

12. Tactical urbanism experiences in building public spaces: lessons learned in Italy

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12.1 INTRODUCTION TO TEMPORARY URBAN DESIGN ACTIONS

Urban planning has changed its paradigm following the evolution of the development approach from unlimited growth to sustainable development (Daly 2014; OECD 2020). The need to save natural resources (particularly the soil), to fight climate change, to favor local economic development, have brought about a paradigm shift also in urban planning that has moved the focus of disciplinary interest from the indefinite expansion of urban suburbs to the regeneration of the existing city both in its physical spaces and in its society (Van der Zwet and Ferry 2019; EC 2020; Beer and Clower 2019; Medeiros and van der Zwet 2020). In urban regeneration processes, the degraded spaces and the residual voids of previous expansion cycles have become the privileged spaces for new projects (Magnaghi 2005).

Social reasons for changes in urban planning have been added to the environmental ones, linked to the contemporary demographic dynamics of most Western nations experiencing a phase of demographic contraction. The shrinking cities phenomenon and its consequences have been explored in a large international literature (Oswalt and Rieniets 2006; Pallagst et al. 2009; Audirac and Alejandre 2010; Camarda et al. 2015).

After reductions in mortality, fertility not only decreased but reached values lower than those of generational replacement (which corresponds to approximately two children per woman). The European continent, as a whole, has collapsed below this threshold since the second half of the 1970s. The current European Union figure is just over 1.5. The United States managed to remain close to the replacement value for longer, but in the last decade it has suffered a significant reduction (United Nations 2022). Naturally, demographic dynam-

ics are very different for nations like China or India. Even more than in the past, growth rates between areas of the world and between generations have never been so divergent.

Such processes of ecological and demographic transition have forced development models to change with obvious and decisive consequences also in urban planning. Urban regeneration of existing cities is the main objective of urban planning and the main tool of urban design. But how should urban regeneration processes be carried out? There are project tools that allow “planning by doing” as Campos Venuti (1978) elaborated in another historical context, anticipating and verifying the possible consequences of design choices and allowing the inhabitants to realize this directly by experimenting with the solutions without having to read difficult three-dimensional models or to be anxious about spending a lot of public money without being able to go back on the choices made.

There have been multiple ways of defining possible answers to these questions which have taken on different names often indicating very similar interventions such as: “do-it-yourself” (DIY), “pop-up”, “guerilla”, and “tactical urbanism”. All these practices (many of them already discussed by Lydon 2011; Lydon and Garcia 2015; and Bishop and Williams 2012) were informal and temporary urban design governance actions, very often related to bottom-up processes of community empowerment (a panorama of these European informal urban design governance practices has been made by the Urban Maestro organization,¹ summarized and discussed by Carmona et al. 2023), and used as urban regeneration catalysts (Oswalt et al. 2014).

With the spread of these experiences throughout the world, institutions have also begun to realize that these types of interventions, especially if placed within broader urban regeneration strategies, might no longer be promoted only by inhabitants or autonomous groups of interests (often to counteract the inertia of institutions in tackling the degradation of some places), but also directly by the institutions themselves. In this new institutional context, tactical urbanism (TU) has come to be regarded as a regeneration tool capable of providing innovative answers to pressing problems in cities and urban areas.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary² defines “tactical” as “of or relating to small-scale actions serving a larger purpose” or “made or carried out with only a limited or immediate end in view”. So, starting from Lydon’s (2011) definition, applied to an institutional approach, TU can be defined as actions and strategies for revitalizing and activating urban spaces that focus on short-term,

¹ See <https://urbanmaestro.org>.

² See <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/tactical>.

low-cost, and scalable interventions and policies, to experiment with possible long-term effects in urban regeneration, directly involving communities.

As already said, after the first experiences, public administrations have also shown interest in these informal techniques for redeveloping public spaces and streets (in France, for example, those experiences have been called “urbanisme transitoire”, ANRU 2021; or “urbanisme transitionnel”, Besson 2020), but it was during the Covid-19 pandemic that the push to use these soft tools established itself and has resulted in many institutional projects and creations (Pradifta et al. 2021; Cariello et al. 2021; Stevens et al. 2021; Kim 2022; Abdelkader et al. 2023).

After some years it is now possible to evaluate the results and first tactical urbanism experiences instigated by institutions during the Covid-19 pandemic. We have the opportunity to observe the longevity of the earliest results in the mid-term.

In this chapter, case studies made of two municipal institutions in Italy (Milan and Bari, the first in the north and the second in the south) are evaluated and lead to some conclusions highlighting useful results to guide the use of these tools in urban regeneration policies, which increasingly use them even if not always consciously.

The selected case studies involved some of the authors and offer interesting indications of effective, ineffective and in-between experiences of TU applications promoted in Italy by the municipalities in Milan and Bari. They were chosen to provide an overview of the types of interventions (squares, pedestrian and cycle paths, green spaces, etc.) and to understand how the institutions, when they directly promote these processes, manage to involve the inhabitants in the construction of the new configuration of the public spaces.

Before going deeper into the analysis, a disclaimer is necessary to clarify that the proposed case studies presentation should in no way be understood either as a proper “classification” or as a “ranking” of the results. The analysis presented here is merely meant to suggest a research direction towards a complete evaluation methodology to observe existing Italian experiments and, perhaps, to foresee the impact of the ones to come. It is therefore evident that a complete research should include several examples for each category and for the different regional territories (for a nation as regionalized as Italy), which is obviously not possible within the limits of this chapter. This chapter should be understood as the start of a broader research work to be explored more comprehensively in the future, as the experiences of TU spread and become part of the usual tools of urban regeneration promoted by institutions as well as by the inhabitants.

12.2 LEARNING THE HARD WAY: CASES WITH CRITICALITIES

12.2.1 Typologies Matter: Piazza Minniti in Milan

We begin with the question of “typology”.³ By this slippery word we mean here to address features of public spaces that characterize their relationship with both formal-geometric and functional values. We will then address how some specific “typologies” of public spaces might critically influence the impacts of tactical, participatory urbanism experiments in the mid-term.

The first case studied is piazza Minniti, a beautiful space in the core of a central, historical upper-middle-class neighborhood named Isola, in Milan. This experiment, realized in 2020 with partial European funding,⁴ belongs to the wide municipal tactical urbanism program of the city, named “Piazze Aperte” and started in 2018, with no fewer than 40 new tactical pedestrian transformations achieved to date.⁵ Typically, the Piazze Aperte methodology, now in its third project cycle, involves citizens and neighborhood actors in all

³ The Italian tradition of architectural theory pays strong attention to the concept of architectural typology. Theorists Saverio Muratori (1960) and Gianfranco Caniggia and Gian Luigi Maffei (1979) famously researched the relationship between the evolutions of urban morphologies and the building traditions of both residential and public buildings, as well as the progressive differentiation between base and specialized ones. By following this important and widely acknowledged theoretical approach, it could be interesting to extend the research to public spaces, recognizing forms of specialization in them and, as a consequence, their specific design approach.

⁴ The co-funding came from “CLEAR – City LiveAbility by Redesign”, a project funded by EIT (European Institute of Innovation and Technology) Urban Mobility, a body of the European Union, in which Milan was networked with Amsterdam and Munich along with their technical universities and some private companies, and active from 2019 to 2021. See <https://www.eiturbanmobility.eu/projects/city-liveability-by-redesign/> (last accessed April 6, 2023).

⁵ Piazze Aperte (“Open Squares”) is a program of the City of Milan, developed by Agenzia Mobilità Ambiente Territorio (AMAT), together with Bloomberg Associates and the Global Designing Cities Initiative. The program centers around urban regeneration and sustainable mobility, key goals of the Territory Governance Plan for Milan 2030 (PGT Milano 2030) and the Sustainable Urban Mobility Plan, in the context of the “Piano Quartieri” (“Neighborhood Plan”). In 2022, a report containing all the squares realized in the triennial period 2018–2021 was publicly released and is now available in English at: <https://portalril.org/contentido/Piazze%20aperte%20-%20A%20public%20space%20program%20for%20Milan.pdf> (last accessed April 6, 2023).

the steps of the decision process, starting from opening to anyone the possibility to propose spaces for pedestrianization through specific calls, going on through a deep co-design process led by dedicated teams,⁶ and partaking in co-realizing workshops involving NGOs, families, schools and active citizens to build up these city spaces together accordingly.

Piazza Minniti's case is slightly exceptional, as the peak of the Covid-19 emergency, active when the experiment was planned and realized, inhibited the actualization of a perfect participatory interaction and rather directed the municipality to involve muralists in the realization of the ground painting and forced the neighborhood to only interact with them remotely.⁷ As a result, a nice work of public art was realized in the newly pedestrianized area in the heart of the vibrant Isola district to help distinguish it from the street surface and keep it safer for pedestrians and easy to understand by car drivers (Figure 12.1).



Source: Authors.

Figure 12.1 Freshly completed artwork for the pedestrianization of piazza Minniti, Milan

⁶ All the transformations are led by *Officina Urbana*, an internal team of *AMAT*, together with the Mobility Department of the City of Milan.

⁷ The process behind this and other *Piazze Aperte* cases has been reviewed in more detail in *Cariello et al. (2021)*.

Even when it was a redundant street space colonized by parked cars, piazza Minniti has always been used as an open air urban marketplace, active twice a week with a very intense use in terms of logistics and attendance by citizens. By prioritizing this tactical urbanism intervention in the dense *Piazze Aperte* timeline, this strong *functional* character of the area was considered as an advantage by the municipality, as it would have been a powerful warranting factor in the activation of the new space, as well as for its security and identity. Unfortunately, a *typological* character had been ignored unknowingly, one that would critically affect the result in the mid-term. First, market squares must basically stay empty: the possibilities of adding furniture to them are reduced to very minor elements, as the big vehicles used in the logistics of the market must be allowed in the space when the market is open and active. Therefore, any square of this type will inevitably be slightly unbalanced in terms of void distribution, with sparse furnishings mainly distributed along borders or concentrated in small areas to allow the movement of dedicated vehicles. And, secondly but more importantly, market squares used twice a week are, accordingly, washed with chemical products and heavily wiped with mechanical brushes twice a week, with destructive effects on surface paintings (Figure 12.2).



Source: Authors.

Figure 12.2 *The state of the artwork after few weeks in piazza Minniti, Milan*

In piazza Minniti, this conjunction of elements determined a very quick erasure of the flooring artwork, which, for the reasons mentioned above, also contained graphic elements with functional values (like mazes and other play-ground designs for children's use), resulting in a rapid loss of effectiveness in the novel appearance of the square.

This case shows how the limited means of TU can affect the impacts of a pedestrianizing experiment under specific circumstances, and particularly when dealing with functional and morphological restraints requested by some typological features of public spaces. The relevance of such risk in TU processes might well lead to deeper research about the full spectrum of cases that could assimilate to this one and, as an interesting consequence, expand the existing urban design field of knowledge towards further characterizations of public spaces with a more attentive typological awareness.

12.3 CONTROVERSIAL OUTCOMES, INCOMPLETE SUCCESSES AND WHAT WE CAN UNDERSTAND FROM THEM

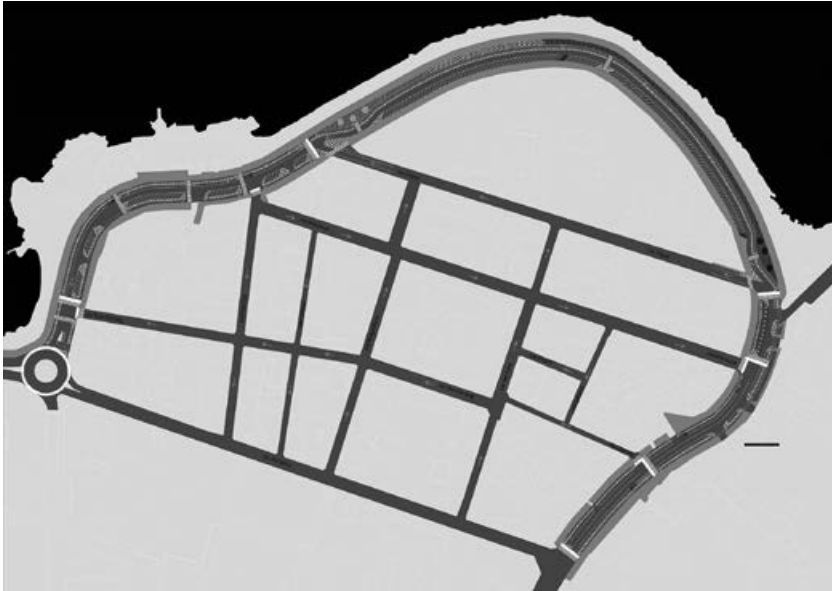
12.3.1 The Importance of Being Consistent: Lungomare san Cataldo in Bari

Lungomare San Cataldo is located on the sealine of Bari, a medium-sized city in southern Italy where, in May 2020, during the first Covid-19 wave, the municipality launched an "Open Space" program,⁸ intended to foster sustainable mobility, increase the number and distribution of open public spaces, and improve greenery and nearby services by using tools belonging to the tactical urbanism domain, with quick, economic, flexible interventions involving the participation of local communities. A specific branch of the program, named "A stare", used TU as a means to quickly provide new public spaces and equip existing ones for physical well-being, sporting activities, and food takeaway and consumption, with specifically intensified activities around target neighborhood congregation spots, like schools, parishes and socio-cultural hubs.

Lungomare San Cataldo is a valuable piece of coastline right to the west of the urban historical center, in a vibrant neighborhood sharing the same toponym and characterized by the presence of events like the "Fiera del Levante", a district fair funded since the 1930s and known for hosting national and international events throughout the second part of the twentieth century. Here, the linear public space of the coastline, extending for about 1 km, has

⁸ See <https://www.comune.bari.it/-/bari-open-space-presentato-il-programma-di-interventi-sulla-mobilita-sostenibile-e-sullo-spazio-pubblico>.

always been dramatically underused, compared with the potential of the area in terms of environmental, urban and architectural qualities, as well as the density of population living nearby (Figure 12.3).



Source: Authors.

Figure 12.3 The intervention extension around the San Cataldo peninsula, in Bari

The transformation process began in 2020 with several participatory meetings with the neighborhood. Despite wide agreement on the need for a redevelopment of the waterfront, the possibility of total pedestrianization was not as popular among the participants. An experimental compromise was then preferred, with a reduction in the load and speed of vehicular traffic and a different displacement of the parking slots in order to increase pedestrian space and create a new bike lane right on the seaside (Figure 12.4).

After the conclusion of the participatory phase, the intervention was, unfortunately, postponed several times due to the first waves of the Covid-19 pandemic. The municipality's priority was, in fact, to co-realize the intervention with the citizens' communities in order to build affection for the project and a sense of belonging to the new identity of the place, but such a tight interaction in person was impossible, for well-known reasons, throughout all of 2020. Finally, after several stops and starts, the municipality was forced to realize



Source: Authors.

Figure 12.4 View from the road of the intervention in Lungomare San Cataldo in Bari

the intervention autonomously, with no possible inclusion of the citizens, and relying on a company through classical public procurement procedures instead.

This lack of interaction in the executive phase of the tactical intervention is probably the main cause of a first, partial rejection of the new vehicular traffic layout by the neighborhood during the first test phase. Luckily, the tactical nature of the experiment allowed for some adjustments in the geometry of the bike lane for easier management of vehicular flow, leading to a further test phase that proved successful.

Unexpectedly, this experiment provided the value of tactical urbanism, by experimenting with trial-and-error dynamics in participatory practices, and moreover in a very short period of time. Currently, after just three years and having completed its temporary phase, the intervention is being planned to be converted into permanent form thanks to future works on the area. Such an apparently favorable conclusion, however, masks some criticalities. Due to the discontinuous progress of the experiment, some furniture additions (like calisthenic and playground elements) planned in the tactical phase were postponed to the forthcoming permanent works phase. But the transient period of the intervention has already been extended longer than originally planned, given the complexity of such an integrated action that will impact the waterfront of the whole district, including the wider landscape, raising mobility issues and generating high social expectations due to the relevance of the urban context.

As a result of these multiple fractures in the whole process, the site is currently in a suspended phase, never actually completed as tactical nor really started as permanent. This has probably caused some dispersion in the potential strength of the process and the consequent, overall impact of the process, yet the site has already improved relevance and is densely used by citizens.

12.4 GOOD PRACTICES (AND SOME AFTERTHOUGHTS)

12.4.1 **Lost (and Found) in Translation: Three Tactical Squares Made Permanent in Milan**

Among the 40 and more Piazze Aperte realized in Milan within the program, there are some that can specifically be considered mature processes, having completed their life cycle from tactical – and therefore inherently temporary – experiments, to permanent transformations, realized under the classical procedures of public works.⁹

⁹ The webpage dedicated to Piazze Aperte can be found at the following link. By opening the tab “Dall’urbanistica tattica alla trasformazione permanente” it

Three of these spaces are piazza Dergano in Dergano district, piazza Angilberto II (N) in Corvetto and piazza Belloveso (N) in Niguarda, three semi-peripheral districts distributed all around the city center, in the northern, south-eastern and north-western sectors (Figures 12.5–12.7). The tactical phases of the three interventions all belonged to the first cycle of *Piazze Aperte*, realized between 2018 and 2019, and were therefore the first three to pass to the following phase.



Source: Authors.

Figure 12.5 Final stage of piazza Dergano intervention in Milan

The final step involved large, underground tree plantings with appropriate irrigation, an adjusted lighting system, an optimized disposition of furniture, ground repaving with stone and gravel materials and the final removal of all the existing architectural barriers to allow full access to people with impairments, children and the elderly.

Further relevant advantages of such completion phases are the possibility to extend the permeable areas of the ground by installing wide flowerbeds and

is possible to read the list of squares that have already been made permanent or are currently in the process of being transformed in such a direction: <https://www.comune.milano.it/aree-tematiche/quartieri/piano-quartieri/piazze-aperte>.



Source: Authors.

Figure 12.6 Final stage of piazza Angilberto intervention in Milan



Source: Authors.

Figure 12.7 Final stage of piazza Belloveso intervention in Milan

replacing asphalt with semi-permeable finishing layers, which can also match the dominant colors in the neighborhood along with their traditional materials (an element that had emerged as critical during public debates in cases like piazza Belloveso, deeply nested in the old, rooted identity of Niguarda).

12.4.2 How We Learned (It Is Possible) to Stop Worrying and Love the Rainbow: Piazza Spoleto in Milan

A related but different example of good practice may be the case of piazza Spoleto-Venini. This involved the pedestrianization of an amoeba-shaped area in the center of a multiple crossroads in the North-Loreto (“NoLo”) district. The intervention, also realized in 2018–19, was aimed at solving, at the same time, the problem of the hazardous nature of the original crossroads for pedestrians (due to its large, undifferentiated asphalt area, where crossing rules were quite puzzling to interpret for any kind of street user, including cars) and the lack of proximity space for an elementary school directly facing the street with only a narrow sidewalk to allow access for children and families at entry and exit times. The new pedestrian space, with its bubbly shape, bright thick color fields of yellow and pale blue with matching furniture, and several potted trees, was an immediate success (Figure 12.8). Day by day it became a significant center of the neighborhood, acquiring a new toponym coined by the school children (“piazza Arcobalena”, translating as “Rainbow square”) and progressively giving a new boost to the once sleepy economy of the surrounding shops and ultimately entering the imaginary and identity of that part of the city, to the point that the municipality is evaluating the possibility of extending the “tactical” phase for this case, as its visual appeal is considered one of the main reasons for its success.¹⁰

These apparently similar happy endings actually reveal some final considerations that must be made to complete the picture of the externalities and side effects we are now beginning to observe in such experiments.

From one perspective, if the permanent versions of the tactical squares acquire indisputably higher value by solving the social, technical and environmental issues mentioned above that necessarily require classical works and harder engineering procedures, they will also probably lose some aesthetic quality by conforming to the traditional design “norms”, typically blending into the background of the urban landscape and abandoning any appearance of

¹⁰ To the point that, in 2021, the municipality chose to use a second EIT Urban Mobility funding to consolidate the ground surface painting with an experimental composition of more durable materials in order to extend the life cycle of the square in its tactical configuration to a maximum of five further years.



Source: Authors.

Figure 12.8 *Piazza Spoleto (piazza Arcobalena) intervention in Milan*

fresh, “pop” or “bold” design solutions. That poses the danger of neglecting new horizons where urban design and public art could merge harmoniously with public spatial quality.

From the other side though, it may be that this problem is unique to piazza Arcobalena, placed in the core of a district that is itself part of a wider transformative process centered around the priority of entertainment and nightlife, and therefore mainly preferred by young people and prone to very quick processes of gentrification.¹¹ Piazza Spoleto has become a symbol of contradiction and a place of explicit user conflict in the latest history of the city, lining up residents and city users against each other¹² in the interpretation of the best use of the area, as the place is now overcrowded during both day and nighttime. Piazza Spoleto is still evolving, suspended between experimentalism

¹¹ Interesting research on the topic in English may be found in Lecci and Oberti (2021) and Mugnano et al. (2022).

¹² Some emblematic news articles may be found at <https://www.mitomorrow.it/online/ultime/nolo-milano-residenti-movida/>; https://milano.corriere.it/notizie/cronaca/19_settembre_12/nolo-nuova-piazza-colorata-via-venini-spoleto-isola-pedonale-fa-discutere-periferie-divise-817af904-d522-11e9-8969-5b23f308f7f4.shtml; <https://www.labsus.org/un-patto-per-piazza-spoleto/>.

and domesticity, between its appeal to the aggressiveness of the Milanese real estate market and the need to find a compromise between economic dynamism and universal livability.

12.5 CONCLUSIONS

At the end of this brief overview of cases in two emblematic Italian cities it is possible to draw some general reflections on the use of TU interventions in urban regeneration policies promoted by public institutions rather than initiated by the community. From the cases analyzed, such as piazza Minniti in Milan, it is clear that temporary interventions are not really an alternative to traditional long-term physical transformation processes of public spaces. However, they can represent a useful integration of traditional methods and for small-scale interventions they can represent the initial step, as demonstrated by the cases described earlier in this chapter. As already said by Vallance and Edwards (2021), tactical urbanism might usefully serve to enrich orthodox planning and make it more lively.

As hypothesized by the Urban Maestro Team,¹³ we have seen in the analyzed cases, such as the Lungomare san Cataldo in Bari and all the cases in Milan, that synergies between such tools have the potential to make both approaches more effective in attaining their desired outcomes. The cases in Milan demonstrate as already noted in other national contexts (ANRU 2021, pp. 7–8) that the temporary transformations of disused, abandoned or badly used spaces can provide space for local social initiatives and activities, test or prototype reversible solutions, and offer new supports for local urban and social management.

Besides these considerations, analyzing deeply the cases, we can say that, as in piazza Minniti in Milan, TU interventions carried out by public administrations must be monitored even more frequently than traditional ones. The greater “volatility” of TU interventions and their overall cost-effectiveness compared with traditional interventions, if appropriately planned and discussed with the wider community, can be an opportunity for a review of the forms and uses of these spaces, thus keeping them at the center of continuous dynamics of socialization while reducing the risk of obsolescence.

It must not be forgotten that these interventions, precisely because of their cost-effectiveness, may have a limited duration, so it is necessary to think about their use within this temporary logic. Judging the results using traditional categories such as “duration” is misleading for these types of TU interventions.

¹³ See <https://urbanmaestro.org/about/>.

Reflecting on the results of the intervention for the Lungomare san Cataldo in Bari, a tactical urbanism intervention neither completed nor transformed into permanent form in public space, we can see the risks, always present, of a work left half-finished. In the case of a TU intervention this risk increases compared with a traditional intervention because it makes the new uses envisaged by the temporary TU project difficult to read, making the pedestrian and cycle traffic less safe in this case.

It may be useful to always maintain a high level of involvement of the population because during the testing of the TU project new needs may emerge to the point of making it necessary to review the choices made and improve the refinement of the intervention before making it definitive. With reference to the peculiarity of the Italian case (but this example can be widened to all those regions that Europe defines as included in Objective 1 of Cohesion Policies), where the differences between north and south are still significant, the case of Bari highlights that in southern Italy, where public offices often suffer from a less efficient organization often due to a lack of adequately trained and competent public employees, the monitoring and the maintenance of these spaces risks being neglected, accentuating the common difficulties of an intervention left incomplete.

In conclusion, the value of temporary urban design solutions and their ability to integrate traditional ones seems confirmed by the cases analyzed. Also confirmed is the need to continue analyzing the results of the numerous TU projects currently underway, to understand them better, orient, strengthen and renew the methods for involving residents and users of the multiple phases of urban transformation (design thinking, participatory projects, etc.), and to increase connections with the various actors in the territory at different urban scales (cultural actors, associations and organizations dedicated to social housing, developers, public land bodies, temporary urban planning promoters, creative groups of inhabitants and users, city councils, neighborhood residents etc.). In this way, as far as case analysis has taught us, the ambition of TU projects can be increased and, by testing and therefore prefiguring future more permanent uses, TU can improve the whole process of urban planning.

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