

Co-designing Contents With Situated Stakeholders: An In-Field Process in Nolo (Milan)

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Abstract

Neighborhoods today emerges as “design incubators” as they are characterized by the proactivity of local actors — such as citizens, shopkeepers, associations, informal groups — acting at the core of the design process by developing brand-new and tailor-made solutions and at the same time provide environmental, economic, and social beneficial transformation in an inclusive and democratic way. This work presents considerations from a two-years initiative named Off Campus Nolo (OCN), a living lab promoted by the Politecnico di Milano that opened its doors in the Nolo neighborhood (Milan). With its rich set of contents (activities, projects, and events) the experience of OCN demonstrates how creating a bridge to transfer the academic skills on a neighborhood-community level can improve the quality of actions to be developed, also exploring new ways of spreading the knowledge from the academia and prompting new forms of social innovation within neighborhood communities.

Keywords

Neighbourhood communities
Public spaces
Proximity
Participatory design
Social Innovation

Introduction

The challenges of social cohesion in cities can now be tackled starting from on-site activities with local communities, using processes and practices specifically designed for the contexts. Indeed, local communities acting mainly at the neighborhood level have great potential — and a moral responsibility (Deshpande, 2016) — in creating both physical and digital places that facilitate civic engagement and community interaction. Neighborhoods today emerge as “design incubators” powered by the proactivity of local actors — such as citizens, shopkeepers, neighborhood associations, and informal groups — acting as “active collaborators” (Thorpe & Rhodes, 2018) at the core of the design process by constantly caring for urban commons. Those commons such as streets, squares, parks, interstitial and residual public areas, are common resources daily lived by citizens, “neighborhood amenities” (Foster, 2011, p. 57) temporarily shared and used by the local community for the most diverse activities (Gehl, 2013; Groth & Corijn, 2005). Gehl presents his latest work creating (or recreating). The involvement of citizens in the management of urban commons — and in planning processes in general — is increasingly considered by local administrations, thanks also to new types of administrative tools that enhance the role of citizens in developing and co-designing brand-new solutions and at the same time provide environmental, economic, and social beneficial transformation. This work presents considerations from an ongoing initiative named Off Campus Nolo (OCN), a neighborhood living lab that opened its doors two-years ago in the Municipal Market of Nolo (Milan). “OFF CAMPUS. Il cantiere per le periferie”, promoted by Polisocial — the social responsibility programme of the Politecnico di Milano — is an initiative to make the university more responsible, attentive to social challenges, open and close to marginalized territories and communities, through the activation and facilitation of projects and inclusive processes with existing local entities. The living lab has played an important role in making the neighborhood more inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable by actively engaging with local communities and working together to co-design solutions for urgent issues identified over the years by the citizens.

Working With Local Communities: The Launch of off Campus Nolo

Polimi DESIS Lab, the research and design laboratory for social innovation at the Department of Design (Politecnico di Milano) to which the authors belong, has been dedicated to didactic and research activities since 2016 in Nolo (Nord of Loreto), a vibrant neighborhood located in the outskirts of Milan’s historical city center. Nolo for years has been at the center of a process of “beautification” (Fassi & Vergani, 2022) promoted by the active “NoLo Social District”, a Facebook group connecting online more than 12,000 members that have imagined over the years a series of social cohesion interventions and events — such as traveling shows, neighborhood breakfasts, historical walks in the streets — aimed at the well-being of the citizens (ibidem). Since September 2020 — the opening day of

OCN — the community of the Politecnico di Milano started to foster the already proactive neighborhood by promoting new courses of transformative actions using a set of tailor-made tools and methods. The urban living lab has been designed to be a space open to the community, hosting an observatory on issues related to the regeneration and reactivation of neighborhoods, educational laboratories and workshops, seminars and open lectures, exhibitions and public events and an archive of projects developed over the years. Since its opening, OCN and its academic actors developed research projects, community-making practices and volunteering activities, giving voice to the local community, collecting stories and experiences (going beyond language barriers, age, and social backgrounds) to envision and design brand-new solutions for the neighborhood.

Delivering Research and Teaching in the Field: New Roles for Scholars

Merging the first two missions of universities (*education* and *research*) is becoming a way to observe specific contexts dealing with complex issues on a neighborhood scale. Creating a bridge to transfer the academic skills on a neighborhood-community level can improve the quality of actions to be developed, also exploring new ways of spreading the knowledge from the academic real and prompting new forms of social innovation with neighborhood communities (Fassi & Vergani, 2020). These goals can be reached by focusing more on the *third mission* of universities, promoting entrepreneurial skills, innovation, social welfare, the formation of human capital (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020) and producing social values by fostering well-being and civic awareness using methods of effective cultural, social and educational impact (Fassi & Vergani, 2020). This process — that stands between bottom-up and top-down approaches — must be led by the academic realm and its actors, delivering research and teaching activities in the field assuming a brand-new role. As for OCN, the living lab is managed by the *offcampusers* (OCs), i.e., the university community of professors, researchers, PhD candidates and interns who also have the role of activators, facilitators, and volunteers to help the community of Nolo and its shortcomings (Fassi & Vergani, 2022). Before embarking on a new journey with the opening of OCN, the Polimi DESIS Lab community organized four semester-based design studios [Fig. 1](#) allowing post-graduate students from the MSc in Interior and Spatial Design (School of Design, Politecnico di Milano) to design spatial and service solutions in a real context characterized by a “creative community” (Meroni, 2007) still under construction.



Interacting on a Situated Level: Connecting Stakeholders

Neighborhoods are complex *patches* of the wider urban scale. They are social and political spaces generated by cross-species transformative encounters developed through contamination, which constitute temporary *assemblages* unevenly distributed throughout time (history) and space (lively landscapes) (Keleman Saxena, 2021). In this sense, we can think of neighborhoods as *assemblages* of different *agents*¹ and cultures, open-ended interactions between life-forms living together in a community (Tsing, 2015; Tsing et al., 2017). Borrowing the term from the concept of *situated knowledge*² by Donna Haraway (1988), in the process the authors refer to this fluid set of individuals (Bauman, 2013) as *situated stakeholders* (Fassi & Vergani, 2022) Fig. 2, embracing the widest typologies of *agents* present in this particular context and acknowledging the pluralities and divergences played out throughout time (De Rosa et al., 2021). Nolo, like most other places, is a sum of *overlapping geographies*, different portions of spatial, social, cultural identities of a context that are mainly the results of a series of cultural and historical changes given by the development of the city over the centuries (Fassi et al., 2021). This *geographies* are linked to the neighborhood different layers that must be traced and bring to light in order to create a *situated* common discourse built on “common interests” (Haraway, 1988). Working together to map the context and its features, envision concepts and design solutions means including the *situated stakeholders* in all the phases of the process, opening a transformative discourse touching all the different levels and scales of the community, from single citizens up to public bodies. This process must embrace all the public spaces of the neighborhood, interacting with the community using a participative approach and fostering agonism (Arendt, 1958; Mouffe, 2007) to avoid polarization and imagine several innovative solutions.

Fig. 1
The four semester-based design studios organized by the Polimi DESIS lab. © Francesco Vergani.

1
Agents. From the Latin word *agens* — one who acts by causing a certain effect. In *Treccani.it dictionary*. <https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/agente/>

2
Situated knowledge is the knowledge that is embedded in, and thus affected by, the specific historical, cultural, linguistic, and value context of the knowing person. In *APA dictionary of psychology*. <https://dictionary.apa.org/situated-knowledge>

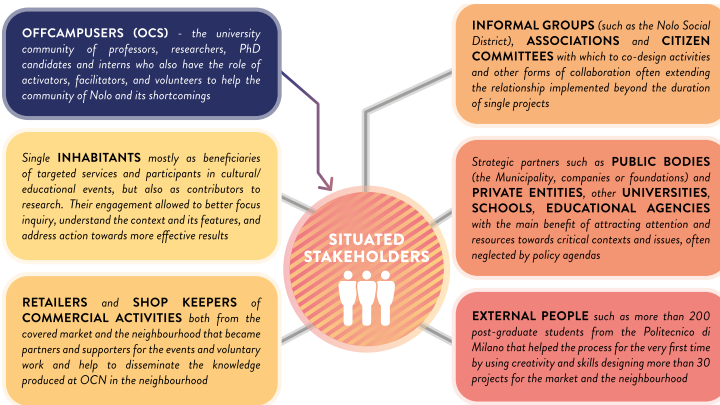


Fig. 2
The *situated stakeholders* of Nolo. © Francesco Vergani.

Objectives

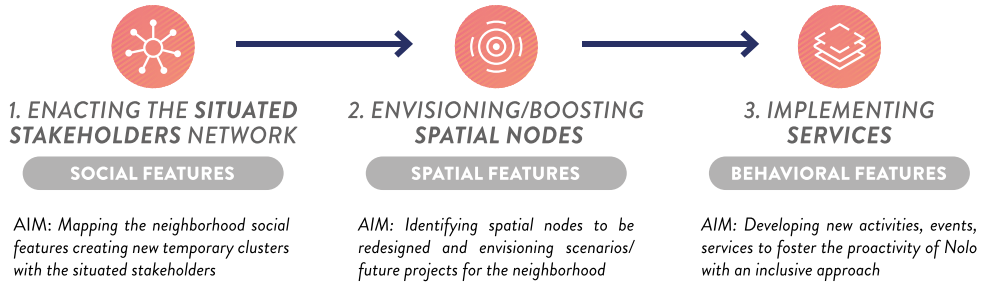
OCN plays an important role in prompting new forms of social innovation by laying the foundations for a more inclusive and ecosystemic bottom-up approach, aimed at making the neighbourhood more proactive, sustainable, innovative, and resilient. Projects and services designed by the *OCs* are always co-designed with the *situated stakeholders* to better fit the needs and expectations of the people involved. In this sense, the living lab is not restricted to the work implemented at OCN and the Municipal Market where it is placed but permeate the whole neighborhood thanks to its actors who aggregate in always different clusters around specific issues. OCN combines social engagement and academic skills to:

- Valorize the Municipal Market and the neighborhood.
- Envision and develop new transformative actions with tailor-made projects and processes for the community, pursuing sustainable life at a neighborhood level by using the approach of *proximity*, intended as a system of close functions and relations (Manzini, 2022).
- Foster the proactivity of Nolo with an inclusive approach promoting a more horizontal approach and openness to direct participation of the *situated stakeholders* in both intercepting values, needs and expectations of Nolo. At the same time OCN aims at giving voice to more fragile communities, developing responsible attitudes, expertise and new values in future generations of citizens and helping to increase awareness to face the challenges of a constantly changing world.

Methodology

Since September 2020, OCN has strengthened its mission by expanding its network with new alliances, developing strategies to re-design spaces, and fostering a practice based on *care* to imagine new projects and services for and with the neighborhood. In this sense, OCN plays the role of a “platform” (Huybrechts et al., 2021; Tassinari & Vergani, 2023) to map the multiple perspective from the local community of Nolo, promoting and implementing different

levels of intervention (social, spatial and behavioral). Most of the projects activated by the OCs use research through design processes (Herriott, 2019; Koskinen et al., 2011; Stappers & Giaccardi, 2017) to reflect on contemporary issues, envision transformative actions and co-design new solutions. Those projects are indeed “potential generators of knowledge” (Stappers & Giaccardi, 2017) since they aim at developing new forms of knowledge that are shared between the academic realm and the society. The works conducted so far at OCN can be clustered in a design process condensed in three main steps Fig. 3.



A
Enacting the situated stakeholders network (Social features)

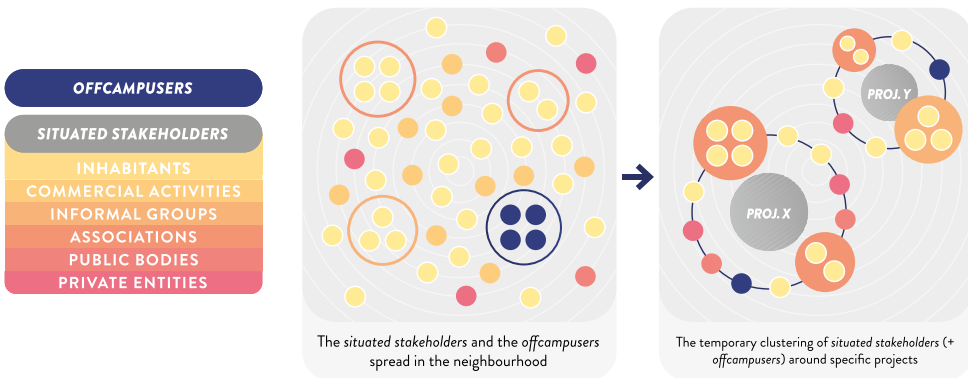
Fig. 3
The design process enacted at OCN. © Francesco Vergani.

To map the *situated stakeholders* network, the OCs promoted a participatory design process using quantitative and qualitative tools exploring the context through direct observation (Koskinen et al., 2011), collecting data, co-designing contents and finally validating the concepts designed. This process is crystallized in the “Vocabolario di Quartiere” (VdQ) research project, a neighbourhood vocabulary that acted as a prompt to dis-articulate and re-articulate points of view and meanings and trigger a cultural discourse on the neighborhood developed by the same neighborhood using a participatory design approach (Vergani et al., 2022). Specific attention is paid to the Vocabulary’s potential to include different “voices” — ideas, stories, points of view — bringing them in dialogue to envision common matters of concern and new courses of transformative actions. This collection of “voices” took place during co-design activities, workshops and interviews triggered both in the physical space of OCN and on online platforms and social media. “VdQ” paid specific attention to include those points of views that are normally unheard, such as those belonging to fragile communities that tend to be excluded or marginalized (foreigners, elderly, children, people with physical disabilities) (Tassinari & Vergani, 2023; Vergani et al., 2022). In this sense the OCs are trying to expand the very meaning of “stakeholder” by embracing also more-than-human agents as individual citizens that must be included in a cultural and innovative transformative discourse. In this process, OCN relies on the voice of scientists (botanists, zoologists, microbiologists, but also environmental activists and practitioners) that act as “representatives” (Latour, 2018) for the more-than-human realm injecting peculiar points of view. Putting

these different “voices” into dialogue is an innovative way to create a shared neighborhood culture, not only to counter social polarizations, but also to imagine possible future actions that take common interests into consideration (Vergani et al., 2022).

B
Envisioning/boosting spatial nodes (Spatial features)

Networks of stakeholders are always connected to both physical and digital places. Neighborhoods can be considered as *stages* where communities of people (and more-than-human agents) daily perform both individual and collective actions according to their needs and visions. In this sense, the *situated stakeholders* are individual agents that aggregate around specific *spatial nodes* — intended as “micro-spaces of daily life” (Sassen, 2004) — where local actors meet and interact. These temporary clustering of the Nolo “project-based community” (Fassi & Manzini, 2021) — specifically combined according to the peculiar skills of each stakeholder — are built after the mapping process when — thanks to the help of the citizens — the *OCs* identified specific *spatial nodes* linked to widespread issues felt by the community Fig. 4. In this sense, the temporary cluster “adopts” the *spatial node* for the timespan of the project by redesigning, taking care and developing initiatives to make it safer, more inclusive, and resilient.



C
Implementing services (Behavioral features)

OCN acts in the neighborhood with a sense of *care* for its people and spaces, trying always to develop tailor-made solutions to support the needs, expectations, and visions of the Nolo community. In this sense, the work conducted on the previous two different features (social and spatial) always aims at prompting actions and behaviors in the neighborhood, giving the *situated stakeholders* new services and initiatives on educational, cultural, volunteering and recreational levels.

Fig. 4
Diagram of the temporary clusters of *situated stakeholders* around specific projects. © Francesco Vergani.

Results



Fig. 5
Cards depicting all the contents (research projects, activities, events, etc.) created at OCN. © Francesco Vergani.

In the first two years, the OCs and the *situated stakeholders* have developed new contents Fig. 5 specifically designed for Nolo and its community. Regarding the work done on a neighborhood scale, OCN fostered those approaches to improve the quality of urban contexts through low-cost and short-term intervention such as *Placemaking*³ and *Tactical Urbanism*⁴ (Lydon & Garcia, 2015; Markusen & Gadwa, 2010; Thomas, 2016; Webb, 2018). Thanks to the project “Nolo Living Streets”, OCN designed parklets for more than twenty commercial activities, transforming 180.5 square meters of public space into recreational areas. As for the Municipal Market (built in the 1930s of the 20th Century), OCN injected new life to the covered market making it more attractive for its unusual mission by a series of micro-intervention to both renew some of the aesthetic features of the structure and put in place new actions and events to revitalize its social life Fig. 6.

3
Placemaking refers to a collaborative process by which communities of people can reimagine and reinvent the public realm to maximize shared value. In *What is Placemaking?*. Project for Public Space. <https://www.pps.org/article/what-is-placemaking>

4
Tactical urbanism is an approach to urban planning that includes low-cost, temporary changes to the built environment, usually in cities, intended to improve local neighbourhoods and city gathering places (Pfeifer, 2013).

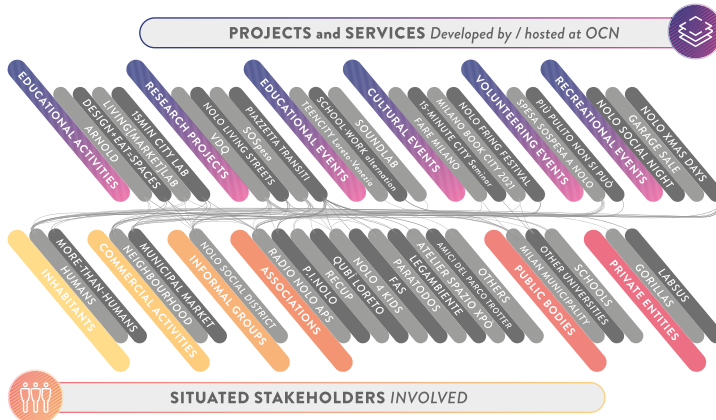


Fig. 6
Projects and services developed by/hosted at OCN. © Francesco Vergani.

After mapping strengths and weaknesses of different *spatial nodes*, the OCs collected ideas on more than 10 spaces developing redesign strategies based on available social and economic resources. OCN — together with the *situated stakeholders* — applied those administrative tools (such as the “Participatory budgeting” or “Collaboration Pact”) that enhance the role of citizens in developing and co-designing new spatial — and therefore also social and behavioral — solutions. Spaces like Piazzetta Transiti (an area of 1,031 square

meters to be redesigned together with 13 entities), or an unused courtyard close to the market, are currently under planning/development by temporary clusters of *situated stakeholders* (Tassinari & Vergani, 2023). OCN strengthened the proactive network of Nolo introducing in its activities those silent and “marginalized” communities that are usually excluded from these types of participatory design processes. In this sense, the approach implemented by the “VdQ” project aimed at engendering a new, inclusive and resilient neighborhood culture, generating a process of empowerment/community infrastructuring (Björgvinsson et al., 2010; Ehn et al., 2014), and fostering the “radical interdependence” (Escobar, 2018) by caring for the human/more-than-human entanglements. Activities such as “Gaia’s Club” — an interactive and transmedia storytelling workshop involving children from the neighborhood in an awareness-raising co-design session to highlight the current social and environmental emergencies – aimed at bonding social with environmental justice to uncover the common interests of Nolo and work for a just, equal, democratic and inclusive neighborhood (Tassinari & Vergani, 2023).

Conclusions

OCN is a multi-purpose format that proved to be particularly suitable for binding research, teaching, and action together, providing some methodological principles that could be possibly scaled and replicated in other contexts. Each context is different and hides latent possibilities that must be brought to light by someone who can navigate within the diversity of the *situated stakeholders*, leading the way towards a common goal. The peculiar feature of the model is giving by the tailor-made and three-steps process (1. Enacting the *situated stakeholders* network, 2. Envisioning/boosting *spatial nodes*, 3. Implementing services) that implies a continuous dialogue between the academic realm and the context of application. As for the academic realm, the model offered by OC with the hybrid figures of the *offcampusers* is useful to develop different skills that go beyond those given in the academia, learning and creating new knowledge directly in the field while managing social innovation projects with a high degree of complexity. The group entered in the context years before the implementation of OCN, getting in touch with local dynamics, testing and co-designing small spatial and service interventions with academic projects. This first part of field research was essential for the birth of OCN as it is essential to fit in an unknown context with a light and respectful approach to neighborhood dynamics, avoiding top-down intervention that too often struggle to grasp the real needs and visions of the communities. In this sense, OCN can be considered as a best-practice of community-making processes that stands between bottom-up and top-down approaches and a prime instance of how universities can invest in the third mission sending scholars into the real contexts of application.

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