point in the field of contemporary theatre at national and international level.

Compared with the previous two cases, the level of investment and resources are significant, both in absolute terms and in terms of local authority funding: according to our sources, investment in the area totalled 65 million Euros, of which 7,610,000 Euros (from the municipality, the region, and the EU) allocated to CAOS, with an additional yearly contribution of about 500,000 Euros.

Despite this investment, political changes at local level, with the arrival of a right-wing coalition in 2018, are currently challenging the relationships between the municipality and the consortium. A reduction in the yearly grant is a possibility:

“In my opinion, the reasons for redefining the initiative are economic, as the municipality is in financial disarray and in this situation it is difficult to find 500,000 Euros per year just to manage those spaces and sacrifice [...] other cultural activities in the city” (interview with municipal Cultural Services Officer, December 2018).

Indeed, while the local administration's support was a competitive advantage for the project, today, after the political change and the new agenda, it is the project's greatest weakness.

## 5. Discussion

The cases reveal three different models of urban regeneration adaptive reuse and social entrepreneurship in three different contexts, suggesting a simple taxonomy: 1) post-industrial peripheries in large urban settings: Turin; 2) sites abandoned by public industry in a mid-size city: Terni; 3) historical centres in serious decay in a small town of the South: Favara. While being neither exhaustive nor deterministic, our taxonomy supports some reflections on three different levels, which reflect our theoretical focus: the role of social entrepreneurship and its peculiar governance and business models, the specific features of adaptive reuse and urban regeneration processes, and the relationship between art and urban regeneration. Rather than being separated, the three levels of reflection are strongly interrelated (see Table 2).

Insert table 2 here

Firstly, in terms of social entrepreneurship, all three cases show how civil society can self-organise in response to a lack of action in the public sector due to austerity measures. This is true in Turin, where bottom-up initiatives shaped the new image of an old industrial neighbourhood, and in Favara, where a wealthy, forward-looking couple took on the municipal administration's role in preserving the old city. It is also the case in Terni, where the non-profit partner (Indisciplinarte) played a key role both in terms of content and administrative solutions, driving the cultural policies of the

city for many years. In summary, urban crisis and subsequent adaptive reuse seem to stimulate initiatives oriented towards social entrepreneurship.

Moreover, the three cases allow us to deepen our understanding of social entrepreneurship, identifying three different models, with different solutions in terms of governance and business models. As for governance, the Turin case identifies a model of multiple actions and players - or a 'diffused non-profit entrepreneurship model' - which might reflect the urban and historical complexity of a (big) city. Here, there is no major, single player but, instead, a plethora of small entities - each with its own vision/goal/tools - which interact with each other and come together in unexpected and independent ways. Most of these entities gather revenues through commercial activities, with a business model where the value created for the final consumer is a mix of cultural, social and market product/services.

Curiously, the other case we analysed in Turin in our wider research project (Toolbox, a co-working space located in an old fashion company and foundry building) reveals significant similarities with the case of Barriera: while being funded and managed by a single private corporation, its overall value proposition and financial sustainability is based on the co-presence of a plethora of private partners and individual freelancers who share common spaces and services, including culture-related workshops and events (Bonini Baraldi and Salone, 2020). Once again, here, no public support is given.

In Terni, the crisis of the major public company led to a public-led intervention, although with significant contributions from private partners (both for profit - Coop - and not for profit – Indisciplinarte), in what could be termed a 'public-private and not-for-profit partnership model'. Economic sustainability in this case is guaranteed by a yearly budget from the municipality, with a business model based on public funds.

Similar experiences can be found in two other cases located in medium-sized cities (Factory Grisù in Ferrara and Ex Fadda in San Vito dei Normanni) where the private initiative is matched by an

active role of the local administrations in supporting the projects (Bonini Baraldi and Salone, 2020). The socio-urban morphology of Favara - a shrinking historical centre in a small southern city - highlights a possible third way: that of a ‘family social business model’, a sort of postmodern patronage rooted in Christian values in which personal and social aims converge in an entrepreneurial approach to the city. Funds - especially investment funds - are obtained from private investments, with no contribution from public entities and little margin provided by commercial activities.

In short, responses to the same phenomena - the urban crisis exacerbated by “expansionary austerity” (Rossi, 2017) and the creation of material ‘voids’ in urban contexts - might engender different governance and business models, according to a city’s specific history, social capital and fabric. The potential solutions and the extent of this correlation are, of course, open to debate, and cannot be inferred from our limited case selection. The Officine Zero case in Rome, for instance, began from the illegal occupation of the former Rail Service Italia buildings by a group of artists and workers, demonstrating an additional (extreme) case of social entrepreneurship in an exceptionally conflicted area of the capital city (Bonini Baraldi and Salone, 2020). Our analysis does, however, expose the simplistic dichotomy around which urban regeneration literature traditionally moves: on the one hand, Keynesian interpretations that posit a fundamental role for government and public policies in urban regeneration policies; on the other hand, neoliberal approaches (Harvey, 1989) that highlight private capital, mostly from for-profit developers, as the only alternative to public intervention (Leary & McCarthy, 2013). Indeed, our cases highlight the possible spectrum of solutions, with the emergence of an urban entrepreneurialism which - also in the cultural field - clearly distances itself from the current neoliberal perspective. Instead, we find initiatives oriented towards philanthropy (the FARM model in Favara) or to diffuse social entrepreneurship (the Barriera Model in Turin), which seek economic sustainability rather than profitability. Paradoxically, it is precisely CAOS - the only public-led solution - that is most fragile, while Favara and Barriera, although fluid, seem more resilient.

The peculiar social entrepreneurship models in which urban regeneration processes have taken shape in our three cases lead us to a second reflection, related to the role of adaptive reuse in urban regeneration. Indeed, our cases reveal that adaptive reuse can have many different goals and urban regeneration can take different forms. In Terni, for instance, there is a clear commercial objective for the reuse initiative, where the private for-profit partner (Coop) and the public partner (the municipality) are both interested - albeit with other actors - in the market values of the area. Art, in this case, is seen *ex-ante* as a tool for the economic redevelopment of an abandoned building/area. In Favara and Turin, however, the *aim* is not to increase the market value of specific assets; rather, it constitutes a non-priority (unexpected?) *outcome*. In Turin, reuse initiatives seek primarily to develop cultural projects, while in Favara, art and cultural projects specifically seek to improve the social conditions in the city. Indeed, compared with traditional adaptive reuse projects, where the history of the artefact is a central aspect of the work (Robiglio, 2016), our experiences reveal a very different approach. Here, the material asset remains in the background: the starting point is not the restoration of physical structures, but the restoration of a social condition or the enablement of a cultural process. The preservation of the building appears in this sense to be instrumental and not the primary purpose. Curiously, the social entrepreneurship model based on public funds (Terni) is the only one in which the primary goal is speculative, while the two privately funded projects (through philanthropy or the market) have little interest in commercial goals.

Finally, our case studies also trigger an observation on the role of art in urban regeneration. Critical contributors have underlined the elite character of urban policies centred on cultural and creative industries, which are blamed for being frequently exploited to justify more or less radical processes of social substitution and gentrification (Peck, 2005; Ponzini & Rossi, 2010). While this may be true in large urban regeneration programmes based on top-down processes (Harvey, 1989; Swyngedouw et al. 2002), it is not so in our cases. In all three, art is the pivotal factor around which the ‘rebirth’ of spaces takes place, even when it is not intended as the primary goal. Precisely due to their bottom-up



nature (personified in Indisciplinarte in Terni), what emerges is the ability of these initiatives to reinterpret art - even the most ‘difficult’ and sophisticated language (such as contemporary art) - and steer artistic projects towards political and social meanings that are closely linked to those emerging in a specific spatial context and strongly felt by its inhabitants. The effect is that of grasping the attention of people uninterested in art itself or who have limited cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1979; Rota & Salone, 2014). Paradoxically, if it is true that art makes social issues intelligible, the opposite is also true: social themes can bring people closer to art - with an unexpected win–win result.

## **5. Final remarks**

Like many other examples of urban actions, urban regeneration practices are also highly differentiated according to both their spatial characteristics and historic circumstances. This basic observation acquires more clarity and significance when considering experiences realised in “ordinary cities” (Robinson, 2006), where opportunities for urban development are less favourable to the major players than in more affluent cities. Our three case studies fall within this category, allowing us to observe the surge of social entrepreneurship as a response to urban regeneration needs in areas where material voids create interesting opportunities for social initiatives (Rabbiosi et al., 2020).

However, social entrepreneurship itself does not follow a single model: the analysis reveals different governance/business models for adaptive reuse interventions. At the same time, there is no single approach to adaptive reuse: while the social aim is always present, it might be overtaken by commercial purposes (asset market values) or merely artistic goals, according to the origin of the initiative. Art itself can be a primary goal or an instrumental tool for urban regeneration, on the one hand, and/or for influencing asset market values on the other hand. Indeed, different social entrepreneurial models are linked both to the social context and to the urban fabric, with consequent

opportunities in terms of adaptive reuse, in the sense that socio-spatial characteristics trigger site-specific responses from organisations and influence their *modus operandi*. While establishing deterministic correlations is not the aim of this paper, the link between governance solutions, adaptive reuse projects, and the typology of regeneration processes might be an interesting field to explore.

Several implications for public policies ensue from our analysis. Firstly, simplifying regulations are no longer sufficient to address the decreased dynamism of the property markets. Confirming what Mangialardo & Micelli (2017) already state, it appears necessary to focus on demand - i.e. those who ultimately use the real estate - to develop more effective policies. Secondly, the need for actions focused on the demand side is now facing radically new conditions engendered by the COVID-19 emergency. Even though any prediction is currently unreliable, many signs seem to herald that the macro-geographical patterns of urbanisation are unlikely to change (Florida et al. 2021). Nonetheless, at local, micro-urban scale some transformations are already unfolding, affecting the spaces of work and consumption and, above all, the functional organisation of the urban space. The short-term tendency of the high-income population to leave urban cores for upscale suburbs or well-equipped medium-sized cities due to health scaring as a result of the pandemic, and the decline of central commercial districts might trigger a significant decrease in real estate values in central areas and encourage the arrival of young people, artists and creative spirits, with an increased trend towards revitalising abandoned buildings (Florida et al., 2021). This could open new opportunities for alternative uses that can stimulate new regulatory frameworks to avoid the deterioration of urban spaces and encourage local initiatives in the domain of social and cultural services (Scott, 2020).

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