

Dispositive-disposition dyads as a lever for change-making: the reconfiguration of school spaces promoted by the Metropolitan Regeneration Program of Bologna

Mauro Baioni

Università degli studi Roma Tre
Email: mauro.baioni@uniroma3.it

Abstract

The paper discusses the modernization of school facilities, to address contemporary educational and social demands, as a critical issue for the public sector. The study focuses on the "Progetto Scuole Terre di Pianura," part of the Metropolitan Regeneration Program in Bologna, which aims to reconfigure school spaces to foster educational and social initiatives. The paper critically examines how public officials (disposition) engage with technical and regulatory frameworks (dispositive) to implement local projects. It underscores the crucial role of public officials in interpreting and applying these frameworks to achieve effective urban regeneration, navigating the complexity of public administration in resource-constrained environments.

Keyword

City-education relationship
Territorial governance
Public action
Small and medium-sized towns

A phase of return on public assets: new dispositive-disposition dyads

The current legacy of school facilities is one of the most significant outcomes of public investment, which received a decisive boost from the obligation to develop regulatory plans through the application of urban planning standards introduced in 1968 by an interministerial decree¹. After decades of application, local governments have obtained land and structures that have contributed significantly to shaping and creating hierarchies in urban contexts of large and small municipalities.

Today, many reasons justify the need for a new cycle of interventions, incorporating different lines of reasoning (Annese, 2016; Chipa, Mangione, 2022; Renzoni, Donadoni, 2022). The modernization of facilities and the articulation of learning spaces relates to the affirmation of more inclusive educational projects attentive to environmental challenges. The effects of some significant social changes (such as the generalized decrease in the number of children per family, the collapse of the population in mountainous and hilly areas, the reproduction of pockets of educational poverty) pose the need to rethink the geographies and functioning of the school infrastructure. The opening of schools to other socio-cultural functions and the interdependence with other public spaces that complete the educational offer (libraries and cultural spaces, gyms and spaces for practicing sports as an activity included in the educational path for all, spaces for outdoor lessons) suggest a rethinking of the role and layout of schools

¹ The obligation to develop regulatory plans was introduced by Law 765/1967. Subsequently, Decree 1444/1968 mandated the reservation of minimum quantities of green spaces and public services or those of public interest, at a rate of no less than 18 square meters per inhabitant. Both measures remain in force.

as nodes of a “fundamental infrastructure” (Collettivo per l’economia fondamentale 2019), based on proximity relationships.

New perspectives and new forms of intervention on schools find opportunities for experimentation through the territorialization of national and regional public policies, which promote and support local initiatives through calls for projects. The need to translate general objectives and instances into local initiatives changes the role, agenda and approaches of local actors (administrators, public-private networks) and cities, understood as recognizable collective actors in decision-making processes (Bifulco, 2016).

Within this context, the theme of the AESOP congress can be understood by examining how the Public Administration manages the implementation of public projects and policies. This occurs in a phase marked by increasing contradictions, as the complexity of managing local changes grows while internal resources and capabilities diminish.

More specifically, we want to reflect on the relationship between dispositives and disposition as a determining factor for the permanence of a space for action. We use the term “dispositive” to mean a heterogeneous set (Agamben, 2006) that incorporates the complex of relationships that is built around and starting from the definition of technical artifacts, such as plans, regulations, projects. We understand by “disposition” the way in which individuals - in this case public officials - position themselves in relation to dispositives, in terms of agency and attribution of meaning.

To reflect on this theme, the present contribution critically revisits an initiative promoted in four small towns in the plains of Bologna, in which I was personally involved as a consultant for the public administration: the “Progetto Scuole Terre di Pianura, included in the Metropolitan Regeneration Program promoted by the Metropolitan City of Bologna and financed by a fund established to promote urban regeneration in areas of greater socio-economic fragility. The project translates the call for proposals’ goals of increasing accessibility and energy efficiency in public buildings by redefining relational spaces (courtyards, entrances, service structures, thresholds, and pathways) in four preschools to promote educational and social initiatives.

After illustrating the fundamental contents of the project and the main stages of its implementation, the text dwells on the dispositive-disposition dyad, that is, on the relationship that was determined between the Metropolitan program, the local Project and the public officials responsible for their implementation.

The Metropolitan Regeneration Program and the “Progetto Scuole”

Following the 2014 institutional reform, the Metropolitan City of Bologna has equipped itself with the entire spectrum of tools to exercise its role as a federating body, in relation and cooperation with the Municipalities and the Unions of municipalities²: the Strategic Metropolitan Plan, the Metropolitan Plan for Sustainable Mobility, the Bologna Charter for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, and the Metropolitan Territorial Plan.

² A Union of municipalities is a local authority formed by at least two municipalities to exercise certain functions. The Union shall have legal personality, statutory, regulatory, organizational and financial autonomy and its own political and management bodies. The metropolitan city of Bologna is subdivided into 50 municipalities, 45 of which are associated in 7 Unions.

The Metropolitan Strategic Plan³ has provided the general framework of objectives to be territorialized and has made explicit the overall intentions and priorities for action including the promotion of urban redevelopment and regeneration projects in areas characterized by lower quality and/or urban and building degradation, economic and social marginality, to enrich public facilities and promote sustainable mobility, avoiding land consumption.

This indication is operationalized by the Equalization Fund, which is set up by The Metropolitan Territorial Plan⁴ to ensure the financing of regeneration programs through a share of the planning fees due to urban expansions producing land consumption. The fund has a compensatory and solidarity character towards the territories not directly involved in urban transformations and is also intended as a lever to attract additional resources necessary to promote territorial rebalancing (Baioni et al, 2019, 34).

Its initial implementation benefited from already available resources. A grant of €700,000 from the Ministry of Infrastructure and Sustainable Mobility was used by municipalities and Unions for the preparation of technical and economic feasibility projects⁵ concerning the works to be financed with the fund's resources. In line with MIMS guidelines and the objectives of the PSM, the design focused on interventions for energy autonomy, energy efficiency, and the reduction of energy poverty, with supra-municipal or metropolitan significance, and primarily involving existing public buildings.

Subsequently, a Call for the composition of the Metropolitan Regeneration Program was issued, with a total budget of 2.3 million euros. All Unions and a single municipality submitted proposals based on the feasibility projects, for a total of 54 interventions. The selection was made through two criteria, to which the same weighting was attributed: the economic, demographic and social fragility of the municipality⁶ and the quality of the proposal (giving 3/5 of the score based on the strategic and urban dimension). Following the evaluation, the Program was composed of 15 interventions and approved on 29 November 2023.

The formation of the program is not episodic. It is part of a process initiated by a series of national calls⁷ that have already stimulated a season of public initiatives. Metropolitan City intends to contribute through the formation of the Metropolitan Programs, on a biennial basis. For this purpose, the Metropolitan City has provided guidance tools (Guidelines for Metropolitan Regeneration Programs) and set the Workshops for Metropolitan Regeneration, to train and support local initiatives.

³ Approved by Council Resolution of Città Metropolitana di Bologna no. 34 of 11 July 2018.

⁴ Approved by Council Resolution of Città Metropolitana di Bologna no. 16 of 12 May 2021

⁵ Technical-economic feasibility projects are the preliminary level of design of public works. Introduced by Decree-Law 50/2016 and confirmed in the new Procurement Code entered into force in 2023, they provide all the information to define the characteristics of the work.

⁶ Metropolitan City carries out periodic monitoring of the demographic, social and economic fragility in the municipalities, the results of which are published [online](#).

⁷ The most relevant initiatives are the Innovative program for housing quality (DM 7 October 2021); the Extraordinary Intervention program for urban redevelopment and suburban safety (DPCM 25 May 2016); the Integrated urban plans, established by the Recovery and Resilience Plan of Italy (approved on 13 July 2021 by Decision implementing the European Council).

The Union of Municipalities Terre di Pianura⁸ submitted the "Progetto Scuole delle Terre di Pianura" for funding. The initial impetus was given by the technical structures of the urban planning office, which is entrusted with the associated exercise of the management, urban and territorial planning functions under municipal jurisdiction, with the indirect assistance of the author, as a consultant for the urban planning general plan being drafted. From the outset, the proposal was oriented towards broader objectives beyond merely reducing energy consumption and physically upgrading the facilities. The funding for the feasibility project was viewed as an opportunity to define a comprehensive action plan addressing the three key aspects of school spaces previously mentioned: learning environments, new social demands, and the relationship with the urban context.

The project's report emphasizes that the pandemic's enforced denial of school attendance has made everyone more aware of their influence on the individual and social sphere. As stated by Alessandro D'Avenia, writer and professor, the poor habitability of schools is a determining factor in inducing young people to seek a digital elsewhere, where they can be better off. Moreover, the report underlines that schools are not monads. They shall be considered as condensers of relationships that primarily involve children, their companions and teachers, but which can extend, through the action of groups and associations, to large segments of the population. This broadening of perspective was made possible thanks to the formation of a working group composed of researchers and university professors, and professionals (architects and engineers)⁹.

The interventions in the four preschools¹⁰, one in each municipality, include:

- The reconfiguration of outdoor spaces and paths that connect schools to other services present in urban centers and public transportation nodes
- The implementation of interventions in service spaces to make the school more welcoming to associations and groups involved in social activities (threshold spaces in Altedo, a multi-purpose community space in San Gabriele, a multi-purpose laboratory in Minerbio and a solar greenhouse in Cadriano).

The proposals were profiled to the physical-functional characteristics of each school facility, the needs identified through dialogue with the teaching staff, and the detected relationships with the surrounding area. The discreet direction carried out by the urban planning office allowed the working group to engage in collective work sessions and moments of discussion with sector managers, school principals and teachers. The contribution of the various expertise has proved to be fruitful. The results of university-level research have been incorporated, ensuring prerequisites for immediate implementation. This has been achieved by calibrating the feasibility projects for progressive implementation in phases, according to available funding, the first of which is secured by the Metropolitan Program.

⁸ The Union Terre di Pianura is a local authority established in 2010 that covers a territory of 177 square kilometers, located between Bologna and Ferrara, with about 40,000 inhabitants.

⁹ The working group of Politecnico di Milano, coordinated by Cristina Renzoni, provided scientific support. Angela Ceresoli (ABC studio), with Mauro Baioni (PUG consultant), oversaw the framework project. Massimo Bernardelli and Angela Ceresoli (ABC studio) were responsible for the elaboration of the four feasibility projects. The analysis of plant engineering was developed by Emilio Morandini. Kiez Agency contributed to the drafting of guidelines for an inclusive approach to the equipment of public spaces.

¹⁰ Preschool of San Gabriele (Baricella), Preschool of Altedo, Preschool "R. Caldarone" in Minerbio, Preschool "Fresu" in Cadriano (Granarolo dell'Emilia).

Moreover, the project offered concrete tools to extend future action. The interpretation of recurring situations regarding accessibility conditions, the relationships between schools and other proximity facilities, and the multifunctionality of spaces translated into indications for the general urban plan. The design criteria on mobility, accessibility in application of the Design for All principles, on the treatment of relational spaces (thresholds, entrances) and open spaces in application of NBS principles have been incorporated into guidelines for future public works planning, including those that can be carried out by private entities when promoting urban transformations.

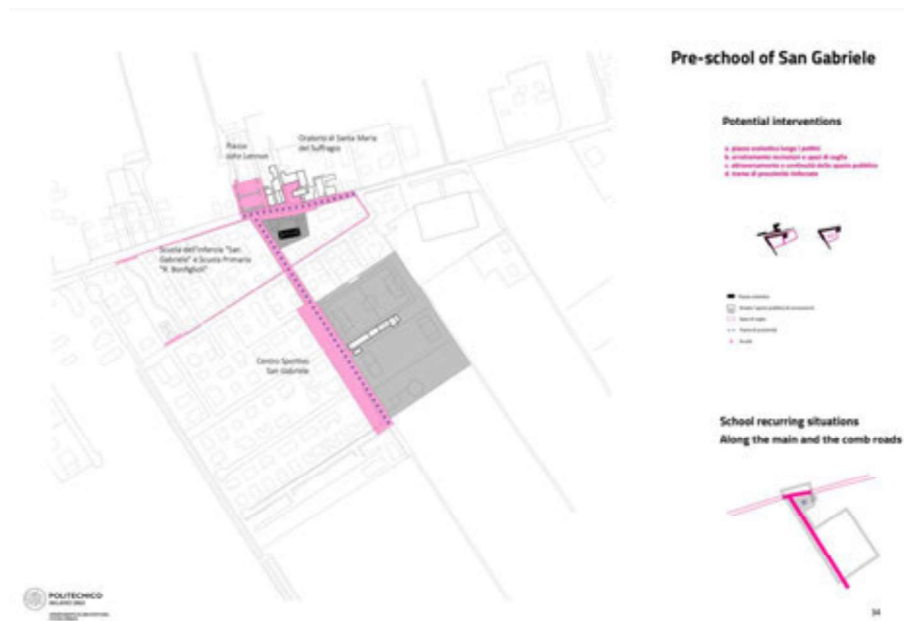


Fig. 1 – Relationship between the school and the other facilities of the local educational infrastructure. The preschool of San Gabriele. Source: Gruppo di ricerca DASTU, Politecnico di Milano (Cristina Renzoni, Ettore Donadoni, Chiara Nifosi, con Giulia Crotti). *Supporto scientifico al progetto Scuole di Terre di Pianura, Report conclusivo.*



Fig. 2 – Intervention on the preschool of San Gabriele, funded by the Metropolitan Regeneration Program. Source: Unione Terre di Pianura, Progetto Quadro (ABC studio).

Between Dispositive and Disposition

To reflect on the relationship between dispositives and disposition, I made use of two interviews with Mariagrazia Ricci and Francesco Selmi (Metropolitan City of Bologna) and Irene Evangelisti (Union of Municipalities of Terre di Pianura), the technical officials who dealt with the formation of the program and the preparation of the proposal, respectively. The interviews were conducted on May 9 and 10, 2024 and were based on the following three questions:

- What is the space for action created by the Metropolitan Program / by the local project?
- What is the space for action that you have created autonomously, having to follow the program, especially with respect to the political mandate and the sensitivities of the administrators?
- What are the enabling conditions for expanding the space for action?

Regarding the dispositive, the technicians of the Metropolitan City underlined the value of the program in terms of empowering the territories. The program prompted the technical structures of the Unions and individual municipalities to overcome the habit of operating in the existing city through single interventions defined by the logic and procedures of public works. This possibility was only seized in two instances, to concretize urban-scale reasoning already in place on energy communities or to propose innovative solutions (like Terre di Pianura). On the other side, compared to previous calls that had received few applications from municipalities, in this case the number of proposals exceeded the overall amount of the allocation.

For the head of the municipal office, the value of the dispositive is linked to the possibility of proposing a lateral perspective on general themes to overcome reductionist approaches based on the "problem-solution" binomial. The call created a space for action because it didn't impose codified solutions (such as the purchase of a tool or the use of a technology) but allowed for the formulation of proposals commensurate with the specificities of the territories and their ability to intercept emerging trends at the local scale. In small municipalities, however, to seize this opportunity is by no means obvious. In the eyes of technicians, it is a problem to give up a

practice that relies on strict sectorization and simplified problem-solution approaches that do not include multidisciplinary and skill integration.

The Metropolitan City emphasized the broad degree of autonomy left by the administrators. The promotion of the calls was prompted by the technical structures, in the presence of general political guidelines. Political support was easily obtained due to the interest in backing local authorities and the possibility of communicating concrete results. At the Union scale, political figures expressed interest in securing funds to reduce energy costs, without engaging in discussions about the nature of the proposals.

The broad freedom left to officials is counterbalanced by the lack of recognition of their initiatives. The organizational forms of public administration are rigidly profiled for the governance of ordinary proceedings. For the municipal technician, freedom and initiative go together if "you have a little courage" and – as Manzoni has Don Abbondio say - "courage, if one doesn't have it, one can't give it to oneself." That said, the interviewees lament that the public administration does not value a proactive attitude towards innovation, unlike professionals – driven by work interests – and the University – for which research and experimentation are constitutive of its mandate. Those who work in public administration remain in the middle, without a client and without incentives.

The technician from Terre di Pianura highlights a paradox arising from this gap: while public administration is required to make rapid decisions, the reliance on outdated or standardized solutions fails to address emerging issues and results in 'acting without being contemporary,' leading to overall ineffectiveness. To overcome this impasse, the Scuole project was built through a "coalition of perspectives" between public administration technicians, professionals and academics. The triangulation gave greater depth to the proposals, allowing to incorporate the results of research, to put them into concrete practice, and to demonstrate the practicability of the solutions to both other professionals and other local administrations, with a pedagogical effect. The formation of working groups including external resources to the public administration should therefore be encouraged.

As for the future, all three interviewed recognized the availability of economic and technical resources, the redefinition of internal organization, and regulatory changes as enabling conditions. Among the enabling conditions, the presence of the urban planning offices at the scale of the Union of Municipalities was seen as a guarantee to ensure minimum conditions for action, especially in small municipalities, and to overcome the segmentation of initiatives by sector (urban planning and public works) and areas of competence (education, sports, culture, social assistance).

Open Strands

As Giovanni Michelucci (2022, 230), a prominent figure in Italian architecture, observed, the "most immediate traces" of the country's transformation are recognized in the school-city relationship. In the second half of the twentieth century, "school and city found themselves submerged by that same growth that they had hoped for" (ibid). Today, the material, organizational and symbolic legacy of the long period of public equipment of cities constitutes a key place to test the public sector's ability to respond to present-day issues.

The case of Bologna offers, in this regard, some interesting insights into the possibilities for action at the local scale.

The transformative capacity at the local scale rests on a series of interdependent components (Wolfram, 2016) referring to three main fields:

- preconditions of agency/interaction (governance between communities of practice and leadership)
- path-deviant envisioning (from initial experimentation to programs based on awareness of the challenge)

- working on (innovation embedding, social learning, political-administrative action). Following the initial affirmation of pioneering practices, change is produced through actions of acceleration, stabilization, scaling-up and diffusion in which institutions can play a proactive role, since they are able to act on the "structuring conditions that configure the very possibility of agency" (Martin, 2019). The equalization fund, the metropolitan programs, the presence of the Unions' urban planning offices can be considered as enabling dispositives. To realize their potential, however, the disposition of the officials is crucial. The case described confirms how decisive public officials are in their skillful assembly of internal and external resources on their own initiative.

In conclusion, if we recognize the value that the location, conditions and functioning of schools have for the present and the future of communities, especially in fragile contexts such as small municipalities on the margins of metropolitan areas, an integrated vision must be promoted - as indicated in the special session to which this contribution contributes. In this perspective, the role of the public administration and, more specifically, of the technicians involved in the promotion and planning of urban scale interventions is decisive.

Beyond the specific perimeter of the interventions on educational infrastructure, therefore, the case of Bologna offers some suggestions about the "set of capabilities" required by public administration: "namely, the ability to adapt and learn; ability to align public services and citizens' needs; ability to govern resilient productive systems." Mazzucato's considerations (Mazzucato and Kattel, 2020, 257) seem to be particularly apt, not only to address the wicked questions of the relationship with market initiatives, but also to give quality to actions on a local scale, in a condition characterized by increasing instability and uncertainty.

The diffusion and stabilization of innovative proposals - as in any transition process - are influenced by dynamics that go beyond the technical sphere and pertain the configuration of the dispositives and the resulting space of action. The dispositive-disposition dyad, which is formed regardless of intentionality, can be consciously considered to mobilize resources, even without comprehensive reforms, to overcome the segmentation of competencies and the rigid dualism between internal planning and outsourcing.

References

Agamben, G. (2006) *Che cos'è un dispositivo?* Roma, Nottetempo

Annese M., Cascione V., Lamacchia M., Sunna C. (2022). "I poli per l'infanzia ZeroSei. Progettare nuovi spazi per crescere tra le istanze della 172 didattica e quelle della città". *Contesti. Città territori progetti*, 26, pp. 172-193.

Baioni M, Basso S., Caudo G., Franzese A., Marchigiani E., Munarin S., Renzoni C., Savoldi P., Tosi M. C., Vazzoler N. (2021). *Diritti in Città*. Roma, Donzelli.

Baioni, M., Bonetti T., Delpiano A., Fava B., Ricci M., Selmi F. (2020). “Il piano territoriale di coordinamento. Città metropolitana di Bologna”. *Urbanistica Informazioni*, 290–291, pp. 33–34.

Bifulco, L. (2016), “Citizenship and governance at a time of territorialization: The Italian local welfare between innovation and fragmentation”, *European Urban and Regional Studies*, Vol. 23(4) 628–644.

Chipa S. & Mangione G. (2022) “Le Piccole scuole, nuove forme di scuola integrata al territorio”, *La scuola di prossimità. Dimensioni, geografie e strumenti di un rinnovato scenario educativo*. Brescia, Morcelliana, pp. 13-18.

Collettivo per l’economia fondamentale (2019) *Economia fondamentale. L’infrastruttura della vita quotidiana*. Milano, Einaudi

Martin, R. (2019), “Media Organize: Persons”, in Beyes T, Conrad L., Martin R. (eds): *Organize*. Lüneburg meson press, S. 1–27.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/13560>

Mazzucato M. & Kattel R. (2020), “COVID-19 and public-sector capacity”, *Oxford Review of Economic Policy*, 36, S1, pp. S256–S269.

Michelucci (2022). “Perché la scuola perché la periferia”, *Contesti. Città territori progetti*, 26, pp. 228-235. First publishing in *La Nuova Città*, Quaderni della Fondazione Giovanni Michelucci, 2, 1983.

Renzoni C., & Donadoni E. (2022). “I territori attraverso la scuola: per un osservatorio sulla provincia italiana”. *La scuola di prossimità. Dimensioni, geografie e strumenti di un rinnovato scenario educativo*, Morcelliana, Brescia, pp. 21-38

Renzoni C., Savoldi P. (2019). “Scuole: spazi urbani di transizione e apprendimento”, *Urbanistica*, 163, pp. 140-147.

Wolfram M. (2016). “Conceptualizing urban transformative capacity: a framework for research and policy”. *Cities*, 50, pp. 121–130.