

D10

Research Report



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0. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This Research Report examines the implementation of four Urban Living Labs (ULLs) within the PS-U-GO project – Madonie Living Lab (Italy), Mare Libero ULL: Towards an accessible and free sea (Italy), Ulloa Aglantzia (Cyprus), and CoCo Stadtlabor (Germany) — with a focus on territorial embeddedness, participant empowerment, and the role of the territorial problematique. The findings highlight that ULLs function as context-sensitive, process-oriented environments where learning and participation are shaped by local socio-spatial conditions rather than predefined outcomes.

Across all cases, participants engaged in comprehensive processes spanning from problem identification to tangible interventions, including spatial installations, mappings, cultural outputs, and public events. These outputs acted as mediators for dialogue and knowledge exchange, rather than final solutions. Experiential and situated learning emerged as a key strength, enabling participants to develop practical, relational, and reflexive skills through direct engagement with local communities and challenges.

The Report identifies participant empowerment as a gradual and context-dependent process. While ULLs created meaningful opportunities for agency — particularly among students and engaged stakeholders — this empowerment remained partial and often limited by structural constraints such as institutional fragmentation, limited outreach, and socio-political tensions.

Overall, the study demonstrates that ULLs contribute to fostering collaborative learning, civic engagement, and locally grounded knowledge production. However, their long-term impact depends on sustained participation, strengthened stakeholder networks, and continued alignment with territorial needs and conditions.

1. THE REPORT: Role, Goals, Aims & Audience

This **Research Report** has been developed within the framework of **the PS-U-GO (Participatory Skills for Sustainable Urban Governance)** project, implemented under the **Erasmus+ programme**. The Report contributes to the project's broader objective of advancing innovative educational approaches for participatory and sustainable urban governance by critically reflecting on the implementation of **Urban Living Labs** (further on: ULLs) as situated learning environments.

The PS-U-GO project is a three-year Erasmus+ initiative that seeks to redefine how ULLs function as educational and civic engagement environments in contemporary urban contexts. Rooted in a transdisciplinary approach, PS-U-GO brings together **students and youth, local residents, urban planners, policymakers, and other stakeholders** from the **quadruple helix** to co-create and test ideas, methods, and interventions addressing urban challenges in four European settings (Cottbus, Naples, Nicosia, and Palermo). At its core, the project's ambition is **to foster place-based civic participation and empower participants with advanced participatory and soft skills** (including facilitation, design thinking, conflict resolution, and collaborative problem-solving) through situated learning experiences grounded in real-life urban processes, community needs, and co-designed solutions. By co-producing a shared pedagogical framework and promoting long-term collaboration between academic institutions, governance bodies, and civil society, **PS-U-GO aims to generate inclusive, resource-efficient spaces of co-governance and sustained engagement that enhance democratic participation in urban life.**

The PS-U-GO project approaches **ULLs as hybrid environments, combining pedagogical experimentation with participatory urban practices**. The implementation of ULLs responds to two interconnected objectives. First, the project aims to strengthen place-based civic participation by creating structured opportunities for collaboration between higher education institutions (HEIs), governance bodies, civil society organisations (NGOs), and local communities. Through this approach, the ULL becomes **a platform for co-governance and collective problem-solving grounded in specific urban territories**. Second, the project seeks to equip students studying in the fields of architecture, urban planning and design, public administration, and social sciences and humanities with advanced participatory and transversal skills. By immersing students in real-world contexts, **ULLs enable experiential learning processes involving facilitation, stakeholder communication, collaborative design, and critical reflection**. Although ULLs are increasingly used in urban innovation and planning processes and contexts, their implementation remains methodologically diverse and often insufficiently documented from a process-oriented perspective. This Report therefore addresses the need to critically examine **how ULLs function in practice, particularly when embedded in different educational frameworks and applied across different territorial settings**.

ULLs are examined in this project as experimental, process-oriented methodologies that integrate education, civic participation, and spatial practices

in real-life urban territories and their social, economic etc. contexts. Within PS-U-GO, the ULLs function as transdisciplinary educational spaces where, in line with the quadruple helix model, students, public authorities, civil society actors, and private stakeholders collaborate to explore urban challenges and co-produce locally grounded, innovative design solutions. These environments are thus designed not only to generate applied spatial outcomes or outputs but also to foster participatory competencies and “soft skills” among students and stakeholders.

This Report presents the results of qualitative research activities carried out across four ULLs in four territories established within PS-U-GO: **Ullol Aglantzia in Nicosia (Cyprus), MaLL in Petralia Sottana (Italy), CoCo in Cottbus (Germany), and Mare Libero ULL in Naples (Italy).**

The research represented in this Research Report is based on a **qualitative and multidisciplinary methodology** combining analytical techniques and tools from architecture, urbanism and (urban) anthropology. The approach integrates territorial mapping, visual and spatial documentation, semi-structured interviews and discussion formats, and contextual research. Fieldwork (described below) was conducted across the four ULLs to capture implementation processes in situ. Particular attention was given to documenting how participatory practices unfold. Rather than providing a purely descriptive or evaluative account, this Report is grounded on a **reflexive analytical perspective**, based in equal parts in urbanistic and anthropological research, to examine **how ULLs operate as context-sensitive methodologies** shaped by local territorial dynamics and problems and participatory practices.

To support a structured reflection on implementation, the Report adopts a dual analytical perspective focusing on **territorial embeddedness** and **participant empowerment**. Together, these two analytical dimensions allow and guide the Report to interpret ULLs as situated processes operating at the sutures of spatial practices, pedagogy, and civil participation. In that sense, the analytical ambition of this Report is therefore not to measure predefined outputs but to examine **how ULLs function as situated, context-sensitive and process-oriented methodologies, shaped by territorial conditions and participatory learning dynamics**. Through this reflexive perspective, the Report seeks to inform both future research and practical implementation of ULLs in educational and governance contexts.

This Report addresses **multiple audiences** involved in participatory urban governance and innovative educational practices, including but not limited to:

- researchers working on living labs, participatory planning, and spatial co-production;
- HEI developing situated and transdisciplinary learning environments;
- public authorities and governance bodies implementing participatory processes;
- civil society organisations, urban activists and other practitioners engaged in community-based urban initiatives.

Beyond its analytical, reflexive, and interpretative contribution, the Report has a practical orientation. By reflecting on implementation processes across diverse

contexts, it aims **to support the development of transferable methodological insights** for future ULL initiatives, particularly those integrating education and civic participation.

Thus, while this Report draws on systematic qualitative research conducted within the PS-U-GO ULLs, it is important to clarify that it is not intended as a conventional academic paper adhering strictly to disciplinary conventions, dense theoretical framing, or formal scholarly debate. Instead, this document is crafted as a **practical, reflective research output that speaks directly to its diverse, aforementioned intended audiences**. The Report focuses on accessible narrative, contextual insights, and grounded interpretation of implementation processes, making space for nuanced reflection without overburdening the reader with highly abstracted or theoretical and academic analysis. Rather than positioning itself as a peer-reviewed scholarly contribution, its emphasis lies in meaningfully connecting empirical experience with practical insight, illuminating how ULLs unfold in specific contexts and how they contribute to participatory capacities.

Thus, the **overall aim of this Research Report is to reflect critically on the implementation of ULLs as process-oriented methodologies**.

Within the overall structure of the PS-U-GO project, this Report contributes to the co-creation of a knowledge base on participatory approaches for public space and ULLs as educational environments. It complements other deliverables (cf. <https://www.psugo.eu/resources/>), particularly its evaluation and validation frameworks and quantitative assessments, by providing deeper and more nuanced insight into experiential, relational, and contextual dimensions of ULL implementation in cross-case interpretation.

This Report is also part of a wider constellation of academic papers and discussions, as the ULLs implemented within the PS-U-GO project have generated a range of academic and practice-oriented outputs that explore participatory pedagogy, situated learning, and civic engagement in urban governance. Across conference papers, journal articles, and methodological reflections, the project has been used as an empirical framework to test how ULLs function simultaneously as educational environments and co-governance platforms. Together, these contributions situate PS-U-GO within broader academic debates on participatory urbanism and ULLs while also supporting the project's applied methodological development across its four implementation contexts.

The Report is structured to progressively move from conceptual framing to reflection and comparative insight. Following this introductory chapter, **Chapter 2** presents the qualitative and multidisciplinary research methodology guiding the study, outlining the interpretative and field-based approaches adopted across the ULLs, as well as describing the implementation of fieldwork, including stakeholder engagement and data collection processes shaped by each territorial context and its associated problematique. **Chapter 3** develops detailed case studies that examine local implementation processes, participatory formats, and learning dynamics. Finally, **Chapter 4** presents an overall summary of this Report.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

Methodological Framework

The research that is a basis of this Report adopted an interpretative qualitative methodology grounded in ethnography and contemporary anthropological and urbanist theory. The epistemological and methodological premise underlying and motivating this research is that ULLs are not merely technical or procedural frameworks but socially produced processes in which meanings, relationships, and spatial practices are continuously negotiated. Accordingly, the research does not treat participation, learning, or territorial dynamics as fixed variables or factors but as situated phenomena that can only be understood through interpretative engagement with practice. Thus, the methodological approach is designed **to examine ULLs not as fixed project structures but as process-oriented socio-spatial practices through which meaning, participation, and territorial relationships are continuously produced**. Rather than focusing primarily on measurable outputs, this Report investigates **how ULLs unfold through interactions between actors, spaces, institutional frameworks, and locally situated problematiques**.

The research is informed by interpretative anthropology, particularly the understanding of culture and social action as systems of meaning. Within this perspective, social processes, such as participatory planning and collaborative spatial practices, are approached as symbolic and relational entanglements that require contextual interpretation rather than purely structural or quantitative measurement. **The methodological emphasis therefore lies on producing context-rich interpretative accounts that reveal how actors understand and enact their roles within the ULLs**. By forwarding the notion of “thick description”, that intends to write about meaningful details and practices in context, the Report emphasizes detailed contextual understanding of social practices and meanings. In this perspective, participatory activities, stakeholder interactions, and spatial interventions are approached not only as functional processes but **as culturally and socially embedded practices through which actors interpret their roles and the urban contexts in which they operate**.

At the same time, the research engages with contemporary urban and urbanistic theory that conceptualizes cities, and by extension ULLs, as relational and processual environments shaped through everyday practices, governance negotiations, and spatial imaginaries. ULLs are therefore examined **as situated methodological assemblages, where learning, participation, and territorial transformation intersect**. ULLs are thus approached **as processual environments, where methodological structures interact with local territorial conditions and evolving problematiques**.

The qualitative nature of the research reflects a commitment to understanding how ULLs function rather than whether they succeed according to predetermined indicators. Qualitative, ethnographic inquiry enables the study to engage with complexity, contingency, relations, and dynamics that characterize participatory processes, by

granting access to interpretations held by participants and stakeholders, situated practices through which participation unfolds, and the evolving meanings attached to territorial problematiques. **The research design focuses on three interconnected analytical dimensions: processes** (i.e., how ULL activities are organized and evolve over time); **practices** (i.e., how stakeholders and participants engage with participatory formats); and, **meaning-making** (i.e., how actors interpret their roles, the territorial context, and the shared problematique).

Furthermore, advancing and basing the research on the practice of “thick description”, meaning layered accounts that connect observable actions with their cultural and contextual meanings, within the context of ULLs, allows the analysis to move beyond formal project structures and instead explore **how participation is experienced and interpreted, how institutional and informal practices intersect, and how territorial problematiques are constructed and negotiated**.

In terms of research strategy, the research presented in this Report followed a grounded theory methodology design. Grounded theory is adopted not as a rigid procedural framework but as a research orientation that prioritizes concepts emerging from fieldwork rather than testing predefined hypotheses. It is particularly appropriate for this study because ULLs are evolving methodological processes, and many of their dynamics emerge through practice rather than through predetermined structures. In other words, considering the exploratory nature of ULL implementation, a grounded theory methodology enables to dynamically respond to the given contexts that within each ULL methodological structures are still evolving and cannot be fully understood through predefined categories. The research therefore proceeded through iterative cycles of data collection and interpretation, constant comparison across cases and contexts, and progressive refinement of analytical categories, allowing openness to context-specific insights while still building comparative understanding across the four ULL settings.

The Report is **intentionally interpretative rather than evaluative**. It does not aim to measure the success of ULLs against predefined indicators but instead seeks to understand how participatory and educational processes unfold across contexts. It therefore **emphasizes process over outcomes, context over generalization, meaning-making over validation metrics**. Such an approach allows the study to capture the complexity and variability inherent in ULL implementation while generating transferable methodological insights grounded in empirical practice.

Within this framework, the concepts of **territorial embeddedness** and **participant empowerment**, that emerged during the research, function as sensitizing concepts rather than fixed variables. They guide observation and interpretation while remaining open to refinement through empirical insight.

Conceptual Framework

The methodological design is directly structured around two core analytical concepts **territorial embeddedness and participant empowerment** aiming to understand how each ULL is shaped by its socio-spatial context and by the locally situated **problematique** emerging from territorial conditions. Common to both concepts and underlying the research is the notion of **territorial problematique**.

Problematique

A central element of the Report is the notion of the **territorial problematique**, which serves as an interpretative anchor connecting territorial embeddedness and participant empowerment, as discussed below. In this Report, it is understood not simply as a problem to be solved or a question demanding an answer, but as **a structured field of inquiry through which social, spatial, and institutional realities are interpreted and negotiated**. Within the context of this Report, the problematique is used as a way to interpretatively bridge territorial conditions and participatory processes, and to understand how ULL activities and the forms of engagement emerged.

Rather than treating urban challenges as predefined technical problems, this Report approaches the **problematique as a socially constructed and evolving interpretative framework shaped through stakeholder interaction and field engagement**. In other words, the problematique is not merely a concrete issue but a system of relations that determines what counts as a problem, which questions can be asked, and which interpretations become possible. Such an approach can be expanded by shifting the attention from the notion of problem to the idea of problematisation, and emphasizing how social realities become constituted as problems through discourse, institutional practices, and power relations.

From this perspective, “urban challenges” as problems are not simply discovered but are actively constructed through social interaction and governance processes. Thus, a problematique can be produced as an urban challenge, an administrative or legal issue, a governance problem, a lack of something (e.g. lack of participation) or excess of something else; it can be framed in local, municipal, regional terms; it can be articulated as solvable or unsolvable; it can entail different strategically available avenues of action and types of actions for actors; it can predetermine available positions for actors (“participant”, “expert”, etc.); it can also predetermine types of possible “answers”, “solutions”, “actions”, etc.; it can also be entangled to wider social, ecological, legal, political etc. discourses.

This expansion is particularly relevant for ULLs because they do not operate on fixed or universally defined territorial problematiques. Instead, each lab engages with locally situated conditions in which multiple actors (public institutions, educators, students, and community stakeholders...) interpret territorial dynamics differently. Furthermore, establishing a lab also necessarily includes a strategic, project-designed problem-solving (re)orientation, a process of negotiating, agreeing, and acting upon or toward specific recognized, identified, and articulated social-spatial problems. The

problematique therefore emerges as a shared yet negotiated frame, evolving through participatory interaction rather than existing as a predetermined project input. The problematique thus marks both the specific practical orientation of each ULL, in addressing their identified problem, and a research category.

By foregrounding the problematique, **the research strengthens the conceptual connection between the two core analytical dimensions, i.e., territorial embeddedness and participant empowerment. Territorial conditions shape how the problematique is articulated, while participatory processes influence how it is interpreted and transformed.** This perspective aligns with interpretative and constructivist traditions in both anthropology and urban studies, where the urban territory is understood as a relational construct shaped by institutional frameworks, spatial practices, and stakeholder narratives.

✓ **Territorial Embeddedness**

In this Report, **territorial embeddedness** is understood as the extent to which and ways in which each ULL is shaped by, responsive to, and actively interacting with its specific socio-spatial context. This context includes governance structures, spatial and morphological characteristics, community dynamics, and existing institutional or civic networks. However, beyond these structural dimensions, territorial embeddedness is approached through the identification of a situated socio-spatial problem or problematique that gives meaning and direction to the ULL process. Emerging in response to locally recognized, identified and oriented challenges, tensions, or development questions embedded in the territory, these problematiques may relate to underused public space, fragmented governance structures, limited youth participation, socio-spatial inequalities, or conflicts between planned and lived urban realities.

From this perspective, territorial embeddedness refers not only to where or when a ULL takes place but to how the methodology is anchored in the territorial conditions that produce the problematique, and how an ULL understands it and responds to it. The Report therefore examines **how each ULL interpreted, translated, and operationalized its socio-spatial problem through participatory processes and situated learning practices.** This approach emphasizes that participatory methodologies cannot be detached from place-based realities; instead, they are co-produced through the interaction between methodological structures and territorial specificities.

✓ **Participant Empowerment**

Participant empowerment refers to the educational and social dimension of the PS-U-GO ULL process, focusing on how engagement in situated participatory environments supports the development of competencies, agency, and collaborative capacities among participants, especially for students participating in HEI in the fields of architecture, urban planning, urban design, etc. Within PS-U-GO, ULLs are conceptualized as non-formal and transdisciplinary learning environments where students, local stakeholders, and governance actors interact through structured

exchanges as well as through organically evolving collaborative processes linked to real territorial problematiques.

Rather than framing empowerment as a measurable outcome or predefined indicator of learning outcomes, the Report approaches it as an interpretative and process-oriented phenomenon. Participants engage in real planning, governance, programming, or spatial design contexts, encountering negotiation processes, institutional constraints, and collective decision-making dynamics. Through these interactions, they develop participatory skills, communication abilities, and specific knowledge. But empowerment also encompasses reflexive awareness and forms of situated agency that extend beyond formal educational frameworks.

Central to this perspective is again the role of the problematique, which functions as the shared reference point around which learning and participation unfold.

Engagement becomes meaningful not simply through participation itself, but through participants' relationship to a concrete territorial issue requiring interpretation, positioning, and collaborative response. It can also emerge through their engagement with their everyday lives and previous experiences, so that their awareness and sense of agency arises because they participated, and irrelevant of the problematique or its outcome. The Report does not aim to validate or evaluate learning outcomes or skill acquisition; instead, it reflects on **how empowerment processes materialize differently across contexts** depending on territorial conditions, ULL implementation, participants' awareness and agency, and the evolving definition of the problematique itself.

ULL Design and Methodology within PS-U-GO

The PS-U-GO project develops and applies a specific **ULL methodology** designed to facilitate participatory urban processes while simultaneously functioning as an educational environment. This ULL methodology is explored in more detail in Deliverable 5, "ULLs Methodologies" (cf. **D5**, [HTTPS://WWW.PSUGO.EU/RESOURCES/](https://www.psugo.eu/resources/)), Deliverable 6, "Situated Learning in ULLs" (cf. **D6**, [HTTPS://WWW.PSUGO.EU/RESOURCES/](https://www.psugo.eu/resources/)), Deliverable 7, "ULLs structures in each city" (cf. **D7**, [HTTPS://WWW.PSUGO.EU/RESOURCES/](https://www.psugo.eu/resources/)), and Deliverable 8, "Booklet for each living lab" (cf. **D8**, [HTTPS://WWW.PSUGO.EU/RESOURCES/](https://www.psugo.eu/resources/)). The methodology synthesises established ULL practices with participatory planning approaches and pedagogical frameworks oriented toward experiential learning and youth engagement. Within this framework, ULLs are conceived as real-life environments in which students, researchers, local stakeholders, and community actors collaboratively explore urban challenges and co-create responses to them. The methodology therefore integrates three **interrelated dimensions: participatory urban governance, collaborative knowledge production, and situated learning processes** that take place within concrete socio-spatial contexts.

A central premise of the PS-U-GO methodology is that **contemporary urban challenges require collaborative and interdisciplinary approaches that extend**

beyond conventional top-down planning models. ULLs therefore function as open innovation environments where actors from different institutional and social spheres interact and experiment with possible interventions in real urban settings. In the PS-U-GO framework, this collaborative structure is organised according to the quadruple helix model, bringing together actors from academia, public authorities, civil society, and the private sector in the joint exploration of urban challenges. (cf. [D5](https://www.psugo.eu/resources/), <https://www.psugo.eu/resources/>)

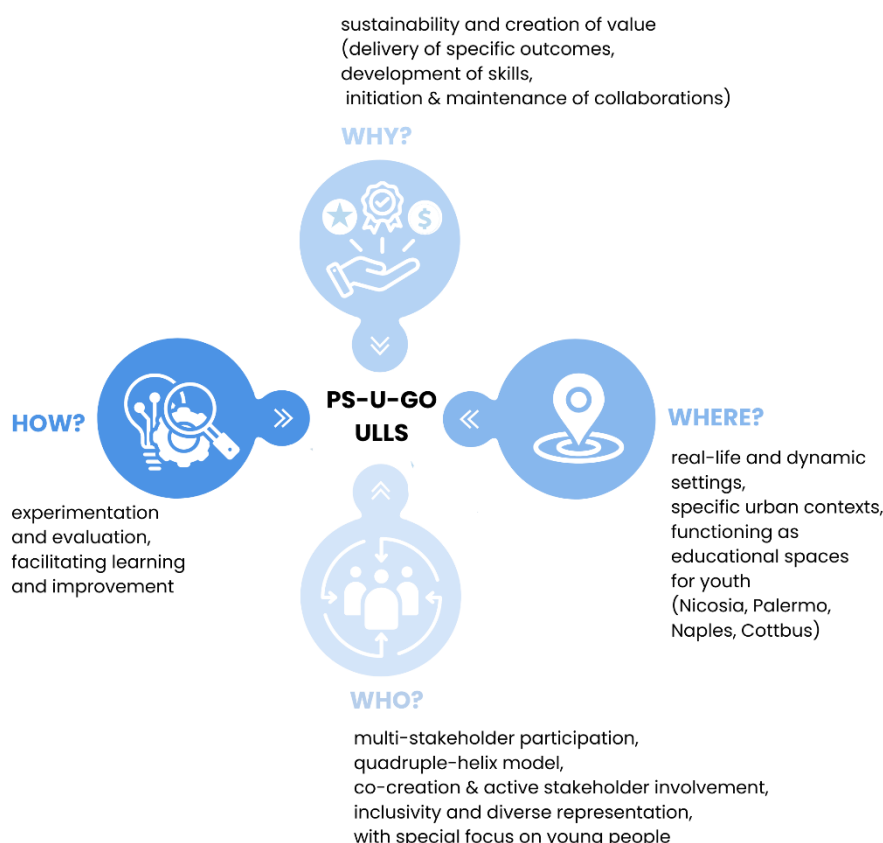


DIAGRAM 1: THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PS-U-GO ULLS. (cf. [D5](https://www.psugo.eu/resources/), <https://www.psugo.eu/resources/>)

The methodological framework structures the implementation of the ULLs **into three main project and operational phases: design and initiation, operation, and evaluation and feedback.** This structure draws on existing research on ULLs and innovation processes, which conceptualise Living Labs as iterative processes combining exploration, experimentation, and evaluation within real-life environments. (cf. [D5](https://www.psugo.eu/resources/), <https://www.psugo.eu/resources/>)

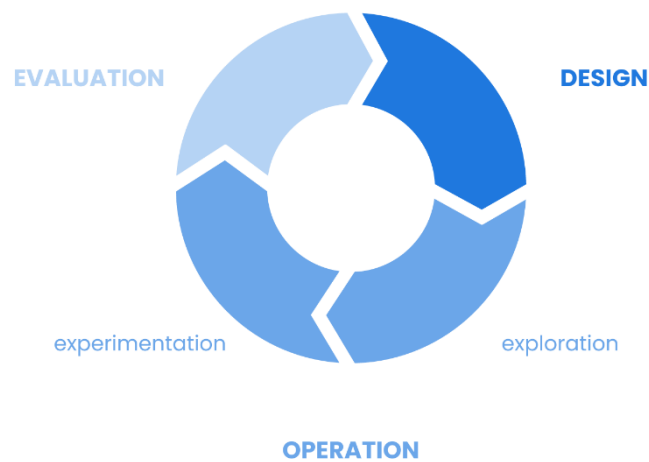


DIAGRAM 2: THE THREE-PHASE GENERAL PROCESS OF PS-U-GO ULLS. (CF. [D5](#), [HTTPS://WWW.PSUGO.EU/RESOURCES/](https://www.psugo.eu/resources/))

The second phase of the PS-U-GO ULL methodology, referred to as the operation phase, represents the core of the Living Lab process, and the subject of research presented in this Report. During this phase, the conceptual and organisational structures established during the design stage are translated into concrete activities that engage participants, stakeholders, and coordinators in collaborative exploration of a specific urban issue. While the overall methodological structure remains consistent across the project, the implementation of this phase varies between cases according to the territorial context, institutional setting, and thematic focus (i.e., problematique) of each lab. The operation phase therefore combines a shared methodological framework with locally adapted practices, enabling both methodological coherence and contextual responsiveness across the four ULLs. (CF. [D5](#), [HTTPS://WWW.PSUGO.EU/RESOURCES/](https://www.psugo.eu/resources/))



DIAGRAM 3: THE FOUR STEPS OF ULLS' IMPLEMENTATION. (CF. [D5](#), [HTTPS://WWW.PSUGO.EU/RESOURCES/](https://www.psugo.eu/resources/))

Within the PS-U-GO framework, **each ULL (“the ULL cycle”) unfolds through four interconnected steps: theme selection, exploration, co-creation and experimentation, and urban showcase**. These stages are not strictly linear but rather iterative, often overlapping and feeding back into one another as participants progressively develop a deeper understanding of the selected urban issue and experiment with possible responses (cf. [D5, **https://www.psugo.eu/resources/**](https://www.psugo.eu/resources/)). In this sense, the operational phase represents the moment in which the PS-U-GO methodology becomes fully enacted: the ULL shifts from a conceptual framework into a dynamic process of interaction, experimentation, and knowledge production situated within specific urban territories.

The **theme selection stage** involves identifying and defining the central urban issue that the ULL will address. This process is typically shaped through dialogue between project partners, students, and local stakeholders, and is closely linked to the specific socio-spatial context of each case. The selected themes reflect locally relevant challenges while aligning with the broader project objective of strengthening civic participation and participatory urban governance. Usually, but not universally, the team running and coordinating the ULL decides on which theme is selected to be implemented, having in mind the limited scope of each cycle. The identification of the theme therefore functions not only as a methodological step but also as a process of collectively articulating the problematique around which the ULL activities will develop.

The **exploration stage** focuses on deepening participants’ understanding of the selected issue and its territorial context. Activities in this stage frequently include urban walks, mapping exercises, workshops, lectures, and discussions with local stakeholders and experts. Through these practices, participants gather knowledge about the social, spatial, institutional, and historical dimensions of the territory. This exploratory phase enables students to engage directly with real urban environments and learn through observation, dialogue, and collaborative inquiry. (cf. [D6, **https://www.psugo.eu/resources/**](https://www.psugo.eu/resources/))

Following exploration, the **co-creation and experimentation stage** represents the most hands-on and creative element of the ULL process. During this stage, participants collectively develop ideas, proposals, or prototypes responding to the identified urban challenge. Activities may include design workshops, brainstorming sessions, participatory mapping, and collaborative planning exercises. Rather than focusing exclusively on producing finalised solutions, this stage emphasises experimentation and learning through practice.

The final step is the **urban showcase**, which involves presenting the outcomes and processes of the ULL to a broader audience. This may take the form of public events, exhibitions, presentations, or digital dissemination. The purpose of this stage is twofold. First, it enables participants to communicate the knowledge and proposals generated during the ULL process to stakeholders and the wider community. Second, it functions as a moment of reflection and recognition, highlighting the collaborative efforts of participants and reinforcing the role of the ULL as a platform for civic engagement and public dialogue.

Within this shared methodological framework, the four PS-U-GO ULLs implement these stages in ways that reflect their distinct territorial and institutional contexts. The **Madonie Living Lab (MaLL) in Petralia Sottana** focuses on challenges related to rural territorial development and youth engagement within the Madonie region of Sicily. The **Mare Libero ULL in Naples** addresses issues of urban regeneration and community participation in the urban coastal area as commons. The **Ullol Aglantzia Living Lab in Nicosia** explores questions related to neighbourhood-scale urban environments and student engagement with the Aglantzia district. Finally, the **CoCo Stadtlabor in Cottbus** focuses on urban experimentation and collaboration between the university, local stakeholders, and the city's broader civic ecosystem in creating a lived space (cf. [D7, HTTPS://WWW.PSUGO.EU/RESOURCES/](https://www.psugo.eu/resources/)).

Differences between **the territorial and institutional contexts and implementation contingencies**, begin to crystallise into a set of similar occurrences, situations, relations, and constellations, or recurring patterns, which can be read as a loose **“typology”** of how the ULL becomes embedded. These patterns are less rigid categories than tendencies that emerge through the interaction between institutional alignments, territorial conditions, and the specific problematique each ULL engages.

One such distinction becomes visible in **relation to local governance and stakeholder alignment**. In Petralia Sottana (MaLL) and Aglantzia (Ullol), the ULLs tended to operate in close proximity to local government structure or their (developmental, social, etc.) agendas. In the case of MaLL, this was evident from the onset, where the initiative was supported and embedded within the agenda of the local municipality, which had a direct interest in addressing questions of rural development and depopulation. Similarly, in Aglantzia, the ULL's activities aligned with neighbourhood-scale concerns that intersected with municipal priorities, allowing not only municipal participation in planning stages but also a degree of institutional anchoring. By contrast, in Naples and Cottbus, the ULLs positioned themselves clearly in relation to civic and activist agendas. In Naples, Mare Libero intersected with ongoing activist and political struggles around coastal commons, aligning with actors like Lido Pola and the Neapolitan committee for Mare Libero, whose activities challenged and questioned institutional frameworks. In Cottbus, CoCo emerged less as an extension of municipal strategy and more as a response to a perceived gap in civic and social infrastructure, operating within them.

A second line of differentiation concerns **spatial and infrastructural conditions**. MaLL and, to a certain extent, Aglantzia, relied on existing infrastructures, such as laboratories, institutional spaces, or locally embedded facilities, which in turn shaped both participation and outputs. In Petralia Sottana, the availability and specificity of the spaces in Spazio Madonie enabled specific forms of activities and programming, while responding to the material and cultural context of the Madonie region. In Aglantzia, the connection to university facilities and their FabLabs provided a stable base from which to engage the surrounding neighbourhood. In contrast, CoCo in Cottbus and Mare Libero in Naples were more actively involved in producing their own spaces, not necessarily as operational spaces and not necessarily in terms of permanent infrastructure, but through what might be described as social and programmatic

construction. In Cottbus, this took the form of a continuously activated urban space, where events and gatherings effectively constituted the ULL. In Naples, a greater emphasis was on producing a dispersed configuration, where the lab attached itself to existing initiatives and spaces (Lido Pola, DiArc, etc), consolidating around a shared cause, instead of a fixed location.

A third line of differentiation and influence is the **number of iterations of the cycle** that each ULL implemented. CoCo's multiple cycles with several generations of students allowed for a repeated testing and adjustment of methods, gradually stabilising its role within the city as a lived space, a place of encounter. MaLL, by contrast, unfolded through a single, more concentrated cycle in a period of three months structured around its three residencies in Petralia Sottana, where intensity replaced repetition. Mare Libero and Ulloῖ Aglantzia occupied a middle ground, each implementing an almost yearlong single cycle that allowed for depth of engagement, but with less opportunity for iterative calibration within the project timeframe.

Differences also emerge in relation to the **composition of participants**. In Cottbus and Aglantzia, the participant base was more homogenous, with students forming the primary group engaged in the ULL process. This lent a certain coherence to the workflow, a streamlining, but also framed the lab as an extension of academic practice. In contrast, MaLL and Mare Libero brought together more heterogeneous groups, including local residents, activists, students, and in some case, practitioners and former participants.

The **territorial problematiques** further conditioned these configurations. In Naples and Cottbus, the issues addressed tended to operate at a broader social and political level: the question of the commons and access to public goods in Naples, and issues of social fragmentation, civic space, and political tension in Cottbus. These are not easily reducible to discrete problems, and the ULLs responded by generating ongoing agendas rather than clearly bounded solutions. In contrast, MaLL and Ulloῖ Aglantzia engaged more directly with identifiable, situated challenges, ranging from local development issues in the Madonie region to specific spatial deficiencies within the Aglantzia district, in a way that the process was then more easily translated into concrete outputs or interventions. The difference, of course, is in the framing of territorial problematique itself.

These differences are closely tied to the idea of the **ULL as a place of production**. The location and nature of this "productive space" shapes not only participation but also the kinds of outcomes that emerge. In Naples and Nicosia, significant parts of the process unfolded within university settings, with an emphasis on the detailed and thorough analytical and methodological work that was developed before being translated into the field. In Cottbus, the ULL space itself became a publicly accessible urban site, embedded within the everyday life of the city and conditioned by its rhythms and constraints. In the Madonie case, the use of regionally embedded infrastructure and the implementation of residency formats created a different kind of immersion, where participants temporarily re/entered the territory and worked within its existing conditions.

Finally, these configurations are reflected in the **character of the ULL outputs and outcomes**. In CoCo and Mare Libero, the emphasis leaned towards the production of an agenda, as a series of activities, encounters, and discursive formats that remained open-ended and processual. In contrast, MaLL and Ulloí Aglantzia produced more discrete, site-specific outputs: cultural artefacts, interventions, spatial modifications that materialised the process in tangible forms.

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Taken together, these variations suggest that the ULL model does not translate uniformly across contexts. Rather, it is **continuously reconfigured through its territorial embeddedness** — shaped by who it aligns with, where it operates, who participates, and what kinds of issues it engages. The typology that emerges is therefore not prescriptive, but **descriptive** of how different configurations of actors, spaces, and problematiques give rise to distinct yet related forms of ULL practice.

Finally, the operational practices across the four ULLs demonstrate **the adaptability of the PS-U-GO methodology**. While the project provides a common methodological framework and a set of recommended participatory tools, each case adapts these practices to its own institutional environment, stakeholder configuration, and urban context. This adaptability allows the ULLs to remain **responsive to local conditions while maintaining the core methodological principles** of collaboration, experimentation, and experiential learning.

Research Questions

These methodological and conceptual frameworks are operationalized through two **main research questions**:

- How were the ULLs implemented in relation to their specific territorial contexts?
- In which ways did the ULLs empower participants through engagement, learning, and co-production?

During the research process, two additional questions emerged through empirical observation:

- How do ULL processes contribute to the social development of the territory?
- How do ULLs influence stakeholder collaboration and institutional practices?

The research questions form the central analytical bridge between the conceptual and methodological frameworks guiding this Report. The two main questions, i.e., addressing **how ULLs are implemented in relation to their territorial contexts** and

how they contribute to participant empowerment, directly operationalize the conceptual focus on territorial embeddedness and participant empowerment, both structured through the interpretative notion of the territorial problematique. The two emergent questions, concerning broader social and stakeholder-related effects, arise from the same conceptual grounding while reflecting patterns observed through iterative qualitative inquiry.

The main and emerging research questions mirror and complement each other in terms of analysis of this Report. The question of how were the ULLs implemented in relation to their specific territorial contexts and how the ULL processes contribute to the social development of the territory are answered in the analysis of the ULL outputs, outcomes and products. The questions of in which ways did the ULLs empower participants through engagement, learning, and co-production and how do ULLs influence stakeholder collaboration and institutional practices are answered by looking closely at the networking and interactions of the participants and stakeholders. Thus, these two points form the structure of the analysis of each case later in the Report.

Research Implementation

Following the research design outlined in the previous chapter, **four fieldwork visits** were conducted during 2025 across the four ULLs established within the project. These visits were organised in close collaboration with the project partners responsible for coordinating and implementing each ULL and were scheduled to correspond with the key phases of the respective ULL implementation cycles. Aligning fieldwork with these cycles allowed the researchers to observe the ULLs not as static organisational structures, but as evolving processes unfolding through interaction, experimentation, and collaboration. This timing enabled engagement with participants, stakeholders, and coordinators at moments when activities, discussions, and collaborative practices were actively taking place, thereby providing access to the lived dynamics of the ULL processes.

Furthermore, as the project had planned and had available funding for only one fieldwork visit per ULL, it was collectively agreed that each visit should be scheduled at a stage of the local ULL programme that would allow for the most meaningful engagement with the process. The aim was therefore to conduct fieldwork at moments when core activities had already begun to unfold but were still actively developing. In practical terms, this enabled the research to focus on three key dimensions during each visit: participant observation of ULL activities, the identification and mapping of the locally articulated territorial problematique, and the collection of participants' perspectives on the process and its perceived outcomes. This approach ensured that each visit could capture both the organisational structure of the ULL and the experiential dimension of participation within it.

The fieldwork visits were therefore designed and collaboratively scheduled to create opportunities for participant observation, individual and group semi-structured

interviews, and the qualitative documentation of ULL activities. Particular emphasis was placed on observing interactions, practices, and forms of collaboration taking place during Living Lab activities, as these interactions constitute the core of the ULL methodology. At the same time, interviews and informal conversations with ULL coordinators, stakeholders, and participants provided additional interpretative insight into the processes, goals, and experiences associated with the labs. Fieldwork activities also included visual documentation through photographs and video recordings, supporting the broader visual ethnographic approach adopted in the research and enabling the documentation of spatial settings, social interactions, and project artefacts.

The first fieldwork visit focused on MaLL, and was conducted in Petralia Sottana in the Madonie region of Sicily (Italy) on 4 – 5 April 2025. During both days, fieldwork presented a blend of both participant observation of participant work at MaLL and fieldwork visits around Petralia Sottana, with informal conversations with locals, representatives of the municipality, museum employees, as well as the ULL coordinators Alessandro Riva and Emilia Pardi, but also other PUSH employees participating in the ULL. On the second day, we conducted a group discussion with participants following their self-evaluation discussion.

The second fieldwork visit, focusing on Mare Libero in Naples (Italy), took place 7 – 8 April 2025, preceding but in coordination with the project's second Transnational Project Meeting (TPM2) and Training Event (TE2). Thus, the fieldwork was extended to encompass TPM2 and TE2. On the first day we conducted a semi-structured interview with Stefania Ragozino and Federica Morra in the offices of CNR-IRISS, where they presented both the problematique of Naples and the design of the Mare Libero ULL. The discussion was followed by an urban exploration of Naples with Stefania Ragozino and Lorenzo Lodato, on the second day of the fieldwork visit.

The third fieldwork visit, focusing on Ulloἶ Aglantzia in Nicosia (Cyprus) was conducted 18 – 19 June 2025. During both days, fieldwork presented a blend of both participant observation of student work at the University of Cyprus and fieldwork visits to the neighbourhood of Aglantzia, with informal conversations with coordinators Christina Panayi and Michalis Tsaras on the first day and a group discussion with participating students on the second day.

The fourth fieldwork visit, focusing on CoCo in Cottbus (Germany) took place 22 – 23 July 2025. The first day was focused on visiting and exploring Cottbus, the Brandenburg University of Technology (BTU Cottbus-Senftenberg), meeting local stakeholders as well as having a round-table discussion with ULL stakeholders and participating students in the CoCo premises, and non-formal discussions with ULL coordinators Hendrik Wiener and Tihomir Viderman. The second day was focused on having in-depth non-formal conversation with coordinators.

Each fieldwork visit was informed by prior project collaboration and preparatory materials developed by the project consortium, including shared documentation and planning resources such as the project's collaborative Miro board. Coordinators were

informed on the range of topics that would be covered in the **individual and group interviews** as well as what **participant observation** would entail. During the visits, **qualitative data** concerning both the design and the operation of the ULLs were collected. The **design dimension** included elements such as the ULLs' mission and vision, guiding principles and values, stakeholder and participant composition, implementation roadmaps, and communication and dissemination strategies. The **operational dimension** focused on the concrete activities undertaken within the ULLs, including implemented steps, ongoing initiatives, and participant interactions.

Data collection combined methods drawn from urbanistic and visual anthropology. **Semi-structured interviews** were conducted with ULL coordinators and key stakeholders, while **focus group discussions** were organized with participants in order to capture reflections on their experiences, participation, and knowledge gained through engagement in the ULL activities. Focus groups were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed in several of the fieldwork visits. In one case, that of Naples, digital participatory tools were used to facilitate discussion and collect participant input, while in other cases focus groups were conducted without digital mediation in order to encourage a more informal and conversational atmosphere. In cases of language barriers, ULL coordinators, facilitators and participants acted as translators and intermediaries.

In addition to formal interviews and focus group sessions, qualitative insights were also gathered through **informal conversations** with researchers, organizers, and community stakeholders involved in the ULL processes. These exchanges, together with **on-site observations** and **audio-visual documentation**, contributed to a comprehensive qualitative record of the ULLs' implementation processes across the four locations.

Following the implementation of the fieldwork visits, and to complement the fieldwork observations and interviews, a structured **follow-up questionnaire** was also developed and distributed to the coordinators of each ULL. Grounded in ethnographic and urbanistic research design principles, the questionnaire functioned as a reflexive instrument intended to support systematic comparison across the four cases. Rather than operating as an evaluative checklist, it was designed to accompany the qualitative material generated through participant observation, fieldnotes, visual documentation, interviews, and group discussions. Its uniform structure enabled the collection of comparable reflections on the planning, implementation, and outcomes of the ULL methodology, while still allowing respondents to articulate the specific institutional, social, and territorial conditions shaping their respective cases. Drawing on approaches from comparative urbanism, practice-based research, and process-oriented ethnography, the questionnaire invited coordinators to reflect analytically on processes of engagement, knowledge production, and learning that emerged during the implementation of the ULL. The responses provided an additional layer of qualitative documentation and were incorporated into the case overview and comparative analysis chapters of this Report, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the implementation processes across the four ULL contexts.

3. THE CASE STUDIES

MaLL (Experimentation & Co-Creation Phase)

“The Open Madonie Living Lab wasn't just a space; it was an invitation. We wanted to create a space where people — both from and out of the Madonie context — could meet, make things together, and care for their territory through creativity, design, art, and a bit of tech magic. We opened the doors wide: kids, artisans, researchers, artists, students, locals. Young and old. Curious minds and skilled hands”.

(SOURCE: [PS-U-GO BOOKLET](https://www.psugo.eu/booklet/mall.html), [HTTPS://WWW.PSUGO.EU/BOOKLET/MALL.HTML](https://www.psugo.eu/booklet/mall.html))

The **Madonie region**, located in the mountainous interior of northern Sicily, represents a distinctive territorial context within contemporary Italy, characterized by a strong interplay between environmental richness, cultural heritage, and socio-economic fragility. At its centre, the towns of Petralia Sottana and Petralia Soprana illustrate many of the structural challenges facing rural areas across Sicily today. These settlements, situated within the protected landscape of the Madonie Regional Natural Park, are marked by their geographic isolation, demographic decline, and economic vulnerability, while simultaneously being recognized for their cultural significance and environmental value.

Historically, the economy of the Madonie region has been rooted in agriculture and pastoralism, which continues to shape local life and identity. Traditional production systems, based on olives, vineyards, cereals, and dairy products, have long provided both subsistence and limited economic exchange. However, in the context of globalized markets and shifting agricultural policies, these local economies have become increasingly fragile and economically marginal, contributing to broader patterns of rural stagnation and dependence on external markets.

In response to these challenges, tourism has emerged since the late 1990s as a key strategy for regional development. The environmental and cultural assets of the Madonie, its landscapes, historic villages, and biodiversity, have been promoted as resources for sustainable tourism, supported in part by heritage recognition and conservation frameworks.

These economic conditions are closely linked to demographic transformations that have significantly altered the social fabric of the region. Like many rural areas in southern Italy, the Madonie region has experienced decades of depopulation driven by the outmigration of younger generations. This process has led to an aging population, reduced household structures, and increasing pressure on already limited public services, including healthcare, education, and mobility infrastructure.

At the same time, the region maintains a strong sense of local identity rooted in shared traditions, cultural practices, and social ties. The preservation of cultural identity, while

often celebrated as a strength, can also become difficult to sustain in the absence of viable economic and social conditions that allow communities to remain and thrive.

Within this context, recent years have also seen the gradual introduction of new tools, skills, and development frameworks aimed at revitalizing rural and inner areas such as the Madonie. Digital technologies, remote work practices, and innovation-driven policy initiatives, often supported by European cohesion funds and national strategies, have begun to open new possibilities for economic diversification and social renewal. However, the availability of such tools does not automatically translate into structural change. Their impact often remains uneven due to limited local capacity, fragmented governance, and the persistence of infrastructural deficits. This gap between potential and implementation reflects a broader challenge across Sicily, where ambitious development programs frequently encounter local constraints that limit their effectiveness on the ground.

In the wider Sicilian context, **the Madonie region thus reflects enduring structural issues**: regional inequality between coastal and inland areas, reliance on external economic centres, and the ongoing tension between development and depopulation. While cities and tourist hubs benefit from greater investment and visibility, inland territories often remain peripheral, both geographically and politically. At the same time, these regions are increasingly recognized as key sites for experimenting with alternative development models based on sustainability, cultural heritage, and community resilience. In this sense, **the problematique of the Madonie region, and then of Petralia Sottana in particular, can be understood as the challenge of translating emerging opportunities into locally embedded, socially inclusive forms of development**. The key issue lies not only in economic revitalization but in ensuring that new tools, skills, and policy frameworks are accessible, adaptable, and responsive to the specific conditions of rural life. The tension between endogenous resources and exogenous pressures — between tradition and innovation, preservation and transformation — defines the contemporary condition of the region.

MaLL's Problematique

Within the PS-U-GO framework, the Madonie region, and in particular Petralia Sottana, is not approached simply as a rural territory in decline, but as a complex socio-spatial system in which structural fragility coexists with underutilized local potential. The problematique articulated in the project builds on the recognition that traditional development approaches, focused either on tourism or external investment, have not sufficiently addressed the deeper challenges of depopulation, economic marginalization, and limited civic participation. Instead, PS-U-GO frames the Madonie context as a place where the **key issue lies in activating local capacities: connecting people, knowledge, and resources that already exist but remain fragmented or invisible within the current development paradigm**.

A central observation emerging from the **Madonie Living Lab (MaLL)** is that the region is not lacking in assets, but rather in mechanisms that allow these assets to be mobilized collectively. The territory is rich in environmental resources, cultural heritage, local knowledge, and emerging skills, yet these elements often remain disconnected from one another. Local communities, schools, small enterprises, and public institutions tend to operate in parallel rather than through coordinated processes. As a result, opportunities for innovation, entrepreneurship, and social development remain underexploited. The problematique, therefore, is not only economic but relational: how to build connections between actors, foster collaboration, and create shared frameworks for action.

The involvement of **PUSH (Palermo Urban Solutions Hub)** in MaLL stems from its broader work on social innovation, participatory design, and community-based development. Founded in Palermo in 2013, PUSH is a design lab working on the fringe of environmental sustainability, digital technologies and social innovation, working on design and developing solutions to improve the quality of life in cities, reduce consumptions and tackle climate change. They have developed methodologies that combine digital tools, design thinking and grassroots community engagement, which they brought into the rural context of Madonie through the PS-U-GO project, as they took over the role of manager of the social hub that was a result of applying for EU funds for social and technological innovation in rural areas. Its role in MaLL is not that of an external expert imposing solutions but of a facilitator structuring process of co-creation, learning, and experimentation between local actors, students, and institutions. This position directly connects to the core problematique of MaLL: how to navigate the gap between external innovation frameworks and the lived realities of a territorially embedded community. By mediating between these tensions, PUSH helped articulate a mode of engagement where innovation is not detached from place, but negotiated within it.

It is within this context that the creation of MaLL can be understood as a response to both structural and relational gaps. Established in **Spazio Madonie**, a repurposed former school building in Petralia Sottana, the lab transforms an underused public space into a multifunctional environment designed to support collaboration, experimentation, and local development. The space itself is equipped with a range of facilities — including a FabLab, food lab, audio-visual production spaces, and digital environments — which reflect an intentional effort to introduce new tools and skills into the region while grounding them in local practices and needs.

However, the significance of MaLL lies less in its physical infrastructure than in its methodological approach. Following the PS-U-GO model of ULLs, MaLL operates as an open, participatory platform where students, residents, researchers, public authorities, and local businesses come together to co-identify challenges and co-create solutions. Ultimately, MaLL represents an attempt to bridge the gap between potential and practice. It acknowledges the structural constraints faced by rural regions — geographic isolation, demographic decline, and economic vulnerability — while simultaneously exploring how these territories can become sites of innovation and

resilience. By positioning Petralia Sottana as a place of experimentation, MaLL demonstrates how participatory, place-based approaches can contribute to redefining development pathways in Sicily, offering insights into how rural communities might not only survive but actively shape their own futures.

MaLL's Experimentation and Co-Creation Phase: Ethnographic Vignette

"Student engagement in the mapping and exploration of the local territory was generally very high, with participants showing curiosity, initiative and a strong willingness to engage beyond the minimum requirements. They adopted a proactive attitude in the exploration phase, independently organising urban walks, interviews, visits to cultural and craft-related spaces, and laboratory-based activities. In several cases, students autonomously selected and combined methods they were already familiar with, adapting them to the specific context of the Madonie territory. Whenever they lacked the technical skills or tools needed to proceed alone, they actively sought support from external experts [...]. This attitude indicates not only motivation, but also an ability to recognise limits and mobilise additional resources when needed. [...]"

(SOURCE: MALL FOLLOW-UP REFLECTION)

We had arrived in Petralia Sottana from Palermo in April on Friday, in the same car with Alessandro Riva and Emilia Pardi, the main coordinators of the MaLL participants' residencies. We arrived early on Friday morning, much earlier than the participants, and they took the time to guide us through the city, and then through the place where the participants will be sleeping as well as Spazio Madonie itself, with all its infrastructure. They joked how they had visited Petralia Sottana so many times by this point that they know the town, with its winding roads, and all its residents, with their stories, by heart, even though neither of them, or the other PUSH team member, had ever visited Petralia Sottana before the start of their engagement with the local municipality in creating a social hub, which would turn into an ULL. We would spend the weekend in Petralia Sottana with them.

It was MaLL's second residency, as we decided to call it, or, as the project's vocabulary would call it, their experimentation and co-creation phase. The first one was hosted a month before that, in March, with participants — students studying in Palermo, and youth from the region — spending a weekend in Petralia Sottana in a structured workshop in which they explored the town, tried to identify problems, propose solutions, work out ways of how to address them, how to engage community, continued to brainstorm and workshop their ideas. As Alessandro and Emilia explained, the first residency was both structured and free-flowing, operational and creative; they tried to help the participants by giving them their own design-based method of working, and tried to make it as democratic and deliberative as possible. The first residency ended in participants giving proposals and presentations of their initial project ideas, and then voting on proposals which they thought were most interesting,

engaging, and creative for them. They came together in teams around four project concepts, which they continued to develop online, by coordinating between themselves, since the first residency; Alessandro and Emilia checked regularly on their progress and checked if they needed assistance, but most of the participants had managed to prepare for the second residency on their own.

While the participants slowly arrived and situated themselves, they were greeted by Alessandro and Emilia with an extraordinary familiarity and closeness; it was as if they were old friends meeting, instead of participants meeting facilitators. Friday evening was reserved for unpacking, catching up, and then in a group discussion checking plans, concepts and setting the schedules.

Early Saturday mornings in Petralia Sottana bring a calm that settles over its steep cobblestone streets and the surrounding Madonie landscape. Even on busy days, the town moves with a kind of measured ease. We went for morning coffee to a coffee-and-pastry shop at one end of the town; the participants were already there, talking with the lady behind the counter about what happened in the last month, sitting at tables with their cornetto's and macchiato's, and already discussing plans. Their morning coffees were short: two sips, two or three bites, a cigarette, and they were already off towards MaLL.

Inside the former school the quiet started to shift. Children were already upstairs, in the space of the local school, for weekend activities, their laughter and games ringing through the courtyard, while the participants in the MaLL prepared the courtyard and adjacent rooms for the day.

Tables, brought to a sunny spot in the courtyard, were set with crayons, watercolours and acrylic paint and brushes, and plasticine; big sheets of coloured paper were unrolled; a whiteboard was dragged close by, and the designer chairs were set around. In the FabLab, computers were running their scanning programs, batteries were changed, 3D scanners and printers were humming, finishing the printing jobs that they started the night before. A nearby room became an improvised interview studio with a table with a tape recorder, papers for notes, laptops, and chairs all around; one of the lacquered plyboard covered walls was divided into sections for notes and images.

As "visitors" arrived – local artisans, elders, youth, and families – the building filled with greetings and invitations. Indeed, they were less visitors; they were, first of all, local, but they seemed to be friends or at least acquaintances: they already knew each other, had talked, had planned to meet today. One young participant reassured an artisan, "We'll do it together," as the artisan took a colourful traditional cap from a paper bag he was carrying. Another participant responded to a local youth who worried he had taken too many photos and had too many stories: "We've printed them all – we want to hear everything you have to say". Children ran into the courtyard and were welcomed with a bright "Good morning!" as they gathered around the table. The mayor of Petralia Sottana visited, without any indication of his office, just to say hi, just to check in and see if everything is okay and if he could help somehow.

Throughout the day the space of MaLL became a lively hub of shared knowledge. Children reinvented the prehistoric museum figurine of Il Guerriero as “Giacomino,” a sci-fi hero saving the world, in a digital technoscape, from an evil figure who stole all his chips. In another room, youths conduct oral-history interviews, documenting residents’ favourite spots and lesser-known stories of their communities, asking about why this place means so much to them, and listening carefully to a story about an indie movie made in the community of Madonie. In the FabLab, a local artisan explained how traditional caps are made and how he tries to modernise and destigmatise them, while the youth demonstrated how 3D scanning and printing could support this craft after listening carefully to his descriptions of how each cap is made.

By afternoon, the work took shape: a storyboard and plasticine models for a short animation about Giacomino, a template for engaging children in the city museum; a wall filled with photographs and transcripts ready for bottom-up mapping the community’s heritage; and, a 3D scan and 3D-printed model of a cap that the artisan can use to promote his work online. The cloister, resisting stillness, in an eager review of the day’s work, alive in discussing how to support the community, how to give back.

MaLL’s Outputs, Outcomes, Results

“The outputs of the Urban Living Lab (ULL) — prototypes such as events, workshops and services — reflected the diverse dynamics within small groups, which shaped how ideas evolved from initial concepts to tangible deliverables. [...] This process leveraged Madonie’s rural-urban context and assets (labs, networks), yielding feasible prototypes attuned to stakeholder needs, such as children’s engagement, artisan visibility, and community storytelling, without encountering particular external relational difficulties. The primary outcome lay in the experiential journey itself: participants developed skills in navigating real-world environments outside academia, forged interactions between students and locals, immersed themselves in Madonie’s living context, and learned to manage conflicts and frustrations toward meaningful results. [...]”
(SOURCE: MALL FOLLOW-UP REFLECTION)

MaLL unfolds less as a clearly bounded project and more as an evolving practice embedded in the everyday life of the town. Approaching **Spazio Madonie**, the building does not immediately signal itself as a site of innovation in the conventional sense. It blends into the urban fabric of the historic centre, carrying traces of its previous uses while gradually accommodating new functions. Entry into the space often coincides with activity already in progress, voices overlapping, materials spread across tables, doors open between rooms, suggesting that the lab is less a destination and more a point of passage, meetings, exchanges.

Inside, the atmosphere resists the formal structure typically associated with laboratories or institutional settings. The space does not impose a strict division between work, learning, and social interaction; instead, these modes continuously overlap.

The various components, coworking areas, FabLab, food lab, and media spaces, are arranged in a way that encourages movement rather than separation. The layout supports a kind of circulation that is both physical and social, allowing interactions to emerge organically rather than being pre-structured.

The involvement of external actors, including organizations such as PUSH, as the organisation hosting the MaLL and its student residencies, is woven into these processes in a manner that avoids clear hierarchies. Facilitators do not occupy a fixed position of authority but instead move between roles, sometimes guiding a discussion, at other times stepping back to allow conversations to unfold independently. Their contribution often takes the form of offering methods to set the overall ambition, organise time and space within the residencies in Petralia Sottana, refine concepts, and then also by introducing tools or methods, mapping techniques, design exercises, digital platforms, that participants can adapt to their own needs. This creates a dynamic in which expertise is distributed rather than centralized, and where learning occurs through interaction rather than instruction.

The presence of students, many of whom arrive from outside the region, and locals, deeply embedded in the region, introduces another layer of complexity to these exchanges. Their perspectives are shaped by different educational and cultural backgrounds, which can both enrich and unsettle the discussions. They bring new questions, unfamiliar references, and alternative ways of seeing the territory, while at the same time navigating their own position as temporary participants. The locals bring local problems, old concerns, local knowledge, concrete and collectively known issues, that set the possible scope. Their engagement is often intense but time-limited, leading to moments of rapid collaboration followed by periods of absence or digital work-arounds of the distance involved. Relationships form through shared work and conversation, yet they remain open-ended, shaped by the rhythms of arrival and departure.

This transient quality becomes an integral aspect of the ULL itself. Rather than being seen as a limitation, the intermittent presence of external participants contributes to a continuous process of renewal. Each new group brings different ideas and energies, while local participants provide continuity and grounding. The resulting dynamic is one of partial overlaps, between residents and visitors, between ongoing concerns and new perspectives, reflecting broader patterns of mobility, uncertainty, and adaptation that characterize rural regions like the Madonie. The resulting dynamic is that of **“contamination”, a deep exchange** between locals and visiting students that compose the participants in the ULL residency, that transforms how they understand the place and their mission in it.

The outputs produced within MaLL emerge gradually from these interactions, often blurring the boundary between process and result. Rather than being conceived as final deliverables, they take shape through ongoing exchanges, negotiations, and reinterpretations that unfold over time. What is documented as “outputs” often appears, in practice, as a series of moments (workshops, conversations, recordings, prototypes) that accumulate and stabilize only temporarily. This processual character

reflects a broader methodological stance within MaLL, where knowledge is not extracted and formalized at once, but allowed to sediment through repeated encounters with people, places, and practices.

Metamadonie, for example, is not simply a digital archive but an interface emerging from a collective engagement with memory, identity, and absence. The act of gathering stories, through interviews, photographs, and informal recollections, becomes a central practice in itself. Participants bring fragments of personal histories; these fragments are not immediately systematized; instead, they are shared, revisited, and gradually translated into digital form. The resulting platform does not present a fixed narrative of the region, but rather an open-ended structure where memories coexist, overlap, and sometimes contradict one another. The participants wanted to create a counter-archive, a space of counter-memory and knowledge, a view of heritage as expressed from “below” and within the community, that would, in turn, present a more vivid, more engaging and interesting view of the local community than those generated by tourist agencies, and become more engaging and interesting to the local community instead of the tourists.

A similar dynamic can be observed in the development project of contributing to the **Civico Museo**, where heritage is approached not as a collection of objects but as a narrative process. Through visits to the local Museum, the figure of the Guerriero was singled out to become the centre point of workshops with children in reimagining him as something else entirely, in producing other ways of creating engaging content for visitors. The Guerriero would become, in its first concept, a sci-fi hero called Giacomino. The involvement of local children in developing the prototypes of a new engagement tool in the local museum is particularly significant here, as it introduces forms of storytelling that are less constrained by established museum representations of the past. Workshops begin with simple exercises, drawing, writing, or recounting their stories, which gradually evolve into more structured narratives: that of a superhero. These narratives are then translated into scripts, visual materials, and eventually digital animations, often using tools that combine traditional storytelling with emerging technologies. What emerges through this process is not a tool for museum presentation in the conventional sense, but a creative and evolving form of cultural production.

Events such as **Madonie Maker Week** further illustrate how MaLL operates through encounters between different forms of knowledge and practice. Artisans arrive with skills rooted in long-standing traditions, woodworking, ceramics, textile production, while digital makers bring tools such as 3D printers and scanners, CNC machines, or laser cutters. These encounters are not always seamless; they often involve moments of hesitation, experimentation, and mutual adjustment. Participants observe one another, test unfamiliar techniques, and negotiate how different methods might be combined or adapted. It is within these moments of friction and curiosity that new possibilities begin to emerge. Maker Week functions as a temporary convergence, an intensified moment in which dispersed knowledge systems are brought into contact, generating outcomes that are as much relational as they are material.

The **Mad Chef** initiative unfolds through a similarly situated and experiential approach, focusing on food as a medium for engaging with the territory. Rather than starting from recipes as abstract instructions, the process begins with the sourcing of ingredients: visiting fields, engaging with producers, and observing seasonal cycles. Participants follow the trajectory of food from landscape to table, encountering the multiple actors and practices involved along the way. Cooking becomes one stage within a broader chain of activities, each of which contributes to the understanding of local food systems. Through this immersion, recipes are revealed as dynamic and context-dependent practices. They are shaped by environmental conditions, availability of ingredients, and individual interpretations, rather than fixed traditions to be reproduced identically.

Across these activities, the outcomes of MaLL are not always immediately legible as measurable impacts or quantifiable results. They tend to emerge in more diffuse and incremental ways, often becoming visible only through sustained observation. A conversation that begins during a workshop may continue weeks later in another context; a collaboration initiated between participants might reappear in a different form, outside the formal structure of the lab; an activity changes depending on participants' and locals' interests. These shifts are not easily captured through conventional evaluation frameworks, yet they shape how individuals relate to one another and to the territory. Over time, patterns of interaction begin to change: people who might not have otherwise met start to recognize each other, exchange ideas, or consider joint initiatives.

These transformations are also perceptual. Places that were previously overlooked or taken for granted acquire new significance when discussed collectively or approached through different practices. For example, a local tradition is reconsidered as a resource for experimentation rather than a relic of the past. In this sense, MaLL does not only generate projects but also reshapes imaginaries, expanding what can be thought and articulated about the future of the Madonie.

At the same time, these encounters unfold within, rather than outside of, the structural constraints that define the region. The issues of depopulation, limited infrastructure, and economic precarity remain present, often surfacing in discussions and influencing what can realistically be pursued. MaLL does not suspend these conditions but brings them into conversation, allowing participants to engage with them from multiple perspectives. What emerges are not solutions in a definitive sense, but shared understandings that can inform future actions, even if these actions remain tentative or incomplete.

In this context, **territorial embeddedness appears not as a stable attribute but as something continuously produced through practice**. It takes shape in the ways people gather in spaces like Spazio Madonie, in the routes they trace through the town, and in the interactions that link local experiences with external inputs. The presence of visiting students, facilitators, and collaborators introduces new perspectives, yet these are always mediated through the specific conditions of Petralia Sottana. MaLL becomes

a site where these different trajectories intersect, sometimes aligning, sometimes diverging, but always remaining tied to the particularities of the place.

Rather than positioning itself as an external intervention, MaLL is entangled within the rhythms and uncertainties of the territory. MaLL's capacity to adapt, to remain open to interruption, to accommodate different forms of engagement, becomes part of its embeddedness.

Through this ongoing process, MaLL does not resolve the problematique of the Madonie in a conclusive way. Instead, it sustains a mode of engagement that allows these issues to be approached collectively and from within. Its significance lies in maintaining spaces where experimentation, dialogue, and collaboration can occur, even if their outcomes remain partial or evolving. In doing so, it offers a way of working that is attuned to the complexities of the region, one that acknowledges constraints while continuing to explore possibilities grounded in everyday life.

MaLL's Participants and Empowerment

"A key factor for the quality of engagement was the decision to open participation not only to university students, but also to young residents from the Madonie area. This mix allowed "insiders" in each group, depending on the chosen theme, to play an active role in mobilising and engaging relevant stakeholders, such as children, local artisans, and participants in the collective memory workshop. Another element that facilitated participation was PUSH's pre-existing relationship with a broad network of institutional and non-institutional stakeholders, together with the Madonie Living Lab "community database", which functioned as a concrete asset for mapping and contacting actors. From the perspective of governance and management of the Madonie Living Lab space, the project also contributed to gently overcoming some institutional and economic inertia linked to opening and activating the laboratories. [...] The Municipality of Petralia believed in the project from the outset, providing the guesthouse for "outsider" participants and taking part actively in the different phases, which further strengthened stakeholder commitment and visibility".

(SOURCE: MALL FOLLOW-UP REFLECTION)

We conducted a group discussion with the participants of MaLL on Sunday, the last day of their second residency, following our observation and participation in their activities on Saturday, and immediately after their self-evaluation session during which they reflected on their acquisition of new skills, knowledge and abilities. The conversation unfolded slowly, but with almost little hesitation from the participants, even if they were given a few minutes to situate themselves vis-a-vis our questions, which were translated to them in Italian by Emilia Pardi.

Their answers came as if they were trying to negotiate the matter while answering, as if trying to explain it in plain words, in simple terms, but also as if there was almost an uncertainty, as if the expressions used needed reformulations, or were understood as

partial answers that needed to be elaborated upon. One participant began with “we’re trying... okay, we’re trying to respond to a need”. Another situated the experience within a longer trajectory of frustration: a trajectory of attempts to “do something” in small towns that often fail to grasp their complexity. Participants did not speak as experts intervening in a territory, but as individuals trying to understand their position within it. Indeed, their positions were complex: some were locals having returned from their studies; others, students studying in Palermo, but from different parts of Sicily; others yet, students studying in Palermo but from other parts of Italy.

But as their discussion developed, what was discussed was no longer a lack but a necessary condition of engagement. One participant reflected that “you have to start from something... you can’t fully grasp the complexity without doing”. The emphasis shifted from knowing to acting, from defining the problem to inhabiting it. In this sense, participation in the MaLL did not immediately empower through solutions, but through a reconfiguration of how knowledge is approached. To act without fully knowing becomes not a limitation, but a way of remaining open to the territory’s complexity.

The territory itself was repeatedly described in ambivalent terms, and often in terms of the problematique. On the one hand, they identified through an attachment to the territory (“I’m deeply connected to this question”), and a recognition of shared conditions across small towns in Sicily and Italy in general. On the other hand, there was a recognized sense of stagnation, of something not fully activated. One participant spoke of the Madonie region as a place that “has a lot to give... but perhaps the inhabitants don’t realise it”. The metaphor of a “treasure” recurred, suggesting latent potential that remained unarticulated or unrecognised, as something very familiar. Yet this perception was immediately complicated: another participant noted that “someone said there’s no life here, but actually, there is life... our presence proves that”. The territory thus oscillated between absence and presence, between perceived emptiness and lived vitality.

Within this oscillation, the role of the participants became difficult for them to fix. Were they bringing something new, or simply revealing what was already there? One response resisted the language of intervention altogether: “I don’t really like saying ‘solve the problems’... it feels like someone from the outside is coming in to fix a place that doesn’t belong to them”. Instead, participants spoke of “activating,” “connecting,” “bringing life”, using terms that suggested movement, emphasizing connection, rather than resolution or problem-solving. They described their activities within MaLL, and MaLL itself, less as a site of problem-solving and more as a catalyst, a place where existing elements, such as people, ideas, practices, can come into contact.

This contact is not without tension, and it is this tension that is considered a privileged and productive site. Conflict emerged as a recurring theme, but it was described in multiple registers. There are small, interpersonal frictions (moments when “there was no openness on the other side”) and broader divisions within the community, between those who believe in initiatives like the MaLL and those who remain sceptical. The latter are described as wanting something “visible, tangible... something concrete and real”.

Their question (“So what happens now?”) hangs, looms over the discussion, pointing to a gap between the processual, exploratory nature of MaLL and expectations shaped by previous, perhaps failed, interventions.

At the same time, conflict was not framed solely as an obstacle. One participant spoke of learning to “stay with conflict... taking a stance, but also accepting it”. Another connected it to both individual and collective dimensions: personal uncertainties about the future, and shared challenges faced by the community. A participant reflected on the dilemma of whether to leave the region or stay and contribute to it, situating personal decision-making within the broader dynamics of depopulation. In this way, the problematique of the Madonie was not external to the participants; it lived through their own trajectories.

Participants repeatedly returned to the experience of encountering difference, recognizing that “people who have very different backgrounds... different ways of interpreting the world”. This was described as both challenging and formative. One participant likened the process to “**osmosis**,” where contact inevitably produces exchange. The metaphor is telling: knowledge, perspectives, and experiences flow between individuals, blurring distinctions between local and external, expert and participant.

These exchanges were not limited to formal activities. They extend into shared time, informal conversations, moments of co-presence. One participant described the experience as “living in a bubble... a breath of fresh air”. MaLL became a temporary suspension of everyday life, a space where different rhythms and possibilities could be and were explored. Yet this temporality is also fragile. The intensity of the experience was tied to its limited duration; participants arrived, engaged deeply, and then left. The relationships formed remained open-ended, their continuation uncertain, their effects unknown.

Within this temporary configuration, certain shifts began to take place. Participants spoke of personal growth, both “horizontally and vertically”, and spoke of validating or rethinking their own ideas. More subtly, they described changes in their perception through these exchanges. The territory was no longer seen only through the lens of lack or decline, but as a site of potential, complexity, and ongoing life. One participant noted that “this experience made me realise what the real starting point could be: relationships”. This statement reframed the problematique itself. Rather than beginning with economic or infrastructural deficits, it is seen to begin with the capacity to connect: establish connections between people from different backgrounds, between knowledge systems, between past and future.

At the same time, the tension between innovation and tradition remained present. Participants recognise that spaces like MaLL were oriented toward “something very futuristic,” yet also had to engage with a context “deeply rooted in tradition”. The challenge was seen as one of how not to replace one with the other, but to bridge them, how to find ways in which new tools and ideas could resonate with existing

practices. This bridging was described not as a technical task, but as a social and cultural one, requiring sensitivity to context and openness to negotiation.

As the conversation drew to a close, participants spoke of reconnecting: reconnecting with themselves, with others, with nature. These reflections moved beyond the immediate scope of the residency at MaLL, instead touching on broader questions of how to live and work, what kinds of futures are imaginable, and what it means to belong to a place. MaLL, in this sense, became more than a project or intervention, and was experienced as a moment of alignment, where personal trajectories and territorial questions intersected, even if only temporarily.

The problematique appeared as something that is continuously articulated through interaction. Participant empowerment, likewise, did not manifest as control or certainty, but as the ability to engage with these dynamics, to remain within them, to navigate them, and to contribute to their ongoing transformation.

Empowerment appeared as something far more tentative, relational, and processual, as something continuously negotiated rather than simply achieved by the end.

Empowerment came to mean several things. On one hand, it came to mean accepting the necessity of acting within complexity. As one already recounted reflection pointed, “you can’t fully grasp the complexity... without doing”, signalling that empowerment could be considered as the capacity to operate within uncertainty and to treat knowledge as something that emerges through practice. On the other hand, empowerment became increasingly tied to how participants positioned themselves in relation to the territory, through their explicit rejection of simply “solving problems” and an adoption of an awareness of the asymmetries embedded in such a viewpoint, there they as outsiders or external actors would assume a position of “problem-solvers”. Instead, they articulated a different stance: empowerment came to be seen through orientation towards activation, connection, and collaboration, as a decentring of oneself and recognizing the agency already present within the community. The repeated assertions that the territory “already has life” suggested that empowerment is not about bringing something new, but making existing capacities visible and actionable, acting in tandem with them and not upon them.

Empowerment is thus seen as relational; the participants consistently returned to relationships as the foundation of their experiences in MaLL. Empowerment can thus be understood not as an individual attribute or achievement, but as something arising or emerging from and through interaction, through “osmosis”, through permeability, mutual influence, and the absence of fixed boundaries between giver and receiver. Knowledge, skills, and perspectives were seen as circulating between participants, locals, and facilitators, as something distributed, without a central point of authority, as something co-produced. Within this, empowerment is seen as thus having to contend with issues of trust and legitimacy, with tensions and conflicts, with scepticism and lack of belief, both internal and external. Empowerment was seen as something to be inhabited, as an affective and relational competence: a capacity to navigate

disagreement, to accept difference, to continue engaging despite uncertainty, a willingness to live with tensions and apply skills and dispositions to work through it.

Empowerment was also seen as something both temporarily and spatially experienced. If MaLL was a “bubble”, a temporary or provisional space-and-time, suspended in the broader structural conditions and everyday life, that allowed for the intensification of interaction and reflection, it nonetheless enabled individuals to feel able to express themselves, experiment with ideas, and form connections. It is a “bubble” within their precarious, uncertain life trajectories, but also as something that prompts them to consider not only acting within the territory, their relationship to it, but their life trajectories as well. In this sense, empowerment can be seen as operating at the intersection of the personal and the territorial, between personal and structural, as an opening of possibilities, a reshaping or rethinking instead of a resolve of structural forces that shape personal decisions about migration, employment and belonging.

Taken together, the discussion suggested that **empowerment was not a stable outcome, but an ongoing practice, enacted through moments of interaction, reflection, and negotiation, and visible in the ways participants began to reframe their role and positions: not as problem-solvers, but as collaborators; not as outsiders but as participants in a shared process.** At the same time, their empowerment can be seen as partial and contingent, not eliminating structural challenges nor fully resolving tensions. Within MaLL, it was articulated by participants as the capacity to engage with the challenges in a more nuanced and situated way, less about achieving transformation or simple outcomes and more about sustaining the ability to act, reflect, and relate within a complex context.

What the participants emphasized was not a newly acquired set of knowledge, skills and abilities, but a renewed sense of possibility, a new position, a new understanding, and an awareness that meaningful engagement with a territory is achievable (even within its constraints) and that meaningful engagement stems from reflection and negotiation.

In this way, empowerment emerges as an enabling condition — one that expands the horizon of what can be imagined and pursued, and that continues to resonate beyond the temporal boundaries of the lab, subtly influencing how participants relate to place, to others, and to their own capacity to act.

Mare Libero (Exploration Phase)

“The Naples Living Lab was born from the desire to reconnect the city with its sea, today marked by decades of uncontrolled expansion, abandoned industries, and increasingly privatized access. We want to create a space where citizens, students, activists, and researchers can come together to imagine and test new ways of living the coastline, from Bagnoli to San Giovanni a Teduccio”.
(SOURCE: [PS-U-GO BOOKLET](https://www.psugo.eu/booklet/naples.html), [HTTPS://WWW.PSUGO.EU/BOOKLET/NAPLES.HTML](https://www.psugo.eu/booklet/naples.html))

Bagnoli, a coastal district on the western edge of **Naples**, historically developed in the early 20th century as a working-class neighbourhood tied to heavy industry, was built around the large steel complex. For decades, the plant structured the economic and social rhythms of the area: employment, housing patterns, and local identity were closely linked to industrial labour. The closure of the steelworks in the 1990s, following a long process of industrial decline and environmental controversy, marked a turning point for the district. Thousands of jobs were lost, and the economic networks that had sustained local life gradually dissolved, leaving behind a vast industrial landscape of abandoned infrastructure and contaminated land and sea. Today, traces of this industrial past remain physically and socially embedded in Bagnoli. The former steel plant still occupies a large portion of the coastline, its unused structures and fenced-off spaces acting as a constant reminder of interrupted redevelopment plans and decades of institutional uncertainty. Decades of industrial production left significant soil and marine pollution, complicating redevelopment efforts and affecting the perception of the coast as a safe and accessible public resource.

In this context of prolonged uncertainty, Bagnoli is often described as socially and spatially marginal within the broader metropolitan area of Naples. Many key cultural, health, and administrative services are concentrated in the city centre, reinforcing that the district remains peripheral to decision-making processes that shape its future. At the same time, Bagnoli maintains a strong sense of local identity rooted in its working-class history and its relationship with the coastline, which continues to play an important role in everyday social life.

Within the broader landscape of post-industrial decline, environmental uncertainty, and institutional stagnation in Bagnoli, the occupied/liberated and collectively managed space of **Lido Pola** represents a significant example of grassroots urban activism and community self-organization. The site, originally a seaside restaurant and bathing establishment built during the mid-twentieth century, fell into abandonment during the decades following the decline of the industrial district. In 2013, local activists, residents, and social collectives occupied the neglected structure with the aim of preventing its privatization and reclaiming the surrounding coastal area as a publicly accessible space. Through voluntary labour and collective organisation, participants gradually restored parts of the building and the adjacent beach, transforming it into a social and cultural meeting point for the local community. Their activities often frame the coast and former industrial areas as commons that should remain accessible to the community, rather than exclusively governed by large-scale redevelopment projects or private interests.

In 2016, the initiative gained formal recognition from the municipality of Naples as a **bene comune (urban commons)** and declared its **Declaration of Use**, within a wider legal and political framework called “Usi Civici e Collettivi Urbani” (Civic and Collective Urban Uses) adopted in Naples and then adapted in some Italian cities to acknowledge forms of collective civic management of public spaces. Lido Pola represents a social infrastructure through which local residents articulate claims to the coastline and to the broader future of Bagnoli. Lido Pola is closely connected to the **National Coordination**

Mare Libero, which advocates for free and unobstructed public access to beaches and coastal areas throughout Italy. Established in 2019, Mare Libero emerged in response to the extensive privatization of the Italian coastline through long-term concessions granted to private beach operators. These concessions often limit public access to the shoreline by fencing off areas, charging entrance fees, or restricting the number of visitors, effectively transforming large sections of the Italian coast into semi-exclusive spaces.

The Mare Libero movement operates through a network of local committees that coordinate campaigns, legal initiatives, and public demonstrations. Its activities aim to promote a different model of coastal governance based on transparency, ecological protection, and the recognition of beaches as public goods. In the broader metropolitan area of Naples, much of the city's coastline is controlled by private beach clubs, where access is often conditioned by entrance fees or reservations, or under special governmental management. Activists associated with Mare Libero Napoli have organized symbolic and proactive actions to contest these restrictions, including public demonstrations and collective actions, during which participants reclaim sections of beach for free public use and through which they gain relevant administrative results in terms of beach accessibility, thanks to civic crowdfunding. These activities highlight how access to the sea can become a matter of social inequality and a power issue, as rising prices and limited availability increasingly exclude lower-income residents from coastal spaces and decision-making processes.

Mare Libero's Problematique

CNR-IRISS (Institute for Research on Innovation and Services in Development), as part of the National Research Council of Italy, has been recognized as an important stakeholder in the urban development of Naples and Bagnoli. Accordingly, CNR-IRISS had reached out to Lido Pola in previous projects aiming at offering scientific coordination to local initiatives, especially in the mapping of community resources, collective management, and aims for the coastal area. Following these previous initiatives, CNR-IRISS, as part of the PS-U-GO consortium, together with the **Department of Architecture (DiARC)** at the Federico II University of Naples, approached **Lido Pola** in establishing a **ULL Naples – Mare Libero**.

The ULL in Naples addresses **a territorial problematique centred on public access to the sea and the governance of coastal space as commons due to issue of pollution, privatisation, a great and inner port area**. Within the PS-U-GO project, and developed around the community space of Lido Pola in the Bagnoli district and the DiARC infrastructure, the Naples ULL explores **how coastal areas can be reclaimed, managed, and experienced collectively rather than primarily through privatized or exclusive uses**.

The ULL is explicitly framed around the theme of social change towards a free and accessible sea, positioning the coastline as a site where issues of citizenship,

participation, and the right to the city intersect. Within the Neapolitan context, the Naples ULL functions as a collaborative environment where students, researchers, civic groups, and local stakeholders jointly explore alternative models of coastal governance.

Rather than focusing on physical redevelopment, the ULL investigates the social practices, institutional arrangements, and forms of collective action through which the coastline could be reclaimed as an urban commons and reintegrated into everyday urban life. The problematique of the Naples ULL can therefore be understood as the intersection of three interconnected dynamics: the post-industrial transformation of Bagnoli, the contested accessibility of the entire Neapolitan coastline, and the emergence of civic initiatives advocating for the sea as a shared urban commons.

Mare Libero's Exploration Phase: Ethnographic Vignette

"The participation of students in the process of mapping and researching/exploring the territory was characterized by a high degree of diversity, both in terms of their academic backgrounds and the continuity of their involvement. The workshop was made accessible from the very beginning through various channels: [...] The group took on an active role in the co-production of knowledge, engaging in the learning and field application of community engagement practices, participatory mapping, GIS tools, and multi-criteria spatial evaluation methods. Activities were organized to foster situated learning and a gradual assumption of operational responsibilities. [...]"
(SOURCE: MARE LIBERO FOLLOW-UP REFLECTION)

The day prior we had agreed to meet at the Mergellina metro station early in the morning. As avid pedestrians, walkers more than flaneurs, we decided not to use the metro but instead walk the approximately 4,5-kilometre length from our lodging in the Porto district to the Mergellina district. We thus started an hour earlier, going from near the Duomo metro station, to the commercial harbour braced by Via Nuova Marina, following it to Piazza Municipio and the enormous cruising ships docks at Porto di Napoli, continued by the harbour until Giardini del Molosiglio, and then through the Santa Lucia district, following the Riviera di Chiaia and the walled 19th century public garden, the Villa Comunale, all the way to Mergellina Station and Piazza Sannazaro. We were fashionably late and a bit lost in Naples traffic when we finally met Stefania Ragozino and Lorenzo Lodato at Piazza Sannazaro, representing Mare Libero and our partners in the following urban exploration we had planned as part of our fieldwork. We had espressos, only to situate ourselves in the urban territory.

The day prior we had spent time with Stefania in the offices of CNR-IRISS, discussing in length the problematique of Naples' coastline and the design of the Mare Libero living lab. The entire process in Naples was problem-oriented, participative and grounded in non-formal educational practices, framed in such a way (as a series of workshops) so as the participants (mostly students, but also locals, teaching staff, and activists that grouped around the initiative) could recognize, identify, analyse the problems at hand in-depth and thoroughly, continually phrasing, recognizing and emphasizing shared

values as the engine of any future work. By the time of our fieldwork, they had produced a Manifesto, positioning the living lab vis-a-vis its partners, collaborators and associates, which expressed this values-focused approach. Stefania had continuously emphasized that the entire problematic of Naples, that the ULL was addressing, will be more understandable (physically, emotionally, affectively, etc.) when we see and experience it. Our urban walk before our exploration with Stefania had already grounded us: the sea of the bay of Naples was unreachable during our whole walk on the lungomare to Piazza Sannazaro.

We continued along the Mergellina lungomare, walking the asphalted causeways along the bay, passing by marinas filled with yachts and smaller ships and small chalets. Spiaggia Mergellina, a small dark-sanded beach was empty, although tourist buses leaving tourists off or taking them to see Pompei and the Amalfi coast were parked around Fontana del Sebeto. We were now at the foothills of Posillipo, the affluent residential quarter of Naples, and would soon go on Via Posillipo to our main destination. Behind the small beach was a much larger one, although covered in concrete and with pools, closed behind memberships in Circolo Relax and Circolo Nautico Posillipo; circolo being clubs or membership-based associations. After them, some smaller beaches were hidden from sight at street level by the multistorey facades of the buildings, and anybody visiting would easily miss the narrow (less than a meter wide) and steep steps leading down between two buildings to Bagno Elena. It seemed as if we were trespassing, even if we weren't, when we met eyes-to-eyes with a board informing us on the dates and hours of availability for public use of the public beach, and then having to manoeuvre gates and passages to get to the beach and sea.

The Bagno Elena beach, with its dark volcanic sand, was divided in two. The "public" beach was no larger than Spiaggia Mergellina, and although it had depth, it was narrow. To get to the other side, one had to cross the wooden (but reinforced with concrete) pier, which was impossible since it was fenced, and the only wooden stairs granting access were removed; or rather, one had to crawl under the pier, ducking not to hit the concrete reinforcements and wooden beams, at one point going on all fours. Coming out from beneath the pier gave a spectacular view: in April, Bagno Elena was empty of deck chairs and parasols, an expanse of dark sand, bathed in sun, leading to the majestic outline of Palazzo Donn'Anna. The other part of the "public" beach was in the shadow of Palazzo Donn'Anna, a narrow strip of stone and sand, divided by invisible lines from the parts of the beach under concession to the hotels, resorts, cafes and restaurants in the buildings behind us. Tomislav gathered seashells, small multi-coloured things that were everywhere on the beach, feeling as if somebody would reprimand him from taking something from the "private" part of the beach. Dafne enquired about the prices of the parasols and deck chairs, and how the concession owners excluded people from the beach. Lorenzo dared us to try and exit back to Via Posillipo through the resort, but we found the gates locked. We had to visit another beach on the other side of Palazzo Donn'Anna, the public beach Spiaggia della Monache, the last beach accessible from the street that doesn't mean entering private property, and plan tomorrow's urban exploration in Bagnoli.

Few days later, along the coastline of Bagnoli and Pozzuoli, the dark volcanic sand shimmered against the blue sea. Its colour reflected the region's geology: Vesuvius, the Phlegraean Fields, and the bradyseism that slowly raises and lowers the ground. These tremors have damaged homes, displaced hundreds of households, and shut down Villa Medusa, a City Council-recognised urban common that once offered vital social and health services. As a local expert explained, the communities today call not only for emergency response and catastrophe management policies, but for long-term community resilience.

We discussed it with him, standing on a pier extending impossibly far into the bay of Pozzuoli. The public promenade, formerly an industrial pier, is a good vantage point in our urban explorations. Students and researchers looked around: behind them, the remains of Bagnoli's heavy industry sit partly hidden under a green canopy; the wide stretch of open land toward the sea is not a park but an industrial brownfield slowly reclaimed by vegetation. Participants sketched the landscape, photographed the remnants, and recorded the local expert's insights.

Earlier, on Bagnoli's small public beach, a resident cleaning trash by hand had complained that "nobody takes care of it". The contrast between community efforts and large-scale industrial pollution becomes clear. Access to the sea follows this same unevenness: the nearby circolo, more precisely a dilettante sport club & association (Associazione Polisportiva Dilettantistica Circolo Ilva Bagnoli), that developed from a former workers' club, is more open than others (open to students, people with disabilities, retirees) but many private seaside clubs restrict entry to those who can afford it.

The walk to Lido Pola, a former restaurant, now a self-managed cultural and social space, before illegally occupied and then recognised by the City Council as urban commons, cuts through a stark landscape. High concrete walls, abandoned pipelines, and the constant rush of traffic create a disorienting corridor. One local described it as "an urban industrial desert". Although the neighbourhood is coastal, the sea feels distant — unseen and unheard — its presence obscured by decades of industrial activity and fragmented urban planning. The struggle for a free access to a clean sea becomes palpable when, finally exiting the corridor and exploring the surroundings of Lido Pola, our exploration is limited with locked gates and fences.

Mare Libero's Outputs, Outcomes, Results

"[...] In the urban context of Naples, characterized by administrative fragility and strong civic activism, these results address the need to produce shared and accessible evidence, helping to bridge the gap between technical knowledge and grassroots demands and supporting potential trajectories toward more inclusive governance. [...] A notable milestone is the release of the documentary's trailer".
(SOURCE: MARE LIBERO FOLLOW-UP REFLECTION)

The ULL developed in Naples addressed its territorial problematic through a mode of engagement that remained closely tied to the material, legal, and social specificities of the coastal edge of Naples. Starting from Bagnoli, only to encompass the entire Neapolitan coast, rather than beginning from predefined solutions, the ULL process unfolded through a sustained effort to render the coastline legible as a shared space — one marked by fragmentation, restricted access, and overlapping regimes of ownership and use. Similarly, the ULL process unfolded in a web of actors, as an attempt to support already existing local initiative in their work, both in terms of research and activism, instead of overtaking their work. In this sense, the primary output of the lab was not a singular intervention, but a layered mapping practice that gradually assembled the coast as a “common” ground for discussion. This mapping did not operate as a neutral technical exercise; it became the basis upon which questions of access, rights, and public value were articulated and debated.

The initial phase of this work took shape through **walkscapes and urban explorations** conducted in collaboration with local actors such as Mare Libero. (One such walkscape was done during Training Event 2). These collective explorations moved along stretches of the coast in Bagnoli, Posillipo, the historic centre, and San Giovanni a Teduccio, tracing not only physical paths but also points of interruption — fences, privatized segments, degraded areas, and informal access routes. Participants encountered the coastline as a discontinuous terrain, where the possibility of reaching the sea was uneven and often contested. These walks functioned as moments of situated observation, where experiential knowledge (such as how one actually reaches or inhabits the coast) began to take precedence over abstract representations.

This experiential layer was gradually translated into more **formalized tools** through the development of a Geographic Information System (GIS) and then a Territorial Informatic System (SIT). Data collected in the field were organized into geolocated datasets, mapping access points, pathways, and liminal zones along the coast. Platforms such as Google My Maps and EpiCollect were used to render this information accessible and shareable, allowing participants to visualize the coastline as a network of conditions rather than a continuous line. The mapping process introduced a dual movement: from embodied exploration to structured representation, and from dispersed observations to a collectively readable framework.

Within this framework, the lab developed a multi-criteria assessment of “enjoyability,” a term that attempted to capture the usability and experiential quality of coastal spaces. This involved defining and negotiating a set of criteria (e.g., accessibility, safety, environmental quality, legal status, and potential for public use) through which different segments of the coast could be evaluated. The resulting **“Map of Enjoyability”** did not resolve conflicts between these criteria; rather, it made them explicit. Certain areas might be physically accessible but environmentally degraded; others visually attractive but legally restricted. In this sense, the map functioned less as a prescriptive tool and more as a way of structuring debate, translating dispersed concerns into a shared analytical language.

The process through which these tools were developed was itself marked by negotiation and adjustment. Weekly meetings alternated between moments of study, field application, and collective reflection, allowing participants to test and refine their approaches. A recurring challenge emerged around language: participants came from different disciplinary and professional backgrounds, and key terms, such as “commons,” “access,” “sustainability”, or “value”, carried different meanings depending on context. Establishing a shared vocabulary required deliberate effort, particularly in the early stages, and led to the adoption of value-based methodologies such as Value-Focused Thinking. Through this, the lab did not simply produce maps, but also a common framework for interpreting what those maps represented.

The territorial embeddedness of the lab became particularly evident in the way it engaged with existing civic initiatives and institutional structures. The involvement of Lido Pola as a local actor ensured continuity with ongoing struggles around coastal access, while CNR-IRISS provided operational coordination and methodological grounding. Interactions with public authorities remained intermittent, reflecting broader conditions of administrative fragmentation in Naples. In this context, the production of shared, accessible evidence such as maps, datasets, and visual materials, took on a specific role: it acted as a bridge between grassroots knowledge and institutional discourse, without fully resolving the gap between them.

At the same time, the outputs extended beyond strictly analytical tools. The production of visual materials, including a documentary based on interviews conducted during the process, contributed to making the issues surrounding the coast more visible to a broader audience. The circulation of these materials, particularly through online platforms, suggested an attempt to expand the reach of the lab beyond its immediate participants, translating technical and situated knowledge into more widely communicable forms.

Across these activities, the lab did not produce a definitive reconfiguration of the coastline, nor did it resolve the structural tensions that define it. Instead, it established a set of practices through which the coast could be read, discussed, and contested as a shared resource. Territorial embeddedness, in this sense, was not a stable condition but **an ongoing alignment between tools, actors, and place-specific dynamics**. The mapping of the coast as a commons did not fix its meaning; it opened it to interpretation, negotiation, and potential transformation, grounded in the lived realities of Naples and the multiple claims that converge along its edge.

Mare Libero’s Participants and Empowerment

“ULL’s involvement developed through a gradual process that engaged different stakeholders. [...] Various stakeholder groups (government, business, research, association and activism) contributed distinctively to defining the weightings, revealing divergences in visions and priorities. [...] This diversity enriched the process but also highlighted tensions. On one hand, the use of social media for calls to action shared with the accounts of citizens’ committees improved

outreach, attracting students and confirming civic interest in access to the sea. On the other hand, maintaining consistent participation, especially from institutional actors, proved challenging. Overall, the process facilitated interaction among stakeholders with different roles and expertise, fostering the creation of a structured forum for dialogue aimed at the shared generation of knowledge”.

(SOURCE: MARE LIBERO FOLLOW-UP REFLECTION)

We had conducted the group discussion and interview as part of Teaching Event 2, following the urban exploration of Bagnoli and Naples, as we had agreed in planning that the Teaching Event would both encompass our fieldwork and also overlap with the Mare Libero activities and workshops. Beyond introductory discussions and setting-up workshops, we had continually discussed with participants their experiences and impressions, and had a focused open discussion on the concept of protagonism in the space of Lido Pola. Having that in mind, the group discussion was held at the last day of the Teaching Event, using Mentimeter (online digital tool, blending presentation and participation tools) to document participant responses. Because of that, the discussion encompassed both participants of Mare Libero ULL but also representatives from other ULLs.

Participant empowerment within the Naples Urban Living Lab did not emerge as a predefined outcome, but as a gradual and situated process shaped through engagement with the territory, its actors, and its conflicts. The Mentimeter reflections suggest that participants initially understood their presence in relatively open and exploratory terms: “listening and learning,” “walking a lot,” “trying something new,” “experiencing Naples,” or “deep dive into activism”. These formulations point less to a clearly defined role and more to an entry into a process — one in which participants positioned themselves as observers, learners, and interlocutors. At the same time, certain terms such as “political practice,” “protagonism,” and “creating community” indicate an emerging awareness that participation was not neutral, but implicated in broader questions of agency and collective action.

As the process unfolded, empowerment became more closely tied to the acquisition of situated knowledge and practical competencies. Participants described learning not only about urban commons as an abstract concept, but about its differentiated meanings across contexts, and its specific articulation within Naples. References to “complexity of Bagnoli,” “plural governance,” and “relationship between research and activism” suggest a shift from general curiosity to a more grounded understanding of how urban issues are structured and contested. This learning was not confined to theoretical insight; it was embedded in practices such as participatory mapping, field exploration, and the use of GIS tools. Through these activities, participants contributed directly to the co-production of knowledge, gradually assuming responsibility within the research process. Empowerment here took the form of increased capacity to interpret, represent, and engage with a complex urban environment.

At the same time, the experiential dimension of participation remained central. Participants described their involvement through affective and relational terms:

“networking, conviviality, care,” “feeling part of a very important scope,” but also “rage against the government,” “contradictions,” and “having to fight even without direct results”. These expressions reflect an encounter with the political and emotional realities of the territory, particularly around issues such as restricted coastal access and the privatization of public space. Empowerment, in this sense, was not only about gaining skills or knowledge, but about developing a form of engagement that combined critical awareness with affective investment. The emphasis on “love and care as a way to connect to places and beings” suggests that participants began to relate to the territory not as external observers, but as involved actors, even if temporarily.

The structure of the ULL played a significant role in enabling this process. Participation evolved from more selective and moderated forms — where activists, researchers, and experts defined initial frameworks — towards broader and more open engagement during fieldwork and co-creation phases. This progression allowed participants to move from guided learning into more autonomous forms of contribution. The diversity of the group, encompassing different disciplinary backgrounds and levels of experience, further shaped this dynamic. Students engaged in tasks ranging from data collection and mapping to facilitation and analysis, supported by a division of labour that reflected their varied skills. While participation fluctuated over time, a core group maintained continuity, ensuring that the process remained operational. In this context, empowerment was closely linked to the gradual assumption of responsibility within a collective structure.

However, this empowerment remained partial and uneven. The process revealed divergences between stakeholder groups (public institutions, businesses, researchers, and civic actors) particularly during the co-creation phase, where differing priorities became visible. While the ULL succeeded in creating a structured space for dialogue and knowledge exchange, maintaining consistent participation, especially from institutional actors, proved difficult. Similarly, student involvement was shaped by external constraints such as academic commitments and turnover. These factors limited the extent to which empowerment could stabilize beyond the duration of the project, suggesting that it functioned more as a situational condition than as a lasting redistribution of influence.

Despite these limitations, the reflections indicate that participants carried forward a set of values and practices that point toward longer-term effects. Terms such as “protagonism,” “participation,” “solidarity,” “perseverance,” and “international communing” suggest that empowerment extended into a reconfiguration of how participants understood their own role in relation to urban issues. The “good practices” they identified (walking as methodology, engaging directly with local actors, valuing people’s efforts, connecting theory and practice) further indicate a shift toward more grounded, relational, and context-sensitive modes of working. In this sense, empowerment did not resolve the territorial problematique of Naples, but enabled participants to engage with it differently: more reflexively, more collectively, and with a heightened awareness of both its possibilities and its constraints.

The notion of **protagonism** that emerges from the Naples ULL is neither a fixed concept nor a simple synonym for participation. It appears instead as something more demanding and ambiguous — an attempt to name a form of engagement in which individuals and groups do not merely take part in processes, but actively position themselves within them, shaping their direction, meaning, and outcomes.

In the reflections, protagonism is often paired with terms like participation, activism, or community, yet it carries a different weight. Participation can remain procedural, in the process of being present, contributing, or responding within a given framework. Protagonism, by contrast, implies initiative, ownership, and responsibility. It suggests that actors do not wait to be included, but assert their role in defining the terms of engagement. To act as a “protagonist” in such a setting as the Neapolitan context is to enter an already conflictual field, not as a neutral contributor but as someone who takes a position.

At the same time, the Mentimeter responses complicate any straightforward reading of protagonism as empowerment. Participants described learning about protagonism, feeling it, or approaching it, rather than fully embodying it. This suggests that protagonism is not immediately accessible, especially for those entering the context from outside. It requires a process of attunement to local struggles, to existing actors, and to the histories embedded in the territory. The emphasis on listening, walking, and talking to people indicates that becoming a protagonist is not about asserting oneself prematurely, but first about understanding the conditions under which action becomes meaningful. Protagonism, in this sense, is not simply about “being active,” but about navigating relationships — deciding when to lead, when to follow, and when to step back.

At the same time, there is a risk embedded in the concept. If not carefully situated, protagonism can be interpreted as something to be “activated” in others, particularly local communities, implying that they lack agency or need external stimulation. The reflections partially resist this reading by emphasizing being local, valorising people’s efforts, and connecting to existing forms of activism. In this sense, protagonism is not introduced by the ULL but encountered and, to some extent, learned from actors already engaged in struggles around the commons.

What emerges, then, is **a relational and processual understanding of protagonism. It is not a stable role that participants acquire, but a position that is continuously negotiated between inside and outside, learning and acting, individual initiative and collective responsibility.** Within the Naples ULL, protagonism does not resolve the problematique of contested commons or fragmented governance. Instead, it provides a way of inhabiting these conditions: not as detached observers, but as situated actors who engage, however partially, in the ongoing making and unmaking of the urban commons.

Ulloi Aglantzia (Experimentation & Co-Creation Phase)

“Ulloi Aglantzia embraces collective action where civic responsibility meets creative experimentation. Our mission is to engage local communities in shaping their urban environment through inclusive co-creative processes that connect people, ideas, and places. We work with residents rather than for them, creating opportunities for meaningful dialogue and collaboration among students, youth, local authorities, and everyday city users”.

(SOURCE: [PS-U-GO BOOKLET](https://www.psugo.eu/booklet/aglantzia.html), [HTTPS://WWW.PSUGO.EU/BOOKLET/AGLANTZIA.HTML](https://www.psugo.eu/booklet/aglantzia.html))

Within the broader territory of the Greek-Cypriot part of Nicosia, **Aglantzia** (Αγλαντζιά, Eḡlence) functions as a suburban municipality located along the southern edge of the city's buffer zone, the demilitarised line that has divided Cyprus and its capital since the events of 1974, when the Turkish military intervention and the subsequent partition of the island resulted in the physical and political division of Nicosia. Covering approximately 31 km² and home to roughly 21,000 inhabitants, the municipality occupies a transitional position between the dense urban core of the capital and the more open landscapes to the south. Although situated entirely within the Greek-Cypriot side of the city, its proximity to the buffer zone situates Aglantzia within the spatial and historical geography of the divided capital, where political and territorial discontinuities continue to shape patterns of development and urban perception.

The historic core of Aglantzia, earlier a village that became absorbed by the city, reflects an earlier phase in the urban development of Nicosia and is characterized by what is commonly described as traditional Cypriot architecture and heritage. Many residential buildings date from the early twentieth century and follow a typology of compact single-storey houses occupying most of their plots. These structures typically feature prominent entrance porticos, enclosed internal courtyards, and small gardens. The morphology of the neighbourhood is defined by a dense and irregular network of narrow streets paved with stone, interspersed with small squares and open spaces that historically functioned as places of encounter and everyday social interaction.

Over time, however, the functions of many of these spaces have shifted. Some have gradually adapted to the demands of contemporary urban mobility and now serve primarily as informal parking areas in a city heavily dependent on private cars. More broadly, the urbanism of Nicosia has long been shaped by a tension between historical urban forms and modern development patterns. While elements of traditional architecture and neighbourhood structures remain visible, many parts of the metropolitan area were developed during periods of rapid urban expansion that prioritised vehicular circulation, dispersed residential development, and functional zoning over pedestrian-oriented public space. As a result, despite its architectural heritage, many urban spaces in Nicosia are experienced less as lively civic environments and more as transitional or infrastructural spaces embedded within a car-dependent urban territory.

Within its municipal boundaries, Aglantzia encompasses a diverse range of territorial functions. To the south lies Athalassa National Forest Park, one of the largest green areas in the Nicosia metropolitan region, together with the nearby campus of the **University of Cyprus (UCY)** and its surrounding parklands. The northern edge of the municipality includes an industrial zone, while the majority of the territory is occupied by residential development. Much of this residential fabric of the wider Aglantzia area, in contrast to the historic core, consists of apartment blocks, typically three- or four-storey buildings with ground-level or underground garages, interspersed with older houses and occasional vacant plots that often serve as improvised parking areas. Over recent decades residential development has gradually expanded from the periphery toward the historic centre, contributing to the gradual densification of the neighbourhood.

Commercial and social activities in this part of the city are largely concentrated along several principal urban arteries, most notably Larnakos Avenue, which diagonally cuts through the municipality, and the avenues of Aglantzias and Ammochostou. These corridors contain shops, cafés, restaurants, and services that structure the everyday rhythms of the neighbourhood. Beyond these streets, however, the area remains strongly residential in character. Social activity increasingly gravitates toward these and other commercial corridors or university-related spaces, leaving certain streets, squares, and small parks within the older urban fabric of Aglantzia less integrated into contemporary patterns of social interaction. Public spaces and streets within the historic core of Aglantzia often appear quiet or sparsely used throughout much of the day, reflecting both the dispersed geography of urban activities and the reliance on car mobility.

At the same time, the proximity of UCY has increasingly influenced the spatial and socio-economic dynamics of the municipality. The presence of UCY and the continuing expansion of the metropolitan area have stimulated demand for housing, contributing to the construction of new apartment buildings and the gradual transformation of parts of the residential landscape. This process has produced a hybrid urban fabric in which long-standing residential communities, student populations, municipal institutions, the national park, and university infrastructures coexist in close proximity. While the municipality retains a strong sense of local identity, these demographic and spatial shifts have also altered patterns of everyday use within the historic centre of Aglantzia. Institutionally, Aglantzia occupies a distinctive position within the governance scheme of the Nicosia metropolitan area. The municipality operates within a framework that includes local authorities, national planning policies, and the institutional presence of UCY. In recent years, the municipality has demonstrated openness toward participatory initiatives and collaboration with UCY, creating opportunities for experimental approaches to urban engagement. At the same time, the coexistence of multiple actors, including municipal authorities, university departments, student communities, and civic organisations, introduces challenges of coordination and communication, particularly when attempting to translate experimental initiatives into longer-term urban practices.

Ullol's Problematique

The **Ullol Aglantzia**, developed within the PS-U-GO project, by the **Department of Architecture of the University of Cyprus** in the municipality of Aglantzia in the metropolitan area of Nicosia, engages with a set of territorial, institutional, and socio-economic dynamics that extend beyond the immediate boundaries of the municipality and are closely connected to the broader urban transformation of the Nicosia metropolitan area. While Aglantzia retains characteristics of a predominantly residential municipality with a strong sense of local identity, its position within the expanding metropolitan structure of the Cypriot capital places it at the intersection of processes such as urban expansion, real-estate development, demographic change associated with the presence of the university, and shifting patterns in the use of public space. The ULL therefore operates within a territorial context in which neighbourhood-scale experiences are shaped by wider urban, economic, and institutional processes.

Within this broader territorial and institutional context, the problematique addressed by Ullol Aglantzia emerges from the intersection of several overlapping dynamics: the transformation of a historically village-like neighbourhood within a rapidly urbanising metropolitan environment; the pressures of residential development and real-estate interest associated with the presence of a major university; and the relative underuse or fragmentation of public spaces within a predominantly residential urban fabric. The ULL therefore addresses **not only the physical qualities of particular spaces but also the social practices through which these spaces are inhabited, perceived, and negotiated**.

Within the historic core of Aglantzia, the Old Square (Plateia Palais Aglantzias), with its Small Pomegranate (Mikri Rhodia) cafe and only a few neighbouring businesses, functions as a small but symbolically significant public space around which several local initiatives have developed. In recent years, UCY has established a presence in this area through the restoration of a traditional building on the square, now operating as the **HyBuild Centre for Sustainable Development**, an off-campus facility of the Department of Architecture. The centre serves as a point of interaction between UCY, the municipality, and the local community, hosting research activities, workshops, and public events related to sustainable development and urban innovation. Within the framework of the PS-U-GO project, the Old Square therefore became a natural focal point for the activities of Ullol Aglantzia, providing both a physical site for experimental interventions and an institutional bridge between academic actors and the neighbourhood.

Rather than responding to a single clearly bounded urban issue, the ULL situated its activities within this complex constellation of territorial, institutional, and civic dynamics. Through participatory exploration of the neighbourhood and small-scale spatial and social interventions in the Old Square, parking lots and interior courtyards of neighbouring buildings, it examined **how public spaces can function as arenas for social encounter, learning, and collaborative urban imagination**. In doing so, the ULL seeks to reveal how territorial conditions, institutional arrangements, and everyday

practices interact in the ongoing production of urban life within the evolving urban territory of Nicosia.

Ullol's Experimentation and Co-Creation Phase: Ethnographic Vignette

„[...] A strong emphasis was also placed on practical and technical skills, particularly in the Experimentation and Co-creation phase. Participants were actively involved in implementing ideas through real interventions, such as the community mural and the SITCom structure. Through these activities, they gained experience in design-build processes, material use, and basic construction techniques, supported by tools like digital fabrication at the UCY Fab Lab. Additionally, communication and storytelling skills were developed through video creation, presentations, and public showcase events, where participants learned to express ideas clearly and engage different audiences. Finally, the process fostered civic awareness and a sense of ownership, as participants interacted with local stakeholders and contributed to shaping their neighbourhood”.

(SOURCE: ULLOI AGLANTZIA FOLLOW-UP REFLECTION)

The table where the laser-cut pieces lay quickly becomes a small workshop. Students lean in, their fingertips darkened by the singed edges of freshly cut plywood. Piece by piece, they begin assembling the prototype, debating orientations and fit. What looks straightforward on the screen reveals hidden complexities in real space. They check pencil markings, flip through design sketches, and refer back to the digital plans as they test each joint.

The architectural object has occupied them for the better part of a week. Before starting the design, they spent several days with mentors and researchers learning the principles of waffle structures — the interlocking slats, the load-bearing logic, the geometric constraints. Now, having completed their first design, they are building a small-scale prototype to verify that every intersection aligns as intended. Their focus is absolute; the model begins to rise from the table as a recognizable form: a shaded bench.

The prototype is only the beginning. Next weekend they will cut the full-scale version and assemble it on site together. Their excitement is palpable. As one student puts it, “As architects we always design... we do this each year. But this is the first time our designs are not going to stay on paper or in a model for our exams. We’re actually gonna build it!” The prototype confirms some elements and reveals flaws in others; this is precisely the value of the process. As soon as they identify an issue, they rush to their laptops to adjust the model, trading quick comments and diagrams across screens. Between tasks they joke about possible names, playing with the words “waffle”, “Ullol Aglantzia”, and “ULL”, testing combinations that sound just absurd enough to stick.

The bench they are building is meant for the Old Square in Aglantzia. Residents have expressed a desire for something to activate the space — “somewhere to sit,” as many put it, “somewhere to gather”. The bench is a modest intervention, but one that reconnects the students’ design education to a specific urban fabric and to the everyday needs of a community.

In this small room, among scattered plywood pieces and glowing laptop screens, the project becomes more than a fabrication exercise. It becomes an experiment in place-making: a student-built structure aimed at restoring a sense of presence and possibility in a local square.

Leaving the students in their work, in the air-conditioned laboratories and workspaces of the University of Cyprus Old Campus, we decided to explore Aglantzia. Following advice from Christina Panayi and Michalis Psaras, the facilitators and student mentors, we passed through the shaded Academias Forest Park, eventually exiting at Aglantzias Avenue and reaching the Aglantzia Fountain, that, even if it was dry, signalled that we had arrived at the right place with its bold text of “I <3 AGLANTZIA”. Behind it, the Spyros Kyprianous Park, with urban playground equipment, offered shade before entering the outskirts of Aglantzia.

From Aglantzia Fountain down Andrea Kalvou Street, we skirted what we recognized was the new residential part of Aglantzia — multi-storeyed residential blocks, with ground level parking lots, and rooftop water cisterns, built in an ambiguous contemporary “Mediterranean” style which could be found anywhere along its coast. A lot of the older houses, much lower and stockier, were now advertised as being “for sale”, and it was obvious they would be soon replaced by these new buildings. Some lots remained “empty”, only in the sense that they acted as improvised or organised parking lots for the residents. A vulcaniser shop near a parking lot and a run-down and decrepit small house punctuated the almost sleek street. Few lots had any green space, and even then, not a lot of foliage, mostly shrubs and palm-trees, plants that could withstand Cyprus’ summer draughts and water shortages.

We passed through Kalvou Street to Irinis Street, Argous street and then Archiepiskopou Makariou III Street, brushed by a bit more foliage, and the steady advance of the contemporary residential into the historic core of Aglantzias, and its ground-level houses in its early 20th century Cypriot traditional architecture style, until we, somehow, ended up at the Old Square of Aglantzia. The Old Square was turned into an impromptu parking lot; the Small Pomegranate Caffé was closed until later in the afternoon, and so we sat in the only available shade, by the stone walls of the HyBuild. It was here that the students planned to install their intervention, the waffle-structure bench and shade, and we understood their concept, clinging to the HyBuild entrance to escape the summer heat. The neighbourhood was completely silent; there was nobody in the streets; it seemed almost like a ghost town.

Ullol’s Outputs, Outcomes, Results

“In Ulloī Aglantzia, the emphasis was placed on developing collaborative, practical, and context-driven transferable knowledge through direct engagement with the local community. A key focus was on collaborative and participatory skills, which were cultivated early on during the Theme Choice phase. By using a modified and more accessible version of the Structured Democratic Dialogue Process, participants worked together to generate, group, and prioritize ideas. This process, combined with open discussions, neighbourhood walks, and interactions with residents and local authorities, allowed participants to practice teamwork, negotiation, and consensus-building in a real urban context”.

(SOURCE: ULLOI AGLANTZIA FOLLOW-UP REFLECTION)

The ULL in Aglantzia unfolded as a practice deeply tied to the specific spatial and social fabric of its neighbourhood, as the questions of territorial embeddedness became visible not only through its methods. Rather than operating as an abstract framework applied onto the territory, Ulloī Aglantzia took shape through repeated, situated engagements with the streets, courtyards, and everyday spaces of the district. Its outputs, murals, temporary structures, events, mappings, were materially and symbolically anchored within the neighbourhood, emerging from direct interaction with its territory as well as its local actors, rhythms, and routines, as well as from articulated needs and collectively identified priorities.

From the outset, the process of identifying themes already reflected this embeddedness. Ulloī extended beyond institutional settings into public space, inviting residents, students, and passers-by to articulate concerns grounded in lived experience. These **discussions** were not only collected but translated into communicative formats (videos, public presentations, and exchanges with municipal representatives) positioning outputs not as analytical abstractions but as devices embedded within the local public sphere. Territorial embeddedness here was enacted through accessibility and exposure: the process itself became visible, open, and intertwined with everyday neighbourhood life.

This connection deepened during the exploration phase, where **neighbourhood walks, door-to-door conversations, and collaborative mapping** positioned the territory as the primary site of knowledge production. Participants documented spatial conditions alongside social interactions, informal uses, and latent potentials. The identification of thematic clusters (ranging from public space and mobility to local economy and social life) was inseparable from the specific locations in which they were observed. Embeddedness thus took the form of proximity and immersion, with knowledge emerging through sustained presence and engagement.

Within this framework, situated knowledge was translated into tangible, site-specific interventions. The **community mural** exemplifies this process. Rather than a generic artistic addition, it was developed through a close reading of the neighbourhood: the artist Twenty Three, together with students, identified recurring objects, patterns, and micro-sites of interaction (thresholds, benches, points of encounter) that define local spatial identity. These elements were translated into a graphic composition that both reflected and reinterpreted the area’s everyday visual language. The process of its making further reinforced embeddedness: residents, students, and institutional actors,

including the Vice Mayor of Aglantzia and representatives of the Nicosia Development Agency, participated directly in its production. The mural thus became not only an image within the urban landscape, but a trace of collective action embedded in both space and process.

Similarly, the **SITCom structure** emerged as a direct response to needs identified during earlier phases. Conceived as a small-scale, modular intervention, it was designed to function as a flexible meeting point within Aglantzia Square, providing seating, shade, and a platform for social and cultural activities. Its construction from interlocking wooden elements allowing disassembly and relocation reflected an understanding of the neighbourhood as dynamic and evolving. The process of its design, testing, and fabrication, carried out by students with support from local expertise, translated abstract ideas into a physical infrastructure embedded in daily use. Installed during the **Musical Courtyards event**, the structure did not remain a temporary installation alone; it continued to support activities by local residents, indicating a degree of persistence within the urban fabric.

The documentation of this process in a booklet containing assembly guidelines, visual material, and architectural drawings further extended the embeddedness of the intervention. It functioned not only as a record, but as a tool for replication and reinterpretation, linking the specific case of Aglantzia to potential future uses while maintaining its grounding in local experience. In this sense, outputs operated across scales: as immediate spatial interventions, as social processes, and as transferable knowledge.

The logic of embeddedness also extended through collective events such as the **Cycling Tour** and **Musical Courtyards**. These initiatives unfolded across multiple sites within the neighbourhood, activating streets, courtyards, and squares through movement, performance, and encounter. By linking dispersed locations and involving local organisations, businesses, and municipal actors, these events embedded the ULL within existing social and spatial networks. They did not introduce new spaces as isolated venues, but reactivated familiar ones, allowing participants to experience the neighbourhood as a shared and dynamic environment.

Across these practices, **territorial embeddedness emerged not as a fixed attribute, but as a cumulative effect of repeated interactions**. The co-production of outputs in response to identified needs, the involvement of diverse actors in both design and implementation, and the anchoring of activities in specific sites all contributed to a gradual integration of the ULL into the everyday life of Aglantzia. At the same time, this embeddedness remained conditioned by the temporal and institutional limits of the project. While certain interventions, such as SITCom, demonstrated continuity beyond the immediate timeframe, the longer-term incorporation of these practices into municipal routines or broader governance structures remained uncertain.

The outputs, outcomes, and results of Ullo Aglantzia can therefore be understood as collectively producing a situated form of territorial engagement. Through murals that reflect local identity, structures that support everyday use, events that activate space,

and documentation that extends knowledge, the lab engaged directly with the neighbourhood's specific challenges — disconnected public spaces, limited youth participation, and the absence of inclusive platforms for dialogue. Territorial embeddedness did not reside in any single intervention, but in the accumulation of these practices, through which the lab became, even if temporarily, part of the spatial, social, and symbolic fabric of Aglantzia.

Ullol's Participants and Empowerment

"As the ULL relied strongly on the constructive engagement of students, an open call was launched inviting students to participate as ambassadors for the entire duration of the research project. This approach ensured a core group of four committed students, who not only participated consistently in activities but also supported knowledge transfer to new participants. Given their more advanced level of studies, they often took the lead in mapping processes during on-site activities. [...] From the perspective of students participants affiliated with the UCY, most joined the activities as these were inextricably linked with the university's design studio course. As a result, overall attendance was high. [...] Some students were more active than others in collecting and documenting information, with this fluctuation being most evident during the Exploration phase. In contrast, during the subsequent phases, especially those involving hands-on activities' student engagement was significantly higher".

(SOURCE: ULLOI AGLANTZIA FOLLOW-UP REFLECTION)

Within ULLol Aglantzia, participant empowerment appeared as something that gradually took shape through involvement in situated, collective practices. The process was structured in a way that consistently invited participants (residents, students, youth, and local actors) to move from observers of their environment to active contributors in shaping it. This shift was not framed in abstract terms, but enacted through concrete situations: discussions held in public space, collaborative walks, hands-on workshops, and moments of building and making together.

By opening the process to a wide range of participants, including passers-by, the lab redistributed the capacity to define what mattered in the neighbourhood. Participants were not responding to pre-established agendas but were actively involved in articulating them. The use of a modified Structured Democratic Dialogue Process, combined with accessible formats such as short videos and public presentations, suggests an effort to lower barriers to participation and to make individual perspectives visible within a shared framework. In this early stage, empowerment emerged as the ability to voice concerns and see them taken seriously within a collective process.

As the process moved into exploration, empowerment became more closely tied to knowledge production. Participants engaged directly with the territory through walks, conversations, and mapping exercises, encountering the neighbourhood not only as users but as interpreters. The emphasis on meeting "the true experts of the neighbourhood" (i.e., its residents) shifted authority away from purely technical

expertise and toward situated knowledge. At the same time, collaboration with professionals such as architects and urban practitioners introduced new tools and perspectives. Empowerment here took the form of learning to navigate between these different forms of knowledge: participants were not only contributing insights but also acquiring the capacity to analyse and represent spatial and social conditions.

The co-creation phase further extended this process by translating ideas into tangible interventions. Projects such as the mural and the SITCom structure required participants to take on active roles in design, decision-making, and construction. The involvement of diverse groups (students, schoolchildren, residents, artists, and local authorities) meant that no single actor controlled the outcome. Instead, the process depended on negotiation, coordination, and shared responsibility. In this context, empowerment was closely linked to making: the act of physically shaping space became a way of asserting presence and agency within the neighbourhood. At the same time, the collaborative nature of these activities required participants to engage with difference, to adapt their ideas, and to work within collective constraints.

Public events in the showcase phase introduced another dimension. Activities such as the Cycling Tour and Musical Courtyards created opportunities for participants to see the results of their involvement reflected in the wider community. These events extended participation beyond the core group, inviting broader audiences into the process. For those directly involved, this visibility could reinforce a sense of contribution and recognition; for others, it offered an accessible entry point into the lab's activities. Empowerment in this phase was therefore not only about participation in production, but also about the ability to engage with and inhabit the outcomes as part of a shared public experience.

We had conducted our focus group discussion with the student participants in Ulloj Aglantzia in the middle of their work on the SITCom bench. The group had been one of the three groups that were formed during the entire process of the implementation with Ulloj; by the time of our visit to Nicosia and our group discussion, one group had already initiated and finished work on the “mural on the parking lot”, as they called it; another was handling the social media and planning the social community events that would take place by the end of summer and the end of the ULL cycle. The group we were to discuss with was the group focusing on planning, designing and constructing the SITCom bench. The group consisted mostly of architecture students, who were participating in this ULL through their summer courses, their design studio, working from the Department of Architecture's studios and FabLabs in the Old Campus. The design orientation of architecture study programmes, such as these, and the extensive work students engaged with and laboured was evident in the approach to the cool, slick studio — the hallways filled with the presentations and models of students' projects they had worked on for the end of the semester and their exams.

The discussion was not recorded; instead, discussion points were jotted down as they were brought up, despite the language barrier which hampered the discussion with the students. However, much of the discussion about student empowerment with the students participating in the ULL, participating in this group of the ULL, revolved

around a central preoccupation, and the biggest advantage they saw from participating in Ulloı Aglantzia. They repeatedly stressed, explained, and reiterated the importance of “doing this”, of participating in activities such as these, and especially the last weeks and the weeks that would follow. They enjoyed and thought that all the activities in the earlier phases of the ULL were important and that they learned a lot, either acquiring skills that they didn’t acquire through their previous education, or were not taught in their study, or that gathered a new concreteness and meaning now that they were able to develop them, or sharpening and engaging knowledges about Aglantzia that they knew, that they acknowledged, and generally grasped, as students residing in Nicosia (regardless if they were born and raised in the city or came from another part of Cyprus), but that they had not previously considered in such a way.

But beyond the general skills and knowledge they acquired that was planned for them to acquire, they were much more interested and preoccupied with the task at hand: developing the urban installation, a piece of both urban equipment but also social equipment — what would become and be named SITCom. For them, the work they were doing and that was specifically focused on designing, testing, and then installing the SITCom installation was much more important. First of all, as they explained, they were engaged with an architectural principle they had learned about, as a possibility, but never really engaged deeper with it; it was now an opportunity to deep-dive into the waffle structure principle, to explore it and utilize it in this specific design, working out the details and the overall plan. The waffle structure inspired design was exciting and challenging.

Second, but equally important, they were about finishing the design and were to send the plans to the CNC cutter to cut the plywood in a miniature mock-up, where they could test and, if necessary, revise their design. (Indeed, the mock-up showed some flaws, which, instead of disheartening the students, motivated them to rush to their laptops to correct the flaws). The mock-up was essential, they explained, as the week after, the CNC cutter would cut it up to scale; then, they would transport it to the site of the Old Square in Aglantzia and then assemble it in-situ by themselves. This was something that they had never previously done during their studies, and the importance of this hands-on approach from idea to realisation was constantly brought up: they would do it themselves. As one student explained, as architecture students, most of their education they had worked “only with paper or models”, and they worked so much, producing so much plans and renders; it was not that they didn’t enjoy the work or found it motivating, on the contrary, they took pride in their work during their educations, presented in end-of-semester exhibitions. The part that had never come through was “actually making it”; instead, it mostly “ended on a piece of paper”. Thus, the idea that something they worked on for so long would be actually constructed, and that they would be the ones constructing it, was thrilling. A youthful rush followed the iterating arguments that the fact that “this won’t just stay on paper”, “we’re going to do it” and “people will actually use it”.

The students’ reflections point to a form of agency that emerged not as an abstract outcome of participation, but through their direct engagement with a concrete task

situated within the territory of Aglantzia, their direct engagement with a new set of knowledge and a direct engagement with an application of that knowledge. The insistence on “doing this” can be read as more than enthusiasm: it signalled a shift in how they related to their own role within the process and the ULL in general. The SITcom bench, as both an urban and social installation, would function as a focal point around which this shift became visible. It translated broader concerns about public space, its usage and social interaction in the neighbourhood into a material problem that required interpretation, decision-making, and collective responsibility.

Empowerment intensified at the moment when students were confronted with the necessity of acting: finalising a design, testing it, correcting it, and ultimately building it in a real urban setting. The problematique of Aglantzia, particularly the question of how public spaces could be activated and made usable, remained present, but in a mediated form. It was not discussed in abstract terms, but embedded in the practical challenge of constructing something that others would encounter and use. In this sense, the students’ sense of agency emerged through a translation of territorial issues into a design-build process.

Their reflections also suggest that empowerment was also tied to the difference between their previous educational experience and the ULL cycle, even if the process was similar to summer schools or programmes in which they previously participated. The repeated contrast between their designs “staying on paper” and “actually making it”, pointed to the argument that participation in the ULL enabled them to reframe their own competencies. Skills that had previously remained within the representational or speculative domains acquired a different weight for them once they were connected to a real site, real users, the possibility of failure and the inevitability of finishing it. All steps within the process reinforced this, by introducing a feedback loop. Empowerment, in this sense, could be seen as closely linked to exposure to application. The experience of carrying a project from conception to realisation, from anticipation of its use to observing its use — appears to have procured a heightened awareness of their potential role in shaping space, reinforcing their sense of agency and the sense of meaningful engagement.

Thus, empowerment in this case did not reside in the acquisition of specific skills alone, nor in the successful completion of the installation. It **emerged in the relationship between participants and the task at hand, in the way they interpreted its relevance, assumed responsibility for its outcome, and recognised its connection to a lived environment beyond the studio**. The statement that “people will actually use it” encapsulates this shift: it marks the moment where the work ceased to be an academic exercise and became part of a shared urban reality. In this sense, SITCom, a placemaking modular wooden structure adaptable to context by (re)assembling, and its realisation was seen as an encapsulation of their broadening sense of agency, excitement and empowerment.

CoCo Stadtlabor (Showcase / Final Events)

“Our mission is to create an open space where publics can meet, work together and explore how urban life is changing. We want to support students, residents and local initiatives who are curious about the city and who wish to develop their own ideas. The lab works at the interface between culture and urban planning and focuses on challenges that matter in Cottbus, including social and spatial transformation, questions of belonging and accessibility”.

(SOURCE: [PS-U-GO BOOKLET](https://www.psugo.eu/booklet/coco.html), [HTTPS://WWW.PSUGO.EU/BOOKLET/COCO.HTML](https://www.psugo.eu/booklet/coco.html))

Cottbus, located in the federal state of Brandenburg in eastern Germany, represents the largest urban centre of the Lusatia (Lausitz) region and has a population of approximately 100,000 inhabitants. Situated between the metropolitan areas of Berlin and Dresden and close to the Polish border, the city has historically served as an administrative, economic, and cultural hub for the surrounding region. Its urban morphology reflects a layered history shaped by industrial development, socialist-era planning, and contemporary processes of economic and environmental transition.

The historic centre of Cottbus is organized around the Altmarkt, the city’s traditional market square, which remains a focal point of urban life. The surrounding area is characterized by a compact urban fabric of restored historical houses, narrow streets, and pedestrian zones that could support accessibility and social interaction. Over time, the city expanded outward in concentric rings, reflecting different phases of urban development. Particularly visible are the large residential districts constructed during the period of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), where functionalist housing blocks, wide avenues, and standardized urban layouts were designed to accommodate workers employed in the region’s energy and industrial sectors. These areas still form a significant portion of the city’s residential landscape and reflect the socio-economic structure that emerged during the decades of industrial production.

For much of the twentieth century, the economic identity of Cottbus was closely tied to the lignite (brown coal) industry. The extraction and combustion of lignite in the surrounding region formed the backbone of the local economy, shaping employment structures, infrastructure development, and the social composition of the city. During the GDR period, energy production from lignite played a strategic role in the national economy, and Cottbus emerged as a key centre for energy generation and industrial labour. Entire neighbourhoods and communities developed around these industries, and for many residents the coal sector became a defining element of local identity and social cohesion. However, the economic foundations of the city began to change significantly following German reunification in the 1990s. The restructuring of the energy sector, the closure or modernization of industrial facilities, and broader market transformations led to a gradual decline in traditional industrial employment. These processes contributed to demographic shifts, including population decline and the outward migration of younger residents seeking employment opportunities elsewhere in Germany. Over time, parts of the city experienced vacant housing, underutilized infrastructure, and the reconfiguration of urban space, reflecting the broader post-industrial transformations experienced by many cities in eastern Germany.

In recent years, these changes have entered a new phase as Germany implements ambitious climate policies that include the gradual phase-out of coal. The Lusatia region, historically dependent on lignite mining, has therefore become one of the key territories targeted for structural transformation. In response, Cottbus has increasingly positioned itself as a centre for innovation, research, and sustainable development. Strategic investments aim to shift the local economy toward high technology, renewable energy, digitalization, and knowledge-based industries. Within this process, the presence of **Brandenburg University of Technology Cottbus-Senftenberg (BTU)** plays a particularly important role, as the university attracts students, researchers, and international collaborations that contribute to the development of new economic sectors. These national and EU ambitions are reflected in the broader regional development initiative led by the **Wirtschaftsregion Lausitz** (Lusatia Economic Region or Investment Region Lusatia) as well as in the municipal **Boomtown Cottbus** campaign. Within the framework of Germany's structural transition program for the Lusatia region, the German government and the EU have committed substantial funds in investment to support economic diversification and sustainable development. Cottbus is positioned as one of the central engines of this transformation. Planned initiatives include the creation of new research and innovation infrastructures, the development of new university campuses, the construction of large-scale renewable energy facilities which aim to produce green energy on former mining sites, as well as ecological renewal of former coal pits. Together, these initiatives seek to generate new jobs across sectors including technology, engineering, healthcare, research, and urban development. Through these projects, Cottbus is imagined to become not only a symbol of regional restructuring but also a model of a climate-conscious and innovation-driven urban future.

Despite these ambitious plans, the process of economic and social transformation has also generated significant tensions within the city. Structural change has not affected all social groups and neighbourhoods in the same way, and the transition away from coal has produced decades long feelings of uncertainty among parts of the population. For communities whose identities and livelihoods were historically connected to mining and energy production, the loss of traditional industries has been accompanied by concerns about employment stability, social mobility, and the preservation of local identity. These anxieties are often intensified by demographic change, including an aging population and the arrival of new residents connected to the expanding research and education sectors.

In recent years, these dynamics have intersected with broader political trends and social tensions visible in parts of eastern Germany. Cottbus has experienced several incidents and demonstrations associated with far-right political and extremist groups, which have raised concerns among residents and contributed to debates about social cohesion and public safety. Such developments are often interpreted as symptoms of deeper socio-economic insecurities and perceptions of marginalization within a rapidly changing regional economy. In neighbourhoods where industrial employment has declined and demographic change is most visible these tensions can contribute to feelings of exclusion or distrust toward institutions and political processes. At the same

time, the social landscape of Cottbus is characterized by significant efforts to promote inclusivity, dialogue, and civic engagement. Numerous civil society organizations, cultural associations, and local initiatives actively work to counter discrimination and foster intercultural exchange within the city. These initiatives organize public events, educational programs, and community activities aimed at strengthening social cohesion and creating spaces for dialogue among residents from diverse backgrounds. As a result, the contemporary atmosphere of Cottbus can be described as ambivalent: on the one hand marked by concerns about economic transition and social division, and on the other by visible efforts to build a more open, inclusive, and participatory urban community.

Another dimension of the city's evolving social landscape relates to the relationship between the university population and the broader urban environment. While BTU attracts a diverse and mobile student population from across Germany and abroad, the spatial organization of the campus and patterns of student mobility can sometimes contribute to a sense of social estrangement. Many students reside in campus located student housing or temporary accommodations or remain only for short periods, which can limit their long-term engagement with the city. As a result, social life often remains concentrated within the university campus, while student interactions with local communities and everyday urban spaces remain limited. At the same time, certain public spaces in the city centre and surrounding neighbourhoods experience relatively low levels of sustained social use outside specific commercial or cultural events. This dynamic reflects a broader challenge faced by many university towns: the need to bridge the social and spatial divide between academic institutions and the wider urban community, while activating public spaces as places of encounter, participation, and collective urban life.

These dynamics are further reflected in the use and perception of urban public spaces. Although Cottbus possesses a historically vibrant city centre and significant green areas, some public spaces remain underused or lack sustained forms of social activation outside of commercial or event-based activities. The absence of continuous interaction between different urban groups (residents, students, newcomers, and long-term communities) can reinforce feelings of disconnection within the urban environment. In parallel, broader political and cultural tensions, including episodes of xenophobia and the visibility of far-right activism, highlight the need for spaces that foster dialogue, social cohesion, and democratic participation.

Taken together, these dynamics illustrate the complex situation of Cottbus as a city undergoing profound structural transformation. The legacy of industrial production, the environmental and economic consequences of the coal phase-out, the ambitious plans for technological and ecological innovation, and the social tensions associated with demographic and political change all intersect within the urban landscape. Cottbus therefore represents a particularly illustrative case of a medium-sized European city navigating the challenges of post-industrial transition while simultaneously attempting to redefine its economic model, social cohesion, and urban identity in the context of a rapidly changing regional and global environment.

CoCo's Problematique

Within this context, the problematique of Cottbus can be described as **the challenge of bridging the gap between large-scale structural transformation and everyday urban life**. On the one hand, the city is undergoing ambitious economic and technological change driven by national and European investments. On the other hand, many social and spatial issues linked to this transformation – such as community fragmentation, limited civic participation, and underutilized public spaces – remain insufficiently addressed through conventional planning processes. The question therefore emerges of how residents, students, and local stakeholders can become active participants in shaping the city's transformation rather than remaining passive recipients of externally driven development strategies.

It is within this broader framework that the **CoCo (Commoning Cottbus)** ULL was established as part of the PS-U-GO initiative. CoCo is conceived as a student-led experimental platform that connects university education with everyday urban life by creating a shared physical and social space for collaboration between students, researchers, residents, and local stakeholders. Rather than functioning solely as an academic exercise, the ULL operates through real-life experimentation in urban contexts, encouraging participants to collectively observe, interpret, and engage with the social and spatial dynamics shaping the city.

Initiated by the **Chair of Urban Management at BTU**, CoCo aims to bring together students of architecture, urban planning and design, civil engineering, and other disciplines with urban residents in order to jointly identify, discuss, and address challenges in the city's public spaces. Through workshops, participatory events, and collaborative experiments, the initiative fosters collective learning processes in which students and community members share knowledge, test ideas, and explore alternative ways of using and perceiving urban environments. By activating a growing network of local stakeholders and organizing accessible participatory activities, CoCo creates opportunities for interaction among groups that might otherwise remain socially or spatially separated. It does so by repurposing a commercial space within a previously vibrant but now mostly unused shopping passage in the city centre, along with other NGO and civic initiatives.

In this sense, CoCo directly addresses one of the central tensions shaping contemporary Cottbus: the gap between top-down strategies of economic transformation and the everyday experiences of residents navigating social change. CoCo operates at the scale of everyday urban practices. It seeks to activate underused urban spaces, facilitate dialogue between students and residents, and experiment with collaborative approaches to urban problem-solving. By doing so, the initiative contributes to strengthening civic engagement, encouraging participatory governance, and supporting the development of a more inclusive urban culture.

Ultimately, CoCo positions itself as **a shared field of experimentation and lived space within the city, understood not as a concrete abstraction but as a lived territory shaped by structural change, everyday routines and contested perceptions of belonging and access**. Through its activities, the ULL explores how participatory practices, local knowledge, and collective learning can contribute to social cohesion and urban imagination within a city undergoing profound structural change.

CoCo's Urban Showcase Phase: Ethnographic Vignette

"[...] Students from different disciplinary backgrounds engaged in exchange with cultural practitioners, local initiatives and, at selected moments, representatives from city administration. Knowledge transfer was facilitated through shared tasks such as mapping activities, public workshops and exhibitions, where different forms of expertise had to be translated into concrete action. [...] Students learned about local governance structures, informal networks and practical constraints of urban work, while non-academic participants gained insight into analytical methods, documentation practices and experimental formats commonly used in research and education. These exchanges were supported by open lab hours, collective reflection sessions and the visible presence of work-in-progress in the space. [...]"
(SOURCE: COCO FOLLOW-UP REFLECTION)

We had finished a meeting with representatives working at the **Department of Education and Integration**; they had welcomed us in their office, offering us biscuits, drinks, and answers to any questions we may have about Cottbus. With a surprising frankness, they had talked about the social tensions in Cottbus, with the rise of far-right and extremist political and social movements and connected the growing social alienation of the city's residents and a dissolution of its communities, and the ways their office had been running projects, funded by the EU and the German federal government, to promote integration, democratic values and civic participation in hopes of combating these issues, although recognizing their limited scope. A recurring sentiment, expressed in both this discussion, and others, during our stay in Cottbus, was that people had had enough of "participation", in its classical sense, in its usage within the German civil society, and that it had its limits.

Following the meeting, we continued to Schlosskirchpassage, the former commercial passage, that once housed shops, now rented and privately owned, connecting the inner old city of Cottbus to its socialist expansion. Even though it was in the centre of Cottbus, it was a bit away from its main routes. With floor-to-ceiling glass partitions between different shop spaces around a central atrium and with its glass staircase connecting to the second floor, it had been kept in a good state, maintained, though it lost its market appeal for some years now. The entirety of the bottom floor of Schlosskirchpassage had been rented out for, at that point, two years, and it had become "der Offenen Passage", "the open passage".

On the Burgstrasse side of the passage, two spaces (one across each other) had been rented out by the Department of Urban Management at BTU; another, at the opposite end, on the Brandenburger Platz side, had been rented out by [LosmachenJetzt](#), a non-profit association aimed at strengthening the civil society in the Lausitz region, allied with other associations and initiatives. Together with others, they had worked on creating [the Offenen Passage](#). After going through Losmachen's space, we go to CoCo.

Along the interior walls of CoCo, a sequence of posters sets the tone of the space. Under the heading "What we pay attention to" in blue letters, short statements act as both reminders and commitments: "In our common space everyone is welcome;" "We create a safe space, free of discrimination;" "We always act for the common good;" "We democratically vote on all activities;" "We take responsibility for our resources;" "We offer space for respectful discourse". These principles frame CoCo as a small but intentional counterpoint to the broader urban issues the students describe.

Outside, the city speaks through another set of messages. The Boomtown Cottbus campaign and federal and state initiatives present the city as a future hub of innovation, green transition, and sustainable growth — announcing investment figures and projected new jobs. These policies respond to long-term regional challenges: economic restructuring after German unification, the decline of the coal industry, and the social tensions that have followed. Locals often express frustration with social alienation and uneven development, while NGOs work to create inclusive meeting places. The university, too, has initiated new forms of engagement.

The students tell us this while sitting in a room they have been gradually reclaiming as their own. Once a small shop within a passageway, it now functions as a collective living room, open to the public through its glass walls. They have held classes here, hosted game nights, organised bike-repair workshops, and staged small concerts and jam sessions. Across the passage, another room displays artworks and design projects from their peers. Though they describe these activities as "small," pride surfaces as they speak. "We learned how to organise and take care of the place".

One student smiles as he recounts: "I organised a Super Mario Kart games night," describing how they brought their own controllers and spent the evening together in town rather than returning each to their room in the dorms. Another reflects on the broader context: "A lot of the students travel. They don't stay in Cottbus. They think there's nothing here to do". She explains that the historic centre, where CoCo sits, often lacks spaces for young people. Their response has been proactive: "We went around asking people what they need. We want to give them a space... We want to do something for the community. So, we went delivering coffee in the neighbourhoods. We organized a cake night, offered free cake to visitors".

Through these small acts of occupation and programming, CoCo becomes a modest yet meaningful urban micro-infrastructure — one that attempts to bridge social gaps, activate underused space, and reimagine the historic centre as a place where young people can both gather and contribute.

CoCo's Outputs, Outcomes, Results

"[...] Rather than aiming for singular or finalized solutions, outputs emerged as situated responses to concrete needs and questions raised during the process. [...] Many outputs addressed the lack of accessible places for encounter in the city centre, as well as the limited visibility of everyday experiences that tend to remain marginal in formal planning processes. Mapping activities and public conversations revealed tensions around belonging and the changing character of urban life, which were translated into formats that made these issues tangible to a wider public. Exhibitions and showcases allowed stakeholders to engage with these perspectives in a shared space, while smaller, recurring formats supported ongoing exchange. [...] The relationship between products, process and territory was therefore iterative. Outputs did not simply illustrate predefined problems but actively shaped how issues were understood and discussed".

(SOURCE: CoCo FOLLOW-UP REFLECTION)

CoCo did not address its territorial problematique through a single intervention or a clearly bounded project; at the same time, its programme could be understood as a clearly bounded and precise intervention. Indeed, it unfolded through the gradual occupation and activation of a centrally located, formerly commercial urban space, which over time began to function as a place of encounter, exchange, and visibility. What emerged was thus not a finished product in the conventional sense, but a space in use, one that was repeatedly opened, rearranged, and inhabited through a sequence of events, conversations, and temporary spatial configurations. In this sense, the absence of accessible and inclusive places in the city centre was not approached abstractly, but was engaged directly, by making such a place exist.

Rather than producing fixed or permanent solutions, its outputs took the form of **events, conversations, mappings, exhibitions, and temporary spatial uses** that responded directly to issues identified through engagement with the city and its inhabitants. In this sense, the primary outcome of CoCo was not a discrete object, but the sustained use of a public place, the creation of an environment in which social and cultural activities could unfold, and where the lack of accessible, inclusive spaces in the city centre could be directly explored. Its primary "output" was exactly the site of its intervention: an ongoing production of public space in use.

This condition became particularly visible in **the launch event**, which functioned as an initial moment of articulation. Visitors were invited to reflect on what they perceived as missing in the city, producing a range of responses that pointed to the limited availability of informal meeting spaces, the lack of opportunities for interaction across different social groups, and the relative invisibility of certain everyday experiences in the urban centre. These observations did not lead to immediate interventions; rather, they were documented and shared, forming a preliminary account of how the city was experienced by its users. The event thus operated both as a gathering and as a means of making these perceptions publicly accessible.

Subsequent formats, such as the **Regional Futures sessions**, extended this process by creating structured settings in which residents could articulate their expectations, concerns, and interpretations of ongoing urban transformation. These discussions addressed themes linked to economic change, new investments, and shifting urban identities, while also reflecting uncertainty regarding how these processes would affect everyday life in Cottbus. The sessions did not aim to produce consensus or strategic direction; instead, they provided a space in which multiple perspectives could be expressed and placed in relation to one another. In doing so, they translated broader processes of structural change into situated accounts grounded in lived experience.

Alongside these more discussion-oriented formats, events such as the **neighbourhood summer festival** introduced more informal and accessible modes of engagement. These activities brought together a wider range of participants and temporarily reconfigured the lab space as a site of social interaction. Through food, cultural programming, and shared presence, such events lowered barriers to participation and enabled encounters between individuals who might not otherwise engage in structured formats. Here, the emphasis shifted from articulation to experience, contributing to the lab's role as a place where different forms of urban life could become visible and shared.

Across **more than thirty events** organised within the CoCo framework, outputs accumulated in an iterative manner. Workshops, exhibitions, and public formats drew on observations generated through walks, mappings, and conversations in and around the city centre. These outputs addressed recurring issues identified through the process, including the limited availability of spaces for encounter, the fragmentation of everyday urban experience, and questions of belonging in a city undergoing structural transformation. Rather than presenting definitive solutions, they functioned as intermediate forms' making these issues tangible, discussable, and accessible to a broader public.

The production of these outputs was closely linked to the configuration of actors involved in the lab. Methodological and organisational support was provided by BTU, while local NGOs played a central role in maintaining continuity and engagement. Municipal actors participated intermittently, contributing to specific events or moments of coordination. This constellation required ongoing negotiation in practice, as expectations, resources, and institutional frameworks had to be aligned in relation to concrete activities. As a result, the outputs were shaped not only by the issues identified in the territory, but also by the conditions under which collaboration was organised.

Over time, the outputs of CoCo began to shape not only how the city was represented, but how it was experienced. The space became a point of reference, a place where something might be happening, even if its exact form was not always known in advance. For some, it offered an opportunity to engage, to speak, or simply to observe; for others, it remained peripheral, encountered only occasionally or not at all. This unevenness was part of its character. CoCo did not transform the city in a comprehensive sense, but it introduced moments of interruption' **instances where everyday routines were slightly altered, where new interactions became possible,**

and where questions about the city could be collectively explored. Through this process, CoCo functioned as an interface between everyday urban life and institutional contexts. Its outputs did not simply represent existing conditions in Cottbus; they contributed to how these conditions were articulated and understood. By creating situations in which local experiences could be shared, discussed, and translated into public formats, the lab supported forms of collective reflection that are often absent from formal planning processes.

In this way, the territorial problematique of Cottbus, marked by fragmented social landscapes, limited spaces of encounter, and evolving forms of belonging, was addressed not through resolution, but through repeated acts of activation. The outputs of CoCo **stood within these conditions, embedded within them, shaped by them, and responsive to them.** Each event, conversation, and temporary installation, as a mediating form within this process, contributed to **an ongoing process in which the city was not simply observed, but continually re-articulated through practice.**

CoCo's Participants and Empowerment

“Stakeholder engagement in the ULL developed unevenly but productively over the course of the implementation. [...] Core stakeholders included university departments, student groups, cultural workers and local initiatives active in the city centre, alongside representatives from city administration who engaged primarily through specific events and moments of exchange. Engagement was strongest where formats were concrete and low threshold. Public workshops, exhibitions, neighbourhood events and open lab hours enabled repeated encounters and sustained participation, particularly from cultural actors, residents and local initiatives. Engagement from administrative and institutional stakeholders was more intermittent and often tied to formal invitations, public showcases or thematic relevance to their mandates. Changes in stakeholder constellations occurred throughout the process. [...] Students played a key role as intermediaries, maintaining relationships and translating between institutional logics and everyday concerns”.

(SOURCE: COCO FOLLOW-UP REFLECTION)

The interviewees described the development and use of a shared civic space in Cottbus that functioned as both a community hub and an experimental learning environment. The space had been established through collaboration between university actors, particularly BTU students and staff, and local civil society initiatives such as Losmachen. It had been created in response to a lack of infrastructure for civic engagement in the region, especially in a context marked by political tension and the presence of far-right movements. The initiative aimed to provide resources, visibility, and networking opportunities for diverse groups working toward democratic and social goals.

The space had been used in a highly flexible way. During the day, it had served as a co-working environment for students, activists, and other users, while in the evenings and on weekends it had hosted workshops, meetings, and public events. Activities had

included repair cafés, exhibitions, pop-up cafés, building workshops, and discussion formats. The space had also been used for larger gatherings, such as festivals and strategy workshops, which brought together participants from different organizations and parts of the region.

A central aspect of the project had been its role as a platform for collaboration. It has connected a wide range of actors, including refugee support networks, anti-discrimination organizations, environmental groups, and youth initiatives. The intention had been to overcome fragmentation among these groups by creating a shared physical and social environment where exchange and cooperation could take place more easily. The proximity to the university had further enabled interaction between academic and non-academic actors.

From the students' perspective, the project represented a significant departure from traditional university courses. Instead of focusing primarily on theoretical analysis or design proposals, students had been actively involved in organizing and managing the space. They had been responsible for developing projects, coordinating events, handling communication, and considering financial and logistical aspects. Initially, many students had felt uncertain and overwhelmed due to the lack of clear structure and predefined tasks. However, over time they had adapted to the open format and had found the experience both challenging and rewarding. They had gained practical skills in communication, teamwork, and project management, as well as a deeper understanding of how civic initiatives operated.

Despite its successes, the project had faced several challenges. Structurally, it had depended heavily on voluntary work and limited funding, which made long-term sustainability uncertain. Operationally, there had been difficulties in defining roles, organizing responsibilities, and maintaining consistent engagement. Public interaction had also been uneven; while events had attracted visitors, meaningful dialogue had not always taken place. Additionally, the broader political context had introduced concerns about safety and visibility, requiring a careful balance between openness and protection.

Efforts had been made to engage the local community through accessible formats such as public events and informal gatherings. Some interactions had been meaningful, including conversations with residents who expressed interest in using the space or contributing to its activities. However, outreach had remained a challenge, and there had been a recognized need to improve communication strategies in order to reach a wider and more diverse audience.

A recurring theme had been the lack of visibility and outreach. Many participants admitted that they had not known about the space before joining the project, and even during the semester most visitors had been friends or people already connected to the initiative. While larger events and festivals had attracted broader audiences, everyday engagement remained limited. Participants had recognized the need for stronger communication strategies, including advertising and outreach efforts, to make the space more widely known in the city.

Another key issue discussed was the disconnection between the university and the city. Participants described a social and cultural divide, influenced by mutual stereotypes and political differences. Some residents viewed the university as elitist or politically biased, while some students held prejudices about local residents. Additionally, structural factors contributed to this divide: many students had lived near campus, socialized within student areas, or commuted from larger cities, limiting their interaction with the broader urban community.

CoCo had been seen as an attempt to bridge this gap by creating a shared space where students and local residents could interact. Workshops and events, such as youth participation activities, had revealed that both groups were aware of this disconnection and expressed a desire for stronger links. Participants noted that even younger residents perceived the university as distant and inaccessible.

The discussion also highlighted the diversity of activities and users within the space. Events ranged from workshops and discussions to informal gatherings like gaming evenings, demonstrating the importance of offering varied formats to attract different audiences. Participants observed that engagement depended strongly on the type of activity, with some formats appealing only to specific groups.

Overall, the project had been understood as an ongoing experiment that combined elements of education, civic engagement, and urban development. It has demonstrated the importance of providing physical space for collaboration and the potential of bottom-up initiatives to foster social connections and democratic participation. At the same time, its future had depended on securing resources, strengthening networks, and refining its approach to public engagement.

The participants had described their role as creating and maintaining an open, inclusive social space. They had aimed to foster connections, encourage participation, and support collaboration among different actors in the city. The project had been understood as an ongoing experiment in civic engagement, with its success depending on improved outreach, sustained participation, and the ability to connect diverse communities.

CoCo thus emerged as a gradual and experience-based process, and not a fixed outcome, creating meaningful opportunities for students and engaged actors to develop practical skills, take responsibility, and gain first-hand experience in fields such as organizing initiatives, managing a space, and collaborating across sectors. In turn, this hands-on involvement strengthened their sense of agency and provided them valuable insights into real-world civic engagement. For civil society actors, CoCo provided a physical space for visibility, networking and cooperation, helping diverse initiatives and co-supporting the development of relationships across different groups, while also offering infrastructure for civic engagement in Cottbus.

Thus, empowerment can be seen on several levels, emerging from and limited by the broader problematique of Cottbus. On the one hand, CoCo clearly created conditions for practical empowerment, particularly for students and engaged actors. The former moved beyond abstract learning and took on responsibilities, such as organising

events, managing the space, etc. which shifted their engagement towards forms of agency typically absent in formal education. Even if this empowerment was not immediate, and initially presented uncertainties, a seeming lack of structure or feelings of being overwhelmed, it has been recognized by the participants themselves; what they understood as empowerment was acquired gradually, in adaptation to ambiguity and responsibility. It was likewise situational and bounded, depending on the framework of the academic year, voluntary engagement, and availability and/or motivation amidst the daily busyness of life. On the other hand, for civil society actors, the space offered infrastructural and relational empowerment. Having recognised the lack of space for encounter and fragmented civic engagement as key territorial issues in Cottbus, particularly in the politically tense environment, CoCo responded by developing initiatives and formats so that groups could meet, organise, and become visible, thus turning what were fragmented initiatives into a network.

Overall, empowerment in this context can be understood **as a dynamic and evolving process, addressing the structural conditions that define the problematique of Cottbus, exposing its contours and layers**. CoCo fostered learning, collaboration, and new connections, while laying important groundwork for future engagement and more inclusive forms of participation within the city. Even if the participants stressed the difficulties in outreach, limited everyday engagement, inconsistent interactions with the broadest local community, thus reflecting continuously on the disconnection between the university and the city and the ongoing social alienation and distrust, CoCo presents an attempt to bridge these divides, and a dedication to the dissolution of these boundaries. Thus, **empowerment could be seen as an awareness and agency**, even if “modest”, towards a reconfiguration of relations within the city. The political context complicates the context, especially the ambitions of CoCo. The space had to balance being accessible with being protected. This tension limits the extent to which empowerment, understood as open participation and public presence, can be fully realised. It suggests that empowerment in this context is not only about enabling action, but also about managing risk.

The creation of a shared space made visible both the possibilities of collaboration and the limits of participation. **Empowerment appeared not as a definitive outcome, but as a situated practice — dependent on context, constrained by resources, and continuously negotiated within the social and political realities of the city.**

4. SUMMARY

This Research Report examined the implementation of Urban Living Labs (ULLs) within the PS-U-GO project as **process-oriented, context-sensitive environments situated at the intersection of education, civic engagement, and urban space**. Rather than approaching ULLs as instruments for delivering predefined outputs or measurable innovations, the analysis focused on how they unfold in practice, through interactions between participants, institutional actors, local communities, and territorially specific conditions. In doing so, the Report positioned **ULLs** not as stable models to be replicated, but **as situated configurations of practice, shaped by the dynamics of the contexts in which they operate**.

A central analytical anchor of the Report is the concept of the *problematique*, which reframes how urban challenges are understood within the ULL framework. Instead of treating issues as discrete, solvable problems, the *problematique* is approached **as a shared field of inquiry, continuously constructed and negotiated through participation**. It emerges through dialogue, observation, and engagement, and functions as the reference point around which learning, action, and interpretation unfold. Importantly, the *problematique* is not fixed at the outset of a ULL process; rather, it evolves as participants encounter the territory, engage with stakeholders, and reflect on their own assumptions. In this sense, ULLs do not “solve” problems in a conventional sense – they render them visible, interpretable, and collectively discussable.

This perspective shifts the focus from outcomes to processes, and from solutions to forms of engagement. Across the cases examined, participants were not simply tasked with addressing predefined issues; they were drawn into processes of interpreting complexity, positioning themselves in relation to it, and negotiating possible responses with others. The value of the ULL thus lies less in what it produces in a material sense, and more in how it reconfigures relationships between knowledge, action, and place.

This Research Report has examined the implementation of four Urban Living Labs (ULLs) within the PS-U-GO framework – Madonie Living Lab (MaLL) in Petralia Sottana, Lido Pola Permanent Laboratory (LP²) in Naples, Ulloa Aglantzia in Nicosia, and CoCo Stadtlabor in Cottbus. Across these diverse contexts, the study has not sought to evaluate success in conventional terms, nor to measure outcomes as stable or transferable solutions. Instead, it has traced how learning, participation, and agency emerge through situated engagement with concrete territorial conditions, and how these processes remain shaped, and often constrained, by the very *problematiques* they attempt to address.

To analyse these dynamics, the Report developed a dual conceptual lens of territorial embeddedness and participant empowerment, treating them as interrelated dimensions of ULL practice.

Another central argument of the Report is that ULL outputs should be understood not as final products, but as integral components of the process. Outputs — whether they

take the form of events, mappings, installations, or cultural productions — serve as mediating devices that translate the problematique into tangible and shareable forms. In all cases, outputs were iterative and open-ended, contributing to an ongoing cycle of reflection and engagement. They did not resolve the problematique, but rather reshaped how it was understood and discussed.

While the Report highlights the potential of ULLs to foster engagement and learning, it also emphasises their limitations. Structural issues such as institutional fragmentation, limited resources, and social disconnection cannot be fully addressed through short-term, project-based interventions. ULLs can create temporary conditions for collaboration, but sustaining these conditions beyond the project lifecycle remains a challenge.

• **Territorial Embeddedness**

Territorial embeddedness refers to the extent to which ULLs are grounded in, responsive to, and shaped by the specific socio-spatial conditions of their context. The Report demonstrates that each ULL developed distinct forms of embeddedness, depending on its institutional configuration, stakeholder networks, spatial conditions, and the nature of its problematique.

In the MaLL, embeddedness was closely linked to regional development challenges, particularly depopulation and the role of youth in rural territories. The ULL was anchored in an existing network of local institutions and infrastructures, including facilities established through prior public investment. This provided a relatively stable institutional framework, but also shaped the kinds of engagements that were possible. Outputs often took the form of cultural productions and site-specific interventions, reflecting an attempt to engage with local identity, memory, and socio-economic conditions.

In contrast, CoCo operated in a context marked by fragmented civic infrastructure and social disconnection, including tensions related to political polarization and the presence of far-right movements. Here, territorial embeddedness was not given through institutional infrastructures and networks but had to be actively constructed through the creation of a shared civic space. This space functioned as a site of encounter, hosting a wide range of activities, from workshops and discussions to informal gatherings, that responded to the lack of accessible platforms for civic engagement. Rather than producing singular outputs, CoCo's primary "product" was the activation of space itself, understood as a condition for interaction and visibility.

Mare Libero engaged with a different kind of territorial problematique: the contested status of the urban coastline, shaped by tensions between public access, private interests, and environmental concerns. Here, embeddedness was achieved through collaboration with activist networks and through methods such as participatory mapping and GIS-based analysis. The resulting outputs, such as the "Map of Enjoyability" and geolocated datasets, did not simply document the territory but translated complex socio-spatial dynamics into shared, interpretable knowledge. This

knowledge functioned as a bridge between grassroots demands and technical or institutional frameworks.

For Ulloa Aglantzia, embeddedness was grounded in neighbourhood-scale engagement, focusing on everyday urban spaces and local community dynamics. Through walks, mappings, workshops, and co-creation processes, participants developed an understanding of the area as a lived environment shaped by social interaction, spatial practices, and local narratives. Outputs such as the SITCom installation or community mural were not isolated design interventions but materialisations of collective processes, rooted in dialogue and shared experience.

Across these cases, territorial embeddedness emerges not as a static condition but as an ongoing process of alignment between the ULL and its context. It involves negotiating relationships with stakeholders, adapting to local rhythms and constraints, and continuously redefining the problematique in response to new insights. Importantly, embeddedness also shapes the limits of what ULLs can achieve. Institutional constraints, resource limitations, and broader socio-political conditions all influence how deeply a ULL can engage with its territory and how far its effects can extend.

Participant Empowerment

The second key dimension of analysis is participant empowerment. The Report approaches empowerment not as a predefined outcome or measurable indicator, but as a processual and relational phenomenon that emerges through engagement in ULL activities. It is closely tied to the problematique: participants become empowered not simply by participating, but by engaging with a concrete territorial issue that requires interpretation, positioning, and collaborative response.

Across the cases, empowerment was most clearly visible in the shift from abstract learning to situated practice. Students, in particular, moved beyond traditional educational formats and took on roles that involved organizing events, managing spaces, conducting research, and interacting with stakeholders. This exposure to real-world conditions enabled them to develop practical skills and a deeper understanding of how civic and urban processes unfold.

However, this empowerment was neither immediate nor uniform. In many cases, participants initially experienced uncertainty, ambiguity, and a lack of structure. The open-ended nature of ULL processes required them to navigate unfamiliar situations, take responsibility, and adapt to changing conditions. Over time, this led to the development of confidence and agency.

In Ulloa Aglantzia, for example, empowerment was strongly linked to the experience of material realisation. Students emphasized the importance of “actually making it” — moving from design concepts to the physical construction of the SITCom installation. This hands-on process transformed their understanding of their role, shifting from representation to production. The sense that “this won’t just stay on paper” captured a

key moment of empowerment, where participants recognized their capacity to intervene in the built environment.

In Mare Libero, empowerment was closely tied to the concept of protagonism, understood as an active, situated form of participation. Participants engaged with complex issues related to urban commons, governance, and activism, developing both technical skills and political awareness. At the same time, empowerment remained uneven, shaped by differences in expertise, continuity of participation, and access to resources.

In CoCo, empowerment took the form of infrastructural and relational capacity. The creation of a shared space enabled participants to connect with others, organize activities, and gain visibility. However, this empowerment was largely limited to those already predisposed to engage, and did not fully extend to broader segments of the local community.

In MaLL, empowerment was seen as an ongoing practice, enacted through moments of interaction, reflection, and negotiation, and visible in the ways participants began to reframe their role and positions: not as problem-solvers, but as collaborators; not as outsiders but as participants in a shared process. Empowerment was articulated as the capacity to engage with the challenges in a more nuanced and situated way, less about achieving transformation or simple outcomes and more about sustaining the ability to act, reflect, and relate within a complex context.

These examples highlight a key insight: empowerment in ULLs is situational and bounded. It depends on the specific conditions of the project, the level of participant engagement, and the broader territorial context. It is not a structural redistribution of power, but an experiential capacity to act, reflect, and collaborate within a given framework.

Learning

The Report also highlights how knowledge acquisition within ULLs was grounded in experiential and situated learning. Participants across all sites moved beyond surface-level understanding toward more critical and reflexive engagement with their contexts. In MaLL, this involved grappling with the socio-cultural complexity of rural life and questioning notions of inclusion. In Ulloa Aglantzia, participants developed a nuanced understanding of urban space, mobility, and social interaction through direct engagement with residents. In Mare Libero, learning was shaped by the contested nature of urban commons, leading participants to critically reflect on the variability of key concepts across contexts. In CoCo, knowledge emerged through the practical challenges of organising and sustaining a civic space within a fragmented urban environment.

Importantly, this learning was not limited to technical knowledge. Participants developed interpretive, relational, and ethical capacities — learning how to listen, negotiate, and respond to diverse perspectives. Skills such as communication, teamwork, and coordination were consistently mentioned, but they were embedded

within broader processes of collective competence-building. The ability to work across disciplinary, social, and institutional boundaries — what has been described as “co-creation literacy” — emerged as a key outcome of the ULL experience.

Concluding Reflection

Ultimately, the Report argues that the value of ULLs lies not in delivering solutions, but in **creating conditions for engagement with complexity**. By bringing together diverse actors, fostering dialogue, and enabling experimentation, ULLs contribute to **a form of urban practice that is reflexive, collaborative, and situated**.

Empowerment and territorial embeddedness are not endpoints but **ongoing processes**, shaped by the interplay between participants, contexts, and problematiques. Through this lens, ULLs can be understood **as spaces of possibility, where new forms of knowledge, relationships, and practices can emerge** — even if their effects remain partial and contingent.

In this sense, ULLs do not resolve the challenges they engage with. Rather, they open them up, making them accessible to collective interpretation and action. Their contribution lies in enabling actors to engage more meaningfully with the complexities of urban life, and in doing so, to imagine and experiment with alternative ways of inhabiting and shaping the city.

Finally, the report highlights the role of **ULLs as sites of production** — not only of outputs but of conditions for learning and engagement. The processes themselves shaped the characteristics of each lab, influencing the types of knowledge generated, the forms of participation enabled, and the nature of the outcomes achieved. In this sense, ULLs can be understood **as environments that condition their own possibilities, rather than as neutral platforms for intervention**.

In conclusion, the research demonstrates that **ULLs operate as complex, situated processes that intertwine learning, participation, and territorial engagement**. Their value lies not in delivering predefined solutions but in creating spaces where issues can be explored collectively, where participants can develop agency through practice, and where new forms of knowledge and collaboration can emerge. At the same time, these processes remain deeply embedded in — and shaped by — the contexts in which they occur.