



PLACES

Portraits and Landscapes
of Academic Community
Engaged Scholarship

If I observe an atom in a position, that atom is in that position *relative to me*. But it may not be in that position relative to another system. There is no 'how things are' except in a relational sense.

This is a radical reduction of being to interaction.

Carlo Rovelli

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Community Engaged Scholarship



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FOIST



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On the cover: Detail of a *trezzota*, a traditional wooden boat from Aci Trezza, Sicily (IT).

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... true scientists [...] know that the only guarantee of scientific progress lies in absolute freedom — including, *in the realm of thought*, the freedom to rebel against all universally accepted principles and all existing institutions.

Luigi Einaudi

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He who thus domineers over you has only two eyes, only two hands, only one body, no more than is possessed by the least man among the infinite numbers dwelling in your cities; he has indeed nothing more than the power that you confer upon him to destroy you. Where has he acquired enough eyes to spy upon you, if you do not provide them yourselves?

How can he have so many arms to beat you with, if he does not borrow them from you? The feet that trample down your cities, where does he get them if they are not your own? How does he have any power over you except through you?

Étienne de La Boétie

— Introduction An invitation to conviviality

Like Marco Polo in Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*. We set out in search of stories to bring back to the Khan. Not chronicles of a well-known empire, but traces of an academic world that rarely features in rankings. A university that exists on the fringes of statistics, in local markets and school canteens, in ramshackle buildings and counselling centres.

Each portrait presented here provides a map to little-known research territories. Faces that have chosen not to separate intellectual work from community life. Paths that demonstrate how academia can be done differently, without waiting for permission.

Here, you will find those who have transformed felt-tip pens and glitter into tools of scientific research. Those who build laboratories in which disciplinary boundaries dissolve and only shared questions remain. Those who have discovered that receiving food when you are ill teaches more about reciprocity than any theory.

There are architects of impossible spaces, weavers of decades-long relationships, and biochemists who study molecular detoxification but practice systemic detoxification. There are those who hold the neighbourhood and the university together like parallel tracks. And those who have realised that academic privilege functions like a traffic light: it serves to protect those crossing.

These biographies show that the engaged university is not a utopia to be built, but a reality that already exists. There is no need to invent; it is enough to see the latent possibilities, combine the available elements, and build *with* others rather than *for* others.

Through the PLACES project, we have explored three European countries in search of this hidden academia. We found it everywhere, obeying common canons: attention to detail, the ability to spot opportunities where others see constraints, the art of transforming projects into living entities, the search for meaning, and the depth of relationships.

Those who work this way do not start from scratch. They gather scattered threads, weave relationships, improvise. Like craftsmen who refine their craft through practice, they work out methods by doing, making mistakes, and learning. Collectively.

Our proposal is both a call to action and an invitation to a convivial conversation. One that remains on a human scale, of authentic relationships that generate meaning and open up spaces for creativity without diminishing autonomy and capacity for action.

What kind of university do we want? How can we shape it? Questions to be asked both inside and outside the lecture halls because the socially desirable university is built through exchange, where different forms of knowledge meet and transform.

As with Calvino, this invisible academy already exists. It is here, in the faces and stories you are about to encounter. You only need to know how to look. And listen.



Craftsmanship names an enduring,
basic human impulse, the desire to do
a job well for its own sake. Although
the word may suggest a way of life that
waned with the advent of industrial
society, the craftsman's realm is far
broader than skilled manual labour.

Richard Sennett

— Portraits



— **Mara Benadusi** Weaving over the long term as a vital choice

‘We become what we do,’ says Mara Benadusi. In order to bring projects, relationships, and transformations to life, we must be there. Over the long term. A timeframe that does not correspond to the rhythms of publications or cycles of funding.

Mara traces the origins of this approach to research back to the 1970s in Borgata Fidene. Her parents, along with other families – following Don Antonio Benazzi, a priest who wanted to work in the suburbs – moved to this neighbourhood outside Rome’s ring road.

There was no school in Fidene. The families demanded one and built it themselves. They were engaged in committees, after-school clubs, and community services. Mara lived there until she was fourteen, deeply attached to the neighbourhood, yet aware of the differences. Her family was middle-class and intellectual, whereas her friends’ parents were labourers, builders, carpenters, and street vendors. She constantly felt caught between two worlds. This position would become the hallmark of her approach to relationships, building bridges across contradictions.

She enjoyed acting. At eighteen, she enrolled in a school that applied Orazio Costa Giovangigli’s method, based on mimesis. For three years, she trained in choral acting, collectivisation of gesture and speech. Different voices contributing to the development of a single vibration and a shared story.

Projects must be brought to life, becoming creatures brimming with new possibilities, and not sterile cogs in the machine of academic competition.

A book recommended by her drama teacher, Giuseppe Manzari, set her on the path to anthropology.

What remained with her from her theatre days was the training and pedagogical approach: tenacity, working with others, and creative improvisation. She applied this to everything; in her projects, she has always sought out diverse groups to forge relationships and build shared understandings through collective harmony.

Since 2008, when she moved to Catania, in Sicily, Mara has developed a distinctive way of understanding and practising university work. Teaching is very intensive, partly because of the experiential component outside the classroom. Exploring the field, working in groups, asking questions, and seeking answers with empathy and discretion. Research pathways intertwine with teaching. She has worked for years in the city’s historic markets, the Pescheria and the Fera ‘ô Luni, running educational workshops and participatory mapping projects alongside secondary school pupils, residents, and street vendors.

These are research projects that must have a long life. Dealing with environmental and climate disasters and imbalances, Mara cannot imagine a complete end to the experiences she initiates, the pathways, and the connections. If you asked people to open up spaces for mutual understanding, you cannot think that responsibility ends when the project ends. She also returns periodically, years later, to her first research site in Sri Lanka.

Mara Benadusi's key dates

1994 - 1997 · Theatre training teaches her to understand the world through body, voice and collective work. An influential book sparks an encounter with anthropology: the body as the site where society takes shape.

1998 - 2002 · A doctorate in anthropology of education sharpens her perspective on how learning occurs: through practice, relationships and extended time. Knowledge as a collectively constructed process.

2004 · The Indian Ocean tsunami directs her research towards a critical study of disasters: inequalities, conflicts and power within reconstruction processes.

2008 · She relocates to Sicily. An interest emerges in industrial landscapes connected to oil refining.

2014 · She begins a research project on late industrialism and energy transition, drawing on collaborative practices.

2022 - 2026 · European project BioTraCes. Action research in the Simeto Valley, alongside communities defending the river. A shared practice of presence, dialogue and negotiation.

Her mind is always looking further ahead. When she arrived in Sicily, she was struck by the industrial area around Syracuse, with its smoking chimneys and environmental pollution. In 2014, she began a research project that is still ongoing. She no longer visits the field as frequently as she once did, but she manages to keep track of the ongoing transformations because her German PhD student, Luisa Mohr, is mending the rifts in a region divided between anti-industry activists and those who have lived off the wealth of oil. It is a project of healing that Mara had dreamed of but had not managed to fully realise.

Passing on the baton, continuing longitudinal research – this dimension of duration and weaving – is fundamental to her. Taking on the social and personal fragmentation that contradictions entail: not denying them, but working patiently to mend bonds through them. It is this work of weaving that allows seemingly incompatible realities to be held together, to build connections where others see only fractures.

And then there is the ability to take part in competitive, international projects. European Horizon projects, Marie Curie doctoral consortia – a key to academic competitiveness. Mara prefers to think of this ability as serving people and communities in a vital and nurturing way. Projects must be brought to life, becoming fertile sources of new possibilities, and not sterile cogs in the machine of academic competition.

The challenge is to ensure that projects – even those involving budget management, reporting, and administrative burdens – do not end with the limited duration of the funding but are linked together over the long term. For concrete outcomes, for the processes they can generate, and for the significance they take on for people. To find and instill a profound meaning even in those activities that seem less

Department of Political
and Social Sciences, Palazzo
Pedagoggi, Catania. ▷
Facing page, bottom right:
"Fera 'ô Luni" market, Catania;
bottom left: meeting with
students at the "Fera" for an
experiential session of the
Master's degree programme in
Mediterranean Anthropology.





significant, and in this way, breathe vitality and far-reaching inspiration into them.

For Mara, it is important that her work serves to develop a social narrative from which change and emancipation can spring. As in the Greek chorus, different voices contribute to a collective movement. She wishes to keep open a space for narrative dissonance, transforming it into an opportunity for reflection.

She argues that rigid positions hinder understanding and that to truly understand, one must be able to navigate the cracks in history and the zones of uncertainty with sensitivity and great intellectual humility. In the Syracuse area, Mara met a young activist fighting against industrial pollution and the Mafia. One day he confided in her: “I have this worm in my family: my uncle... his collusion with the Mafia taught me what that world means, and from there I became who I am, not through rejection but through recognition from a distance.”

To recount these life journeys not merely in terms of justice or injustice is to choose to be present. Things are better understood if we explore the grey areas, minute details, and nuances of everyday life. Not portraying champions of good or evil, but dwelling on the contradictions: that is the real challenge.

To be part, not necessarily by taking sides. Other people’s lives do not necessarily reflect our personal views of the world.

If we become what we create, Mara knows how to nurture projects, support them, and participate consistently in their blossoming. She has learned to put her ability to lead complex initiatives at the service of the communities she works with, fostering mutual growth over time. In every gesture, in every relationship, in shared ideas. She knows how to weave collective narratives in which spaces of autonomy emerge, even in the darkest corners. It is worth building together, experimenting, and reshaping until ideas come alive, pulsating. Presence. With energy and passionate vitality.





Mara with the President of the CSA Association
at Zio Turi's Cantiere Navale Rodolico (shipyard), Acitrezza, IT.



Friends of the Cantiere Navale Rodolico moving a boat.



— Jérôme Santolini Catastrophes, awareness, transformations

Jérôme Santolini is a biochemist who studies oxidative stress at CEA-Saclay. But when he talks about his work, he doesn't talk about molecules. He talks about crises. About a system of crises – ecological, climatic, health, social, political – which are manifestations of a deeper problem: the relationship our civilisation has built with the world.

For Jérôme, crises are not catastrophes to be avoided. They are fractures that make visible what remains hidden. They are spaces where power relations become evident, where contradictions emerge, and where imagining something different becomes possible. Crises are opportunities for transformation.

This is not a comfortable position. Jérôme knows that modern sciences have participated in constructing the grand narrative of Modernity – progress, reason, development. He knows that this narrative has always been arrogant, brutal, blind. And he knows that scientists have failed in narrating crises because truly narrating them means questioning that narrative and one's own role.

But Jérôme has chosen to inhabit this failure, to make it the space of his action.

When he discovered that in school canteens children eat from plastic containers that release endocrine disruptors, he did not simply publish. He became involved in *Cantine Sans Plastique*, a collective initiative in which parents confronted with the health scandal of food plastics came together not to find a final agreement but to share concerns, knowledge, and questions. Jérôme participates as an expert biochemist, but discovers it's a collective learning process where he also learns: from parents' concerns, from cooks' practical knowledge, from administrators' resistance. It was not science communication; it was a reciprocal transformation. In 2018, this mobilisation achieved a law banning plastics in canteens.

Another health scandal concerns nitrite additives in processed meats: despite acknowledgement of the link between nitrite additives and colorectal cancer, which causes thousands of deaths each year in Europe, the Ministry of Agriculture decided to maintain the status quo.

Jérôme understands the failure of regulatory agencies to mobilise knowledge to guide public decisions. Resisting the conformism and culpable passivity of public actors, he attempted to transform this technical issue into a political and scientific challenge.

For Jérôme, responsibility is the capacity to respond to the appeals of those involved. It's presence-commitment in the world. It's accepting that no one can be right alone and that all knowledge must be tested not only by peers but by all those involved.

This vision leads him to join *Scientifiques en Rébellion* and become an administrator of *Sciences Citoyennes*. Not because he rejects science, but because he wants a different

Building the path by walking it,
cultivating questions instead
of imposing answers.

Jérôme Santolini's key dates

1971 • Birth.

1999 • Doctorate in science.

A professional choice: from Chemistry to Biology.
From mastery to an understanding
of Living Matter.

The birth of a vocation: researcher.

2004 • Death of Emile, my first son,
in tragic circumstances.

Total collapse.

The search for meaning as an urgency.

2006 • Birth of Gaspard and Adèle.

Family, health problems, accidents involving my
children, my wife.

Ecological and climate crises, empathy, upheaval.
Defining what matters.

2018 • Commitment as necessity.

Commitments that are not chosen.

Values and Knowledge: demand and resistance.

Responsibility: towards whom, towards what.

Reflexivity: personal and professional.

2025 • Creation of the Nitrogen Observatory.

The need to transform and to account for.

Experiments and new frameworks.

Creation, pleasure, sharing.

Making knowledge differently.

science. A science that doesn't shut itself in the ivory tower, that doesn't submit to the assessments of politico-economic power, and that accepts being transformed by the encounter with other forms of knowledge.

He defines himself as a gleaner-weaver. He gathers knowledge, questions, stories, in laboratories but also in the concrete and imaginary dimensions of our lives, trying to bring out other ways of inhabiting our living environments. He embraces the Zapatista walking-questioning: building the path by walking it, cultivating questions instead of imposing answers. He speaks of regeneration, of ending the Anthropocene: radically changing the relationship between humanity and nature, and between science and society. The challenge is to find new ways of navigating the catastrophe.

When the far right achieves a record result in the elections and Macron dissolves the Assembly, Jérôme's reaction is physical: anguish. But the anguish transforms. He has read: "Worse than the sound of boots, the silence of slippers". He's understood that this is another crisis, another space for action.

He states: we are the society defending itself. Not only researchers, but citizens who use science to defend the future. And defending doesn't mean preserving but transforming.

Jérôme knows that a law on plastics won't resolve the systemic crisis. He knows that denouncing nitrites, endocrine disruptors, pesticides, and other pollutants will not stop the litany of health scandals. But he also knows that each well-constructed

On this page and facing:
Conference "For a More Open,
Critical and Living Research". In
dialogue: Stengers, Santolini and
Considère, University of Lille.

Following pages: LILLIAD
Learning Center Innovation, Lille.





problematic situation, each space of collective learning, and each transformation of relationships is a building block for constructing something new.

His science is one *of* crises and *in* crises. A science that doesn't seek to solve problems but to transform relationships. That doesn't divide between who's right and who's wrong but creates spaces where different voices can be heard. That doesn't educate the public but participates in collective learning. That inhabits contradictions and uses them as spaces for action.

For Jérôme, crises are not the end. They are fractures through which something new can emerge. They are spaces where consolidated relationships are questioned, where it becomes possible to imagine other ways of doing science and other ways of being in the world. Paradoxically, they are necessary. This is not because pain is good, but because power relations become visible and therefore transformable only in crises.

Jérôme studies detoxification at the molecular level. But the real intoxication is systemic. It's in the way modernity has transformed the world into a resource, the land into yield, and knowledge into performance. And detoxification must be equally systemic: it passes through the transformation of our relationship with the world.

Jérôme Santolini is a biochemist who has understood that his work is not studying molecules but inhabiting the fractures of the world. And in these fractures, with tenacity, he builds spaces for transformation.









— Nic Dickson Joy as method

Nic Dickson holds in her hand a dragonfly made from an egg carton, and when she shows it to the women in groups there's always someone who says it's kids' stuff, but she doesn't insist, doesn't explain, she listens. Waits. And then smiles: wait until we get to the glitter; if you fancy it, let's get a bit lost. It's not that she has a pre-established plan to impose. It's that she listens to what the women tell her with words and silences, with their bodies and with their resistance, and from there builds something together. And this is already a revolution, because in traditional scientific research everything must follow a rigid protocol, a method decided beforehand that confuses rigidity with rigour, whilst Nic has understood that true rigour lies in being flexible enough to follow what emerges, attentive enough to grasp the unexpected, and compose it into something meaningful. This is what she always does: she composes harmony from pieces that others wouldn't even see as composable.

Her family had told her to get a proper degree before pursuing art, and so she'd put away her markers. She studied psychology and sociology and earned two master's degrees; thereafter, she worked as a researcher with pre-established questionnaires, and each time, she felt as if she was entering, taking what was needed, and leaving, as if those people were mere receptacles of information.

The breaking point came with Roma women, when she had to give them a form to fill in and knew they couldn't read it. At that point she told herself: I'm not doing this anymore.

Nic listens to what the women tell her with words and silences, with their bodies and with their resistance, and from there builds something together. And this is already a revolution.

During her doctorate she worked with young women who'd survived abuse and childhood trauma. They requested art sessions. Nic offered to provide them. For six months, she entered that room with twelve women and art materials; she'd prepared a study program. But many didn't want to do what she initially suggested. So, instead of insisting, she thought it better to listen to them. Sometimes they had fun, sometimes they left, traumatic situations were confronted, and she learned to follow the rhythm of what emerged. Moments when something melted because she'd known how to wait, to adapt.

It was there that everything came together. She discovered that what she was doing had a name – “arts-based research” – and that there were other people doing it.

Until recently Nic worked at the School of Health and Wellbeing in Glasgow. She keeps using her visual scribe skills in her academic research roles. These are particularly effective when she's working with communities: she brings markers and draws in real time, capturing words, making people laugh. It is transparent. It is playful. If someone says it's like pulling a rabbit out of a hat she draws a rabbit and everyone laughs.

While working as a junior research assistant in a project involving South Asian women who'd experienced domestic violence, she used collage, and while they busied themselves with scissors and magazines, they talked, and thanks to the circle that held them together around a common endeavour, they revealed things they would never have said.



The story that changed everything began by chance. Adults in recovery from addiction: come, let's talk to medical students. Nic: can I draw it? They liked the idea. She met Lindsay Crawford, a doctor who'd written a paper about those meetings. Nic: I've spoken with the recovery community; these meetings change people's self-perception.

They found funding and worked together for a year. The result was a comic book that has been endorsed by the Royal College of General Practitioners and added to the substance misuse learning module for NHS England. It has also been added to the Drug and Alcohol workforce learning directory of the Scottish Government. It's huge, the impact. A professor from Edinburgh called it brilliant. People from the community cried when they recognised their thoughts, ideas, and sometimes sketches represented in the comic. True co-production.

Nic is a Grade 7, junior position, with a full time 4-year contract without guarantees, three children, started late. But this very precarity, instead of paralysing her, has made her capable of composing pathways where others would see fragmentation. She's never had the luxury of a long-term plan; so she's learnt to stay in the unexpected, to take what was there and weave together these apparently disconnected threads into something coherent and positive. For herself and for others. It's the same capacity she uses in research: listening to what emerges, adapting, composing harmony. When, recently, the announcement came out for a role as "Community Embedded Researcher" – four years in Stirling – five people wrote to her: no one has these skills, except you. At the interview, Nic decided to follow her approach: I'll listen, I'll adapt. She got the job.

Circle Dance Group facilitated by Nic. Annexe Communities, Glasgow.



What Nic does is listen. She enters: Hi, I'm Nic, I'm here to learn. She talks about herself, that she tattoos bananas, that she has three children. And listens. If they talk to her about the noisy neighbour when she'd want to ask about cancer, she listens about the noisy neighbour, because she knows that's the starting point, that one can't impose a path from above. She listens and then adapts, changes direction. If someone says markers are kids' stuff, she doesn't insist, tries collage. If collage doesn't work, she tries something else. It's this attentive flexibility, this following the thread of what emerges instead of imposing a rigid method, that allows her to reach where traditional research doesn't reach.

Someone gave her a pencil case, and she wrote her name on it because she was excited. It brings her joy, she loves markers, loves dragonflies made from cartons.

There's something subversive in this joy. Recently, she presented her work on "Communiversity" in Prague, where 15 community members were being trained to be peer researchers. She frankly spoke about what she felt worked and where it didn't feel successful. The feedback: finally, someone who admits that things don't always go according to plan.

Nic: I've always looked for my place, I've always wanted to use the arts and work with people, but I didn't know what job could contain all this, and it took time to understand that I had to invent it myself.

The markers are out, the dragonflies ready. Nic has found her place, a way of doing research that holds together rigour and care and presence, through joy, which is her contribution: having demonstrated that joy isn't the opposite of science but can be its most rigorous method.

Nic Dickson's key dates

1998 • Volunteering at 'Concern for Mental Health', leading art activities with women who experienced poor mental wellbeing. She discovers the transformative potential of creativity and non-formal learning.

2002 • Scottish Community Development Centre. Following travels in India, Africa and South-East Asia, she learns to facilitate community research and engage people in shaping change.

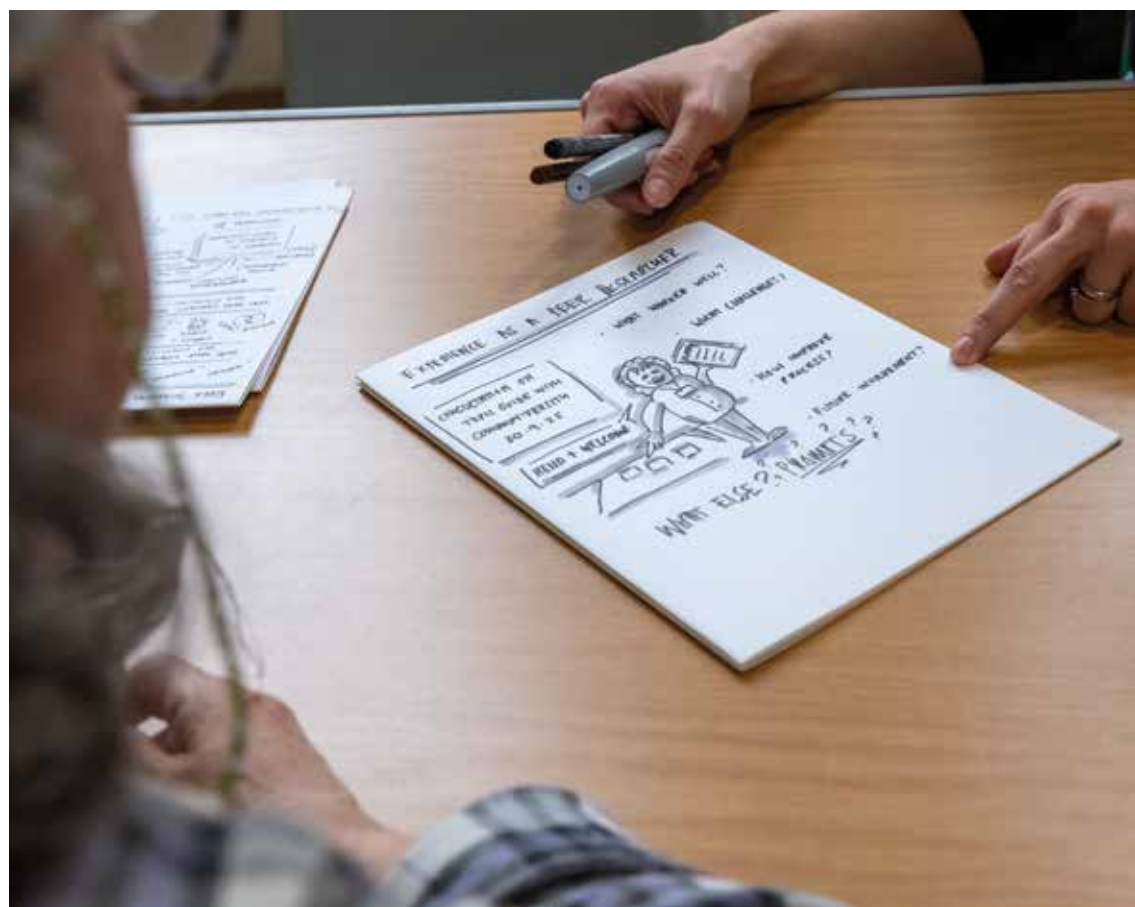
2008-2012 • Birth of her three children. A joyful and challenging experience that reshapes her understanding of resilience, care and learning in everyday life.

2016-2023 • Doctorate at the University of Glasgow, arts-based participatory research with women who experienced homelessness and sexual trauma.

2023-2025 • Researcher in General Practice and Primary Care at Glasgow.

2024-2025 • Chair of SCUTREA and new research role at Stirling. Decades as a visual artist, educator and activist converge to advance social justice through participatory research.

Visual Inquiry. Visual notes as a method of ethical engagement, inclusive representation, effective dissemination.







△ Community Hub at the School of Health & Wellbeing, University of Glasgow.

◁ School of Health & Wellbeing, interior.



— **Bertrand Bocquet** The experimental explorations of a determined engineer-researcher

Bertrand Bocquet has spent much of his research life devising spaces. Spaces where research is done differently, where those normally kept out can enter, where disciplines mix. And each time, he learns something new about how to make them habitable.

He's a physicist who dedicated his doctoral thesis to capturing microwave signals that were so weak he struggled to believe they existed. He's an experimenter and apprentice researcher who used to work every Wednesday in a hospital with his prototype device on breast cancer patients. Once a patient started crying because she didn't understand what he was doing, and Bertrand understood: just as modern physics discovered that phenomena don't exist in themselves but only in relationships, so research cannot exist without those who inhabit it. One cannot understand phenomena by keeping people out.

From there began his search for other possible ways of doing research. He didn't abandon engineering; instead, he expanded the field of its possibilities. He began asking himself: how does one design a space where researchers from different disciplines and where researchers and citizens can truly work together? He became a designer of collaborative architectures.

And this didn't make his life easy.

Between 2011 and 2013, Bertrand built his first experimental space: an interdisciplinary group with colleagues from biology, physics, mathematics, and sociology. The University of Lille recognised it as an "emergent équipe", but with one hard condition: after two years, they would have to find a laboratory to take them in, or disband. But no laboratory wanted such a heterogeneous group. The university wasn't structured to host this type of space. The group split. But Bertrand had experimented with a model and understood which conditions make an interdisciplinary space uninhabitable. In 2016, part of the group moved with him to the CNAM in Paris.

Meanwhile, he worked on bringing to France the experience of Science Shops, the "Boutiques des Sciences" born in the Netherlands in the 1970s. These spaces are designed to reverse power relations: associations bring questions, the science shop team translates them into research projects and carries them out with students coached by researchers. This is research that starts from the real needs of all parties involved. A different way of inhabiting science that lifts the veil on the "undone science": an expression coined by David J. Hess to refer to those areas of research that are generally overlooked, but which social movements or civil society organisations often identify as worthy of further investigation.

How does one design a space where researchers from different disciplines and where researchers and citizens can truly work together?



Teaching at CNAM, Paris.



Meeting, Boutique des Sciences, Lille.

Bertrand Bocquet's key dates

1986 · Begins doctoral research on measuring microwave thermal noise to characterise breast tumours.

2000 · Technology transfer of the imaging system; collaboration ended in 2002 for marketing reasons. Questions about innovation.

2003 · A shift in direction towards microfluidic microsystems. Collaboration with biologists and chemists. Questions about interdisciplinarity.

2013 · Creation of *SCité – Sciences, Sociétés, Cultures dans leurs Evolutions*: interdisciplinary research group on science–society issues.

2016 · Creation of the Lille Science Shop. Integration into the CNAM laboratory in Paris. Work in participatory action research.

In 2016, Bertrand inaugurated the Boutique des Sciences in Lille with €30,000 from the Hauts-de-France Region. Every year, they launch a call, requests arrive. But Bertrand discovers that opening a space and putting people in contact isn't enough. A collaborative space is only inhabited if the right tools are available: researchers struggle to relinquish control, and associations lack academic language. Bertrand develops “participatory engineering”: workshops, world cafés, works on stakeholder postures and other tools that allow the negotiation of the research question, co-construction of knowledge. It's the infrastructure that makes the space habitable.

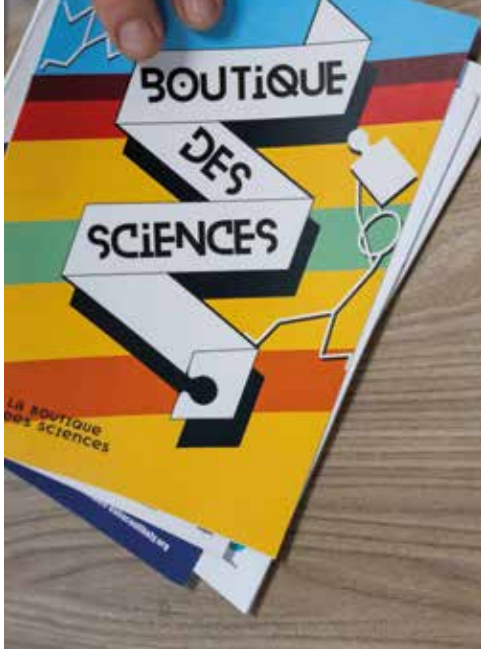
In 2017, the regional political colour changed and the funding wasn't renewed. Activity reduced from six to two projects, but continued. Gradually, the Boutique was recognised and finally integrated by the university in 2020. The space proved to be liveable.

There's an episode that illustrates this difficulty. In 2012, working with environmental associations, it took them a year to articulate a shared question. Almost every time, people clashed harshly. Hard sciences against social sciences, researchers against activists. The space existed, and the people existed; however, the tools to inhabit it together were missing. And each time Bertrand thought: next time no one will come back. Yet, everyone returned. But a year was too long. Devices were needed to make the space less conflictual and to optimise time.

And so he did. He studied, followed training courses on participatory action research, and built a repertoire of tools that don't impose but facilitate the emergence of shared ways.

CNAM, detail, Paris. ▷
Facing page: LILLIAD Learning
Center Innovation, Lille.





In 2024, recognition arrived. When the university created the *Institut des Transitions Environnementales et Sociales*, colleagues came to Bertrand. Bertrand organised co-creation workshops. And something happened: the institute, which was meant to be a space for research only, expanded. Participants pointed out that spaces for training and relationships with society were also needed. Three missions instead of research alone were articulated across four thematic axes conceived from below. The space adapted to those who had to inhabit it.

Today, Bertrand is a professor emeritus and has been retired since January 2025 but continues to transmit this design knowledge. He's on the Scientific Council of the Boutique and continues with ITES. His satisfaction is the Boutique, because it demonstrates that these alternative spaces are habitable, liveable, sustainable.

Bertrand Bocquet is an engineer-researcher who has dedicated his career to designing spaces where research is conducted differently. Spaces where the human dimension is central. Because he's convinced that this is the only way to produce truly useful knowledge. He's fought against university structures designed to separate. He's invented tools, experimented with devices. And he continues, with methodical and creative tenacity, applying the scientific method it's not enough – observe, experiment, learn, refine – not only to circuits but also to meeting spaces, to ways of inhabiting research.

He's the stubborn architect of other possible ways of doing science, and every experience – every space built, every resistance encountered, every tool refined – is another brick in his constantly under construction edifice.





— **Marion Carrel** The craftswoman of knowledge: learning to work slowly

Marion Carrel is a sociologist who had to unlearn her profession in order to truly learn it.

In the 2000s, she studied poor neighbourhoods in France and public participation policies. She saw failures everywhere: institutions couldn't get residents to participate. But she also encountered people she called "artisans de la participation" – craftspeople of participation.

They were professionals who, since the 1970s, had developed popular education methods in working-class neighbourhoods. Suzanne Rosenberg, Michel Anselme, practitioners of theatre of the oppressed. People who didn't apply recipes but patiently built methods, situation by situation.

Marion understood something fundamental: participatory methods are crafted through accumulated experience. There's no miracle method. There's bricolage, as De Certeau says. There's continuous experimentation, patient, reflective research.

But understanding this intellectually and practising it are two different things.

Between 2019 and 2023, Marion coordinated the Collaborative Space "Croiser les savoirs" – Crossing Knowledges. This was a partnership between CNRS, ATD Quart Monde (an anti-poverty movement), and CNAM. Four years of participatory research with three groups: academic researchers, people experiencing poverty, and social work professionals.

The method: peer groups worked separately on the same assignment and then met to cross-reference their findings. A mixed steering committee for decisions. Very long meetings.

Marion found all of this unbearable at first. She'd been trained at the university to work "alone and fast". To write her thesis alone, to compete, and to publish. Now, she found herself spending entire afternoons discussing with associations and social workers about which assignment to give, what went wrong, and how to proceed. This seemed like a waste of time.

"C'était trop long" – it was too long. She couldn't listen. She became agitated.

But then something changed. Slowly, Marion understood that she had to unlearn the individualistic and competitive way in which she had been trained. She had to learn to work "collectively and slowly".

It was a delicate learning process. It meant discovering that her knowledge was partial. "Ça fait mal" – it hurts – "ça fait mal et en même temps c'est très intéressant" – it hurts and it's very interesting at the same time. Everything she'd been explaining for ten years was true but incomplete. She hadn't truly understood the difficulties faced by social workers, the silence of the poor, or why certain mechanisms didn't work.

She needed the knowledge of others to build a more complex understanding. And she couldn't transform society alone.

There's no miracle method.
There's only patient bricolage,
continuous adjustments, collective
reflexivity, and the long haul.
And the discovery that others'
knowledge is necessary to truly
understand.

Marion Carrel's key dates

2004 • Doctorate in sociology (Paris 5) on resident participation in marginalised neighbourhoods.

2007 • Maître de conférences, University of Lille.

2017 • Academic habilitation (Paris 8). Research on citizenship in working-class neighbourhoods, discrimination and participatory methodologies.

2019-2023 • Participatory research project *Espace collaboratif : Croiser les savoirs avec toutes* (CNRS, ATD Quart Monde, CNAM).

2020 • Professor of Sociology at University of Lille, CeRIES laboratory. Director of the Institute of Social Sciences (2022-2025).

2025-2028 • Research on citizenship and democracy (DemoCIS project) in the Collaborative Space, with ATD Quart Monde and the Federation of Social Centres of France.

Marion became a craftswoman. She worked for four years in this collective workshop where a method was built step by step. Peer groups to acknowledge the differences in knowledge, legitimacy, and power. Precise facilitation techniques prevented academics from always taking the floor. Constant reflexivity.

It wasn't rigid, it wasn't a recipe. It was craft: each situation required dedicated care and constant adaptation. It was built by doing.

In 2023, the Collaborative Space won the INRAE Prize for Participatory Research. A collective price and a personal result: Marion learnt that there's no good or bad practice. There are experiences, you learn by doing, and you learn from one another.

And her career? Paradoxically, this slow and collective approach didn't hold her back. It provided her with the energy to infuse her research. In 2017, she obtained her Academic habilitation and became a full professor in Lille. Since 2022, she's been the co-director of the Sociology Department. In 2023, she received the ESA Best Article Award.

Not despite, but thanks to participatory research. She produced different knowledge, more complex and more just. She opened spaces that others didn't see.

At the final conference of the Collaborative Space, 150 people from France, Quebec, Switzerland, and Belgium attended. Researchers, people with mental health issues, people in poverty, professionals. All engaged in reflexivity on ethical and epistemological questions. A craftspeople's ecosystem: different workshops sharing accumulated knowledge.

Marion used the expression "artisans de la participation" in her 2013 book. But only after four years of the Collaborative Space did she truly understand what it meant. It means building methods with patience. It means slow collective work. It means accepting that one's knowledge is partial and that this partiality hurts but is also the condition for learning.

This means conducting radical research: co-produced from start to finish without claims of neutrality, aimed at producing social justice. It means recognising subaltern knowledges – post-poverty epistemology, just as there's feminist and post-colonial epistemology.

Above all, it means accepting that there's no miracle method. There's only patient bricolage, continuous adjustments, collective reflexivity, and the long haul. And the discovery that others' knowledge is necessary to truly understand.

Marion Carrel is a craftswoman who learnt her profession slowly, collectively, uncomfortably. She now knows that this is the only way for research truly aimed at transformation: not recipes to apply, but knowledge to build together, step by step, with the patience and care of a craftsperson.





◁ Stills from the presentation video of the project "Espace collaboratif : Croiser les savoirs avec tou.te.s" (ATD Quart Monde, CNAM, CNRS).

Facing page, top: Inrae Participatory Research Award 2023, co-construction category: "Croiser les savoirs avec tou.te.s".







— **John Barry** The mothers on the road

In the neighbourhood where John was born, in Dublin, there was a road where lorries passed and cars went fast. A child died crossing it, and the neighbourhood mothers went to the council. They asked for a traffic light. A traffic light would be enough, they said. The administration said no, and the mothers returned to the road.

They sat on the tarmac and said they wouldn't move until they got the traffic light. John was a little child but he understood that sometimes voting isn't enough and writing letters isn't enough. Sometimes you have to sit on the road and wait.

Many years later, John was the first in his family to enter university. Every morning, he left his working-class neighbourhood and went towards those buildings where everyone spoke with an accent different from his. To support himself, he worked as a kitchen porter in the British police canteen. He already had two degrees but had to hide them to get that job. Every day, he washed the dishes and thought about what he'd studied and what he was doing.

Today, John is Professor of Green Political Economy at Queen's University Belfast. He directed the Centre for Sustainability, Equality and Climate Action and chaired the Belfast Climate Commission, which emerged from a collaboration between the university and the municipality. His work involves translating academic research into concrete policies. He has status and autonomy and time and influence. He's a full professor, male, white, heterosexual. He's protected and recognised and safe.

But he hasn't forgotten the mothers sitting on the road.

That's why he organises public events on topics that not everyone likes and opens university lecture halls to neighbourhood groups. "The university is paid for with everyone's money," he says. "In summer it's empty. Why should we make people pay to use spaces that already belong to them?"

John knows not everyone can afford to do what he does. Among younger colleagues, there are those on precarious contracts, those who are afraid, and those who need the salary. That's why he's committed to the union, not to protect himself because his pension is fine, but to protect them.

"Many of my colleagues are Marxists and socialists and feminists," he says, "but they leave everything inside books. For me, you can't be coherent if you only speak in the lecture hall. You also have to turn up at protests."

John turns up at protests. He was a councillor for seven years and a leader of the Green Party in Northern Ireland and an Extinction Rebellion activist. He wears t-shirts with writings that bother people and speaks in language that makes elegant professors wrinkle their noses. "The planet is literally on fire," he says. "Doesn't this require a strong response?"

"Privilege is like a traffic light.
It serves to protect those crossing.
And if you've earned it you have the
duty to make it work for everyone,
not just for you."



The International Wall in Belfast transformed into the Palestinian Wall by local artists.



Entrance to Queen's University, Belfast. Statue of Galileo.

John Barry's key dates

September 1975 · Paying respects to the remains of President de Valera at Dublin Castle. A child's boredom mingled with the confused sense of witnessing something historic.

March–October 1981 · IRA hunger strikes. Ten deaths. Black flags on the lamp posts of a working-class neighbourhood. Images of the protests fill the television news.

June 1996 · Doctorate at Glasgow University on the political economy of post-growth.

June 1998 · Birth of his daughter Saoirse. "Future generations" shifts from abstract concept to real person.

October 2011–2018 · Green Party councillor. Academic, father, husband. An experience that deepens his understanding of the limits of capitalism and liberal representative democracy.

As years go by, John ages in that privilege he conquered centimetre by centimetre. He publishes peer-reviewed articles and directs the research centre and appears on local media talking about climate. He works in the furrow traced by the mothers on the road and that was the most important political lesson, the one no book taught him better.

"Privilege is like a traffic light," John says. "It serves to protect those crossing. And if you've earned it you have the duty to make it work for everyone, not just for you."

There's a question John has always asked himself: "Who am I?" Not what must I do, but who am I. The answer is as plain as the tarmac beneath the mothers' feet: someone who doesn't forget where he comes from.

Sometimes in the evening, when the university empties and the lecture halls remain uninhabited, John thinks about his mother and the other women. He wonders if they understood that what he does now – opening lecture halls and protesting and using his protected position – is just a different way of sitting on the road.

Politics is always the same. Don't let the world run you over. And when you have strength and privilege and space, make room for those who come after.

The mothers knew it. John learnt it from them.

Planning meeting with colleagues.



Surely the Second Coming!
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

[January 1919]

1920

OF COURSE YOU DON'T WANT TO BE HOMELESS AND MALNOURISHED, I MEAN WHO WOULD, BUT YOU SEE WE HAD TO STRUCTURALLY ADJUST YOUR COUNTRY OR YOU'D END UP MISSING OUT ON ECONOMIC GROWTH, AND THEN YOU'D BE IN A RIGHT OLD PICKLE, WOULDN'T YOU, BECAUSE ONE DAY THAT ECONOMIC GROWTH IS GOING TO TRICKLE DOWN TO YOU, YOU SEE, AND SO YOUR PARENTS LOSING THEIR JOBS AND THE PRICE OF FOOD DOUBLING IS ACTUALLY A JOLLY GOOD THING, REALLY, ISN'T IT? EH..?



DECEMBER 1987 / NEW INTERNATIONALIST

Green special

'It's not
easy
being
green'



JOHN BARRY

DANGEROUS MACHINE -
DO NOT TALK TO THE
OPERATOR WHEN IN USE



— **Campsbourne Community Collective** A room of our own: conviviality, reciprocity, possible futures

On the border that divides wealthy Haringey from poor Haringey, where railway tracks cut London into two segregated halves, there's a working-class neighbourhood and a council estate that appears as a dark stain on the deprivation index map amid the white of wealth. It's there that every Friday, in a ramshackle building that's been many things – a Black feminist centre in the Seventies, a workers' pub, a youth club, and now a Kurdish migrant advice centre – a collective gathers that has made precarity its strength and research its weapon.

The Campsbourne Community Collective (formed by residents with backgrounds from Africa and the Caribbean, Turkey, Kurdistan, and Bangladesh) has no statute, no hierarchy. It has one rule: anyone who lives or works in the estate can come, propose, and realise. Every week, the vast majority of the group shows up because eating together is the most important thing.

Among those who arrive is Jude Fransman. For a long time, Jude thought she was there to help. With a politicised migrant background (her South African Jewish parents were anti-apartheid activists), she was raised in Scotland but schooled partly in Japan, where she was branded a dirty foreigner. This fuelled an interest in difference and connection and led to an academic career with formal qualifications and publications, political frameworks, and the certainty of someone who knows.

In 2012, her daughter was born, and Jude started attending the neighbourhood school, the one that brings together children from million-pound houses and children living six to a room, families who had been in temporary housing for over a decade. There, she started talking to her fellow parents about what could be done together.

It was 2019, there was Corbyn, a moment of socialist hope. They campaigned and built relationships. Then Corbyn was defeated, but the relationships remained. When COVID arrived, they were ready: mutual aid, food bank. Unlike all the other groups born during the pandemic, theirs survived because it was rooted in relationships, an ethos of inclusion, and a desire to make real change for the next generation.

The collective works strategically with all the estate's institutions: schools, migrant centre, sheltered housing, and Alexandra Palace – that 1870 "People's Palace" that favoured the richer neighbourhoods and neglected the areas near the estate until COVID forced the poor to claim that public space too. And here's the crucial point: they've trained community researchers and use research as a strategy for self-help and social advocacy. They've mapped food systems to build food sovereignty, documented housing conditions to pressure the Council, analysed care pathways to organise support. They even have a "time travel" program where they imagine the

In that instant, Jude understood. It wasn't her helping them. She was part of the community, she too with her vulnerabilities.



Kurdish Advice Centre, Haringey, London. ▷
Campsbourne Community Collective (CCC)
meeting at the Kurdish Advice Centre. ▽



Jude Fransman's key dates

1980s · A childhood in South Africa shaped by her parents' anti-apartheid activism and experiences of antisemitism. An interest in social justice takes root.

1997–2007 · Voting against the Conservatives, a decade across China, France, Tanzania, Vietnam, Thailand and Mexico. Participatory programmes and adult education.

2011 · Doctorate on representations of migrant communities — an expert in community studies, it seems!

2015 · Corbyn reignites hope. Engagement with the local community. Disillusionment with academic research.

2020–2021 · Covid-19. Co-founding of a mutual aid network and a community research programme. It turns out she is not a community expert at all!

2050 (2025) · A future vision set in Birmingham. From solitary researcher to member of a community research collective.



neighbourhood's futures through speculative fiction and digital historical mapping and use this knowledge to inform their action and hold the Council accountable.

Jude coordinates this research, maintaining collaborations with universities – the Open University, UCL, Birkbeck – but on the terms of the collective, inverting the traditional model. It's no longer the university that brings a project and then leaves with the data. It's the community that has an ongoing agenda and invites academics when needed, but control remains with the collective. Community research is rigorous and strategic, serves to defend rights, to negotiate, to build narratives that give power. It is also grounded in an ethics of care.

One day, while coordinating projects and feeling like the one who helps, Jude fell ill. When her ringing phone showed the number of a struggling family she thought: I feel too awful, I can't do it. She answered anyway, but the voice at the other end wasn't asking for help: we're outside your house; we've brought you food; the whole community contributed.

In that instant, Jude understood. It wasn't her helping them. She was part of the community, she too with her vulnerabilities. From that day on, she stopped thinking in terms of projects, objectives, and academic outputs. She started thinking in terms of long-term relationships and strategies. Research is an instrument of activism, rigorous, and at the service of the community. But it is also a way of understanding the local context, of valuing people's lived experience, of bringing funds to struggling organisations and some income to struggling individuals, of creating space for friends to come together and trust to be built, and of mobilising the broader community in all its rich and sometimes conflictual diversity.

Every week, something happens that surprises Jude, such as when a woman from Martinique proposed some guided tourist trips. Jude thought: this can't be a priority. But she said to her: let's try. And the response was overwhelming, especially from newly arrived Muslim families: isolated mothers who'd been afraid to go out and who suddenly found a safe group.

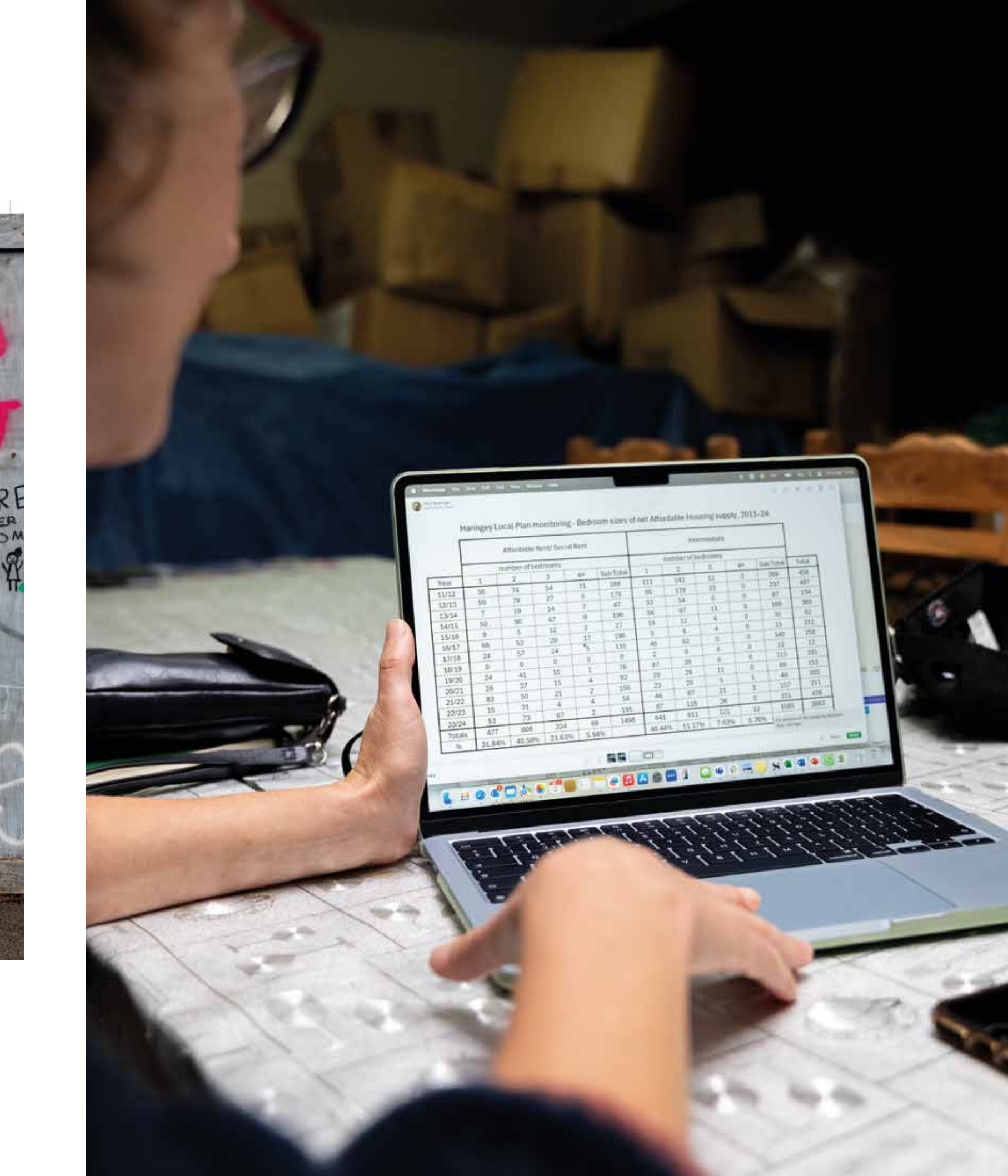
Every Friday, in that centre full of boxes because there's always the risk that it will be demolished, in that ramshackle place that precisely because of this can be many things, the collective gathers. The academics Jude invites must learn the rules: you can't send Google Docs, you have to translate digital into paper or better still, spoken words, it takes three times as long, and you have to be present. Those who truly listen stay.

The collective won't save the world, but every Friday, it demonstrates that people can gather and build change. And in that centre's precarity, there's a principle that holds everything: reciprocity. Not charity, not one-way help, but that discovery Jude made when she was ill and understood that they were all giving to one another, all part of a collective fabric.

Every Friday, while the world divides rich and poor with tracks and maps, inside that centre it's demonstrated that another way is possible. Not perfect, not replicable, but alive: made of strategic research and shared meals, of struggles for space and laughter, of vulnerability and common strength. Collectively, stubbornly, strategically, joyfully alive.



△ Housing matters. Local artists mobilise for a better future.
Monitoring the availability of affordable housing in Haringey. ▷



Haringey Local Plan monitoring - Bedroom sizes of net Affordable Housing supply, 2013-24

Haringey Local Plan monitoring - Bedroom sizes in new private rented properties												
Year	Affordable Rent/ Social Rent					Intermediate						
	number of bedrooms					number of bedrooms						
	1	2	3	4+	Sub Total	1	2	3	4+	Sub Total	Total	
11/12	90	74	54	33	188	111	143	12	3	269	458	
12/13	59	79	27	3	179	95	159	23	0	277	457	
13/14	7	19	14	7	47	33	54	6	0	93	141	
14/15	50	90	47	9	196	56	97	11	0	164	360	
15/16	8	5	12	7	32	19	12	4	0	35	67	
16/17	88	52	29	17	186	9	6	0	0	15	201	
17/18	24	57	24	5	110	40	92	0	0	132	242	
18/19	0	0	0	0	0	2	8	4	0	14	14	
19/20	24	41	10	1	76	87	29	11	0	127	203	
20/21	26	37	15	4	82	28	29	5	1	63	145	
21/22	83	50	21	2	156	23	28	21	3	75	231	
22/23	15	31	4	4	54	46	97	21	3	167	221	
23/24	63	73	67	2	205	87	118	26	5	236	441	
Totals	477	608	334	89	1498	641	811	121	12	1585	3083	
%	31.84%	40.59%	21.63%	5.94%		40.44%	51.17%	7.63%	0.76%			



— Francesca Cognetti Two tracks

Francesca Cognetti has learnt to walk along two parallel tracks. The first is San Siro, a social housing estate in Milan with a population of 12,000. The second is the Politecnico di Milano, Italy's largest university of science and technology.

In 2011, Francesca was a researcher in urban policy and the mother of two children attending a primary school on the outskirts of San Siro. It was through her children's classmates that she gained a first-hand understanding of a dimension that had previously been merely theoretical. Invitations to homes and lunches in humble 40-square-meter flats, where families of six lived. A generous welcome in cramped spaces despite poverty. And the school as a place of solidarity and learning together.

A deep sense of injustice arose as the days went by. Francesca began to build, step by step.

In 2013, she organised Mapping San Siro: around thirty students, eight local commissioners, three months. At the end, the students could not leave – and neither could Francesca.

The following year, she approaches the head of the department with an idea. He encourages her. They find a space thanks to an agreement with *Aler Milano* – thirty square meters facing the street – on a free loan for use. Francesca's department takes up the costs.

It might seem like a small thing, yet from the start, Francesca formalises that presence: it is not just her as an activist researcher, but the university that is making its presence felt.

This is where the two strands begin to unfold.

The first strand: at least one day a week at San Siro, with the research group, students, and relationships being built with residents and associations. Relational work that measures time according to criteria other than those of immediate academic productivity. Alliances that seem fragile because they are not formalised, yet are solid because they are founded on mutual trust.

The second strand: since 2016, Francesca has been the Rector's delegate for social responsibility. However, since 2014, she has been working with Vice-Rector Balducci to jointly devise a public engagement program for Politecnico.

In 2018, the initial 'Mapping San Siro' eventually evolved into 'Off Campus San Siro': a university pilot scheme. No longer 30 but 130 square metres. A pilot initiative that, over three years, gave rise to three further Off Campus sites: at the market in Via Padova, at the San Vittore prison, and in a farmhouse near Corvetto. Four hubs in total, and with Rector Donatella Sciuto, from 2025, a dedicated budget and a scientific committee to define the program's plan and prospects. In 2022, the Ambrogino d'Oro: the citizenship merit award by the City of Milan.

However, this journey has been a series of incremental steps, stumbles, and procedural innovations that sometimes require great effort. Agreements are exchanged back and forth a thousand times before being formalised. And the procedures for regulating informal relationships are difficult to understand and implement for an administration accustomed to operating in other contexts.

The challenge remains:
balancing institutional innovation
with meaningful relationships and
mutual trust with communities.





Francesca Cognetti's key dates

2013 · Mapping San Siro workshop with architecture students. Social and urban mapping of the neighbourhood, with Beatrice De Carli, Ferdinando Fava, Liliana Padovani and Anna Delera.

2014 · Self-recovery of a 30 m² space in San Siro. Politecnico–Aler agreement: a stable university presence in the area. Work with Maranghi, Ranzini, Solazzi and Orsenigo.

2016 · Rector's delegate for Social Responsibility in the Territory. Experiments on the role of the university in urban challenges.

2018 · Opening of Off Campus San Siro, the programme's first space. Innovative teaching, responsible research and co-design for social impact.

2020 · Founding member of the APEnet Committee. Promotion of public engagement across universities and research institutions.

2022 · Off Campus Politecnico is awarded the *Ambrogino d'Oro* prize.

2023 · Rector's delegate for the Off Campus Programme.

2024 · Curalab founded with Paolo Grassi. Action research on urban marginalisation at local and global scale.

2025 · Off Campus formalised as a University Programme for proximity innovation. Four territorial hubs, three-year plan.

Francesca has established formal agreements with a wide range of organisations – from voluntary associations to Bocconi University, from the Lombardy Region to small neighbourhood groups. Most of these agreements are approved by the Academic Senate. This is a way of providing institutional recognition, even to the smallest organisations. She has worked extensively with technical and administrative staff – initially with Ida Castelnuovo in particular, and later with the Innovation and Social Responsibility Service, which oversees the programme – to develop new procedures, even if simply to ensure that Off Campus spaces can access the Polytechnic's Wi-Fi or be treated as university libraries.

She has worked on various types of working groups: project groups for co-design, advocacy groups where the university gives a voice to those who are not normally invited to institutional discussions, and less formalised alliances based on trust, which may seem fragile but whose strength lies in the quality and value of the relationships. In all these cases, the theme is reciprocity; the collaborative dimension enriches the university first and foremost.

The challenge remains: balancing institutional innovation with meaningful relationships and mutual trust with local communities. With the budget come KPIs and formalised evaluation metrics. Universities tend to highlight only successes; however, these projects are also fraught with setbacks and failures.

This path risks slowing down personal careers. One writes less when cultivating relationships and dedicating time – according to the criteria of non-immediate scientific productivity – to building with others.

Previous pages: San Siro neighbourhood, Milan. Aerial view.
Meeting with local residents at the ARCI Fiocchi club, Milan. ▽





It was not a solitary endeavour. It was a collective one. Four people took to the stage at the *Ambrogino d'Oro* award ceremony: Francesca, Davide Fassi, Andrea di Franco and Ida Castelnovo. Francesca coordinates the Curalab research workshop, based at Off Campus San Siro, alongside anthropologist Paolo Grassi. Bocconi, Bicocca, and the University of Milan also have permanent activities at Off Campus today. Not a model of the lone hero, but a configuration of meaningful relationships that opens up possibilities.

Francesca has cultivated a profound sense of the university as a public institution called upon to tackle the most difficult social challenges. In her experience, injustice often has the flavour of everyday life for many, and it is at this level – at the street level – that she has chosen to position herself. A university that stands alongside the city's most vulnerable ones, even carrying their voice into other contexts: the tables of the most powerful.

Collective dimensions and self-reflection are antidotes to burnout. Students are taking a fresh look at things. Alliances offer protection without building armour. And the university does not expect to solve everything but to make a realistic and concrete contribution through its ability to generate knowledge, understanding, and the search for solutions.

Francesca has balanced the roles of a mother, citizen, and researcher. She walked along two tracks. The tracks unfold, run parallel, and head in the direction of change.

Research activities, Off Campus San Siro, Milan.



Legal advice activities, Off Campus San Siro, Milan.





— **Alberto Merler** The strategy of attention

His journey and example have inspired us for this PLACES research project. Alberto Merler has taught us that academic commitment does not arise from a single moment, but from a mindset cultivated over time. It is a strategy of paying attention to contextualised details, people, and possibilities.

He learnt loyalty and entrepreneurial daring from his parents. From his father, a merchant who helped farmers sell their produce directly without making a profit, foregoing personal gain for the common good. From his mother, who was active in the Women's Social Movement. From the Brazilian school he attended in Itapetininga, in the state of São Paulo, he learnt that education is a holistic undertaking, encompassing science laboratories, well-stocked libraries, and career guidance.

Interculturalism was also a great teacher. Brazil, Africa, Europe, Japan. Dakar and Sheikh Anta Diop. The universities of São Paulo, Milan, and Trento. Journeys always open to the unexpected, to the combination of seemingly disparate factors that open up new possibilities.

Use the bricks you have,
not the timber you wish you had.
Above all, build collective actors.

Alberto showed us that being a socially engaged academic means knowing how to bring together available resources. It means daring – *audere* – when colleagues say 'it can't be done'. Creating a degree course in Social Work by bringing together four faculties. Establishing the PhD program when others had tried and failed. Taking students out into the field, to the markets, to the gardens of Piazza Conte di Moriana to understand social issues by observing the manhole covers from 1880.

His lesson is simple and radical: when you get your hands dirty, things get done. Don't wait for ideal conditions. Use the bricks you have, not the timber you'd like. And above all, build collective actors. Commitment doesn't depend on a single individual but on collaboration. On breathing that vital breath that transforms a project into a living creature.

We, who were his students, continue to ask ourselves whether we are still following this path. The answer lies in this very quest, which arose from his questioning and example. Alberto taught us that lending a helping hand is never merely a remedy for the individual body but rather a concern for society, for our connections, and for the possibilities for transformation that open up when we have the courage to see, listen, and act.

Audire, audere, adiuvere. Listen, dare, help. This is the path he followed and the one he showed us.



— Project team



◁ *Gioco per il futuro. Il mio futuro in gioco.*
["Playing for the future. My future at play"]. Final
event with the children of the Santa Maria di Pisa
primary school, Sassari.

What we need, then, is 'real utopias': utopian ideals that are grounded in the real potentials of humanity, utopian destinations that have accessible waystations, utopian designs of institutions that can inform our practical tasks of navigating a world of imperfect conditions for social change.

Erik Olin Wright

— Landscapes

— United Kingdom Public engagement, social impact, inclusiveness

National context and higher education system

With a population of around 69 million, the United Kingdom has a wide and well-distributed network of universities across the country, with a strong concentration in the London area. Universities enjoy a high degree of autonomy and considerable freedom in defining their organizational structures, research priorities, and development strategies.

Many UK universities actively participate in international research networks, collaborating with partners across multiple countries and contributing to large-scale scientific projects. The system is also characterized by its strong capacity to attract international students and doctoral candidates, as well as by a diversified funding model combining public resources allocated through evaluation-based mechanisms with external funding sources.

In terms of investment, the UK allocates a significant share of its resources to Research and Development, which amounts to around 2.5% of GDP, thereby reinforcing the role of universities in the country's socio-economic development.

Community engagement in the United Kingdom

In the United Kingdom, community engagement is promoted in multiple ways and has long been a central component of universities' missions. Since the 1990s, national policies have encouraged the public role of universities and dialogue between research and society, encouraging institutions to integrate community engagement into their strategies and everyday practices. A key milestone was the *Concordat for Engaging the Public with Research* (2011), which established shared principles and clarified the responsibilities of research funders in fostering closer and more sustained relationships between science and citizens. In recent years, this orientation has been further strengthened by the public engagement strategy developed by *UK Research and Innovation* (UKRI), which aims to “break down the barriers between research, innovation and society” and to make science more inclusive and accessible.

Within this framework, public engagement encompasses a wide range of activities, including collaborative research, citizen involvement, public dialogue, and events held in festivals, museums, laboratories, libraries, and schools. A key reference point is the *National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement*, established in 2008, which supports universities and research institutions in developing engagement practices by providing operational resources, self-assessment tools, and tailored guidance. The Centre also promotes position papers such as the *Manifesto for Public Engagement* and recognition tools like the *Engagement Watermark*, which highlight institutions particularly active in this field.

Community engagement is supported by a broad range of funding opportunities provided by public agencies, research councils, philanthropic foundations, and universities themselves. National programs fostering dialogue between science and



Campsbourne Community Collective, Haringey, London.



society, thematic initiatives on public issues, and dedicated funding streams make the UK a particularly favourable context for engagement practices. In this landscape, the social value of research is further reinforced by the *Research Excellence Framework* (REF), which recognizes societal impact as a key evaluation criterion and includes community engagement among the ways universities demonstrate their value to society.

Universities involved in the PLACES project¹

The two UK universities involved in the PLACES project adopt partially distinct approaches to community engagement, while sharing a common emphasis on relational continuity. Field interviews indicate that, in both institutions, engagement with local communities is grounded in the development of trust-based relationships and sustained partnerships over time.

In the first university, engagement with the local context is articulated through ongoing collaborations with local authorities, alongside structured interactions with community committees, which facilitate exchanges between researchers and civil society. These partnerships are progressively built through practices of active listening, the identification of shared objectives, and the adaptation of collaborative arrangements to the specific needs of different groups (for instance, in areas such as education, poverty, or environmental issues). This approach contributes to the consolidation of stable and enduring local relationships.

In the second university, greater emphasis is placed on the relational groundwork that precedes the initiation of projects. Dedicated teams and liaison roles operate continuously to establish and maintain trust with local organisations, associations, and third-sector actors, taking into account the constraints under which these actors operate. Within this framework, particular attention is devoted to shaping collaborations that are both realistic and mutually beneficial, thereby creating favourable conditions for the activation of joint initiatives as new opportunities emerge.

Queen's University, Belfast.



— **France** Open science, participatory research, sharing

National context and higher education system

With a population of around 66 million, France has a well-structured higher education system comprising universities, *grandes écoles*, and research organisations. Universities constitute a central component of the public research system and maintain close collaborations with major national research institutions such as CNRS and INSERM, sharing laboratories, projects, and research activities.

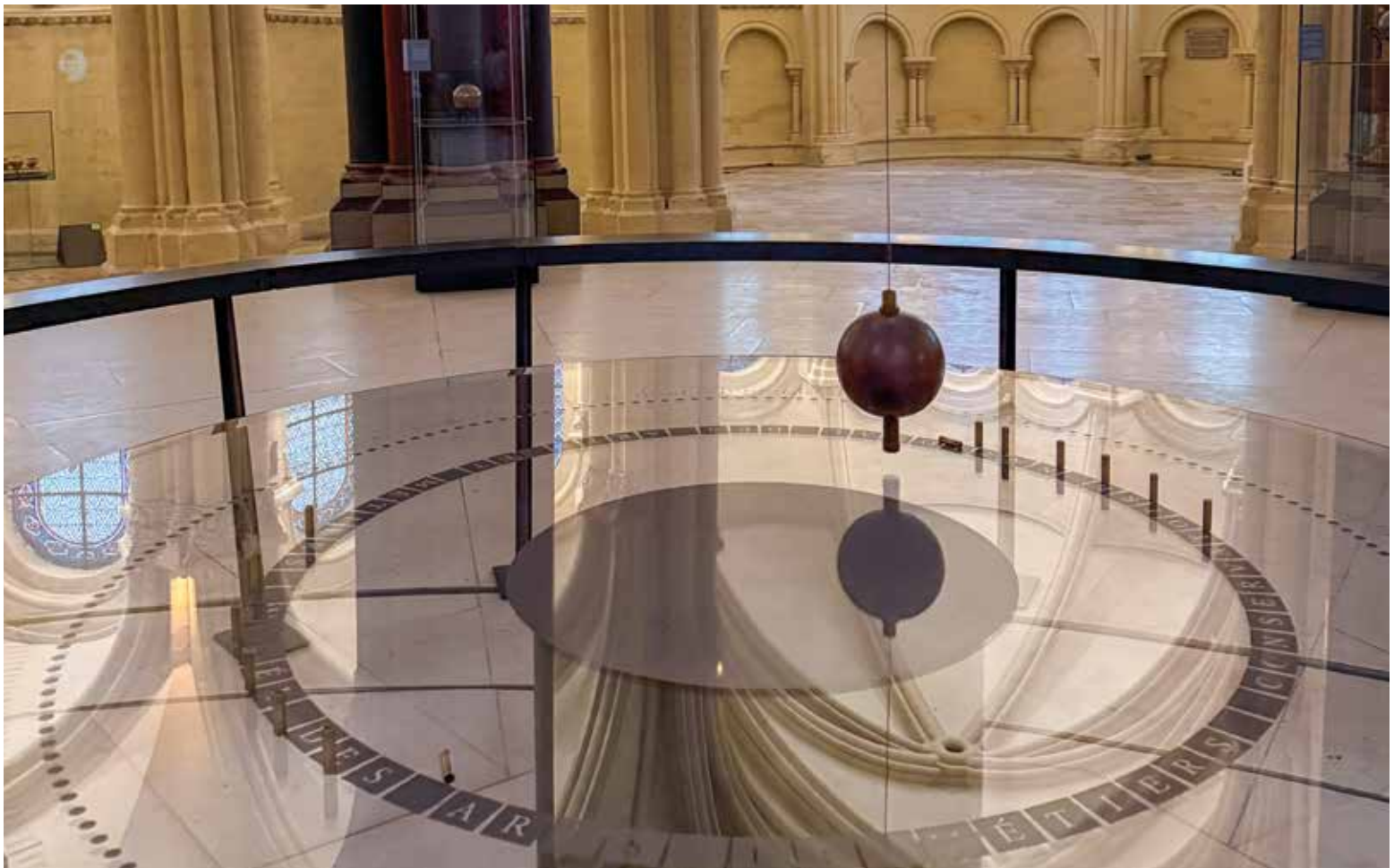
Universities are distributed across the entire territory: alongside large institutions located in major urban centres, there are universities embedded in diverse regional contexts, often playing an active role in local cultural and social life.

In terms of investment, France allocates a significant share of resources to Research and Development, with total expenditure amounting to around 2% of GDP. In recent years, growing attention has been devoted to the public role of universities and their contribution to fostering dialogue between science and society.

Community engagement in France

In France, community engagement is situated within an institutional framework that is still evolving. While the importance of dialogue between universities and society is widely recognized, community engagement is not always explicitly defined as an

Foucault Pendulum, National Museum of Arts and Crafts (MUAM/CNAM), Paris.





Continuing professional development workshop, CNAM, Paris.

autonomous and priority domain of academic activity. More often, the relationship between universities and society is framed within the so-called “third mission”, which in the French context closely aligns with the concept of open science (*science ouverte*), understood as a more transparent, accessible, and sharing-oriented approach to research.

Unlike in other European countries, there is no single, widely shared definition of community engagement. Activities directed toward the public are described through a plurality of overlapping terms and categories, making the boundaries between practices less clear. This lack of a unified conceptual framework makes it more difficult to translate community engagement into structured and recognizable practices within universities, which often develop initiatives in flexible and experimental ways

Since 2021, a significant impulse has been provided by the policy named *Science avec et pour la société*, which explicitly promotes the idea of science “with and for society”. Through dedicated measures and investments, this policy has supported science communication activities, participatory research, collaborations with local actors, and initiatives fostering interaction between researchers and citizens, contributing to greater visibility and recognition of universities’ engagement efforts.

Engagement practices in France are far from marginal. Collaborations with museums and cultural institutions, open laboratories, science events, educational activities, and interactions with citizens and schools are widespread and contribute to making science more accessible. Many initiatives emerge from the direct involvement of researchers, departments, or research groups and develop in response to local contexts and audiences.

Universities involved in the PLACES project¹

The two French universities involved in the PLACES project demonstrate different ways of building relationships with local communities. Field interviews highlighted distinct approaches.

The first university, resulting from the merger of a university and a research institute, has developed more structured forms of collaboration with its territory. Through an office dedicated to participatory research, the institution promotes dialogue between researchers and citizen associations to identify local needs and co-develop solutions, alongside initiatives led by individual researchers.

At the second university, engagement with the local context is primarily built through case-by-case collaborations based on personal relationships and mutual trust. Researchers start from the needs of local partners and seek common ground between different interests to initiate joint projects. This is complemented by the implementation of the *Science et Société* (SAPS) plan, which promotes dialogue between research and society through dedicated engagement initiatives.

Overall, the observed experiences show that community engagement in French universities takes diverse forms, ranging from more structured models to more flexible practices strongly rooted in local contexts.

— **Italy** Dialogue with local communities, trust-based relationships, meaningful collaborations

National context and higher education system

With a population of around 59 million, Italy is among the major European countries in terms of demographic and economic size and presents generally advanced social and economic conditions.

The higher education system, rooted in a long historical tradition, includes both public and private universities distributed across the national territory and plays a central role in higher education and knowledge production. However, this role is shaped by a structural limitation: Italy invests relatively little in research and development compared to other comparable European countries, with total expenditure around 1.5% of GDP.

Within this context of limited resources, universities operate under highly differentiated conditions, resulting in a heterogeneous system where large institutions in major urban centres coexist with universities located in areas characterized by greater socio-economic fragility.

Community engagement in Italy

In Italy, community engagement is carried out through activities aimed at bringing research outside traditional academic contexts, including public events, science communication initiatives, projects involving citizens, activities with schools, and collaborations with local authorities and third-sector organizations. The goal is to make science more accessible and to foster dialogue between those who produce knowledge and those who live within local communities.

Compared with other European countries, such as the United Kingdom, this approach to university–society relations developed somewhat later. For a long time, community engagement has been considered secondary to universities' traditional missions of teaching and research. In recent years, however, community engagement has gained clearer recognition and has progressively been incorporated into the evaluation systems of universities' third mission.

A key step was the inclusion of these activities in the *Valutazione della Qualità della Ricerca* (VQR: Research Quality Evaluation) starting from the 2011–2014 cycle, the main national exercise assessing university research performance. Since 2018, under the guidance of the National Agency for the Evaluation of the University and Research System (ANVUR), universities have begun to document their engagement activities more systematically.

These activities now influence, although to a limited extent, the allocation of a portion of public funding. Despite these developments, many initiatives still rely on the direct commitment of individual researchers or departments, also due to the lack of dedicated resources.



Open lecture *Urbanismo affettivo* ["Affective Urbanism"] and exhibition of the project *Italia di mezzo* ["Middle Italy"], CRAFT Space, Politecnico di Milano.



Rectorate, Politecnico di Milano.

Universities involved in the PLACES project¹

In the Italian context, the community engagement practices observed in the two universities involved in the PLACES project are primarily based on the continuity of personal relationships between academics and civil society actors, and on the gradual construction of dialogue with local communities.

Field interviews highlighted the importance of building sustained relationships over time and sharing common goals to initiate meaningful collaborations, especially in the early stages.

In both case studies, engagement takes shape through a combination of informal channels and more structured spaces: direct contacts and personal networks are complemented by forums, public events, and institutional initiatives promoted by universities. Festivals, spaces made available by universities and local administrations, as well as collaborations with associations, schools, and third-sector organizations, represent key settings where interaction between universities and communities becomes concrete and visible.

Overall, community engagement in Italian universities appears as an evolving process, strongly shaped by local specificities.

¹ To protect the privacy of the individuals and institutions involved, the names of the universities have been anonymised.

The redemption and liberation of young people — of humanity — presupposes an individual commitment, from each single person, respect for their inclinations and vocations, for their specific personal preferences and aspirations across various fields: yet it is fully and lastingly achieved only through collective effort, a shared endeavour, a common struggle. In short, we save ourselves and move forward if we act together, and not merely one by one.

Enrico Berlinguer

— **Project**

— Behind the stories Why universities need the world (and vice versa)

The stories you encountered in this book do not celebrate academic heroes and heroines. These are maps of possibilities. Each charts a territory where the university meets society not as a bureaucratic obligation but as a meaningful choice. As a vital necessity. They show that commitment stems from a strategy of attention cultivated over time, from the ability to see possibilities where others see only constraints, from the willingness to combine available elements to generate something new.

These biographies are not exceptions. They are examples of what might be the norm if we stopped thinking of the university as a machine for producing scientific publications and ‘graduates for the labour market’ and began to see it as a social infrastructure for the shared production of knowledge.

The details of daily work are meaningful because they are not detached in the worker’s mind from the product of the work. The worker is free to control his own working action. The craftsman is thus able to learn from his work; and to use and develop his capacities and skills in its prosecution. There is no split of work and play, or work and culture. The craftsman’s way of livelihood determines and infuses his entire mode of living.

Charles Wright Mills

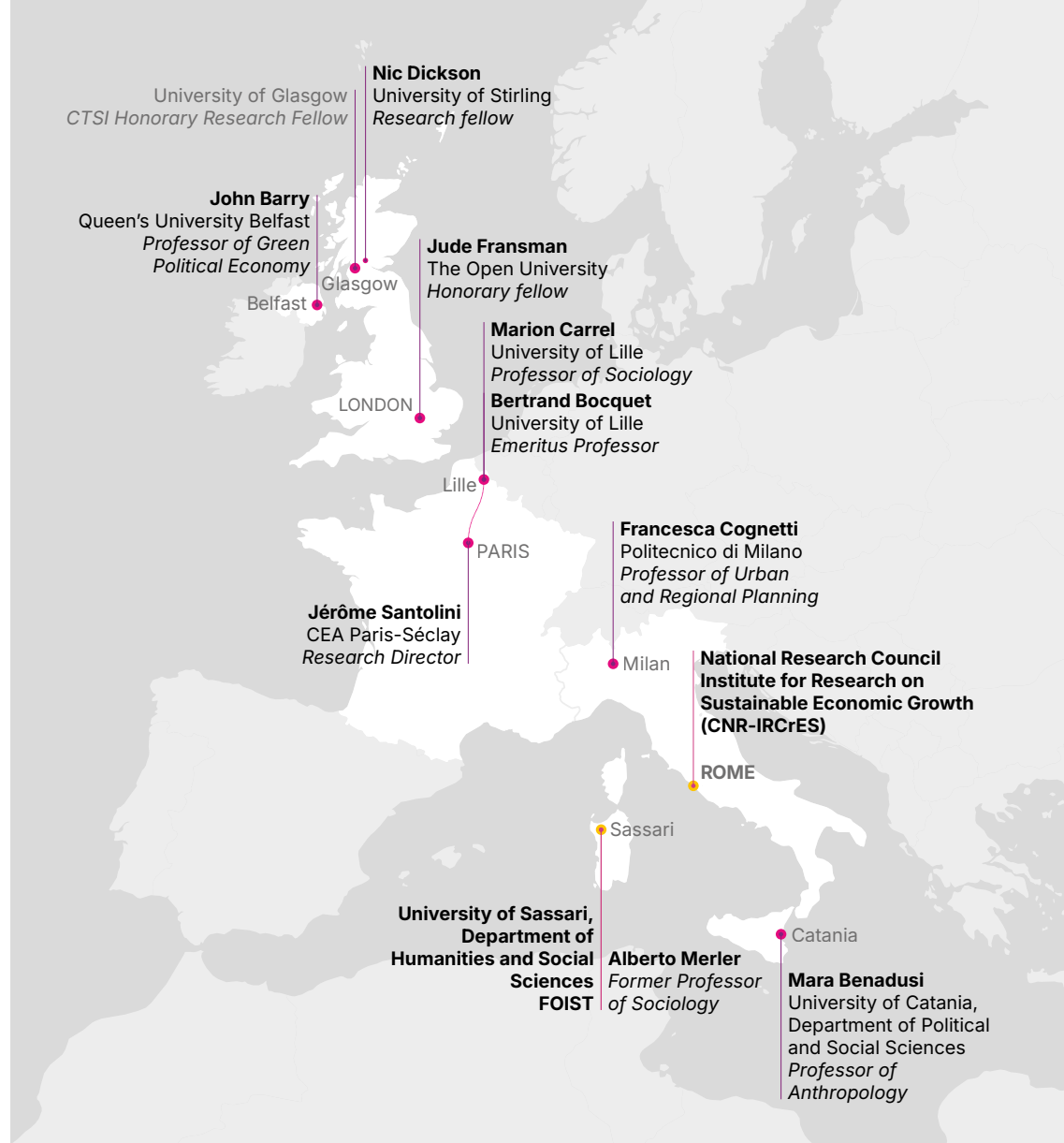
The PLACES project: portraits and landscapes of academic engagement

These points for reflection stem from the PLACES project – *Portraits and Landscapes of Academic Community Engaged Scholarship* – which sought to understand what enables universities to engage in transformative work with communities. The acronym describes the method: on the one hand, ‘portraits’, biographical profiles of researchers who are particularly committed; on the other, ‘landscapes’, the institutional contexts in which they operate. Following a case-study methodology, the project, led by the University of Sassari and the CNR, explored three profoundly different European university systems: Italy, France, and the United Kingdom. Alongside the empirical research, conducted primarily using secondary data and interviews at the universities under study, we have included an in-depth examination of the academic and biographical trajectories, as well as the photographic portraits of the persons featured here.

‘Community engagement’ is a slippery expression, used to describe very different realities. In our work, it refers to something specific: collaboration between members of the academic world and non-academic actors, based on reciprocity and symmetrical relationships. Not consultancy. Nor dissemination. Something more radical: the university’s capacity to co-produce knowledge with communities, in a process that transforms both parties.

When it truly works, this kind of engagement does not simply apply knowledge already produced within academia. It generates new research questions, opens up new fields of enquiry, and challenges traditional epistemic hierarchies. We have focused on *transformative engagement*, which aims to bring about profound and lasting change in both communities and academic institutions. It requires time, mutual trust, and a willingness to take risks. It requires accepting that the relevant questions do not always arise within academia.

Cities, institutions and places of research and activities of the nine featured testimonials. Case-study universities analysed within the “landscapes” research branch are not represented in order to protect the privacy of involved people and institutions.

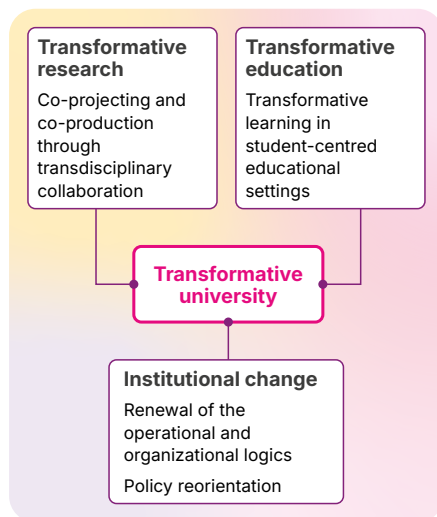


The country profiles in this volume reveal very different contexts. The UK has been developing a comprehensive system of incentives for decades. Since 2014, the Research Excellence Framework has included social impact among its evaluation criteria. There are coordination centres, dedicated funding, and an established culture. Italy is at an intermediate stage: since 2015, the research evaluation system has included public engagement in its third mission, but a comprehensive system of incentives is lacking. The risk is that it will become yet another box to tick without any real cultural change. France presents the most difficult picture to pin down: at an institutional level, the concept is loosely formalised, but on the ground, many universities are carrying out innovative activities, driven by the initiative of individual researchers and dedicated funding streams.

These national frameworks shape opportunities but do not determine them entirely. These stories show that commitment can find ways to flourish, even in less favourable contexts.



Driving concepts: Transformative Engagement



The Transformative university:

- Has the capacity to **make positive change in society** through its research, teaching and engagement efforts
- Is committed to fostering positive **social innovation, critical thinking, social responsibility**
- Prioritizes **transdisciplinary collaboration, diversity and inclusion, sustainability, ethical leadership**

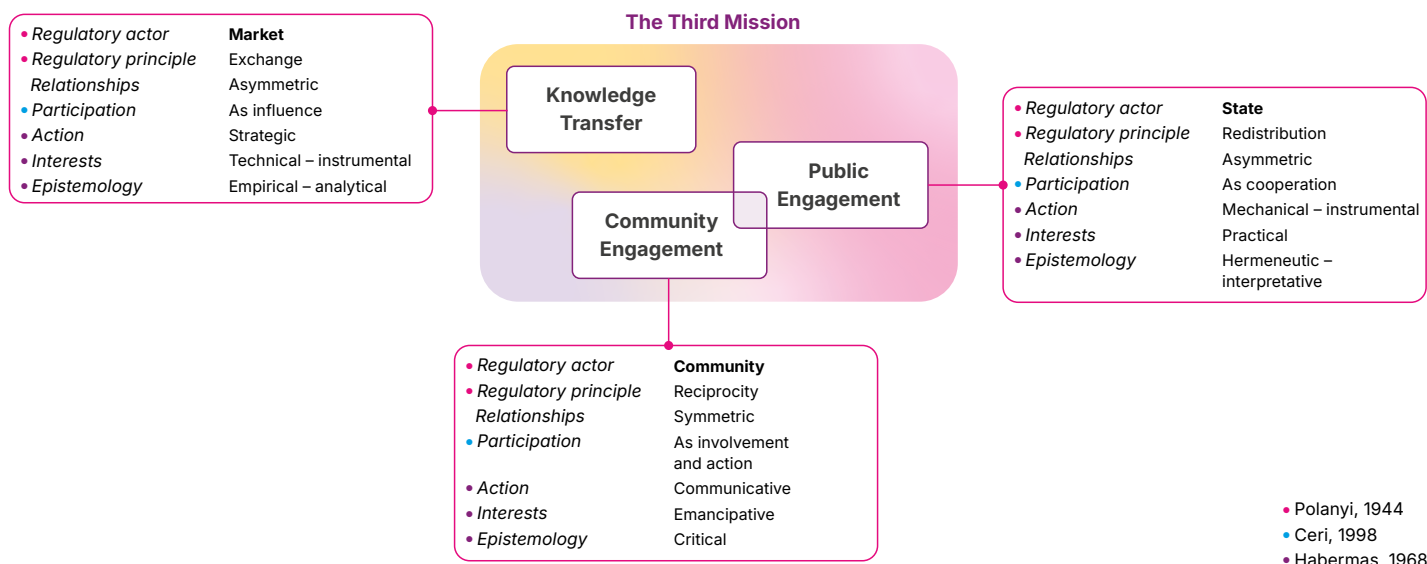
Adjacent possibles and false myths

One aspect that frequently emerges in our interviews resonates with the concept of ‘adjacent possible’, coined by biologist Stuart Kauffman to describe the set of all new configurations, states, or innovations that become accessible to a complex system based on its current condition. This is the space of the “immediately attainable possible” that continually expands as the system evolves, creating new opportunities that did not even conceptually exist before.

Engaged researchers never start from scratch. They identify latent possibilities within the fabric of existing relationships. A chance collaboration becomes a decade-long project. A question asked at a public meeting opens up a line of research. Failure becomes a learning experience. This requires a strategy of attention: seeing the possibilities for transformation in the folds of everyday life. Not visionary idealism. Radical pragmatism. The art of combining available elements – people, resources, knowledge – to generate something new and useful to the community.

The transformative university is a generative university: it recognises and amplifies the potential of situations. It does not wait for ideal conditions. It works with what is there, but with the ambition to make it different. Analysing biographical stories reveals recurring patterns: early formative experiences that act as ‘critical events’; mentors and communities of practice, because no one builds this path in isolation; ‘institutional intelligence’, the ability to navigate university structures and find room for manoeuvre; acceptance of risk; a sense of purpose, because engagement with communities restores meaning to academic work.

It is worth clearing up some recurring misunderstandings. Community engagement is not for second-class figures in academia; the stories feature



outstanding individuals. It is not limited to certain disciplines; we have found examples in physics, computer science, mathematics, and engineering. It is not activism rather than science: transformative engagement often enhances rigor by subjecting research to scrutiny by communities with deep knowledge of the issues. It is not a passing fad; behind the rhetoric lies a fundamental question about what it means to be a public university in the 21st century.

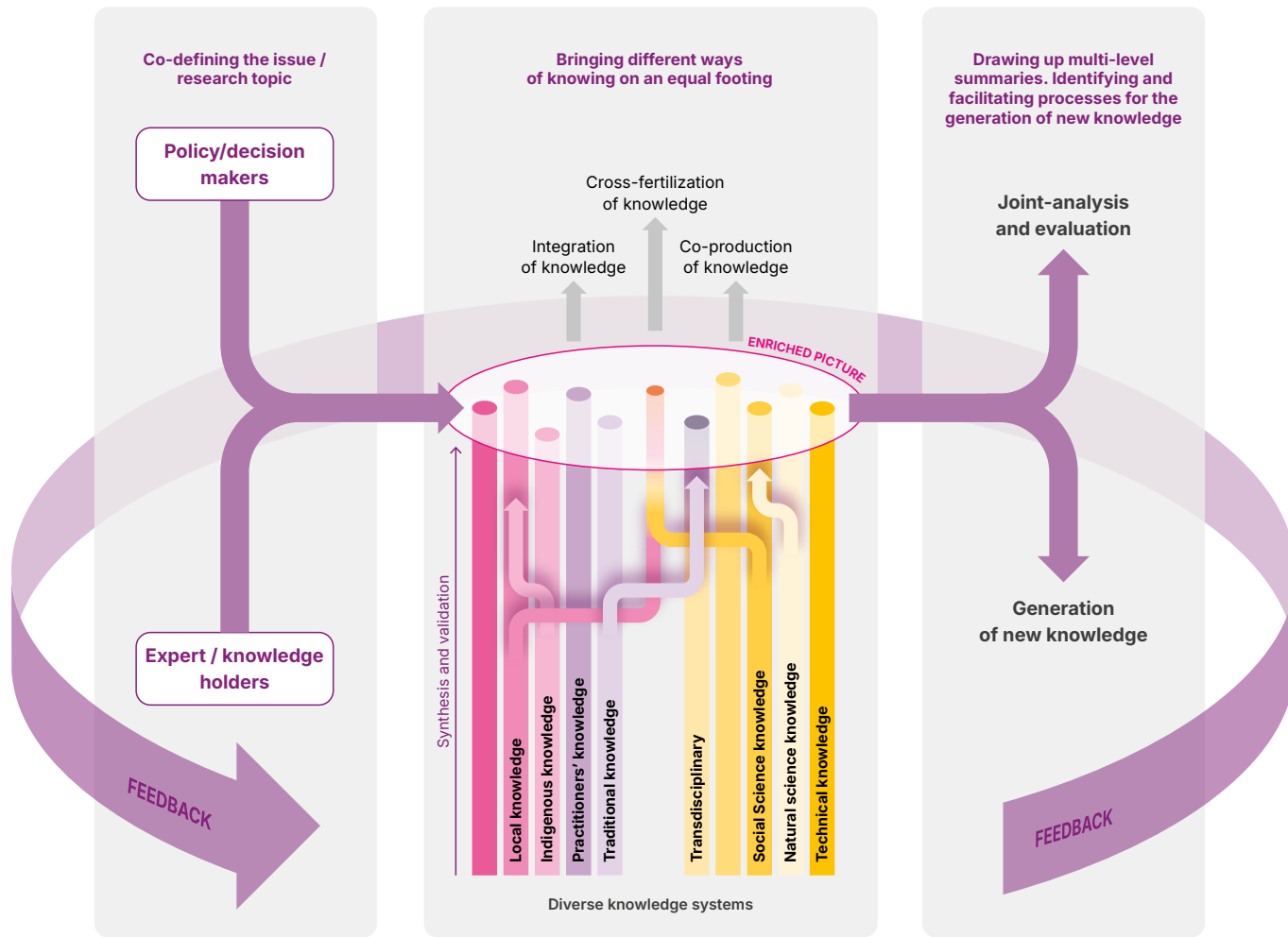
Stepping off the rat race: towards a different kind of university

In 2016, the rector of Ghent University, Rik Van de Walle, used a stark expression to describe a pervasive dynamic among contemporary universities: a “rat race”. Publishing more and more, accumulating citations, chasing funding, climbing rankings. This relentless acceleration does not necessarily produce better knowledge or happier researchers. Ghent then deliberately chose to “step out of this rat race”, drastically reducing evaluation bureaucracy, lengthening evaluation cycles, and returning the university to those who work there rather than to the bureaucracy.

The stories presented here suggest similar paths. These academics publish, compete, and face pressure from the system. But they have found an anchor of meaning in their relationships with communities and with people. This creates a breathing space. It allows room to ask: For whom am I conducting research? For what future am I working? Who benefits from my intellectual work?

There is a paradox at the heart of the contemporary university. It has never been so necessary: pandemics, the climate crisis, growing inequalities, and democratic crises all require robust scientific knowledge. Yet, it risks social irrelevance: excessively locked into competitive logics and self-referential disputes, imprisoned in metrics that measure everything except what truly matters. Transformative community engagement can revitalise the university. It can make it less vulnerable to attacks on academic freedom, funding cuts, and growing public mistrust. A university that produces value recognisable to communities has greater strength to defend its autonomy.

The three levels of a collaborative approach based on multiple strands of evidence



A democratic issue, a call to action

The findings of our project are not only relevant to those working within the university. They speak to public decision-makers, local councillors, and citizens. The university is a public good funded by public resources and a crucial infrastructure for democracy and social justice. However, this role is not limited to opening its doors to more students or transferring technology. Universities can be strategic partners for communities, but they must be challenged, provoked, and held to account.

Communities – local authorities, third-sector organisations, citizens' committees – must learn to ask probing questions: Can we co-design research? Can we co-produce knowledge? Those who govern institutions must choose: do they want universities that chase international rankings, or universities oriented toward the common good, capable of educating critical thinkers and supporting democratic processes? These are not radically incompatible objectives, but they require clear choices and imply institutional balances and structures that are different from the current ones.

The stories we gathered show that it is possible to experience the university differently, to give meaning to intellectual work by connecting it to projects of social transformation. Another university is possible: one in which academic excellence does not contradict social commitment, freedom of research does not mean self-

referentiality, and methodological rigor coexists with openness to different forms of knowledge.

This university is built from the bottom up, within the fabric of existing institutions, by making the most of the opportunities that lie alongside them. With the boldness of those who try to do things differently, the patience of those who build long-term relationships, and the intelligence of those who navigate between constraints and the drive for change.

Those who work in academia, such as hamsters on the wheel of competitiveness, may find in these stories the impetus to ask themselves: What sort of person do I want to be in research? Who am I working for? These are uncomfortable questions that challenge established routines. However, they are necessary if we want the university to remain a space of intellectual freedom.

The path we propose here is an invitation. To researchers: to experiment with forms of engagement that restore meaning. To university governors: to create conditions that make such engagement possible. To public policy shapers: to view the university as a partner for social transformation. To citizens: to demand that public universities generate social value for the community.

The intellectual lives we describe here show that this is possible. Not easy. Not without costs. Not guaranteed. But possible. And in the ability to grasp the potential of the situation inherent in adjacent possibilities – in what is almost within reach – lies perhaps our best hope for a university capable of meeting the challenges of our time.



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Photo on page 61: top left **Andrea Orazio Spinello**; centre right and centre left **Ugo Finardi**

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Quotations

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p. 5 **Luigi Einaudi**, *Per la libertà di scienza e di coscienza*, in "Corriere della Sera", December 7th 1910. Now available online: <https://www.luigieinaudi.it/doc/per-la-liberta-di-scienza-e-di-coscienza/>

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Following page: after the final event of the project *Gioco per il futuro. Il mio futuro in gioco* ["Playing for the future. My future at play"]. Courtyard of the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Sassari. ►





PLACES

Portraits and Landscapes
of Academic Community
Engaged Scholarship

Nine portraits. Three countries. One question: how can we do university differently?

Nine portraits. Three countries. One question: how can we do university differently?

Those who transform felt-tip pens into scientific instruments. Those who build laboratories where disciplines and fields of knowledge cross-pollinate. Those who discover that reciprocity is also learned through receiving.

Architects of impossible spaces, weavers of decades-long relationships, researchers who hold communities and universities together.

PLACES has searched Italy, France, and the United Kingdom for an academic world that rarely features in rankings. We have found it: it lives in markets, school canteens, and dilapidated buildings.

This photographic book and the accompanying exhibition are an invitation to a *convivial conversation* around crucial questions – What kind of university do we want? How can we shape it? – beginning with a journey through the academy that produces collective value, where different forms of knowledge meet, where people and relationships rediscover meaning, where communities open up.

Texts

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