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# Urban regeneration ‘from the bottom up’

## Critique or co-optation? Notes from Milan, Italy

Chiara Rabbiosi

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*In the last decade, urban studies scholars have been studying a wide variety of urban regeneration strategies formulated by social movements and civic networks. These initiatives range from physical interventions to social and cultural activities that also serve to appropriate urban space, according to a logical alternative to neo-liberal redevelopment plans. The aim of this paper is to participate in this debate by focusing on urban interventions that arise from self-organised local civic networks, to which I refer to as urban regeneration ‘from the bottom up’. The term includes proposals, projects or effective actions that are not yet framed by a public policy implemented by governments. Drawing on empirical research in the Navigli area of Milan, Italy, civic network initiatives are contrasted to municipal strategies of regeneration. By focusing on two different experiences I show how civic networks’ actions respond to neo-liberalism ambiguously: they challenge it, but at the same time they are consistent with its logic. In the conclusion, it is claimed that urban regeneration ‘from the bottom up’ suggests that the urban civic substratum of contemporary cities is still thriving. However, it is urgent that the contradictions these strategies entail are critically appropriated in order to develop a stronger answer to austerity urbanism.*

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**Key words:** local civic networks, urban regeneration, participation, austerity urbanism, Milan, Italy

Over the last three decades, researchers in the field of urban studies have debated urban regeneration by addressing a wide range of actions aimed at re-establishing the quality of urban life and exploring the relationships that connect the social and built structures of cities (for a review, see Leary and McCarthy 2013; Porter and Shaw 2009). Specifically, this paper focuses on the debate of urban regeneration, as it emerges from self-organised local civic networks to protect, regenerate and promote

urban commons (Bresnihan and Byrne 2015; Bialski et al. 2015). Urban regeneration arising ‘from the bottom up’ consists of heterogeneous initiatives based on the principles of progressive redistribution, ecological sustainability and social responsibility. These activities have not yet been turned into the ‘non-conflictual conceptions of creativity, sustainability, [and] liveability’ (Catterall 2012, 624) at the core of contemporary neo-liberal urban development, following the so-called creative turn (Florida 2002; Landry and Bianchini 1995).

The 'hidden potential' of local areas and neighbourhoods within cities has recently been the object of research demonstrating the ability of (apparently) 'interstitial' interventions to answer the needs of local communities in terms of urban regeneration (Moulaert et al. 2010; Unsworth et al. 2011). Examples of this kind can include the creation of collective urban gardening fields (as in Berlin's Prinzessinnengärten; Wulff 2014) or free playing fields that serve a wide category of temporary and less temporary populations (as in the case of cricket pitches in East Croydon, installed in a wasteland close to the UK Border Agency; Tonkiss 2013). Such initiatives have framed specific areas spatially, integrating public, private and non-profit motives. They have also sought to address environmental issues, arts and culture, and social sustainability; thereby overcoming the limitations within recent urban policy at a time of public expenditure cutbacks (Bialski et al. 2015; Unsworth et al. 2011). This is also the context for the restructuring of the governance of 'global north' cities, under the aegis of the austerity that followed the 2008 economic crisis (Peck 2012).

The paper discusses the process of urban regeneration led by self-organised civic networks, which emerged in response to the Milan city government's apparent commitment to regeneration 'from the bottom up'. How are self-organised local civic networks fighting against, responding to, or reproducing neo-liberal urban policies? Is the entanglement between the proposals of civic networks and municipal strategies really able to provide cities with renewed forms of urban regeneration? To answer these questions, I sketch the profiles and outcomes of two self-organised civic networks active in the Navigli area of Milan during 2011: *Gruppo Verdi*<sup>1</sup> and *Laboratorio Urbano*. They serve as opposite comparative cases. The former, founded by a group of residents, has been able to realise and implement part of its urban regeneration project (a community garden), while the latter, dissimilar to a community-based movement, has disappeared.

The success of *Gruppo Verdi* can be seen as a successful story of urban regeneration 'from the bottom up'; representing a possible 'critique-through-practice' to contemporary austerity urbanism. At the same time, to succeed in its aims, this civic network has also adopted part of the neo-liberal ideology supporting austerity urbanism.

### *The changing meaning of participation in urban regeneration*

Urban regeneration has been a significant topic over the past three decades and can be seen in different aspects of urban policy neo-liberalisation (Keil 2009). If very little space for local players and communities was allowed in the 1980s, the beginning of the 1990s instead made room for major real estate and infrastructure developers. A second term was characterised by the adoption of so-called participative policies from the second half of the 1990s onwards, introduced by interactive, collaborative and/or participatory planning approaches (Davoudi et al. 2008; Healey 1997; Krivý and Kaminer 2013). However, the generally restricted meaning of participation in urban policy, in terms of citizens' inclusion and empowerment, as well as the ideology and implications behind it, has been the object of widespread debate since the beginning of the 2000s (Jones 2003; Raco 2000; Souza 2006; Swyngedouw, Moulaert, and Rodriguez 2002). Moving beyond institutionalised 'participatory' policies, the debate about urban regeneration has more recently focused on the initiatives of local self-organised civic networks (Bialski et al. 2015), critical of the failed pro-growth strategies of the pre-crisis decades (Unsworth et al. 2011). Still, these initiatives are ambiguous in so far as they often turn out to respond to 'good neoliberal citizenship by discursively appropriating neoliberal goals' (Changfoot 2007, 130) and may fail to challenge the larger structures that lead to uneven urban development (Hillbrandt and Richter 2015).

The economic downturn and associated financial cuts to municipal budgets in the cities of the 'global north' have also been interpreted as creating momentum to facilitate the processes of cities' neo-liberalisation, instead of reversing them (Peck 2012). With reduced budgets, city governments are much more likely to externalise interventions to private actors and inhabitants, in order to improve urban life. As Margit Mayer (2013), suggests, such principles as 'self-management, self-realisation and *all kinds of unconventional or insurgent creativity* have become not only easily feasible, but are also a generative force in today's neoliberalising cities [...], they have been usurped as essential ingredients of sub-local regeneration programs' (12; my emphasis). In the age of austerity urbanism (Bialski et al. 2015; Peck 2012; Tonkiss 2013), the relationship between civic network initiatives and local governments is a good indicator of that 'roll-with-it neoliberalisation' (Keil 2009) characterised by the normalisation of practices and mind-sets of neo-liberalism in urban planning and everyday city life. This also involves civic activism (Hillbrandt and Richter 2015), which often uses discourses based on the neo-liberal ethos of self-sufficiency or economic growth (Changfoot 2007), and interstitial urban interventions that may be complicit with the logic of 'keeping vacant sites warm while development capital is cool' (Tonkiss 2013, 318).

Before discussing how this ambiguity is performed in Milan, I will briefly outline the city's political assets and strategies of regeneration during 2011–15.

#### *Milan between austerity and political 'rebirth'*

Italy was seriously concerned about the euro-zone crisis that developed after the Wall Street crash of 2008. Austerity urbanism also interested Milan (see Pollio 2016), despite it being a metropolitan area generally considered to be the most prominent

transport, industrial and financial hub in northern Italy. This time period also corresponded to a major change in the city's government. The elections of May 2011 saw the unexpected success of a left-wing candidate, Giuliano Pisapia, a lawyer involved in social movements and minority parties. A few months after the new left coalition was installed, Milan's General Development Plan for 2011–2016 (Comune di Milano 2011) was edited. The document revised the city as a 'common good' and proposed to reform the city government by creating an agenda that might be able 'to face the current crisis and feed a new project for Milan in a moment of decreasing resources'.<sup>2</sup> Listening to civil society proposals was a key component by which the coalition, guided by Pisapia, endeavoured to be distinguished from the previous 20-plus years of centre-right administration that incentivised exploitative real estate redevelopment and annihilated participative projects (see González 2009).

It is in this transitory context (which was full of expectations) that I was involved in a research project aimed at mapping the urban regeneration proposals that were arising from local civic networks in the Navigli area of Milan. The proponents were different in size, guiding principles and motivations. They also adopted different approaches towards getting their proposals recognised by the municipality or other local actors. This paper draws on that research project, conducted in 2011, and focuses on the period between 2011 and 2015. The research project, in a sense, has its roots in the 'roll-with-it' neo-liberalisation ambiguity that characterises both elite practices and bottom-linked movements (Keil 2009). The research project in fact was brought about in an academic applied research framework. This was performed with a private actor who represented a civic network and who also co-financed part of my salary as a post-doctoral researcher.<sup>3</sup> My job was to map 'the living realities' of actors (Senel 2014) who were pushing urban regeneration in the



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290 Navigli area of Milan, in addition to helping  
our civic network partner transform its indi-  
vidual interest into a collective one. My  
activities also became of interest to the  
newly elected District Mayor<sup>4</sup> who wanted  
to introduce new participatory policy tools  
295 in the area, and who supported me in becom-  
ing a 'linking' actor among the relevant active  
civic networks. Even though my own per-  
formance of research was at some distance  
from that associating activism in academia  
300 and grass-roots involvement (Chatterton,  
Fuller, and Routledge 2007), it often  
approached such framework.

In 2011, I searched for, and followed, the  
existent organisations that were willing to  
305 contribute to the urban regeneration of the  
area between the two canals. Materials  
about the proposals of civic networks were  
collected; these ranged from feasibility plans  
to communication leaflets. Key persons at  
310 each organisation were interviewed,<sup>5</sup> and I  
attended most of their public initiatives.  
Occasionally I also attended their private  
meetings.

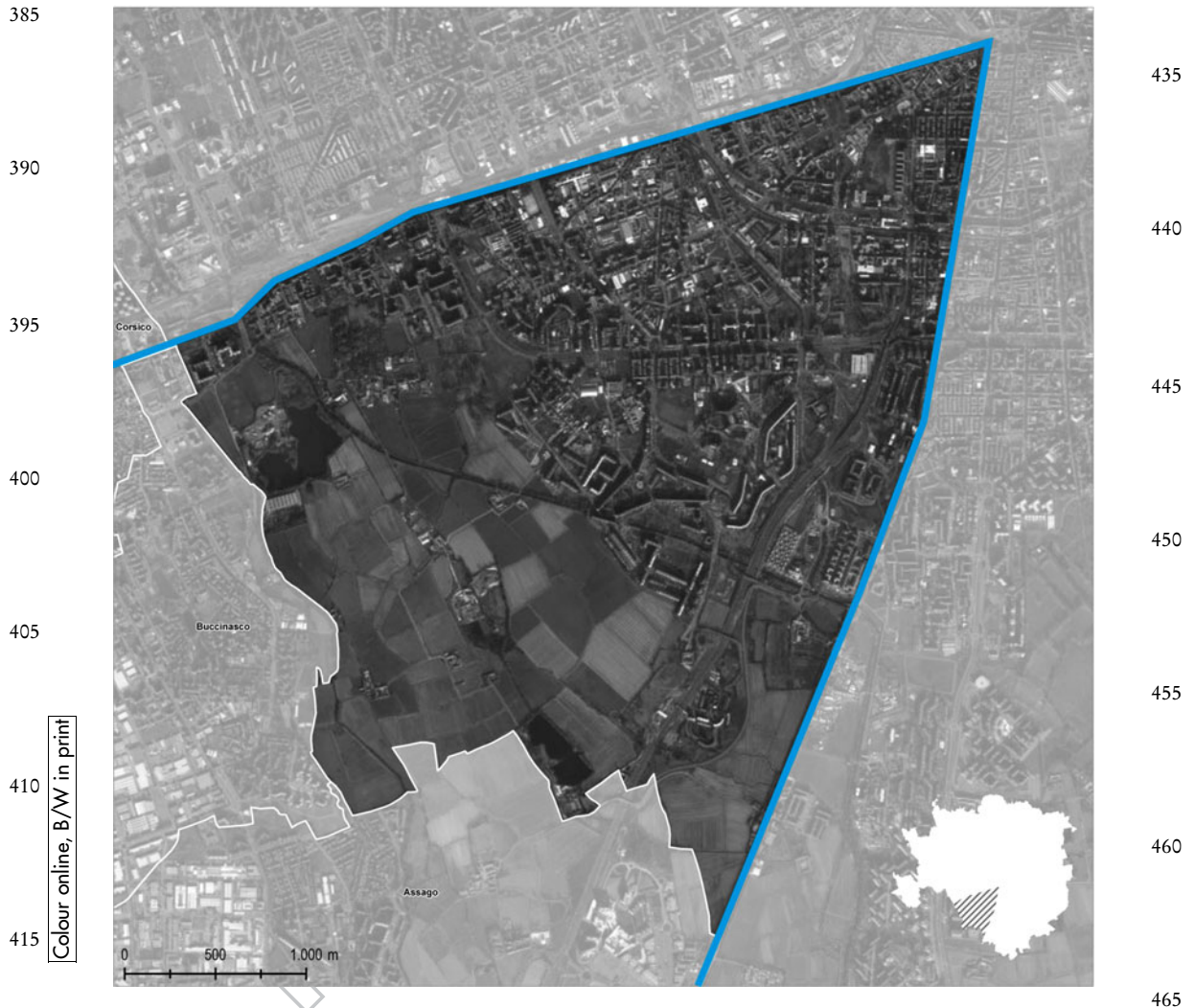
The discursive and practical routes under-  
315 taken to realise proposals were observed in  
a range of settings (neighbourhood fairs or  
official presentations to municipal represen-  
tatives), culminating, as far as the research  
was concerned, in a round table discussion  
320 that I co-organised on 3 November 2011  
with the active support of the District  
Council. This event was attended by over a  
hundred individual citizens who came to  
listen and propose their visions as to how  
325 the area should be changed. Using their  
own documentation and activities to date as  
a starting point, I analysed a variety of pat-  
terns of urban regeneration proposed by  
civic networks arising from outside the fra-  
330 mework of a public policy. I then questioned  
how much 'room' was allowed by the city  
government for the different proposals to be  
realised. Finally, I focused on the impli-  
cations of the adoption or co-optation of  
335 self-organised local civic network projects.  
Based on these research performances, the  
following section will offer a snapshot of

the area as a living laboratory for urban  
regeneration 'from the bottom up'.

340  
*Making space for urban regeneration 'from  
the bottom up'? A snapshot of the Navigli  
area, 2011*

345 Stretching south-west from its most north-  
erly point, close to the city centre towards  
the urban fringes, the area between the two  
urban canals, Naviglio Grande and Naviglio  
Pavese (Figure 1), has a strong rural back-  
350 ground that was largely destroyed during  
the Fordist boom of the 1960s and 1970s.  
The first phase of destruction was undertaken  
in order to make room for factories and a  
variety of housing estates (from the 1950s  
355 onwards), and a later phase saw the creation  
of service sector buildings and more  
housing (1990s onwards). Finally, the north-  
ern part of the area has rapidly become very  
attractive to businesses connected with the  
360 cultural-cognitive economy that started  
relocating into obsolete industrial or manu-  
facturing buildings in the early 2000s  
(Bovone, Mazzette, and Rovati 2005). By  
contrast, the southern part of the area con-  
365 tinues to combine popular neighbourhoods  
poor in services.

In 2011 and 2012, an abundance of projects  
were proposed by local self-organised civic  
370 networks to regenerate the area between the  
two canals (see Table 1). These proposals  
were encouraged by the climate of transition,  
introduced both by the new City Council  
and the prospect of the Universal Exhibition  
375 that would have been held in Milan during  
2015.<sup>6</sup> Within the city limits it was thought  
that this major event would have been of  
greater interest to this part of Milan than to  
other areas. At that time, it was possible to  
380 identify a variety of organisations that were  
partnering in order to stimulate a process of  
urban regeneration outside the realm of insti-  
tutionalised policy tools. Including a variety  
of community-based organisations (i.e. the  
neighbourhood radio station), cultural  
associations, residents' associations and



**Figure 1** The researched area between the Naviglio Grande and Naviglio Pavese canals in Milan, Italy

420 businesses with social commitments, local  
 421 civic networks were mainly oriented  
 422 towards defending and improving the  
 423 quality of open spaces and green areas, or  
 424 creating the necessary infrastructure to  
 425 connect different parts of the Navigli area  
 426 via walking or cycle paths. Physical interven-  
 427 tions were also accompanied (although only  
 428 to a minor extent) by the possibility of enhan-  
 429 cing health and community services, or re-  
 430 vitalising local production and distribution.  
 Cultural activities involving both artists, resi-  
 dents and other populations dealing with the  
 area were proposed as a means to facilitate

cultural expression and identity formation  
 within the area. 'Participation', 'synergy',  
 'bond-creating' and 'place-making' emerged  
 as key terms for many civic networks in the  
 discussion on fostering urban regeneration  
 'from the bottom up'. However, the terms  
 were used to describe very different kinds  
 of actions along a formal continuum  
 between institutional participation and com-  
 munity-based initiatives.

I will now turn to examine the case of  
 two of the most active civic networks.  
 They have been chosen for their diverse  
 profiles and outcomes. One, *Gruppo Verdi*,



**Table 1** Project proposals from civic networks, 2011–12

Organisation Type Active since	Urban regeneration project proposals 011–12 State of advancement	530
485 Fiumi Milanesi <i>Civic network whose members are partially close to the Democrats party</i> 2006	Public urban park along the canals connecting the municipal area with the outskirts <i>Advanced project proposal</i>	535
490 Parco Metropolitan <i>Local residents and farmers</i> 2008	Cultural and environmental project aimed at revitalising the urban paddy fields. This includes food education labs, thematic itineraries in the park aimed at light infrastructure to access the park and connect to the canal <i>Advanced project proposal</i>	540
495 Campi di Via Martini <i>Private vegetable garden and its users</i> 2000	Enhancement of community urban gardens <i>Advanced project proposal</i>	545
Associazione Amici dell'acqua <i>Cultural association</i> 1985	Hydraulic intervention in the Darsena area <i>Advanced project proposal</i>	550
Gruppo Sport sui Navigli <i>Local sport business</i> 2007	Sport, tourism and cultural promotion <i>Proposal</i>	555
500 Porto Ribelle <i>Local residents and urban environmentalists</i> 2009	Wildlife public urban island <i>Advanced project proposal</i>	560
Laboratorio urbano <i>Local businesses (SME) network, driven by an architecture company located in the area</i> 2008	Local urban park requalification; the local underground station requalification <i>Proposal</i>	565
Gruppo Verdi <i>Residents</i> 2010	Environmental requalification of the areas between Naviglio Grande and the railway; introduction of a system of barges to connect the two sides of the Naviglio Grande; environmental requalification of the Olona filling channel <i>Advanced project proposal</i>	570
510 Il quartiere per Milano, Cantiere Ticinese <i>Civic network and architects-residents</i> 2011	Requalification of micro-areas and implementation of connectivity in public areas <i>Project proposal</i>	575
Fatto qui <i>A sum of cultural agencies, charities and residents</i> 2011	Social marketing <i>Existing project</i>	

Note: All the names of the civic networks have been changed.

AQ5 Source: Rabbiosi and Morandi (2012); [www.cives.partecipami.it/infodiscs/index/3](http://www.cives.partecipami.it/infodiscs/index/3) (last update 9 July 2012; last accessed 17 September 2014); personal enquiry.

520 represents a residents' network, and the second, *Laboratorio Urbano*, was primarily composed, but not limited to, different kinds of businesses located in the area. While different, these two civic networks shared a similarity as they were mainly composed of the middle-class components of the Navigli area. However, their respective manifestos were addressing the city in

its social and economic diversity and not the specificity their profile represented. Today *Gruppo Verdi* has realised part of its project(s), a community garden. On the other hand, after it produced plans for investing in obsolete space laying in abandonment in 2010–11, *Laboratorio Urbano* slowly disappeared without giving shape to its project(s).

*Gruppo Verdi* was established in 2010 as a residents' civic network to re-appropriate wastelands in the area that often turned into unofficial garbage dumps. *Gruppo Verdi*'s members began cleaning them up and reclaiming the direct management of one limited allotment. Community involvement was not limited to the civic network's founder members. Participation was incentivised through different activities (cleaning up, social events). In addition to this, by using the skills of some of its members, *Gruppo Verdi* prepared a feasibility study for installing a system of public transport barges in the canals, in order to overcome the problem of the limited number of bridges. Water is indeed a problematic issue in the Navigli area, one that extends beyond the canals to include a filling channel, the Scolmatore Olona, which runs partly in the open air (Figure 2). The filling channel forms a barrier, as its banks are neglected. Besides *Gruppo Verdi*, a variety of other civic networks work to ensure better maintenance of the canals and of the filling channel. While fostering its own projects, *Gruppo Verdi* also tightened connections with other networks involved in active citizenship, with the aim of enhancing the area by emphasising the social resources already available locally and reinforcing community involvement.

*Laboratorio Urbano*<sup>7</sup> was founded by a newly arrived architectural and engineering company in late 2008; composed of some two dozen other local businesses of different sizes. In a way, the network represented the 'creative' cluster that had recently located in the area. Among this network's proposals was a major project to reconnect the Navigli area with the rest of the city through the redevelopment of an underground station at the core of the neighbourhood. Another project involved recovering a green allotment with reclaimed soil and some furniture to adjoin it to an already existing urban park.

In comparison with *Gruppo Verdi*, *Laboratorio Urbano*'s actions were less rooted in

everyday practice and community involvement. Both networks wanted to regenerate wasteland as part of their aims. But, in the case of *Laboratorio Urbano*, the final output would not have been a community garden, but simply an open infrastructured space. With this aim, the network started a feasibility plan, but this was accompanied only by increased networking with the representatives of other civic networks, or even major private and public actors. Only in one case, during 2011, *Laboratorio Urbano* took part in a popular neighbourhood festival, presenting its projects and asking the audience (made up primarily of residents) to comment and implement them.

For both *Gruppo Verdi* and *Laboratorio Urbano*, as with the majority of the networks in the Navigli area, urban regeneration actions focused on the reduction of physical obstacles within the area. However, for *Gruppo Verdi*, what divided their area from the rest of the city was also intangible and to regenerate it meant filling the gaps in cultural and social deprivation paths through daily activities involving the neighbourhoods' residents. Meanwhile, for *Laboratorio Urbano*, this kind of regeneration would have followed a simple physical intervention.

Starting from different premises, *Gruppo Verdi* and *Laboratorio Urbano* brought about different outcomes. In the Navigli area, *Gruppo Verdi* 'found that there are fragments of land that are theoretically everybody's land but that are actually no one's [...] What we say is, let's try to find the tools to re-appropriate these lands through timely actions.'<sup>8</sup> As already mentioned, this initial engagement turned into a community garden. The City of Milan recognised the garden in 2013 and granted its management to *Gruppo Verdi* for a starting period of three years (currently under renewal). In the garden a variety of leisure activities are performed and maintained by the network (Figure 3). Throughout this process, *Gruppo Verdi* reinforced its relationship with the municipality: it was eager, for

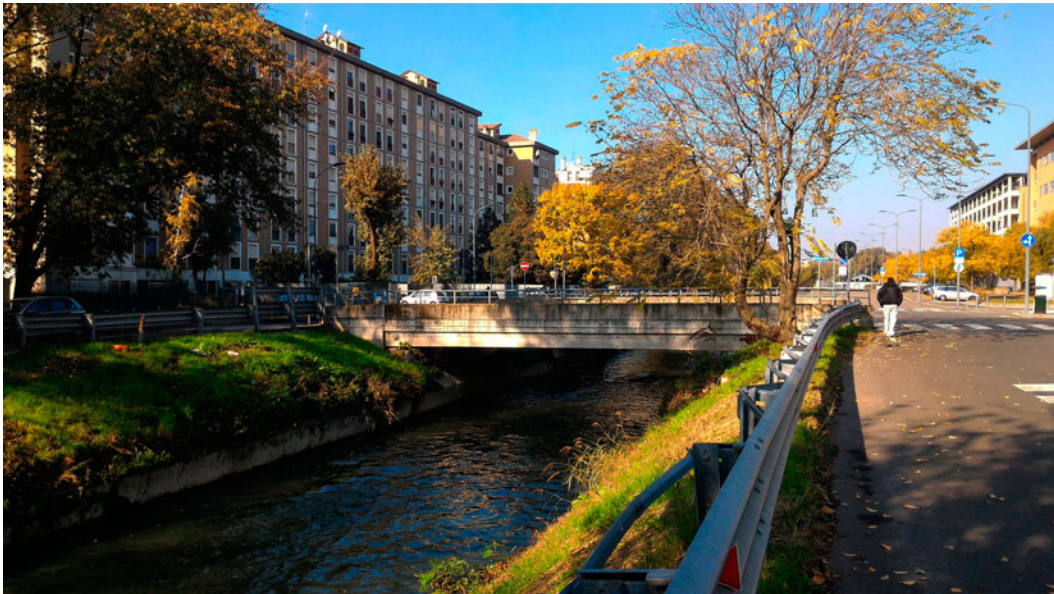
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**Figure 2** The filling channel Scolmatore Olona in the poorest part of the Navigli area. Local civic networks have been asking for the regeneration of its banks.

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instance, to take part in the participatory budgeting that was provisionally introduced in the area by the Milanese government in 2015.

Working from within, and assuming the amount of time that institutionalised urban regeneration 'from the bottom up' might take (see also Changfoot 2007), *Gruppo*

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**Figure 3** *Gruppo Verdi's* proposal to re-appropriate a wasteland garden in 2011 turned into a community garden by 2015.

Verdi was able to give shape and continuity to its action. *Laboratorio Urbano* was the farthest from social activism among all the networks analysed in 2011.

*'Laboratorio Urbano* is born under the initiative of an entrepreneur [...] and we were inspired by the UK model of the Business Improvement Districts [...] but then we realised that here the situation is very complex. After the initial spontaneous enthusiasm, we got frustrated by the difficulty to make understanding our project to other businesses [located, as are we, in the area].'<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, *Laboratorio Urbano* was more oriented towards partnering with businesses, or even real estate developers in the area, while *Gruppo Verdi* was more keen to partner with community-based networks. *Laboratorio Urbano* was not able to make this shift; it also lost the support of many of its original followers and gradually withdrew from urban regeneration 'from the bottom up'.

### Urban regeneration 'from the bottom up': critique or co-optation?

What has been described so far can be considered as a way of responding to austerity urbanism by self-organised civic networks' initiatives. The cost of producing feasibility plans or cleaning up wastelands was sustained through their own direct actions 'from the bottom up', outside a policy scheme. In doing so, *Laboratorio Urbano* and *Gruppo Verdi* proposed and generated 'micro-scale' interventions, responding to a 'macro-scale' disinvestment in connecting the social and built structures of cities finalised to improve the quality of life of its citizens.

Most of the networks mentioned in this paper had originally aimed to turn their bottom-up action into an institutionalised one. Such an opportunity arose in 2012, when the new District Mayor of the area proposed that both the central City Council and local stakeholders (civic networks included)

should take part in a forum then known as either the *Milano EXPO2015 Zona 6* or *Via d'Acqua EXPO 2015*, which was designed with a common vision for both the local government and Milan's citizens. This was a prelude to the major event that the city would host four years later. The Forum Chart<sup>10</sup> pinpointed three main aims: the promotion of extended and diffused connections of the area from the margins of the city to the city centre; the individuation of new public spaces within the city margins, especially where divisions were currently present; and the promotion of private, coherent interventions in obsolete or underused spaces. The intention was to create an intermediate occasion for debating projects that came 'from the bottom up', such as those presented here. Strategies for mending physical as well as social divides were lacking in the city, as were paths towards participatory forms of urban regeneration, framed by at least a few criteria of social, environmental, economic and institutional sustainability. Indeed, 'recognis[ing] untapped areas of potential by challenging and going beyond the business-as-usual urban policy orthodoxy, and how to enable communities to realise this potential to build their own resilience strategies and improve well-being' (Unsworth et al. 2011, 183) is not only of interest to social movements or local civic networks. It is also (and more often) important to institutional actors who might consider strategies to approve bottom-up proposals as a way to institutionally respond to the shift towards austerity urbanism (Peck 2012). There is also scope for exploitative business interests that might indirectly take advantage of the urban regeneration provided by grass-roots initiatives. This is undertaken through turning it to their own advantage by first externalising actions to increase the quality of urban life on the back of civic networks, and then making a profit out of it as soon as the 'business-as-usual' economy returns (Tonkiss 2013).

The participatory forum for the Navigli area was officially discussed at a public

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Colour online, B/W in print



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**Figure 4** The new cycle path along the Naviglio Grande can be considered one of the few proposals of the civic networks that was partly taken on board by institutions and financed by a number of private partners.

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meeting held at the end of 2012,<sup>11</sup> but it never translated into a real, permanent, policy tool; nor were most of the projects proposed 'from the bottom up' realised.

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However, some of the proposals of the civic networks were partly taken on board as the Municipality intervened to redevelop some parts of the area, such as a new cycle path connecting the different green areas between the two canals (Figure 4).

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Nevertheless, what is worth mentioning here is that during the origins of this process there was a notable investment on the part of civic networks in defining certain problematic issues in the Navigli area. Civic networks have actively engaged in proposing how to face them. In order to do that, they turned their action towards self-management and self-sufficiency (Mayer 2013). Self-sufficiency is not immanently neo-liberal, but it has been appropriated by neo-liberalism as a mantra to reproduce itself. Many civic networks rely on this same notion, without being able to reflect this appropriation. In this sense, their action is co-opted by neo-liberal policies. In

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the two cases outlined, this co-optation is very subtle. The community garden managed by *Gruppo Verdi* is possibly the only original project effectively realised that is still in the hands of the proponent civic network. In order to achieve this result, the civic network has worked in two directions: on **the one hand**, by self-providing interventions for making it real through everyday practice; on the other, by coming to terms with the municipality. On the contrary, the most business-rooted civic network, *Laboratorio Urbano*, decided not to continue investing in bottom-up urban regeneration. Responding to the logic of economic 'return on investment', *Laboratorio Urbano* evaluated that the game was not worth playing.

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## Conclusion

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Some of the possible risks of urban regeneration 'from the bottom up' are that the outcomes are then appropriated by actors not interested in achieving socio-spatial transformation answering the needs of local

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communities, or by the municipality in order to seize upon the positive press for itself. Thus, they claim that citizens' voices have been received and freedom of choosing the city's future has been allowed to them. Literature discussing austerity urbanism (Mayer 2013; Peck 2012; Tonkiss 2013) has warned of the risk of instrumentalisation of the economic crises. Following Peck (2012), public budget cutbacks turn into a good excuse for institutional actors to do 'less with less', a turn that is consistent with a particular intensification of neo-liberal restructuring strategies. In line with the recent account of Pollio (2016), I suggest looking at the other side of the coin, to consider the 'more with less' that can be done in this context. In the above-mentioned case, the 'more' is represented in the attempt of the Milanese government to support some projects that had been proposed outside pre-existent policy tools. Secondly, the 'less' that can descend from the limited ability of the municipality to implement its policies towards urban regeneration 'from the bottom up', doesn't erase the 'more' contained in 'backstage' proposals from self-organised civic networks. Namely, the learning process civic networks had to go through to engage with larger collective interests; the personal investment performed by their members to structure their proposal; and, as in the case of *Gruppo Verdi*, the effort to bring it to life through everyday practice.

Local civic networks have been able to stimulate participatory, albeit partial, processes within themselves and/or from the part of the city government. This 'more' is evidently ambiguous since it often includes the assumption of rhetoric and behaviours of self-sufficiency and self-reliance consistent with neo-liberalism; thus participating to its normalisation (Keil 2009). There is the risk that the critique urban regeneration 'from the bottom up' brings to austerity urbanism eventually dissolves in it. Local civic networks' agency is messy, experimental and embedded in micro-tactics, similar to what happens for strictly political, grass-roots

initiatives developing alternatives to capitalism (Chatterton and Pickerill 2010). It is necessary to recognise on the one hand the agentic role of civic networks in providing effective strategies of urban regeneration. However, it is of greater urgency to unveil the ways through which urban regeneration 'from the bottom up' is simultaneously against and within the neo-liberal present. As long as all the parties involved with it do not recognise this—critically appropriating this contradiction—their action will result in only a partial alternative to austerity urbanism.



#### Disclosure statement



No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

#### Notes

- 1 All the names of the civic networks have been changed.
- 2 ~~All the names of the civic networks have been changed.~~
- 3 During that year, I felt constantly challenged to question my research partner and my own research practices. I struggled to find a place for myself in the research; as a Milanese citizen; as a researcher. I also wanted to maintain a commitment to my own values and political views, and equally, I had to respond to my role as an employee. I was somehow the object and the subject of different layers of 'roll-with-it' neo-liberal governmentality.
- 4 The area of the enquiry does not correspond exactly to a City District. Here we refer to the district that comprises it predominantly.
- 5 Twenty-two semi-structured interviews were undertaken in 2011. In 2015, while revisions of this paper were made, I was able to conduct three follow-up interviews.
- 6 Under the slogan *Feeding the Planet, Energy for Life*, this massive event was thought to embrace the broad issue of sustainability and extend its influence and infrastructural intervention throughout the city, well beyond the Expo site (Di Vita 2014). The event—a classical top-down urban regeneration intervention—was the object of a variety of objections that I cannot address in this limited context.

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- 7 *Laboratorio Urbano* was the research project partner mentioned in the previous paragraph.
- 8 Round table 'Rigenerazione urbana tra Naviglio grande e Naviglio pavese. Attori locali a confronto' (Urban Regeneration between the Naviglio grande and the Naviglio pavese. A Debate among Local Actors), Milan, Italy, 3 November 2011.
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- 9 Round table 'Rigenerazione urbana tra Naviglio grande e Naviglio pavese. Attori locali a confronto' (Urban Regeneration between the Naviglio grande and the Naviglio pavese. A Debate among Local Actors), Milan, Italy, 3 November 2011.
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- 10 Comune di Milano, *Forum Milano Expo 2015 Zona 6*, 2012. Non-recoverable, personal communication.
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- 11 See [http://www.arcipelagomilano.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/programma\\_navigli.pdf](http://www.arcipelagomilano.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/programma_navigli.pdf) (last accessed 17 September 2014).
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