

Notes from a Ground that Refuses to Resolve

Ambivalences of Participatory Practice in Rione Scala

ricerca-azione partecipativa
posizionalità
etica della cura
ecologia politica urbana
ritmanalisi
participatory action research
positionality
ethics of care
urban political ecology
rhythmanalysis

Questo articolo assume Rione Scala in Pavia come luogo di indagine su cosa significhi praticare l'architettura in territori che resistono a ogni risoluzione. Attingendo a cinque anni di lavoro attraverso Architecture(s) of Care, il quartiere viene letto come territorio non prescritto: non uno spazio di assenza o abbandono, ma una situazione in cui i copioni della proprietà, dell'uso e del valore istituzionale risultano allentati, sospesi o contestati. Seguendo la nozione di terrain vague di de Solà-Morales, questa indeterminazione non è un problema in attesa di soluzione ma una condizione da cui la conoscenza architettonica deve essere generata. L'articolo procede per note di campo situate, mettendo in scena tensioni tra presenza ed estrazione, mediazione istituzionale e critica strutturale, produzione di beni comuni e rischio della loro estetizzazione, con la ricerca-azione partecipativa (PAR) al centro. La PAR è esaminata per le sue potenzialità emancipatorie e i rischi che comporta quando praticata da un'istituzione accademica in un territorio marginalizzato. Attingendo a Haraway (1988), Tronto (1993), Puig de la Bellacasa (2017), Federici (2018), Rawes (2013), Heynen et al. (2006) e Lefebvre (2004), in una genealogia che include Augé, Koolhaas, Debord, Illich, Alexander, La Pietra, Pettena e Conde, propongo la ricerca architettonica situata come pratica riflessiva che rifiuta di risolvere le contraddizioni che abita, e sostengo che il territorio periferico non prescritto richieda non la risoluzione, ma una presenza sostenuta, responsabile e strutturalmente consapevole.

This article takes Rione Scala in Pavia as the site of an inquiry into what it means to practice architecture in territories that resist resolution. Drawing on five years of engagement through Architecture(s) of Care, it positions the neighbourhood as an unscripted ground: not a space of absence or neglect, but a situation in which the scripts of ownership, use, and institutional value are loosened, suspended, or contested. Following de Solà-Morales's notion of terrain vague, this indeterminacy is not a problem awaiting solution but a condition from which architectural knowledge must be generated. The article proceeds through situated field notes, staging tensions between presence and extraction, institutional mediation and structural critique, the production of commons and the risk of their aestheticisation, with participatory action research (PAR) at its centre. PAR is examined for its emancipatory potentials and the risks it carries when practised from an academic institution in a marginalised territory. Drawing on Haraway (1988), Tronto (1993), Puig de la Bellacasa (2017), Federici (2018), Rawes (2013), Heynen et al. (2006), and Lefebvre (2004), within a genealogy including Augé, Koolhaas, Debord, Illich, Alexander, La Pietra, Pettena, and Conde, I propose situated architectural research as a reflexive practice that refuses to resolve the contradictions it inhabits, and argue that the unscripted peripheral ground demands not resolution, but sustained, accountable, and structurally conscious presence.

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ON NOT RESOLVING THE GROUND

These reflections begin not from a design proposal, but from an unresolved condition. Rione Scala, a peripheral neighbourhood on the southern edge of Pavia, refuses the scripts that urban planning typically projects onto marginal territories. It is not derelict, it is densely inhabited by overlapping communities whose everyday spatial practices generate forms of coexistence that neither planning instruments nor architectural typologies adequately describe. Yet it is also fragile: infrastructurally underserved, intermittently visible to institutional actors, and persistently vulnerable to the oscillation between neglect and sudden regenerative attention. Demographically it stands at the intersection of ageing Italian working-class communities and more recently arrived migrant populations, whose everyday geographies rarely coincide with institutional representations of neighbourhood life. Spatially its edges are porous, between housing stock of different eras and conditions, between open land and infrastructural detritus, between maintained civic space and territory that has quietly reverted to informal management.

It is, in the terms this issue invites us to think with, an unscripted ground. The concept of the terrain vague, as theorised by Ignasi de Solà-Morales (1995), captures something essential about this condition: spaces simultaneously absent from the city's functional order and present to its imagination, sites where the stability of property, use, and meaning is held in productive suspension. Yet the terrain vague also risks romanticisation, the peripheral void aestheticised from a distance by those who do not live within it. Part of the ethical labour of this article is to think against that aestheticisation while still taking seriously what indeterminacy, as a structural condition, enables and forecloses. This genealogy of indeterminate urban space runs deeper than de Solà-Morales alone. Marc Augé's

(1992) notion of the non-place, the anonymous, transitional space of supermodernity stripped of identity, relation, and history, offers a counterpoint. Augé identifies the dissolution of place as a symptom of late capitalism's acceleration. The terrain vague of Rione Scala is neither fully place nor non-place but something more contested, more inhabited. Rem Koolhaas's (2002) concept of Junk Space, the entropic residue of modernisation, the leftover of the architectural programme, resonates with the neighbourhood's infrastructural detritus while also demanding qualification. Junk Space for Koolhaas is a condition of surfeit, where in peripheral territories, the analogous condition is produced by systematic withdrawal rather than excess. The Situationist International's practice of the *dérive*, the unplanned, affect-driven drift through urban environments as a form of critical spatial knowledge production (Debord, 1958), anticipates the methodological register this article adopts. The neighbourhood here is understood through duration and sensory immersion rather than cartographic abstraction.

Italian radical design offers a further genealogical thread. Ugo La Pietra's "use of the city" instructions (La Pietra, 1979) and Gianni Pettena's urban experimentations reframed the city as a field of relational encounter rather than a fixed programme. This is a precedent for the situated, participatory mode of practice developed in Rione Scala. Yago Conde's (2000) architecture of indeterminacy provides a more recent theoretical articulation of design that works with, rather than against, the open, unresolved character of marginal urban territories. This indeterminacy is not neutral, it is structurally produced. As David Harvey (2008) argues, the uneven geography of urban investment and disinvestment reflects the spatial dynamics of capital accumulation. Peripheral territories are not incidentally marginal but systematically positioned at the edges of extractive urban processes. To engage Rione

Scala without accounting for this structural production is to risk converting political economy into picturesque.

My engagement with Rione Scala through the programme Architecture(s) of Care spans five years. It began with a Summer School linking architectural theory and social research, and evolved slowly, incompletely, through repeated returns and acknowledged departures into a long-term neighbourhood presence. This article does not present that programme as a model. It presents it as a site of inquiry into its own conditions of possibility and its own contradictions. The central question I address is not whether participatory architecture works, but what it costs — epistemically, ethically, politically — to practice it from within a university, in a territory that has not asked for an architect. Underlying the inquiry is a claim about the discipline itself, that architecture, if it is to remain meaningful in marginalised urban territories, cannot be a predetermined practice, a sequence of brief, survey, proposal, delivery, but must become an open process, responsive to conditions it cannot fully anticipate and accountable to communities it did not initially know. Peripheral neighbourhoods such as Rione Scala are not merely sites of need; they are laboratories of contemporary living, where the contradictions of the city between investment and abandonment, between formal governance and informal practice, between individual dignity and collective precarity, are most nakedly legible. To read these contradictions requires a convergence of perspectives that no single disciplinary formation supplies. The fine-grained attentiveness of ethnography, the structural analysis of urban sociology, the processual thinking of anthropology, and the spatial and material intelligence of architectural design. This convergence is not merely methodological, it is, as Petrescu, Axinte, and Medeşan (2026) demonstrate through their comparative analysis of design-supported urban commons in

collective housing estates, a condition of responsible practice in marginalised territories. It is one that requires designers to move from the role of technocratic expert toward that of co-initiator, activist, facilitator, and, ultimately, engaged neighbor. It is at precisely this intersection that architecture is forced to rethink not only its methods but the scale of its ambitions. It need recognise, as Camillo Boano (2020) argues in his account of the minor project, that the small, the incomplete, and the inoperative can carry an intensity of political and spatial significance that the monumental and the resolved cannot. Designing for a mixed society, one constituted by difference of generation, origin, legal status, and everyday spatial practice, demands an architecture willing to give form to individual and collective dignity without resolving the complexity that makes that dignity difficult to achieve.

THE UNSCRIPTED GROUND AS SITUATION

A distinction is necessary at the outset between site and situation. A site can be surveyed, mapped, programmed, and returned to with a proposal. A situation must be entered, endured, and allowed to alter the one who engages it. What this issue's call proposes, and what Rione Scala demands, is precisely this shift. A shift from the neighbourhood as a bounded space of intervention to the neighbourhood as a knot of material, social, and symbolic relations that only becomes legible through sustained, attentive, and often collective engagement with place. The unscripted ground as situation refuses the detached architectural gaze; it insists on co-implication. To remain in Rione Scala over time is to become partially and provisionally a party to its negotiations between resident associations and the municipality, between older Italian-born residents and recently arrived migrant families, between the civic infrastructure that exists and the care infrastructure that does not.

This is not only an architectural shift but an epistemological one. Following Haraway's (1988) insistence on situated knowledges the claim that all knowing is partial, located, and accountable I argue that the peripheral neighbourhood forces architectural research into a more honest reckoning with its own positionality. This is precisely because it resists the stabilising scripts of planning. The terrain vague does not merely await architectural interpretation, it demands that the interpreter account for the position from which interpretation occurs. This has direct methodological and ethical consequences for how research is designed, how participation is structured, and how results are translated and to whom. Lefebvre's (2004) *rhythmanalysis*; an approach to urban life that attends to the temporal structures of everyday practice through bodily and sensory engagement, offers a complementary methodological register here. In Rione Scala the rhythms of the neighbourhood are spatially and temporally differentiated in ways that escape survey-based documentation: the kitchen at a community event, the contested threshold of a shared courtyard at different hours of the day, the changing occupancy of the civic centre by different communities across the week. Reading these rhythms requires duration and immersion, not observation from a distance. It requires, in Lefebvre's terms, becoming something of a *rhythm analyst*, attuned to the polyrhythmic complexity of a social space whose full legibility can only be achieved from within.

The indeterminacy that characterises unscripted grounds also opens genuine possibilities. Informal associations have claimed spaces that planning abandoned. Migrant-led social infrastructures have filled gaps in municipal provision. The civic centre renovated through an earlier institutional programme is occupied in ways that neither its designers nor its funders anticipated. In Tsing's (2015) terms these are forms of life that flourish in the gaps that global

and local systems leave behind. They are improvisations that are not merely adaptive but generative of new social forms. Federici's (2018) feminist analysis of commoning adds a further dimension here, the commons are not simply shared resources but social relations of reproduction, and women in particular have historically borne the labour of sustaining them. In Rione Scala the informal networks of solidarity that structure everyday life, the sharing of childcare, the collective preparation of food, the mutual assistance in navigating bureaucratic systems, are predominantly carried by women. Their labour is largely invisible to the spatial and institutional frameworks through which the neighbourhood is typically read. The unscripted ground, read carefully from within rather than observed from without, is full of this kind of invisible labour and a feminist analytical lens is necessary to make it visible.

PRACTICING ARCHITECTURE AS SITUATED RESEARCH: METHOD, IMMERSION AND THE ETHICS OF DURATION

The Architecture(s) of Care programme developed through a methodological shift that I can only describe retrospectively as a necessary disillusionment. What began as a Summer School conceived within the conventions of university-community outreach, temporary, bounded, legible as academic service, became something more difficult and more demanding. It became a long-term research commitment that could not be justified by any single deliverable. This shift emerged from the recognition that short-term engagement, however intensive, risks reproducing the extractive logic it claims to critique. One arrives, one listens, one makes, one leaves and the neighbourhood absorbs another cycle of attention without structural change. Trust, as a social relation, cannot be

produced within a workshop cycle. It takes longer than a semester to understand why a particular resident chooses not to attend meetings, or what the spatial politics of a shared courtyard actually are. Duration also changes the researcher. Over five years in Rione Scala, my assumptions about what architectural intervention could achieve have been substantially revised. I arrived with design convictions and I remain more slowly, more uncertainly with research questions. This is not failure; it is, I would argue, the condition of intellectual honesty in participatory practice.

Ethnography is often treated as a social science tool that architects borrow and set aside once design commences. In Rione Scala, ethnographic method has been inseparable from architectural thinking, not as a precursor to design but as a co-constitutive practice. I attended residents' meetings without presenting proposals, because I needed to understand what proposals would mean in a context I did not yet know. I observed how the renovated civic centre was used differently by different communities at different times of day, and how space that reads as neutral from the outside is, from within, intensely territorial and temporally structured. I participated in food preparation at community events not because this was architecturally useful in any obvious sense but because the kitchen, in Rione Scala, is a political space. It is the site where authority is negotiated, alliances formed, and the conditions of collective life worked out. This approach draws on the reflexive anthropological tradition that James Clifford (1986) identified as the acknowledgement of partial truths, the recognition that ethnographic accounts are always produced from a particular position and cannot claim to represent a social world in its totality. My field notes are partial; they record what I was positioned to observe, which is not everything. Making this partiality explicit is not a methodological weakness it is, following Haraway (1988), the condition of responsible knowledge production. Design-build

workshops became ethnographic instruments in this context. During the construction of the neighbourhood book-crossing cabin (2025), residents brought fragments of domestic material: salvaged wood, leftover paint, a hinge from a defunct garden gate. The workshop produced not only a cabin but a temporary community of making in which social relations, hierarchies, and solidarities became briefly visible. Material assembly, as a method, reveals relational structures that conversation alone does not access.

PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH: POTENTIALS, LIMITATIONS AND THE UNRESOLVABLE

Participatory Action Research (PAR) has a genealogy rooted in emancipatory commitments that architectural practice has frequently instrumentalised without adequately honouring. Its theoretical foundations lie in the work of Fals-Borda (1987), who, in the Colombian context of the 1970s and 1980s, articulated a research practice premised on the dissolution of the boundary between researcher and researched. This was a practice developed with and led by peasant and marginalised communities, rather than on or about them. Freire's (1970) parallel articulation of conscientisation as a pedagogical and political practice of collective critical awareness deepened this epistemological commitment. Knowledge, for Freire, is not transmitted from expert to layperson but generated through dialogical engagement with the conditions of one's own oppression. As systematised by Reason and Bradbury (2001), PAR encompasses collective knowledge production, reflexive cycles of inquiry and action, and an orientation toward transformative rather than merely descriptive ends. In the context of marginalised urban territories, these commitments translate into a research practice that takes seriously the experiential knowledge

of those who inhabit precarious conditions. It engages knowledge that is fine-grained, embodied, and irreplaceable and that holds open the possibility that spatial practice, at any scale, might contribute to the conditions of its own critique (Fig.1).

In Rione Scala PAR produced outcomes that would not have been achievable through conventional design methods. Workshops such as *Il Bar dei Vicini* (Festival dei Diritti 2024) engaged residents in constructing a mobile kiosk used for neighbourhood events. This was an object designed collaboratively, built collectively, and used in ways that exceeded the intentions of its initiators. The kiosk merits closer attention as a design object precisely because its significance lies not in its formal resolution but in the social process it condensed and the spatial agency it enabled. Its programme emerged from a sequence of open assemblies in which residents identified the absence of a neutral, mobile gathering device, one not affiliated with any single association, as a structural gap in the neighbourhood's social infrastructure. Its material specification was shaped by the constraints of collective fabrication. Dimensions were determined by what could be transported by hand and assembled without specialist tools, and surfaces left partially unfinished to allow future modification. Alexander's (1977) pattern language, with its insistence that living structures emerge from the accumulated wisdom of those who inhabit them rather than from the imposition of expert systems, offers a useful if incomplete theoretical frame here. The kiosk is not a pattern in Alexander's sense, it is too singular, too embedded in a specific set of social negotiations to claim the generative universality he sought. But its design process shares Alexander's core commitment, that spatial form must be generated from within a community's own understanding of its needs, through a process that is itself educative and politically meaningful. What distinguishes the kiosk from conventional community-design outcomes is precisely its



Fig.1 - Set-up for a students-citizens open assembly. Credits: Author, 2025.

openness to appropriation. It was designed to travel, to be claimed by different groups for different purposes, to accumulate meaning through use. Illich's (1973) concept of convivial tools, artefacts that are simple, transparent, and accessible to all, which expand rather than constrain the autonomy of their users, illuminates what the kiosk aspires to be; not a service delivery mechanism but a spatial resource whose value is relational and open-ended. This is what Boano (2020) identifies as the political potential of the minor project; not the grand gesture but the small, deliberate, incompletely resolved object that operates as an intensity rather than a monument, one whose significance lies in what it activates rather than what it completes (Fig.2).

The book-crossing cabin (2025), designed and built in a subsequent cycle of the programme, operates through an analogous logic. Materially modest, it nevertheless generates forms of attachment, the repeated gesture of leaving and taking a book, the recognition of a shared device in a shared space, that exceed its physical dimensions. Both objects are, in the terms this article proposes, devices of care. Not care as sentiment or aesthetics, but care as the ongoing, material, and social practice of maintaining a shared world (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). Their resonance with comparable devices documented in other peripheral European territories, such as the informal proximity libraries and kiosks of Bucharest and Cluj described by Petrescu, Axinte, and Medeşan (2026), suggests that such objects may constitute an emerging repertoire for participatory architectural practice in collective housing contexts across Europe. Small in scale, but significant in what Escobar (2018) calls their ontological force, they have capacity to reshape the ways in which communities engage with shared space, knowledge, and the possibility of collective life. They do not substitute for structural provision, they make the absence of structural provision visible while simultaneously demonstrating, at the scale of the

everyday, what an architecture of accountable presence might look like.

Neighbourhood mapping exercises surfaced spatial knowledge that no GIS dataset contained, the informal routes, the contested thresholds, the locations of informal solidarity, that are invisible to planning instruments but central to everyday life. Participatory processes created conditions in which residents who rarely occupied the same institutional

space came to share a material practice, negotiating, however temporarily, the differences that ordinarily structured their separation. These achievements point to a genuine capacity of PAR to produce both spatial knowledge and social relation simultaneously, to treat the built environment not as a product to be delivered but as a process to be shared. Yet PAR carries significant limitations that must be engaged with rigour rather than acknowledged only in passing. The first is epistemic



Fig.2 - The mobile kiosk travelling across the neighbourhood to offer tea and coffee on a Saturday morning. Credits: Author, 2025.

participatory processes do not dissolve the power asymmetry between academic researcher and neighbourhood resident, they reconfigure it in ways that can be harder to see. When I curate outcomes for exhibitions, when I select which voices to amplify in published accounts, when I translate neighbourhood experience into the vocabulary of academic discourse, as I am doing now, I am exercising forms of interpretive authority that no amount of participatory method entirely redistributes. The knowledge produced in PAR is genuinely co-produced in process but not always equally owned in representation. Cooke and Kothari's (2001) warning about the 'new tyranny of participation' is not merely a historical caution; it describes a structural tendency that operates through the very mechanisms: consensus, inclusion, shared making, that participatory practice valorises. More pointedly, Patricia Maguire's (1987) feminist critique identified the androcentric assumptions embedded in early PAR formulations that participation frameworks have persistently failed to account for the gendered distribution of labour that makes commoning possible, rendering invisible precisely the reproductive work that sustains it. In Rione Scala, this critique is materially present in who attends workshops, who prepares the meals that punctuate them, and whose knowledge counts as architectural knowledge within the research process.

The second limitation is political. PAR can be instrumentalised within governance frameworks that it was designed to contest. Miraftab's (2009) distinction between invited and insurgent spaces of participation sharpens this diagnosis. The invited space of the funded workshop convened by an institution, structured by a methodology, documented for reporting purposes is not the same as the insurgent space of resident self-organisation, even when the two overlap. Municipal actors in Pavia have, on occasion, cited community workshops as evidence of successful neighbourhood engagement while leaving structural

issues of housing precarity, inadequate health services, and legal vulnerability for migrant residents entirely unaddressed. In this framing, participation becomes alibi rather than practice. The presence of collaborative process serving as justification for not meeting structural needs. Federici's (2018) analysis of new enclosures' under neoliberalism is instructive here. The withdrawal of public welfare and the simultaneous promotion of community-led resilience are not coincidental but structurally related processes. When participatory architectural research fills a gap left by disinvestment, it must name that gap as a political condition and refuse to present its own presence as a substitute for the provision that has been withdrawn.

The third limitation is temporal and concerns sustainability. PAR depends on the sustained engagement of participants whose lives are structured by precarity such as irregular employment, uncertain legal status, the daily labour of care, that makes sustained engagement asymmetrically costly. Participation fluctuates not because residents lack commitment, but because commitment competes with survival. When funding cycles end or university calendars impose their own temporality on neighbourhood processes, the continuity that PAR requires is interrupted, and the relational infrastructures it builds can dissolve more quickly than they were assembled.

The ethics of initiating participatory processes therefore includes the ethics of sustaining them, which requires resources, institutional support, and a willingness to remain present beyond the conditions of any particular project. It also requires honesty about when those conditions cannot be met, and what that failure costs the communities involved. These limitations do not invalidate PAR as a method, they specify the conditions under which it can be practised responsibly and the political accounting that responsible practice must maintain.

POSITIONALITY, INSTITUTIONAL POWER, AND THE RISK OF SUBSTITUTION

I am embedded in Rione Scala through sustained presence, collaborative relationships with local associations, and an ongoing commitment to neighbourhood processes that exceed any particular project. I am simultaneously external, university-affiliated, academically credentialed, and capable of translating local experience into the currency of academic publication.

This duality is not a problem to be solved but a structural condition to be inhabited with care. Feminist standpoint theory insists that acknowledging positionality does not dissolve power asymmetries, it makes them visible and therefore available for critical reflection and partial accountability. When my institutional affiliation facilitates access to municipal planning officers that residents themselves cannot easily obtain, this is not a neutral resource, it is an expression of the same structural inequality that produced the neighbourhood's marginalisation. To use institutional capital in the service of community advocacy without acknowledging this is to reproduce the asymmetry one claims to be working against. I have also had to reckon with the ways in which my presence produces effects I cannot fully control. Some residents speak more confidently in workshops I facilitate, others withdraw. Some associations have come to expect forms of support such as design expertise, grant-writing capacity, access to university networks, that exceed what I am able or obligated to provide.

The ethics of remaining in a neighbourhood over time includes the ethics of managing expectation and being clear about what I can offer, what I cannot, and what must be demanded of institutions rather than outsourced to academic presence.

The most structurally uncomfortable question that Rione Scala has posed to my practice is this, does the presence of engaged architectural researchers in under-resourced territories substitute for the public investment those territories require, and in doing so legitimise its absence? Tronto's (1993) political theory of care is decisive here. Tronto argues that care is not merely an interpersonal ethic but a political one. Caring practices are always already embedded in relations of power, and the question of who cares for whom, at whose cost, and under what structural conditions is irreducibly political.

When care is delegated downward, from the state to the community, from the community to its most precarious members, it does not simply fill a gap, it reinforces the social hierarchies that produced the gap. Krasny's (2019) feminist theorisation of care as spatial practice extends this argument into the architectural domain, insisting that care must confront its political entanglements rather than aestheticise them. Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) adds a further critical dimension. Care, understood as simultaneously labour, affect, and ethico-political obligation, cannot be reduced to a stylistic register or a design vocabulary. It requires attention to the invisible, often feminised work that makes any spatial commons actually function, such as the maintenance, the conflict resolution, or the ongoing negotiation, that is never photographed and rarely acknowledged in architectural accounts.

When a community kiosk built by architecture students fills the absence left by defunded public infrastructure, the kiosk is not merely an act of solidarity it is also, potentially, a cover story for disinvestment. I do not think this makes the kiosk wrong. I think it makes the political conditions of its production something that must be named, contested, and refused as sufficient. The self-built civic device is a micro-space of agency, as Awan, Schneider, and

Till (2011) suggest spatial agency can be, but micro-spaces of agency are not substitutes for structural transformation. The ethical obligation of situated architectural research is to hold these scales simultaneously, and to work at the scale of the neighbourhood without losing sight of the scale at which the neighbourhood's conditions are produced.

A related question concerns representation and its aestheticisation of marginality. The Sharper Night exhibition relocated Rione Scala's narratives into the city centre. While this visibility mattered, and while the translation of peripheral experience into a more legible urban space was requested and welcomed by some residents, it also simplified complexity.

As Jane Rendell (2005) suggests, critical spatial practice must acknowledge the partiality of representation. Exhibiting peripheral life risks producing it as spectacle, setting it as evidence of urban diversity for audiences who do not share its precarity. Writing this article presents a structurally similar risk, and I hold this in view.

COMMONS, SPATIAL AGENCY, AND THE ECOLOGY OF THE UNFINISHED

The infrastructures produced through Architecture(s) of Care, the community kiosk (Il Bar dei Vicini, 2024), the neighbourhood book-crossing cabin (2025), and the neighbourhood mapping exercises, are materially modest and deliberately fragile. Their value lies not in formal resolution but in the processes they enabled and the negotiations they made visible (Fig.3). They are, in the terms this article proposes, devices capable of generating attachment and care. They are objects small enough to be built collectively, open enough to accumulate meaning through use, and sufficiently present in the everyday life of the neighbourhood to become reference points for a mixed community navigating

shared space across difference. The designer's role in this process is not that of the technocratic expert that modernist planning imagined, but something more distributed and relational. It is what Till (2005) calls the negotiation of hope, the capacity to work with the uncertainty and incompleteness of communities' actual situations rather than projecting predetermined solutions onto them. Manzini (2015) understands design for social innovation as precisely this, not as the imposition of formal expertise but the facilitation of conditions in which people cooperate, recombine existing resources, and act in ways that generate new forms of collective life. Petrescu's (2005) understanding of commons as ongoing negotiation rather than settled arrangement captures what these objects are and are not. A position further developed in her recent comparative analysis of design-supported urban commons in European collective housing contexts demonstrates how such negotiations are always agonistic, contested, and constitutively unresolved (Petrescu, Axinte, and Medeşan, 2026). In the terms of Mouffe's (2007) agonistic democracy, the conflicts that arise around these objects, who uses them, when, for whom, are not obstacles to the commons but constitutive of it. The agonistic space is where commoning actually happens. They are not common goods in any stable sense, they are invitations to commoning, which is always contested, always provisional, and always at risk of being claimed by one group at the expense of others. Ostrom's (1990) foundational analysis of common-pool resource governance established that commons can be sustainably managed by communities through self-defined rules and institutions. Her framework however, drawn from rural and natural resource contexts, requires significant modification when transposed to the urban environment, as Foster and Iaione (2018) have shown. Urban commons are constituted not around bounded natural resources but around the ongoing social negotiation of shared



Fig.3 - "Building as a collective ritual", upcycling workshop at Rione Scala. Credits: Author, 2025.

urban space. They are therefore far more vulnerable to the asymmetric power relations, the institutional pressures, and the temporal disruptions that characterise peripheral urban territories. When residents in Rione Scala dispute access to the book cabin, or when the kiosk is appropriated by one association in ways that exclude others, these are not design failures they are the political nature of urban commoning becoming visible, and they must be engaged rather than resolved away.

Federici's (2018) feminist critique of commoning adds a necessary historical and political dimension here. For Federici, commons are not happy islands in a sea of capitalist relations but sites of active struggle against enclosure, against the ongoing processes of privatisation and disinvestment through which capital extracts value from collective life. The fragility of the commons in Rione Scala is not accidental, it is a product of the same structural processes of neoliberal governance, the withdrawal of public services, and the precarity of migrant legal status that produced the neighbourhood's marginalisation. To speak of commons in this context without attending to these structural conditions is to aestheticise what is, in fact, a site of political struggle. Rawes's (2013) conceptualisation of relational architectural ecologies is useful alongside this.

The built objects produced in participatory processes are nodes in a network of human and non-human actors, institutional and informal relations, material and symbolic exchanges. Their meaning is relational and therefore unstable, not because relations are inherently fluid but because the social and structural conditions that constitute them are themselves contested and subject to transformation. Urban political ecology as developed by Heynen, Kaika, and Swyngedouw (2006) insists that urban environments are metabolic, the product of material flows, labour processes, and ecological relations that are inseparable from social and political ones. Rione

Scala's infrastructural fragility is the materialisation of structural inequality in built form.

Leaking roofs, uneven pavements, inadequate lighting in public spaces, these are not design failures but political ones, and they must be engaged as such. Attending to these material conditions is learning to read the building stock as a record of disinvestment, the open spaces as sites of informal ecological process, the domestic thresholds as negotiations between private and collective life. This has been as important to this research as any theoretical framework. Harvey's (2008) right to the city is, in Rione Scala, not an abstract aspiration but a daily negotiation whose outcome is genuinely uncertain. Small-scale spatial interventions do not resolve that uncertainty. They can however make visible what is otherwise invisible, build capacities that persist beyond any particular project cycle, and create micro-spaces of agency in which residents can rehearse forms of collective claim-making that have effects at larger scales, provided the practitioner does not mistake the former for the latter.

This issue's call asks how unscripted grounds shift over time, whether they remain at the margins or are reintegrated into mainstream planning, and to what extent lessons from experimentation persist or are erased. Rione Scala is subject to periodic waves of institutional attention in the form of urban regeneration programmes, European funding cycles, municipal 'inclusion' initiatives, each of which brings its own interpretive frame.

These frames do not simply describe the neighbourhood, they attempt to script it. The risk is the normalisation of the unscripted ground, its absorption into planning's legibility at the cost of the informal processes and insurgent practices that its indeterminacy enabled. My practice has had to negotiate this risk continuously, participating in funded programmes while maintaining critical distance from their framing, insisting that what cannot be measured by institutional

instruments also has value and making knowledge publicly available while resisting its reduction to policy recommendation.

CONCLUSION: TOWARD AN ARCHITECTURE OF ACCOUNTABLE PRESENCE

What does it mean to practice architecture in a territory that has not asked for an architect, in a condition that refuses resolution, at a moment when the politics of care and the politics of capital are in fundamental tension? It means, first, to refuse the consolations of method.

Participatory architecture, ethnographic immersion, commons-oriented spatial practice, these are not solutions to the contradictions of engaging peripheral territories from institutional positions. They are frameworks for navigating those contradictions with greater honesty and greater accountability, and they carry their own risks which must be named and held rather than absorbed into methodological confidence. The genealogy of PAR, from Fals-Borda's militant research in rural Colombia to its contemporary articulations in urban architecture, carries within it both a genuine emancipatory promise and a persistent risk of co-optation by the very institutional frameworks it was designed to contest. Situated architectural research, as I understand it, requires holding both dimensions in view.

It means, second, to insist on the political stakes of spatial practice at the margins. The unscripted ground is not simply a site of creative indeterminacy, it is a site of structurally produced vulnerability. An architecture that engages it without attending to that structural production without naming what produced the fragility and demanding its transformation risks being, at best, formally inventive and, at worst, politically complicit. The peripheral neighbourhood does not need more aestheticisation of

its conditions, it needs practices that can hold the scale of the everyday and the scale of the structural in the same analytical frame. The feminist theorists of care, Tronto, Puig de la Bellacasa, Federici, are united in this insistence, care without structural critique is not care but its simulation.

It means, third, to acknowledge the limits of architectural agency while refusing to use those limits as alibi for inaction or disengagement. Rione Scala remains unresolved, conflictual, demographically complex, and materially fragile. It is also alive, generative of forms of social practice and spatial knowledge that exceed anything a funded programme could produce or any academic account could fully capture.

The responsibility of architectural practice at the unscripted ground is not to script it, but to remain present, accountable, and honest about the conditions: institutional, political, structural, from which that presence proceeds. The ground that refuses to resolve is, precisely for that reason, the ground where architecture has the most to learn.

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