

The Old Town of Taranto. Reclaim neglected spaces to challenge narratives of decline

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Abstract

This paper examines the precarious spatial and social condition of Taranto's Old Town, affected by a radical process of abandonment and subsequent ruination. Part 1 provides a historical overview of Taranto's transformation from a small coastal settlement into a contemporary sacrifice zone for global industrial interests. Part 2 offers an in-depth focus on the Old Town, tracing its enduring condition of spatial injustice across history and analyzing how successive waves of industrial development and demographic shifts have progressively marginalized the area and made it a symbol of socio-economic exclusion and infrastructural decay. Part 3 briefly explores grassroots spatial practices active within the Old Town, which reclaim neglected or underused spaces, generating alternative cultural and social dynamics that contest dominant narratives of abandonment and decline.

Keywords: Taranto, Taranto's Old Town, Sacrifice Zones, Toxic Legacies, Post Disaster

1 - Taranto: ascent and decline of a 'platform city'.

Taranto is a port city in Southern Italy that underwent an extensive modernization and industrialization process in the first half of the 20th century, which radically altered its scale and modes of existence, transforming a small-sized coastal town into a node of heavy production on a global scale.

The industrial turn shaped a parabolic trajectory in the city's urban development — marked by a phase of rapid ascent followed by decline over the course of a century — heavily influenced by state-led projects that deeply affected both the social and spatial composition of the city.

Today, the entire territory is compromised by a stratification of contaminations — inscribed in the sea, air, soil, and subsoil — legitimized by a hegemonic narrative that frames territorial development as inevitably dependent on industrial growth. These legacies extend beyond the physical boundaries and imagined narratives of a specific site or case study, often revealing the ways in which an era is perceived by its actors, both in its continuities and in its ruptures (Brenu, Pessina, Tiganea, 2024). In this sense, Taranto's toxic legacy is closely intertwined with the techno-optimistic imaginary of industrial modernity, which has produced uneasy and often intangible heritages, functioning as collective objects of inquiry, conflict, debate and, at times, denial.

With regard to its spatial structure, Taranto presents itself as a 'platform city', extensively top-down planned, where multiple systems can be identified (Curci, Geroldi, 2020), each operating at very different scales (see Figure 1).

Within the urban system, two distinct types of city can be recognised: the dense, pre-industrial fabric (comprising the Old Town and the nineteenth-century grid) and the post-war expansion, dispersed and fragmented into spatially separate areas and satellite districts.

The system of productive and military infrastructure, on the other hand, consists of the steel industrial area, petrochemical plants, industrial port, naval arsenal, and military bases. These occupy vast portions of the city, forming enclaves entirely inaccessible to its inhabitants.

stagnation in regional convergence processes observed in most Western European countries since the 1990s. (Martinelli, 2022)

The construction and expansion of the steel industry, alongside the development of the port, an oil refinery, and a cement factory, produced significant social and territorial impacts, giving rise to conflict between influential state powers and local institutions. (Coppola, D'Ovidio 2018). During this phase, the city continued to grow, gaining approximately 50,000 more inhabitants between 1961 and 1981. However, this demographic growth never halted the depopulation of the Old Town, which became increasingly intense and irreversible.

In 1982, Taranto reached its peak population of 244,798 residents, after which it began to shrink. With an economy based on industrial monoculture, the city was unable to withstand the negative effects of the steel crisis. Today, both unemployment rates² and population numbers are returning to the levels of the pre-industrial period (Santa Cruz Grau, 2014).

1.2 - From Techno-optimism to the awareness of sacrifice

At the time of the construction of the steel plant, in the early 1960s, a transformation occurred that was not only spatial and economic, but also cultural: the myth of industry – as the city was being reshaped – took root and gained strength (Leogrande, 2018), supported by an extensive media propaganda campaign.

However, the initial enthusiasm was soon overshadowed by the disproportionate expansion of industrial infrastructure. In 1968, Italsider (the Italian steelmaking company) proposed extending the steelworks from 528 to 1,500 hectares, overriding both the municipal master plan and the 1961 industrial development plan. Prioritizing logistical concerns, the state-owned company advanced plans to expand toward the port and city. The so-called raddoppio – effectively a tripling of the plant's surface area – provoked resistance from parts of the local political establishment. In January 1971, the municipal administration denied Italsider a construction permit for the port works, citing incompatibility with urban planning regulations (Gianni, Migliaccio 2016).

In 1972 the journalist Antonio Cederna used for the first time the word “disaster” to refer to the city of Taranto. In the pages of *Corriere della Sera*³, Cederna described what was happening in Taranto as

a truly barbaric process of industrialisation. A state-participated industrial enterprise, with an investment of almost 2,000 billion lire, which had not yet considered even the most basic anti-pollution measures, nor planted a single tree to protect the poor residents of the downwind working-class neighbourhoods.

Despite this, in the mid-1970s, the expansion was eventually executed (through an injunction decree issued by the Committee of Ministers for the Mezzogiorno) bringing the number of direct employees to an exorbitant 22,000, with a further 14,000 employed in around 400 subcontracting companies⁴. This expansion further increased the size of the factory, laying the foundations for an industrial gigantism that today contributes to making the city a “complex problem” (Balducci, 2020). Indeed, in the following decades, the multiple effects of industrial overloading gradually began to surface, fuelling a multidimensional crisis characterised by the simultaneous presence of environmental and public health issues. In 1990, the Ionian area, together with several neighbouring municipalities, was declared an “area of high environmental risk” by the Italian Ministry of the Environment (at the time, it alone produced 92% of the dioxin emissions in Italy). In 1995, with the privatisation and sale of the steel plant, environmental concerns intensified and became a widely shared social issue. However, it was only in 1998 that official documents acknowledged the existence of a severe environmental and public health crisis. In 2008, the Apulia regional government approved a law establishing emission thresholds for industrial pollutants in the atmosphere, particularly for dioxins, assigning enforcement responsibilities to ARPA (the Regional Environmental Protection Agency) which was obliged to suspend polluting production in the event of violations. Epidemiological

2 C. Bechis, ‘Taranto, con la crisi 1 su 3 è senza lavoro’, *Corriere del Mezzogiorno*, 04/03/2010

3 Antonio Cederna, Taranto in balia dell'Italsider, *Corriere della Sera*, 13/04/1972.

4 data from Istituto Tagliacarne; OECD, 2016

studies revealed that the incidence rates of respiratory, cardiovascular, and cancer-related diseases in the Taranto area were significantly higher than the national average (Greco 2020).

Nowadays, Taranto is un-famous for being one of Italy's most known environmental disasters. On January 2022, a U.N. report on human rights⁵ included the city in the list of "sacrifice zones": areas where vulnerable and marginalized communities are exposed to extreme levels of pollution and toxic contamination. The term originated in the cold war era, when it was used to describe areas rendered uninhabitable by nuclear experiments and, according to the report,

today a sacrifice zone can be understood to be a place where residents suffer devastating physical and mental health consequences and human rights violations as a result of living in pollution hotspots and heavily contaminated areas.

From the perspective of collective awareness, the UN report had a significant impact on the population, as it was an official and formal acknowledgment of such a condition. However, it is important to highlight that, in the preceding decade, several researchers and activists had already been denouncing evidence of a sacrificial process. In 2019, Lidia Greco, Professor of Economic and Labour Sociology at the University of Bari, wrote:

[...] within the dynamics of capitalism and the industrial division of labour, certain areas and social groups are sacrificed in the name of broader processes that enable and sustain the very possibility of accumulation. In this sense, Taranto constitutes a sacrificial area. Rather than taking shape as a social conflict centred on environmental justice [...] the conflict in Taranto tends to manifest as a post-political issue. Here, the absence of accountability and strategic visions is combined with the search for an almost exclusively technical and scientific solution to the problem, one focused on the physical limits of growth, territorial degradation, and resource scarcity, without questioning the aims and values of the development model affecting the area and the way its costs and benefits are distributed. In Taranto, however, it is not merely a question of creating a world compatible with life and capable of sustaining it; it is also about representing and interpreting reality as a whole, giving it meaning primarily through the creation of bonds among individuals who find in it the reason for their existence.

In the current context, one of the most difficult challenges lies in seeking a balance between health, employment, and the environment. The pursuit of environmental justice must begin with the recognition of the inherently political nature of the issue, which involves not only the workers but also the various social groups that collectively bear the social costs of industrial overloading.

2 - The Old Town: isolated both physically and socially

All the massive transformations induced by the industrial development profoundly reshaped the territory in a very short time, layering new lifestyles and urban practices onto pre-existing ones. In this process, certain parts of the city and groups of inhabitants were left behind, to the extent of becoming sorts of residual wastes produced by the voracity of radical transformation. The most significant case is represented by the island of the Old Town. Commonly referred to as "Città Vecchia" by the inhabitants of Taranto, the Old Town is the original settlement of the city, located on a small, narrow island (approximately 25 hectares) that extends longitudinally along an East-West axis, separating the open sea from a smaller inland lagoon, and connected to the mainland on both sides by two bridges (See Figure 2). The trajectory of its urban history is closely intertwined with the broader impacts that industrialisation — and its subsequent decline — have had on the city's social and spatial organisation (Coppola, D'Ovidio 2018).

⁵ United Nations, General Assembly, The right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment: non-toxic environment. Report of the Special Rapporteur on the issue of human rights obligations relating to the enjoyment of a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment, 12/01/2022



Figure 2. The island of the Old Town, satellite view

2.1 - *Story of an exodus*

Due to a particular combination of historical events and geographic configuration, Città Vecchia has always been marked by conditions of social disparity and spatial injustice. For centuries, the island was subjected to extremely high population density, as a result of military regulations that prohibited urban expansion beyond its fortifications. Demographic growth in the 18th and 19th centuries eventually rendered the confines of the Old Town excessively narrow: by the second half of the 19th century, approximately 25,000 inhabitants were concentrated within the island.

Amidst this condition of extreme density — which left no room for open spaces for social interaction — two distinct urban areas can still be identified, both spatially and socially. The upper part overlooks the open sea and is characterised by a more spacious urban fabric, with large residential palaces that once housed the city's wealthier classes. The lower part, also known as la marina, developed along the inland lagoon (the Mar Piccolo) and took the form of a dense maze of small, tightly packed dwellings built on an artificial extension of the island. This part of the Old Town — which, in the pre-industrial period, was mainly inhabited by fishermen and the working class — has long been affected by precarious living conditions, and still today, following the processes of ruination and abandonment of the island, remains the most severely impacted by the city's recent crisis.

The problem of overcrowding in Taranto's Old Town, along with the difficult sanitary and hygienic conditions it entailed, remained a constant feature of the city's history from at least the second half of the eighteenth century until the 1950s (Lapesa 2011). After visiting Taranto at the end of the eighteenth century, the Swiss traveller Carl Ulysses von Salis-Marschlins noted:

Eighteen thousand inhabitants are crammed onto this small rock, in houses so tall and so tightly packed one against the other that the streets are rendered dark, exceedingly narrow, and uncomfortably windswept. To this, one must add a dreadful paving, especially along the Via della Marina, which [...] is impassable due to its filth and stench. This quarter provides overwhelming evidence that the city is far too

populated for the extent of its territory.

About half a century later, in 1844, Giuseppe Costa, commissioned by the Società Economica di Terra d'Otranto to collect statistical information on the city, observed:

Given the limited perimeter of the city for the size of its population, the shortage of space is compensated by multiplying the floors of the dwellings. Nevertheless, the number of inhabitants far exceeds the capacity of these homes, and as a result, they live in extremely cramped conditions.

In such a context, it became necessary to adopt an expansion plan aimed also at addressing the island's severe sanitary conditions, which had been further exacerbated by overcrowding. Meanwhile, in 1882, the Italian Parliament approved the construction of what would become the largest naval arsenal in the country, to be located near the newly planned urban expansion, while additional civilian production areas were established on the mainland to the west of the island.

In this phase of urban development, the Old Town played a highly marginal role, while rapid and uncontrolled growth took place in the Borgo Nuovo – beyond the bridge to the east of the island – which first attracted the upper and middle classes (See Figure 3).

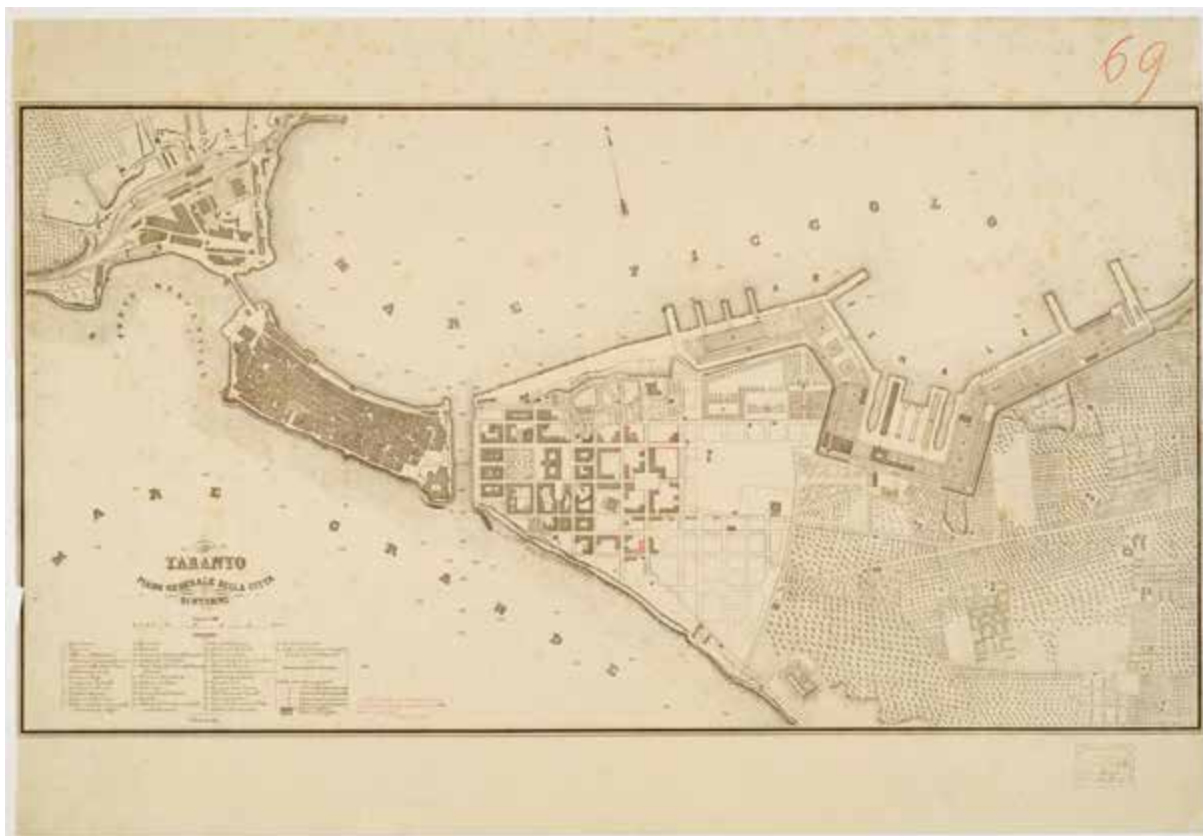


Figure 3. Taranto, general plan of the city. Istituto Geografico Militare, 1889

Finally, in the post-war era, the Old Town experienced a significant diaspora. By 1969, population data already recorded 15,861 residents, the majority of whom were employed in fishing and the construction industry⁶. As the island was gradually abandoned, a large number of new social housing complexes were built on the city's

⁶ Franco Blandino, *Relazione Illustrativa del Piano Particolareggiato per il Risanamento e il Restauro Conservativo della Città Vecchia* (Illustrative Report of the Detailed Plan for the Rehabilitation and Conservation Restoration of the Old Town), Municipality of Taranto, 1971.

periphery, fueling the growth of the so-called “Città Nuova” — the modern expansion area, which today is by far the largest both in terms of surface area and population.

Depopulation steadily increased until 1975, the year of the tragic “Vico Reale collapse”, when a three-story building fell down, claiming the lives of six people. The incident had a strong emotional impact and was widely covered by the media, contributing to a stigmatizing narrative about the entire neighborhood. At the same time, it triggered a process of structural monitoring of unsafe buildings, whose data were used to justify top-down depopulation policies. A so-called “sanitization” program, promoted by the government, forced the remaining residents to relocate to newly built districts through expropriation procedures. As a result, today the majority of the abandoned — and thus physically deteriorated — housing units, many of which have since collapsed, are publicly owned⁷ (see Figures 4, 5).



Figure 4. Taranto, top view of the Via di Mezzo enclosed area. ph. Pierfrancesco Lafratta



Figure 5. Taranto's Old Town. View from a rooftop. ph. Pierfrancesco Lafratta

At present, the Old Town of Taranto counts approximately 2,500 inhabitants. Among the most severe outcomes of the prolonged depopulation process is the structural collapse of abandoned buildings. By 2011, it was estimated that one out of every three structures was no longer suitable for habitation (ANCSA 2017). In this regard, the historic core of Taranto represents one of the most physically compromised urban centers in Italy, second only to L'Aquila following the 2009 earthquake. A substantial portion of the island is now rendered inaccessible due to the deteriorating condition of vacant properties. Over the years, the municipal administration has progressively erected walls to isolate unsafe areas, effectively fragmenting the urban fabric. These enclosures impede free

⁷ According to data provided by the Municipality of Taranto (Gazzetta Amministrativa), over 1,600 properties in the Old Town are owned by the municipality. Of these, 1,338 are residential buildings.

circulation through the island and oblige remaining residents to navigate around large restricted zones, further exacerbating the spatial and social fragmentation of the area. (see Figures 6, 7).

The walls that partially conceal the perception of urban disaster – together with the steel structures encaging abandoned buildings to prevent their collapse – have become a stable and defining feature of the Old Town's urban landscape for over fifty years. These interventions, rather than representing a coherent risk management strategy, appear to embody a form of institutional disengagement from a condition of structural fragility that has become deeply embedded over time.

This widespread perception of institutional inaction is further reinforced by the fact that not only has the residential architectural heritage been left to a gradual and unchecked process of ruination, but buildings of recognized historical and cultural value have been subjected to the same fate. A clear example of this is the case of the Church of San Paolo, dating back to the 15th century, long abandoned and closed to the public. In February 2011, part of its perimeter wall and a section of the dome collapsed onto the street below, dramatically exposing an advanced state of material decay⁸. (see Figure 8)

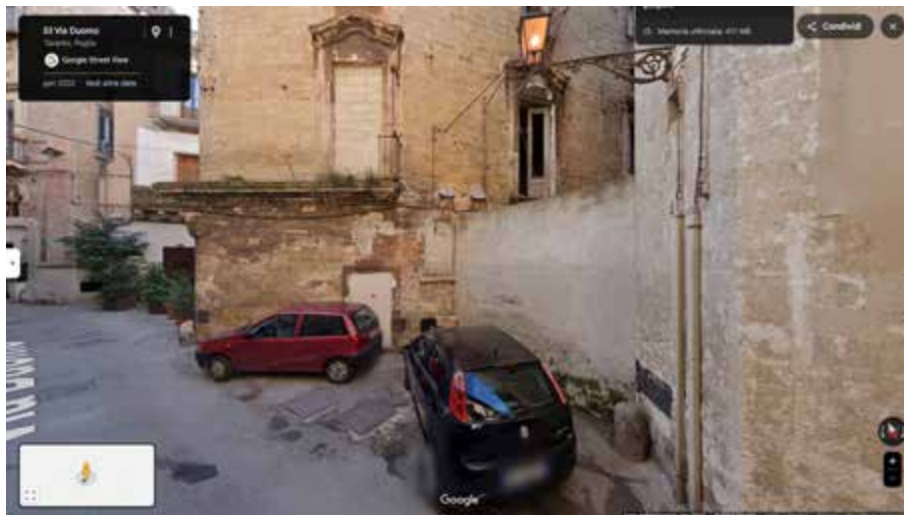


Figure 6. Taranto's Old Town, via Duomo. A wall seals off an uninhabited area
source: Google Street View

8 Redazione, Crolla chiesa di San Paolo: c'è un ferito, Corriere del Mezzogiorno, 11/02/2011



Figure 7. Taranto's Old Town, via Duomo. A wall seals off an uninhabited area
source: Google Street View



Figure 8. The state of the Church of San Paolo 14 years after the collapse

2.2 - Informal strategies to deal with social-spatial fragility

This combination of forced abandonment, physical fragmentation, and persistent lack of care in the Old Town is closely connected to the social fragility and fragmentation of its inhabitants. Within such a context, informal and illegal activities found fertile ground, further fueling a stigmatizing narrative that portrayed the Old Town as a criminal ghetto. Over the years, the area gradually came to be perceived as a dangerous and unsafe place.

The Old Town and its problems receive little attention in the national media, overshadowed by the prominent and complex issues surrounding the fate of the steelworks plant, whose implications extend far beyond the local level and the city of Taranto itself. Yet, the Old Town accumulates and stratifies deep contradictions and opportunities, making it a remarkable place — a condenser of unexpected and powerful possibilities to produce a rupture within a dominant narrative, one that today remains narrowly focused on the fate of the steelworks (Pucci, 2020).

Recently, the interweaving of industrial, environmental, and social crises — combined with the site's strategic value — has turned Taranto into the object of nationally scaled policy interventions. Within these frameworks, the regeneration of the Old Town has often assumed a symbolic role in narratives of the city's rebirth⁹. In recent years, the historic centre has experienced a limited flow of investment, primarily linked to the Urban II Initiative, whose implementation nonetheless produced mixed outcomes (Santa Cruz Grau, 2014), with regeneration projects concentrated in areas directly affected by tourist presence and the opening of a few new commercial activities (Coppola, D'Ovidio 2018). It is important to recognise, however, that despite funding schemes and planning initiatives, the Old Town continues to experience persistent demographic stagnation and multidimensional crisis. At present, notwithstanding the numerous building renovation projects currently underway, no policy framework has been established that actively incorporates the involvement of local residents, either in participatory terms or through employment opportunities directly connected to urban regeneration processes. Conversely, one of the most prominent policy measures introduced in recent years has been the so-called "Case a 1 euro" (one-euro homes) programme, which, through a series of public calls, allows private individuals to acquire vacant properties within the Old Town at a symbolic price, conditional upon the demonstration of both the technical and financial feasibility of their restoration projects. This policy mechanism, however, is structurally exclusionary with respect to the existing local population, which remains largely unable to access either the financial capital required or the complex bureaucratic, technical, and administrative procedures necessary for participation.

And yet, within this condition of spatial and social degradation — and in the broader inadequacy of official recovery policies — the Old Town represents an extremely vital context in terms of the diversity of urban practices enacted within it. What might appear as an atmosphere of abandonment and stagnation is, in fact, beneath the surface and largely invisible to institutional scrutiny, a theatre of informal and often submerged spatial practices. These are predominantly forms of spontaneous self-organisation, emerging as necessary strategies to compensate for the persistent absence of institutional care and public services.

In a context marked by widespread physical ruination, where spaces for daily life and social interaction have become scarce and precarious resources, some of the most significant practices involve collective actions that — with different degrees of informality depending on the social groups and needs involved — activate processes of reclaiming and reappropriating residual and unused spaces. At an informal level, a multiplicity of dynamics can be observed, reflecting a specific spatialisation of the local social infrastructure (Lo Re 2023): housing occupations, informal exchanges of public housing units through verbal and trust-based agreements between relatives and acquaintances, mutual support practices targeting the most socially vulnerable, self-managed recuperation of public spaces, and the addition of informal storeys to existing buildings.

In parallel with these practices, which are closely linked to the organisation and social reproduction of the most fragile social groups, examples of social mobilisation and civic activism emerge, aimed at providing responses and alternatives to material and social degradation. These initiatives operate by connecting and enhancing environmental and relational-cultural resources (Berardi, Castronuovo 2017). Through these actions, forms of belonging are constructed and alternative imaginaries shaped, attempting to overcome the recurring rhetoric of disadvantage and marginality.

In the next section, I focus attention — through three examples — on practices of commoning and grassroots regeneration carried out by interdisciplinary groups of inhabitants and cultural workers. These initiatives have

⁹ "Since 2015, an extraordinary mobilization of state powers and resources has been launched through the establishment of multilevel governance mechanisms. An "Institutional Development Contract" (CIS) was created, managed by a state-controlled agency (Invitalia). Within this broader framework, the city was also asked to develop a "Plan for the recovery, regeneration, and enhancement" of the Old Town, for which an ideas competition was announced in 2015. To implement the measures outlined in this framework, state funds were allocated for port development, environmental remediation, the construction of new services and housing, and the regeneration of the historic center." (Coppola, D'Ovidio 2018)

experimented with models of social and cultural innovation, placing at the centre of their interventions the recovery, participatory management, and re-signification of underused spaces within the Old Town of Taranto.

3 - Collective practices of space reclamation. Three case studies

Within the context of the ongoing environmental, economic, political – and consequently social – permacrisis in which the city of Taranto appears to be ‘stuck’, the latent potential of abandoned and physically degraded spaces in the Old Town represents an opportunity to imagine and experiment with alternative forms of living, social relations, and work.

The practices discussed here are united by a reclamation of urban space in which the use of the discarded and the residual performs a dialectical function in relation to the imposed economic development model (Lo Re 2023). In this sense, the projects do not merely aim at the functional recovery of underutilised spaces, but contribute to promoting a process of collective emancipation by fostering a renewed imaginary of the Old Town – shifting its image from a stigmatised and marginalised area to a contemporary laboratory of social and cultural innovation.

In the first case, I delve into the spatial practice of the Labuat collective through an in-depth exploration of ‘Park Urka!’, a project that re-signified a residual urban void by promoting a process of active listening and co-design with the social groups involved in the area.

The second case is the Domus Armenorum project: an attempt – led by a mixed group of residents and cultural practitioners – to consolidate the (already existing) practice of collective management of a deconsecrated church through the institutional recognition of the space as a common good.

The third case is Post Disaster Rooftops, an interdisciplinary project positioned at the intersection of artistic activism and culture-led urban regeneration, which temporarily transforms the rooftops of the Old Town into spaces for conversation and artistic production, fostering a critical debate on the condition of the city.

It is important to note, in analysing these practices, that a significant number of the people involved – in more or less direct ways depending on the specific case – have been part of a regional network supported by a particularly productive period of youth policies implemented by the Apulia Region between 2005 and 2015. This policy context promoted the emergence of an interconnected ecosystem of bottom-up, culturally driven urban regeneration initiatives through public funding, networking platforms, and capacity-building programmes¹⁰.

3.1 - LABuat and the “Park Urka!” project

The first case concerns a series of initiatives carried out by the cultural association LABuat, composed of young architects and cultural practitioners from Taranto. The association was established within the framework of the “Principi Attivi” call (1st edition) promoted by the Apulia Region, “with the aim of redeveloping urban spaces through concrete, collectively significant interventions”¹¹.

LABuat operates through co-design workshops involving local communities, conceived as tools to trigger tentative transformations, reveal hidden situations, and open up new possible trajectories. The group’s statement reads as follows:

¹⁰ Since 2005, the Apulia Region has developed a new political strategy focused on local development, culture, and youth. EU structural funds were used innovatively to boost the local economy through tourism and the creative industries. Over the years, a system of sectoral programs and integrated local strategies fostered widespread creativity, cultural centers, and creative enterprises across the region. Initiatives like Principi Attivi and Bollenti Spiriti (from 2008) and Pugliesi Innovativi (from 2015) supported entrepreneurial projects in areas such as natural conservation, knowledge-based local development, social inclusion, and cultural, technological, and social innovation. Funding, training opportunities, mentoring, and public workshops were essential components of these programs, promoting a multifaceted idea of development combining economic growth, community empowerment, self-entrepreneurship, and urban regeneration.

¹¹ from LABuat website - <https://labuat.wordpress.com/>

LABuat aims to promote a process of citizen participation around the reclaiming and reappropriation of the city and its public spaces. The city should communicate to its inhabitants the joy of inhabiting, the pleasure of belonging to a place and a community, as well as memory and desire. LABuat seeks to disseminate this message through tangible actions related to the regeneration and management of urban spaces, and their improved use through the installation of temporary and/or permanent structures, with the goal of creating new opportunities for encounter and conviviality, and establishing new conditions of livability in otherwise abandoned or underused places.

The group presents itself as a multidisciplinary, non-profit organization whose projects focus on participation, active citizenship, environmental sustainability, and local development, actively involving actors and communities typically positioned at the margins of public discourse and decision-making.

Although primarily concentrated in the Old Town, LABuat's spatial practice has extended to other areas of the city as well. Among its initiatives located within the Old Town, a particularly relevant case study is the Park Urka! project – a spatial transformation process combining grassroots urban regeneration and tactical urbanism. The project is noteworthy for two main reasons. Firstly, for the emphasis placed on relational processes aimed at developing a spatial practice oriented toward a co-design model. Secondly, for the symbolic value of the site itself – an empty space created by the collapse of a building in the very area historically marked by the tragic collapse of Vico Reale. In this sense, the project intervenes in the re-signification of a difficult, or even dark, heritage and proposes the imaginary of a possible “new beginning”¹² (See Figures 9, 10).



Figure 9. Making of the Park Urka! project, 2009

¹² translation for “rinascita”, used by Labuat in the project description on their website.



Figure 10. Park Urka! opening, 2009

In engaging with the Old Town both spatially and socially, the group deliberately chose to intervene in a marginal, discarded space — an urban void without a defined function, yet informally appropriated in various ways, from a children's play area to a site for illegal waste dumping.

We believed that the only viable path was to reclaim an abandoned space and turn it into a field for practical and manual experimentation, directly involving local residents and, above all, the youngest members of the community. The aesthetic quality of the final outcome was not our primary concern. What mattered was the process of dialogue, exchange, and collective construction that, for days, kept us working together from morning to evening in those spaces with the residents of Via Cava. In those September days, we had the opportunity to deepen our understanding of the Old Town and grasp some of its underlying issues through the simple observation of everyday habits.

[...]

It was through the children that we learned the first issue to be addressed in that open area was the paving, since the combination of poor cement quality and steep incline made it impossible for them to even play a basic game of football.

As a result of these observations, the intervention consisted in levelling the uneven surface of the “square” and placing playground elements along the edges of the space, in order to allow for football games. Although the wooden playground components were vandalized shortly after installation, the square is still used today by local children, who have renamed it “il Campetto” - the little football pitch (See Figure 11).



Figure 11. “Il Campetto” in 2018 (9 years after Labuat intervention)
source: Google Street View

3.2 - *Domus Armenorum*

The second case of interest - which includes (among others) the Labuat association - is the collective management of the Church of Sant'Andrea degli Armeni, a small deconsecrated church “embedded” among the buildings of Piazza Monteoliveto in the Old Town. The project, named *Domus Armenorum*, represents a (partially successful) attempt to formalize an existing practice of re-appropriating a disused public asset by citizen committees and cultural activists from the city. On the project's social media pages, it states:

The project was born out of the spontaneous collaboration of local residents, architects, and cultural heritage professionals. It aims to foster a model of recovery and participatory management of the widespread cultural heritage of Taranto's Old Town, much of which lies in a state of abandonment, with the goal of preventing its loss and promoting its integrated enhancement.

The small church was originally part of a larger complex that included a rectory and a sacristy. These adjacent structures were recently acquired and incorporated into a hospitality facility (the Hotel Residence Sant'Andrea degli Armeni), while the church's main hall—restored with public funds in 2008 and subsequently forsaken—became the focus of a series of initiatives aimed at its valorization, promoted by local residents, neighborhood committees, cultural associations, NGOs, foundations, and individual citizens.

The use of the church, almost exclusively dedicated to public events of community interest, was “regulated” by an informal set of guidelines that spontaneously emerged over time through collective co-management practices. These simple principles included basic rules such as being fully autonomous in organizing the events and cleaning the space after use.

After several years of informal and entirely self-organized co-management—without the involvement of the local administration—a group of activists, including residents and young members of the LABuat association, promoted an attempt to formalize this practice by seeking official recognition of the church as a relational good (Berardi, Castronuovo 2017). In 2014, the association sent a letter addressed to various institutional bodies potentially concerned with the matter, stating:

LABUAT Association's proposal is to experiment with new forms of preservation, enhancement, and participatory management of the diffused cultural heritage within the island, starting with what we consider a ‘good practice’ already in place: the ‘spontaneous care’ undertaken by local residents and qualified cultural

practitioners for the church of Sant'Andrea degli Armeni. This care practice is something the association intends to encourage and support through the DOMUS ARMENORUM project.

[...]

At present, no institution, of any nature, formally claims responsibility for the architectural asset, generating a bureaucratic deadlock and a lack of interlocutors, which limits the feasibility of projects and significantly slows down processes of enhancement. In the meantime, a group of local residents continues to take care of the sixteenth-century church on a voluntary basis, viewing it as an essential component of the quality of the urban space, preserving it from deterioration and informally ensuring its cleanliness, maintenance, and accessibility for both tourism and socio-cultural purposes.

The aim of this initiative was therefore to promote the full and effective public use of the site – while respecting its historical and artistic significance and ensuring its preservation – through the self-training of citizens capable of providing services within a framework of reciprocity. The experience of revitalizing, enhancing, and collectively managing the church of Sant'Andrea degli Armeni generated a process of participatory urban regeneration and contributed to the wider revitalisation of the neighbourhood. Additionally, the LABuat association organised a self-financed construction workshop aimed at providing the church with the necessary furnishings to host community events.

By 2017, the direct management of the site involved ten island residents (six of whom lived in Piazza Monteoliveto) and three local associations, which enabled the site to open for approximately two hundred days a year (Berardi, Castronuovo 2017).

Today, the participatory management of the site continues, albeit with fluctuating intensity depending on the availability of endogenous and exogenous resources, while the Domus Armenorum project has expanded the scope of its actions by integrating the church into a broader network of cultural and natural heritage sites across the territory.



Figure 12. Taranto, Old Town, Piazza Monteoliveto
(church of Sant'Andrea degli Armeni on the left)
source: google street view



Figure 13. Live arts event at Sant'Andrea degli Armeni



Figure 14. Live arts event at Sant'Andrea degli Armeni

3.3 - Post Disaster Rooftops

The third case, in chronological terms, is Post Disaster Rooftops, a platform for artistic and cultural production set on the rooftops of Taranto's Old Town. The project — which I am personally involved in as a co-founder — was initiated in 2018 by the independent initiative of a group of architects and designers from Taranto and its surrounding areas. All of them had been directly or indirectly involved in practices, projects, and organisations supported by the Puglia Region's youth policies in the previous decade.

The initiative was driven by an urgent need to move beyond a pervasive sense of resignation, which had emerged in the wake of the exhaustion of both these public policies and the bottom-up initiatives that had animated the Old Town in preceding years. That same year, the Italian government had sold the local steel industry to a

foreign corporation, and The New York Times published an article depicting Taranto as a fading city, an emblem of Western political failure¹³. Post Disaster Rooftops arose, in part, as a response to this suffocating narrative that had settled over the city following its intense media exposure in 2012¹⁴.

As suggested by its name, the project rests upon two intertwined notions that together shape and synthesise the format of the practice: one of a critical nature, articulated through the cultural provocation embedded in the idea of the post-disaster; and one of a spatial nature, through the concept of rooftops, understood both as a physical platform and as an elevated, situated vantage point from which to observe and reflect upon global processes.

By creating temporary installations on the rooftops that combine scenographic and functional elements, the collective Post Disaster — which later took its name from the project itself — transforms existing spaces, amplifying their performative and relational potential (see Figures 15, 16, 17). Within these spaces, artists and researchers are invited to develop context-related projects, based on their own media and disciplinary practices, while engaging in dialogue and collaboration with local artists and cultural practitioners.

Each edition of the project addresses distinct yet interconnected themes, all informed by the city's ongoing condition of crisis (e.g., the relationship between nature and culture; territorial subalternity; the notion of monstrosity, etc.). The project's ephemeral nature is compensated by the creation of a multimedia archive that collects and preserves the content produced during the live events in the form of texts, images, videos, and sound recordings.

The rooftops are reimagined as relational spaces within a specific urban context — the Old Town of Taranto — where public space is largely denied by physical barriers of various forms. In contrast, within the hyper-dense urban fabric of the island, rooftops constitute a potential network of visually (and, in some cases, even physically) interconnected spaces offering sites for encounter and sociality, a sort of diffused common. In the project's statement, it reads:

PDR interprets rooftops as unconventional urban spaces — suspended between public and private — free from the main hegemonic forms of control. Climbing up onto the roofs of Taranto's Old Town provides an overview of a traumatised city. But it also offers an opportunity for healing, a privileged point of view from which to collectively imagine possible futures, starting from those buildings still standing.

13 Peter S. Goodman, Italy Is Having an Election. Most Italians Are Too Depressed to Care. The New York Times, 27/02/2018

14 In 2012, Taranto's environmental crisis reached a peak of public attention following an investigation by the Public Prosecutor's Office, which led to the seizure of ILVA steel plant's hot area facilities and the arrest of several executives and owners. The charges included environmental disaster, food contamination, manslaughter, and corruption



Figure 15. Post Disaster Rooftops EP02, Taranto, 2019. Ph Pierfrancesco Lafratta

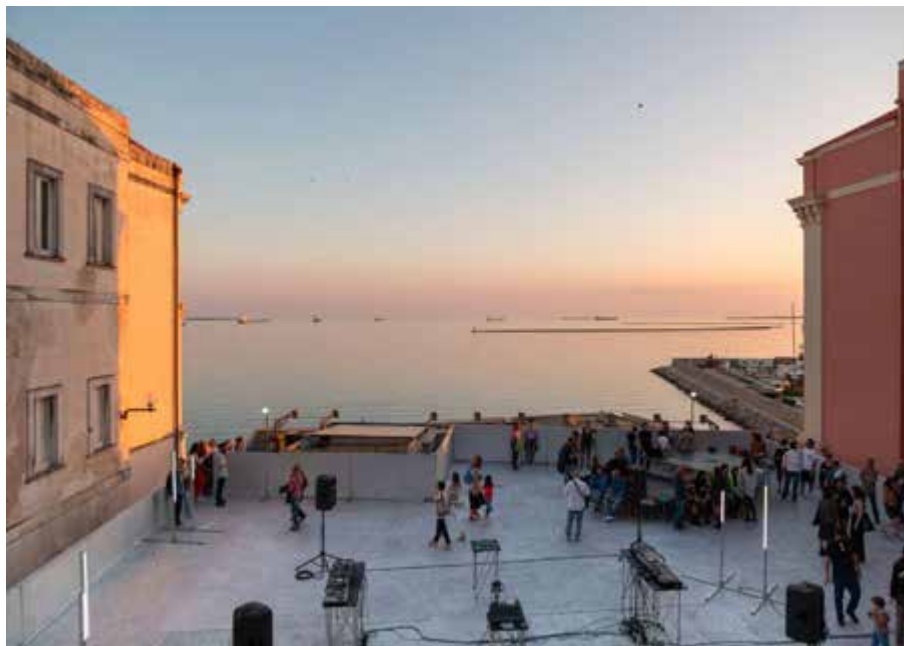


Figure 16. Post Disaster Rooftops EP03, Taranto, 2022. Ph Gabriele Fanelli



Figure 17. Post Disaster Rooftops EP05, Taranto, 2025. Ph Cosimo Calabrese

Originally conceived as a fully self-funded initiative, starting 2022 Post Disaster Rooftops progressively evolved into a project supported by national, regional, and European funding. Each edition is articulated through two complementary and interdependent phases.

The first consists of a production phase of spatial and relational nature, aimed at generating the material and social infrastructure necessary for the programme to unfold. This phase establishes a context-specific collaboration with the local communities inhabiting Taranto's Old Town, whose participation is integral to shaping the spatial configurations and relational dynamics of the project.

The second phase takes the form of a live, public programme – composed of site-specific artistic interventions, conversations, and performances – designed to engage both the neighbourhood's residents and a wider urban and regional audience.

Depending on the availability and nature of the spaces hosting the practice, the public programme can vary in both form and duration – ranging from a very dense, week-long sequence of events to a more extended schedule unfolding over several months, featuring individual contributions on a weekly basis. For instance, the fifth edition, recently held in April 2025, concentrated a particularly dense programme within two weeks, including: four artist residencies followed by site-specific live events; two sound performances; a temporary exhibition; a public poster campaign in the city; four thematic talks.

Over the years, Post Disaster Rooftops has experimented with different spatial and organizational models. One particularly significant case concerns the rooftop of the Galilei School gymnasium, a structure built in the late 1970s following the demolition of a decaying building. Although originally conceived as a public space, complete with an external staircase, the rooftop has never been publicly accessible (except for a very brief squat in the 1990s). In 2022, after opening a dialogue with the municipal administration, the collective managed to obtain a

temporary agreement for the use of the space. This allowed for a steady presence and a series of cultural initiatives, briefly transforming the rooftop into a vibrant meeting point for the city's creative community (See Figure 18). However, in 2025, after the mayor's resignation and the appointment of a technical government, the authorization was formally withdrawn, abruptly interrupting the project. This episode exemplifies the structural fragility of cultural practices in geographically and politically marginal contexts, where local administrations often lack the autonomy and stability to support long-term civic initiatives.



Figure 18. Post Disaster Rooftops EP03, Taranto, 2022. Ph Pierfrancesco Lafratta
(rooftop of the Galilei School gymnasium)

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