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Neighbourhood branding and urban regeneration: performing the 'right to the brand' in Casilino, Rome

In the last decade, many cities have experimented with small-scale initiatives aimed at enhancing the quality of life of residents; these initiatives have somehow fostered a reconceptualization of the term, as well as practice, of urban regeneration. In this context, the role of civic networks in bringing forward experiments in the production of alternative imaginaries and place-making has gained a major role, in particular in marginal neighbourhoods. By focusing on a case study in the eastern periphery of Rome, the paper explores the case of citizen-led neighbourhood branding, highlighting open issues and ambiguities in claiming a 'right to the brand'.

Neighbourhood branding, citizen-led initiatives, reconceptualising urban regeneration, Ecomuseum, Rome.

Introduction

In the last decades, urban regeneration has been experiencing a variety of shifts in the principles guiding it and the ways in which it is enacted; as a consequence, a call for a reconceptualization of the term has been hailed (Leary & McCarthy 2013). One of these shifts concerns both the 'physical' priorities of urban regeneration - from large-scale requalification projects to smaller-scale initiatives - and the symbolic repositioning of a city image, sustained through those strategies generally labelled as city branding. Indeed,

city branding has been an increasingly relevant practice worldwide in the last thirty years, in particular in the framework of post-industrial transformations and neoliberalisation (Rossi & Vanolo 2012). City branding may seem softer and less tangible than urban regeneration in a strict sense, but it might be as impacting and disruptive, as critical urban scholars have demonstrated (Bookman 2017; Julier 2011; Vanolo 2008, 2015).

While a multitude of stakeholders foster city branding today – including governments, the private sector, cultural institutions, educational bodies, and residents, all of whom invest variously in the communication of a place and its characteristics (Dinnie 2011) – two main categories have been leading different forms of branding strategies in the last three decades: public institutions and private companies. These two often cooperate in public-private partnerships as crucial contributors in the development of initiatives and/or promotional campaigns aimed at branding a city or even a specific neighbourhood, mainly in light of large urban regeneration projects (Colomb 2012; Haila 2008). At the same time, the diffused lack of democratic participation that characterizes many city branding initiatives has been highlighted, despite the long-lasting impact this may have on the ordinary life of citizens, something now also recognised within more mainstream marketing literature (Braun, Kavaratzis & Zenker, 2013; Kavaratzis & Kalandides 2015; Lucarelli & Hallin 2015).

As a consequence, increasing attention has been developed on the participation of residents in branding strategies, as a prerequisite for their success (Kavaratzis, Giovanardi, & Lichrou 2017; Kavaratzis & Kalandides 2015; Zenker & Erfgen 2014). The role of residents in the success or failure of branding strategies is acquiring even more relevance in the last decade, in light of the growing urban activism in proposing cultural or social initiatives that pursue forms of urban regeneration towards more sustainable cities (Celata & Coletti 2019; Unsworth et al. 2011). These kinds of urban

regeneration initiatives have been flourishing in part as a result of the lack of provisions of public services by local administrations, in times of neoliberalism and austerity (Changfoot 2007; Rabbiosi 2016; Tonkiss 2013). This is particularly the case in southern European cities, where the effects of the economic crisis have been especially severe on public institutions at different scales (Bull 2018; Bull & Pasquino 2018; Knieling & Othengrafen 2016; Petmesidou & Guillén 2014; Sotiropoulos 2015).

Within this framework, this paper focuses more specifically on emerging cases where the promotion of a different imaginary and reputation of a specific neighbourhood is a primary and explicit aim in the activities carried out by civic networks and urban activists, thus influencing neighbourhood branding and place-making (Masuda & Bookman 2018). In particular, we assess the notion of a 'right to the brand', that is, the right of citizens to participate in the imaginary produced and promoted for a certain place (Vanolo 2017). The actions undertaken by the *Ecomuseum Casilino Ad Duas Lauros*, a citizen-led initiative that emerged in 2012 in Municipio V, a district in the eastern periphery of Rome, Italy, serves as the case study. Municipio V is made of historical neighbourhoods, rich with archaeological heritage dating back to ancient Roman times but also with intangible heritage connected to the WWII and even contemporary street art. Most of this heritage, however, is neither visible nor exploited, and the area continues to be represented mainly through its character as a marginal periphery, despite having witnessed a significant process of gentrification in recent years (Annunziata 2010).

The paper addresses neighbourhood branding as enacted by *Ecomuseum Casilino* through the logic of an exploratory case study (Streb 2010) carried out between 2016 and 2018. With the aim to discuss the potentialities, constraints and contradictions of citizen-led neighbourhood branding, we first turn our attention to place branding literature as it emerges in critical urban studies scholarship, with a specific focus on neighbourhood branding and

citizen participation. This section also describes the methodology and methods used to collect data for this study. We set the scene of our exploratory case study in the third section and present the experience of *Ecomuseum Casilino Ad Duas Lauros* in the fourth section, before moving to a discussion of the contradictions and open issues that this case raises in front of a supposed right to the brand in the fifth section. In the conclusion we claim that the experience of the *Ecomuseum Casilino* shows how the ownership of branding strategies by citizens and residents, in particular in supposedly marginal neighbourhoods, can lead to the adoption of a different gaze and perspective towards the neighbourhood itself, which redeems it from mainstream stigmatization. On the other hand, the recognition of a 'right to the brand' does not prevent branding strategies from generating conflicts. Possibly, making these conflicts and ambiguities explicit may give a deeper meaning to the politics of representation as they emerge from citizen-led neighbourhood branding.

Neighbourhoods branding in the (post?) austerity city

Place branding strategies can be developed at different scales: they may focus on an entire country, a specific region, a city or specific districts or neighbourhoods. Recently, the latter has been defined as referring to 'the symbolic and material practices of state and/or private cultural producers who aim to enhance the appeal of local areas within the city in order to attract investment, promote consumption, reduce criminality, or to achieve social and cultural aims such as invoking civic pride' (Masuda & Bookman 2018, p.166).

Critical urban studies have offered a crucial contribution in highlighting the meaning and implications of city branding as a 'politics of representation' (Rossi & Vanolo 2012; see also Johansson 2012; Julier 2005; Vanolo 2017): by promoting the city's assets and supposed qualities, branding activities contribute to the creation of specific urban imaginaries that shape the idea of

the city in people's minds. These imaginaries are not only descriptive but, on the contrary, performative (see also Lucarelli & Hallin 2015; Lury 2004) and actively shaping urban life (Bookman 2017). For instance, branding strategies may end up guiding the allocation of public funds, as in the case of mega events, such as the Olympic Games (Andranovich et al. 2001; Gold & Gold 2008). More generally but crucially, branding strategies and politics of representation may deeply influence the perception of urban citizenship and feelings of belonging (Boland 2008; Vanolo 2017; Wherry 2011). Branding strategies are always selective and non-neutral (Johansson 2012; Sandercock 2003), insofar as they are based on the promotion (and often, parallel amelioration) of specific aspects or characteristics of the city at the detriment of others. This means that branding strategies contribute to determine what is visible and what is not about the city, crucially contributing to the definition of urban political priorities (Vanolo 2017).

Beside the selective character of city branding, another issue at stake is the lack of democratic mechanisms and actual participation of residents in many branding strategies (Andranovich et al. 2001; Colomb 2012; Kaika 2010; Ponzini 2011; Braun et al. 2013; Vanolo 2017). Not only residents play a crucial role in determining success or failure of a branding strategy (Braun et al 2013; Eshuis et al 2014; Vallaster et al. 2018), but their involvement looks particularly relevant in light of the role played by those strategies in shaping citizens' identities (Bookman 2017; Wherry 2011). In this regard, Alberto Vanolo (2017) has provocatively suggested the existence of a 'right to the brand', or the right of citizens to participate in the imaginary produced and promoted for a certain place, in particular in light of the partiality of any representation and of the implications of branding for place-related identities and the everyday life of local communities.

The acknowledgement of the crucial role played by residents for the successful implementation of a city branding strategy increasingly meets the bottom-up

request expressed by citizens to take part in wider processes of urban regeneration. This is particularly the case with reference to **those urban regeneration strategies** not focused on large-scale projects driven by major real estate and infrastructure developers, but smaller-scale interventions based more on fostering place-making in specific neighbourhoods (Bonini Baraldi, Governa & Salone 2019; Rota & Salone 2014). Think, for instance, of marginal neighbourhoods, which are often represented as problematic **in common discourse (Martin 2000)**. By promoting cultural or social initiatives that offer new ways of living and experiencing the neighbourhood, the action of civic networks and urban activists can pursue not only the goal of ameliorating the quality of life of citizens, but also support – implicitly or explicitly – a new imaginary of the neighbourhood. Together with official branding, counter-branding contributes to the definition of a proposed imaginary of a place, which is inevitably plural (Pasquinelli 2017). Consequently, urban regeneration practices enacted by civic networks and urban activists, regardless their primary and explicit goal, may actively contribute to the re-negotiation of the imaginary and reputation of the area, which is a premise of place-making.

Neighbourhood branding emerges as a promising scale of research, especially when it turns into a place-making device encompassing ‘subaltern configurations of place mobilized by urban social movements’ (Masuda & Bookman 2018, p. 166). In these cases, it may offer a platform for action to preserve urban commons, thus acting as a strategy to reclaim a Right to the City (Masuda & Bookman 2018). Neighbourhood branding may act as a way to promote a different imaginary of the district, with respect to the traditional representation of peripheries as areas of non-conformity and deprivation (Bonini Baraldi, Governa & Salone 2019). However, citizen-led initiatives are themselves the product of a mediation among plural representations and different aims, and they present ambiguities and contradictions in their definition, as well as implementation, that need to be explored.

Open issues of the attempt of civic networks and urban activists to ‘make their voice heard’ in the definition of a neighbourhood’s imaginary, thus reclaiming a ‘right to the brand’ (Vanolo 2017), are addressed in the following sections, by focusing on the case of the *Ecomuseum Casilino Ad Duas Lauros*, in the city of Rome. While a variety of definitions of what ecomuseums are exists, they can be roughly be defined as cultural institutions **based on the voluntary contribution and participation of citizens who are** committed to taking care of the ‘sense of place’ (Davis 1999) of a specific area, in so far focusing less on tangible heritage and more on subjective and intangible heritage. They are considered key instruments for supporting both the exogenous promotion of a certain area and a growing endogenous consciousness of its identity. **The concept was primarily affirmed by** the French innovative museologist Georges-Henri Rivière (1897-1985) **as** the sites where institutions and population conceive, construct and exploit together (Rivière 1985). While the primary aim of an ecomuseum is not to reclaim the ‘right to the brand’ of a neighbourhood or any other place-based community, ecomuseums are in fact engaged in coordinating specific localities as ‘specific contexts of consumption using multi-layered visual, material, and infrastructural elements’ (Bookman 2017, p. 69), in so doing turning into effective agents for neighbourhood branding in a performative way.

In this paper, the experience of the *Ecomuseum Casilino Ad Duos Lauros* is considered through the logic of exploratory case study research (Streb 2010), that is to say a preliminary step of an overall research design exploring a relatively new field of scientific investigation. In our study, the case has served to ‘test’ the limits and potentialities of the idea of a right to the brand, recently proposed by Vanolo (2017) and Masuda & Bookman (2018). In line with the methodology proposed, we made use of multiple methods. These included a semiotic analysis of the logotypes used to brand Municipio V through citizen-led initiatives, content analysis of secondary sources and qualitative

interviews. All the data are from the period 2016-2018. More specifically, we scrutinized articles appeared in the online edition of the national newspaper *La Repubblica* targeting either the area of interest of the ecomuseum or more specifically *Ecomuseum Casilino* itself.¹ The qualitative analysis of the content of these articles allowed us to compare the emerging image of the area using two different data sets. The rationale beyond this part of our exploratory case study included the possibility to reflect upon the performativity of *Ecomuseum Casilino* in branding the neighbourhood in the two years considered. Articles from other newspapers or online entries (in journals and blogs) have also been collected and analysed, allowing us to shift from a variety of scales (we found notice of *Ecomuseum Casilino* also in blogs aimed at an international readership, as will be pinpointed in the analytic sections). Official documents concerning the development plans for the area of Municipio V² and the neighbourhood branding strategies currently enacted by the Ecomuseum or other local actors have also been considered and are quoted at various points in the next sections. The performative agency of *Ecomuseum Casilino* has also been accounted through monitoring of its Facebook page and website. In addition, five in-depth interviews with local activists and members of local institutions were considered to help supplant the limited case study size. The selection of interviewees was aimed at including stakeholders who have followed the evolution of the *Ecomuseum Casilino Ad Duas Lauros* from different positions and perspectives: promoters of the initiative, other activists and representatives of local institutions at different scales.³

¹ Since the exploratory nature of our study we have focussed only on this newspaper, isolating 11 articles published on its on-line version in which a definition of the area and its quality were given, and 6 articles strictly referring to the Ecomuseum.

² Official documents considered include national, urban and regional guidelines and legislation, such as the City of Rome Masterplan or the national law on the areas of archeological interest (some of which are located in the area of Casilino).

³ Specifically, an activist from the Ecomuseum (interviewed twice, in Nov. 2016 and Nov. 2018), a local stakeholder (May 2017), a City Council Representative (Nov. 2017) and a neighbourhood activist that is not involved in the Ecomuseum activities (Oct. 2018), were interviewed. Lasting from 30' to 120', the interviews were conducted in person by one of the two authors.

Before moving to a detailed discussion of the alternative imaginaries and place-making fostered by *Ecomuseum Casilino Ad Duos Lauros*, in the next section we will present some references to locate the Casilino area in time and space within the city of Rome.

Municipio V: a peculiar area in a problematic metropolis

Among the general difficulties experienced in the management of southern European cities in times of austerity, the city of Rome is experiencing a process of dramatic transformations in the last years that has attracted a growing interest of practitioners and scholars (Coppola & Punziano 2018a, 2018b). Rome was profoundly hit by the 2008 crisis, with a stronger impact than the rest of Italy (Causi 2018). The city faces several problems, including weaknesses of the productive structure, inefficiency of public institutions, infrastructure deficits (and the collapse of public investments after 2008), apathetic local political class, as well as lack of attention from national governments (Causi 2018), problems of criminal infiltration (Sabella & Calapà 2016; Martone 2016; Vannucci 2016), and a brittle and disjointed urban context where inhabitants, emptying the city centre, move towards external areas with limited public transportation connection (De Lucia & Erbani 2016). To discuss causes and consequences of these processes goes beyond the aims of this paper; however, it is important to recognize the city's huge contemporary urban, economic and political challenges, as a background framework of the experience explored in the case study.

Located in the eastern periphery of the city, Municipio V⁴ is made of historical neighbourhoods – including Pigneto, Prenestino, Torpignattara, Quadraro, Villa

⁴ *Municipio* in Rome is the name given to a local council, with its own President and administrative functions. The current structure of Municipio V was defined after a municipal decentralization reform that entered into force in 2013.

Gordiani, Collatino, Centocelle, Alessandrino, Quarticciolo – formed after the inclusion of Rome in the Kingdom of Italy in 1870, and relatively younger neighbourhoods, created in the second half of the 1970s. Today, Municipio V includes some of the poorest neighbourhoods in Rome, in terms of average wages, as well as vulnerable populations (Manna & Esposito 2018). Since the 1990s, the neighbourhood has also become home to a variety of immigrant communities, forcing old residents to confront new ones. As for 2017, Municipio V represented the area with the third highest concentration of foreign residents in the Italian capital,⁵ while population density is among the highest in Rome and Italy (9,000 inhabitants/km² in Italy).⁶ Most of the areas in the district suffer from urban decay, environmental problems, traffic overcrowding and consequent difficult transportation connections with the city centre. The problems of Municipio V are usually in the spotlight when the area is portrayed in the news or the press; consequently, they contribute to the definition of a dominant negative place imaginary of this district as marginal and problematic.

Negative representations of Municipio V mixed with a sensationalist attitude are not uncommon, as seen in newspaper headlines. Consider the article *The anger of Torpignattara, a melting pot powder keg. 'Italians are afraid'* (La Repubblica, 2 Nov. 2017)⁷ presenting the neighbourhood of Torpignattara in the framework of an 'investigation on the suburbs' (sic). As the title implies, the article emphasizes the difficulties in multicultural integration and depicts the area as a place of clash, anger and intolerance between Italians and

⁵ Countries of origin being mainly Bangladesh, Romania, China, Philippines and Egypt. City of Rome on ISTAT data: https://www.comune.roma.it/web-resources/cms/documents/La_popolazione_straniera_residente_2017_antico.pdf (Last access 16 July 2019).

⁶ City of Rome on ISTAT data: https://www.comune.roma.it/web-resources/cms/documents/Popolazione_2016_rev.pdf (Last access 16 July 2019).

⁷ Authors' translation. Original title: *La rabbia di Torpignattara, melting pot polveriera. 'Gli italiani hanno paura'*. <https://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2017/11/02/la-rabbia-di-torpignattara-melting-pot-polveriera-pauraRoma05.html> (Last access 25 September 2019).

foreign residents.⁸ Another article is entitled *Land of fires in Centocelle: an enquiry into the tunnel waste* (La Repubblica, 17 Feb. 2017)⁹. The journalistic term 'Land of fires' (*Terra dei fuochi*) has been used since the early 2000s to identify the area in southern Italy between the cities of Naples and Caserta, where a high number of fires have repeatedly broken out due to uncontrolled dumping of trash. The term also recalls organized crime – and namely the *Camorra* – that is deemed responsible for the waste landfill in the above-mentioned area. The article headline deals with a crucial environmental problem of Municipio V concerning the Centocelle Park and caused by a high level of buried waste, but it adopts a vocabulary that stimulates alarm and fear among readers. Other titles include *To live and to die in Tor Pignattara. The story of Shahzad, the Pakistani mowed down in the mixed-race neighbourhood* (La Repubblica, 7 March 2016)¹⁰ or *Far West at the tire shop: three people arrested, two young men are wanted* (La Repubblica, 5 Sept. 2018)¹¹, which are just two examples of (racialised) crime stories about the neighbourhoods included in Municipio V.

Parallel to a series of other problems, Municipio V has qualities which are often overlooked. These are based on tangible heritage such as the archaeological heritage, which still lay underground in the three urban parks of Villa de Sanctis, Villa Gordiani and the above-mentioned Parco di Centocelle, also representing Municipio V's natural resources together with a few other parks. Other qualities include intangible heritage, mainly connected with the fact that

⁸ The article was fiercely criticized by the civic network *I love Topigna* in an online article entitled *Torpignattara's real anger is against this shameless journalism*. <https://ilovetorpigna.it/2017/11/02/la-rabbia-vera-di-tor-pignattara-e-contro-questo-giornalismo-senza-vergogna/> (Last access 25 September 2019).

⁹ Authors' translation. Original title: *Terra dei fuochi a Centocelle, inchiesta sui rifiuti nel tunnel*. https://roma.repubblica.it/cronaca/2017/02/17/news/terra_dei_fuochi_a_centocelle_inchiesta_sui_rifiuti_nel_tunnel-158547154/ (Last access 25 September 2019).

¹⁰ Authors' translation. Original title: *Vivere e morire a Tor Pignattara. La storia del pakistano Shahzad massacrato nella periferia meticcias*. <https://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2016/03/07/vivere-e-morire-a-tor-pignattara-la-storia-meticciaRoma11.html> (Last access 25 September 2019).

¹¹ Authors' translation. Original title: *Far west dal gommista, tre arresti. Al Casilino caccia a due giovani*. <https://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2018/09/05/far-west-dal-gommista-tre-arresti-al-casilino-caccia-a-due-giovaniRoma08.html> (Last access 25 September 2019).

some of the neighbourhood comprised in Municipio V were the main centres of resistance against the German occupation after September 1943 during WWII. In the 1950s and 1960s, parts of the area now comprised under this district were also central locations in the novels of Italian intellectuals, such as Pier Paolo Pasolini and Alberto Moravia. Moreover, the area is witnessing a process of partial gentrification, located specifically in some of its parts, such as in the neighbourhood of Pigneto (Annunziata 2010). A 'creative class' (Florida 2002), which includes artists, researchers and professionals that might have high formal cultural capital but not such high incomes in Municipio V, has recently moved to the district, increasing the complexity and making the differences within the district even more pronounced. While this group has contributed to renurturing the traditionally lively activism of citizens and neighbourhood social capital, it has also often demonstrated a lifestyle (in terms of cultural consumption, for instance) that is significantly different from older inhabitants. This not only includes those residents that have supposedly lived in Rome for several generations, but also migrants from Pakistan and Bangladesh who can equally be considered 'local residents' of Municipio V after years residing there.

Issues at stake in Municipio V are diverse, ranging from social inclusion of poor and disadvantaged citizens to inter-cultural dialogue, from environmental problems (in particular the already mentioned toxic soil in Centocelle Park, which is the main issue addressed by numerous activists) to the risk of overbuilding. The latter issue is a common problem in the city of Rome, where real estate developers represent a powerful lobby and land overconsumption is a major threat (Berdini 2008; Mudu & Marini 2016). From this point of view, the situation in Municipio V is even more problematic than in the rest of the city, due to the peculiar situation of the 'missing' masterplan of one of its areas (also known as *Comprensorio Casilino*). During the 1960s, the area was at the centre of a big and ambitious project, aimed at transforming it into the Eastern Directional Centre of the City of Rome. However, the project was abandoned

for several reasons, including a crucial landscape protective restriction imposed by the Italian Ministry for Cultural and Environmental Heritage in 1995.¹² The restriction was due to the numerous archaeological remains of a Roman imperial possession generally called *ad duas lauros* (literarily meaning 'to the two laurels'). Currently, the restriction imposes constraints to the possibility of new constructions and limitations to buildings renovations in the area. The City of Rome never approved a detailed masterplan for Casilino, differently from what happened in the rest of the city. However, the lack of a detailed and official plan makes the neighbourhood vulnerable to the interests of real estate developers. It is as a civic reaction to this kind of threat that the story of the *Ecomuseum Casilino Ad Duas Lauros* originates (Broccolini and Padiglione 2015), as will be further illustrated in the next section.

***Ecomuseum Casilino Ad Duas Lauros* between urban activism and neighbourhood branding**

In 2006, the Regional Administrative Court of Lazio upheld the appeal of some individuals against the landscape protective restriction over the *ad duas lauros* area, on the basis of the 'legal non-applicability of the adopted instrument'.¹³ The inapplicability of the landscape protective restriction unlocked the possibility for private real estate developers to build in most of the green areas of the district.¹⁴ This decision triggered the reaction of activists, who started to organize themselves in civic networks in an attempt to prevent the destruction of the area for merely formal reasons, with a negative impact on the quality of the present and future life of local communities. One of the first

¹² D.M. 21.19.1995, available (in Italian) at:

http://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/atto/serie_generale/caricaDettaglioAtto/originario?atto.dataPubblicazioneGazzetta=1996-02-10&atto.codiceRedazionale=096A0800&elenco30giorni=false (Last access 16 July 2019).

¹³ For more information: <http://www.osservatoriocasilino.it/> (Last access 16 July 2019).

(<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1GtmEjZABPXz82S5wojYVq2qJmzA19jt/view>)(Last access 16 July 2019).

¹⁴ For a map comparing the total amount of green areas in Municipio V see Valentina Ferrari:

<https://vivilaluna.wordpress.com/il-parco/le-aree-verdi-per-singola-zona-urbanistica-del-municipio-v/> (Last access 25 September 2019)

results of this self-organization was the website *Osservatorio Casilino* (<http://www.osservatoriocasilino.it/>), which acted as a virtual meeting point for the different neighbourhood-based civic networks, also turning into an online historical archive of the diverse activities that these networks activate.

In terms of citizens' participation, Municipio V has always been considered one of the most active neighbourhoods in Rome. Many examples can be offered in this regard, ranging from the role of the district in the Resistance movement during WWII to civic networks that have spoken up to claim services, rights, houses and parks since the 1970s, or - more recently - to defend common spaces (Portelli et al 2007; Mordenti et al. 2013; Cellamare, 2014). According to a public servant of the Municipality of Rome '*Municipio V is very active, even too much (...). Political contrasts among the numerous actors located in the neighbourhood are very strong*' (13 Nov. 2017). Among the various initiatives, the experience of the neighbourhood network of Torpignattara, *I love Torpigna* - which also played an important role in the emergence of the Ecomuseum - is worth mentioning. *I love Torpigna* is not only a network promoting various activities with the aim of ameliorating the quality of life of the residents, but it has also activated a place-naming process, which may stimulate a sense of pride and belonging towards the neighbourhood, an objective that often pairs both entrepreneurial-based neighbourhood branding strategies and those that are more grassroots (Medway & Warnaby 2014). Naming practices and place-making strategies are not only increasingly bound to branding processes because they can help create and manage the contexts in which the cultural meanings and practices associated with a name are enacted, but they also represent a device bridging materialist and discursive approaches in the discussion of neighbourhood branding (Masuda & Bookman 2018). The network has also created a logo (Figure 2a) based on the style of the popular place brand *I love New York*. Logos are a popular and diffused 'performative' branding strategy (Lury 2004), aimed at attaching a positive value to the identification and recognition of a city (Kavaratzis & Ashworth 2005) or - as in

this case - a neighbourhood. Differently, the *Ecomuseum Casilino* logo (Figure 2b) is based more on visual communication and includes a sketch of *Aqua Alessandrina*, an ancient Roman aqueduct running through Centocelle, Torpignattara and Via Casilina in Municipio V.

(Fig. 1a about here)

(Fig. 1b about here)

Civic networks and urban activists often feel 'a separate category' with respect to other residents. Activists of the district confirm the difficulty of involving other residents in their struggles for a better quality of life, reporting the perception of '*living in a bubble*' (7 Feb. 2018) with respect to a vast majority of citizens, who are perceived as basically being indifferent to most of the battles they are engaged with. It is within this bubble, that the idea of the ecomuseum emerged, thanks to the personal contacts of some of the activists - and with the participation of parallel experiences such as *I love Torpigna* and *Osservatorio Casilino* - with experts on this specific form of preservation and promotion of local assets. It is not by chance that one of the documented sources on the establishment of the *Ecomuseum Casilino* was provided by two academic scholars in the field of anthropology, who were also part of the activists movement (see their article, Broccolini & Padiglione 2015). The initiative was thus proposed by a series of civic networks starting in 2010 but, since its origins, promoted by a group of highly skilled, socially active residents, who contributed with their different professional backgrounds - some may label them as belonging to the so-called 'creative class' according to the much abused Florida (2002) definition - to nourish the neighbourhood with social capital and contribute to tell the new 'story' of the neighbourhood. This story is clearly summarized in the homepage of the *Ecomuseum Casilino* website:

'Imagining the territory¹⁵ as a space to be collectively designed, as a space for valorisation, protection, development, identity and innovation. "Making the Eco-museum" means changing the development perspective of a territory, starting from the identification of cultural assets (memories, legacies, productions, actions) and reconnecting them together in a continuous process of interpretation. The goal of this process is not to become a "museum display", but to create a fluid and widespread space. An accessible and freely usable space, with no entrance tickets. Precisely for this openness, [the Ecomuseum will be a space] able to set in motion new economic development scenarios' (from the website www.ecomuseocasilino.it, retrieved 28 March 2017, authors translation).

The *Ecomuseum Casilino Ad Duas Lauros* constituted itself as a legal association in 2012. As stated in its website, the explicit aim is to enhance and network around the tangible and intangible heritage of the transversal area of Municipio V in order to better defend it from building speculation: *'The ecomuseum was born as an act of positive exercise of the participatory planning rights of the territory, in opposition to the looming risks of overbuilding and speculation in the area'* (www.ecomuseocasilino.it, retrieved 28 March 2017). The ambition of the proponents was, and is, to make the *Casilino Ad Duas Lauros* the biggest urban ecomuseum in the city of Rome.¹⁶ In so doing, the ecomuseum proposes a vision for a participatory urban plan for the district, based on a common knowledge of its multifaceted cultural heritage (Peritore 2018).

¹⁵ Please consider that the original term *territorio* has in Italian a different meaning than the English term of territory, corresponding to a wider conception of place as theorized among cultural geographers.

¹⁶ As declared by Claudio Gnessi, President of the association of the Ecomuseum Casilino: <https://www.internazionale.it/video/2016/10/31/un-grande-ecomuseo-urbano-per-roma> (Last access 16 July 2019).

It is crucial to highlight that, according to the website and to the interviews conducted for this study, the project was developed starting from the acknowledgement that the struggles of the activists against the economic power and interests of real estate developers to defend the area could be ineffective in the long run, and that it was necessary to create alternative futures for the neighbourhood that could combine environmental protection, residents' well-being and economic revenues. Many of the aims of *Ecomuseum Casilino* are similar to those of civic networks and grassroots initiatives that work for more traditional and limited scopes (environmental protection, social inclusion or cultural development), but the Ecomuseum offers a further step by imagining a possible future for the neighbourhood, based on the promotion of its assets for a long-term, sustainable development, rather than its destruction for short-term revenues. In so doing, through visual, embodied, digital and narrative performances, the actions of *Ecomuseum Casilino Ad Duas Lauros* open up to neighbourhood branding. For instance, different thematic foci have turned into routes designed and proposed to appreciate local landscape (Figure 3). The different routes are the result of a participatory process with local stakeholders (including citizens, institutions, religious communities, schools, researchers and experts) and are managed and run by the different professionals of archaeology, history, urban development, etc. that compose the core group at the basis of the Ecomuseum.¹⁷ The resulting thematic selection diversely includes the significant monumental archaeological heritage of the area; the intangible set of memories, actions and relationships (including those connected with WWII); naturalistic and environmental resources; gastronomy; and street art and creative workshops. Lastly, a route on the theme of spirituality is centred on the historical places of Christianity and on those, more recent, of the other religions practiced by the different communities of the neighbourhood.¹⁸

¹⁷ A list of the participants to the Working Group of the Ecomuseum (in Italian), including their professional profile, is available on the Ecomuseum website: <http://www.ecomuseocasilino.it/chi-siamo/> (Last access 25 September 2019)

¹⁸ For more information: <http://www.ecomuseocasilino.it/ecomuseo-casilino-i-percorsi/> (Last access 16 July 2019).

(Figure 2 about here)

Ecomuseum Casilino also deploys an important communication strategy, based only partially on its logo. A webpage, social networks and participation in public events has allowed *Ecomuseum Casilino* to attract the interest of national magazines and TVs.¹⁹ If local residents represent a crucial target for the *Ecomuseum* initiatives and activities with the aim of sharing, promoting and pursuing a future for the district based on a different vision, the efforts devoted by the *Ecomuseum* to external visibility clearly shows an interest as well in presenting the initiative in wider frameworks, coherently with aim to promote alternative forms of economic development for the district.²⁰ *Ecomuseum Casilino* has been represented in media discourse as an innovative and promising way of taking care of a place, not only by dealing with everyday problems, but also by promoting a different vision of the area:

'We were a group of people large enough to claim the right to be a community that takes care of its territory (...) where "to take care" (...) means to have a vision on this territory, in order to leave it better than how it was found, and leaving it better means not only clean but also maybe not "raped" from a building point of view, not treated

¹⁹ A focus on *Ecomuseum Casilino* was broadcast by the national tv educational channel *Rai Scuola* : <http://www.raiscuola.rai.it/articoli/claudio-gnessi-lecomuseo-casilino-e-il-progetto-co-heritage/41756/default.aspx> (Last access 16 July 2019), but also by the cultural and political magazine *Internazionale* <https://www.internazionale.it/video/2016/10/31/un-grande-ecomuseo-urbano-per-roma> (Last access 16 July 2019), or the magazine *Business insider*, that has included the *Ecomuseum* among ten cases of innovative forms of urban regeneration: <https://it.businessinsider.com/come-ti-rigenero-il-rudere-tra-centri-storici-gallerie-darte-e-zuccherifici-musei-10-casi-di-riqualificazione-urbana-in-italia/?fbclid=IwAR3ttShmczLIDvNzWEv1N5U11IFb06kJeR3zN4JyjUZFuP5-plE2s-a9Ldw> (Last Access 30 June 2019)

²⁰ While we were revising this paper, a notice from the *Ecomuseum* appeared in the *Cooperative City Magazine*, a blog edited by the German-Italian company *Eutropian*. The post was entitled *The art of travelling light: tourism with a positive impact* and *Ecomuseum Casilino* was listed as one of those initiatives 'helping municipalities in adopting their tourism strategies to accommodate more responsible ways of traveling': <https://cooperativacity.org/2019/07/23/the-art-of-traveling-light-tourism-with-a-positive-impact/?fbclid=IwAR0xnB3TmbPcpqFC78mTQvq-Zu-EpY8g20RCUVhKaYXoQtBBymlyXsdxNow> (Last access 28 October 2019).

badly from a narrative point of view, not neglected from a social point of view, not relegated to the margins from a cultural point of view' (the President of Ecomuseum Casilino interviewed by the National broadcasting channel RAI; retrieved 16 July 2019, authors translation).

At the local scale, the activities of the Ecomuseum are entangled and disentangled through performances of place that also feed imaginaries and consequently contribute to reclaim a 'right to the brand' (Vanolo 2017) for the district. The Ecomuseum indeed promotes a number of imaginaries **not only through the 'story' it tells through narrative performances, but also through the imaginaries that emerge from embodied and material performances such as the ones connected with the routes it proposes (Figure 3).** First of all, the imaginary of a place marked by an important historical cultural heritage, which deserves to be preserved, enhanced and well-known among residents and visitors. Second, the imaginary of a culturally lively place, where new forms of creativity and cultural production take place every day. Third, the imaginary of a green place, where agricultural landscape and natural biodiversity are intertwined with the urban environment. Fourth, the imaginary of a multicultural place, which assumes multiculturalism as a value in a time when narratives of 'clash of civilizations' and 'threat to western values' are often dominant in public discourse related to immigrants. **In particular, the contribution of diverse international ethnic groups that have become 'local residents' in Municipio V in the last two decades is considered an added value, as it is represented in terms of cultural richness and opportunity of mutual learning.**

Fifth, the imaginary of a place of memory, in particular connected to WWII, in a time of diffused historical revisionism. Finally, and more generally, the Ecomuseum promotes a different imaginary of urban margins (Broccolini & 2017), as places with specific potentialities that need to be uncovered. On this

matter, it is worth highlighting that the Ecomuseum also organizes an annual event, *Giornate del territorio*,²¹ where national and international researchers, activists and practitioners are invited to meet, discuss and experiment on local development and participatory planning for a few days. Indeed, as confirmed by the activists we interviewed and from the analysis of the Ecomuseum's Facebook posts, the Ecomuseum has developed important external relations over the years. These relations involve other associations, including other ecomuseums or civic networks active in Municipio V with more specific and targeted aims, as well as with universities, research centres and in some cases the private sector. Partnering activities have helped the Ecomuseum connect its efforts focused at the local scale to a wider network. The Ecomuseum also has important relations with local governments representing Municipio V, the City of Rome or Lazio Region.²² However the Ecomuseum is still basically a citizen-led initiative, as will be discussed in the next section.

The 'right to the brand': contradictions and open issues

Recently, Masuda and Bookman (2018) proposed a focus on neighbourhoods as a fertile scale for unpacking place and rights entanglements, moving from the so-called Right to the City literature, while Vanolo (2017) more specifically called upon a 'right to the brand', or 'a provocative idea', whose main aim is to emphasize that brands are not things developed 'naturally', out of the control of ordinary people. Brands are social constructions, and hence they are forged by the multiple voices of subjects living, experiencing and talking about the city' (Vanolo 2017, p. 108). The *Ecomuseum Casilino Ad Duae Lauros* can be considered an interesting example of how neighbourhood branding can be deployed outside a governmental strategy to intervene in the urban political

²¹ <http://www.ecomuseocasilino.it/2018/10/17/giornate-del-territorio-4a-edizione-10-11-novembre-2018/> (Last access 16 July 2019).

²² The Region in particular approved its first law on ecomuseums in 2017. While we were revising the paper, in October 2019, *Ecomuseum Casilino* was officially included in the list of 'Ecomuseums of regional interest' by Lazio Region. http://www.regione.lazio.it/binary/rl_main/tbl_documenti/CUL_DD_G13389_07_10_2019.pdf (Last access 31 October 2019)

economic arena, but also through alternative views to the one of the neoliberal city, carried out by community members through constant negotiation (Wherry 2011, p. 144).

Even if the general goal pursued by the *Ecomuseum Casilino* is the same of other initiatives in the same area, the adopted strategy is deeply different, and represents the first and most interesting aspect of this experience. First, the Ecomuseum promoters adopt a vision of what the neighbourhood is, which is different from the dominant one (focused on problems and critical aspects), and which can act by changing the perception of (present and future) residents and driving future development strategies. Second, the Ecomuseum aims at protecting and ameliorating the living conditions in the neighbourhood by imagining an alternative path for its economic development, by offering the basis for profitable initiatives (including those connected with tourism) associated with an imaginary based on the valorisation of the local tangible and intangible heritage, rather than on its destruction, as in the case of real estate development which is still a constant threat in the city of Rome. The focus on local heritage represents a crucial aspect of this experience, as the Ecomuseum challenges conventional representation of urban margins, disregarding specificities and local processes (Bonini Baraldi, Governa, & Salone 2019). A third interesting aspect and achievement of the initiative, according to the interviews collected, is that the involvement of a wider group of residents besides activists, even if not easy to achieve, is stronger with respect to traditional civic networks and urban movements. For instance, 'walklabs' - embodied performances in the form of itinerant workshops that address specific issues through a thematic route - and community-based discovery workshops aimed at enacting a participatory process for the definition of community maps, have become effective instruments of wider engagement. As highlighted by one of the activists of the Ecomuseum: '*At the beginning, it was hard to establish a relationship with residents, but we start to see important results*' (6 Nov. 2017). In so doing, the Ecomuseum stimulates

a stronger pride and sense of belonging among residents, by promoting a change in the identity of the district.

By affecting residents' self-perception, the initiatives enacted by the Ecomuseum indirectly influence the definition of urban priorities in the neighbourhood. The same cultural activities proposed by the Ecomuseum are also functional to a kind of neighbourhood regeneration that is more culturally lively and attractive today than before. Thanks to this activism, the popularity of the initiative and of the imaginary it promotes is growing within and outside the district. Finally, through the development of collaborative relations with researchers and practitioners – at local, national and even international scales – the Ecomuseum offers its contribution to a wider re-thinking of urban regeneration and marginal neighbourhoods. From this point of view, the experience represents a successful attempt of some citizens to make their voice heard and actively contribute to the present and future development of their neighbourhood.

However, and at the same time, the experience of the Ecomuseum also presents a number of contradictions and open issues that are possible to explore starting from the very aim of the strategy. If the attempt of making the district profitable for different kind of investments rather than real estate, the long-term consequences of this strategy present several risks and challenges. In particular, the new, positive imaginary of the district that the Ecomuseum tries to promote implies the exploitation and preservation of local assets and heritage, but at the same time exposes the district to the risk of gentrification (Zukin 2010), as is well known. This concern was also highlighted in some of the interviews conducted with local stakeholders: *If the Ecomuseum is to be successful, then restaurants and bars will replace other activities, as already happened in other [gentrified] districts* (16 May 2017).

Our interviews confirmed that the experience of the Ecomuseum is well known in the neighbourhood; at the same time, it does not present a specific power of attraction or mobilization if compared to other initiatives that deal with more specific and targeted issues. Whereas the initiative is successful in terms of cultural offer and promotion, the wider involvement and participation of citizens is crucial in order for it to move further and pursue the goal of reclaiming 'a right to the brand', through which collectively imagine a different future for the district. The possibility of a renovated imaginary for the neighbourhood sometimes fails to be successful, in particular among those local stakeholders who believe that *'the narrative proposed by the Ecomuseum is far from reality'* (16 May 2017). The negative representation of the neighbourhood is still dominant and is based on a diffused perception that sets the problems of the district, rather than potentialities, on the foreground. This is clearly paired with a highest priority given to initiatives tackling the everyday life of inhabitants, rather than an experience like the Ecomuseum: *'the activity of branding the district may be successful towards those that decide to buy a house here, but it is a romantic vision of an non-existent past. Here, there was total degradation (...) we need first of all to improve the district'*, **the same respondent continues.** Frictions among different perspectives are also visible within the Ecomuseum itself and its closer network, in particular between a focus on the protection of 'urban commons', or the cultural and natural heritage of the neighbourhood and the promotion of this heritage in order to attract tourists, residents and investors. Whereas in the design of the initiative the two aims are strictly interconnected, a focus on the first or second aim leads to different priorities and strategies.

The limited power of attraction of the Ecomuseum initiatives points also to the (lack of) role of public institutions. Ecomuseum activists have indeed established important connections with all the relevant levels of government (local, city and regional). However, there is a matter of difficulty in finding a balance of responsibilities and ownership (*'From the Ecomuseum they ask for*

support, but they wish to keep control over the initiative', City Council representative, 13 Nov. 2017) and the more general lack of experience in the City Council in working with associations and citizens (*'It is possible to co-manage activities, public institutions have started to do so, with private entities, which is easier than with citizens', the same City Council representative adds on*). This is again typical of Rome, with respect to more developed experience of cooperation between grassroots initiatives and public institutions in particular in northern Europe (Celata & Coletti 2019). Whatever the reason, the lack of serious involvement from public institutions is a crucial issue in many respects.

First of all, the combination of branding strategies with other policies aimed at strengthening the assets of the city is a crucial component for achieving place-making. In the case of the *ad duas lauros* area, crucial assets are surely represented by the significant underground archaeological heritage that, if unveiled, could offer a massive cultural attractive element: *'On the subject of archaeological persistence associations can do little, if the institutions do not dig and do not take things out (...) There must be the political will to open spaces and make them usable'* (Local stakeholder, 16 May 2017). The issue of underground heritage, in particular in some areas like in the Centocelle Park, is a long-standing topic of discussion and planning by the City of Rome, but decisions are still pending. Such an investment could boost the activity of the Ecomuseum and the attractiveness of the neighbourhood more generally; but this is beyond the responsibility of civic networks.

Second, interviewees also pointed to the 'democratic' value of institutions; leaving this kind of initiative in the hands of citizens means, according to some observers, further enlarging disparities across the city: *'In this district you have qualified people who have developed this strategy; other districts don't have these people; don't they deserve their ecomuseum? What is missing is the institution, as well as planning'* (Local stakeholder, 16 May 2017). More

generally, the involvement of local institutions – and the City Council in particular – could guarantee the inclusion of Municipio V in the wider scale of city branding. This inclusion **may offer the opportunity** for broadening the target of the promotion of this specific neighbourhood, as well as in keeping the sense of pride that this promotion may nurture among local residents, not only limited to the specific area but also connected to the city as a whole. **At the same time, local ownership is a crucial aspect pursued and preserved in the experience of the Ecomuseum; consequently, the form of this inclusion should be carefully evaluated.**

Conclusions

The active involvement of citizens in the design and implementation of a branding strategy is increasingly recognized by the literature on city branding as a crucial element for their success (Colomb & Kalandides 2010; Kavaratzis, Giovanardi & Lichrou 2017; Kavaratzis 2012; Zenker & Erfgen 2014). Critical urban studies have taken this issue a step further, emphasizing how the pervasive impact of branding strategies may configure a ‘right to the brand’, as Vanolo (2017) has called it, pinpointing the right of citizens and residents to contribute to the ‘imagination’ of their city or neighbourhood. The locus of neighbourhood branding may even become the site to shift the ‘right to the brand’ to the more ambitious Right to the City (Masuda & Bookman 2018), that is to say considering neighbourhoods as the site of experimentations for the subaltern classes to reclaim control over business-as-usual processes of urbanization, often characterised by capitalist ideals of growth, competitiveness and profit accumulation through repetitive cycles of creative destruction (Marcuse 2012; Purcell 2002). In this framework, the aim of this paper was to discuss potentialities and constraints of neighbourhood branding strategies as they are activated by civic networks and urban activism. The case of *Ecomuseum Casilino Ad Duae Lauros* served this purpose, representing a local civic network in the eastern periphery of Rome, the action of which is

devoted to preserving tangible and intangible heritage in an area constantly under attack by speculative real estate interests. Promoting a different imaginary of the district is undertaken by *Ecomuseum Casilino* as an alternative strategy for neighbourhood development.

As discussed, **the exploratory** case study has shown several achievements, as well as critical aspects of this specific experience. In terms of achievements and potentialities, the experience of the *Ecomuseum Casilino* shows how the ownership of branding strategies by local communities can lead to adopt a different imaginary of the neighbourhood itself, in particular in supposedly marginal neighbourhoods. Municipio V is widely portrayed as a problematic area, while the Ecomuseum proposes a narrative based on its potentialities rather than its limitations. From this point of view, the case study shows how grassroots initiatives and citizens activism can emphasize assets that are usually inaudible in the dominant discourse. Through the promotion and preservation of tangible and intangible heritage, *Ecomuseum Casilino* has achieved citizens' participation, raised awareness towards assets that were not even perceived as such before. In so doing, the initiative indirectly influences - and may further influence in the future - the definition of urban priorities in the neighbourhood.

There are also some other open issues discussed in the previous section towards which the experience of the *Ecomuseum Casilino* can offer some insights. These open issues are related with three, interconnected potential conflicts: in representations, management and achievements.

First, the case study emphasizes the different representations that coexist over the place, alongside the one proposed by the Ecomuseum. This is not surprising in light of the intrinsic plurality of representations of any place (Pasquinelli 2017); however, the conflict of representations among citizens

and a lack of convergence on a common strategy surely limits the potentialities of the activities carried out at the local scale.

This lack of convergence also points to the second above-mentioned aspect, related to conflicts around the management of the branding initiative. The case study shows how the ambivalent relationship between local institution and activists limits the impact and development potentialities of the Ecomuseum. While the initiative has reached important results in stimulating a sense of pride and belonging in the neighbourhood, substantial support from public institutions could significantly increase the impact of the activities put in place, in particular towards an external audience.

Finally, the case study contributes to unveiling conflictual achievements that citizen-led branding initiatives may pursue. The main aim of *Ecomuseo Casilino* is to protect the tangible and intangible heritage of the neighbourhood as 'urban commons', in particular from the threat of excessive overbuilding; but the adopted strategy consists of making the neighbourhood attractive and profitable because of – and not despite – its heritage, which may produce ambivalent results, favouring processes of further gentrification and exploitation in the long run. It shall not be forgotten that in the last few years Municipio V has already witnessed a process of partial gentrification (Annunziata 2010), that has contributed to the concentration in the district of highly skilled residents that are actually at the basis of the Ecomuseum project.

The convergence of old and new generations of activists, as well as of historical and more recent social groups, is definitely a precondition for a more democratic form of neighbourhood branding, but it also raises questions around the ability of the 'right to the brand' to be transformed in a Right to the City. Indeed, this is an issue towards which research shall continue carefully investigating. Possibly, making the variety of emerging conflicts and

ambiguities explicit – as we have tried to do in this paper – may give a deeper meaning to the politics of place branding as it emerges from urban activism and citizens led initiatives.

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List of figures

Figure 1a. The logo of the neighbourhood network Torpignattara
(Permission to publish the image has been obtained)

Figure 1b. The logo of the Ecomuseum Casilino Ad Duas Lauros
(Permission to publish the image has been obtained)

Figure 2 On-line alerts for three different discovery walks ('walklabs') organised by the Ecomuseum around a specific focus.

- a. Focus on archaeological heritage
- b. Focus on sacred and religious heritage
- c. Focus on street-art