

Designing Hybrid Spaces

ENVISIONING PLURAL ECOSYSTEMS AND SOCIO-CULTURAL
PRACTICES FOR REGENERATIVE URBAN FUTURES

Edited by

Laura Galluzzo and Salvatore Di Dio

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Hybrid Spaces: values, relations and participation

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According to the Eurispes Report Public Real Estate: An Asset to be Enhanced (2025), Italy's public real estate portfolio is valued at €296.9 billion, of which about €31 billion corresponds to institutional properties no longer directly used by public administrations. Nearly half of this stock is leased to private actors, while around €10 billion remains entirely unused, resulting in missed valorization and potential degradation. The Annual Report on Public Real Estate by the Ministry of Economy and Finance (cited by Eurispes) further estimates that 9.16% of institutional buildings and 6.46% of residential buildings are currently unutilized. A significant portion of this underutilised heritage consists of public interiors, defined as spatially contained environments inside civic buildings and public institutions, such as schools, hospitals, cultural centres, and administrative offices (Pimlott, 2018). In recent years, these interiors have been increasingly subject to de-functionalisation, a process driven by structural transformations in public service provision. One of the primary factors behind this shift is the digitalisation of public services. These transformations have reshaped citizens' relationships with public space, reducing

physical access and interaction. As a result, many public interiors are undergoing profound changes in terms of service functions, spatial organisation, and patterns of use (Legeby *et al.*, 2022). These developments highlight not only an issue of resource inefficiency, but also an opportunity: the reactivation of these underused spaces could support sustainable development goals by reducing waste and fostering social inclusion.

Urban regeneration through culture (Micelli *et al.*, 2024) represents a growing phenomenon in Italy, marked by increasing institutionalisation and diffusion across the country. This process is visible in both policy frameworks and on-the-ground practices. Recent mapping and infrastructural efforts reveal a structured movement that redefines the relationship between space, culture, and citizenship. As Ostanel (2025) observes, the intersection between cultural and social dimensions is generating hybrid practices that challenge traditional sectoral boundaries and contribute to urban revitalisation with a generative, community-driven approach.

Among the most promising forms of spatial reuse are the Socio-cultural Hybrid Spaces (SCHS), which function at the intersection of cultural production, social innovation, and urban regeneration in plural ecosystems. These spaces often emerge from grassroots initiatives and are hosted in a wide variety of underused settings: former industrial buildings, farmsteads, kindergartens, churches, cinemas, offices, gatehouses, and market halls. They respond to urban fragmentation and social exclusion by becoming incubators of creative practices and social experimentation (Manzini, 2021). Their adaptive, multifunctional nature enables them to blend cultural, social, and economic dimensions, creating fertile ground for both innovation and cohesion (Krasilnikova & Klimov, 2020). These SCHS promote collaboration and active involvement from diverse stakeholders. They are not merely locations for public interaction, but active parts of the urban fabric – hubs of civic participation and collective empowerment that contribute to a broader, more inclusive idea of plural cityscapes.

The increasing need for more flexible and queer urban environments resonates with the notion of open urbanism as described by Sennett (2017). Within this framework, SCHS are gaining centrality as experimental platforms for participation and inclusion through cultural

and creative processes. They represent concrete sites of social innovation, where cultural practices respond to unmet social needs while fostering new forms of collaboration and community building (Murray *et al*, 2010). Despite their growing significance, local public administrations often struggle to support the scalability and institutional recognition of SCHS. The absence of shared models and evaluation tools limits the potential for replicating these initiatives and systematically assessing their social, economic, and environmental impact. To unlock their transformative potential, it is essential to develop shared and collaborative frameworks and public policies that acknowledge and sustain these practices.

What social role can SCHS play in counteracting urban inequalities and in fostering new forms of active citizenship? How can participatory practices become not only tools for shared design, but real democratic governance devices capable of redefining the relationships between communities, institutions, and urban spaces?

Building on these questions, the action-research project *OS-MOSI*. Observation and Study of Design and Development Models of hybrid Spaces, places of urban experimentation and social Inclusion through creative and cultural activities explores the impact of SCHS in Italy, focusing specifically on the regions of Lombardy and Sicily. Funded by the Ministry of University and Research through the National Research Program and Projects of Relevant National Interest (PRIN) 2022, the project is coordinated by the Polimi DESIS Lab Research Group, operating within the Department of Design at the Politecnico di Milano, within the co-coordination by the University of Palermo through its Department of Architecture. Additional contributions come from the Department of Architecture, Built Environment and Construction Engineering and the Department of Management Engineering at the Politecnico di Milano, as well as the Department of Psychological, Pedagogical, Exercise and Educational Sciences at the University of Palermo.

OSMOSI aims to contribute to the emerging field of study on the impact of SCHS, proposing a framework to support their development and their potential adaptability and scalability across various urban and extra-urban contexts. The overarching objective of the research project is to develop a model capable of guiding Public Administra-

tions and relevant stakeholders in the experimentation and implementation of future SCHS that are socially, economically, and environmentally sustainable. The research benefits from the collaboration of two nationally recognised reference points in the field of spatial hybridisation: BASE Milano, located in the former Ansaldo complex in Milan (Lombardy), is an experiment in the contamination between art, business, technology, and social innovation, and a prominent hub for public-private collaboration and social innovation; and Farm Cultural Park in Favara (Sicily), an independent initiative that has transformed the city's historic centre into a vibrant space for urban and cultural regeneration, promoting active participation and sustainable development. Building on the practices and knowledge developed by these SCHS, the project has initiated two local pilot actions: *Open Casello* in Milan and the *Museo delle Città del Mondo (World Cities' Museum)* in Palermo. Both serve as experimental contexts to test innovative models for the activation and management of SCHS, in close dialogue with local communities and public institutions.

Among its core objectives, *OSMOSI* project addresses the challenge of connecting geographically distant contexts by fostering the convergence of diverse experiences and promoting shared participatory processes. Digital collaborative environments – such as metaverse platforms – are emerging as alternative or complementary venues for public interaction. While often framed as substitutes for physical presence, these digital spaces require further investigation in terms of their potential to enhance participation, accessibility, and inclusion. Rather than replicating physical spaces, the metaverse is conceived as a hybrid ecosystem that can bridge spatial and social divides while supporting Participatory Design practices. The research critically investigates its affordances and limitations, particular attention is paid to user engagement, the role of digital tools in mediating co-design processes, and their broader implications for spatial perception, social interaction, and innovation in design methodologies. The productive dimension is not merely symbolic; the co-created materials function as decision-making tools, communication supports among stakeholders, and operational resources for implementing real-world solutions. Their value lies in this dual role: both as tangible outcomes of the design process and as reinforcements

of participants' commitment and ownership. Co-presence in virtual environments, combined with shared spatial and narrative experiences, fosters collaboration among heterogeneous actors. Furthermore, participants develop new competencies, including digital literacy, communication and collaboration skills, and creative capabilities (Romero, 2016).

Taking into consideration the premises and goals of the OSMOSI project, it is clear that there is an urgent need to foster interdisciplinarity and expand the scope of existing fields of experimentation, adapting them to diverse cultural and territorial contexts. This book aims to serve as an open interdisciplinary forum designed to cultivate a community of scholars and practitioners interested in envisioning plural ecosystems and socio-cultural practices for regenerative urban futures. The diversity of backgrounds and expertise among the contributors has naturally generated overlaps, variations in terminology, and at times divergent perspectives across the chapters. Far from being a limitation, we regard this heterogeneity as one of the book's main strengths: it mirrors the plurality, openness, and experimental nature of SCHS themselves, and offers readers a multifaceted lens through which to approach the topic. At the same time, it represents an essential part of the ongoing dialogue within the project – a point of departure for developing shared reflections and a more common ground for future research and practice. The volume is structured into four sections, each reflecting a specific perspective on SCHS, their functions, design approaches, and transformative potential within contemporary urban and territorial contexts, this volume brings together contributions from an open call and integrates the initial outcomes of the OSMOSI research, establishing a rich and diverse collection of reflections and case studies. The book is organized into four sections:

- Hybrid Spaces as a plural ecosystem;
- The public value of Hybrid Spaces;
- Cultural and participatory synergies in reclaiming public spaces;
- Digital tools for new models of participation.

The first section, *Hybrid Spaces as a Plural Ecosystem*, brings together a range of reflections and case studies that explore SCHS as

adaptive, multifunctional environments capable of responding to the complexities of contemporary urban and territorial contexts. Emphasis is placed on their evolving and processual nature and on their ability to reconfigure underutilised or abandoned places into meaningful and inclusive settings (Chapter 1). From self-managed community hubs to experimental design interventions, the texts highlight how SCHS operate at the intersection of social practices, cultural engagement and urban regeneration. They invite a rethinking of urban environments as plural ecosystems shaped through situated, participatory and iterative practices (Chapter 2). The contributions offer diverse perspectives on the potential of SCHS to foster sustainable regeneration through context-sensitive and adaptive strategies. One paper investigates how participation, procedural flexibility and non-intentionality function as generative forces for long-term social and economic sustainability, illustrated by the case of Il Giardino di Torricola in Rome (Chapter 4), a self-managed community ecosystem that fosters inclusion and resilience. Another contribution focuses on the city of Venice (Chapter 3), where interior design becomes a tool to reconfigure underused spaces in response to tourism monoculture and the decline of stable inhabitation. These interventions integrate cultural, productive and relational functions, offering sustainable and participatory design strategies. In Brazil, the symbolic reactivation of Casa Linhares (Chapter 5) demonstrates how collaborative cultural practices and place-making processes can strengthen social bonds and support territorial development through local engagement. Other works highlight often overlooked dimensions of design, such as environmental comfort – thermal, acoustic and visual – as critical components in the co-design of multifunctional public interiors (Chapter 6). Here, comfort is not only addressed as a technical standard but is redefined through the interaction between users, technologies and spatial configurations. Therefore, a study on Milan's hybrid economies (Chapter 7) explores how design can support inclusive innovation, weaving together manufacturing, education and cultural activity into multifunctional platforms that enhance civic engagement and regenerate peripheral urban areas through relational proximity and new urban imaginaries. Together, these contributions offer a multifaceted understanding of SCHS as dynamic and generative ecosystems that

negotiate complexity, promote social cohesion and support regenerative urban futures.

The second section, *The Public Value of Hybrid Spaces*, explores how these spaces generate civic impact, support new governance models, and contribute to more resilient and inclusive urban systems. Hybrid spaces produce multiple forms of value – social, cultural, environmental, and economic – beyond conventional market evaluations. Grounded in plural and intersectional practices, they challenge dominant governance structures and open up possibilities for more inclusive and participatory models that recognise historically marginalised voices. This section presents contributions that examine different ways in which SCHS act as civic infrastructures, starting from an overview of their social impact emerged from the *OSMOSI* mapping (Chapter 9). The case of Open Casello in Milan illustrates how youth participation and co-management can inform sustainable models of governance (Chapter 10). Other field-based experiences in Milan highlight how hybrid spaces can activate territories, foster reciprocity, and support informal networks through proximity services and relational welfare (Chapter 11). Further contributions analyse the outcomes of the SPACE programme by Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo (Chapter 12), which supported collaborative spaces across Northern Italy by strengthening their management models and competencies. The experience of Fondazione Housing Sociale (Chapter 13) focuses on local commerce as a tool for community building and neighbourhood-based innovation, showing how hybrid spaces can also serve as catalysts for economic and social inclusion. To sum up, these reflections emphasise the potential of SCHS to redefine public value by integrating civic engagement, institutional collaboration, and long-term sustainability.

The third section, *Cultural and Participatory Synergies in Reclaiming Public Spaces*, explores how cultural practices and participatory approaches contribute to the regeneration and reappropriation of public spaces as shared commons. These processes enable new forms of publicness, often driven by collaborations between institutions, local communities, cultural actors, and grassroots organisations. Through co-design, creative engagement, and inclusive cultural production, public spaces become platforms for civic activation and

social imagination. The contributions in this section reflect a diverse set of strategies and tools aimed at reinforcing the democratic role of public space. Several papers focus on how participatory and culture-based design can reframe urban transformation processes, as in the case of the *Museo delle Città del Mondo* in Palermo (Chapter 14) and the *Open Casello* in Milan (Chapter 15), developed within the *OSMOSI* project. Other contributions examine design-led innovation in peripheral areas, such as the Talents HUBs in Emilia-Romagna (Chapter 17), and the use of performative devices in bottom-up regeneration, as exemplified by *Terzo Paesaggio* in Milan (Chapter 18). Also, projects like the School of Neighbourhoods in Milan (Chapter 16), illustrate how distributed and adaptive design frameworks can support citizen-driven initiatives and the emergence of new hybrid spaces across urban territories. Taken as a whole, these experiences emphasise the importance of inclusive participation, cultural infrastructure, and relational dynamics in reclaiming and reimagining public space in ways that are locally rooted and socially transformative.

The fourth and final section, *Digital Tools for New Models of Participation*, investigates how digital technologies are reshaping participatory design in the context of public space, cultural heritage, and collective governance. From immersive environments to digital platforms, these tools expand possibilities for engagement and co-creation while introducing new challenges around access, embodiment, and inclusivity. The contributions explore a range of approaches, from the use of the metaverse for co-design in the *OSMOSI* project (Chapter 19), to the application of sensory design to support embodied and plural participation in hybrid spaces (Chapter 20). Comparative studies of platforms like *Decidim* and *Lisboa Participa* (Chapter 21) offer insights into digital democracy and participatory policymaking, while the ongoing development of a shared platform by Stecca3 and Mare Culturale Urbano (Chapter 22) reflects efforts to build community-driven networks that transcend consumption-based models. Viewed in combination, these projects illustrate how digital tools can facilitate collaborative design, reinforce civic engagement, and articulate inclusive modes of participation across physical and virtual environments. This volume has the ambition to move beyond mere academic reflection and provide a critical toolkit for public adminis-

trations and stakeholders. We challenge the often-ephemeral nature of past experiments in SCHS, which have too frequently resulted in elite, exclusionary models that fail to achieve lasting public value. Our research posits that for these spaces to truly fulfil their promise as engines of urban regeneration, they must become radically more public, open, and accessible. This requires a deliberate shift in strategy:

- From temporary projects to permanent infrastructure: we advocate for embedding these spaces within the long-term strategic framework of the city, moving them from the periphery next to the core of public service delivery.
- From cultural consumption to civic functions: we collected concrete examples and frameworks for integrating essential, strategic public services – from citizen labs and public library outposts to co-working hubs for the third sector – within these environments. This creates a vital public-private functional mix that guarantees daily relevance.
- From top-down to ecosystem activation: contributions in this volume demonstrate how to systematically engage and activate the rich ecosystems of local third-sector actors, positioning them not as beneficiaries but as co-designers and fundamental partners in governance.

By dissecting both successful and failed models, we aim to offer actionable insights into participatory decision-making. Our goal is to empower PAs with the design-led methodologies needed to catalyse this structural change, ultimately strengthening the role of these spaces as essential, democratic infrastructure for community-driven social innovation.

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This volume investigates the potential of Socio-Cultural Hybrid Spaces as engines of urban regeneration, democratic participation, and cultural innovation. Emerging at the intersection of cultural production, social experimentation, and territorial transformation, these spaces challenge conventional boundaries between public and private, temporary and permanent, physical and digital. Through four main sections, the book develops a critical and impactful perspective on the functions, design and interdisciplinary approaches, and transformative potential of Socio-Cultural Hybrid Spaces. From their evolving role as plural ecosystems to their capacity to generate declinations of public value; from cultural and participatory practices that reclaim and reimagine the commons to the opportunities and challenges introduced by digital technologies; it offers a multifaceted lens on *hybrid practices* in contemporary urban and territorial contexts. By weaving together theoretical perspectives, empirical research, and case studies, this book provides critical reflections by and for scholars, practitioners, and institutions. How can cultural initiatives generate new alliances between institutions and communities? What forms of participation can strengthen the democratic role of public space? And what challenges arise in connecting physical and virtual dimensions for collective engagement?