

Instituting Practices as an Interpretative Device for the Emancipation of Social Phenomenologies. A gaze on Ponticelli, East Naples

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1. Introduction. Innovating welfare spaces

Contemporary cities and territories are increasingly involved in complex, dynamic, transformative processes that elude the rational frameworks traditionally employed by urban planning tools. Within this disciplinary crisis (among others, Gabellini, 2018) and from the perspective of urban regeneration, emerges a pressing need to innovate tools, norms, projects, and processes through their trans-

disciplinary hybridization.

Above all, such a condition calls for constructing a new gaze (Viganò, 2014; Pasqui, 2018, 2017), conceived as a renewed framework of meaning capable of emancipating stigmatized socio-urban conditions and restoring their dignity as living bodies. Therefore, it is only through the construction of a different interpretative lens that we can “give meaning and value” (Secchi, 1989) to the existing city, recognizing and legitimizing those minimal

This paper reflects on an attempt to spatialize the theoretical concept of instituting practices developed by philosopher Roberto Esposito. Grounded in an empirical investigation of welfare spaces and practices in Ponticelli, a peripheral and socially fragile district of Naples, the study examines how collective practices can generate durable spatial transformations. The analysis focuses on an urban health garden developed within a partially abandoned public park through long-term practices of care. The case highlights the role of time, spatial

production, and collective agency in processes that compensate for institutional gaps without becoming institutionalized themselves.

The recognition of an instituting process opens the possibility of an instituting project, understood not as a prescriptive design tool but as an open, experimental, and relational device capable of engaging with uncertainty, conflict, and diversity. The paper contributes to debates on urban regeneration and planning theory by proposing an operational translation of Esposito's philosophical concept into an interpretive framework for urban analysis that provides the basis for an alternative design approach.

and latent phenomena that emerge within the interstices of socio-spatial relations.

From this perspective, this paper offers a reflection on the attempt to spatialize Roberto Esposito's notion of instituting practices (2020; 2021), starting from an investigation of welfare spaces and practices within a fragile and complex context on the periphery of Naples. Rather than applying Esposito's concept directly, the paper develops an operational reinterpretation aimed at a disciplinary translation into the field of urban project practice.

The paper builds upon doctoral research in urbanism carried out at the Università Iuav di

Venezia and completed in 2022. Starting from that research, the aim of this paper is not to analyze the relationship between institutions and civil society per se, but rather to investigate those social practices recognized as 'instituting'; capable of challenging established urban design approaches and reconfiguring urban design itself. Esposito's thought is translated not to analyze institutions, but rather to embed the dimension of instituting (2020; 2021; 2023). This assumption enables an interpretation of heterodox social phenomena – bottom-up, spontaneous, variously recognized, sometimes illicit – that contribute to urban transformations (Holston, 2008; Simone, 2004) in contexts where the distance from or weakness of public institutions generates conditions of stalemate. Particular attention is devoted to understanding how such practices may affect the instituting dimension of the project, conceived as a process and a device capable of enabling the creative potential of instituting practices.

The paper is not based on a theoretical framework drawn from policy or planning theory. Rather, it adopts urban design as its epistemic foundation, using exploratory tools that place the physical form of space at the centre of inquiry in order to interpret socio-spatial phenomena.

Within this operational effort to test Esposito's philosophical framework, instituting practices are understood as a conceptual construction site and a hermeneutic device capable

of recognizing those social practices that are able to emancipate physical space through transformative and regenerative urban action. Such action transcends the scale of intervention of a single building and extends to the local context. Among the multiplicity of bottom-up urban social phenomena (Ostanel, 2017; Stavrides, [2016] 2022), instituting practices are distinguished by their ability to develop a certain inertia over time and across space without losing vitality – understood as a conflictual tension toward continuous evolution.

This perspective is not assumed a priori but is deeply rooted in the exploration of the case study. Ponticelli, a district located on the eastern periphery of Naples, is, on the one hand, emblematic of many modern peripheries: large-scale residential settlements, poor-quality urban environments, and persistent conditions of social hardship and decay. On the other hand, Ponticelli reveals itself as a complex palimpsest of overlapping urban traces that narrate a far more articulated history. Starting from a specific urban asset – the welfare space infrastructure, or urban planning standards – the investigation focuses on the relationship between spaces and social practices. In doing so, it surprisingly uncovers a rich and diverse constellation of initiatives that fight against social degradation while also improving spatial conditions.

The aim of this interpretative effort is to recognize instituting practices as drivers of change

that challenge traditional processes of urban rewriting and planning, questioning the role and forms of the urban project itself as an institutional response to territorial governance.

In this sense, the project as a device can be understood as an institution: a system of mechanisms that regulates and gives form to urban transformations. According to Esposito's position, the institution is characterized by a tension between two poles, absoluteness and multiplicity (2020, XVIII). The ambition of this paper is not to define an instituting project, but to lay the groundwork for future investigations in that direction. Such a project would challenge some of the assumptions on which design practice is traditionally based (Viganò, 2001), while embedding the transformative capacities already expressed by civil society through everyday practices and spatial action. It may become an instrument of social empowerment in spatial transformation.

In this sense, the project – etymologically linked to the future – accompanies an uncertain horizon through a continuous relationship between immanence and transcendence, or, borrowing Esposito's words, by inscribing transcendence within immanence (2020, 13). The notion of an instituting project, still preliminary and largely untested, may therefore represent a possible disciplinary response to the radical rethinking of the category of institution proposed by Esposito.

The urban project thus becomes a device that

not only supports less defined and continuously evolving spaces – moving towards an open city (Sennett, 2018; Stavrides, [2016] 2022) – but, above all, actively shapes the collective imagination, acknowledging its pivotal role as an institutional power (Castoriadis, [1975] 2022).

2. Methodology and Approach. Questioning spaces tracing rights on the ground

This interpretative framework is operationalized through an empirical and spatial investigation that grounds the theoretical reflection in a specific territorial context. It is rooted in an in-depth exploration of the territory of Ponticelli, where the vitality of social movements acts as a counterpoint both to the complexity and fragility of the peripheral condition and to the administrative difficulties of urban and social management.

This work adopts a qualitative, interpretative, and spatially grounded approach, aimed at investigating the gap between norms and reality, between project, implementation, and actual uses. From a methodological standpoint, a form of “close reading” (Viganò, 1999) was implemented through a dual perspective on the territory: from above, via a zenithal cartographic reading, and from eye level, by traversing the territory and meeting its inhabitants, in order to reconstruct those similar processes that give rise to different outcomes (to paraphrase Secchi, 1989).

The Ponticelli territory is understood as a palimpsest (Corboz, 1985) shaped by multiple and interwoven layers that narrate its evolution over time. A process of elementarization (Viganò, *ibid*), structured through disassembling and reassembling phases, focused on the spaces of the collective facilities that spread across this territory.

This operation enabled an entry into Ponticelli’s “black box” (Latour, 1998) in search of its specific operating mechanisms, leading to the discovery of an osmotic and vital relationship between spaces and inhabitants. While this observation might appear obvious, in the context of Ponticelli it assumes the character of a necessity. The investigation of the relationships between “the physical characteristics and the decision-making processes that participate in the construction of parts of the city” (author’s translation, Renzoni, 2018, p. 41) therefore concentrated on those minimal, unstable, and vulnerable processes generated by grassroots social practices, which animate spaces with uses and meanings.

Social spaces and practices were observed through a specific interpretative lens built around the issue of constitutional rights. Drawing on a transdisciplinary review of the literature from the fields of constitutional law and philosophy of law, this lens focused on the nexus between right and life, interpreting the right linked to life as a vital and generative force rather than as a fixed and

Ponticelli 'public city'. The map highlights public housing settlements (in black/grey) and the welfare infrastructure (in red), within the district borders

Source: drawing by the author

Fig. 1

immobilizing status (cf. Grassi, 2003; Rodotà, 2012; Maddalena, 2014; Mattei, 2020). From this perspective, rights are understood as institutionalizing life while simultaneously transforming themselves in response to the reality they have modified, giving rise to a circular dynamic process. The lens operates by tracing collective rights and fundamental principles on the ground, particularly those related to health, education, ecology, solidarity, dignity, and substantive equality. The constitutional reading therefore interprets and reorganizes the findings produced through the territorial close reading, providing a framework through which the processes of disassembling and reassembling acquire meaning. The disassembling phase allowed the recognition and revelation of socio-spatial relational features that remain invisible within an overall view. The subsequent reassembling phase was conducted through spatial sequences identified along several urban transects, enabling a situated rereading of the articulations between spaces and practices through a constitutionally oriented interpretation. Disassembling occurred through complementary operations. A first temporal decomposition identified the phases in which the construction of the welfare infrastructure was concentrated in relation to the development of urban settlements. A subsequent process of elementarization focused on the individual facilities and spaces catalogued through dimen-

sional and functional taxonomies in order to assess their design quality, spatial distribution features, and state of maintenance. These catalogues finally made it possible to compare individual urban elements of the welfare infrastructure, while also connecting them to the narratives collected from residents, local actors, and users during fieldwork, thereby revealing the relationships between physical space and social dynamics (fig. 1-2).

During the reassembling phase, several urban morphologies were recognized, revealing the relationships between facilities and their context. This process led to the recognition of site-specific spatial configurations capable of simultaneously accounting for evolving urban phenomena, functional programmes, the actors involved in urban development, and the contemporary social perception of these spaces (cf. Lynch, 1960).

Finally, the reassembling phase employed a series of urban transects to investigate, within specific portions of the territory, the persistence of forms of socio-spatial injustice. The transect device (Gandy, 2020) – which cuts across the territory – thus delineates temporally defined socio-spatial frames conceived as multisemantic pools capable of supporting further reflection and evaluation.

The triad of spaces–practices–rights thus operates as a hermeneutic device through which values or disvalues can be identified, revealing how practices may increase or reduce the ca-



Taxonomy of the welfare infrastructure in Ponticelli: schools, leisure facilities, parks, sports and health facilities

Source: drawing by the author

Fig. 2

capacity of spaces to support the affirmation of rights within a process of mutual and reciprocal contamination.

3. Background and context. An entangled city

Naples, Italy's third-largest city, is a dense and complex urban environment that resists straightforward categorization. Positioned at the boundary between the dynamics of formality and informality (Berruti, Palestino, 2018), the city periodically faces endemic conditions of economic decline, housing pressure, and shortages in welfare facilities. As Secchi noted, "Naples has long been a difficult city for urbanists. For some time, however, it has also become a city where it is difficult to talk about urbanism" (author's translation, Secchi, 1986, p. 73). Within this historically critical condi-

tion for urban planning, "the city that refuses plans" (Samonà, 1959) was, during the years of this research, attempting to enter a phase of institutional learning through an urban planning process aimed at institutionalizing the innovative, site-specific experiences related to the recognition of commons and urban civic uses (Capone, 2022). These renowned experiences were being translated into the drafting of the new master plan (still pending approval), which interprets commons as an evolution and updating of collective facilities, the so-called urban planning standards (Comune di Napoli, 2019, 2020), envisaged by a national planning law (DM 1444/68). This law historically enabled the construction of the collective welfare infrastructure of the so-called public city, predominantly shaping peripheries

throughout Italy (Laboratorio Standard, 2021; cf. Giaimo, 2019). Against this background, it appeared relevant to investigate how those peripheral areas of the municipal territory that had not been directly affected by the urban commons movement responded to the presence – or absence – of welfare infrastructure. It is within this framework that the exploration of the Ponticelli district is situated. Located in the eastern area of Naples, Ponticelli has approximately 50,000 inhabitants and is characterized by the largest territorial extension and the lowest population density among Naples' districts, representing an exceptional condition within the city as a whole. A further exceptional feature is the abundance of collective facilities in the area. Most residential settlements and their corresponding collective facilities were built in the 1980s using substantial public funds allocated for post-earthquake reconstruction through an extraordinary housing programme (Pser). Prior to this massive phase of urbanization, Ponticelli consisted predominantly of fertile agricultural land on the slopes of Mount Vesuvius. This extensive urbanization process, however, remains incomplete. Areas awaiting transformation create an urban drosscape, intensifying conditions of fragility and insecurity. The existing welfare assets (e.g. schools, parks, sports and health facilities, social centres, etc.) are largely affected by decay and obsolescence. This condition mirrors that of many modernist

peripheries and generates a paradoxical situation in which welfare spaces are simultaneously present and lacking. In constitutional terms, this paradox reflects the dichotomy between the formal and the substantive, revealing the gap between the application of norms and lived reality.

4. Social practices between waiting spaces and waiting times

The physical distance between urban settlements and the oversized car mobility infrastructure tends to obscure the human dimension of the urban environment. The census of collective facilities in Ponticelli made it possible not only to record their operational conditions but, above all, to identify the social practices they host or activate. The survey highlights the gap between “building” collective welfare spaces and “dwelling” them (paraphrasing Sennett, 2018), that is, between their mere provision and their effective use in enabling practices of social emancipation.

Through this further analytical step, the abundance of bottom-up and grassroots practices of care emerged as a surprising finding. In the time lag between the drafting of plans, projects, and institutional decision-making processes and their actual implementation, while spaces may remain on hold, their uses remain dynamic. In these interstices, institutional processes are often supplanted by spontaneous or informal ones, giving rise to a form

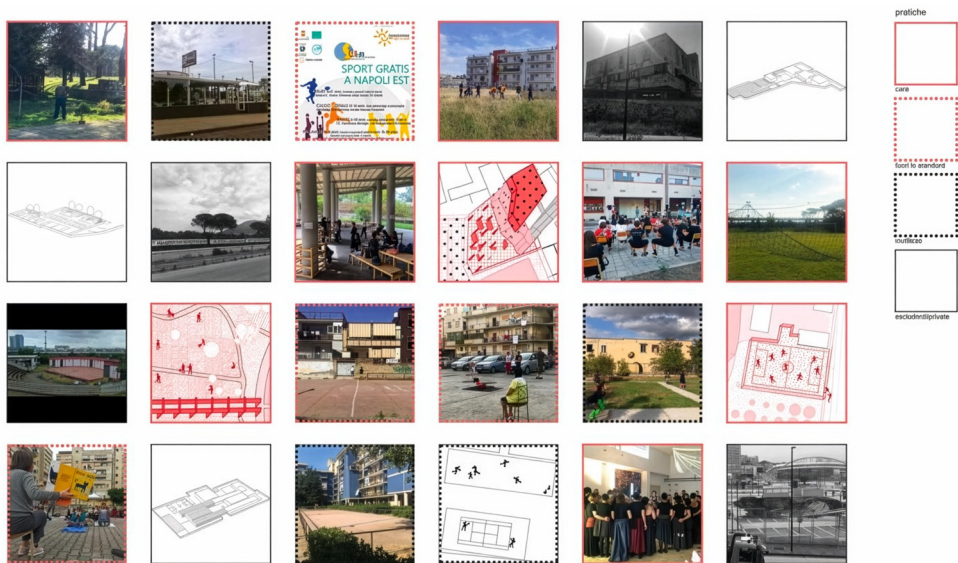
of collaborative urbanism (Healey, 1997; Cellamare, 2019; Ostanel, 2025).

A qualitative field investigation – drawing on the approaches of de Certeau ([1980] 2001) and Perec ([1975] 2011, [1974] 2008) – accompanied the fieldwork conducted in Ponticelli between 2019 and 2022 and took place across complex spaces and temporalities. The limitations encountered were related both to the COVID-19 pandemic and to Camorra feuds affecting some neighbourhoods of the district, conditions that required alternative forms of inquiry. The combination of information gathered from local newspapers, the numerous films shot in Ponticelli – including those produced by the film school coordinated by Arcimovie, based in the district – and, above all, social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram made it possible to monitor and discover, from a distance, many of the activities animating the neighbourhood, thereby broadening the range of available information. Despite these adverse conditions, numerous practices were observed and monitored through repeated site visits and participant observation. In some cases, these visits were accompanied by key local actors and involved participation in both everyday and exceptional events, including tree-planting initiatives for a new public garden, rehearsals for site-specific theatrical performances, school plays, extracurricular activities organized by schools during weekends, neighbourhood marches

and celebrations, workshops promoted by non-profit associations, and local festivals.

Through contact with a wide range of actors – including institutional representatives, third-sector organizations, and individual residents – one recurring feature that emerged was the alternation between distrust and hospitality. For this reason, the investigation was conducted primarily through active listening and open-ended interviews, supported by a semi-structured guide focusing on the spaces used, the target groups involved, and future perspectives. This approach made it possible, on the one hand, to gather information relevant to the research and, on the other, to bring to light situated desires and needs that had not been anticipated, while capturing deeper nuances of everyday social life.

While not exhaustive, the investigation identified a substantial number of practices and actors, which can be grouped into two broad categories. The first category originated from the welfare facilities themselves – including schools, parks, the public library, sports facilities, social and health centres, municipal offices, and churches. The second comprised actors operating across the territory through the provision of welfare services and social animation activities. More specifically, the actors involved included eight officials from the Municipality, the Municipal District, and the Local Health Authority; fourteen school principals out of the almost thirty schools located in Ponticelli;



five people connected to the library, including the project coordinator, municipal employees, and students; thirteen representatives of socio-cultural associations and social operators (including Maestri di Strada, Emergency, and Inward); two artists; one local historian; three representatives of parish communities; four gardeners involved in the social garden; two managers of sports facilities; and numerous residents. This classification should not be interpreted as a rigid correspondence between actors and spaces. Rather, the uses of space emerge through the overlapping activities and interactions of the various actors identified during the research.

The collection of these “voices from within” proved to be an extremely enriching experience, providing depth and meaning to the parallel spatial investigation of Ponticelli’s welfare infrastructure.

Among the plurality of observed social practices, only a few can be identified as instituting. In the background, an open catalogue

of minimal and unstable practices operates as a sort of reference system (Fig. 3). Social and grassroots practices generate forms of community that Stefano Rodotà defined as a “new anthropology” (2012, p. 194), grounded in commitment. These practices compensate for the absence and distance of an outdated and insufficient institutional system. They simultaneously address the recovery of spaces, services, and rights that should have been guaranteed by public institutions, while also responding to emerging social, environmental, and cultural needs.

The catalogue collects a constellation of experiences characterized by low inertia, given their instability over time and across space and the mutable forms they assume. They manifest themselves as vital and vivifying presences within what Anna Tsing has described as the “ruins of modernity” (2015). This open abacus collects minimal stories that outline attitudes preceding formal activity, legal status, or management structures; they are “ordinary things

Catalogue of social practices

Source: drawing by the author

Fig. 3

without any apparent value [...] situations without quality" (author's translation, Bianchetti, 2011, p. 25). Through a constitutionally oriented approach, the catalogue aims to identify which rights are enacted, denied, claimed, assured, or guaranteed by these practices.

5. The Instituting thought for practices emerging from the ground

Within this broad and heterogeneous field, while the catalogue itself functions as a background condition that makes such emergence intelligible, only some practices acquire an instituting capacity.

Some scholars have begun to explore the relationship between Esposito's thought and urban planning. Li Destri Nicosia and Saija (2023) highlight how Esposito remains relatively underrepresented within international planning scholarship, unlike other authors associated with Italian Theory, most notably Giorgio Agamben. Esposito's reception in urban and planning studies has been largely confined to the notions of affirmative biopolitics and biopower, understood as a politics of life rather than a politics over life. Similar observations have been advanced by Viganò (2023) and Boano (2020) in urban theory and design.

Li Destri Nicosia and Saija therefore investigate the influence that instituting thought has had – or may have – on contemporary planning theory, identifying points of convergence with a number of authors and approaches, including Mouffe's theory of agonistic democracy

(2005). Among the different strands of political ontology, they argue that Esposito's position offers particularly productive insights for planning theory. The additive and affirmative character of his conception of institutions can be read as allowing for the relevance of insurgent practices and civic organizations without undermining the primacy of institutions, instead emphasizing the inherently conflictual relationship between these two poles (Esposito, 2020). Social movements, from this perspective, "always come into existence because of institutions, no matter if the intention is of either effecting, changing, or contrasting them. Esposito explicitly asks to focus less on the spontaneous and self-organized initiatives [...] and more on those collective political actions that are also intrinsically organizational, [...] that are temporary but not extemporaneous. These collectives might develop from a single, self-organized, spontaneous uprising related to a specific issue or conflict, but do not end with it. They are sustained over time, developing the capacity to make the normative level more adaptable to the plurality of inputs coming from civic life" (ibid., p. 14). Instituting thought may therefore find particular relevance in institutional contexts where "there is a need to plan for counter-hegemonic spaces of resistance" (ibid., p. 15).

Building on these reflections, and finding a point of convergence in the idea of the plan "as a document embedding an instituting thought" (ibid.), this paper explores how the

notion of instituting praxis can be operationalized through the analysis of welfare spaces and translated into a projective device. In order to develop a disciplinary translation of instituting thought, some of the key conceptual nodes of Esposito's theoretical construction are retraced, reinterpreted, and, above all, recognized within field observations through a relationship of analogy rather than direct application.

Through a genealogical reconstruction of Western philosophical thought aimed at reconnecting right with its living roots (2021, 2023), Esposito's position seeks to recover the connection between institution and life according to a radically pluralistic and dynamic conception of institutions. The intersection between right and life constitutes both the remote matrix from which institutions emerge and the objective towards which they move (2023). Instituting thought (2020) – which Esposito distinguishes from the 'destituent' one (associated with Martin Heidegger's position) and the 'constituent' one (linked, in the author's interpretation, to the positions of Gilles Deleuze and Toni Negri) – is articulated as a political ontology grounded in the phenomenological philosophy of Claude Lefort and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. According to the philosopher's position, the instituting paradigm, unlike the other two, is capable of reversing the crisis of politics through an affirmative project.

Instituting thought derives its vital and vivi-

fying force from conflict, movement, change, and process; it is grounded in continuous becoming (2023). Drawing on the work of influential jurists such as Santi Romano and Maurice Hauriou, Esposito argues that 'necessity' should be understood as the fundamental source of law.

Instituting praxis thus designates practices that reveal the dynamic and non-static nature of institutions, which do not refer to things or people, but to life itself. This paradigmatic shift exceeds the modern dialectic between inside and outside. "Outside the state's orbit [...] [it is possible] to recognize a multiplicity of social constitutions that are neither entirely public nor entirely private, produced across the differentiated spheres of contemporary society [...] [when] the distinction between public and private is now surpassed by a polycontextuality irreducible to binary logic, articulated instead through a constellation of orthogonal semantic universes" (author's translation, 2021, p. 6).

Esposito's theoretical elaboration identifies two complementary trajectories – "vivifying institutions" and "institutionalizing life" (2021). Focusing on the first, the concept recovers what legal philosophy defines as the 'negative': that which lies outside positive law. This dimension can be assimilated to the notion of 'living law', understood as a common, conflictual, and impersonal form of law oriented towards the reduction of exclusion.

The aim of this research is to construct a new interpretative paradigm that entails a shift in posture and the adoption of a different way of seeing, knowing, and recognizing. Such a shift requires suspending judgment in order to first engage with the dynamics of territorial transformation in depth (as stated in *Learning from Las Vegas*). This effort calls for new interpretative categories that are neither exclusive nor hierarchical, but inclusive and complex. As Esposito himself argues, “No real change in political forms can be imagined without a profound mutation of our interpretative categories” (author’s translation, 2014, p. XVIII).

6. Insights from the Case study. Instituting practices device in action

On the basis of this theoretical framework, Esposito’s instituting thought is mobilized as an epistemological matrix for constructing an interpretative category within urbanism. According to the philosopher’s position, practices can be defined as instituting when they prefigure and configure new vital, provisional, and temporally variable orders.

Building on this perspective, this paper argues that certain social practices can be recognized as instituting agents of change within what Stefano Rodotà described as “the palimpsest of life” (2012, p. 273). They are distinguished by their capacity to counter the inertia that characterizes both physical space and the institutional framework and to compensate for

institutional shortcomings without ever institutionalizing themselves.

These practices belong to the broader catalogue of ordinary and everyday practices of care identified in Ponticelli, mentioned above. While they differ in terms of organizational form, the number and type of actors involved, sources of funding, development trajectories and processes, and relationships with local public institutions, they emerge from this wider field through a number of distinctive characteristics.

First, they display a degree of continuity over time that enables them to maintain a relatively stable capacity for action. Second, they establish a relationship of permanent tension with local institutions, oscillating between collaboration and conflict according to changing circumstances. Third, they are organized in locally rooted networks that simultaneously extend beyond the local scale, establishing connections and collaborations at broader, including international, levels. Such networks should not be understood as fixed organizational structures but rather as flexible and evolving assemblages that preserve continuity through the presence of a committed core group. Their persistence is often sustained by strong motivations and forms of personal commitment linked to the desire to challenge the socio-spatial stigma affecting the territories in which they operate. Finally, these practices do not identify themselves with specific institution-

The transect shows a territorial portion highlighting physical condition of collective welfare spaces within the contest. Fratelli De Filippo Park lays in the middle

Source: drawing by the author

Fig. 4

al forms. Their legal status may change over time, yet they continue to act regardless of formal institutional recognition, showing little interest in stabilizing themselves through a definitive juridical configuration.

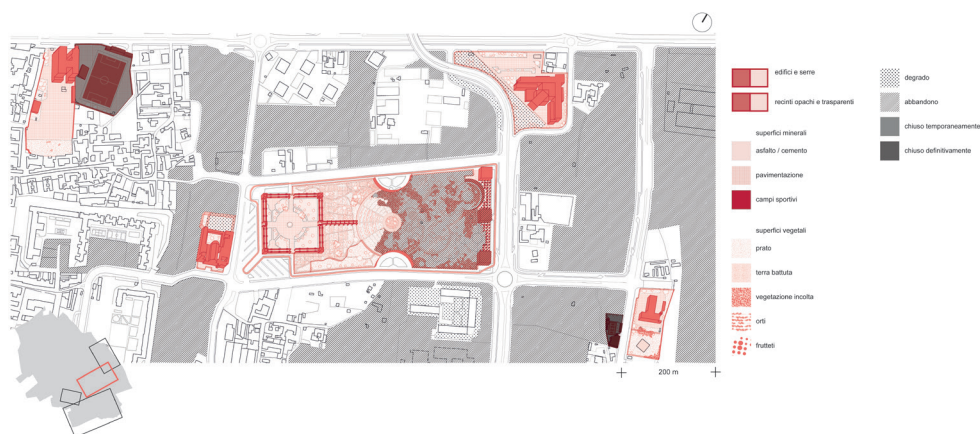
For the purposes of this research, however, their most significant characteristic lies elsewhere. Some practices – those recognized here as instituting – demonstrate the capacity to transform portions of territory. Starting from interventions on a single building or open space, they progressively reshape the broader urban context with which they interact. They possess a dual capacity: on the one hand, they transform the narratives associated with places; on the other, they physically modify spaces through situated and collective actions of self-construction, care, and adaptation. In doing so, urban intervention becomes a vehicle for broader forms of social engagement. From this perspective, instituting practices can contribute to the reconfiguration of planning and design processes by revealing transformative capacities already embedded within everyday social action.

The fieldwork conducted in Ponticelli, interpreted through the constitutional lens developed to investigate the relationship between welfare infrastructure and social practices, made it possible to identify three cases that can be recognized as instituting practices. Although they differ in terms of spatial setting, organizational structure, and the actors and

networks involved – which inevitably intertwine – they share the characteristics previously identified as constitutive of instituting practices.

For the sake of clarity, these characteristics emerged through a comparative reading of the wider catalogue of practices observed in Ponticelli. These practices are not considered instituting a priori; their identification did not derive from their organizational success or institutional recognition. Rather, they are distinguished by a transformative capacity to generate socio-spatial transformations that, through the interpretative framework developed in this research, are understood as instituting in the sense proposed by Esposito.

One case concerns an urban health garden reclaiming an abandoned park through the joint efforts of the Local Health Authority, a social cooperative working with a public addiction centre, and a broader network of local residents and associations. Another involves the redevelopment of an abandoned school by the non-profit organization Maestri di Strada and the educational community it has fostered over many years. Finally, the third instituting practice concerns the work of the Noi@Europe association for the Deledda neighbourhood library, periodically closed due to accessibility issues and lack of staff, conceived as the first node of an emerging network of neighbourhood libraries located in socially and institutionally fragile urban areas.



As noted above, all three cases are driven by the shared need to address the shortcomings of public institutions. They outline forms of collective care, understood as a political practice that shapes the physical transformation of public welfare spaces. The first case, described below, provides an empirical illustration of how instituting practices emerge through collective care, translating social and political engagement into concrete spatial transformations.

7. Stories from Lilliput: an urban health garden in the Fratelli De Filippo Park

The Fratelli De Filippo Park represents a significant trace of the urbanization process of Ponticelli, persisting between two phases of public housing development (Peep and Pser) that began in the 1960s. It is a large park (12 hectares) that stands like a cathedral in the desert, occupying a solitary and introverted position between areas awaiting transformation and an oversized car mobility infrastructure that divides – rather than connects – public housing settlements characterized by significant social fragility.

The park extends within a double portico that

acts as an enclosure and seems to protect it from the surrounding urban context. It is bordered by a cycle lane that leads nowhere but creates a circular route along which many people engage in sporting activities throughout the day. This spatial condition turns the park into an urban island, contributing to the broader sense of disorientation produced by spatial dilation (Fig. 4).

Built as part of the post-earthquake reconstruction programme (Pser), the park was inaugurated in 1995 during the mayoralty of Antonio Bassolino (under the slogan “all districts will have a municipal park”). Between 2005 and 2014, it reopened three times and then closed again three times due to a lack of maintenance funding. During this period, ‘inappropriate’ uses by criminal groups turned it into a “wasteland” (Berruti et al., 2021).

The park can be divided into three sections, corresponding to different stages in the urban transition of welfare spaces. The entrance plaza is a conventional public space: a paved area subject to public intervention through maintenance projects funded by the Metropolitan City. At the opposite end lie several buildings



intended to host public functions. Built in the 1990s and entrusted to the municipal administration, they were never put into operation and were restored with public funds even before becoming functional, due to ongoing vandalism. Today, they house Napoli Servizi S.p.A. and the territorial headquarters of the Emergency NGO, which plays a significant role in providing services to vulnerable local populations and immigrants. Between these two parts, the large central section consists of sloping terraces built above construction

waste and originally intended to host gardens. Separated from the entrance plaza by a gate, this part of the park was abandoned by public authorities and gradually turned into an urban forest of brambles, engulfing greenhouses and pathways. This section has been progressively transformed into a vegetable garden through community-led practices of collective care. In 2015, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed between the Municipality and the Local Health Authority (ASL N1), granting free use of the park's central section for the creation

The urban health garden

Source: photos by the author, 2022

Fig. 5-6

of a 'social health garden' (Figs. 5-6) linked to the Lilliput Centre, a day centre for addiction treatment located in Ponticelli. The ERA social enterprise, which manages the day centre's services, plays a key operational role in implementing the project, which frames gardening as a therapeutic activity supporting the rehabilitation of people with addictions.

This initiative originated from the intuition of Dr Anna Ascione, then head of the Lilliput Centre, who was the first to envision the recovery of this large abandoned and vandalized park through manual activities involving socially vulnerable people. From this initial intuition, sustained by remarkable perseverance – and, as she herself describes it, a certain degree of stubbornness – the project gradually expanded, progressively involving residents from the surrounding neighbourhoods. The management of the garden is further supported by the local community through an agreement between the Municipality and citizens' committees – some of which later merged into a single committee – allowing for the allocation of terraces to be adopted and cultivated. Over the years, the number of gardeners has increased to such an extent that a ranking system was introduced to regulate access to cultivation plots.

Through gradual effort and perseverance, the park's original design progressively reemerges in an unintended process that reveals its initial spatial quality, restoring it to a pleasant

and peaceful condition. Over the years, the people involved have cleaned and reclaimed progressively larger portions of the degraded and abandoned park, planting native vegetables and endangered traditional cultivars, fruit trees, and botanical species. Through practices of mutual aid and the sharing of skills, they have built fences, tool sheds, gazebos equipped for convivial activities, composting systems, and rainwater collection facilities, despite repeated acts of vandalism. Finally, the central plaza at the top of the terraced hill has been cleaned to host performances and film screenings.

Over the years, the park has hosted artistic events, festivals, and community celebrations, as well as educational and training activities, research initiatives, and academic workshops, contributing to the project's visibility and recognition beyond the local context, including at the international level. No direct public investment was provided by the Municipality or the Local Health Authority; funding instead came from crowdfunding and private donations, while some activities were embedded within larger projects supported by national and European funding. Nevertheless, volunteer work has remained the primary force shaping the garden as a renewed public park.

The process involves a wide range of actors engaged in the ambivalent process of care that has generated an urban microcosm of spaces and practices. The Local Health Authority acts

as the formal promoter of the initiative, while Dr Anna Ascione played a key role in conceiving the idea and initiating the process. The ERA social cooperative, entrusted with service provision, operates on the ground with patients at the addiction treatment centre. Alongside these actors, the local network involved in the 'adopt a terrace' initiative includes citizens' committees, social associations and cooperatives, schools, and parish centres. The daily maintenance of the community garden is carried out primarily by local residents – often retirees – together with a few professionals who participate mainly at weekends and come from neighbouring municipalities around Mount Vesuvius, reaching the park by car. The gardening practice also represents a reconnection with the area's rural cultural roots, reactivating memories of the peasant past of the fertile countryside on the slopes of Mount Vesuvius. The evolution of the urban health garden reveals a process that cannot be reduced either to a conventional public intervention or to a purely grassroots initiative. Rather, it has generated a complex set of relationships among public institutions, social organizations, and local residents.

Over the years, both the agreement between the Municipality and the Local Health Authority and the arrangements regulating the involvement of the ERA cooperative and local residents have been renewed. Likewise, the Local Health Authority has periodically renewed both the service contract with the so-

cial cooperative and the allocation of terraces to local residents.

Two distinct relational configurations have progressively emerged, both centred on the role of the Local Health Authority. On the one hand, the relationship with the ERA cooperative is characterised by close collaboration and a shared commitment to the social and educational objectives of the project, since the cooperative is directly entrusted with service delivery. On the other hand, the relationship with the citizens' committees alternates between collaboration and conflict. While agreements are often reached regarding the management of the garden, disputes periodically arise concerning decision-making authority. Because they are directly involved in the daily maintenance of the garden, the committees claim a primary role in decisions regarding its management, including the rules governing coexistence among gardeners. Conversely, the Local Health Authority, which remains formally responsible for the agreement governing interventions within the public park, often adopts a more centralized approach that limits the committees' decision-making autonomy. More recently, however, a change in leadership within the Local Health Authority has led to a progressive institutional hardening, which no longer recognises the citizens' committee or the ERA cooperative as parties to the agreement, moving instead towards the internalization of activities.

This variability in the relationships between

civil society and public institutions directly affects the transformative process of the park, extending its timelines and introducing uncertainty into its recovery and enhancement. Yet it is precisely within this conflictual dimension that a highly situated characteristic emerges: the capacity for persistence displayed by some local residents, who continue to care for the garden on a daily basis regardless of the oscillations between collaboration and conflict that characterize the institutional framework.

8. Discussion. Learning from Lilliput

Rather than resulting from a linear planning and implementation process, the transformation of the park emerged through the progressive sedimentation of several factors: the project emerged gradually through care practices and collective actions that generated physical transformation; the actors involved – both as individuals and as social categories – changed over time; institutional arrangements were continuously redefined; and conflict constituted an intrinsic component of the process. These characteristics suggest interpreting the process as a form of open, incremental, and assemblage-based urban regeneration (Healey, 2002, 2007; McFarlane, 2011; Stavrides, [2016] 2022; Tedesco, 2024), through which the urban garden once again became a welfare space while simultaneously functioning as an ecological infrastructure of care (Puig de la Bel-lacasa, 2017; Klinenberg, 2018; The Care Collective, 2021; Lenna, 2026).

An ecosystem has developed around the park, producing multiple positive effects. The process has functioned as a tool for the social inclusion and empowerment of vulnerable groups through active citizenship and the autonomous management of gardening activities. It has activated a broader educational community, revitalizing an important collective space long abandoned by public institutions. It is also an exercise in genuinely operative direct democracy that ‘draws social rights on the ground’: ecological and educational rights, as well as the principles of solidarity and mutual cooperation. In this sense, the park can be understood as an augmented space of enacted rights.

At the same time, it must also be acknowledged that this open and inclusive process has not succeeded in fully engaging the local community itself, characterized by significant social fragility, as evidenced by repeated acts of vandalism. Rather, it has tended to attract middle-class individuals and groups from neighbouring municipalities. In this respect, the park can be interpreted as a collectively private space, according to Stavrides’ interpretation ([2016] 2022).

Although embedded within the broader phenomenon of urban community gardening (Krasny & Tidball, 2015; Certomà & Nottoboom, 2017; Kwartnik-Pruc & Droj, 2023), this practice has been interpreted as an “isolated miracle,” unparalleled in Naples, according to Federica Palestino (Berruti et al., 2021) (con-

versely, the top-down 'Restart' participatory process in Scampia did not produce comparable outcomes).

The conflictual dimension described above makes visible an instituting capacity: the persistence of collective care practices, understood as stewardship commitments, that continue despite the changing configurations of institutional support, opposition, or indifference. Self-determination and the spontaneity of these practices emerge as fundamental conditions for the urban health garden to be recognized as an instituting practice.

The more centralized approach to the management of public assets that followed the change in leadership – both within the Local Health Authority and the municipal administration – can be interpreted in two different ways. On the one hand, a stronger institutional presence may be regarded as a positive development, potentially ensuring greater stability and public accountability. On the other hand, this attitude risks interrupting the continuity of the knowledge, relationships, and forms of cooperation through which the park regained vitality, ultimately undermining the durability of the outcomes achieved. This condition reveals the variable, unfinished, and continually negotiated nature of the process itself, which never stabilizes into a definitive configuration. The case therefore does not describe an alternative to public institutions, but rather a dynamic process through which institutional

action and civic initiative continuously redefine one another through configurations that vary over time according to the agreements established between institutions and civil society, as well as the degree of commitment displayed by the actors involved.

Ponticelli's social health garden sheds light on three fundamental dimensions related to space, time, and the relationship between people and practices. Together, these dimensions provide a first basis for outlining some preliminary assumptions towards what may be described as an instituting project.

First, the investigation into the park's physical dimension highlights the generative potential of space: "Space is a sign, a trace of the framework of meanings that guides organizational interactions. At the same time, space is a medium for meaning-making processes: it contributes to creating this framework and therefore exerts a force on interactions, establishing their structures and directions" (author's translation, Bifulco & Vitale, 2003, p. 11). The park acts as the trigger for the process, insofar as it embodies a denied social right resulting from its long-term abandonment and underuse. Space is therefore no longer conceived as a passive support for social action but as an active body (Viganò, 2023), capable of enabling, orienting, and sustaining practices.

Second, an examination of the processual dimension foregrounds the instituting role of time. The alternation between periods of wait-

ing and periods of action – between openings and closures, experimentation and sedimentation, incremental practices that gradually transform the space, and the changing constellation of actors involved – demonstrates how duration constitutes a fundamental element in the construction of instituting processes.

Finally, the garden's story is populated by a multiplicity of actors who have activated forms of engagement, educational initiatives, ecological awareness processes, and, above all, practices of physical transformation. A prosumer figure emerges: an actor capable not only of using space but also of producing and transforming it according to situated needs and opportunities, partially assuming functions traditionally assigned to public authorities. Inhabitants, gardeners, managers, and operators, understood as prosumers, thus reveal an instituting capacity whose strength derives from persistence and perseverance in pursuing a shared vision, even under adverse conditions.

This form of agency is profoundly situated and rooted in place. It is not institutionalized, since it is sustained less by formal roles or responsibilities than by personal commitment and practical involvement; formal recognition remains secondary to action itself. What emerges is therefore a community of practice, corresponding to a “new anthropology” (Rodotà, 2012). This perspective highlights

another characteristic that can be considered instituting: acting towards shared aims rather than according to predetermined juridical, institutional, or representative forms. In doing so, these practices implicitly respond to the constitutional rights lens adopted in this research, which, as discussed above, enables the recognition of certain phenomena while rendering others less visible.

The identification of highly engaged pivotal figures is a characteristic shared by all three instituting cases recognized in Ponticelli. In the case of the social health garden within De Filippo Park, two figures stand out. Anna Ascione, former head of the Lilliput Centre, envisioned the transformation of this enormous urban wasteland, initiated the process, and became personally involved in its development. Her retirement marked a turning point in the trajectory of the process. Antonio Romano, a gardener, retired trade unionist, and president of the citizens' committee, who guards the garden daily, sought to structure the gardeners' organization as a cooperative, positioning it as an institutional actor in its relations with the Local Health Authority and the Municipality, and asserting the gardeners' right to participate in decision-making processes. These two figures do not explain change by themselves; rather, they reveal how transformative processes often crystallize around highly committed actors capable of connecting institutions, practices, and collective action. They embody

distinct yet intertwined forms of power – public and collective – both marked by a strong emotional dimension that animates the instituting process with a vital and vivifying character.

This multiplicity of actors, understood as a collective body, can be interpreted as a radical form of institutional transcendence embedded within the immanence of everyday practices, echoing Esposito's reflection on the relationship between life and institution (2020).

Urban change emerges through the interaction among these spatial, temporal, and relational dimensions. It cannot be reduced to the action of individual actors alone, but results from evolving socio-spatial relations that develop over time and create the conditions for collective self-determination. It is within these conditions that the instituting character of the process becomes visible and can lead to a radical reinterpretation of the project as an instituting device.

The instituting process remains unthought, as Esposito argues. The case study, nonetheless, raises key issues that lay the groundwork for a new gaze that is both hermeneutic and operational. In the interpretation advanced in this paper, the instituting practice of the urban health garden is capable of spatial production. Furthermore, the case delineates the characteristics and conditions of a process that remains instituting without ever becoming instituted. Finally, the park's story reveals the

ambivalent relationships between public institutions and civic self-organization and produces a persistent tension between dialogue and conflict, resistance and collaboration.

9. Non-Conclusion. Instituting Practices towards shaping instituting projects

The recognition of instituting practices makes visible a series of operational conditions that may raise a projective question, forcing us to rethink some project categories. This case study demonstrates what an instituting practice allows us to observe; it does not aim to define how it should function. In doing so, it opens up a new gaze on contemporary urban transformation phenomena. The construction of dense and critical descriptions – where the physical characteristics of space overlap with the subjects who transform it through innovative or traditional practices – makes it possible to preserve complexity and points towards the emancipation of the urban as a living place. This approach outlines what geographer Giuseppe Dematteis has described as an "implicit project", in which critical descriptions already lead to future prefigurations (1995), while at the same time the project itself is understood as a "knowledge producer" (Viganò, 2011). If instituting practices are capable of transforming space while remaining open and dynamic, what forms of project are capable of supporting such processes without neutralizing them?

The article does not demonstrate the existence of an instituting project, nor does it seek to define one as a coherent theory. Rather, it opens a reflection on the possibility of an instituting project, suggesting a set of preliminary hypotheses for defining a new project paradigm that nevertheless deserves further investigation and testing before it can be developed into a fully articulated theory.

In a difficult context such as Ponticelli – and, more broadly, Naples – a succession of plans and projects for development, recovery, and urban transformation have been proposed since the 1980s. Many of these initiatives were never implemented, or were only partially realized, due to a variety of factors, including legal disputes, regulatory changes, and political instability. The issue, therefore, has not been a lack of planning capacity, nor is the quality of these projects necessarily in question. Rather, the problem lies in the impossibility of verifying whether planning approaches were capable of addressing the specific problems they sought to solve.

Traditionally understood as a tool that defines spatial configurations and functional programmes intended to remain stable over time, the project has never been a neutral device. Over the years, design practice has revealed the limitations of this deterministic approach, which assumes that similar solutions can be applied across different territories. The investigation carried out in Ponticelli highlights the

inadequacy of such an understanding and, at the same time, suggests the need – among others – for a different kind of project, characterized by its capacity to adapt to the conditions generated by the evolving, conflictual, and situated nature of urban processes. This is not conceived as an alternative to existing design tools, but as a still-missing possibility that may operate both within the temporal interstices between planning and implementation and in situations where public institutions or private developers fail to realize or complete urban transformations.

From this perspective, recognizing certain practices as instituting becomes a design problem in itself, as their recognition can lead to the development of a new type of project: a project-device capable of absorbing diversity, tensions, and conflicts, which are not predetermined but emerge on a case-by-case basis. The project is therefore not external to the instituting process. In seeking a theoretical genealogy, the instituting project can be rooted in the concept of “minoritarian thought” proposed by Deleuze and Guattari (1980), Burckhardt’s position on “minimal intervention” (2019; 2013), the “minor project” (Boano, 2020), and the “weak project” (Viganò, 2023). Borrowing Boano’s reflections on the notion of the minor project – whose outcomes are shared here despite being grounded in Agamben’s destituent thought, which the author partially overlaps with Esposito’s instituting

perspective – an instituting project can be understood as a relational device. It is not defined through opposition, distance, or alterity, but through the generative tension between conflicting poles (Boano, 2020, p. 95). It is a process rather than a finished or definitive product.

As a first attempt at disciplinary translation, the instituting project may operate through two interconnected dimensions. On the one hand, it requires a minimal yet stable structure, functioning as a framework that organizes the field of urban transformation. This framework establishes a set of minimum priorities and necessary interventions that must be guaranteed under all circumstances and ensured through public action. On the other hand, within this framework, large urban patches can be conceived as open “clearings” (Formato, 2021): spaces of possibility available for subsequent modifications, appropriations, uses, and functions. In these areas, the primary agents of transformation are local communities understood as prosumers. Here, the instituting project relinquishes morphological determinacy, control, and authorship, engaging instead with the situated capacities of those who inhabit, transform, and maintain the territory.

An instituting project may therefore imply a different distribution of responsibilities between civil society and public institutions. Acknowledging the capacity of certain actors

– not because of the formal roles they occupy, but because of the commitment that drives them – to carry forward transformative actions, this partial loss of control over the whole is understood as an intentional condition rather than an accidental one. Following the examples of some of the practices identified in Ponticelli, this does not merely constitute an assumption of responsibility; it also creates a field for experimenting with self-determination. In this perspective, property rights no longer occupy a central position (Capone, 2020). Rather, it is the use made of a space that progressively shapes its physical configuration (borrowing Crosta’s words, 2010).

An instituting project may recognize already existing processes and enhance their capacity to act; it does not replace them, nor does it institutionalize them into fixed forms. It therefore accepts a condition of incompleteness. The practices observed suggest that change can occur before, alongside, or beyond the project itself. For this reason, an instituting project should not necessarily be understood as the producer of change, but rather as a device capable of accompanying and supporting the projective capacities already present within a place. An instituting project may incorporate already existing categories such as participatory processes, co-design practices, experiments in tactical urbanism, and even urban commons, particularly in the form of urban civic uses developed in Naples. However, it does not

coincide with any of these approaches. For instance, some local actors – such as Maestri di Strada – have expressed reservations about the civic-use framework, arguing that it does not provide sufficient long-term stability for initiatives conceived over a medium-term horizon.

Consequently, an instituting project cannot be defined in a closed or definitive manner. Rather, it may be understood as a form of “minor project” characterized by a different intensity (Boano), or as a “weak structure” offering a socio-ecological opportunity for experimentation and the radical renewal of tools and practices (Viganò, 2023).

The instituting project is therefore not conceived as a solution, but as a future starting point. It does not seek to establish a final order; instead, it creates the conditions through which life and institutions may continue to redefine one another in an ongoing and reciprocal process.

Instituting practices do not yet demonstrate the existence of an instituting project, but they make it possible to identify some of its operational and theoretical preconditions. They are not recognized on the basis of the success of an operation, but rather through their capacity to open up fields of possibility. This presupposes a capacity for imagination understood as an evolving practice, echoing Cornelius Castoriadis’s notion of instituting imagination ([1975] 2022), in which the social

imaginary does not reproduce reality but actively creates it through an incessant instituting process. In this sense, the instituting project is imagined as a tool for the emancipation of space through the self-determination of those who transform it.

At the end of this brief and non-exhaustive overview, it is worth recalling that the relationship between instituted and instituting practice, project, process, and imaginary is neither alternative nor exclusive. The continuous passage between the instituting and the instituted generates a vital circuit that is necessary for understanding the dynamics of life within which urban design and planning are situated.

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