A Playground and Arts for a Community in Transition: A Circular Model for Built Heritage Regeneration in the Sanità District (Naples, Italy)

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Abstract: Open spaces for collective use in the built heritage of cities are the places to promote and sustain social, cultural, and economic changes. The transformation of the built environment raises awareness of following the policies and tools for the implementation of the EU New Generation Programme, redefining the framework of intervention priorities at the urban scale. Tackling the increasing physical degradation, underutilization, social disparity, and loss of the tangible and intangible culture of these types of spaces, this research identifies artistic production and social cohesion as the enabling factors of maintenance. The regeneration of areas of collective use returns an experimentation of strategic importance for the participatory and shared care of consolidated heritage contexts. The Sanità district in Naples represents a case study of a community-built custom playground, testing a co-design approach, maintaining the consolidated qualities, and awakening the responsibility of the youngest. The outcome is a circular model that focuses on the regeneration of such spaces, transforming an abandoned built environment from waste into a resource.

Keywords: built heritage; playground; urban regeneration; collective use; public space; children education; circular model; artistic production; adaptive reuse; creativity

1. Introduction

Regenerating the system of collective open spaces in historical and cultural contexts means intervening in the places where community values are built up over time and where they are specifically concentrated and manifested [1]. Collaboration and participatory planning can contribute strategically to the regeneration of these spaces, as places of community values in terms of the dynamics of everyday life [2]. Collective open spaces are a system of small urban areas, characterized by a significant set of social and economic relationships. In 2018, they were recognized as key sites of European identity [3]. Collective open spaces have the capacity to promote and support deep and lasting tangible and intangible changes in the built environment [4].

The balance between the transformation and conservation of open spaces for collective use is recognized in the spatial development policies and implementation tools of the EU’s Next Generation Programme. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the European Commission released this framework to define pilot actions for the quality of public space regeneration, aiming to mitigate environmental, economic, and educational deprivation, especially for future generations. The EU’s Next Generation Programme envisaged and foresaw the allocation of EUR 750 billion in investment related to the Recovery and Resilience Facility [5].

From one perspective, the rethinking of public spaces for young people and children has become a strategic goal, considering the need for social distance and outdoor living. On the other hand, to address the increasing processes of physical degradation, misuse,
social disparity, and loss of the tangible and intangible culture of cities, this research identifies artistic production to regenerate and manage the built environment.

Creativity becomes a driving force for raising awareness and cooperation between the different actors involved in the regeneration process of the built environment. By awakening the responsibility of the youngest for beauty through play, this research aims to empower the community to become custodians of local qualities [6]. This vision elevates the playground design to a noble theme of architecture through the projects of Aldo Van Eyck, Isamu Noguchi, and many other admirable authors of the Modern Movement and beyond [7]. The design of the playground becomes a tool for reading the condition of urban crisis, and in such a way, the interest of architects and artists in the play has re-emerged in contemporary architecture [8].

In recent decades, play areas have become standardized as a consequence of assembling equipment chosen from a catalog; they are unfamiliar in the context of reference, poor in stimulation, and unable to trigger fruitful social relationships. Play activities are repetitive, mechanical, boring, contribute little to the child’s development, and feed a passive approach to criticalities. The association between art and architecture could redirect the transformation of the built environment toward inclusive approaches aimed at the active involvement of users in maintaining and managing public open spaces. The aim is to strengthen the sense of belonging of the community to the places they use in different ways and to generate new skills and professionalism. This will have a direct impact on the regeneration and maintenance of the common good [9].

In the adaptive reuse of the built environment, transformation is developed as an iterative information-decision process. Using a case study, this research tests a regeneration model to be replicated and to trigger incremental transition processes of the built environment. The research considers the built environment as an outdoor laboratory in which to validate decision-making processes. By creating a network of spatial elements (residual open spaces for collective use) and technological solutions, the process aims to activate a circular perspective capable of regenerating the new foundations for managing places, with bottom-up rules. The hypothesis is that iterative, community-led processes can rehabilitate the awareness, practical skills, and creative intuition of local actors and help to increase cultural-based sustainability. The key fundamental actors capable of transforming the built environment into a resource are local authorities, entrepreneurship, higher education, and citizens [10].

The analysis focused on multi-stakeholder collaborative processes, with particular attention given to Living Labs. The Living Lab (LL) framework, commonly associated with the realm of open innovation, is characterized as a user-centered ecosystem. It employs a systemic co-creation approach that integrates research and innovation processes within communities and real-life contexts. The Living Lab experience [11], which started in North America, is one of the most relevant tools for the development, dissemination, and testing of new strategies and technologies in real-life environments. It has spread across Europe thanks to cohesion policies focused on community involvement. Originating in 2006 under the Finnish Presidency and endorsed by the European Union through the establishment of the European network ENoLL [12], the Living Lab approach aligned with the European 2020 strategy. It serves as an implementation tool for Horizon 2020 and promotes a novel model that combines scientific research, technological development, and market considerations. In Italy, since 2018, the Creative Living Lab project of the Direzione Generale Creatività Contemporanea has been promoting the joint urban regeneration of peripheral areas by funding innovative projects in the cultural and creative fields. Between 2018 and 2022, 4 editions of the public call were held, with more than 105 projects accepted for funding, proposed by public and private bodies operating in the cultural sector through stakeholder engagement. The latter activates a multidisciplinary approach toward the creation of participatory actions carried out by communities for themselves.
This research aims to test the design community-built custom playground as a creative tool for the participatory regeneration of space. By engaging in play, individuals re-discover cultural identity, and the community’s connection to places is reinforced, providing an opportunity to safeguard the settlement system [13–15]. Play spaces serve as effective tools for implementing strategies related to the reuse, rehabilitation, and collaborative maintenance of open spaces of collective use. They offer a chance to unite diverse individuals through interaction and collaboration [16]. Play activities, when reintroduced to urban open spaces, serve as instruments for preserving both the built environment and community [13]. The experimentation carried out over the last three years of the research allowed this tool to be tested, validating the circular model for the built heritage regeneration proposed.

This paper is divided into five main sections: the first is an introduction, describing our goals and intended outcomes. The second relates to the international framework of the four dimensions of the regeneration process of open spaces for collective use. The third outlines the criteria of the research approach and methods. The fourth describes the materials and experimentation methods, funded by a public call for proposals carried out in a pilot area in Naples, Italy. Moreover, the fifth section describes the findings, and the sixth discusses the start of a process of education for community responsibility toward public space, achieved based on a synergy of knowledge.

2. Toward a Creative Process of Urban Regeneration from the Circular Economy Perspective

Recent European urban policies place the community at the center of the regeneration of the built environment. To build communities, it is necessary to connect different generations. In the case of playgrounds, the exchange of information and emotions takes place between adults and children. The establishment of communities is therefore the crucial point of the dimensions in which the built environment is immersed. The built environment is the result of the interaction of a complex system of relationships between community, nature, buildings, infrastructure, and urban spaces [17]. Related to urban regeneration, this research aims to mitigate the physical and social degradation that affects the dynamics of overlayed centers [18]. This is achieved through the identification of dimensions to revitalize the built environment as an intrinsic connection between the following processes:

- The physical processes related to urban regeneration, supported by the ecological transition;
- The circular economic processes related to the adaptive reuse of the built environment;
- The social processes related to community engagement in the care of identity heritage;
- The cultural processes related to the conservation and transformation of traditions, and habits that guide creative strategies for transforming the built environment (Figure 1).
The instrument placed at the center of this cognitive scientific framework is the community-built custom playground, considered the engine of built environment dimensions. Play is one of the most spontaneous uses of public space by the urban community because it stimulates awareness and cooperation. It can counteract the ecological poverty of cities and the educational vulnerability of stakeholders, especially of children and the youth [19].

Play becomes a form of revolutionary counter-offensive for a society that is the victim of a crisis condition. This crisis involves an increasing deterioration in the living conditions of the inhabitants of the modern and contemporary city [20]. The 20th century is a period of intense focus on children’s rights, education, and well-being. For social cohesion, especially in depressed and problematic areas, the playground was configured as a creative space in which designers, artists, and architects sought to create a new world of color, texture, and form. The public space could be a locus ludens, not only interpreted in the sense of play but also as the Latin verb ludo; it can also be translated as wandering, floating.

2.1. Physical Dimension: Urban Regeneration for Ecological Transition in the International Context

To achieve the broader sustainable goal of making cities greener, more accessible, and more resilient, the contemporary theoretical background focuses on urban regeneration processes [21]. This approach promotes the creation of recreational spaces, parks, and accessible open spaces, which help improve the quality of life of inhabitants. These also encourage sustainable mobility and resource and waste management to enhance built environment quality [22]. Urban regeneration policies must address the uncontrolled expansion and densification of cities and, on the other hand, the rapid development and growth of the value of the land.

According to the United Nations’ World Urbanization Perspectives [23], more than 55% of the world’s population lives in urban areas, and this percentage is expected to reach 68% by 2050 [24]. Following these business and governance models, urban regeneration policies for European cities and landscapes are aimed at attracting new economically
and financially viable investments for regenerating the built environment from disrepair and decline [25].

The New Green Deal [25] sets as a priority objective that Member States should aim for climate neutrality by 2050. It sets out priority actions to invest in environmentally friendly technologies, support industry innovation in transportation and energy efficiency, and strengthen cooperation between stakeholders and decision-makers [26].

The Next Generation European Union (NGEU) supports this vision and, as a strategic agency to address the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, aims to identify effective tools to achieve the community’s environmental goals [9]. Regulation 241 of 2021, which establishes the Plan for Recovery and Resilience (NRP), is the operative instrument of the Next Generation European Union [27]. This tool emphasizes how ecological transition promotes the regeneration of the built environment in terms of respecting the balance between developing human civilization and preserving the environment in response to global challenges [27]. The process of ecological transition can focus on the regeneration policies that, on the one hand, reduce the environmental impacts associated with the processes of decay of the built environment. On the other hand, they preserve the available resources. In 2022, the United Nations Environment Programme, through the Adaptation Gap Report [22], identified four main categories of regeneration actions according to their different scale and scope. They range from innovative technologies to the use of sustainable techniques and materials for renewed quality of life [28]; from bioclimatic design for ecosystem quality to energy rehabilitation for collective well-being [29]; and from building reuse processes to urban regeneration for transforming the city and its infrastructure [29].

Examples of the aforementioned dimension related to the tool of the playground are Gian Maria Tosatti’s ‘Seven Seasons of the Spirit’ (2013–16, Naples), Silvia Camporesi’s ‘Atlas Italiae’, and Antonio De Pascale’s ‘Soglie’. In these experiences, a sustainable future for the built environment is promoted, fostering continuous negotiation between private and public memory [30]. Even though the built environment is a protagonist of public art experiences, playgrounds are repositories of an overlayed identity [31].

2.2. Economic Dimension: Transforming ‘Waste’ into ‘Resource’ for the Regeneration of Discarded Urban Spaces as a Driver of Circular Processes

The achievement of climate neutrality goals requires urgent action on heritage, integrating regeneration interventions with the enhancement of built environment resources [32]. The European Union favors a strategy based on the circularity of transformation processes in the built environment. This strategy supports the principle that in nature nothing is wasted, and everything can be a resource [33]. In particular, it applies the principles of sustainable development from a circular economy perspective [34].

The United Nations introduced the concept of circular economy in Goal 12 of the 2030 Agenda [25], which is cited in paragraphs 71–74 of the New Urban Agenda [25]. This promotes an indefinite extension of the resources’ lifetime and the value of their use through cycles of cooperation between different actors for the implementation of the circular economy model [34]. Circularity becomes an attribute that recognizes the importance of systemic change in the city, its organization, its economy, its community, and its governance [21]. From this perspective, a circular economy is emerging in most sectors, going beyond its reductive interpretation as an economy of reuse, recycling, and regeneration, acting as a co-evolutionary economy, not in conflict with man and nature [15]. Thus, regeneration actions must be able to generate multidimensional benefits, such as economic, environmental, and socio-cultural benefits [35]. The processes of transformation of the built environment [36] must allow the values of the material culture to comply with the identity of the local community. On the one hand, this directs actions to regenerate and enhance the heritage, preserving a legacy for future generations. On the other, it represents the most important process for the triggering of circular and cyclical development on different scales [37]. Regeneration actions reconnect the signs of the past with the prospects of the future in a circular process in which the degradation and obsolescence of the
built environment become an opportunity to renew social capital and governance strategies.

Regeneration makes it possible to abandon the notion of a fixed and static identity of cultural capital, pointing to a dynamic vision.

Examples of the aforementioned dimension related to the tool of the playground are studies on the links that arise from public administrations, businesses, and communities to animate and make even small urban spaces attractive through art and culture. Faced with structural changes and the loss of identity roots, the Creative Placemaking movement with the Artscape Lab project has produced empirical evidence of the potential of creative initiatives in regenerating places and reactivating economic development. This could achieve significant results in terms of livability, diversity, employment, income, innovation, and cultural growth [30].

2.3. Social Dimension: Participation and Social Cohesion for the Care and Maintenance of the Built Environment

Processes of change in the built environment are triggered by and interact with social dynamics by considering open spaces for collective use as vehicles for transmitting ideas that serve a wider range of contemporary social needs [38]. Cultural heritage is developed and recognized through the actions of the communities that experience and value it [39].

The system of urban spaces is the living tissue of our cities. However, it is often subject to neglect, abandonment, degradation, and vandalism. The state of disuse, abandonment, and degradation can be caused by a weakening of social cohesion, a low level of knowledge about places and consequently a low sense of belonging to the community, and a lack of sensitivity to the care of heritage. At the same time, mistakes in the planning of functions can lead to poor attendance and insecurity in the use of public space.

Since 1994, with the ‘Nara Document on Authenticity’, the international community has recognized that heritage belongs to the cultural community that created it and is therefore entrusted with its management (Art. 8). More recently, the results of the current debate in Europe on the right of communities to contribute to the enrichment of cultural heritage (Art. 4a) through processes of study, interpretation, protection, and conservation (Art. 12) have been incorporated into the Council of Europe’s Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage (Preamble and Art. 1a) [40]. The Convention and the 2018–2019 Action Plan Handbook mark a paradigm shift in the engagement of communities, which are called to be responsible for both the sedimented values and the unfolding potential of places. For decades, experts considered community participation and involvement as crucial to regenerating the built environment [41]. Common spaces play an important role as an arena for activating citizenship and practicing forms and tools of social and cultural innovation. Embedded in such places, it is a relational value aimed at socializing and sharing experiences and traditions [13]. Recognizing the cultural value of public space, thus, goes beyond the elitist tradition that includes the valuable urban architectural dimension and also promotes this collective dimension [14].

Community participation helps build a shared capacity for the more sustainable and durable integrated management of heritage, from knowledge acquisition to needs definition, from the negotiation of design choices to the sharing of solutions [16].

Sharing between a group of people and the built environment takes the form of collective actions of exchanging expertise to improve alliances and synergies between decision-makers and stakeholders [9]. Actions to regenerate and manage the built environment represent a driver of inclusive urban growth, promoting social cohesion and equity [42].

An example of the aforementioned dimension related to the tool of the playground is the thesis that art holds the possibility of identifying different, disinterested, meaningful human relationships. This premise for Bertolt Brecht’s new idea of community looked at the play as the last line of defense of humanity. By intervening in the built environment, art and play make it possible with unparalleled force to rehabilitate the human paradigm,
which is the root of everything [31]. More than regenerating the public space, art helps to enhance the public dimension of space and, by extending the object of adaptive reuse beyond the physical space, to redevelop the whole of conscious participating and cooperating citizens.

2.4. Cultural Dimension: Creativity for Building New Habitat in the Long Run

Participatory actions support and empower the regeneration and maintenance of open spaces for collective use. The stakeholders’ engagement enables the experimentation of creative strategies, acting on the reinterpretation of the lost values in the historical and cultural urban context. Culture and creativity in these spaces are potential drivers for reconnecting lost relationships between the built environment and communities [43]. In fact, in the process of regeneration, creative cooperation can play an educational role in the formation of new generations [44].

Since 2007, the Leipzig Charter on Sustainable European Cities has recognized the capacity of urban communities to bring about physical, social, and cultural change through cooperation, creativity and innovation, cohesion, and solidarity [45].

Within the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development [46] and the New Urban Agenda [25], culture emerges as a cross-cutting driver, both as knowledge capital, a source of creativity and innovation, and a resource for addressing challenges and finding appropriate solutions.

Addressing global challenges and strengthening European industrial competitiveness, Cluster 2 Culture, Creativity, and Inclusive Society of the Horizon 2021–2027 European Research Programme promotes an inclusive and sustainable growth model that benefits from technological progress, supports Europe’s cultural diversity and heritage, and strengthens citizens through social innovation.

The Right to the City [47] is a principle that underpins the empowerment of individuals and communities to manage resources by regenerating social, natural, and cultural relationships and promoting shared creativity [48].

Since Florida’s studies on creativity for economic growth [49], public administrations, businesses, and communities have joined forces to revitalize small urban spaces through art and culture.

Believing in the capacity of culture and the arts to contribute to social change [48], the educational function of urban space is highlighted in international documents [50] and recent interventions [3,4] that combine cultural and artistic production with the regeneration of collective use areas [51]. More than the regeneration of public space, art contributes to the regeneration of the public dimension of space by extending the object of regeneration beyond the physical space. This process develops to ultimately rehabilitate the group of consciously participating and cooperating citizens.

An example of the aforementioned dimension related to the tool of the playground is the ‘Play in the Everyday, Running’ by Temitayo Ogunbiyi, at the Madre Museum (8 July–2 September 2020). With interactive sculptures, inspired by intertwined vines, it transformed the museum’s inner courtyard into a playground and garden, where children and families could play. Space and community become such only through a process of empowerment that finds in children and young people privileged users capable of negotiating participation in the contingent situation, producing a common space in which they take responsibility for choices.

3. Research Methodology

This research employs a collaborative approach through a community-built custom playground as a tool for the regeneration and maintenance of urban contexts, characterized by historical heritage values and social and physical degradation. The goal is to trigger the regeneration of a degraded built environment through a network of spaces for collective use, regenerated by art and entrusted to the care of the community. The research approach aims to empower the community by involving artists and children as the main
The latter can learn to be guardians of shared urban values, awakening young people’s responsibility for beauty through play [52].

The research methodology is structured according to the Living Lab process model (LL) [53]. As a user-centric research methodology for identifying, prototyping, validating, and refining complex solutions in diverse and evolving real-life contexts [54], the Living Lab allows the multi-stakeholder network to actively participate in the experimental research process [55]. From Bristol Living Lab, Penny Evans describes the LL as ‘a place where citizens, artists, technologists, companies and public sector organizations can come together to co-create ideas, tools and technologies that will address local challenges; a place for innovation and exploration of new possibilities, where reflection and evaluation are integrated into the work process’ [56]. Within the design process for playgrounds, the Living Lab keeps together the super core creativity of the artists, the technical–scientific skills of the researchers, and the collaborative vocation of the community. This approach allows for building innovation from the capture and sharing of the awareness of the place and the enabling links between actors and context.

In the research, the Living Lab was characterized as a provider-driven (university) [53], open, and dynamic research ecosystem structured as a space for dialogue between expert knowledge and common knowledge. About 80 students from the Department of Architecture of the University of Naples Federico II, guided by the research team, were mediators in the process of involving five groups of stakeholders with specific roles:

- Children and the community, as guardians of the complex cultural, social, and economic values of the settlement system;
- Researchers, as producers of knowledge and innovation;
- Local authorities, as guarantors of rules and procedures;
- Artists, through their artwork, as interpreters of places to enrich them with beauty;
- The third sector, as a promoter of social sustainability.

Together, they gave rise to a context-aware community capable of initiating processes of participation, collaboration, and shared responsibility.

The Living Lab enabled the activation of a synergy between the knowledge held by the stakeholders. It also strengthened the networks of relationships between the actors involved in the transition to change.

Managing transitions in a degraded context, this approach involves a system of coordinated micro-actions to implement a shared and incremental strategy (Figure 2).
3.1. Phase 1: Shared Knowledge

Through the participation of citizens in forums and workshops, this research aimed to conduct the following activities:

- Recognize the actions that have transformed the context and values that are still recognizable in the cultural heritage of the observed neighborhood (as it was—as it is). This was accompanied by telling stories linked to abandonment and degradation;
- Identify the conditions of marginality manifested by the spaces in terms of physical decay, misuse, and abandonment;
- Analyze the causes of decay, distinguishing between functional, environmental, and management causes;
- Identify users’ needs in terms of safety, accessibility, comfort conditions, maintenance, and management of spaces;
- Negotiate the constraints of transformation [57], considering identity elements, the quality of contextual elements, and the interactions between perceptual-cultural, morphological-dimensional, and material-constructive aspects. The perceptual-cultural constraints relate to the preservation of the aesthetic values of the building; the respect of historical instances, recognizable in the layers that have succeeded over the centuries; and the preservation of the psychological and perceptual values of the built resource, recognized by users. The morphological-dimensional constraints refer to the geometric configuration characteristics of the building. The material-constructive constraints are based on the objective of respecting the behavior of the material and technology present in the building to be reused.

The meeting between the community and researchers was a prerequisite for decoding the stratified relationships that were set in motion within the settlement systems between the tangible and intangible values. The dialogue revealed the dynamics of addition,
demolition, and replacement; the causes underlying the changes in morphological–dimensional relationships between built and green spaces; and the unappropriated solutions for tangible culture. As a result, the shared thresholds for adapting the settlement system were prefigured.

The identification of decay, its nature, and extension are read as a condition for new needs and future performance levels of the settlement system. This ensures a transition for reversing physical, economic, and social deterioration while preserving cultural heritage identity.

At this stage, a welcome book [58] was developed as a tool for facilitation and dialogue among the actors involved in the community-built custom playground. The goal of the welcome book [58] is to:

- Support the artist in getting to know the places where the practice will take place, highlighting the needs, conditions, and expectations of the stakeholders involved;
- Facilitate relationships between the artist, community, client, and stakeholders;
- Raise community awareness of the artist’s creative process;
- Monitor the residency process, documenting the different stages;
- Disseminate short-term results, foreshadowing visions of the future.

3.2. Phase 2: Collaborative Design and Creation

In the phase of the design process, the interaction between play and art was tested at a pilot site by activating an artist’s residence practice. The Europe 2020 strategy promotes artist residencies as a cornerstone of European cultural policy to ensure social cohesion and dialogue between different communities [59].

During the research, the team—constituted by local cultural associations, artists, and researchers—worked on a document to launch an international call for artists [60]. The goal was to select a young artist under the age of 40 to inhabit a public space for 15 days and to accompany collective creativity in the design of an urban playground. All forms of visual art practice were allowed: sculpture, painting, new media art, and workshop art. The selection was based on an art project. The location and budget were specified in the call for artists in residence.

The focus of this phase was the collaborative design and co-creation of a community-built playground. It is an intervention to reclaim urban spaces and activate synergies between the creativity of artists and children, the design skills of architects and designers, institutions, and entrepreneurs, the know-how of local producers and craftsmen, and the mediation skills of local associations.

3.3. Phase 3: Co-Validation

The aim of this phase was to validate the process and long-term management actions of the playground, starting with the ownership of the actors involved. This phase foresaw an ex-ante and an ex-post evaluation. The ex-ante evaluation was carried out through regular meetings between the members of the research group. It is mainly related to the involvement of the stakeholders in the process. The short-term ex-post evaluation was conducted after a monitoring period—approximately 4 months after the implementation of the playground—and was based on:

- The number of active participants in the inauguration of the pilot site;
- The number and importance of other regeneration experiences activated in the same neighborhood or others;
- The number of relationships with other universities, research foundations, and study centers;
- The ability to sensitize stakeholders and decision-makers to the signing of a management and maintenance agreement for the pilot site.
In addition, this last phase was the start of an iterative process of information and decision-making, in which knowledge improved the quality of project choices. In turn, these complement the knowledge phase, with the results from specific pilot cases.

4. Materials

Pilot Site: The Sanità District in the Historic Center of Naples

The Sanità district in Naples was the case study for the activation of the Living Lab. It has a historical urban landscape of exceptional value with a high housing density and built environment decay. The Sanità district is a fragile, mainly residential, area. It is in the historic center of Naples. It has a population of up to 32,000 and covers an area of approximately 2 square kilometers. The Sanità district has long been a crime-ridden area. Social exclusion is high, as are unemployment and underemployment rates, despite the area’s historical and cultural potential. The presence of abandoned open spaces for collective use with strong social inequalities in a young social context and the active role of a third sector represent the main factors in selecting it as a case study.

Based on the above criteria and the experience of the research team from the Department of Architecture of the University of Naples Federico II, with some of the approximately 30 active non-profit organizations, the Sanità district was selected.

Young people aged between 0 and 20 years old (about 23% of the municipal population) live in this area. Many of them are poorly educated and at high risk of dropping out of school. In recent years, because of the low cost of rental housing, the district has been under immigration pressure.

However, the last few decades have seen a turnaround, with 6000 square meters of building stock being renovated, and around 5 million euros have been invested in projects by public and private bodies. Much of this regeneration has come about through the involvement of local associations. For example, the San Gennaro Community Foundation was created in 2014 in response to the needs of the district. For more than twenty years, it has brought together non-governmental organizations working to regenerate the built heritage, particularly the catacombs, and the human capital of the district [61]. Art and creativity are the driving forces for generating and creating a sense of belonging.

In the Sanità district, the process of activation of the Living Lab was initiated by the creation of synergies between the different actors involved. They express, through the wishes of the local children’s community and stakeholders, the resources and values of the context, the expectations of cultural and creative practice, and common knowledge.

Children, young people, and families, together with researchers, students, and district workers, through interviews, questionnaires, and workshops, were involved in drawing up a scenario of resources and critical issues in the Sanità district, focusing on open spaces for collective use. Based on the mapping of the Sanità district, local associations and the community support the selection of the Cristallini 73 Community House as a specific pilot site for the activation of cultural and creative practice (Figure 3).
Figure 3. The Cristallini 73 Community House (authors’ elaboration).

This is a former convent complex entrusted to local associations to house the young people of the Sanità district. The selection criteria were:

- The small scale: identification of the starting point for a network of small interventions;
- The activating capacity: attracting the community and stakeholders to the site as a catalyst for the regeneration of the district;
- The speed and incisiveness of experimentation: having an active user base.

The St Mary Magdalene building in the Cristallini 73 Community House was built at the end of the 1700s as an asylum for women who had gone astray and wanted to repent. By 1851, a small one-room church had been built with private donations. In 1885, the building was given to the State, and after many years, in 1952, it became a hospice for the disabled. Finally, at the end of the 1980s, the building, renamed Cristallini 73, was returned to the municipality, which carried out restoration works and entrusted its management to the Third Naples Municipality. Twenty years of closure and vandalism have affected the performance of the building, which covers approximately 7000 square meters over three floors, including a roof garden, a terrace, and four inner and urban courtyards.

In 2015, it was completely regenerated, becoming the hub of the engagement process of vulnerable generations, both young and old. The management of the new functions was entrusted to local associations and the third sector through a Memorandum of Understanding.

In 2020, the Cristallini 73 Community House was a community center for engaging and inclusive activities. The project involves the San Gennaro Community Foundation and the network of Sanità district associations. To test the community-built custom playground, one of four courtyards of the Cristallini 73 Community House was chosen. We selected the urban courtyard, which is the most marginal, both because of its location with
many apartments overlooking it and because of its construction and the life cycle process (Figure 4).

**Figure 4.** Courtyard of experimentation (authors’ elaboration).

### 5. Findings

**A Circular Regeneration Model for the Built Heritage through a Creative-Based Strategy**

Creativity and art provide an incomparable power with which to regenerate the human paradigm [44] by intervening in the built heritage. Art became an ethical experience that generated cooperation and community in the capacity to coordinate activities in the name of a common good [31]. The circular regeneration model came out with the tool of the community-built custom playground, based on children’s participation and education for shared responsibility. This led urban regeneration strategy to has the potential to stimulate the community dimension of care. The circular regeneration model represents an iterative process to gradually adapt the built environment to its dimension changes and the needs of the young people involved. Starting with meetings between researchers, architecture students, associations, and socio-cultural entities, the need-performance analysis [62] was carried out in the courtyard of the Cristallini 73 Community House. Seven
classes of requirements were identified: Safety, Well-being, Usability, Integration, Appearance, Management, and Environmental Protection. By associating each class of requirements with its UNI 8289: 1981 standard definition [62], it was possible to identify the relative performances.

For the class of Safety, the set of conditions relating to the security of users, the performance of use or maneuverability, control of water flow, ease of intervention and danger to users, and/or conditions of degradation were analyzed.

For the Comfort class, as the set of conditions relating to the conditions of the building system, the performance of solar, acoustic, and lighting conditions control was analyzed.

For the Usability class, as the set of conditions related to the ability of the space to be adequately used by users in carrying out their activities, the performance of morphological stability, ventilation, and equipment was analyzed.

For the Integration class, which can be defined as a set of conditions relating to the ability of the units and elements to functionally connect with each other, the performance of reliability, morphological stability, and control of dimensional tolerances was analyzed.

For the Management class, which can be defined as the set of conditions relating to the economy of the operation, the performances of economy, maintainability, and management actions were analyzed.

For the Appearance class, which can be defined as the set of conditions relating to the perception of space by the users, the performance of the appearance was analyzed.

For the Environmental Protection class, as the set of conditions for maintaining and improving the state of the built environment system [62], the performance of the biological degradation of wastewater was analyzed.

This process was essential to select the artist and evaluate the submitted proposal for the construction of a community-built custom playground in the identified courtyard [59]. The aim was to select a young artist who would inhabit the public space for 15 days and accompany the collective creativity in the design of the playground [63]. The jury was appointed in synergy with local cultural associations, and the winner of the competition was an artist of Turkish origin. She proposed a collective work using mixed techniques to be carried out mainly by the children of the Sanità district.

Once selected, the artist was welcomed and integrated into the community through visits held at the pilot site [64].

In the experiment, it was possible to trace the contribution of the community-built custom playground in each of the built environment dimensions analyzed in the literature:

- For the physical dimension, the artist worked with researchers and a team of designers to reuse the courtyard from the definition of the requirements of the small open space for collective use and its technological elements to become a playground. The children, with the support of the artist, volunteers, and associations, translated their emotions, desires, and expectations into words and symbols through photographs, embroideries, and drawings, to rediscover the spatial dimension of the district and their right to the city (Figure 5);
For the economic dimension, the artist, together with designers and craftsmen active in the neighborhood, researchers, and volunteers, carried out minor maintenance work to accommodate the new cultural and creative function of the disused courtyard. As an integral part of the playground, local artisans, supported by architects and researchers, built a wooden structure; it was also installed with the support of the children’s activities (Figure 6). Through experimentation, stakeholders developed a sense of belonging to the place, which affects the care of the built environment in the long term.

For the cultural dimension, the associations and local community manage the pilot site, organizing a series of events for the micro-intervention of urban space regeneration. These events aim to disseminate the practice and create commitments for the
future of the project. These events held the active participation of the entire community, which, together with artists and designers, proposed solutions for the management of the experiment’s legacy. These events represented the start of the process of caring for the reclaimed small urban space for collective use (Figure 7).

Figure 7. The events and celebrations of the playground in the courtyard.

- For the social dimension, the artist involved the children in creative activities of knowledge and appropriation of the district to enhance its values. This was supported by the synergistic collaboration between the educators of the foundations working in the Cristallini 73 Community House and the researchers (Figure 8).
The circular regeneration model was based on culture and creativity to link each dimension to a specific transformation. The physical transformation processes supported by ecological transition could be related to the adaptive reuse of the built environment. The social transformation processes could be related to community maintenance and care actions for the enhancement of cultural heritage identity. Cultural transformation processes could be related to the improvement of traditions and habits. The economic transformation process could be related to the community empowerment of the culture of responsibility and care in the maintenance of the built environment (Figure 9).

Figure 8. The appropriation of district from the playground of the urban courtyard.
Figure 9. Flowchart of circular regeneration model for the built heritage through creative-based strategy.

The creation of a network of spatial elements and technological solutions as a new basis for the stewardship of places, characterized by bottom-up shared rules of use, was involved in the iterations of the circular process of regenerating the district’s urban waste. On the one hand, the shift from occasional and discontinuous stakeholder engagement to replicable regeneration processes was a fundamental requirement for community capacity building. On the other hand, it regulated the procedures of sharing and cooperation between the different stakeholders. The key actors capable of transforming built heritage into a resource were local authorities, entrepreneurs, and citizens [53].

6. Discussion

The Living Lab approach highlighted the importance of the first phase of the regeneration process. In the knowledge-sharing phase, the needs and requirements are developed, the built environment dimensions are identified and shared, and the cultural and creative practices are negotiated. In this phase, an important role was played by the university as a mediator in the dialogue process, which required different times and modalities depending on the interlocutor—such as children, local bodies, small artisan businesses, professional designers, and the district of artists community. The lack of technical skills and awareness/experience of participation are weaknesses of Living Labs, especially those led by local administrations [55]. In the case of the experimentation, the Department of Architecture operated in a social context where the community has often been involved in participatory practices. This has happened since the early 2000s, thanks to numerous cultural associations.

Getting to know the district, its community, and stakeholders, during the Living Lab was also elaborated in a welcome book [58], which preceded the artist’s residence practice. This tool was used to facilitate dialogue with the artist and to help her to know the site and the needs, conditions, and expectations of stakeholders. This element also characterized the residence practice and the monitoring phases, in order to control and evaluate the results of the experimentation. The monitoring phases of the playground noted the rebirth of the courtyard as an outcome of artistic practice. It also opened up to the district through the organization of parties and performances.

After six months to the end of the research project, participatory ex-post evaluation tools were developed to monitor the success and maintenance of the experiment over time. On all occasions when the community-built custom playground was used, a survey of a sample of 103 stakeholders was conducted (Table 1).

Table 1. Questionnaire for the survey of satisfied requirements in relation to community-built custom playground.

| 1. | Do you believe that art can be an effective tool to improve your city? |
| 2. | Would you like to be involved in community-built custom playground that enhance your city? |
| 3. | Based on previous experiences, do you believe that art has benefited your urban context? |
| 4. | Do you believe that this kind of community-built custom playground can increase community cohesion? |
| 5. | Do you believe that this kind of community-built custom playground can lead to new opportunities for the economic context? |
| 6. | Do you believe that this type of community-built custom playground can have positive environmental effects? |
| 7. | Do you think you can draw direct or indirect positives from this type of community-built custom playground? |
8. Do you fear any negative impacts of this type of community-built custom playground on you or your city?

9. Would you suggest to other people you know to participate in this kind of participatory regeneration art project?

10. Would you be willing to voluntarily maintain the artistic legacies of the community-built custom playground?

The analysis showed that almost the entire sample (93.9%) believes that art applied to processes of transformation of the built environment can improve the city. Some stakeholders (81.8%) would like to be involved in this dynamic on a creative basis. The same percentage believed that, based on their project experience, art can effectively benefit the urban context. Almost the entire sample (94.9%) believed that art could increase both social cohesion and the environmental value of the place where it takes place. On the other hand, less than half of the respondents—some stakeholders (48.5%)—believed that this type of project could generate economic opportunities. Only some of the stakeholders (72.7%) believed that they would benefit directly or indirectly from the project.

What was striking in terms of impact was the data showing that stakeholders (87.9%) would recommend that other members of the community should take part in this type of project (Figure 10).

Figure 10. Ex-post evaluation to validate the success of the community engagement process into community-built custom playground.

The monitoring process and the collection of feedback have also been useful in embedding the benefits of the practice in the stakeholders, who often find it difficult to understand the long-term implications of urban regeneration perspectives [55].

The development of a garrison culture, initiated with the Living Lab, which sees the stakeholders of Cristallini 73 Community House as the custodians, required a long-term commitment based on synergies between the municipality, agencies, institutions, and new participatory local planning tools.
The pilot project tested the willingness of the administration, the third sector, and citizens to enter a cooperation pact for playground maintenance to initiate long-term processes. The pact is a tool for negotiation in which the administration and the citizens build up a relationship that is a contract for the benefit of both parties. The pact of care outlined an operational response to the complexity of the relationship between the public and private sectors in the management of the commons, as an innovative tool for participatory local planning [48,65]. Experimentation opens up research into new scenarios in which to replicate the model identified and produce pacts of care to be adapted to different contexts, as well as to public and private users.

7. Conclusions

This proposal tested the participatory design of a playground created by the artist Ozge Sahin in the courtyard of the Cristallini 73 Community House—a pilot site entrusted to local associations for hosting the youth of the Sanità district.

Artistic production in the creation of community-built custom playgrounds is an engine for the mitigation of ecological and educational poverty of children and youths. Play is the most recurrent of the spontaneous uses through which the community appropriates public space. In the scenario of a transition to sustainable human development, a playground is a tool for garrisoning settlement culture. By creating bonds of affection and responsibility toward the territory in which they grow up and consider as a common home, it can contribute to the growth of children.

The experimentation met requirements, transferable to other contexts, characterized by the vulnerability of cultural heritage and social and economic fragilities.

The requirements tested in the case study are: small-scale interventions; lack of investment in a large urban transformation and network of actions; enabling capacity to be a catalyst for district regeneration; rapidity and impact of experimentation; and low cost of intervention.

The research work plan was structured according to the Living Lab model to improve the process of public space regeneration. The bottom-up approach must be integrated with a scientific top-down. The young Turkish artist, Ozge Sahin, assisted by researchers and students from the Department of Architecture (DiARC), worked with children, families, and educators. This was to determine the constraints to reuse, the preference of materials of the playground, and the actions for its care.

The care and frequent use of the Cristallini 73 Community House courtyard are the clearest indicators of the design process’s success for urban spaces of collective use.

The case of the Sanità district shows that children can glimpse beauty amidst the decay of their built environment and care for it, starting with micro-interventions such as the one carried out. These are the targets of the project for contributing to the transition to a more ecological and sustainable world. They are the ones who show us ‘the way to the future’—the title Ozge Sahin proposed for the community-built custom playground.

In the long term, the expected result is participation and education in responsibility toward the public space, increasing understanding between private and public administrations through a pact of care for the city.

The culture of garrisoning defines new conditions for the use and enhancement of built heritage. The community extracts economic value and social benefits by becoming a responsible custodian of the values embedded in the built environment that it has maintained over time.

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