

Instituting practices in urban space.

Civic-Institutional experimentation in Milan Municipality 9

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An action-research experience in participatory planning and sustainable mobility offers an opportunity to reflect on the evolving relationships between civic initiatives and public institutions in urban contexts. Developed in the north-western area of Milan, the study builds on a long-term engagement with local actors and institutions that led to the establishment of the IFe civic lab in 2023. The laboratory brings together associations, residents, researchers and local organisations to experiment with new forms of civic engagement and institutional interaction around public space

1. Introduction. A practice to experiment with the relationship between civic and institutions

Within the context of contemporary urban transformations and the ongoing reconfiguration of public space, territorially situated action-research practices can be understood as sites where planning is not merely implemented, but continuously constituted through interaction (Forester, 1999). When such practices unfold over extended temporalities, they enable the progressive formation of trust, the

co-production of knowledge, and processes of mutual capacity-building between civil society and institutional actors (Vicari Haddock and Moulaert, 2009; Ostanel, 2015).

These dynamics open a space in which planning approaches themselves may be questioned, reoriented, and re-instituted over time (Healey, 2007; Salet, 2018). From this perspective, experimentation operates not only at the level of participation or engagement but

and mobility issues. Drawing on the experience of the Space and Change initiative in Municipality 9, the paper examines how fragmented civic demands can be translated into collective learning processes and how local institutions can engage with them. The case highlights both the opportunities and tensions emerging when civic experimentation intersects with planning practices, raising broader questions about institutional learning, intermediary infrastructures and the potential instituting role of civic action in urban governance.

also at the level of planning rationalities, institutional logics, and governance arrangements (Savini and Bertolini, 2019). Through iterative cycles of practice, reflection, and adjustment, action-research (Saija, 2016) may contribute to the emergence and consolidation of alternative planning trajectories.

The contribution examines a potential *instituting practice* (Esposito, 2021) that emerges from local questions and fragmented or geographically dislocated interests, rising from different civic actors. This bottom-up dynamic intersects with the interest of a municipal institution engaged in exploring alternative and experimental modes of contribution to public policymaking. In this case, the institution envisioned producing a non-mandated yet propositional document intended to inform and enrich the development of a Local Sustainable Urban

Mobility Plan (Moro, Acerbi, 2026), positioning itself in a space that exceeds the traditional dichotomy between institutional planning and civic initiative.

The experimentation pursues a dual objective. On the one hand, it seeks to recompose a dispersed constellation of minor and locally grounded demands by placing them in relation to one another through comparison, dialogue, and collective discussion. This process aims to move beyond particularisms, reduce conflict, and connect otherwise isolated proposals. By doing so, attention and resources can be redirected toward less visible issues and areas, fostering a more balanced articulation of collective priorities. On the other hand, the experimentation tests an alternative planning practice that structurally integrates the contribution of citizens and organised civic groups through a dedicated process of accompaniment and capacity-building.

The experience is embedded within the trajectory of the territorial laboratory, IFe civic lab, active in Milan's Municipality 9¹.

The opportunity to consolidate and expand this practice emerged through the intersection of local civic engagement with European and National research and innovation projects², which provided both financial support and a broader experimental framework. This context enabled the spontaneous formation of an active group born at the intersection of citizenship and research, composed of researchers on

urban issues, local activists, representatives of local associations and active spaces, to test a shared theoretical framework and a set of digital tools. Over the course of a year-long experimentation, these elements were operationalised into a coherent methodology, contributing to the development of new competences within the working group and reinforcing its capacity to act as an intermediary between civic actors and institutional processes.

The thematic focus of the experimentation concerns public space and mobility, an area of relevance in Milan, where both institutional and civic actors are currently engaged in significant innovation in planning practices and policy agendas.

Within this context, the central question relates to the scope and limits of such innovation: to what extent can experimental, civic-driven planning practices contribute to transforming governance arrangements by meaningfully including institutionally “weak” actors, and by enabling these actors to support intermediary infrastructures and organisational forms capable of strengthening participation and territorial capacity-building?

After introducing the theoretical framework, the contribution outlines the civic and institutional context in which the experience unfolds. It subsequently discusses the “Space and Change” process as a potential “institutional practice” (Esposito, idem), focusing on the adopted methodology and its initial implica-

tions for planning and governance. The concluding section advances a critical reflection on the case in relation to the broader lens, questioning the conditions under which civic and institutional practices can move beyond *niche* (Geels, 2002) configurations and forms of experimentation (Savini and Bertolini, idem) to exert a more durable influence on planning processes and policy orientations.

1. Theoretical background

Transition studies to orient civic-institutional processes

Socio-technical transition theories offer a particularly useful interpretative framework for understanding how radical and long-term changes can emerge from context-specific experimental practices. From this perspective, transitions are not the result of single decisions or linear innovations, but rather complex processes involving a plurality of actors, levels, and temporal dynamics, intertwining technological, institutional, cultural, and social dimensions (Geels, idem; Grin, Rotmans et al., 2010). Geels' contribution is central to the development of the Multi-Level Perspective (MLP), which distinguishes three interconnected analytical levels: the *niche* level, where radical innovations and experimental practices develop; the *regime* level, composed of stabilized institutional, regulatory, and socio-technical arrangements; and the *landscape* (or *scape*) level, which includes macro-structural

factors of an economic, political, and cultural nature, generally beyond the direct control of local actors. Within this framework, *niches* serve as relatively protected spaces for experimentation. However, Geels himself emphasises that the success of innovations does not depend exclusively on their capacity to replace dominant regimes, but also on trajectories of alignment, negotiation, and learning that are activated across different levels (Geels & Schot, 2007). In this direction, part of the literature has progressively shifted its focus from the technological dimension alone to the social and institutional processes that accompany the management of the sustainability transition (Köhler et al. 2019; Loorbach, Frantzeskaki et al., 2017) and its urban dimensions (Frantzeskaki, Bach et al., 2018).

Within the Multi-Level Perspective, different scaling trajectories are described as *scaling up*, referring to the institutionalisation and consolidation of innovations within existing regimes; *scaling out*, understood as diffusion and replication across different contexts; and *scaling deep*, which concerns the evolution and consolidation of organisational practices that embed changes in shared meanings, competences, and relationships across the involved ecosystem. Considered as interrelated and overlapping analytical lenses, these trajectories can be mobilised to interpret and orient processes that engage both civic and institutional practices within a coherent dynamic.

In this sense, they prove particularly relevant not only for *ex post* analysis, but also within a prescriptive context, informing the design – or rather the co-design – of local-scale civic-institutional practices, where impact can be assessed both through formal long-term outcomes and through shorter-term capacities to reorient visions and actions within a shared civic-institutional field. From this perspective, the MLP becomes an interpretative tool for understanding how situated experiences can contribute to processes of institutional learning and to a progressive transformation of planning practices.

Deliberation studies and the co-design of urban space

A second relevant theoretical reference is represented by deliberative democracy studies, which place the quality of argumentative exchange at the centre of collective decision-making processes (Davidson, Stark, 2011). Unlike participatory approaches primarily oriented towards consultation or the aggregation of preferences, deliberation emphasises informed public confrontation among diverse positions as a condition for the formation of more reflective and conscious judgments (Fung, 2006).

In the field of urban planning, this perspective has contributed to a rethinking of the role of citizens not only as bearers of interests but also as subjects capable of articulating argu-

ments, evaluating alternatives, and engaging with the complexity of spatial choices (Allegretti, Secchi, 2016). In the Italian context, these approaches have progressively informed innovative planning practices, moving beyond episodic consultation towards more structured forms of civic involvement within planning processes. A significant example is represented by the recent Urban General Plan (PUG) of Bologna, whose formulation was supported by an extensive programme of participatory workshops and public engagement activities conceived as an integral component of the planning process itself (Orioli & Massari, 2023). Similar trajectories can be observed in the activities promoted by Urban Centres in several Italian cities³, which function as communication and dissemination platforms, sometimes assuming the role of intermediaries to support dialogue, co-production and civic learning around urban transformation processes. Experiences such as Urban Centre Bologna, Urban Centre Brescia and Urban Lab Torino illustrate how these organisational settings can help strengthen the relationship among civic actors, technical expertise and public institutions.

Applied to the processes of co-designing urban space, the deliberative perspective enables a move beyond superficial or polarised forms of interaction, promoting deeper modes of engagement grounded in argumentation, the visibility of positions, and the possibility

of exploring convergences and divergences (De Liddo & Buckingham Shum, 2010).

This aligns well with approaches to urban design and planning grounded in practices (Crosta 2010), embodied experiences (Bianchetti, 2020), and everyday-life temporalities described as “urban population” (Pasqui, 2008) and communities of practices for how described by Fareri⁴, through which urban space – particularly public space – is inhabited and signified.

From this standpoint, it becomes possible to identify a link between attention to individual actors, as a self-standing practice, and their (eventual) qualitative informative contribution to transformative policies and projects. Far from top-down participatory frameworks, this approach aims to enable civil society to mobilise interests and competences by emphasising a “competence sphere” in which knowledge is grounded, namely, considering the urban domain, in the spatial trajectories and places inhabited in everyday life. Deliberative co-design thus recognises partial, local expertise as a legitimate contribution to collective decision-making.

The deliberative dimension associated with co-design helps refine the construction of rich and inclusive processes that capture fragmented contributions and project them into arenas of interaction and confrontation, guiding the incremental structuring of shared interpretative frameworks necessary to activate

action that produces tangible effects on urban realities.

Taken together, *transition studies* and *deliberation approaches* offer a framework for interpreting co-design as a space of negotiation and translation among civic knowledge, professional practices, and institutional rationalities, contributing to potentially instituting practices in urban space.

2. Methodological approach and time frame of the initiative

Reflecting on the relationship between civic initiatives and institutional transformation enables this contribution to critically assess the implications of an ongoing, still-evolving experience, rather than presenting it as a completed or stabilised model.

Although the experimentation analysed here formally started in January 2025, it is the result of a longer trajectory of interaction, smaller projects and collaborative activities developed within the same territorial ecosystem and network of actors. At the time of writing, the first cycle of activities has been completed, while the final public presentation and the publication of the final reports are still in preparation. After introducing the institutional and civic context in which the experience unfolds, the paper focuses on one major initiative developed within the IFe civic lab framework.

From a methodological perspective, the case is analysed through three interconnected analyt-

ical lenses, each directly linked to the research question concerning the contribution of civic practices to institutional transformation.

The first lens examines the extent to which a civic niche can contribute to processes of institutional learning and partial scaling up, exploring how small-scale experimentation interacts with existing governance arrangements and institutional routines.

The second lens focuses on the introduction of deliberative dimensions into co-design practices, analysing how argumentative interaction, collective reflection and the gradual construction of shared problem framings can enhance the quality of participation beyond consultative formats.

The third lens investigates the “*instituting* potential” of the process itself, questioning how the experimentation contributes not only to the consolidation of the activist-researcher group (IFe civic lab) as an intermediary organisational form, but also to a partial transformation of the Municipality’s role, making its action more meaningfully civic-embedded despite its limited institutional capacity.

These three lenses structure the analysis presented in the following sections, where the contribution selectively mobilises empirical elements from the process to interrogate the relationship between civic experimentation, institutional learning and instituting practices.



3. The urban and civic context: Milan, Municipality 9 and the IFe laboratory

The Milan environment

Within the Italian and European landscape,

Milan also represents a particularly significant context for observing evolving mobility practices at the Urban region scale and related planning innovations (Pucci, 2017). At the City

The territory of Municipality 9 and the network of actors

Source: elaboration of Elena Acerbi

Fig. 1

scale it is a rich context for observing interactions between civic practices and urban policies, especially through recent experiments in tactical urbanism (Bruzzese, 2026; Mahmoud, 2024) collaborative governance, public space regeneration (Moro, Renzoni, 2026), and participatory mobility policies (Comune di Milano, 2021) following a general trend for European cities in these years (Global Designing Cities Initiative, 2022; URBACT, 2023).

In recent years, the city has undergone an intense phase of experimentation on public space and mobility, driven both by institutional programmes oriented toward sustainability and proximity and by an active and widespread civic fabric, capable of critically engaging with ongoing transformations. In this framework, issues such as slow mobility, road safety, walkability, and the temporary use of public spaces have become privileged arenas of interaction among citizens, associations, and the local administration.

The Institution: Municipality 9

The case discussed here is set in Municipality 9, an area located in the northern part of the city, characterised by marked socio-spatial heterogeneity (Manfredini, Giavarini, 2022). The territory includes historically working-class and productive neighbourhoods such as Dergano and Bovisa, as well as more consolidated residential areas such as Affori and Niguarda. It is affected by significant urban transformations

at different scales. From a socio-demographic perspective, the Municipality has a large and growing population (188.904 inhabitants, 2024⁵), a medium-high (very high in some areas, with almost 35%) presence of residents of foreign origin, and a complex social composition combining middle or low-income groups with new households attracted by still relatively accessible housing and, for some of the neighbourhoods, young people (Dergano has the highest percentage of young people in the city, in recent years).

Ambivalent dynamics of change affect the context. On the one hand, the presence of large-scale transformation projects and rising property values fuels pressure and potential displacement; on the other, the area hosts a dense network of civic, associative, and informal initiatives operating in public space, in proximity services, building on community ties. These initiatives actively contribute to the production of urban and social values. However, they often struggle to recognise themselves as part of a broader collective process or to exert a more structured influence on institutional decision-making.

Within the governance system of the Municipality of Milan, the Municipalities constitute proximity institutions with limited but potentially strategic competences. Municipality 9 has, over time, demonstrated sustained attention to the social and cultural dimensions, promoting initiatives of territorial animation,



IFe civic lab inaugural event, 19th November 2023

Source: IFe civic lab

Fig. 2

opportunities for public encounter, and forms of dialogue with the local associative fabric. This openness helps build trust among a significant portion of civic actors, consolidating the Municipality's role as a proximity-based institutional presence.

Within this framework, the participatory dimension, although present, remained largely anchored in consultation and indirect representation, lacking direct and continuous resident involvement.

The civic organisation: IFe civic lab

Located within this articulated, problematic yet vibrant context, *IFe Civic Lab* was estab-

lished in 2023 at the intersection of active civic groups, academic research and pre-existing local networks (Fig. 1). The laboratory operates as an "inter-boundary space" (von Wirth et al., 2020), connecting civic initiatives, situated knowledge, research practices and institutional actors across Municipality 9.

The laboratory is currently organised as an informal governance setting. Its core group consists of a small team of researchers⁶ (3 people) and several local representatives (4-5 people) associated with various civic, cultural, social and artistic initiatives, along with a local physical hub that combines cultural, social and hospitality functions. Within this config-



Preliminary activities: collection of inputs on everyday life practices, May 2024

Source: Elena Acerbi

Fig. 3

uration, the university primarily performs a role of methodological support, research development and mediation between local experimentation and broader planning debates. Conversely, the extension of the territorial network, the mobilisation of participants and the day-to-day interaction with local actors are mainly carried out by civic representatives embedded in the neighbourhood context and collaborating with the lab. Intermediation is therefore distributed, as the name and the mycelial metaphor (as the name suggests), relying on complementary forms of expertise and territorial embeddedness. At present, IFe remains an informal organisa-

tional arrangement. One outcome of the ongoing experimentation is the progressive consolidation of its role in connecting civic initiatives and local institutions, with the possibility of evolving towards a more structured organisational form in the future.

The “Space and Change” initiative by the IFe lab: an overview

IFe Civic Lab constitutes the primary object of observation of this contribution. More than a project, it operates as an evolving organisational setting through which different initiatives, collaborations and experimental activities are progressively developed and connected.



The Space and Change initiative and phases: Engagement in the neighbourhoods (I)

Source: Elena Acerbi, Alessia Viola and Lorenzo Grenga
Fig. 4

Among these initiatives, *Space and Change* represents the most structured pathway implemented during the period considered by this research. Supported in part by opportunities such as the European project ORBIS (De Liddo, Concilio et al., 2023) and the co-funding of a local research trajectory through the CRAFT initiative, it provided a particularly fertile occasion for observing how the laboratory operates in practice and how relations between civic actors and institutions are constructed, negotiated and transformed over time.

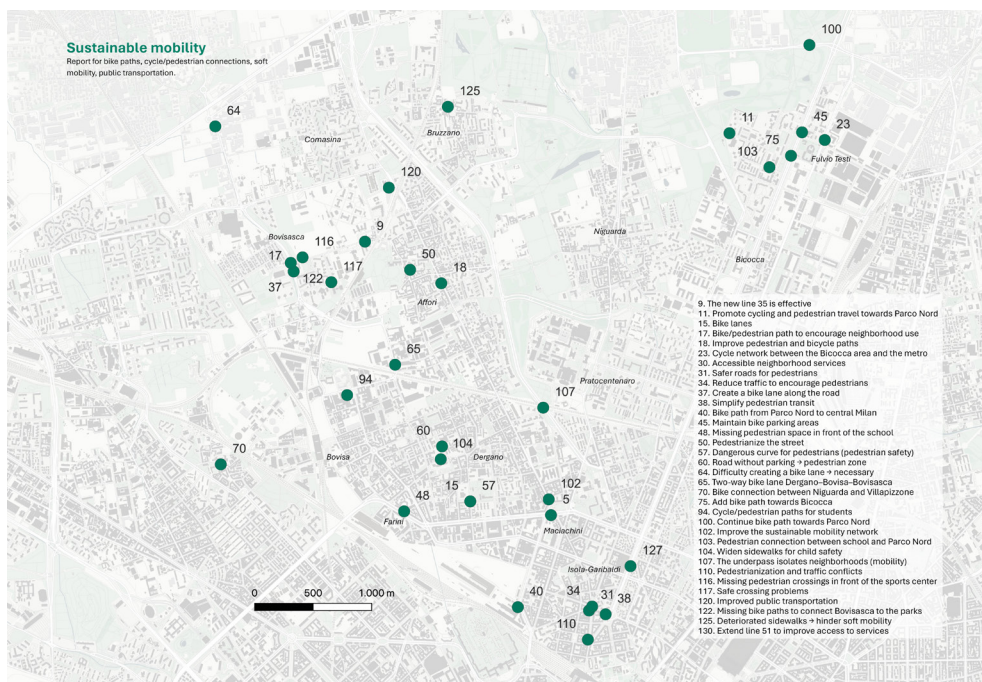
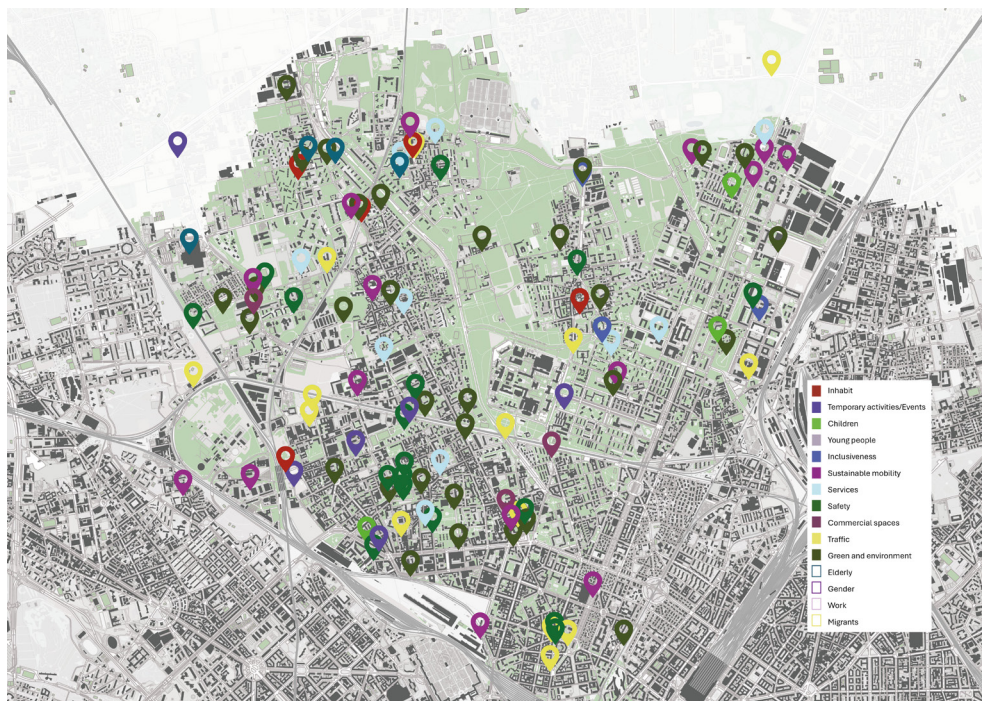
The initiative addressed residents across the entire territory of Municipality 9. It focused on public space and mobility in their multiple dimensions, not only as technical planning issues but also as lenses through which ongoing urban transformations, everyday practices and emerging territorial tensions could be collectively interpreted. From an operational perspective, the process unfolded in a sequence of partially overlapping phases between January 2025 and January 2026, including engagement activities, territorial mapping, deliberative dialogues and co-design sessions, followed by preliminary restitution and institutional discussion⁷.

The experimentation, instead of being fully designed in advance, evolved through a suc-

cession of contingent opportunities and adaptive reconfigurations.

In this sense, the experience resonates with recent critiques of overly programmed urban living labs, suggesting a more situated understanding of experimentation shaped by temporary openings, frictions and opportunities rather than by stable institutional architectures (Mukhtar-Landgren et al., 2026). Some of these openings, or “cracks”, took the form of small, flexible opportunities, such as a local cultural grant that enabled the first public event through which IFe formally constituted itself. Others were more structured, such as the Horizon Europe project ORBIS, which introduced a clearer organisational framework while remaining coherent, unlike many externally imposed experimentation settings, with the laboratory’s participatory orientation, as it was designed by researchers already involved in the initiative.

In this manner, the IFe approach does not lie in the presence of specific funding schemes or experimental tools, but in the underlying research posture informing the laboratory itself. The initiative is grounded in an everyday-life perspective that considers ordinary practices and local forms of interpretation as indispensable components of planning and institutional



Contribution collected through the Space and Change Mapping, and selection of contributions on Sustainable Mobility

Source: Caterina Podestà, Matteo Monchiero on Telegram-Bcause data

Fig. 5-6

The Space and Change initiative and phases: Co-design hybrid session with students and inhabitants (Rob de Matt, Magma, Dergano neighbourhood) (III)

Source: Alessandro Frigerio

Fig. 7

learning. It is precisely through this processual and non-static understanding of the urban living lab that the relationship between civic and institutional dimensions becomes analytically meaningful.

4. Discussion: a multifaceted process

A non-isolated niche

The case of the IFe civic lab, particularly through the recent long-term initiative, can first be interpreted through the lens of *niche* experimentation within transition studies. In the Multi-Level Perspective mentioned above, shared expectations, learning processes, network-building dynamics and forms of protection from the pressures of dominant regimes generally characterise niches.

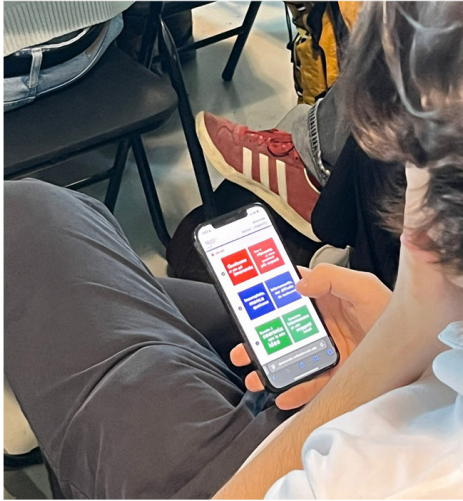
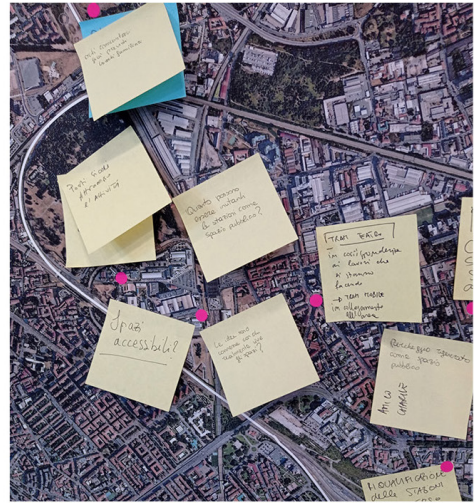
IFe civic lab only partially corresponds to this classical understanding of a niche. While it does operate as a relatively flexible and protected setting in which alternative forms of civic-institutional interaction can be explored without being fully absorbed into existing governance routines, several conditions usually associated with stable niches are weak or absent. The laboratory lacks stable resources, consolidated organisational structures and long-term institutional guarantees. Participation remains uneven and partly dependent on voluntary engagement, temporary funding opportunities and the fragile continuity of relationships among actors. Moreover, the experimentation unfolds in a context where

the boundaries between institutional and civic spheres remain fluid and continuously negotiated.

Unlike many civic initiatives that intentionally position themselves outside institutional processes or in explicit opposition to them (Savini, 2023), the laboratory progressively sought a direct interaction with local governance arrangements, particularly through its relation with Municipality 9. At the same time, the process has so far remained cautious regarding the central administration of the City of Milan. This caution derives from multiple intertwined reasons: political asymmetries between municipal scales; the still fragile and experimental condition of the process itself; the need to consolidate a clearer operational relation with the local administration before engaging more directly with central governance structures; and the attempt to preserve a degree of autonomy and differentiation between civic and institutional roles, avoiding premature forms of overlap or institutional absorption.

In this sense, the experimentation does not seek autonomy from institutions, but rather attempts to create conditions for partial forms of institutional permeability and learning.

From a complementary perspective, the process can also be interpreted as a form of *scaling deep* within the laboratory itself. As discussed in transition literature, scaling deep refers to transformations in values, relationships, cultural meanings and collective capaci-



ties. In the case of the IFe civic lab, this dimension becomes visible in the slow consolidation of a shared language, in the strengthening of relational infrastructures among actors, and the emergence of more reflexive forms of interaction between civic practices and local institutional actors. This evolving feature may be part of a strategy to overcome the niche's separation.

The relevance of the case, therefore, lies both in the production of potentially scalable solu-

tions and in its attempt to connect situated civic knowledge with institutional processes. This orientation resonates with recent reflections on civic initiatives that generate public effects not necessarily through formal institutionalisation, but through the stabilisation of practices, relations and shared interpretative frameworks over time (Campagnari, 2024). The case also reflects the ambiguities of experimental governance settings, which oscillate between openness and institutional cap-

The Space and Change initiative and phases: Small group workshop with teens (Bovisasca neighbourhood) (IV)

Source: Federico De Ambrosis, Elena Acerbi, Francesco Purpura
Fig. 8

ture, between adaptive flexibility and the risk of becoming overly programmed forms of participation (Mukhtar-Landgren et al., 2026). At the same time, some of the ongoing outcomes suggest possible scaling-up trajectories. These do not primarily concern the institutionalisation of the laboratory itself, but rather the progressive embedding of selected methodologies, tools and collaborative practices within existing institutional arrangements. Current discussions include the formalisation of new agreements around sustainable mobility and public space, the development of longer-term listening pathways, and the possible institutional adoption of some of the experimental tools tested during the process. These developments provide an initial indication of how civic experimentation may begin to influence policy practices without necessarily being fully absorbed into formal institutional structures.

Deliberation for co-design processes

A second interpretative lens concerns the role of deliberation in a place-based, tailored approach to co-design at the community level. Within the planning and urban design literature, co-design has increasingly been understood as a way to integrate local forms of knowledge and everyday experience into technical and professional planning practices, particularly in relation to public space and neighbourhood transformation processes (Sanders and Stappers, 2008; Manzini, 2015).

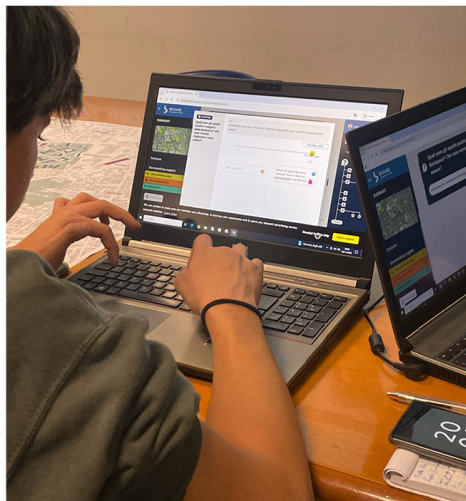
In practice, however, participatory processes

often tend to follow two recurrent trajectories. On the one hand, participation relies on already organised groups or associations that formulate proposals and negotiate specific territorial issues. On the other hand, broader participatory settings ask non-expert citizens to express preferences among predefined scenarios or solutions, often without creating adequate conditions for understanding, discussion and collective reflection.

The issue changes when participation is approached not primarily as a collection of opinions or proposals, but as the progressive emergence of knowledge rooted in lived experience. Within this perspective, the relevance of public space lies in its capacity to expose individual experiences to confrontation with others, making visible differences, interdependencies and latent collective dimensions.

At this point, the contribution of deliberative approaches becomes significant. Deliberation allows the process to move beyond the simple collection of preferences or isolated demands, creating conditions for reflection, comparison and the progressive articulation of positions through interaction and exposure to different perspectives (Forester, 1999; Curato et al., 2018).

Within the analysed initiative, the fragmentation of the co-creation process into multiple moments, formats and scales of interaction enabled different actors to contribute incrementally according to different forms of engagement and capacities. Avoiding fully



formed positions or already competent participants, the process sought to construct tailored opportunities for access, confrontation and learning, allowing broader forms of collective understanding to emerge over time.

In practice, this flexibility stretched the boundaries of the original activity and enabled broader and, in some cases, unforeseen forms of participation. One example concerns the unexpected involvement of very young participants, initially activated through auto-

nous yet locally embedded social programmes informally connected to members of the IFe network. These moments can be interpreted “as cracks, not doors” (Mukhtar-Landgren et al., 2026): not fully planned openings but specific deviations that temporarily reoriented the process and generated new possibilities of interaction. In response, organisers adapted their formats and protocols to engage younger participants more effectively.

At the same time, other attempts proved sig-

nificantly less successful. Efforts to involve groups of foreign women, for instance, encountered substantial limitations due to language barriers and broader social vulnerabilities that the initial process configuration was ill-equipped to address. Instead of concealing these limits, the experimentation made them visible, highlighting the uneven capacities of participation and the inadequacy of certain tools and resources for engaging more fragile or distant social groups within a large-scale territorial process.

Deliberation mattered less for increasing participation than for transforming the quality of interaction among participants. Through repeated exchanges and the progressive construction of shared framings, participants were encouraged to move beyond isolated complaints and highly localised demands toward more articulated forms of argumentation. The process helped make diverse positions visible within a shared interpretative space, opening new possibilities for confrontation, collective learning and future co-creation trajectories. In this sense, the process also generated intermediate spaces of interaction between civic actors and institutions, where knowledge could be translated, discussed and progressively embedded in planning practices, beyond the immediate production of decisions (Oldbury, Henriksson, 2026).

From this perspective, deliberation did not simply complement co-design. Still, it recon-

figured it, shifting the focus from producing proposals to building collective capacities and shared problem framing over time. The process can therefore be interpreted as a form of civic capacity-building in which participation is not reduced to consultation but becomes a grounded learning process that evolves and stimulates new forms of civic activation and co-creation.

Institutional learning and instituting potential

The third interpretative lens concerns the instituting dimension of the process and its implications for institutional learning. One of the most relevant aspects emerging from the case is the evolving transformation of the Municipality's role within the process. Municipality 9 progressively shifted from acting primarily as a recipient of civic demands and facilitator of local initiatives to engaging in a more reflexive and reciprocal form of interaction.

This transformation did not occur through formal agreements or predefined governance arrangements, but through an incremental process of mutual learning. During the initial phase, the relationship between the laboratory and the Municipality was characterised by distance and autonomy. Activities and meetings involved only civic actors and local initiatives, allowing the group to develop an independent perspective and organisational identity. As the process matured, however, an explicit effort was made to establish a dialogue channel with

the Municipality, initially through a joint application to a public call for events. This marked the beginning of a more contextualised and negotiated form of interaction between active citizenship and local institutions.

Over time, collaboration and trust between the IFe organising group and Municipality 9 gradually deepened. The Municipality facilitated contacts that allowed the network to expand, while the group experimented within municipal spaces, sharing methods, partial outcomes and alternative visions for public space and mobility. Step by step, and partly through university-led exploratory work and design proposals, the institution developed a broader understanding of the possibilities for territorial regeneration, while simultaneously strengthening participatory and listening-oriented approaches that were already partially present in its action.

During this phase, however, tensions and requests for clarification also emerged. Some independent groups perceived the project as overly institutional, expressing concerns about the potential loss of autonomy and independent voice. These concerns prompted the IFe group to draw a clearer distinction between the general reporting of the process – as an independent outcome of civic participation – and the proposal developed in relation to the Sustainable Mobility Plan.

By the end of the pathway, a core working group focused on urban and technological is-

ssues had clearly taken shape. At the same time, IFe civic lab and Municipality 9 were consolidating a new, more explicitly co-designed participatory initiative. This marked a significant shift from the earlier phase, when the administration provided light support while remaining largely “at the window”. Multiple forms of cooperation and informal agreement between the civic-research group and the institution were beginning to stabilise, substantially altering the initial configuration of the relationship.

The encounter with the practice analysed in this contribution provided the Local City Council with an opportunity to experiment with a more structured approach to participation over time and, more importantly, to rethink the institution’s qualitative role. In this shift, Municipality 9 moved beyond the role of a simple collector of signals and activator of local initiatives, towards that of an actor actively engaged in creating the conditions for shared learning processes, mediating between neighbourhood-scale knowledge and city-wide policy discussions.

In this sense, the process contributed to making the Municipality’s action more reflexive and civic-embedded, despite its limited formal competencies and resources. Institutional learning concerned not only the incorporation of new tools or methods, but also the ignited transformation of how mobility, participation and territorial priorities were framed and dis-

cussed within the institution itself. The laboratory's action contributed to expanding municipal capacities by supporting existing pathways of dialogue, introducing deliberative practices and enriching the content of policy discussions through a broader territorial perspective. From this viewpoint, the case provides an example of *scaling deep* within a local institution, understood as a transformation of meanings, relationships, and organisational capacities, rather than the simple adoption of new procedures.

5. Conclusions

The case discussed in this contribution offers a situated observation of an intermediary infrastructure in formation, whose significance lies less in the production of a replicable model than in the questions it raises regarding the relationship between civic initiatives, institutional learning and planning practice.

Analysed through the lenses of niche experimentation, deliberative capacity-building and instituting potential, the experience suggests that the relevance of civic experimentation cannot be reduced either to its immediate outcomes or to its capacity for formal institutionalisation. Rather, its contribution lies in the gradual construction of relationships, competences, and shared interpretative frameworks that connect civic and institutional actors.

Three tensions emerge from the case. The first concerns the relationship between sta-

bilisation and openness. While the consolidation of intermediary infrastructures appears necessary to ensure continuity and influence, increasing organisational stability may also reduce the flexibility and exploratory capacity that initially enabled experimentation. The challenge, therefore, lies not simply in scaling up civic initiatives, but in identifying organisational forms capable of maintaining openness while engaging more directly with institutional structures.

The second concerns the role of universities and other actors capable of mobilising significant resources within such organisational settings. Although IFe intentionally positioned the university as one actor among others, the case reveals how methodological competences, funding opportunities and institutional legitimacy continue to play a significant role in shaping the process. Whether such infrastructures can sustain themselves without becoming dependent on these resources remains an open question.

The third tension concerns the transformative potential of local institutions.

The case suggests that proximity-based institutions may act not only as recipients of civic demands but also as sites of institutional learning. Beyond the adoption of specific tools or proposals, the most significant outcome is the emergence of reflexive and civic-embedded forms of action able to integrate local knowledge into policy discussions and plan-

ning practice. Whether such learning can remain transformative once incorporated into ordinary planning practices remains an open question.

More broadly, the case invites reflection on whether initiatives such as IFe should be understood as emerging institutions, temporary alignments between actors, or something in between. Rather than asking whether civic initiatives can become institutions, the experience suggests a different question: under what conditions can institutions remain sufficiently permeable to learn from civic experimentation without absorbing or neutralising it? It is within this tension that the relevance of these civic-institutional arrangements for contemporary urban governance may ultimately reside.

Notes

¹ Since 2016, Milan has been divided into nine Municipalities, decentralised bodies operating between the central administration and neighbourhoods. They hold consultative and propositional functions on local territorial matters and manage limited resources for local initiatives. Municipality 9, the focus of this contribution, has approximately 189,000 residents (<https://www2.comune.milano.it/comune/palazzo-marino/municipi>).

² The experimentation was supported by the Horizon Europe project ORBIS-Augmenting Participation, Co-creation, Trust and Transparency in Deliberative Democracy and by the Competence Center for Antifragility (CRAFT) at DASTU Politecnico di Milano.

³ Established in 2017 on the initiative of Turin and Bologna, the Italian Urban Center Network promotes collaboration and knowledge exchange among Urban Centers across Italy.

⁴ The definition was explored, particularly by Paolo Fareri, within the experimentation of the Strategic Plan for the Milan Province, DiAP (now DASTU) Politecnico di Milano, 2005-2009, resp A. Balducci.

⁵ The primary source of these data is the Population Register of the Municipality of Milan, whose statistical analyses are available on the Milano Statistica – Comune di Milano portal.

⁶ The laboratory is supported by research and teaching activities developed within DASTU (Politecnico di Milano), including the CALL (Cities for Action Learning Lab) research group, student theses and internships, and urban design studios focused on Municipality 9.

⁷ For a detailed account of the process and the digital tools employed, see Moro & Acerbi (2026) and Anastasiou et al. (2026).

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