The Community Hub as Urban Strategy
The adaptive reuse of The Former Custom House as a catalyst
for the regeneration of Pietra Alta district in Turin

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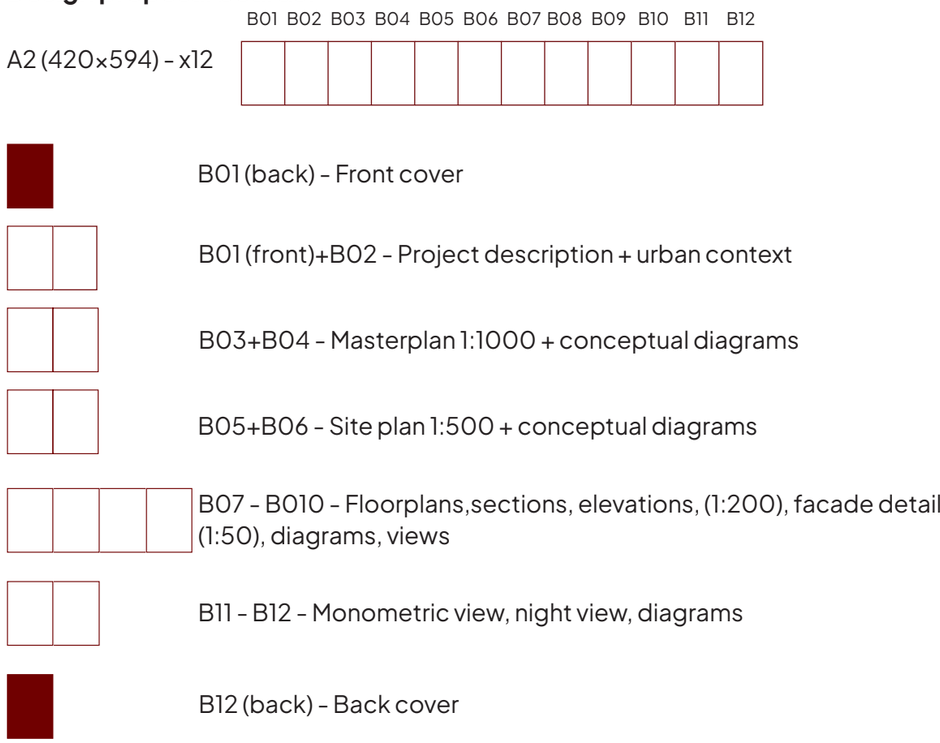


ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the Community Hub as a strategy for urban regeneration in fragmented post-industrial territories, focusing on Turin's Pietra Alta district. It explores how adaptive reuse, social infrastructure, and multi-scalar design can address spatial and social fragmentation, viewing architecture as an urban catalyst rather than the rehabilitation of a single building.

The research combines theoretical studies, case analyses, territorial mapping, and design research. After defining a framework based on community hubs, third places, urban commons, and adaptive reuse, key principles are applied to Pietra Alta. Territorial analysis reveals a fragmented area shaped by industrial decline and major infrastructures. The Former Custom House is identified as a strategic intervention point due to its central location and civic potential.

The proposal operates across scales: improving urban connectivity through pedestrian and cycling links, enhancing public space and accessibility, creating an urban garden for community activities, and transforming the Former Custom House into a flexible Community Hub with shared services and gathering spaces. The thesis argues that adaptive reuse, integrated within a broader strategy of connectivity and social infrastructure, can strengthen social cohesion, restore spatial continuity, and redefine Turin's northern gateway as a place of participation and collective identity.

INTRODUCTION

This thesis began with an interest in understanding how architecture can contribute to urban regeneration in places where physical decline and social fragmentation have become deeply interconnected. In many contemporary cities, particularly in former industrial areas, regeneration is often discussed in terms of new development, economic growth, or the recovery of individual buildings. Yet, during the initial stages of this research, it became increasingly clear that some of the most pressing urban challenges are not simply related to the condition of the built environment. They are also connected to the weakening of everyday social relationships, the loss of shared spaces, and the growing separation between different parts of the city.

These observations led to a broader question that guided the development of the thesis: how can architecture help reconnect fragmented urban territories while supporting forms of collective life that are capable of adapting to changing social needs over time? Rather than searching for a purely physical solution, the research explored the possibility that regeneration could be understood as a process that combines spatial transformation, social infrastructure, and community participation. From this perspective, architecture is not considered only as the design of buildings, but as a tool capable of creating conditions for encounter, collaboration, and civic engagement.

The concept of the community hub emerged as a particularly relevant framework through which to investigate these issues. Over the last two decades, community hubs have appeared in many different forms across Europe, often occupying former industrial buildings, abandoned public facilities, or underused urban spaces. Despite their diversity, they share a common ambition: to create places where social, cultural, educational, and economic activities can coexist while responding to the specific needs of local communities. What makes these projects particularly interesting is that their success rarely depends on architectural form alone. Instead, it is often linked to the relationship between space, governance, participation, and local identity. For this reason, the research did not begin with the intention of designing a community hub. The first objective was to understand what community hubs actually are, how they function, and why some of them are able to generate long-term social value while others struggle to remain active over time. This investigation forms the basis of the first chapter.

The opening chapter explores the evolution of community-oriented spaces and the theoretical concepts that have influenced their development. Ideas such as third places, urban commons, social infrastructure, and adaptive reuse provide an important foundation for understanding the contemporary role of community hubs. Rather than approaching these concepts as isolated theories, the research examines the ways in which they intersect and contribute to the creation of spaces that support everyday forms of social interaction and collective use.

The theoretical investigation is complemented by a comparative analysis of selected case studies from Turin and other European cities. These examples were chosen not because they share a common architectural language, but because they represent different approaches to governance, ownership, participation, and spatial organization. Looking at projects such as Cascina Roccafranca, Bagni Pubblici di Via Agliè, beeozanam, Granby Four Streets, Bar Bricolage, and Medialab Prado made it possible to move beyond abstract definitions and observe how community hubs operate in practice.

One of the most significant findings that emerged from this comparison was that successful community hubs rarely depend on a specific architectural typology. Their effectiveness is more closely related to their capacity to remain adaptable, to encourage participation, and to establish meaningful relationships with the communities they serve. Flexibility, both spatial and organizational, appeared repeatedly as a key factor. At the same time, the case studies revealed recurring difficulties, including fragmented governance structures, economic vulnerability, limited collaboration between different actors, and challenges in maintaining long-term relevance.

While these findings provided useful theoretical and operational principles, they also raised another question. If community hubs can function as catalysts for social interaction and local regeneration, what happens when these principles are applied to a territory characterized by fragmentation, infrastructural pressure, and the absence of shared civic spaces? Answering this question required moving away from the broader discussion of community hubs and focusing on a specific urban context.

The second stage of the research therefore concentrated on Pietra Alta, a peripheral district located in the northern sector of Turin. Initially, the area appeared interesting because of its strategic location within the metropolitan system. However, as the investigation progressed, it became evident that Pietra Alta represented a much more complex condition than a simple urban periphery. The district occupies a position where different historical layers, infrastructural systems, and urban functions overlap, often without establishing meaningful relationships with one another.

Understanding this condition required looking at the territory from multiple perspectives. Historical documents, maps, demographic data, urban studies, field observations, and spatial analyses were brought together in order to construct a more comprehensive reading of the area. Rather than treating the district as a static physical environment, the research approached it as a territory shaped by successive processes of transformation whose effects continue to influence contemporary urban life.

The historical analysis revealed how the present condition of Pietra Alta has undergone significant territorial changes. What was once a predominantly rural landscape gradually evolved into an industrial enclave centred around the SNIA Viscosa workers' village. Later, major infrastructural interventions, particularly the construction of the A4 motorway and the development of the Stura transport node, profoundly altered existing relationships between residential areas, productive landscapes, and public spaces. Over time, the area became increasingly fragmented, with mobility infrastructures prioritizing regional connectivity while simultaneously creating barriers at the local scale.

The contemporary analysis confirmed many of these observations. Mapping exercises highlighted a territory characterized by a notable contradiction. On one hand, Pietra Alta is one of the most accessible areas within the northern metropolitan system. On the other, it remains disconnected internally, with pedestrian routes interrupted by infrastructure, fragmented public spaces, and limited opportunities for social interaction. Several strategically located sites appeared underused despite their potential significance within the urban structure.

The social dimension of the research added another layer of understanding. Demographic trends, local surveys, and community studies revealed a neighbourhood experiencing demographic ageing while in the same time become increasingly multicultural. Concerns related to insecurity, maintenance, and the lack of collective spaces emerged repeatedly. Yet the research also uncovered something equally important: a strong sense of attachment to the neighbourhood and a clear desire among residents for places capable of supporting social life and community activities.

At the same time, the mapping of ongoing urban transformations across North Turin revealed another important contradiction. Significant public and private investments are currently reshaping the northern districts through new infrastructure, commercial developments, environmental remediation projects, and service upgrades. Despite being located in the middle of these transformations, Pietra Alta remains largely excluded from initiatives focused on social infrastructure and community-oriented spaces. This absence became increasingly difficult to ignore throughout the research process.

It was through the convergence of these different investigations that attention gradually shifted towards the Former Custom House. Initially considered as one element among many within the district, the building progressively emerged as a particularly significant site. Its location at the intersection of Corso Vercelli and Corso Giulio Cesare places it at the meeting point between residential neighbourhoods, metropolitan infrastructure, and recent commercial development. Historically important yet currently underused, visible yet disconnected from everyday community life, the building appeared to embody many of the contradictions identified throughout the territorial analysis.

Rather than viewing the Former Custom House simply as a building requiring renovation, the research began to consider it as a potential urban catalyst. This shift in perspective marked the transition from analysis to design and became the starting point for the final phase of the thesis.

The third chapter presents the design proposal that emerged from this process. The project is based on the idea that the challenges affecting Pietra Alta cannot be addressed through the adaptive reuse of a building alone. Instead, the proposal seeks to understand how a relatively small intervention can generate wider effects by strengthening connections between people, spaces, and urban systems.

Throughout the development of the project, the relationship between analysis and design remained central. The proposal was not conceived as the application of a predetermined model, nor as the direct replication of the case studies examined earlier. Instead, each design decision evolved from specific observations made during the research process. The lack of pedestrian continuity informed the development of new routes and connections. The shortage of collective spaces influenced the creation of flexible public areas and community-oriented programs. The presence of underused land suggested opportunities for landscape interventions capable of supporting both environmental and social objectives.

For this reason, the project operates across several scales simultaneously. At the urban scale, it seeks to reconnect fragmented territories and improve the relationship

between public space and mobility infrastructure. At the landscape scale, it transforms residual spaces into active environments capable of supporting ecological functions and community activities. At the architectural scale, it reimagines the Former Custom House as a flexible framework capable of adapting to changing forms of collective use. Finally, at the social scale, it explores governance structures and patterns of participation that can contribute to the long-term sustainability of the intervention.

The project is presented through a series of strategies, drawings, diagrams, plans, sections, and visualizations. These materials are not intended simply to illustrate a final design. They are part of the research itself, demonstrating how theoretical principles and territorial observations are translated into spatial decisions. In this sense, the drawings function both as design tools and as a means of communicating the reasoning behind the proposal.

At the centre of the intervention is the ambition to transform a place primarily associated with movement into a place capable of supporting permanence. Today, the area surrounding the Former Custom House is largely dominated by roads, parking surfaces, and infrastructural systems. The proposal seeks to introduce a different logic based on encounter, participation, and everyday use. Community gardens, flexible open spaces, pedestrian routes, gathering areas, and shared facilities are therefore conceived as parts of a broader strategy aimed at restoring a human dimension to a territory often experienced through movement rather than occupation.

The adaptive reuse of the Former Custom House represents the focal point of this transformation. Reimagined as a Community Hub, the building is designed not around a fixed program but around the possibility of change. This approach reflects one of the central lessons emerging from the earlier phases of the research: spaces that remain open to different forms of appropriation are often better equipped to respond to evolving social conditions and community needs.

Ultimately, this thesis does not claim to provide a definitive solution to the challenges of Pietra Alta. Instead, it explores how architecture can contribute to wider processes of urban regeneration when understood as part of a broader network of social, spatial, and institutional relationships. Through the adaptive reuse of the Former Custom House and the creation of a new community hub, the project investigates the potential of architecture to operate as an urban suture, reconnecting fragmented territories and creating opportunities for collective life within a rapidly changing urban landscape. The intention is not only to regenerate a building, but to contribute to a wider discussion about how contemporary cities can create spaces that support participation, belonging, and shared forms of urban life.

CHAPTER 1
Community Hubs

Background

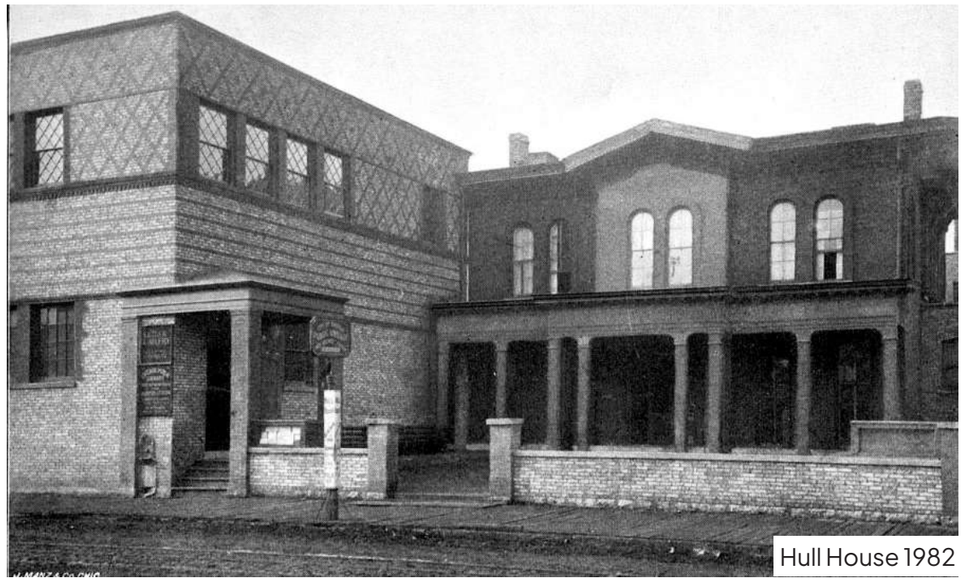
Across Europe, cities are facing a series of interconnected challenges that are reshaping the way urban communities function. Demographic changes, economic uncertainty, increasing social inequalities, and growing environmental concerns are placing pressure on traditional forms of public infrastructure and on the institutions that have historically supported **community life**. As cities become more diverse and complex, there is a growing need for spaces that can respond to changing social demands while fostering inclusion, participation, and everyday well-being (Dempsey et al., 2011; Gehl, 2011).

Within this context, **community hubs** have gained increasing attention as places capable of supporting social interaction and strengthening local networks. More than simply providing services or hosting activities, these spaces create opportunities for people from different backgrounds to meet, exchange knowledge, and participate in **collective life**. Their value lies not only in the programs they offer but also in their capacity to build relationships and trust among residents. As Latham and Layton (2019) argue, community hubs can be understood as forms of **social infrastructure** that facilitate encounters across differences of age, class, ethnicity, and culture, contributing to what they describe as an "**ethics of togetherness**" that is fundamental to civic life.

Although the term "community hub" has become increasingly common in recent years, the idea itself is not new. Throughout history, societies have created spaces dedicated to gathering, learning, and collective exchange. From guild halls and public libraries to schools, settlement houses, and civic centres, these places have played an important role in supporting social cohesion and democratic participation. One of the most frequently cited examples is **Hull House** in Chicago, which combined education, welfare services, and community activities within a single institution. While their forms and functions differed, these spaces shared a common objective: creating opportunities for people to interact, organize, and participate in public life.

Contemporary community hubs build upon this legacy while responding to new urban conditions. Considering the very rapid shifts in technology, demographics, work culture and modalities, social diversity etc require spaces that are more **adaptable** than many traditional civic facilities. As a result, **flexibility** has become a central characteristic of contemporary community infrastructure. This flexibility is not limited to architectural design; it also concerns governance, programming, and the ability of spaces to evolve alongside the communities they serve (Till & Schneider, 2007; Kronenburg, 2007).

The concept of flexibility is closely connected to the idea of the **"third place"** introduced by Oldenburg (1989). Third places are environments situated between home and work where informal interaction can occur and social relationships can develop. Cafés, community centres, libraries, and neighbourhood gathering spaces all have the potential to function in this way. Unlike institutional settings defined by strict rules and specialized functions, third places tend to encourage spontaneity, accessibility, and social mixing. In contemporary cities, community hubs often perform a similar role by providing spaces where different groups can come together through everyday activities rather than formal participation alone.


Hull House 1982

reception 1890

coffee room 1890

nursery 1890

From an architectural perspective, flexibility refers to the capacity of a building to accommodate changing uses over time and to support different forms of occupation without requiring continuous physical transformation (Brand, 1994). This understanding is particularly relevant in the context of **adaptive reuse**, where existing buildings are reinterpreted to accommodate new social functions. Rather than prescribing a single use, adaptable spaces allow communities to shape and redefine their environments according to **emerging needs**.

These questions are particularly relevant in the case of Turin. Like many former industrial cities, Turin has undergone deep economic and social transformations following the decline of its manufacturing sector. Once closely associated with industrial production and large-scale employment, the city has gradually repositioned itself around culture, innovation, services, and social initiatives. While this transition has generated new opportunities, it has also exposed forms of spatial and social fragmentation that are particularly visible at the neighbourhood level. Underused public buildings, changing demographic patterns, and the need for more **inclusive spaces** have become recurring themes within local urban policies and regeneration strategies (Comune di Torino, 2021).

In response to these challenges, increasing attention has been directed toward forms of civic infrastructure capable of supporting participation, social inclusion, and community-led initiatives. Community hubs represent one possible response to this need. Their ability to combine multiple functions, adapt to changing circumstances, and create opportunities for collective use makes them particularly relevant within contemporary urban regeneration processes. For this reason, this thesis investigates how more **flexible**, **hybrid**, and **context-sensitive** community spaces could contribute to strengthening social infrastructure in Turin, combining architectural adaptability with broader questions of **civic engagement** and **collective life**.

1.1 Definition of Community Hubs: Historical Evolution and Traditional Models

Understanding the contemporary role of community hubs requires looking beyond their current forms and examining the longer history of spaces dedicated to collective life. Although the terminology may be relatively recent, the idea of creating places where people gather, exchange knowledge, organize activities, and participate in civic life has deep historical roots. The evolution of community hubs reflects broader changes in social organization, political priorities, and urban development, making them useful lenses through which to understand the relationship between **architecture** and **society**.

Many of the earliest forms of community gathering emerged within the everyday spaces of pre-industrial cities. Public squares, marketplaces, religious buildings, and shared courtyards often functioned as environments where economic, social, and political activities overlapped. The **agora** of ancient Greece and the **Roman foru**m are frequently referenced as early examples of spaces that combined public discussion, commercial exchange, and civic participation within a single urban setting (Mumford, 1961). Their significance was not simply related to physical form but to their role as places where **collective life** became visible and accessible. During the nineteenth century, rapid industrialization transformed both cities and social relations. The growth of industrial centres brought unprecedented levels of urbanization, but also generated overcrowding, poverty, and **social fragmentation**. In response, reform movements

illustration for agora

illustration Roman forum

across Europe and North America began establishing institutions intended to improve living conditions and strengthen community life. Settlement houses, public libraries, educational centres, and workers' clubs emerged as important spaces for social support, cultural development, and civic engagement (Howard, 1902; Geddes, 1915). Projects such as **Toynbee Hall** in London and **Hull House** in Chicago are often regarded as important predecessors of contemporary community hubs. These initiatives offered much more than basic services. They created opportunities for education, cultural expression, and social interaction while encouraging greater **participation** in public life. At the same time, however, they largely operated through **top-down structures**, with decisions frequently made by reformers, philanthropists, or public authorities rather than by local communities themselves (Davidoff, 1965). This tension between institutional support and community autonomy remains relevant in contemporary discussions about civic infrastructure.

The reconstruction period following the Second World War introduced another important phase in the evolution of community-oriented spaces. Across Europe, governments invested heavily in civic facilities as part of expanding welfare systems. Youth centres, community halls, cultural centres, libraries, and neighbourhood facilities became physical manifestations of the welfare state and its commitment to collective well-being. These buildings were often shaped by modernist planning principles that emphasized functionality, efficiency, and standardized provision (Jacobs, 1961). While they successfully expanded access to public services, many struggled to adapt to changing social conditions over time. Their highly programmed nature and limited opportunities for user participation sometimes resulted in spaces that became disconnected from the communities they were intended to serve.

In Italy, alternative approaches began to emerge through the work of architects and planners interested in participation and democratic design. Among the most influential figures was Giancarlo De Carlo, who argued that architecture should not be imposed upon communities but developed through **dialogue** with them. His work highlighted the importance of involving **users** in shaping the spaces they inhabit and challenged the idea that **civic infrastructure** could be designed through purely top-down processes (Roggiani, 2015). A significant shift occurred during the late twentieth century with the publication of Ray Oldenburg's theory of "third places" (Oldenburg, 1989). Oldenburg emphasized the importance of **informal gathering spaces** located

Toynbee hall 1902

production centre 1914

girl's dinner club 1926

court/classes 1938

outside the home and workplace, arguing that these environments play a crucial role in supporting social relationships, civic engagement, and community identity. Unlike formal institutions, third places are characterized by accessibility, inclusiveness, informality, and the ability to bring together people from different backgrounds through everyday interaction. The influence of this theory can be seen in many contemporary community hubs, which increasingly prioritize openness, flexibility, and social interaction over rigid programmatic structures. The focus shifts from delivering services to creating conditions that encourage participation, encounter, and belonging.

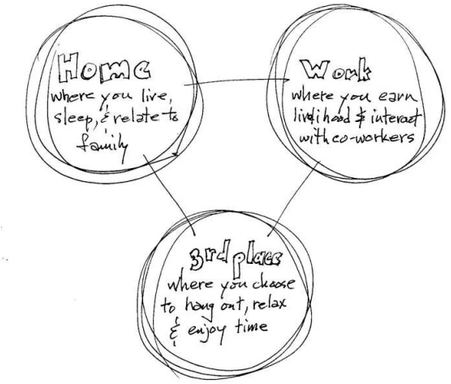


Diagram illustrating the relationship between first, second and third places. Source: Rowan Design & Sustainability Collaborative (n.d.), based on Oldenburg's theory.

At the same time, new forms of **community-led** urban action began to emerge across European cities. In places such as Berlin, Barcelona, and Milan, abandoned buildings and vacant sites were reclaimed by local groups and transformed into cultural centres, social spaces, and experimental forms of collective infrastructure (Harvey, 2012; Borch & Kornberger, 2015). These initiatives introduced ideas that would later become central to discussions around urban commons, including collective management, adaptive reuse, temporary occupation, and shared responsibility. These developments contributed to a broader rethinking of civic space. Community hubs increasingly came to be understood not only as buildings but as **platforms** capable of supporting **social innovation**, **participation**, and **collaborative forms** of urban life. Their role expanded beyond service provision to include cultural production, local empowerment, and the creation of new forms of civic engagement.

Today, community hubs exist in a wide variety of forms, ranging from **purpose-built** facilities to the **adaptive reuse** of industrial buildings, schools, warehouses, and other underused structures. Despite these differences, they share a common ambition: creating spaces where diverse activities, users, and forms of participation can **coexist**. Their evolution reflects a gradual shift away from rigid institutional models toward more flexible, hybrid, and participatory approaches capable of responding to the complexity of contemporary urban life.

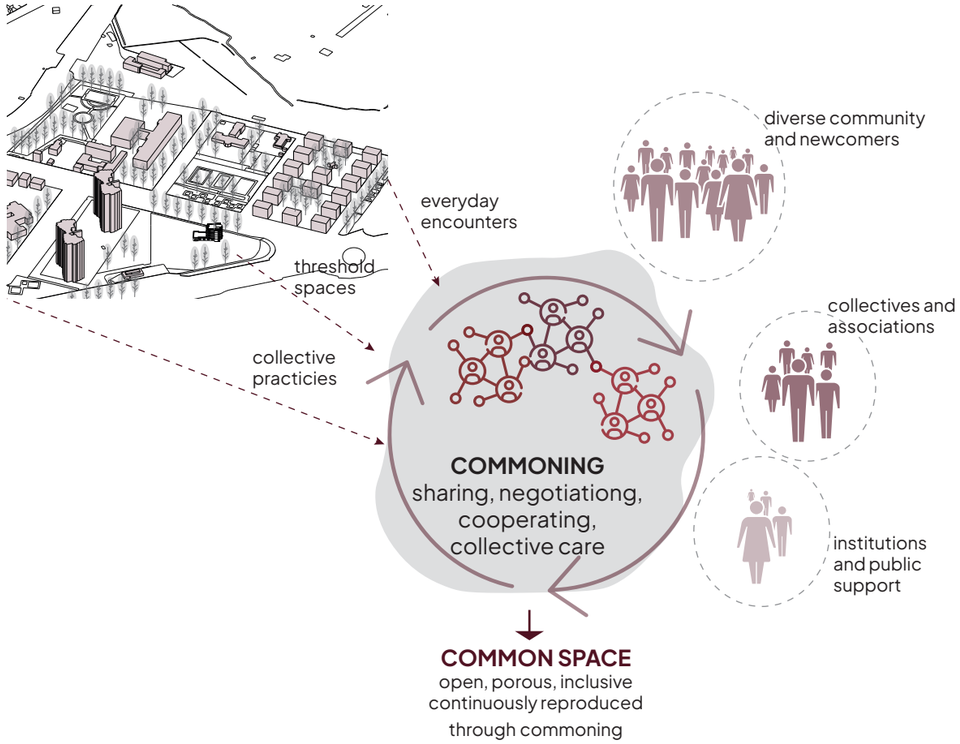
1.2 Community Hubs as Urban Commons

The growing interest in **community hubs** is closely connected to broader discussions surrounding the concept of the urban commons. While community hubs are often described as physical spaces that accommodate services, activities, and community initiatives, many scholars argue that their significance extends beyond their **physical boundaries**. Their value lies not only in what they contain, but also in how they are collectively managed, accessed, and used by local communities. For this reason, understanding community hubs through the lens of the urban commons provides a useful framework for exploring their social and political dimensions.

The concept of the commons has a long and complex history. Traditionally associated with shared natural resources such as forests, pastures, or water systems, the term has gradually expanded to include urban spaces, cultural assets, knowledge, and forms of collective infrastructure. Rather than focusing exclusively on ownership, contemporary interpretations of the commons emphasize the social practices and relationships that enable resources to be collectively maintained and shared (Ostrom, 1990). This perspective is particularly relevant within **urban environments**, where many of the challenges faced by communities cannot be addressed through purely public or purely private approaches. Public institutions often struggle with **limited resources** and **increasing social demands**, while market-driven development can prioritize economic value over collective well-being. In this context, urban commons have emerged as alternative forms of governance that seek to balance **public interest**, **community participation**, and **long-term stewardship**.

According to Stavrides (2016), **urban commons** should not be understood simply as spaces that are publicly accessible. Instead, they are environments where collective practices create opportunities for cooperation, negotiation, and shared responsibility. What distinguishes a common space is therefore not its legal status, but the existence of social relationships that enable people to **actively participate** in its production and management. From this perspective, commoning is an ongoing process rather than a fixed condition. Many contemporary community hubs reflect these principles. In numerous cases, they function as platforms where local organizations, residents, public institutions, and other stakeholders collaborate to develop activities and services that respond to specific local needs. The space itself becomes a resource that is **collectively produced** and continuously redefined through use. This shift from passive consumption to active participation represents one of the most significant differences between community hubs and more traditional civic facilities.

The relationship between c**ommunity hubs** and **urban commons** becomes particularly evident in projects based on **adaptive reuse**. Across Europe, many former industrial buildings, warehouses, schools, and public facilities have been transformed into community-oriented spaces through collaborative processes involving local actors, civic associations, and municipal administrations. These projects demonstrate how abandoned or underutilized assets can acquire new **social value** when they are reintegrated into collective life. At the same time, the literature also highlights a number of challenges associated with commons-based approaches. While participation is often celebrated as a positive outcome, maintaining long-term engagement can be difficult. **Community-led** initiatives frequently depend on volunteer labour, unstable funding structures, and the continuous negotiation of responsibilities among differ-



Interpretation of the process of commoning, adapted from Stavrides (2016)

ent actors (Foster & Iaione, 2015). Questions of **representation**, **inclusion**, and **decision-making** also remain central concerns, particularly when certain groups possess greater resources or influence than others. These challenges are important because they reveal that community hubs should not be idealized as inherently democratic or universally accessible spaces. Their success depends on the ability to **establish governance** structures that **balance openness** with accountability and participation with **effective management**. In other words, the production of a common space requires continuous effort and cannot be guaranteed by architectural design alone.

Nevertheless, the concept of the urban commons offers an important contribution to the understanding of community hubs. It shifts attention away from buildings as isolated objects and towards the social relationships that give meaning to space. This perspective is particularly relevant for the objectives of this thesis, which seeks to explore ***how architecture can support collective life within a fragmented urban territory.*** The question is therefore not only how a building can be reused, but also how it can become a platform for shared activities, local initiatives, and long-term community engagement.

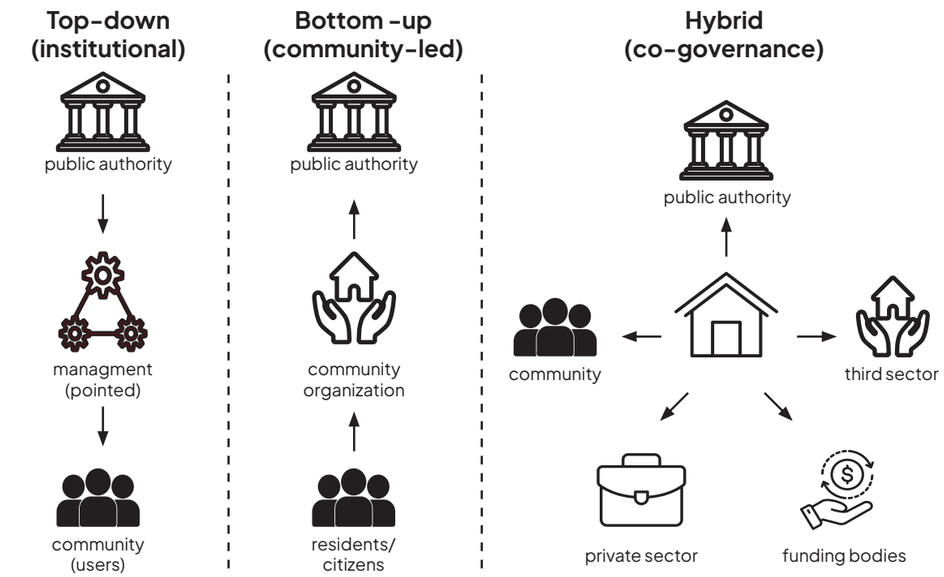
For Pietra Alta, this discussion is especially significant. The absence of spaces dedicated to collective activities emerged repeatedly throughout the territorial analysis, suggesting that the challenge is not simply the lack of facilities but the lack of places capable of supporting relationships between different groups and actors. Viewing the proposed Community Hub as a potential urban common therefore provides a useful framework for understanding its role beyond the architectural scale and within the broader social life of the neighbourhood.v

1.3 Governance models of Community Hubs

If community hubs are understood as spaces where collective life takes place, then **governance** becomes one of the key factors influencing their long-term success. Throughout the literature, governance is consistently identified as a critical dimension of community hubs, often shaping their effectiveness as much as their physical design. While **architecture** provides the **spatial framework** within which activities occur, **governance** determines **how** decisions are made, how resources are allocated, and **who** has the ability to participate in shaping the future of the space. For this reason, community hubs cannot be evaluated solely through their architectural qualities. Similar buildings may produce very different outcomes depending on the organizational structures that support them. A well-designed space may struggle if governance mechanisms fail to **encourage participation**, while relatively modest environments can become highly successful when supported by strong **networks** and **effective management**.

The relationship between governance and community development has been extensively discussed within urban studies and planning literature. Healey (1997) argues that contemporary urban governance increasingly depends on collaboration between multiple actors rather than on centralized decision-making alone. Local governments, community organizations, private partners, cultural associations, and residents all play a role in shaping urban initiatives. Community hubs often operate within this **collaborative framework**, functioning as spaces where these **different actors** interact and negotiate shared objectives.

The case studies examined in this research reveal a wide variety of governance arrangements. Some community hubs are managed directly by public authorities, while others operate through non-profit organizations, cooperatives, foundations, or hybrid partnerships involving multiple stakeholders. Each model presents specific opportunities and limitations, reflecting different approaches to participation, accountability, and financial sustainability.



Decision-making led by public authorities

Initiatives initiated and managed by local communities

Shared governance between public, civic and private actors

Main governance models

Publicly managed community hubs generally benefit from **institutional stability**, access to **public resources**, and stronger connections to **municipal policies**. Their integration within broader public strategies can facilitate long-term continuity and provide a degree of financial security that community-led initiatives often struggle to achieve. However, these models may also face challenges related to **bureaucracy**, **limited flexibility**, and **slower decision-making processes**, particularly when responding to rapidly changing community needs.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, **community-led models** often provide greater opportunities for **local participation** and experimentation. Because decision-making processes are frequently more direct and responsive, these initiatives can adapt quickly to emerging needs and l**ocal priorities**. They often foster a stronger sense of **ownership** among participants and encourage active involvement in both pro-

gramming and management. At the same time, their dependence on volunteer work, external funding, and informal organizational structures can create vulnerabilities that **threaten long-term stability**.

Between these two approaches lies a growing number of **hybrid governance** models. These arrangements combine the resources and legitimacy of public institutions with the **flexibility** and local knowledge of **community organizations**. Rather than concentrating decision-making within a single actor, hybrid models distribute responsibilities among **different stakeholders**. Examples such as the Case del Quartiere network in Turin demonstrate how collaborative governance can create spaces that remain both institutionally supported and strongly rooted within local communities. The growing popularity of hybrid governance reflects a broader recognition that contemporary urban challenges often require forms of cooperation that transcend traditional institutional boundaries. Issues such as social inclusion, cultural production, and community development are rarely addressed effectively by a single organization acting alone. Instead, they require partnerships capable of mobilizing different forms of expertise, resources, and local knowledge.

1.3.1 Financial models of Community Hubs

Financial sustainability represents another important aspect of governance. Community hubs often operate through complex combinations of public funding, grants, commercial activities, membership fees, donations, and partnerships. The ability to diversify revenue streams frequently determines whether a project can remain active over time. However, balancing **economic sustainability** with **social accessibility** remains a constant challenge. Excessive dependence on commercial activities can compromise the inclusive character of a community hub, while exclusive reliance on public funding may expose projects to political and economic fluctuations . The literature increasingly suggests that successful governance is not defined by a single organizational model. Instead, **effective community hub**s tend to share certain characteristics regardless of their formal structure. These include transparency, adaptability, shared responsibility, clear decision-making processes, and meaningful opportunities for participation. In many cases, governance functions less as a rigid framework and more as a process of continuous **negotiation** between different interests and objectives.

This observation is particularly relevant for the development of the proposed Community Hub in Pietra Alta. The lessons emerging from both the literature and the selected case studies suggest that the long-term success of the project will depend not only on spatial design but also on the establishment of governance structures capable of supporting collaboration, flexibility, and community involvement. For this reason, **governance** is considered throughout this thesis not as a secondary operational issue but as an integral component of the design process itself.

Ultimately, the discussion of governance reinforces one of the central arguments of this research: ***community hubs are defined as much by the relationships they facilitate as by the spaces they occupy***. Understanding how these relationships are organized, negotiated, and sustained is therefore essential for evaluating their role as instruments of **urban regeneration** and **social infrastructure**.

1.3.2 Research question

Throughout the previous sections, community hubs have been explored from multiple perspectives, including their historical evolution, their relationship with urban commons, and the governance structures that support their long-term operation. Together, these discussions demonstrate that community hubs cannot be understood simply as architectural objects or service-providing facilities. Rather, they are complex socio-spatial systems whose effectiveness depends on the interaction between spatial design, organizational models, community participation, and their relationship with the surrounding urban context.

Despite the growing body of literature on community hubs, no single model can be considered universally applicable. Their success is strongly influenced by local conditions, making it difficult to identify fixed architectural or organizational solutions that can be transferred directly from one context to another. Instead, the literature suggests that recurring principles emerge across different experiences while their specific implementation varies according to social, economic, and territorial circumstances.

This observation leads to the central research question that guides the comparative phase of this thesis:
Which spatial, organizational, and governance principles enable community hubs to function as effective catalysts for urban regeneration, and how can these principles be adapted to the specific context of Pietra Alta?

1.4 Case Studies- Methodology and Criteria Selection

Following the theoretical investigation of community hubs, urban commons, governance models, and adaptive reuse practices, the research moved towards a comparative analysis of selected case studies. The purpose of this phase was not simply to collect examples of successful projects, but to understand how the **principles** identified in the literature are translated into practice under different social, economic, and spatial conditions. While theoretical frameworks provide important conceptual tools, examining built and operational projects allows these concepts to be tested against the realities of implementation, management, and everyday use.

The decision to adopt a case study methodology emerged from the nature of the research question itself. Community hubs are highly **context-dependent** spaces whose success cannot be evaluated solely through architectural form. Their effectiveness is influenced by a combination of factors including governance structures, financial models, community participation, spatial organization, and relationships with the surrounding urban environment. For this reason, understanding how community hubs function requires looking beyond plans and programs and examining the broader systems that support them. Rather than searching for a single ideal model, the research sought to investigate a range of experiences that would be able to reveal both common patterns and significant differences. The selected case studies therefore represent **diverse approaches** to **community-oriented regeneration**, varying in scale, governance arrangements, funding structures, and spatial characteristics. This diversity was considered particularly important because it allowed the analysis to move beyond prescriptive solutions and focus instead on **adaptable principles** that could be applied within **different contexts**.

The selection process was guided by several **criteria** directly related to the objectives of the thesis. The first criterion concerned the relationship between **community hubs** and **urban regeneration**. Priority was given to projects that had contributed to the activation of underused buildings, vacant sites, or marginalized urban areas. Since the proposed intervention in Pietra Alta is based on the **adaptive reuse** of the Former Custom House, understanding how other projects have **transformed** existing assets into community resources became a central objective of the analysis.

A second criterion focused on **governance** and **management** structures. One of the repeated themes identified in the literature is the importance of organizational models in determining the long-term success of community hubs. Consequently, the selected examples include projects managed through different arrangements, ranging from publicly led initiatives to community-based organizations and hybrid partnerships. Comparing these models made it possible to identify how different forms of decision-making influence participation, accessibility, financial sustainability, and operational flexibility.

The third criterion concerned **spatial organization** and **adaptability**. Community hubs frequently host a wide range of activities that evolve over time, making flexibility an essential characteristic. The research therefore examined how different projects accommodate changing uses through spatial design, multifunctional environments, and adaptable programming strategies. Particular attention was paid to the relationship between **architecture** and **use**, exploring how physical spaces either support or limit the capacity of communities to appropriate and transform their environments.

A fourth criterion addressed the relationship between **community hubs** and their **urban context**. Rather than functioning as isolated buildings, many successful hubs operate as **connectors** between different social groups, institutions, and urban systems. For this reason, the analysis considered how each case engages with its surrounding neighbourhood, contributes to public life, and participates in broader r**egeneration processes**.

The final selection includes examples from both Turin and other European cities. The Turin-based projects were particularly important because they provide direct insight into the local context and the experience of the Case del Quartiere network, one of the most significant examples of community-oriented infrastructure in Italy. Projects such as Cascina Roccafranca, Bagni Pubblici di Via Agliè, and beeozanam demonstrate how community hubs can operate within different neighbourhood conditions while maintaining strong relationships with local residents and institutions. At the same time, the inclusion of international examples allowed the research to expand beyond the specific context of Turin. Projects such as Granby Four Streets in Liverpool, Bar Bricolage in Ghent, and Medialab Prado in Madrid illustrate alternative approaches to participation, ownership, adaptive reuse, and collective management.

Although these projects operate within different political and cultural contexts, they address many of the same questions explored throughout this thesis: ***how can underused spaces be transformed into community resources***, ***how can participation be supported through design and governance,*** and ***how can local initiatives contribute to wider processes of urban regeneration***?

To ensure consistency across the analysis, each case study was examined through a common analytical framework. Rather than producing descriptive project profiles, the research focused on a set of recurring themes that emerged from the theoretical investigation. These themes include governance and decision-making structures, financial and ownership models, adaptive reuse strategies, spatial organization, flexibility, community participation, and the relationship between the project and its wider urban context. The analysis combined information obtained from academic literature, project documentation, official reports, organizational publications, and available architectural material. Whenever possible, attention was given not only to the original intentions of the projects but also to their **long-term operation** and **evolution**. This distinction proved important because many community hubs change significantly over time, **adapting** to new circumstances, partnerships, and community needs. Examining these processes of transformation provided valuable insight into the factors that contribute to **long-term resilience** and **sustainability**.

Rather than identifying a single best practice, the comparative analysis sought to uncover recurring principles that appeared across multiple examples. Some of these principles emerged consistently, regardless of differences in scale or governance. Flexibility, mixed-use programming, strong local partnerships, and the ability to adapt over time were among the most recurrent characteristics. At the same time, the analysis also highlighted **limitation**s and challenges, including financial instability, governance complexity, dependence on key individuals, and difficulties in maintaining long-term participation. These observations became particularly important when considering the future development of the project in Pietra Alta. The objective was never to replicate an existing model but to learn from the successes and shortcomings of different experiences. The value of the case studies therefore lies not in their direct transferability but in their capacity to reveal s**trategies** that can be adapted to local conditions.

Ultimately, this comparative methodology transformed the case studies from simple references into active research tools. By examining how different projects negotiate the relationship between architecture, governance, participation, and urban regeneration, the analysis generated a **set of principles** that informed the subsequent stages of the thesis. These findings provided a critical bridge between theoretical discussion and site-specific design, helping to establish the criteria through which the Former Custom House could be reimagined as a Community Hub capable of responding to the particular challenges and opportunities of Pietra Alta.

This page introduces the icons used in the following study case analysis.

Gathering point

Open-use space

Adaptive reuse startegy

Flexible use of space

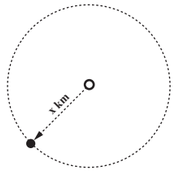
Fixed use of space

Use of recycled materials

Handmade construction

Seasonal/temporary use

Reversable construction



Distance from city centre

Case study : Cascina Roccafranca
Location: Turin, Italy
Type: Community Hub
Governance model: Hybrid (public + third sector organization + civic)
Administration: Cascina Roccafranca foundation
Status: Public building with civic co-managment
Financial model: Public funds/no rental contracts

City of Turin (Public owner)

Foundation (Managment) ↔ Associations/ Users

1.4.1 Cascina Roccafranca as Neighbourhood Social Infrastructure

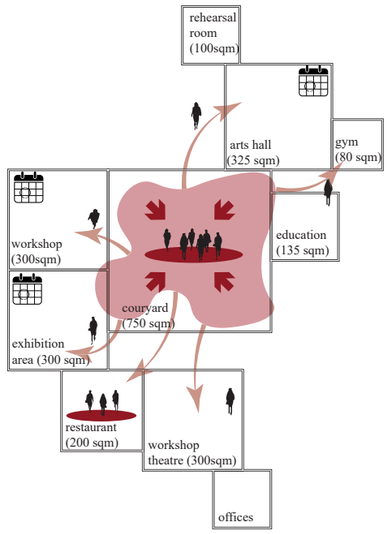
Located in the Mirafiori Nord district of Turin, Cascina Roccafranca represents one of the most established examples of **community-oriented** social infrastructure within the city. As part of the Case del Quartiere network, the centre was developed to support participation, local welfare, and social inclusion through a broad range of cultural, educational, and community-based activities (Comune di Torino, 2020). The building is publicly owned and managed by the Fondazione Cascina Roccafranca, which coordinates activities in collaboration with local associations, informal groups, and municipal actors (Fondazione Cascina Roccafranca, n.d.).

What distinguishes Cascina Roccafranca from many other civic facilities is its strong connection to everyday **neighbourhood life**. Rather than functioning primarily as an event venue or a space used occasionally by residents, the centre hosts activities that encourage regular attendance and repeated use. Educational courses, cultural initiatives, social services, and associative meetings create a continuous presence of users throughout the day, allowing the building to become a familiar and **accessible point** of reference for different groups within the community.

This emphasis on routine use is particularly significant when considering the role of community hubs as **social infrastructure**. As Klinenberg (2018) argues, social infrastructure is not defined solely by the services it provides, but by its ability to create opportunities for recurring interaction and long-term relationship building. In this respect, Cascina Roccafranca demonstrates how a community hub can contribute to **social cohesion** by offering a stable setting where everyday encounters, informal exchanges, and collective activities become part of daily life.

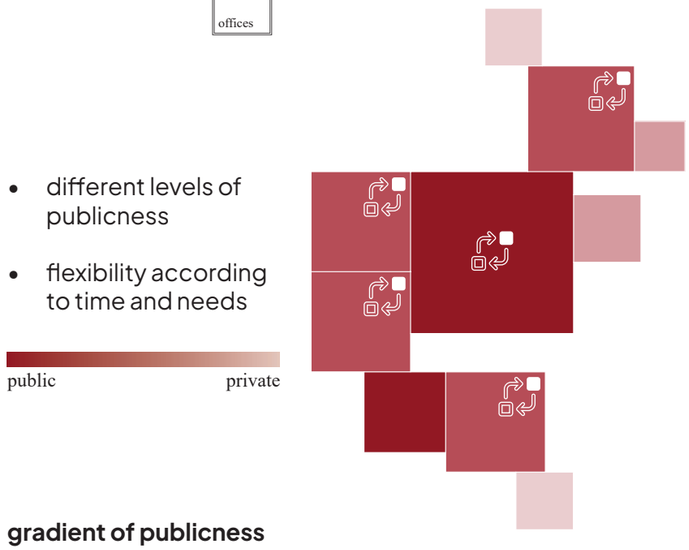
1.4.1.1 Governance Structure and Its Spatial Implications

The governance model adopted by Cascina Roccafranca combines **public ownership** with a **shared management** structure. While the City of Turin retains ownership of the building, the Fondazione Cascina Roccafranca oversees daily operations, coordinates programming, and facilitates collaboration among a diverse range of associations, community groups, and institutional actors (Comune di Torino, 2020). This arrangement provides a balance between institutional stability and operational flexibility, allowing the centre to remain publicly accessible while responding to evolving local needs. The influence of governance becomes visible not only in the organisation of



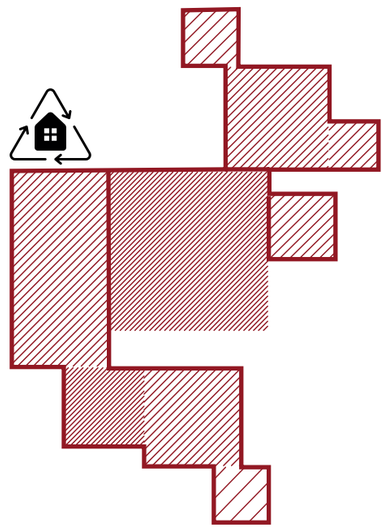
use of space

- place of encounter
- coexistance of different actors and users: various typology of spaces



- different levels of publicness
- flexibility according to time and needs

gradient of publicness



- adaptive reuse strategy
- different frequency of use according to function and space

frequency of use

activities but also in the spatial structure of the building itself. Because **multiple actors** operate simultaneously within the hub, the architecture must accommodate **different levels of access**, control, and autonomy. As a result, spaces are organised through a gradual transition between public, semi-public, and more specialised areas. Open communal spaces coexist with rooms dedicated to specific organisations or activities, creating a system that supports both collective use and independent management. This relationship between governance and space highlights an important aspect of community hubs: management structures are not separate from architecture but are often reflected in the way spaces are organised and experienced. As Awan, Schneider, and Till (2011) suggest, governance arrangements frequently materialise through spatial hierarchies, patterns of access, and forms of occupation. In the case of Cascina Roccafranca, the **hybrid governance** model finds a direct spatial expression in the building's ability to accommodate diverse users while maintaining an overall sense of openness and accessibility.

1.4.1.2 Financial Framework and the Production of Spatial Generosity

The financial model of Cascina Roccafranca is largely supported through **public funding** and the **non-commercial allocation of space.** Rather than relying primarily on market-based rental agreements, many spaces are made available to **associations** and **community groups** through collaborative arrangements that prioritise social value over economic return (Fondazione Cascina Roccafranca, n.d.). This financial condition has important spatial consequences. Because the building is not required to maximise revenue from every square metre, it is able to accommodate spaces that might otherwise be considered economically inefficient. Shared halls, circulation areas, meeting spaces, and informal gathering zones occupy a significant part of the building and contribute to its role as a **social environment** rather than simply a container of programmed functions. These spaces are particularly important because they support forms of interaction that cannot easily be planned or scheduled. **Informal encounters** between users, spontaneous conversations, and overlapping activities often occur within circulation areas and shared spaces, reinforcing the social role of the hub beyond its formal programme. The generosity of these spaces therefore becomes an architectural expression of the underlying financial and institutional framework.

The observation reflects a broader argument advanced by Till (2009), who emphasises that architecture cannot be understood independently from the economic and institutional systems that shape it. In the case of Cascina Roccafranca, spatial generosity is not simply the result of design decisions; it is made possible by a governance and funding model that prioritises **collective benefit** over commercial performa

1.4.1.3 Adaptive Reuse Strategy and Architectural Constraints

Cascina Roccafranca emerged through the **adaptive reuse** of a former agricultural complex, demonstrating how existing buildings can be transformed into **contemporary social infrastructure** while retaining their historical identity. Rather than replacing the original structure or imposing a completely new spatial order, the project worked within the existing architectural framework, **adapting spaces** to accommodate **new functions** while preserving many of the building's morphological characteristics (Comune di Torino, 2020). This approach reflects a broader understanding of adaptive reuse as a process of negotiation between continuity and change. The existing

structure imposes certain constraints, but these constraints also provide opportunities. The spatial organisation inherited from the former agricultural complex introduces a diversity of rooms, connections, and scales that support multiple forms of occupation without requiring extensive architectural intervention. One of the strengths of this approach lies in its capacity to accommodate gradual transformation over time. Rather than being designed around a fixed programme, the building has evolved incrementally in response to changing **community needs.** New functions have been introduced without compromising the overall coherence of the structure, allowing the centre to remain adaptable while preserving its identity.

This strategy aligns closely with contemporary interpretations of adaptive reuse that view **existing buildings** as **long-term frameworks** capable of supporting evolving social practices (Plevoets & Van Cleempoel, 2011). In this sense, the architectural constraints of the original structure become productive conditions that encourage flexibility, diversity, and long-term resilience.

1.4.1.4 Architectural Quality and the Construction of Publicness

The public character of Cascina Roccafranca is not expressed through monumentality or architectural spectacle. Instead, it emerges through a combination of accessibility, spatial continuity, and everyday use. The relationship between interior rooms and outdoor spaces, particularly the courtyards, creates a strong sense of permeability that encourages movement, visibility, and informal occupation. **Circulation spaces** play a particularly important role in this configuration. Rather than functioning solely as connectors between programmed rooms, they become places where **social interaction** can occur. Users encounter one another while moving through the building, creating opportunities for informal exchange that complement the more structured activities taking place within dedicated spaces. The organisation of the building also accommodates different levels of participation. Visitors can engage actively in organised activities, make temporary use of shared spaces, or simply pass through and observe. This **flexibility** allows different forms of engagement to coexist and reduces barriers to participation.

From this perspective, publicness is not understood as a formal designation but as a condition produced through **accessibility**, **visibility**, and **social interaction**. As Madanipour (2010) argues, public space is created through patterns of use and **collective experience** rather than through ownership alone. Cascina Roccafranca demonstrates this principle effectively, showing how architecture can support a variety of social practices while maintaining an inclusive and welcoming environment.

Ultimately, the project illustrates how community hubs can operate as long-term neighbourhood anchors. Its combination of adaptive reuse, hybrid governance, spatial flexibility, and everyday accessibility creates a form of social infrastructure that extends beyond the provision of services and contributes to the construction of local identity, social cohesion, and collective life.

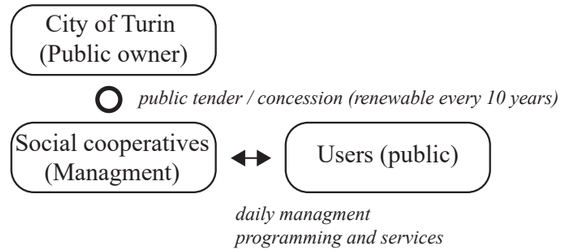
Critical Reading:

Cascina Roccafranca demonstrates how a hybrid governance model, supported by public ownership and collaborative management, can generate **long-term social value** through the adaptive reuse of existing heritage. Its greatest strength lies in its ability to function as an everyday **neighbourhood anchor** rather than as an occasional cultural venue. The combination of diverse programmes, flexible spaces, and stable institutional support encourages recurring participation and fosters strong relationships between local associations, residents, and public institutions. The project also illustrates how architectural quality, spatial generosity, and governance are closely interconnected, creating an environment that supports both organised activities and informal social interaction.

At the same time, the project reveals several limitations that are characteristic of large community hubs operating within institutional frameworks. Although the hybrid governance model provides organisational stability, it also depends on continuous coordination between multiple actors, making **decision-making** more **complex** and potentially slower than in smaller community-led initiatives. The centre's long-term operation is also strongly linked to sustained public funding and institutional support, raising questions about its replicability in contexts with fewer economic resources. Furthermore, the scale and programme of Cascina Roccafranca are closely related to the demographic and organisational capacity of the Mirafiori district, making it difficult to transfer the model directly to neighbourhoods with different social conditions or more limited civic networks.

For the purposes of this research, Cascina Roccafranca offers valuable lessons that extend beyond its architectural solution. Rather than replicating the project, the analysis highlights the importance of adopting its underlying principles: hybrid governance, spatial flexibility, mixed-use programming, and the creation of everyday social infrastructure. At the same time, the identified limitations reinforce the need to develop governance and financial strategies that remain adaptable to the specific social, economic, and territorial conditions of Pietra Alta.

Case study: Bagni Pubblici di Via Agliè
Location: Turin, Italy
Type: Community Hub / social welfare and cultural hub
Governance model: Hybrid (public + third sector organization + civic)
Administration: Consortium of Kairòs social cooperatives
Status: Public building with civic and third-sector co-managment
Financial model: Mixed funding (public and private non-profit), delegated management, no rental contracts.

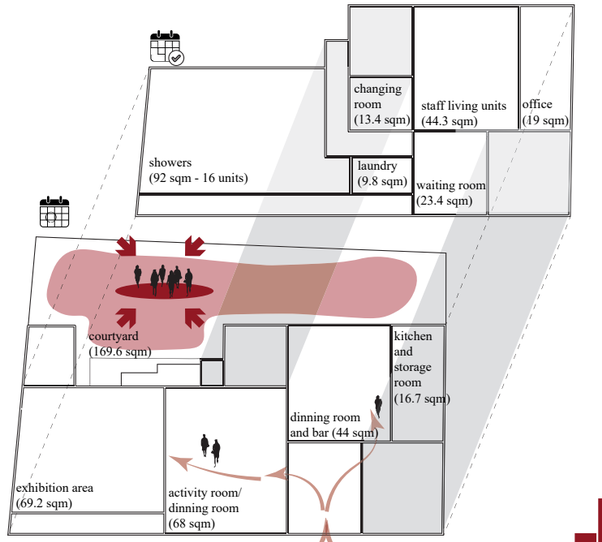


1.4.2 Bagni Pubblici di Via Agliè as a Care-Based Social Infrastructure

Located in the Barriera di Milano district of Turin, Bagni Pubblici di Via Agliè represents a distinctive example of **community-oriented** social infrastructure rooted in everyday care and **welfare** provision. Unlike many contemporary community hubs that originate from cultural or **civic initiatives**, the building retains a direct connection to its original function as a **municipal public bath** facility. Over time, however, it has evolved into a **hybrid space** that combines welfare services, cultural activities, educational initiatives, and opportunities for community engagement (Comune di Torino, 2020; Rete delle Case del Quartiere, n.d.). What makes this project particularly significant is the way it responds to basic **everyday needs** while simultaneously creating opportunities for **social interaction** and **participation**. Essential services continue to play an important role within the building, especially for vulnerable groups, but these functions coexist with activities that support cultural exchange, learning, and collective life. As a result, Bagni Pubblici occupies a unique position between social assistance and community development, demonstrating how **care-oriented facilities** can also operate as spaces of inclusion and neighbourhood cohesion. This dual role reflects a broader understanding of social infrastructure as something that extends beyond physical facilities and service provision. As Klinenberg (2018) argues, social infrastructure becomes meaningful when it creates opportunities for relationships to develop alongside practical support. In this respect, Bagni Pubblici illustrates how everyday care can act as a foundation for wider forms of community engagement and social connection.

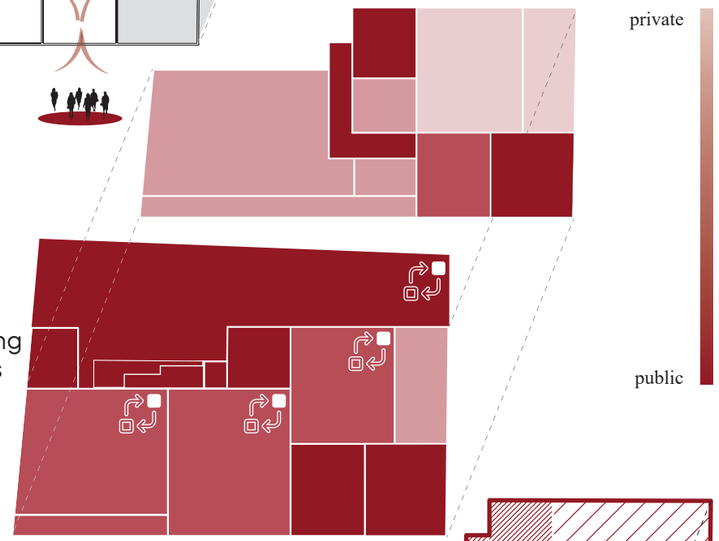
1.4.2.1 Governance Structure and Social Mediation

The governance of Bagni Pubblici di Via Agliè is based on a collaborative arrangement that combines **public ownership** with **third-sector management**. While the



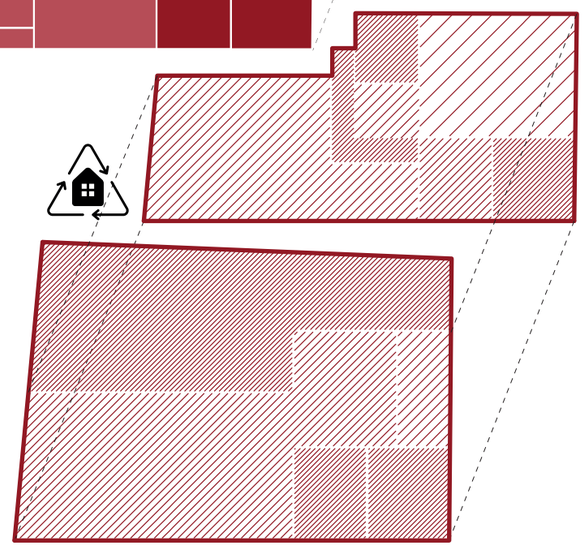
- place of care and encounter
- coexistance of different actors and users - various typology of spaces
- functional stratification (cooperative-led management)

use of space



- different levels of publicness
- flexibility according to time and needs
- no open plan

gradient of publicness



- different frequency of use according to function and space

frequency of use

City of Turin retains ownership of the building and includes it within the wider Case del Quartiere network, daily operations are coordinated by **social cooperatives** and **local associations** responsible for programming, service delivery, and community engagement (Comune di Torino, 2020). This model places particular emphasis on mediation. Rather than functioning simply as a venue for activities, the management structure actively facilitates relationships between institutions, service providers, community organisations, and local residents. The role of governance therefore extends beyond administration and becomes part of the building's **social function**. An important consequence of this arrangement is **continuity**. Essential services can be maintained through institutional support while the programming remains sufficiently flexible to accommodate new initiatives and respond to changing community needs. This balance allows the hub to evolve over time without losing its original social purpose.

From a spatial perspective, governance contributes to the **coexistence** of different forms of use within the same building. Welfare functions, cultural activities, educational programmes, and informal encounters are carefully integrated rather than separated, creating a complex environment where different user groups can occupy the space simultaneously. The building therefore becomes not only a place where services are delivered but also a setting where social relationships are continuously negotiated and reinforced.

1.4.2.2 Financial Framework and the Redistribution of Space

The **financial model** supporting Bagni Pubblici combines public funding, welfare-related resources, project-based grants, and limited income generated through activities and services (Rete delle Case del Quartiere, n.d.). Unlike commercially driven models, the primary objective is not financial return but **social impact**. This condition has significantly influenced the evolution of the building over time. As **community** needs have changed, spaces have gradually been reassigned and adapted to accommodate new activities. Areas once dedicated exclusively to **hygiene services** have been transformed into spaces for exhibitions, cultural initiatives, workshops, and collective events, while maintaining the building's original welfare-oriented mission. The redistribution of space reflects a broader process of social adaptation. Rather than being organised around fixed functions, the building has responded incrementally to emerging **needs** within the **neighbourhood**. This **flexibility** demonstrates how financial frameworks can shape spatial outcomes by enabling experimentation and gradual transformation without requiring large-scale redevelopment. Importantly, the project shows that social value can become a driving force in spatial decision-making. The ability to prioritise community benefit over profitability has allowed the building to accommodate activities that strengthen **social inclusion**, even when they do not generate significant economic returns.

1.4.2.3 Architectural Quality and Gradients of Publicness

One of the most interesting architectural characteristics of Bagni Pubblici di Via Agliè is its ability to accommodate different **levels of access**, privacy, and participation within a relatively compact building. Rather than treating publicness as a uniform condition, the project organises spaces through a series of **gradual transitions** that respond to different **social needs**. Areas dedicated to welfare services require a degree of ***privacy*** and **control**, partic-

ularly when supporting vulnerable users. At the same time, exhibition spaces, meeting rooms, and communal areas are designed to encourage ***openness*** and **public participation**. The coexistence of these different environments allows the building to support both individual care and collective engagement. This spatial differentiation contributes to a more nuanced understanding of publicness. Accessibility is not achieved simply by making every space fully open; instead, it emerges through the careful balance between **openness**, **protection**, and **inclusion**. Users can participate in public activities, access specialised services, or engage with the building in more informal ways depending on their needs and circumstances.

From this perspective, the architecture demonstrates how social infrastructure can accommodate diversity without sacrificing accessibility. Different forms of occupation coexist within the same framework, creating a spatial environment that supports both care and community life. This aligns closely with Klinenberg's (2018) argument that successful social infrastructure often depends on its ability to welcome different groups while responding to their specific requirements.

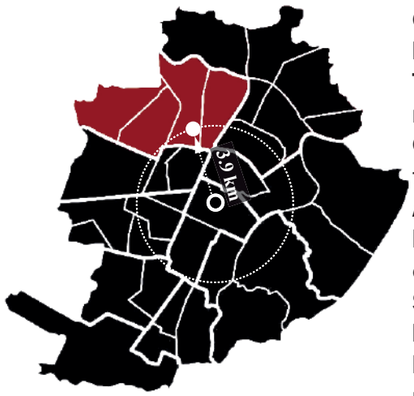
1.4.2.4 Adaptive Reuse as Incremental Transformation

The transformation of Bagni Pubblici di Via Agliè differs from many **adaptive reuse** projects because it has not been driven by a single comprehensive intervention. Instead, the building has evolved gradually through a series of targeted modifications that allow new uses to coexist with existing functions (Comune di Torino, 2020). This incremental approach has enabled the project to maintain continuity while adapting to changing **social conditions**. The original spatial logic of the building remains largely intact, preserving its identity and recognisable role within the **neighbourhood**. At the same time, selective interventions have introduced new opportunities for cultural production, education, and community engagement.

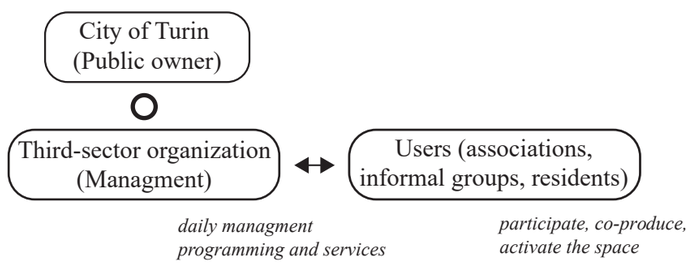
The project demonstrates that adaptive reuse does not always require radical architectural transformation. In some cases, long-term relevance is achieved through small-scale adjustments and continuous management rather than through extensive physical redesign. The capacity of the building to **evolve** gradually has allowed it to remain responsive to **local needs** while preserving its historical function and social significance. Viewed in this way, adaptive reuse becomes an ongoing process rather than a completed architectural act. The value of the building lies not only in its **physical adaptation** but also in its ability to support changing forms of social life over time. This makes Bagni Pubblici an important example of how existing public facilities can be reinterpreted as contemporary social infrastructure while retaining a strong connection to their original purpose.

Critical Reading

Bagni Pubblici di Via Agliè demonstrates how care-based services can act as a foundation for wider forms of community life. Its strength lies not in the scale of its spaces or the diversity of its programme, but in its ability to combine welfare provision, cultural activities, and social interaction within a single architectural framework. The project shows that **social infrastructure** can emerge through continuity and everyday use rather than through large-scale transformation. At the same time, the case also highlights certain **limitations**. The building's strong connection to welfare services inevitably shapes the range of activities it can accommodate, and its impact remains closely tied to the capacity of social cooperatives and public institutions to maintain long-term support. Nevertheless, its **gradual evolution** demonstrates that **adaptive reuse** and **community development** can occur through incremental processes that prioritise care, accessibility, and local relevance over architectural spectacle.



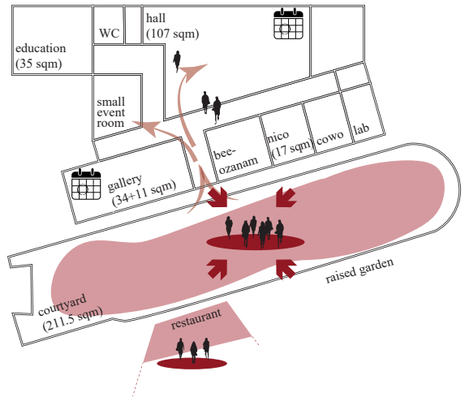
Case study: Beeozanam
Location: Turin, Italy
Type: Social hub / civic innovation and community space
Governance model: Hybrid (municipality + third-sector organizations + civic actors)
Administration: Third-sector management led by BeeOzanam + municipality oversight (collaboration pact)
Status: Public building, co-managment
Financial model: Hybrid funding model combining public support (in-kind space provision), project-based grants, and limited self-generated income.



1.4.3 Beeozanam as a Hybrid Community Infrastructure

Beeozanam represents one of the most ambitious examples of community-oriented regeneration within Turin's contemporary urban landscape. Located in the Borgo Vittoria district, the project emerged through the transformation of a former religious and welfare complex into a **multifunctional centre** that brings together social services, educational activities, cultural initiatives, co-working spaces, and community-oriented programs (Beeozanam, n.d.). Rather than being conceived as a single-purpose facility, the hub operates as a platform where different activities, institutions, and user groups coexist within the same architectural framework. What makes Beeozanam particularly significant is its ability to respond simultaneously to different dimensions of **community life**. While many community facilities focus on a specific target group or service, Beeozanam accommodates a broad spectrum of activities ranging from youth programs and educational support to professional development, social inclusion initiatives, and cultural production. This diversity allows the building to remain active throughout the day and creates opportunities for interaction between groups that might otherwise occupy separate spaces within the city.

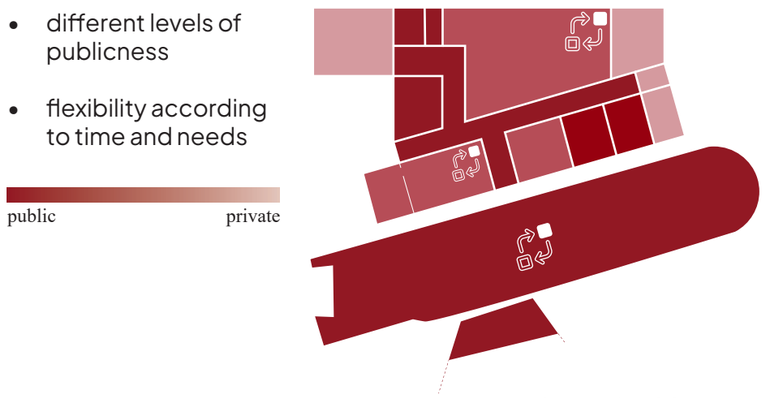
The project reflects a broader shift in the understanding of community infrastructure. Rather than conceiving social services, cultural activities, and productive functions as independent domains, Beeozanam demonstrates how these elements can be integrated within a **shared environment**. The resulting mix of uses generates a dynamic ecosystem in which learning, working, socializing, and community engagement become interconnected rather than isolated experiences. From this perspective, Beeozanam can be understood as more than a **community centre**. It functions as a **neighbourhood infrastructure** that supports different forms



- place of encounter
- coexistance of different actors and users: various typology of spaces (production and services)

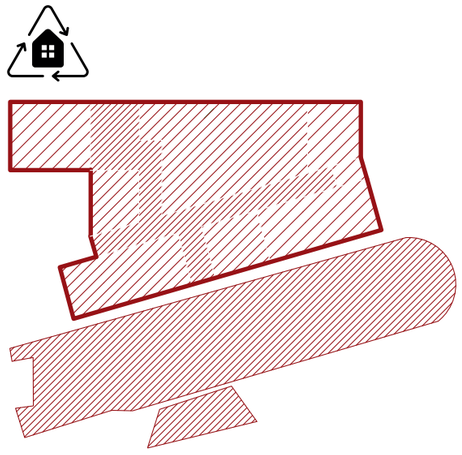
use of space

- different levels of publicness
- flexibility according to time and needs



gradient of publicness

- different frequency of use according to function and space



frequency of use

of participation while contributing to local identity and social cohesion. Its relevance to this research lies precisely in its ability to combine spatial transformation, social inclusion, and long-term adaptability within a single project.

1.4.3.1 Governance Structure and Institutional Collaboration

The organisational model of Beeozanam is based on a **collaborative governance** framework involving foundations, social cooperatives, educational organisations, and local partners. Rather than relying on a single managing body, the project operates through a network of actors that contribute different forms of expertise, resources, and programming (Beeozanam, n.d.).

This collaborative structure plays a crucial role in shaping the identity of the hub. The diversity of organisations involved allows the building to host activities that address multiple social needs while maintaining a coherent vision. Educational programs, social services, entrepreneurial initiatives, and cultural activities are not managed as separate entities but are coordinated within a broader framework that encourages cooperation and resource sharing.

The influence of governance extends beyond administration and directly affects the **spatial organisation** of the project. Because multiple actors occupy the building simultaneously, spaces are designed to accommodate different levels of **autonomy** while maintaining opportunities for **interaction**. Dedicated areas for specific activities **coexist** with shared environments that encourage encounters between users and organisations. This relationship between governance and space reflects a recurring theme identified throughout the literature on community hubs. Successful projects often depend on their ability to balance independence and collaboration, allowing different actors to pursue their objectives while contributing to a **collective project**. Beeozanam illustrates this balance particularly well, demonstrating how institutional diversity can become a resource rather than a source of fragmentation.

At the same time, the project highlights the **complexity** of **collaborative governance**. Coordinating multiple stakeholders inevitably requires continuous negotiation, communication, and adaptation. The long-term success of the hub therefore depends not only on its physical qualities but also on the strength of the relationships that support its operation.

1.4.3.2 Financial Framework and Long-Term Sustainability

The **financial model** supporting Beeozanam combines public resources, foundation support, project-based funding, partnerships, and income-generating activities. This diversified approach reduces dependence on a single funding source and contributes to the **long-term resilience** of the project (Beeozanam, n.d.). One of the most interesting aspects of this model is the way economic sustainability is integrated with social objectives. Rather than separating productive activities from community-oriented functions, the project creates opportunities for mutual support between different programs. Spaces dedicated to training, professional development, and entrepreneurial initiatives contribute not only to financial sustainability but also to broader social goals such as employment, education, and local empowerment. This approach reflects a growing tendency within contemporary community hubs to develop **hybrid economic models** capable of balancing social impact with operational viability. The challenge is not simply generating revenue, but doing so without compromising accessibility or

excluding groups that may have limited economic resources. The spatial implications of this model are particularly visible in the diversity of environments accommodated within the building. Productive functions **coexist** with community spaces, educational facilities, and social services, creating a complex ecosystem in which different activities contribute to the overall sustainability of the project. **Financial resilience** therefore becomes closely connected to **spatial diversity** and **programmatic flexibility**.

1.4.3.3 Programmatic Diversity and Spatial Flexibility

One of Beeozanam's defining characteristics is its capacity to accommodate a wide range of activities without losing coherence as a **collective space.** Educational programs, co-working environments, social services, training facilities, cultural initiatives, and community events coexist within a single architectural framework, creating a highly adaptable environment capable of responding to changing needs over time. This flexibility is not achieved simply through the provision of **multifunctional rooms**. Rather, it emerges from the way spaces are organised and connected. Different activities maintain their own identity while remaining part of a larger system of **shared spaces** and circulation areas. Users moving through the building are therefore exposed to activities beyond their immediate purpose, increasing opportunities for interaction and cross-pollination between different groups.
From an architectural perspective, this approach aligns with the idea that community hubs should function as **open frameworks** rather than rigidly programmed institutions. The ability to accommodate change becomes particularly important in contexts characterised by **evolving social demands** and uncertain future conditions. Spaces that can support multiple forms of occupation are more likely to remain relevant over time than environments designed around highly specialised uses. The project therefore demonstrates how **flexibility** can be understood not only as a technical or spatial characteristic, but also as a social **strategy**. By allowing different activities and user groups to coexist, Beeozanam creates conditions for unexpected encounters and collaborative relationships to emerge.

1.4.3.4 Adaptive Reuse and the Reinterpretation of Existing Structures

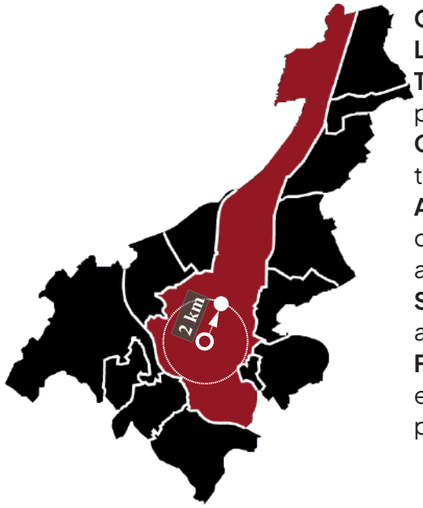
The development of Beeozanam is rooted in the transformation of an existing building complex, demonstrating the potential of **adaptive reuse** as a tool for community-oriented regeneration. Rather than erasing the site's previous identity, the intervention builds upon its historical role as a place associated with welfare, education, and social support, reinterpreting these functions within a contemporary framework. This continuity between past and present is particularly significant. Adaptive reuse is often discussed in terms of **environmental sustainability** or **heritage preservation**, but Beeozanam highlights another dimension: the capacity of existing buildings to retain and reinterpret **social meanings**. By preserving elements of the original complex while introducing new activities, the project establishes a dialogue between historical memory and contemporary needs. The architectural strategy avoids imposing a singular image or rigid program. Instead, the existing structure becomes a flexible framework capable of accommodating diverse forms of use. This approach reinforces the idea that **adaptive reuse** is not merely a technical intervention but a **process** through which buildings acquire new relevance while maintaining connections to their historical context.

For a project such as Pietra Alta, where the Former Custom House possesses both historical significance and strategic urban visibility, this lesson is particularly valuable. Beeozanam demonstrates how existing buildings can become **catalysts** for social activity without losing the **identity** that makes them meaningful within the collective memory of a place.

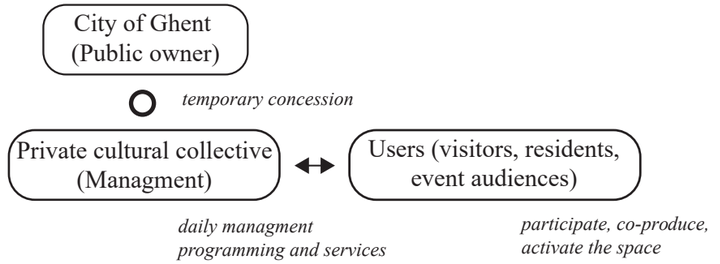
Critical reading

Among the case studies analysed in this research, Beeozanam offers one of the clearest examples of how adaptive reuse, collaborative governance, and programmatic diversity can be integrated within a single project. Its strength lies in its ability to bring together different forms of social, educational, cultural, and productive activity while maintaining a **coherent identity** and a strong connection to the surrounding **neighbourhood**. The project demonstrates that **community hubs** can function as **platforms** rather than as fixed institutions. Their role is not simply to provide services but to create conditions that support interaction, learning, participation, and collaboration over time. In this sense, Beeozanam moves beyond traditional understandings of community centres and presents a more flexible and contemporary model of **social infrastructure**. At the same time, the complexity that makes the project successful also introduces challenges. Coordinating multiple stakeholders, balancing diverse objectives, and ensuring long-term financial sustainability require significant organisational capacity. The effectiveness of the hub therefore depends as much on governance and management as on architectural design.

Nevertheless, Beeozanam provides valuable lessons for the development of the Community Hub proposed in Pietra Alta. In particular, it demonstrates the potential of existing buildings to accommodate **diverse programs**, the importance of **collaborative governance**, and the value of creating **spaces** that remain **adaptable** to changing community needs. These principles resonate strongly with the objectives of this thesis and offer useful insights for the transformation of the Former Custom House into a new **civic anchor** for the district.



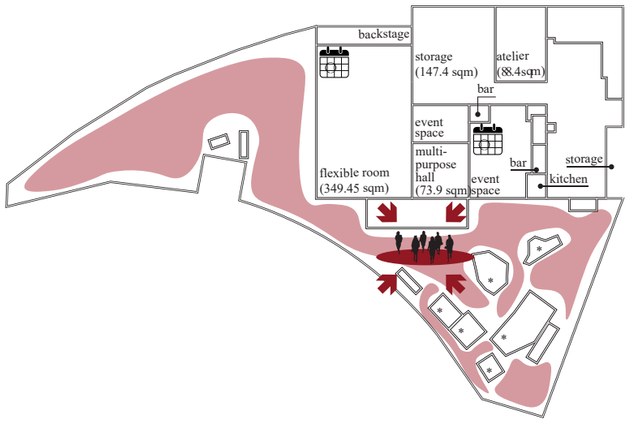
Case study: Bar Bricolage
Location: Ghent, Belgium
Type: Informal cultural and social space / temporary community hub
Governance model: Bottom-up (private collective initiative)
Administration: Managed by a private cultural collective, with activities organized by the managing group and external collaborators
Status: Owned by municipality, privately managed space with open civic use
Financial model: Self-financed model based on event-related income, bar activities, and temporary use of space



1.4.4 Bar Bricolage as a Temporary Social Infrastructure

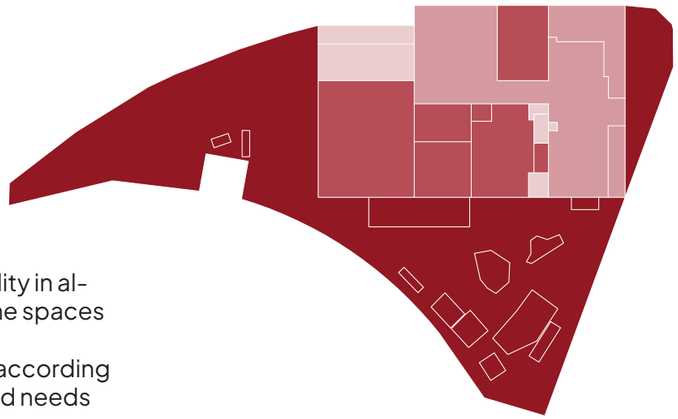
Bar Bricolage offers a different perspective on the role of social infrastructure within contemporary cities. Located within the Dok Noord redevelopment area in Ghent, the project occupies **publicly owned** land through a **temporary use** agreement and operates within a context of ongoing **urban transformation** (Bar Bricolage, n.d.; Stad Gent, n.d.). Unlike many of the community hubs examined in this research, Bar Bricolage was never intended to become a permanent civic institution. Instead, it emerged as an interim intervention designed to activate a vacant site while larger redevelopment processes were still unfolding. Its significance lies precisely in this temporary condition. Through cultural events, communal activities, food, music, and informal gathering, the project transforms an otherwise **underused space** into a lively social environment. Rather than providing continuous services or structured forms of community support, Bar Bricolage creates opportunities for **encounter** and **collective experience** through temporary programming and seasonal occupation. In doing so, it demonstrates how social infrastructure can emerge even in situations where permanence is absent, highlighting the capacity of temporary urban initiatives to generate **social value** within **transitional contexts** (Oswalt et al., 2013).

The project also challenges conventional understandings of community hubs. While many examples discussed throughout this chapter rely on long-term governance structures and stable physical environments, Bar Bricolage operates through flexibility, experimentation, and limited-duration occupation. Its contribution therefore



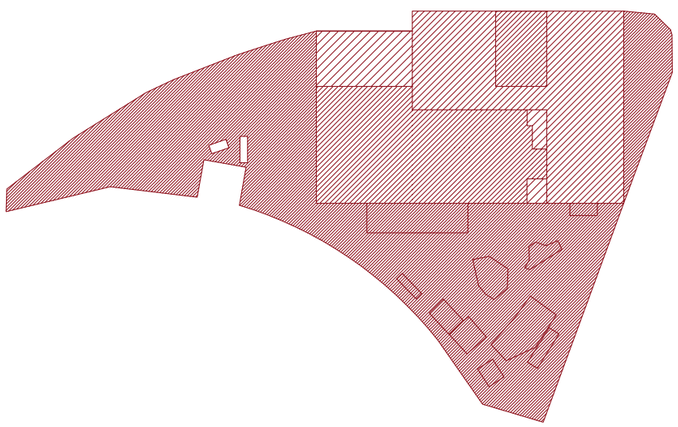
- place of encounter
- * temporary structures

use of space



- accessibility in almost all the spaces
- flexibility according to time and needs

gradient of publicness



- different frequency of use according to function and space

frequency of use

lies less in the creation of lasting institutions and more in its ability to reveal the **social potential** of spaces awaiting future transformation.

1.4.4.1 Governance Through Temporary Autonomy

The **governance model** of Bar Bricolage combines **public ownership** with **privately managed** cultural programming. The site remains under the control of the City of Ghent through the municipal development agency sogent, while day-to-day operations are carried out by a cultural collective responsible for organising activities and managing the space (Stad Gent, n.d.). This arrangement creates a distinctive balance between **institutional oversight** and **operational freedom**. Because the project is not embedded within complex administrative structures, the management team is able to respond quickly to opportunities, adapt programming, and experiment with different forms of occupation. The relative autonomy granted by the temporary concession encourages creativity and flexibility, qualities that are often difficult to achieve within more formal institutional frameworks. At the same time, this autonomy is inseparable from the project's **temporary status**. The possibility of operating with fewer constraints is linked to the understanding that the occupation is provisional. Unlike community-owned or permanently established hubs, Bar Bricolage remains dependent on agreements that can be modified or terminated as redevelopment priorities evolve. This creates a condition in which **flexibility** and **uncertainty** coexist. **Participation** within the project occurs primarily through use rather than through governance. Visitors contribute to the s**ocial life** of the space through attendance, engagement, and informal interaction, but they generally do not play a direct role in strategic decision-making. As a result, community involvement is expressed through occupation and experience rather than through shared ownership or collective management.

1.4.4.2 Financial Model and the Logic of Impermanence

The **financial sustainability** of Bar Bricolage relies largely on **self-generated income** derived from bar activities, cultural events, and seasonal programming, with relatively limited dependence on long-term public funding (Bar Bricolage, n.d.). This model reflects the temporary nature of the project and supports an approach centred on adaptability rather than permanence. Because financial resources are closely tied to short-term operation, investment in the site tends to prioritise lightweight, reversible, and cost-effective interventions. Architectural decisions are guided by practicality and flexibility rather than by long-term durability. Structures can be **assembled**, **modified**, or **removed** with relative ease, allowing the space to evolve according to changing needs and available resources. This relationship between economic conditions and spatial outcomes reflects broader discussions surrounding temporary urbanism.

As Bishop and Williams (2012) argue, temporary projects often derive their strength from their ability to operate with limited resources while experimenting with alternative forms of use. Rather than waiting for large-scale development, they activate spaces immediately and generate social value through occupation.

However, this same condition also introduces limitations. The absence of long-term investment can restrict the range of activities supported by the site and may limit its capacity to develop more stable forms of social infrastructure. Financial flexibility therefore comes at the cost of permanence and institutional continuity.

1.4.4.3 Architecture as an Enabling Framework

Architecturally, Bar Bricolage is characterised by a deliberately **informal approach**. Rather than relying on a permanent building or a highly defined spatial composition, the project consists of **temporary structures**, **reused materials**, outdoor gathering areas, and **adaptable installations** that can be modified over time. The architecture functions primarily as an enabling framework rather than as a finished object. Its role is to facilitate social interaction, cultural activities, and collective experiences rather than to impose a predetermined use. Spaces remain open to **interpretation** and can accommodate a variety of events, from concerts and performances to communal dining, workshops, and informal gatherings.

Publicness is produced largely through atmosphere, accessibility, and occupation. Visitors are attracted by the openness of the environment and the diversity of activities rather than by institutional programming or civic services. This creates a highly **inclusive** and **informal setting** capable of bringing together different groups within a shared space. At the same time, the absence of permanent facilities limits the range of functions that the project can support. While the space performs effectively as a venue for leisure, cultural production, and social interaction, it is less equipped to accommodate everyday services, long-term educational activities, or forms of support that require continuity and stability. The project therefore highlights both the possibilities and the limitations of temporary social infrastructure.

1.4.4.4 Adaptive Reuse and Critical Limitations

Although Bar Bricolage engages with principles of **reuse**, its approach differs significantly from the adaptive reuse strategies observed in projects such as Cascina Roccafranca, Beeozanam, or Medialab Prado. Rather than transforming an existing building for long-term occupation, the project focuses on the **temporary activation** of a site awaiting future redevelopment. Reuse in this context is less concerned with preserving architectural heritage and more oriented towards **maximising** the **social potential** of underused urban land. Temporary structures, reclaimed materials, and reversible interventions allow the site to remain active while larger development processes are postponed or redefined. The project demonstrates how vacant spaces can contribute to urban life even when their future remains uncertain.

Nevertheless, the temporary nature of the intervention also reveals its greatest limitation. Because occupation depends on broader redevelopment agendas, the social networks and activities generated by the project remain vulnerable to **displacement**. Once development pressures re-emerge, there is no guarantee that the community formed around the space will be able to continue elsewhere (Oswalt et al., 2013). This tension between activation and permanence is central to understanding the project. Bar Bricolage successfully demonstrates the capacity of **temporary initiatives** to create social value, test new uses, and foster community interaction. However, it also illustrates the difficulties of translating these temporary successes into long-term forms of **social infrastructure**.

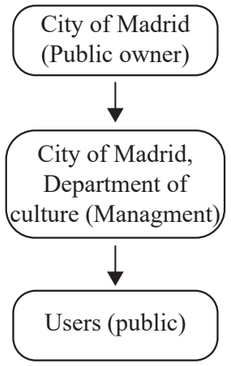
Critical Reading

Among the case studies analysed in this research, Bar Bricolage presents perhaps the clearest example of social infrastructure emerging through **temporary occupation** rather than **permanent investment**. Its strength lies in its ability to activate underused urban land quickly, attract diverse users, and generate a strong sense of place through relatively modest interventions. The project demonstrates that meaningful social spaces do not always require extensive construction or long-term planning. In certain contexts, temporary initiatives can play an important role in testing ideas, supporting cultural activities, and revealing the social potential of neglected sites. This flexibility makes projects such as Bar Bricolage particularly valuable within areas undergoing transition or **awaiting redevelopment**.

At the same time, the case highlights the **limitations** of relying exclusively on **temporary urbanism**. While temporary interventions can successfully activate spaces, they often struggle to provide the continuity, stability, and institutional support associated with long-term community infrastructure. For this reason, Bar Bricolage should be understood not as a substitute for permanent community hubs, but as a complementary strategy capable of initiating social processes that may later evolve into more durable forms of urban engagement.

For the purposes of this thesis, the project provides an important lesson regarding the activation of **underused spaces** and the value of **flexible programming**. It demonstrates how even modest interventions can generate **social interaction** and strengthen the relationship between people and place, while also reinforcing the importance of long-term governance and permanence in sustaining collective life over time.

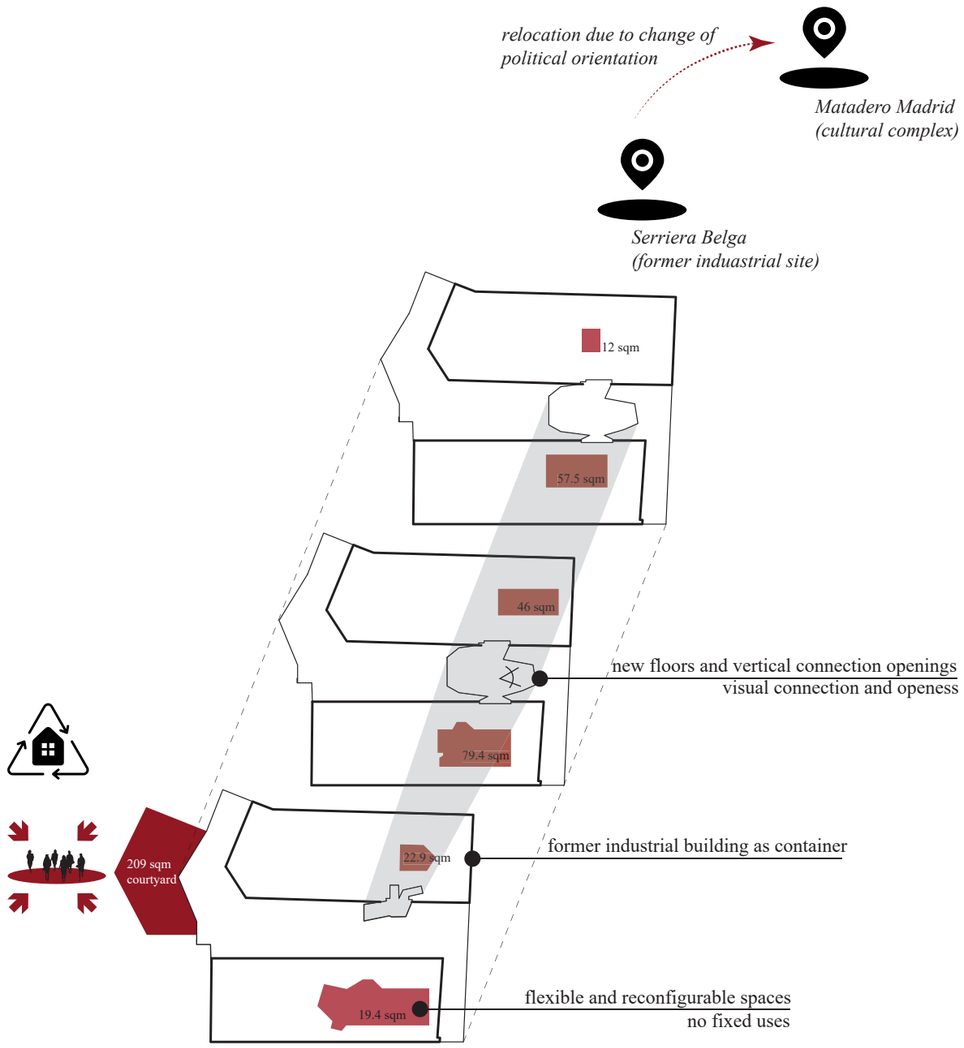
Case study: Medialab Prado (now Medialab Matadero)
Location: Madrid, Spain
Type: Civic innovation and cultural laboratory
Governance model: Top-down public initiative with participatory programming
Administration: Managed by the Municipality of Madrid through its cultural institutions, with participatory and open-call-based programming
Status: Publicly owned and publicly managed cultural infrastructure
Financial model: Fully publicly funded model supported by municipal cultural budgets



1.4.5 Medialab Prado as a Publicly Driven Civic Platform

Medialab Prado represents one of the most influential examples of civic innovation infrastructure developed in Europe during the last two decades. Promoted and funded by the City of Madrid, the project was housed until 2021 in the refurbished Serrería Belga building, a former industrial facility located in the city centre (Ayuntamiento de Madrid, n.d.; Langarita-Navarro Arquitectos, n.d.)Unlike neighbourhood-based community hubs, which are typically rooted in local communities and everyday social practices, Medialab Prado operated at a **metropolitan scale**, engaging a diverse public composed of citizens, researchers, artists, designers, institutions, and cultural organisations. The project was conceived as an open platform dedicated to experimentation, collaborative learning, and collective knowledge production. Workshops, laboratories, exhibitions, public debates, and citizen-led initiatives formed the core of its programming, creating an environment where different forms of expertise could intersect and generate new ideas. Rather than focusing on welfare provision or neighbourhood services, Medialab Prado positioned itself as a **civic interface** capable of connecting institutions and citizens through processes of **co-creation** and **innovation**. This orientation distinguishes Medialab Prado from many of the community hubs analysed throughout this research.

Its primary objective was not to strengthen local neighbourhood networks but to create opportunities for collaboration across disciplinary, institutional, and social boundaries. From this perspective, the project can be understood as a form of **social infrastructure** dedicated to **collective learning** and **civic experimentation** (Klinenberg, 2018). The emphasis on innovation significantly influenced both the spatial organisation of the building and the patterns of use that developed within it, producing a more



use of space

fluid and project-oriented environment than those typically associated with neighbourhood-based community hubs.

1.4.5.1 Governance Structure and Institutional Control

The **governance mode**l of Medialab Prado was predominantly **public** and **institutionally** driven. Ownership, funding, and management were all coordinated by the City of Madrid through its Department of Culture, which maintained responsibility for strategic direction, operational decisions, and long-term planning (Ayuntamiento de Madrid, n.d.). At the same time, the institution actively promoted participation through open calls, collaborative projects, and citizen-led initiatives. Individuals and organisations were encouraged to propose ideas, contribute knowledge, and take part in experimental projects. However, while participation was central to the programming model, **decision-making authority** ultimately remained within the **municipal structure**. This created a governance arrangement that can be described as **top-down** enabling: participation was facilitated and encouraged, but within a framework defined and controlled by the public institution. This governance model had direct implications for the organisation of space. The building was required to accommodate a wide variety of activities while maintaining a clear institutional identity and operational coherence. Spaces needed to be sufficiently adaptable to support changing programs, yet they also had to function within the administrative requirements of a public cultural institution.

From a critical perspective, Medialab Prado illustrates one of the recurring tensions present in publicly managed participatory spaces. While institutional support can provide resources, visibility, and stability, it can also create dependencies on political priorities and administrative structures. As Madanipour (2010) suggests, **participation** does not necessarily imply **shared control**. The long-term continuity of these spaces often depends less on community ownership than on the willingness of institutions to maintain support over time.

1.4.5.2 Financial Model and Its Spatial Implications

The financial framework of Medialab Prado relied almost entirely on **public investment**. Municipal funding covered operational costs, programming, maintenance, and spatial transformation, allowing the project to remain free and accessible to a broad public (Langarita-Navarro Arquitectos, n.d.). This condition had important spatial consequences. Freed from the pressures associated with rent generation or commercial profitability, the project was able to dedicate substantial portions of the building to collective use. Large open areas, shared laboratories, flexible workspaces, and multipurpose rooms could coexist without being evaluated primarily through economic performance. **Spatial generosity** therefore became a direct consequence of the institutional commitment to accessibility and experimentation. The absence of commercial pressures also encouraged **programmatic flexibility**. Spaces could be adapted according to emerging projects, temporary initiatives, and collaborative activities without requiring immediate financial return. This flexibility aligned closely with the innovation-oriented mission of the institution and supported the constantly evolving nature of its programming. At the same time, the **reliance on public funding** exposed the project to a different form of v**ulnerability**. Because governance, ownership, and financial support were concentrated within the municipality, changes in political priorities had a direct impact on

the future of the institution. The **relocation** of Medialab Prado from Serrería Belga to Matadero Madrid in 2021 illustrates how even highly successful civic platforms can be affected by broader administrative and political decisions (ArchDaily, 2021). This experience highlights an important distinction between **spatial flexibility** and **institutional resilience**. While the architecture was designed to accommodate change, the long-term continuity of the project remained dependent on factors beyond the building itself.

1.4.5.3 Adaptive Reuse Strategy and Architectural Approach

The transformation of the Serrería Belga building demonstrates how **adaptive reuse** can support new forms of **civic activity** within an existing architectural framework. Originally constructed as an **industrial facility** in the early twentieth century, the building was reimagined as an open and flexible environment capable of supporting a wide range of **collaborative practices** (Langarita-Navarro Arquitectos, n.d.). Rather than imposing a fixed program, the architectural intervention focused on creating conditions for adaptability. The existing structural framework was largely preserved, while new circulation systems, service cores, and open floor plates were introduced to facilitate changing uses. Transparency, openness, and visibility became key design principles, reinforcing the building's role as a platform for exchange and experimentation

This approach reflects contemporary understandings of adaptive reuse that prioritise **adaptability** over **permanence**. Rather than designing spaces around predetermined functions, the project created a framework capable of accommodating activities that could not be fully anticipated at the time of design (Plevoets & Van Cleempoel, 2011). Architecture becomes a support structure for evolving **social practices** rather than a container for fixed programs. At the same time, the case reveals the limitations of relying exclusively on spatial flexibility. While the building successfully accommodated changing forms of occupation, architectural adaptability alone was insufficient to guarantee long-term institutional continuity. The experience of Medialab Prado demonstrates that **flexible spaces** require equally **resilient governance** structures if they are to sustain their social role over time.

1.4.5.4 Architectural Quality and the Construction of Publicness

One of the defining characteristics of Medialab Prado was its ability to construct **publicness** through openness, visibility, and accessibility. The architectural design emphasised large open floors, visual connections between different levels, and circulation systems that exposed visitors to ongoing activities throughout the building. Publicness was therefore produced through **transparency** and **participation**. Users could observe workshops, engage with projects, or simply move through the building while remaining connected to the wider activities taking place around them. The architecture encouraged curiosity, interaction, and informal learning, reinforcing the institution's role as a space of collective experimentation. However, the nature of this publicness differs significantly from that observed in neighbourhood-based community hubs. In projects such as Cascina Roccafranca or Bagni Pubblici di Via Agliè, publicness emerges through **repeated encounters**, routine activities, and long-term relationships embedded within a local community. Medialab Prado, by contrast, relied more heavily on events, projects, and temporary collaborations. This distinction is important because it highlights two different understandings of social infrastructure. One is rooted in **everyday life** and **sustained local relationships**; the other is based on **innovation**, **experimentation**, and the **temporary assembly** of diverse actors. Both contribute to civic life, but they operate through different rhythms and forms of engagement.

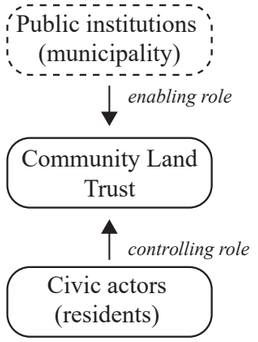
Critical Reading

Medialab Prado demonstrates how **public institutions** can create spaces that support collaboration, experimentation, and collective knowledge production at an **urban scale**. Its greatest contribution lies in its ability to transform a former industrial building into a civic platform where citizens, cultural actors, and institutions could engage in shared processes of learning and innovation.

The project also illustrates the potential of adaptive reuse as a strategy for accommodating programmatic uncertainty. Rather than designing for fixed uses, the architecture was conceived as a framework capable of supporting changing forms of participation and cultural production. This **flexibility** became one of the defining strengths of the project and contributed significantly to its influence within international discussions on **civic innovation**. At the same time, Medialab Prado reveals the limitations of institutionally driven participation. While the project successfully promoted **openness** and **collaboration**, its long-term continuity remained dependent on political support and administrative priorities. The relocation of the institution demonstrates how public participation can coexist with structural forms of dependency that remain largely outside the control of users and communities.

For the purposes of this research, Medialab Prado provides an important counterpoint to the neighbourhood-based case studies analysed previously. It demonstrates that community-oriented spaces can operate at multiple scales and pursue different objectives, ranging from everyday social support to civic innovation and collective experimentation. At the same time, it reinforces a central finding emerging throughout the case studies: **architecture** alone cannot guarantee long-term success. **Spatial flexibility** must be accompanied by **governance structures** capable of sustaining participation, ownership, and institutional continuity over time.

Case study: Location: Liverpool, United Kingdom
Type: Community-led urban regeneration / social infrastructure
Governance model: Bottom-up (community ownership and resident-led governance through a Community Land Trust)
Administration: Managed by the Granby Four Streets Community Land Trust, governed by local residents and community representatives
Status: Collectively owned community assets under a Community Land Trust structure
Financial model: Grant-based funding combined with community ownership mechanisms and reinvestment of locally generated value



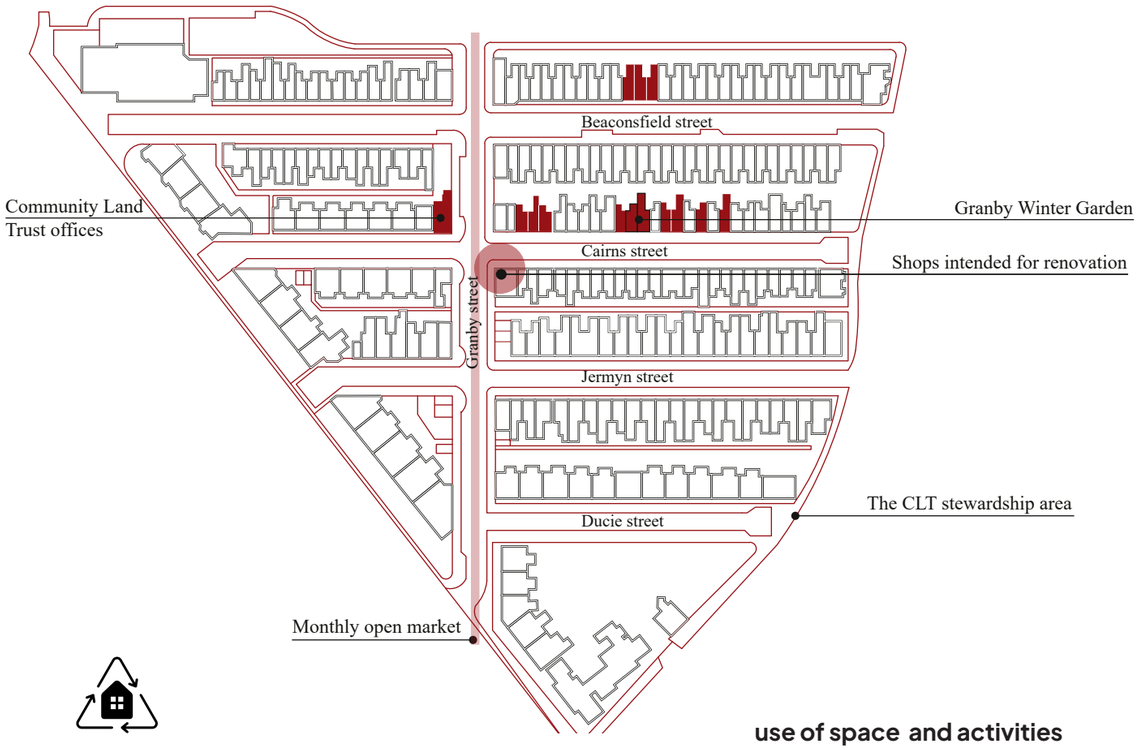
1.4.6 Granby Four Streets as a Community-Led Urban Social Infrastructure

Granby Four Streets represents one of the most influential examples of **community-led regeneration** in contemporary Europe. Located in the Toxteth area of Liverpool, the project emerged in response to decades of disinvestment, housing abandonment, and population decline. Rather than being conceived as a single building or community facility, Granby developed through a series of **small-scale interventions** distributed across four Victorian terraced streets. This dispersed approach challenges conventional understandings of community hubs as singular architectural objects and instead proposes a model in which social infrastructure is embedded within the everyday fabric of the neighbourhood.

At its core, the project is less concerned with physical renewal than with the **reactivation of community life** through collective ownership, long-term stewardship, and resident participation. Housing, public space, productive activities, and social initiatives are treated as interconnected elements within a broader **regeneration strategy**, allowing social infrastructure to emerge gradually through everyday practices rather than through a single intervention (Granby Four Streets CLT, n.d.; World Habitat, 2019). In this sense, Granby demonstrates how community development can be understood as a long-term process rooted in local agency and collective responsibility.

1.4.6.1 Governance Through Community Ownership

The governance structure of Granby Four Streets is based on a **bottom-up model** centred around the Granby Four Streets Community Land Trust (CLT). Established and managed by l**ocal residents**, the CLT owns and oversees a number of properties within the neighbourhood while acting as the **principal decision-making body** for future development initiatives (Granby Four Streets CLT, n.d.). Unlike conventional regeneration projects led by public authorities or private developers, residents play a direct role in shaping the future of their neighbourhood and are actively involved in decisions concerning investment, maintenance, and spatial transformation.



use of space and activities

This governance model fundamentally redefines the relationship between **communities** and **urban regeneration**. Residents are not treated as beneficiaries of external interventions but as long-term custodians of the area. Public institutions remain important, particularly through the provision of legal frameworks, grants, and enabling policies, yet their role is largely supportive rather than directive. As a result, decision-making remains closely connected to local needs, priorities, and aspirations. The significance of this approach extends beyond governance itself. By linking **ownership** and **participation**, the project creates a stronger sense of responsibility towards both buildings and public spaces. The process of **regeneration** becomes inseparable from the process of community-building, demonstrating how governance structures can directly influence social cohesion and long-term neighbourhood resilience.

1.4.6.2 Financial Model and Long-Term Affordability

The financial framework of Granby Four Streets combines public funding, philanthropic support, housing programmes, cultural grants, and resources generated through the Community Land Trust model. This diversified approach has enabled the project to support both physical interventions and community initiatives while maintaining a strong commitment to affordability and social value (World Habitat, 2019). A key feature of the CLT model is its ability to remove land and housing from speculative real estate markets. Through mechanisms regulating **resale values** and **rental agreements**, the project ensures that renovated properties remain accessible to current and future residents. In doing so, Granby addresses one of the most common criticisms of **urban regeneration** projects: the risk of **displacement** and **gentrification**. The financial model therefore operates not simply as a funding mechanism but as a tool for shaping spatial and social outcomes. Because the project prioritises long-term stability rather than short-term profit, investment decisions tend to favour repair, maintenance, and gradual improvement over large-scale redevelopment. This emphasis on continuity reinforces the project's broader commitment to preserving community identity while supporting sustainable change.

At the same time, the model is not without limitations. The success of the project depends on continued **civic engagement** and access to **external funding** opportunities. Questions of **scalability** and **transferability** remain relevant, particularly in contexts where strong community organisations or supportive institutional frameworks may be absent. Nevertheless, Granby demonstrates how alternative ownership structures can create conditions for more equitable and socially grounded forms of urban regeneration.

1.4.6.3 Spatial Strategy and the Production of Everyday Publicness

One of the most distinctive aspects of Granby Four Streets is the way **publicness** is produced through everyday spaces rather than through formal civic architecture. Instead of relying on large public squares, community centres, or landmark buildings, the project creates a network of **shared environments** embedded within the residential fabric of the neighbourhood. Renovated houses, productive workshops, community gardens, and small-scale collective spaces such as the Granby Winter Garden and Granby Workshop form a dispersed system of social infrastructure that supports **daily interaction** and **neighbourhood life** (Assemble, 2015). These spaces operate at a domestic scale and are closely integrated into the routines of residents, allowing social relationships to develop organically through repeated encounters and shared activities. **Publicness** in Granby is therefore generated through proximity, familiarity, and **everyday occupation**. Social interaction occurs not because people are drawn to a central civic destination, but because community-oriented spaces are woven directly into the places where residents live and work. This approach offers an alternative understanding of public space, one that emerges from **collective use** and **local participation** rather than from monumental urban design. The project demonstrates that social infrastructure does not necessarily require large or highly visible interventions. In certain contexts, smaller and more distributed spaces may be equally effective in supporting social cohesion and strengthening neighbourhood identity.

1.4.6.4 Adaptive Reuse beyond the Building Scale

Granby Four Streets expands the concept of adaptive reuse beyond the scale of individual buildings. While the renovation of existing **housing stock** remains a central component of the project, reuse also operates at the level of the neighbourhood as a whole. Social relationships, local knowledge, collective memory, and informal networks are all reactivated alongside the physical environment. This broader interpretation challenges conventional understandings of adaptive reuse as a purely architectural practice. The transformation of space influences directly the transformation of **social conditions**, **governance structures**, and **patterns of ownership**. In Granby, the reuse of buildings becomes part of a wider process of community recovery and **neighbourhood reconstruction**. The project therefore demonstrates how **adaptive reuse** can function as an ongoing **social process** rather than a finite design intervention. Physical renewal provides the framework, but it is the reactivation of collective

life that ultimately gives meaning to the transformation. As Klinenberg (2018) argues, social infrastructure derives its value from the relationships it supports, and Granby offers a powerful example of how these relationships can be rebuilt through long-term, **community-led action**.

Critical Reading

Granby Four Streets represents a radical alternative to conventional **urban regeneration** practices. Its greatest contribution lies in demonstrating that social infrastructure can emerge through community ownership, local stewardship, and incremental transformation rather than through large-scale public investment or iconic architectural projects. The project challenges dominant assumptions about regeneration by placing governance and ownership at the centre of **spatial production**. Here, architecture operates as one component within a broader social process, supporting rather than directing community development. The resulting spaces may appear modest when compared to more conventional civic projects, yet their impact lies precisely in their ability to strengthen everyday forms of **social interaction** and **collective responsibility**. At the same time, Granby raises important questions regarding **scalability** and **long-term sustainability**. Its success is deeply rooted in a specific local context characterised by strong community mobilisation and access to external support. Replicating these conditions elsewhere may not always be possible.

Nevertheless, the project provides valuable lessons for contemporary community hubs, particularly regarding the importance of local ownership, long-term stewardship, and the role of incremental change in fostering **resilient communities**.

For the purposes of this thesis, Granby Four Streets demonstrates that **regeneration** can be understood as a process of **reconnecting people** as much as **spaces**. Its emphasis on participation, collective care, and adaptive reuse offers important insights into how social infrastructure can contribute to rebuilding fragmented urban environments while reinforcing local identity and belonging.

Synthesis Matrix of the Case Study Analysis

	Cascina Roccafranca	Public Bathrooms of via Agliè	Beeozanam	Bar Bricolage	Medialab Prado (Matadero)	Granby Four Streets
Adaptive reuse	●●●	●●●	●●●	●●	●●●	●●●
Flexibility	●●	●●	●●●	●●●	●●	●●
Mixed programmes	●●●	●●	●●●	●	●●●	●●●
Accessibility	●●●	●●●	●●	●●●	●●	●●●
Community partecipation	●●●	●●●	●●	●	●	●●●
Urban integration	●●●	●●	●●	●	●	●●●
Governance model	H	H	H	BU	TD	BU
Limitations	Operational complexity	Programmatic constraints	Operational complexity	Temporary character	Institutional dependency	Context dependency

●●● - Strong
●● - Moderate
● - Limited

H- Hybrid
BU- Bottom-Up
TD- Top-Down

1.5 Critical Reflection: Translating Case Study Lessons into a Design Framework for the Former Custom House

Looking across the selected case studies, it becomes clear that **community hubs** cannot be understood simply as buildings or architectural typologies. What ultimately determines their success is not only the quality of their physical spaces, but the way governance structures, financial mechanisms, and organisational models interact with architecture over time. Throughout the analysis, **architecture** emerges less as an independent solution and more as a **framework** through which social, economic, and institutional relationships take shape. This observation is particularly relevant for the **Former Custom House** in **Pietra Alta**, where the challenge is not only to reuse an existing building but also to respond to a broader condition of **urban fragmentation** and the absence of spaces dedicated to **community life**.

One of the strongest themes to emerge from the comparison concerns the relationship between **governance** and **space**. The case studies demonstrate that governance structures influence not only how community hubs operate, but also how they are experienced and appropriated by users. **Publicly managed** initiatives often benefit from greater continuity, institutional support, and financial stability. At the same time, they can sometimes generate spaces that are highly programmed and less capable of adapting to changing community needs. **Community-led** models present a different set of qualities. Their strength lies in being closely connected to local communities and giving people a sense of belonging and responsibility.

However, these projects frequently depend on sustained civic engagement, volunteer involvement, and external sources of support, factors that can make long-term continuity more uncertain. The most convincing examples examined in this research are those that may be considered as in between these two extremes. Several of the Turin-based projects show how institutional support and community participation can coexist within the same framework, creating governance models that remain stable while still allowing room for **experimentation** and **adaptation**. What makes these arrangements particularly interesting is that they do not treat governance as a fixed structure. Instead, responsibilities, decision-making processes, and forms of participation remain open to **negotiation** and **adjustment** over time.

For the Pietra Alta project, this suggests that governance should not be considered an operational issue to be addressed after the design phase. Rather, it should be understood as an integral part of the project itself, shaping how the building will evolve, be used, and remain relevant in the future.

A similar conclusion emerges when considering the financial dimension of community hubs. The case studies reveal that **funding models** have a direct impact on **spatial organisation** and **architectural choices**. Projects supported by stable public funding often benefit from generous and inclusive spaces that can accommodate a wide range of activities. Yet this stability can sometimes reduce **flexibility**, especially when spaces become tied to predefined programmes or institutional requirements. At the other end of the spectrum, projects that rely primarily on grants, temporary funding, or self-generated income often demonstrate a greater capacity for experimentation and adaptation, but they are also more exposed to uncertainty and financial instability. The examples that appear most resilient are those that combine different forms of support. In these cases, public institutions provide a stable foundation—often through the provision of space—while project-based funding and limited income-generating activities create opportunities for growth, experimentation, and change. This balance is reflected directly in the architecture. Flexible layouts, shared spaces, reversible interventions, and multifunctional environments are not simply aesthetic or functional decisions; they are responses to economic realities and changing patterns of use. For the Former Custom House, this reinforces the importance of designing spaces that can accommodate different activities over time rather than relying on rigid functional divisions. The projects analysed share several similarities in how their spaces are organised. The most successful **community hubs** rarely operate through clear separations between public and private, **open** and **closed**, **formal** and **informal**. Instead, they are structured through a series of gradual transitions that allow different activities and users to coexist. Welfare services, cultural programmes, educational activities, and informal social encounters often occupy the same building, yet they do so through carefully layered spaces that provide different levels of accessibility, privacy, and interaction.

This observation is particularly relevant for Pietra Alta. The proposed intervention occupies a complex position between residential areas, commercial developments, and large-scale infrastructure. As a result, the project must address a wide range of users and needs rather than responding to a single function or community group. The idea of **spatial gradients** therefore becomes a useful design principle, offering a way to accommodate **diversity** while maintaining coherence. Rather than creating spaces with fixed identities, the project can encourage different forms of occupation and participation to emerge over time.

Another important lesson concerns **adaptive reuse**. Throughout the case studies, reuse consistently appears as more than a technical or environmental strategy. Rather than treating existing buildings as limitations, the most successful examples build on their **potential** to support new forms of collective life. In many cases, the qualities that make these projects distinctive stem precisely from their ability to work with existing conditions rather than erase them. Structural limitations, historical traces, and spatial irregularities often become opportunities for adaptation and reinterpretation. What emerges from these examples is a shared acceptance of incompleteness. Rather than seeking definitive solutions, many of the projects remain open to ***change***, allowing future users to **shape** and **redefine spaces** according to evolving needs. Incremental transformation, reversibility, and adaptability appear repeatedly across different contexts and governance models. This perspective is particularly relevant for the Former Custom House, whose location between **neighbourhood fabric** and **metropolitan infrastructure** requires an intervention capable of mediating different conditions rather than resolving them through a single architectural gesture.

Taken together, the case studies do not point towards one ideal model that can simply be replicated in Pietra Alta. Instead, they reveal a series of interconnected principles that can inform the development of the project. Governance, funding, spatial organisation, and architecture are not independent components but closely related dimensions that influence one another. Understanding these relationships has been one of the most important outcomes of the research process. For this reason, the proposed Community Hub should not be understood as an isolated architectural intervention.

Rather, it should be seen as a piece of ***social infrastructure*** capable of **connecting** wider urban transformations with the everyday experiences of residents. The ambition is not only to reactivate an abandoned building, but to create a ***civic anchor*** that can strengthen relationships, support participation, and address a structural gap within the social landscape of North Turin. In this sense, the lessons drawn from the case studies provide not a blueprint, but a framework through which the potential role of the Former Custom House can be reimagined.

1.6 Turin as Project Context- The "Case del Quartiere" Model: A Local Response

Choosing Turin as the context for this research is not accidental. The city provides a particularly interesting environment in which questions of urban regeneration, social inclusion, and community participation have been explored through concrete policies and local initiatives. Historically shaped by industrial development and waves of labour migration, Turin has long faced challenges related to social cohesion, territorial inequalities, and the integration of diverse communities. As industrial restructuring transformed many parts of the city, new forms of social and spatial fragmentation began to emerge, highlighting the need for places capable of supporting community life and strengthening local networks. It is within this context that Turin developed one of the most significant experiences of **community-oriented** social infrastructure in Italy. Beginning in the late 1990s and gaining momentum throughout the 2000s, the municipality started investing in a network of neighbourhood houses and community hubs known as the Case del Quartiere. These spaces were conceived not simply as facilities providing services, but as places where social interaction, cultural exchange, participation, and collective initiatives could take place within the everyday life of the city.

The Case del Quartiere model represents a distinctive approach based on collaboration between **public institutions**, **third-sector organisations**, **local associations**, and **residents**. In most cases, these hubs occupy existing public buildings that have been repurposed and reactivated through **adaptive reuse** strategies. Former schools, municipal offices, and other underused public assets have been transformed into multifunctional spaces managed through agreements between the Municipality of Turin and non-profit organisations. This approach allows public resources to remain accessible while encouraging local actors to play an active role in programming and management.

According to the strategic objectives outlined by the Municipality of Turin (Comune di Torino, 2021), these spaces aim to foster social inclusion, encourage cultural exchange, support grassroots initiatives, and provide flexible environments for educational, cultural, and community activities. Equally important is their role as **connectors** within neighbourhoods that often experience forms of **social** or **spatial fragmentation**. Rather than functioning as isolated facilities, the Case del Quartiere operate as local reference points where different groups, organisations, and generations can interact and collaborate.

The origins of this network can be traced back to 2007, when the first neighbourhood houses were established in Turin. Between 2007 and 2012, eight community hubs were gradually developed across different districts of the city, each responding to the specific characteristics and needs of its local context. Although these projects emerged independently, they progressively began to collaborate, sharing experiences, resources, and strategies. This process eventually led to the creation of an informal network, which gained wider recognition after winning the national cultural competition CheFare in 2014 with the project "Di casa in casa". A further step was taken in 2017 with the formal establishment of the Rete delle Case del Quartiere, the first network of neighbourhood houses of its kind in Italy (Cultural Corners, 2020). Since then, the initiative has become a national reference point for community-oriented urban policies. The experience of Turin has inspired similar projects in other Italian cities, where the model has been adapted to different social, economic, and territorial conditions. These developments reflect a growing awareness of the role that community spaces can play in strengthening social inclusion, civic participation, and collaborative forms of urban governance (Tafter Journal, n.d.).

For this reason, Turin represents much more than a geographical setting for the project developed in this thesis. The city offers a concrete example of how **community hubs** can operate as forms of social infrastructure embedded within wider urban regeneration processes. The experience of the Case del Quartiere demonstrates that architecture alone is rarely sufficient to generate social impact. Rather, meaningful outcomes emerge when physical spaces are supported by governance models, local partnerships, and opportunities for participation. The relevance of the Turin experience extends beyond the local scale and aligns with broader international discussions on **sustainable urban development**. The principles underlying the Case del Quartiere resonate strongly with the objectives of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. In particular, **Goal 11** promotes the creation of cities that are inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable, emphasising the importance of participatory planning, the reuse of existing resources, and access to quality public spaces (United Nations, 2015).

Similar priorities can be observed within contemporary European urban policies, which increasingly encourage place-based approaches, social innovation, and the activation of **underused public assets** for collective benefit (European Commission, 2020). In many respects, Turin anticipated several of these discussions through its long-term investment in **community-oriented** infrastructure and collaborative governance models. This makes the city a particularly relevant case through which to explore the relationship between adaptive reuse, social participation, and urban regeneration.

Ultimately, the decision to develop a community hub project in Turin stems from the city's unique combination of physical, social, and institutional conditions. Here, concepts such as urban commons, social infrastructure, adaptive reuse, and participatory governance are not only theoretical ideas but practices that have already been tested through real projects and local experiences. The **Case del Quartiere** provide evidence that architecture, when embedded within broader social processes, can contribute to rebuilding relationships, strengthening local identity, and creating more inclusive forms of urban life.

Considering all of the above, **Turin** should be understood not simply as the location of the project, but as an **active component** of its conceptual and methodological foundation. The lessons emerging from the city's experience provide an essential framework for understanding the potential role of the proposed Community Hub in Pietra Alta and its contribution to the wider r**egeneration** of **North Turin**.

1.7 Limitations in Community Hubs - Turin context and case studies

1.7.1 Inflexibility in Spatial and Functional Design

One of the recurring challenges that emerged throughout the analysis concerns the **limited adaptability** of many community hubs once they become established. While these spaces are often conceived as places capable of responding to changing community needs, their **physical organisation** does not always support this ambition. In several Turin-based examples, spaces were originally designed around specific functions or service models, resulting in layouts that can be difficult to adapt over time (Comune di Torino, 2020). As community expectations evolve, the capacity to accommodate new activities, forms of work, educational initiatives, or informal uses often becomes constrained by the original **spatial configuration**. This issue is particularly visible in projects developed within existing buildings. In cases such as Bagni Pubblici di Via Agliè, the qualities that make the building historically and architecturally valuable can also limit the possibilities for **transformation**. Structural constraints, preservation requirements, and existing service systems inevitably influence how spaces can be modified and reprogrammed (Comune di Torino, 2020). As a result, **flexibility** becomes a negotiated condition rather than an inherent characteristic.

The comparative analysis suggests that this challenge extends beyond the Turin context. Projects such as Medialab Prado demonstrate that even highly adaptable architectural environments may face limitations when flexibility is constrained by governance structures or institutional programming (Ardizzola & Manrique, 2019). Conversely, highly informal examples such as Bar Bricolage reveal the opposite condition. Their **temporary** and **underdefined character** allows for rapid adaptation and experimentation, yet this same openness often comes at the expense of **continuity** and **long-term stability** (Stavrides, 2016). What emerges from these examples is a broader tension between **permanence** and **adaptability**. Community hubs require enough stability to support long-term social relationships, yet they must also remain capable of responding to changing forms of use. Finding this balance remains one of the most significant challenges in the design and management of contemporary community infrastructure.

1.7.2 Limited Community Engagement in Governance

A second limitation concerns the role of **communities** within **governance** processes. Although participation is frequently presented as a central objective of community hubs, the degree to which **users** are involved in **decision-making** varies considerably across different projects. In many Turin-based examples, governance remains largely concentrated within public institutions or managing organisations, while residents participate primarily through activities and services rather than through direct involvement in shaping the future of the space (Fung, 2006; Comune di Torino, 2020).

While this approach provides stability and organisational continuity, it can also distance decision-making from everyday users. If **participation** is limited to attending activities rather than helping shape them, programmes may struggle to adapt to the changing needs of the community. Over time, this can reduce people's sense of **connection** to the space and their **involvement** in its development.

The Turin experience illustrates this tension particularly well. Community hubs located in areas such as San Salvario, Mirafiori, and Vallette benefit from strong institutional partnerships and established organisational structures, yet they often struggle to develop forms of governance that allow residents to play a more active role in decision-making. More **community-oriented** examples, such as Bagni Pubblici di Via Agliè, demonstrate stronger local embeddedness, but maintaining **long-term participation** introduces its own challenges related to capacity, continuity, and organisational resources (Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo, 2019).

The international case studies reinforce these observations. Granby Four Streets, for example, illustrates the transformative potential of **community ownership** and **bottom-up governance**. At the same time, it highlights the difficulties associated with sustaining long-term engagement and maintaining organisational resilience without continuous civic commitment and external support (Granby Four Streets CLT, 2019). These examples suggest that participation should not be understood as a fixed condition, but as an ongoing process that requires constant maintenance and adaptation.

1.7.3 Fragmentation and Lack of Networked Collaboration

Despite the presence of multiple community hubs across Turin, their **collective impact** is weakened by fragmentation and limited coordination. Many hubs operate as **autonomous** entities with few mechanisms for systematic knowledge exchange or shared programming, resulting in duplicated efforts and inefficient resource use (Comune di Torino, 2020). This **fragmentation** limits the ability of community hubs to address broader social and territorial challenges through coordinated action.

Comparable dynamics are observed in European cases, where successful projects often remain isolated within their immediate contexts. Even when embedded in larger **cultural infrastructures**, as in the case of Medialab Matadero, the capacity of hubs to influence surrounding neighbourhoods depends largely on institutional agendas rather than horizontal collaboration with other civic spaces (Ardizzola & Manrique, 2019). The absence of strong **networks** prevents community hubs from functioning as a distributed system of social infrastructure at the urban scale.

1.7.4 Lack of Systemic Integration

Closely related to **fragmentation** is the question of how community hubs interact with broader urban systems. Throughout the analysis, it became evident that many hubs continue to operate as relatively **isolated facilities**, despite their potential to engage with sectors such as education, welfare, mobility, culture, and public space (Klinenberg, 2018). In many cases, connections with schools, libraries, health services, digital platforms, and environmental networks remain limited or informal. While these spaces often succeed in addressing local needs, their ability to respond to more complex **social challenges** is constrained when they operate independently from other forms of **urban infrastructure**.

The comparative analysis indicates that this issue is not restricted to a particular governance model. Temporary and informal projects may be highly effective in activating spaces and fostering **participation** in the short term, yet they often struggle to establish durable institutional connections. More formalized hubs provide continuity and organizational stability but can sometimes become **inward-looking** and **disconnected** from wider **urban processes** (Stavrides, 2016). This tension highlights the importance of thinking about community hubs not as standalone facilities but as components of larger **urban ecosystems**. Their long-term impact depends not only

on what happens within the building itself, but also on their ability to **connect** people, services, institutions, and public spaces across multiple scales

Toward a Reframing of Community Hubs
Taken together, the limitations identified throughout the Turin case studies and the international precedents suggest that the challenges facing **community hubs** are fundamentally relational rather than purely architectural. Questions of flexibility, participation, collaboration, and connectivity emerge repeatedly across different governance models, spatial configurations, and urban contexts (Klinenberg, 2018; Ostrom, 2010). Rather than undermining the value of community hubs, these limitations reveal the need to rethink them as more **dynamic** and **interconnected** forms of social infrastructure. The most successful examples are not necessarily those with the most innovative architecture or the largest programs, but those capable of **adapting** over time, engaging communities meaningfully, and establishing connections beyond their own boundaries.

This critical reading therefore shifts the focus away from the idea of the community hub as a singular building and towards a broader understanding of it as a socio-spatial system. Architecture remains important, but it is only one component within a larger framework that also includes governance, funding, participation, and institutional relationships. Recognizing these interdependencies provides the basis for developing strategies capable of addressing the limitations identified throughout the analysis. The following section builds on these observations and explores a series of architectural, organizational, and governance-related strategies that can inform the development of more flexible, inclusive, and resilient community hubs, while responding directly to the challenges highlighted by both the Turin experience and the comparative case studies

1.7.5 Overcoming the Limitations
The limitations identified throughout the Turin experience and the comparative case studies do not suggest that the community hub model is ineffective. On the contrary, they reveal the **complexity** of creating spaces that are capable of remaining relevant over time while responding to changing social, economic, and urban conditions. The challenges of spatial rigidity, limited participation, fragmentation, and weak integration should therefore be understood not as failures, but as opportunities to rethink how community hubs are designed, managed, and embedded within the city.

One of the clearest lessons emerging from the research is that these issues cannot be addressed through architecture alone. Spatial design, governance structures, funding models, and organisational frameworks are closely **interconnected**, and the success of a community hub depends on the way these dimensions support one another. Overcoming existing limitations therefore requires an integrated approach in which physical space and social organisation evolve together.

1.7.5.1 Adaptive Reuse- Reprogramming the Existing
`Across the analysed case studies, **adaptive reuse** consistently emerges as one of the most effective tools for creating community-oriented spaces. More than a technical strategy, reuse represents a way of working with existing resources, histories, and identities while introducing new forms of collective use. This approach is particularly relevant in cities such as Turin, where numerous industrial, public, and institutional buildings remain **underused** despite occupying strategic positions within the **urban fabric**. The advantages of adaptive reuse are widely recognised. Reusing **existing structures** reduces material consumption and embodied energy, contributing to more sustainable forms of development (Douglas, 2006). At the same time, it preserves traces of **local history** and collective memory, allowing buildings to retain a connection to their context while accommodating **contemporary needs** (Plevoets & Van Cleempoel, 2011). In many cases, reuse also offers practical advantages, reducing construction costs and enabling interventions to be implemented more quickly than entirely new developments.

Within the context of community hubs, however, adaptive reuse takes on an additional significance. The transformation of an abandoned school, warehouse, or public building into a **shared civic resource** is not only a design decision but also a social and political statement. It demonstrates how existing assets can be reactivated to serve collective purposes and how neglected spaces can become opportunities for **community development**. As Polyák et al. (2021) and Patti and Polyák (2017) suggest, access to space is often the first condition for community initiatives to emerge, allowing local groups to experiment, organise, and establish themselves without the immediate burden of large financial investments.

What became particularly evident throughout the case studies is that successful reuse projects rarely attempt to completely redefine a building. Instead, they work with existing constraints, allowing adaptation to occur gradually over time. In this sense, reuse is not simply about preserving the past but about creating a framework that remains open to **future transformation**.

1.7.5.2 Designing for Flexibility Rather Than Fixed Functions
Another recurring lesson concerns the need for greater **spatial flexibility**. Several of the challenges identified in existing community hubs originate from spaces that were designed around **predetermined programmes** and **fixed uses**. While these arrangements may function effectively in the short term, they often struggle to accommodate changing activities and evolving community needs. The analysed projects suggest an alternative approach. Examples such as Bar Bricolage and Granby Four Streets demonstrate how simple, adaptable environments can support a wide range of uses through openness, incremental transformation, and user appropriation (Stavrides, 2016; Granby Four Streets CLT, 2019). Their success is not necessarily linked to sophisticated architectural solutions but to the ability of spaces to evolve over time. At the same time, the Turin case studies highlight the importance of balancing flexibility with continuity. Projects such as Cascina Roccafranca and beeozanam show that **adaptability** is most effective when supported by a stable organisational framework and a recognisable spatial structure (Comune di Torino, 2020). Completely undefined environments may encourage experimentation, but they can also struggle to support long-term activities and collective ownership.

This suggests that flexibility should not be interpreted as the absence of design. Rather, it should be understood as a capacity embedded within the architecture itself. Spaces should be able to accommodate different activities, users, and temporalities without requiring constant **physical transformation**. Designing for change therefore becomes one of the key challenges for contemporary **community infrastructure**.

1.7.5.3 Participatory Governance and Shared Responsibility

The research also highlights the importance of moving beyond traditional distinctions between **top-down** and **bottom-up** approaches. None of the case studies suggest that either model is sufficient on its own. Instead, the most resilient examples are those that combine **institutional support** with meaningful forms of **community participation**. Projects such as Bagni Pubblici di Via Agliè and beeozanam illustrate how public institutions, third-sector organisations, and local actors can work together within shared governance structures (Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo, 2019). These arrangements provide access to resources and organisational continuity while maintaining a strong connection to l**ocal needs** and aspirations.

Participation in this context should not be understood simply as consultation. Throughout the case studies, it becomes evident that long-term involvement requires mechanisms through which users can actively contribute to the development, management, and evolution of a space (Fung, 2006). Community hubs are most effective when participation is embedded within their organisational structure rather than treated as an occasional activity.

This perspective naturally extends to the design process itself. **Participatory design** offers an opportunity to involve future users in shaping spaces before they are built or transformed. Rooted in the work of architects such as Giancarlo De Carlo and broader participatory movements of the twentieth century, this approach recognises **local communities** as **active contributors** rather than passive recipients. Collaborative workshops, co-design sessions, and open-ended design strategies allow projects to respond more closely to local needs while fostering a stronger sense of ownership. The benefits extend beyond the design phase. When people participate in **shaping a space**, they are often more likely to use it, care for it, and contribute to its long-term development. Participation therefore becomes both a design methodology and a governance strategy.

1.7.5.4 Building Networks Rather Than Isolated Facilities

A further lesson emerging from the research concerns the importance of **collaboration** between **community hubs**. While many of the analysed projects have generated significant local impact, their influence often remains limited when they operate in isolation. The experience of Turin reveals both the strengths and limitations of this condition. Although the Case del Quartiere network represents an important step towards collaboration, opportunities for shared programming, collective learning, and coordinated action remain uneven across the city (Comune di Torino, 2020). As a result, valuable experiences sometimes remain confined to individual neighbourhoods rather than contributing to a broader **urban strategy**. The comparative case studies suggest that community hubs become more resilient when they function as part of **wider networks**. Knowledge exchange, resource sharing, and complementary programming can increase their collective impact and reduce duplication of efforts. Medialab Prado, for example, demonstrates how institutional platforms can facilitate collaboration across sectors and disciplines, even if maintaining openness remains an ongoing challenge (Ardizzola & Manrique, 2019). This points towards a broader understanding of community infrastructure. Rather than conceiving hubs as standalone buildings, they can be understood as **nodes** within larger social and territorial networks, connected through relationships, shared resources, and collective objectives.

1.7.5.5 Integrating Community Hubs Within Urban Systems

Finally, the research highlights the importance of strengthening **connections** between community hubs and wider **urban systems**. Many of the limitations identified throughout the analysis stem from the tendency of these spaces to operate independently from surrounding services, public spaces, educational institutions, and welfare networks. The most successful examples demonstrate a greater capacity to connect different layers of **urban life**. Shared public spaces, relationships with local organisations, connections to mobility networks, and links with cultural or educational institutions all contribute to making community hubs more relevant and accessible in everyday life (Klinenberg, 2018). This suggests that community hubs should be conceived not as isolated destinations but as interfaces capable of **linking** different actors, spaces, and services. Their role extends beyond the building itself and involves **mediating** between formal institutions and informal practices, between local needs and wider urban transformations.

Toward a More Flexible and Networked Community Hub

Taken together, these strategies point towards a broader redefinition of the community hub. The research suggests that the most effective examples are those capable of balancing stability and adaptability, openness and structure, local identity and wider connectivity. Rather than attempting to eliminate the tensions that characterise community infrastructure, successful projects often work with them. Participation and institutional support, permanence and change, formal organisation and informal use are not opposing conditions but complementary dimensions that can reinforce one another when carefully integrated.

The lessons emerging from the Turin experience and the comparative case studies therefore provide more than a collection of design recommendations. They offer a framework for understanding community hubs as flexible, participatory, and networked forms of social infrastructure. This framework becomes particularly relevant when considering the future transformation of the **Former Custom House** in **Pietra Alta**, where architecture, governance, and community development must work together to address a broader condition of **urban fragmentation** and **social disconnection**.

CHAPTER 2

Case Study: Pietra Alta Neighborhood and the Former Custom House

2.1 Context, Purpose, and Research Position

The project is located in **Pietra Alta**, a marginal and fragmented area within the Barriera di Milano district in Turin, historically shaped by industrial development, infrastructural pressure, and successive waves of social transformation. Despite its strategic position in the northern sector of the city, Pietra Alta remains **spatially** and **socially disconnected**, characterized by underused plots, infrastructural barriers, and a lack of cohesive public spaces. This condition results not from absence, but from discontinuous urban development, where large-scale infrastructure and mono-functional zoning have generated residual spaces and weakened local identity.

Within this broader territorial condition, the project focuses on a specific and highly strategic site: the Former Custom House (ex dazio) and its immediate surroundings at the intersection of Corso Vercelli and Corso Giulio Cesare, at the northern gateway of Turin. Embedded within Pietra Alta yet operating at a different scale, the site occupies a high-tension morphological position, functioning as an **urban hinge** between historic residential fabrics, post-war housing experiments, and contemporary high-speed infrastructure. Rather than addressing the district as a whole, the project concentrates on this precise **nodal condition**, where the broader contradictions of Pietra Alta become spatially and socially manifest. At the vertex of this "**nodal triangle**" lies the Former Custom House, once a functional element of the Cinta Daziaria and a symbol of fiscal control at the city's edge. Today, the building exists in a state of functional suspension, having lost its original role and become a neglected **void** associated with informal uses and infrastructural dominance.

The project is grounded taking in consideration that, in such contexts, architecture must operate not as an isolated object but as an **urban strategy** capable of mediating between conflicting scales, flows, and social conditions. While the area is among the most **hyper-connected** zones in the Turin metropolitan system, the historical layering of fiscal boundaries, rail infrastructure, and motorway systems has produced deep **physical** and **social fragmentation**, severing long-standing relationships between residential enclaves and former productive territories.

Within this fragmented threshold, the Former Custom House is identified as a s**trategic catalyst** for **urban regeneration**. By reclaiming this rationalist structure and its surrounding residual spaces, the project seeks to transform a **site of transit** into a **place of pause**, encounter, and social aggregation. The proposed community hub is conceived as a form of social infrastructure—an adaptive and inclusive framework capable of hosting cultural, social, and collective activities over time.

The intervention positions itself as a precise architectural action with urban effects, acting as an "**urban suture**" within a fractured landscape. Through permeability, openness, and the reconfiguration of relationships between interior and exterior spaces and between pedestrian and infrastructural systems, the project aims to reframe the northern entrance of Turin as a place of civic presence and shared use.

From a methodological perspective, the project draws on the analysis of selected community hubs examined through a consistent analytical framework. Shared parameters and variables enable a structured reading of different case studies, informing a site-specific response. The intervention thus operates as both a **design proposal** and a **research inquiry**, testing how architecture can mediate between urban scale and local practices, permanence and adaptability, within a localized yet strategic context.

2.2 Geographical Framework and Administrative Boundaries

Pietra Alta is a peripheral district located in the northernmost sector of Turin (Circoscrizione 6), positioned as a strategic threshold between the **urban fabric** and the **metropolitan hinterland**. Geographically, the neighborhood is defined by clear physical and infrastructural **boundaries** that have contributed to its historical isolation. To the north and west, the territory is delimited by the Turin-Milan railway line, which creates a rigid barrier separating it from the Falchera district. To the east, the boundary is formed by the A4 Motorway and Corso Giulio Cesare, while the southern edge is defined by the natural course of the Stura di Lanzo river (Torino Urban Lab, 2022; MuseoTorino, 2023) Historically known as "Oltrestura," this area was once part of the Contado di Villaretto e Cascinette. Its name, "Pietra Alta" (High Stone), likely derives from a historical landmark or milestone located along the ancient road to Leinì, signaling the neighborhood's long-standing identity

2.2.1 The "Border Landscape" and Infrastructural Collisions

Today, Pietra Alta exists as a "**border landscape**" where different urban scales collide. The **human scale** of the historic SNIA residential blocks is directly confronted by the "**machine scale**" of the high-speed road networks. This geographical condition has led to a state of territorial anomie, where the lack of connectivity between the residential core and the new commercial hubs (such as the "To Dream" district and Porte di Torino) forces a dependency on vehicular movement. The specific "triangle" of the site—formed by the intersection of Corso Vercelli, Corso Giulio Cesare, and the Sphinx roundabout—represents the point where these infrastructural systems converge most clearly. It is here that the **geographical isolation** of the neighborhood is most visible, as the Former Custom House sits at the exact point where the city's historic entrance meets its modern, high-speed bypass (Torino Urban Lab, 2022).

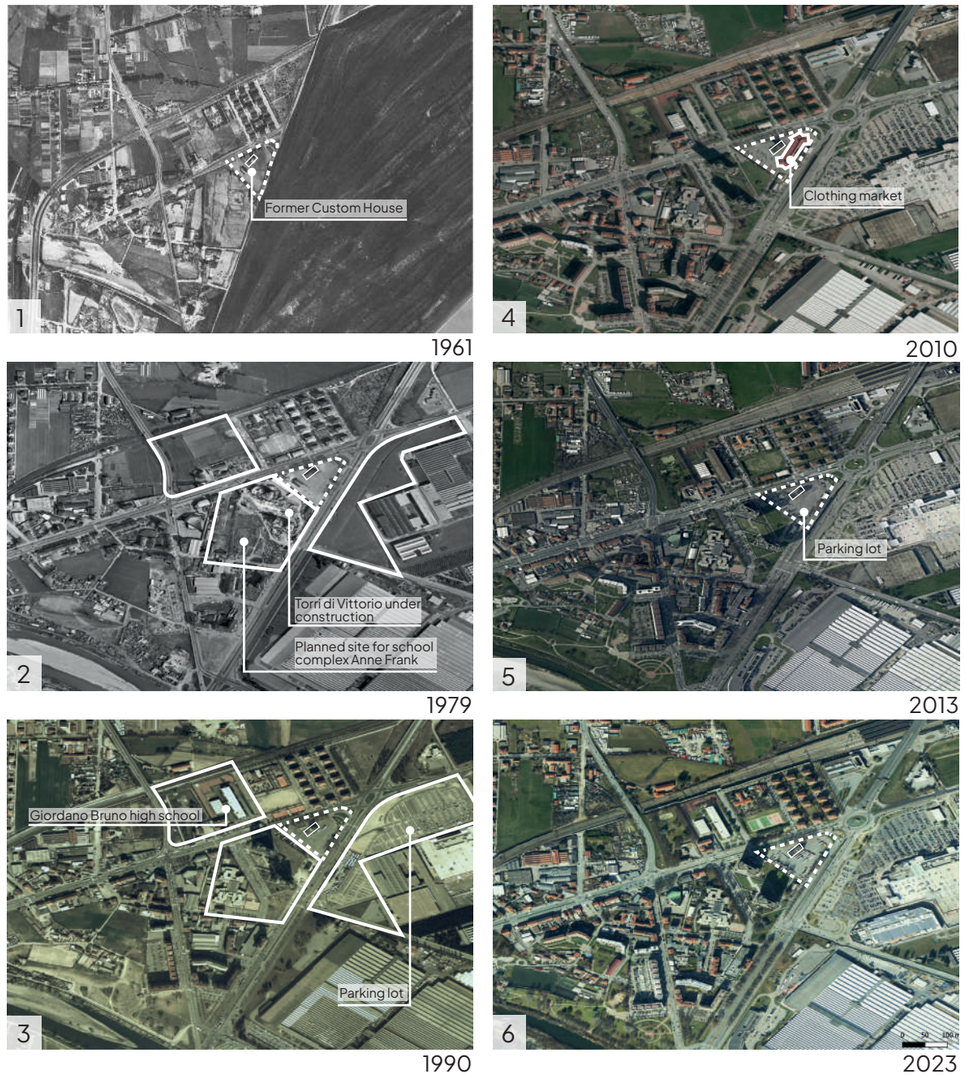
2.3 Morphological Evolution: From Rural Gateway to Industrial Enclave

Until the late 19th century, Pietra Alta was characterized by a rural palimpsest of farmsteads (cascine) and cultivated fields, serving as a vital crossroads for trade routes directed toward Chivasso and Milan. However, the **urban morphology** underwent a radical transformation in the early 20th century, driven by the industrialization of Turin's northern quadrant. The land-use history of Pietra Alta is a classic example of the 20th-century "**industrialization of the periphery**", where rural voids were systematically filled by productive and infrastructural giants (MuseoTorino, 2024). This evolution can be categorized into three distinct morphological phases:

Phase 1: The Agricultural Palimpsest (Pre-1920s)Until the early 1920s, the area was dominated by an agrarian landscape characterized by **"wild" woods** and traditional Piemontese farmsteads (cascine) along the Stura river. Aerial records from the early 20th century show a territory defined by the "Slow City" logic, where the primary land use was the cultivation of grains and forage, and the only structural interventions were the historic Strada Reale (now Corso Giulio Cesare) and the original riverbank (Archeocarta, 2021). During this period, the site of the current Former Custom House was a simple rural crossroad.

Phase 2: Industrial Saturation and Paternalistic Planning (1924–1960s) The introduction of the **SNIA Viscosa** plant in 1924 acted as the primary **agent** of change, converting over 200,000 square meters of agricultural land into a concentrated industrial site. The soil went through a "rationalization": the organic field patterns were replaced by the rigid **grid** of the Villaggio SNIA and the massive horizontal volumes of the manufacturing sheds. This phase introduced the "Machine Scale" to Pietra Alta, further reinforced by the 1932 opening of the A4 Motorway, which physically sliced through the remaining agricultural parcels and created the "Rotonda della Sfinge". Together with the subsequent construction of the the Stura intermodal node further solidified this **fragmentation**, turning the former gateway into a "transit-oriented non-place" (Torino Torino Urban Lab, 2022). It was on of the most significant morphological "imprint" occurred. Viscosa factory and its accompanying worker's village (Villaggio SNIA). Designed by Vittorio Tornielli, the village was a "**company town**" experiment, intended to house 15,000 workers in a self-sufficient but ***isolated community*** (Favero, 1979, as cited in MuseoTorino, 2023). This intervention introduced a new urban logic—the "industrial enclave"—which broke the historical continuity of the agricultural landscape.

Phase 3: Post-Industrial Fragmentation and Commercial Re-layering (1970s–Present) The final transformation occurred as the productive identity of the area collapsed. The acquisition of the SNIA plant by Michelin in 1954 and its subsequent closure led to a period of "brownfield" dormancy (MuseoTorino, 2024). The most recent rupture consist on the **conversion** of the Michelin site into the To Dream Urban District, an "Open Mall" that replaces the **industrial production** logic with a **commercial-leisure consumption** logic (Lombardini22, 2022). The "Green" agricultural heritage has been entirely replaced by a "Grey" landscape of asphalt, dominated by Stura parking station and the parking loops surrounding the Former Custom House.



Source: Satellite imagery 1 from Archivio Storico della Città di Torino; satellite imagery 2–6 from GeoPortale Torino.

Ex-SNIA village
A4 motorway
Rotonda della Sfinge
Corso Vercelli
Corso Giulio Cesare
Ex SNIA Viscosa
factory
(today- Porte di Torino
shopping mall)
Stura river

2.4 Social Context

Demographic profile and Population Dynamics
The demographic evolution of Pietra Alta is characterized by a significant contraction and **aging** of the resident population. Between 1971 and 2001, the neighborhood suffered a dramatic demographic decline, losing nearly 50% of its inhabitants, falling from approximately 6,000 to 3,105 residents (Torino Urban Lab, 2022). The population is heavily skewed toward the elderly; residents over 65 years old represent a high percentage of the total, while the aging index (the ratio of elderly to youth) is nearly double the average of the city of Turin (Torino Urban Lab, 2022). There is a prevalence of **single-person households**, often composed of elderly individuals living alone in the historical housing stock of the SNIA village (Torino Urban Lab, 2022). In recent years, the percentage of **foreign residents** has increased to approximately 10.6%, with the largest groups originating from Romania, Morocco, and Egypt, creating a new layer of cultural complexity in the district (Torino Urban Lab, 2022).

Services and Activities
The functional analysis of the neighborhood reveals a landscape of "**service desertification**," where institutional and commercial presences are minimal. The area is served by the "Anna Frank" elementary school and the "XXV Aprile" middle school, which act as primary social anchors, though they are physically separated from the SNIA village by the A4 infrastructure (Torino Urban Lab, 2022). Historic retail activities have largely disappeared, leaving only 12 functional commercial units (mainly bars, tobacco shops, and small groceries) compared to over 40 units identified in the 1960s (Torino Urban Lab, 2022). The only formal "**Third Place**" is the Parish of San Michele Arcangelo, which manages an oratory and sports fields that represent the sole **aggregation point** for the youth population (Torino Urban Lab, 2022).

Transportation and Infrastructural Constraint
Pietra Alta is paradoxically defined by **high external accessibility** and **low internal connectivity**. The district is home to the Torino Stura railway station and the multi-story **Movicentro parking** (617 spaces), which serve regional commuters (Torino Urban Lab, 2022). The **A4 motorway** entrance and the railway lines create "impassable borders" for pedestrians. The connection between the residential core and the Stura station is described as a hostile route through "industrial voids".
The Stura River: Despite its potential as a green lung, the river remains disconnected from the neighborhood fabric due to the lack of safe pedestrian crossings and the presence of the motorway overpass.

2.4.1 Neighborhood perceptions

According to responses collected through the "Laboratorio di Quartiere" questionnaire administered to local residents (Torino Urban Lab, 2022), provides a direct insight into the residents' perceptions of their environment:
Sense of Insecurity: 72% of respondents identified the area around the Former Custom House and the parking lots as a source of high perceived insecurity, particularly at night.
Abandonment Perception: A recurring theme in the qualitative answers is the "feeling of being forgotten" by the central municipality, with 85% of participants citing the lack of maintenance in public lighting and green areas.
Proposed Priorities: When asked for intervention priorities, the residents highlighted three main needs:

- A **multifunctional space** for local associations (recovering the Former Custom House).
- Improvement of the **pedestrian connection** to the Stura station.
- Revitalization of the ground floors of the SNIA village for social activities.

At the same time, several other studies underline that residents tend to identify environmental qualities—such as the presence of **green areas** and proximity to the Stura river—as key positive features of the neighborhood, often compensating for deficiencies in service provision (Fondazione ULAOP CRT, 2024). These findings suggest a polarized perception of Pietra Alta, where natural assets and residential quietness coexist with feelings of **isolation** and limited access to everyday services.

Identity Attachment: Despite the degradation, 65% of residents in the SNIA village reported a strong **sense of belonging** to the district, emphasizing the historical memory of the "worker's village" as a core value.

Residents' perceptions of Pietra Alta have been explored through a combination of participatory tools, qualitative interviews, and survey-based investigations conducted by different institutions and research groups. Urban studies focusing on Turin Nord consistently report a perceived lack of neighborhood-scale services, particularly in relation to healthcare facilities, small retail, cultural spaces, and indoor meeting places, alongside a strong reliance on large commercial centers located outside the immediate residential area (Torino Urban Lab Torino, 2022). The results of the study confirm that the **Former Custom House** is the critical **node** for the regeneration of area. Its current state as an "uncontrolled spot" contributes to the fragmentation of the district, but the data extacted from the residents reveal a latent desire for its **reactivation**. Transforming this building into a Community Hub addresses the identified "social voids" by providing a neutral ground for the aging population and a creative outlet for the new immigrant generations.

2.5 Geographical location of the Former Custom House site

The specific area of intervention occupies a high-tension morphological position within the northern gateway of Turin. While the broader district of Pietra Alta is defined by its industrial past, the project site functions as a strategic **urban hinge**, a point of convergence where the historic city fabric, residential experiments, and contemporary high-speed infrastructure collide. This "nodal triangle" is strictly delimited by three major urban vectors: To the North-West (Corso Vercelli): The historic axis that served as the primary connection between the city center and the Villaggio SNIA. This boundary represents the "**human scale**" of the neighborhood's residential memory. To the East (Corso Giulio Cesare): The massive infrastructural vector of the northern entrance to Turin. This boundary represents the "**machine scale**", characterized by high-velocity transit and the physical barrier of the motorway ramps. To the North-East (Rotonda della Sfinge / A4 Motorway): A large **distribution centre** is located between these two areas. Although it plays an important role in the movement of goods and vehicles, it also makes pedestrian access more difficult. The Torri di Vittorio dominate the southern skyline. As the tallest residential towers in Turin, they are one of the area's most recognisable landmarks and stand out from the lower buildings that surround them. Within this dense intersection of flows sits the Former Custom House in study. Positioned at the main vertex of this triangle, it is no longer a functional gateway for tax

collection, but rather a "**functional void**" caught between the residential stability of the Torri di Vittorio and the commercial expansion of the nearby shopping districts. It is precisely within this **fragmented threshold** that the project identifies the opportunity for an "urban suture." By reclaiming this landmark, the design seeks to transform a site of transit into a place of pause and social aggregation.

2.5.1 Immediate Urban Landmarks and Infrastructure

Social Fabrics - The Villaggio SNIA and the Torri Di Vittorio

Villaggio SNIA - Constructed between 1924 and 1927, the Villaggio SNIA represents the model of the "Company Town" (MuseoTorino, 2024). Designed by the Società Nazionale Industria Applicazioni Viscosa to house its employees, the village was built as a **self-contained unit** with its own internal logic and community services (MuseoTorino, 2024). Morphologically, it stands as a low-density, human-scale residential "social island" within a sea of industrial and infrastructural giants (Torino Cronaca, 2020).

Torri Di Vittorio - In 1978, the introduction of the Torri Di Vittorio added a monumental vertical dimension to the site (Loquis, 2018). These 70–meter towers designed by Giuseppe Varaldo were designed as a visual "sign" of arrival for the city, housing the high-density social populations resulting from the massive migrations of that era (Loquis, 2018). They represent the final layer of the "Modernist Dream" in North Turin, serving as a **visual compass** for the entire district. While the towers represent the Vertical City, the Former Custom House represents the Human-Scale City, offering a rare opportunity to re-establish a ground-level civic interface in a neighborhood dom-

The Michelin industrial site was once the economic engine of the district, providing jobs and a sense of "productive identity" to the area (MuseoTorino, 2024). Its replacement by the To Dream Urban District signals a shift toward a "**consumptive identity.**" While the 1924 Villaggio SNIA was built to integrate home and work (MuseoTorino, 2024), the To Dream mall is an "introverted" urban district that focuses inward on consumption (Lombardini22, 2022). This 270,000 sqm project functions as a city within a city, but it is fundamentally private. The Former Custom House sits on the edge of this development, acting as a crucial "border post" where public interests can be defended against total privatization (Lombardini22, 2022).

Social and Sacred Infrastructure — Schools and Churches

The spiritual landscape of the area is a direct reflection of its demographic shifts. Originally, the only place of worship was the small chapel within the Villaggio SNIA, built to serve the immediate needs of the industrial workers (MuseoTorino, 2024). However, as the Pietra Alta district expanded in the 1960s, a more monumental presence was required.The schools in the area were built as part of the mid-century "zoning" logic, attempting to provide local services to the burgeoning working-class population.

Church of San Michele Arcangelo - Located at the corner of Corso Vercelli and Via Ivrea, this church was constructed between 1966 and 1971 (Chiese Italiane, 2023). Designed by architects Enzo Dolci and Antonino Tripodi, it replaced the older SNIA chapel with a fan-shaped brutalist structure that mirrors the modern architectural language of the nearby Torri Di Vittorio (Chiese Italiane, 2023). It serves as a ***critical social hub***, featuring an oratory and meeting rooms that counteract the isolation caused by the surrounding motorway (MuseoTorino, 2015).

Anna Frank Plesso Scolastico XXV - In a densely populated area like Barriera di Milano in the 1970s, where local schools had to operate double shifts, this new complex was built between 1979 and 1981. The structure aims to be a **landmark** for the neighborhood and to accommodate the demographic expansion of the industrial suburbs (IC Carolina Picchio, 2023). Once home to the "Il Pulcino" nursery school, it also houses the "La Rotonda" playroom, with an entrance on Via Tempia. It accommodates 20 elementary school classes and 12 middle school classes and one kindergarten. (Museo Torino, 2024)

The Giordano Bruno High School is located in the northwestern part of the City of Turin, on the left bank of the Po River, bordered by Corso Vercelli to the south, Via Marinuzzi to the east, and the Turin Rebaudengo Fossata – Turin Stura railway line to the north. It was built in the 1980s, more precisely between 1986 and 1988, and is home to the scientific high school specializing in linguistics and applied sciences. In the 2021–2022 school year, the school housed approximately 50 classes for a total of just under 1,100 students. The latest intervention was concluded in 2024 financed were financed with funds from the National Recovery and Resilience Plan. (Torino Camnbia n.d)

Infrastructure as a Catalyst for Fragmentation

The A4 Motorway: The construction of the A4 Torino-Milano motorway acted as a definitive **rupture** in the urban fabric of Pietra Alta even though it transformed the area from a rural fringe into a high-speed threshold.While it connected Turin to the European economic network, it physically severed the relationship between the Villaggio SNIA and the agricultural lands to the north (MuseoTorino, 2024). The Former Custom House was "trapped" within the resulting infrastructural loop, transforming it from a "gatekeeper" of the road into an **isolated island** surrounded by asphalt.

The Stura Transport Node - The Stazione di Torino Stura was not originally designed as a passenger hub but as an i**ndustrial gateway**. The original passenger building was inaugurated in 1926 to support the massive expansion of the Abbadia di Stura industrial zone. It primarily served the SNIA Viscosa plant, providing a direct rail link for raw materials and finished textiles. Following the closure of SNIA in 1954 and the subsequent decline of other local industrial giants like Michelin and IVECO, the station lost its primary function as a freight terminal. Within the framework of the "Passante Ferroviario" (way bypass) project, the station was entirely rebuilt and expanded to nine tracks (up from three) to serve as a key **node** for the high-speed line towards Milan and the local Metropolitan Railway Service (SFM).

The Movicentro and the Parcheggio Stura (Interchange Parking)

Complementing the station is the Parcheggio Stura, a cornerstone of Turin's strategy for "Park-and-Ride" mobility. The feasibility study for the "Movicentro Stura" and the multi-story interchange parking was approved by the Turin City Council in 2001. This was part of a broader territorial plan to manage the massive automotive flow from the A4 motorway. The facility, currently operated by GTT (Gruppo Torinese Trasporti), offers 617 parking spaces. It was designed to allow commuters from northern provinces to leave their private vehicles and enter the city center via Line 4 tram or the SFM train lines. While highly functional, the parking structure contributes to the "asphaltization" of the site. It reinforces the area's identity as a **space of transit** rather than stay, physically isolating the residential Pietra Alta from the railway infrastructure.

2.6 The Node as a Project Catalyst

The analysis of Pietra Alta reveals a clear contradiction. Although it is one of the most connected areas in the Turin metropolitan region, it remains physically and socially **fragmented**. This condition has developed over time. The **Cinta Daziaria** first established the area as a **boundary** within the city, while the later construction of the A4 motorway and Torino Stura station further reinforced this separation.These infrastructures, while serving the macroscopic logistical needs of the "City Gateway," have acted as surgical cuts, severing the historic relationship between the local residential fabric—exemplified by the Villaggio SNIA—and the productive territories of the former Michelin plant. The contemporary transformation of the Michelin site into the To Dream Urban District represents a significant shift in the area's power dynamics, where a formerly **public-industrial** identity has been replaced by a privatized, consumptive logic. In this post-industrial context, the remaining social anchors—including the San Michele Arcangelo Church, the local primary and secondary school complexes, and the Stura intermodal parking node—exist as isolated "islands" of service within a landscape dominated by asphalt and high-speed transit flows. The current state of the Former Custom House, which functions as a site of functional suspension and informal housing, is the physical manifestation of this neglect and urban "**void**".

The **complexity** of this site is not merely a constraint but the primary generator for the proposed architectural intervention. By reclaiming this Rationalist structure and the surrounding uncontrolled parking areas, the project aims to **transform** a "non-place" of transit into a "place" of stay. The proposed Community Hub acts as a strategic suture, utilizing the building's historical administrative role to **redefine** the northern entrance of Turin—moving from a site of mere economic extraction or transit to one of civic presence and social integration for the residents of Pietra Alta.

Giordano Bruno high school
Kindergarten
Ex SNIA houses
(residential buildings)
Stura car parking
A4 motorway
Torri di Vittorio
Project: Community Hub
Void area: 13081 sqm
Building footprint: 387.29 sqm
Location: Pietra Alta, Turin
ToDream District
Former Auchan Torino
S.Michelle Arcangelo parish
Anna Frank elementary school

2.7 Urban Interventions and the Missing Civic Anchor in North Turin

The **northern** sector of **Turin** is currently undergoing a significant phase of transformation driven by public and private investments, large-scale redevelopment projects, environmental remediation programmes, and infrastructure upgrades. These interventions are **reshaping** mobility patterns, land use, and economic activity across neighbourhoods such as Aurora, Barriera di Milano, and Rebaudendo (Comune di Torino, 2022; Comune di Torino, 2023). Among the most significant projects is Metro Linea 2, which will strengthen connections across the city and reinforce the role of Rebaudengo as a major intermodal hub linked to the Torino Rebaudendo Fossata railway station (Comune di Torino, 2021). While these investments improve accessibility and connectivity, they remain primarily focused on movement and metropolitan flows rather than on the creation of spaces that support everyday social interaction.

Other mobility-related interventions follow a similar logic. The ongoing reconfiguration of Piazza Baldissera, historically one of Turin's most congested **traffic nodes**, together with the introduction of safer cycling infrastructure along Corso Vercelli and Via Cena, seeks to improve accessibility, road safety, and sustainable mobility throughout District 6 (Comune di Torino, 2023). These projects contribute positively to environmental performance and urban accessibility, yet they remain largely centred on movement and **circulation**. While they improve the experience of **travelling** through the area, they offer fewer opportunities for people to stop, gather, or develop a sense of **belonging to place**.

Alongside these infrastructural investments, several **regeneration** programmes are focusing on the quality of public space and neighbourhood liveability. The Aurora–Barriera di Milano regeneration framework, which includes interventions along Via Palermo and Via Martorelli, introduces a coordinated strategy aimed at improving streetscapes, pedestrian environments, lighting systems, and green areas in neighbourhoods that have historically faced social and spatial challenges (Comune di Torino, 2023). Through a series of distributed interventions, the programme seeks to make **public spaces** safer, more accessible, and more attractive for everyday use.

A similar objective can be observed in the upgrading of Parco Sempione, which contributes to strengthening the network of **green infrastructure** across North Turin. Beyond providing recreational opportunities, these interventions improve environmental quality and reinforce ecological continuity within a densely urbanised context. Together, they reflect an increasing awareness of the role that public space and **environmental quality** play in supporting urban well-being.

Environmental remediation forms another important component of the ongoing transformation. In the Basse di Stura area, long-standing industrial contamination is being addressed through the reclamation of the Deltasider municipal site and the adjacent Former Cimi Montubi area. These projects involve complex operations aimed at securing contaminated land, stabilising former industrial deposits, and restoring environmental safety through a combination of technical and landscape interventions (Comune di Torino, 2022). Once completed, the reclaimed areas will be converted into ***public green spaces***, allowing land that was previously inaccessible and environmentally compromised to become part of the city's open-space network.
Although these interventions are fundamental from an environmental perspective, their primary focus remains **ecological** recovery rather than the creation of social infrastructure. They improve environmental conditions and public accessibility but do not directly address the need for spaces capable of supporting collective life, participation, or community activities.

At the same time, private and semi-private investments are reshaping the economic geography of North Turin. One of the most visible examples is the ToDream Urban District, developed on the former Michelin industrial site. The project has introduced new commercial, leisure, and entertainment functions, creating a **contemporary destination** that has significantly altered the image and attractiveness of the area (ToDream Urban District, 2020). Similar dynamics can be observed in the redevelopment of former logistics and industrial sites such as the Former Gondrand area, where regeneration strategies focus primarily on productive, commercial, and mixed-use programmes aimed at stimulating economic activity and employment opportunities (Comune di Torino, 2019). While these developments contribute to economic revitalisation and attract new users to the area, they are largely oriented towards consumption, commerce, and private investment. Their contribution to civic life and community-building remains more limited, raising questions about how the benefits generated by these transformations are distributed among local residents.

In parallel with physical regeneration projects, several initiatives focus on improving **public services** and **community facilities**. Educational buildings, including Scuola Novaro and the former Pergolesi school, are undergoing refurbishment programmes intended to improve energy performance, spatial quality, and learning environments (Comune di Torino, 2023). Other interventions target social housing complexes and welfare facilities, particularly along Via Leoncavallo, with the aim of strengthening local support services and improving living conditions.

Cultural infrastructure also plays an increasingly important role within this broader transformation process. Projects involving Biblioteca Don Milani, Rita Atria, Cascina Marchesa, Casa della Cultura Mozart, and Biblioteca Primo Levi seek to expand the role of libraries beyond their traditional functions. These spaces are increasingly being reimagined as **neighbourhood cultural centres** capable of hosting educational activities, workshops, community events, and opportunities for social interaction (Comune di Torino, 2023). In doing so, they contribute to strengthening local identity and fostering everyday forms of social engagement.

Complementing these physical interventions, the City of Turin has also developed a network of digital facilitation services designed to support access to online public services and improve digital literacy. Through permanent and mobile facilities located in public buildings, social housing complexes, employment centres, and initiatives such as the Bibliobus, these programmes aim to reduce digital exclusion, particularly among elderly residents and more vulnerable groups (Comune di Torino, 2024). Although less visible from a spatial perspective, these initiatives contribute to a broader system of **social support** distributed across the city.

All these projects reveal the scale and diversity of the investments currently reshaping North Turin. Yet when viewed collectively, they also reveal a striking contradiction. Despite being surrounded by major infrastructure projects, environmental investments, commercial developments, and service upgrades, the Pietra Alta area remains largely absent from **regeneration strategies** specifically focused on **community life**

and social infrastructure. This condition becomes particularly evident around the Rotonda della Sfinge and the Former Custom House. Positioned at the intersection of important mobility corridors and in close proximity to several ongoing transformations, the area occupies a strategic location within the changing geography of North Turin. Yet it lacks dedicated **civic spaces** capable of translating these wider investments into everyday benefits for local residents.

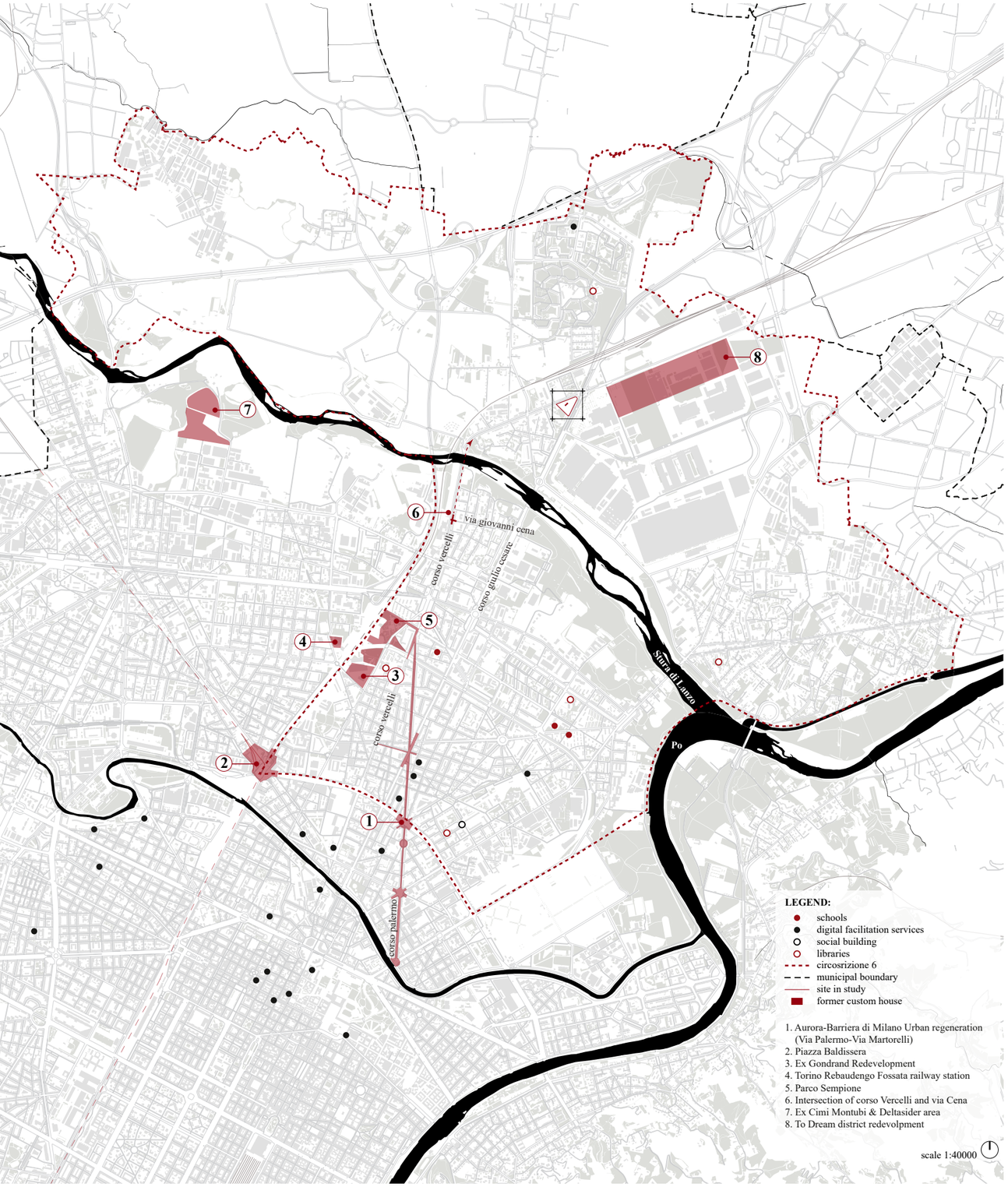
The mapping of Turin's Case del Quartiere network further reinforces this observation. While community hubs such as Cascina Roccafranca, Cecchi Point, and Bagni Pubblici di Via Agliè provide important social infrastructure in other parts of the city, no equivalent facility exists within or immediately adjacent to Pietra Alta (Comune di Torino, 2020). The closest reference point, Bagni Pubblici di Via Agliè, performs a valuable role in addressing issues of inclusion, welfare, and everyday support. However, its scale, catchment area, and location limit its ability to respond directly to the specific spatial and infrastructural conditions that characterise Pietra Alta.

Taken together, the ongoing transformations in North Turin reveal a clear **imbalance**. While the area is benefiting from major investments in mobility, environmental remediation, commercial development, and public services, Pietra Alta remains largely excluded from initiatives focused on **community life** and **social infrastructure**. The absence of a community hub is particularly evident when compared to other districts served by facilities such as Cascina Roccafranca, Cecchi Point, and Bagni Pubblici di Via Agliè (Comune di Torino, 2020). In this context, the adaptive reuse of the Former Custom House offers an opportunity to address a significant gap, introducing a ***civic anchor*** capable of connecting wider urban transformations with the everyday needs of local residents.

1.Public Bathrooms in via Agliè
2.Barrito
3.Neighborhood house
4.House in the park
5.Roccafranca farmhouse
6.Cecchi point
7.Chaos workshops
8.More spacefour

Case del Quartiere of Turin

Manifesto of the Rete delle Case del Quartiere. Adapted from Rete delle Case del Quartiere (n.d.).



2.7.1 A Multi-Scalar Reading of Urban Transformations in North Turin

The mapping of urban transformations in North Turin intentionally brings together large-scale infrastructural and commercial projects with smaller, localized interventions such as school refurbishments, library upgrades, and the implementation of community-oriented services. This approach does not seek to equate interventions operating at **different scales** or with different objectives, but rather to reveal the broader logic of public and private investment shaping the northern districts. By visualizing these layers simultaneously, the map highlights how **urban change** is occurring through a combination of metropolitan-scale infrastructures, sector-specific service improvements, and incremental maintenance actions, all contributing to the transformation of the area in fragmented and functionally specialized ways.

This multi-scalar mapping makes visible a critical **spatial condition**: despite the density of ongoing investments—ranging from transport infrastructure and commercial redevelopment to educational and cultural facility upgrades—there is a notable absence of spaces dedicated to **collective use** and everyday social interaction within the Pietra Alta area. While schools and libraries reinforce essential services and large projects reshape flows and economic dynamics, none of these interventions provide a **spatial anchor** capable of mediating between mobility, daily life, and community practices. The exclusion of Pietra Alta and the Former Custom House from both strategic regeneration programmes and local-scale community investments is therefore not incidental, but symptomatic of a planning approach that prioritizes efficiency, sectoral upgrading, and circulation over the creation of shared **civic environments**. In this sense, the mapping operates as a critical analytical tool, exposing the structural gap that the proposed community hub seeks to address.

Methodological note: The map includes only facilities and buildings that are part of active or planned regeneration, refurbishment, or development programmes. Schools, libraries, and public services are mapped selectively to indicate ongoing interventions rather than their general presence within the area.

2.8 Building selection - Synthetic Integration of Community Need

As established in the preceding socio-territorial analysis, the design strategy for this site is rooted in an empirical understanding of local requirements captured during the neighborhood surveys. The project moves from data to architectural action by addressing the three critical pillars identified by the community: ***Reversing Urban Insecurity through Active Presence:*** Building upon the previously discussed finding that 72% of residents perceive the Former Custom House area as high-risk, the project introduces constant social activity to provide the necessary "eyes on the street" that the current vacant state lacks. ***Facilitating Strategic Links:*** Reflecting the community's explicit desire for improved access to the surroundings, the intervention prioritizes the restoration of human-scale connectivity to unlock the site's potential as a **transit-oriented** gateway. ***Structured Transformation of Residual Voids:*** In response to the 85% of respondents who cited a lack of maintained public space, the project transforms the existing parking "voids" into a high-quality public ground, thereby validating the site selection as a civic necessity.

2.8.1 Customs Buildings as Urban Thresholds - A short historical overview of the evolution of Turin's Daziary Rings

The expansion of Turin has historically been regulated by its "cinta daziaria" (taxation walls), which served both as **fiscal boundaries** and urban containment measures. The history of the Former Custom House is strongly linked to the fiscal and physical boundaries of Turin. In 1853, a defensive and taxation wall, known as the Cinta Daziaria, was established to regulate the entry of goods and collect consumption taxes (Wikipedia, 2024). However, as the city underwent rapid **industrialization** in the late 19th century, this boundary became a bottleneck for development.

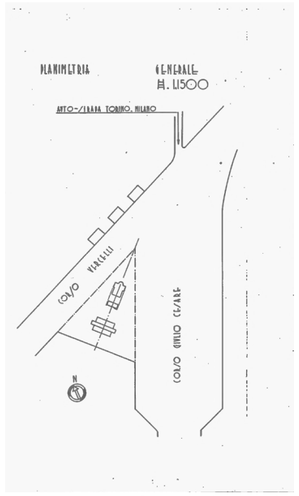
This first ring largely followed the current path of the "Corsi" system (Corso Regina Margherita, Corso Vittorio Emanuele II). As the city industrialized, these walls became a barrier to growth, leading to a "tax-evasion" urbanism where factories were built just outside the walls to avoid duties (MuseoTorino, 2015).

In 1912, a second, wider "cinta daziaria" was constructed to encompass the newly forming industrial suburbs (Vivoin, 2022). This expansion was not merely administrative; it defined the "Barriere" (barriers) of the city such as Barriera di Milano and Barriera di Lanzo. —**frontier zones** where the urban fabric met the rural landscape. The custom houses (Dazi) built during this era were typically modest, neoclassical, or eclectic pavilions. Unlike the decorative 19th-century custom booths of the first ring, the custom houses of the 1912 expansion were designed with a focus on administrative efficiency and territorial control (Vivoin, 2022). However, the building in Pietra Alta belongs to a later, more complex phase of this system, marking one of the final evolutionary steps of the city's tax boundaries before their general abolition in 1930 (Wikipedia, 2024).

The Late Rationalist Ring: T**he Former Custom House in Pietra Alta**

The Former Custom House in Pietra Alta represents the final evolutionary stage of the dazio system. While the general "dazio" was abolished nationally in 1930, specific municipal checkpoints remained for local surveillance and health inspections until later decades (Wikipedia, 2024).

The Shift in Style: By the mid-1930s, the neoclassical style of older toll houses was The



General site plan

replaced by Italian Rationalism. This explains the unique architecture of the building in study—the semicircular glass tower and the rigid geometric volumes—which served to project an image of a modern, efficient, and technologically advanced state (MuseoTorino, 2015).

Location Logic: The building was placed at the convergence point for the historic Strada Reale d'Italia (Corso Giulio Cesare) and the emerging motorway infrastructure (Torino Cronaca, 2020).

2.8.2 The Former Custom House at Corso Vercelli 440

Constructed in 1936, the Former Customs House at Corso Vercelli 440 is an example of rationalist architecture, reflecting the architectural style promoted during the Fascist era.

Elevations of the Custom House at the crossroad of Corso Vercelli and Giulio Cesare
Source: Archivio Storico della Città di Torino

The Former Custom House of Pietra Alta is a historical administrative structure that served as a customs point for the city. Accoridng to the National law n. 82/1959: physical dazi buildings were transferred to municipal property for other municipal uses (altri usi comunali). (Repubblica Italiana, 1959). By that time many custom offices across Torino get reassigned to the Corpo di Polizia Municipale. In 2000 Police Headquarters assigned to the Former Custom building of Corso Vercelli moved out. According to MuseoTorino (2015), the building later functioned as a district meeting center (Centro Incontri) for the local community.

It is a distinct architectural volume that stands in **contrast** to the surrounding industrial and residential landscape. In recent years, it has become a focal point of urban debate due to its **proximity** to major regeneration projects and its occupation by local social movements (Radio Blackout, 2022). The building's design emphasized functionality and modernity, aligning with the regime's ideals. Over the decades, the building's function shifted from administrative offices to various uses, including periods of abandonment. In recent years, the building has been repurposed for social and cultural activities, serving as a community hub. This transformation underscores the site's adaptability and its continued relevance to the neighborhood's social fabric.

Note: The complete set of original archival drawings from 1936 is provided in Appendix A.

Category 1
Customs Office

1853

The first custom ring

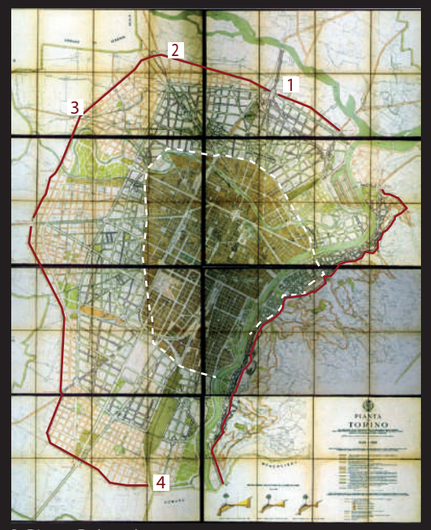
3-Piazza Crispi
4-Piazza Bernini
5-Piazza Nizza

The custom ring

Artisans and merchants settled beyond the walls to escape the consumption tax.

Category 2
Customs Office
Piazza Cirene
1913

The second custom ring



1-Piazza Rebaudengo
2.Piazza Stampalia
3-Piazza Sirene
4-Bengasi

Second custom ring
First custom ring

1930

B.Mussolini demolishes city's toll walls

1936

Construction of the custom building at the intersection of St. Vercelli and Giulio Cesare, Pietra Alta

CITTÀ DI TORINO

Avviso d'Asta

UNICA E DEFINITIVA A TERMINI ABBREVIATI

per l'appalto della costruzione di edificio ad angolo dei corsi Vercelli e Giulio Cesare

Il Podestà
Ugo SARTIRANA

1945

PIETRA ALTA

National law n. 82/1959:
physical dazi buildings were transferred to municipal property for “altri usi comunali”.
Many ex-dazio offices across Torino get reassigned to the Corpo di Polizia Municipale

1959

1972

The tax collection stops

1979

Neighborhood expansion in Turin

Reproduction of the historical overview of the evolution of Turin’s Daziary Rings

2.8.3 Current Condition and The Social Potential of the Former Custom House

Today, the Former Custom House stands as one of the most recognisable yet underutilised buildings within the Pietra Alta district. Located at the intersection of Corso Vercelli and Corso Giulio Cesare, it occupies a **strategic position** between the surrounding residential fabric and the main mobility corridors of northern Turin. Despite its visibility and historical significance, the site currently represents a **fragmented urban space** that remains **disconnected** from the everyday life of the neighbourhood.

The building is presently occupied by families without formal authorisation from the municipality, a condition that has complicated both its management and its future redevelopment. As part of the site investigation carried out for this research, it was not possible to access the interior of the building, as entry was denied during the visit. Consequently, the analysis of the existing structure is based on direct external observation, archival documentation, and available public sources describing its current condition (Radio Blackout, 2022; Torino Cronaca, 2024).

The surrounding open spaces reinforce this condition of **abandonment**. During several site visits, the area appeared to function primarily as an informal **parking space**, where authorised and unauthorised parking coexist without a clear spatial organisation. Large paved surfaces, the absence of defined public spaces, and the lack of activities at ground level contribute to an environment that feels **disconnected** from the rest of the neighbourhood. Although schools, residential buildings, local services, and public transport are all located within walking distance, the Former Custom House currently acts more as a **physical barrier** than as a place of encounter.

This situation becomes even more evident when considered within the broader transformation of northern Turin. Major public investments, including the future Metro Line 2, the redevelopment of former industrial sites, and improvements to the surrounding infrastructure, are progressively reshaping the area and reinforcing Pietra Alta's strategic role within the city (Comune di Torino, 2023). Yet, despite occupying one of the most **visible locations** in the district, the Former Custom House remains **excluded** from these ongoing processes, leaving a significant urban void at the centre of a rapidly changing context.

The need for intervention extends beyond the introduction of new functions, activities, and public spaces. It also involves addressing the building's technical and technological deficiencies, improving both its structural performance and its overall condition. Although the building underwent refurbishment in 1987 (Città di Torino, Ufficio Tecnico Lavori Pubblici, 1987; see Appendix A), its current state clearly demonstrates the need for a new phase of rehabilitation.

Despite its current condition, the site retains considerable potential for regeneration. Its architectural identity, strategic location, and generous open spaces provide the physical conditions to accommodate new collective functions capable of reconnecting the surrounding neighbourhood. The aim is to be able to transform the whole site with the building in the centre into a stoping and reference point rather than just a transitional space. More than the recovery of a single building, the intervention represents an opportunity to reactivate an overlooked urban threshold and transform an underused site into a place that once again supports everyday social life.

Source: ISMEL – Polo del '900 Digital Archives (n.d.)

Source: Photographs taken during the site survey

CHAPTER 3

Design proposal - A Multi-Scalar Urban Suture

Project: Community Hub
Site area : 14468.29 sqm
Building footprint area: 387.29 sqm
GFA: 922.53 sqm
Location: Pietra Alta, Turin, Italy

3.1 General Objectives of the Design Proposal

The design proposal is conceived as an architectural and urban intervention aimed at reactivating a **marginal** and **fragmented** area of Pietra Alta through the creation of a **community hub** understood as a social and spatial infrastructure. The project does not approach the site as an isolated object of architectural transformation, but as a **strategic node** within a broader urban system, where architecture operates as a **mediator** between different scales, actors, and modes of use. The primary objective is to **transform** a currently underutilized and disconnected site into a place of collective reference, capable of supporting everyday social life while remaining open to **change** over time.

At an **urban scale**, the project seeks to re-establish physical and perceptive continuity between the two main streets, Corso Vercelli and Corso Giulio Cesare, addressing conditions of **fragmentation** produced by infrastructural barriers and mono-functional development. By redefining the ground plane as a shared, **pedestrian-oriented** surface, the intervention aims to slow down vehicular movement, enhance safety, and reinforce walkability, allowing the site to function as connective tissue rather than a boundary. The building and its surrounding open spaces are therefore conceived as part of a continuous **public realm**, extending beyond the architectural footprint to engage directly with the surrounding neighborhood. While maintaining this condition of visual and spatial openness, the project also introduces permeable boundary elements and selectively controlled access points intended to support safety, collective maintenance, and the long-term adaptability of the space. Rather than operating as rigid barriers, these threshold devices are conceived as **negotiable** and **reversible** interfaces that preserve the public character of the intervention while enabling different degrees of **accessibility** and use over time.

At the architectural scale, the project aims to reinterpret an existing building as an **open** and **adaptable** framework rather than a fixed programmatic container. The design prioritizes permeability, accessibility, and spatial continuity, particularly at ground level, where the removal of rigid interior boundaries enables fluid movement between interior, exterior, and underground spaces. This strategy reflects the intention to create a **gradient of publicness**, accommodating different degrees of openness and intimacy according to function while maintaining a clear relationship between collective and more specialized spaces.

A key objective of the proposal is to support a wide range of temporary and permanent activities without predetermining their form or duration. The project therefore adopts an **underdesigned** approach in specific areas, particularly in the large open space at the rear of the site, which is conceived as a **flexible** ground capable of hosting markets, communal events, performances, and informal gatherings. Rather than defining use through architectural form, the project seeks to enable appropriation through spatial neutrality, material continuity, and infrastructural readiness.

Socially, the project aspires to foster **inclusivity** and **collective ownership** by providing spaces that are accessible, legible, and adaptable to diverse user groups. The community hub is conceived as a platform for interaction between residents, associations, informal groups, and institutions, reflecting a **hybrid governance** model in which public responsibility and civic participation coexist. Architecture, in this sense, becomes an enabling device that supports collaboration, visibility, and encounter rather than control or specialization.

Finally, the project aims to establish a recognizable **identity** within the urban landscape, functioning as both a local **landmark** and a point of **orientation** for the neighborhood. The proposal further reinforces this role through the introduction of a vertical lighting tower positioned at the entrance roundabout of the district. Conceived not as an isolated sculptural object but as an urban signal integrated within the larger spatial system, the tower establishes a visual dialogue with the existing historical residential towers that have long functioned as markers of arrival to the city. Rather than competing with these elements through formal complexity, the intervention adopts a restrained and legible language based on verticality, proportion, and controlled illumination. The tower is therefore designed as a contemporary landmark that mediates between **infrastructural scale** and **pedestrian experience**, while simultaneously reinforcing orientation, visibility, and the perceptive continuity of the new public realm. Its integrated light cut acts as a subtle nocturnal reference point, complementing the horizontal lighting strategy of the adjacent pedestrian path and contributing to the creation of a recognizable **civic identity** at the **urban threshold**.

Through its spatial openness, material strategies, and relationship to light and movement, the building is intended to signal the presence of a shared civic space, reinforcing the role of architecture as a **catalyst** for **social interaction** and **urban regeneration**. In doing so, the design proposal positions the community hub as a long-term public resource, capable of evolving alongside the social and spatial dynamics of Pietra Alta

3.1.1 Urban Strategy: Restoring Connectivity and Safety

The design intervention operates within a complex territorial matrix characterized by a collision of **scales** and a diverse range of **stakeholders**, from private commercial entities to public residential communities. The primary urban hypothesis posits that the Former Custom House can only be reactivated if the aggressive "machine scale" of the surrounding infrastructure is mitigated to allow for a safer, **human-centric environment**.

To achieve this, the proposal initiates a radical reconfiguration of the transit flows on Corso Giulio Cesare and Corso Vercelli. By introducing strategic "connectivity cuts" across these axes, the project physically integrates the two streets, forcing a reduction in vehicular speed and creating a perceived sense of security for pedestrians. This infrastructural "calming" transforms the site from a high-speed bypass into a protected precinct, establishing the necessary conditions for a gathering space that fosters a sense of community belonging (Torino Urban Lab, 2022).

3.1.2 Site Morphology: From "Functional Void" to Landscaped Public Realm

The project addresses the existing "**functional void**" currently occupied by the disorganized parking lot. The reorganization of this space follows a dual logic dictated by the surrounding urban fabric: The **Residential Front** (Corso Vercelli): This side is dedicated to the residents of Pietra Alta. By aligning the outdoor spaces with the secondary streets emerging from the residential blocks, the project establishes a continuous and accessible extension of the neighborhood's public realm. The **Commercial Front** (Corso Giulio Cesare): Recognizing the functional necessity of the main artery, this sector maintains parking capacity but shifts the typology from a barren asphalt lot to

a “landscaped parking” model. Here, soft-scape elements and permeable surfaces dissolve the rigid boundary between the car and the city.

3.2 Architectural Strategy: Flexibility and Orientation

The architectural intervention focuses on the **adaptive reuse** of the Former Custom House, a structure characterized by its original **rigid**, **administrative layout** (see Appendix A). The design hypothesis seeks to “liberate” the internal volume, reorganizing it into a free, **flexible** space capable of rearranging itself according to evolving **community needs**. This interior fluidity is mirrored by a strong indoor-outdoor interconnectivity. By opening the ground floor envelope, the building no longer acts as a barrier, but as a **transparent** filter. Furthermore, the proposal reinforces the building’s role as a subject of orientation—a vertical and functional **landmark** that guides users through the fragmented landscape of the northern fringe. The introduced **tower** reinforces this ambition at a larger **urban scale**. Conceived in coherence with Vittorio’s existing towers while deliberately avoiding formal competition with them, the intervention acts as an element of orientation and urban recognition, visible from the highway and surrounding infrastructural network. Through its restrained vertical presence and the integration of a controlled lighting element, the tower maintains its role as a landmark during nighttime, contributing to the perceptive continuity and identity of the site after dark.

3.3 Potential Users and Collaborative Actors of a Community Hub in Pietra Alta

The definition of potential users and collaborators for a community hub in Pietra Alta must be grounded in a careful reading of the district’s socio-demographic structure, service gaps, and existing local actors. As highlighted by the Torino Urban Lab research conducted between 2021 and 2022, Pietra Alta constitutes a semi-autonomous **urban enclave** within the northern quadrant of Turin, characterized by physical fragmentation, limited service concentration, and a strong yet under-supported local social fabric (Torino Urban Lab, 2022). Within this context, the community hub is not conceived merely as a programmatic container, but as a relational infrastructure capable of **mediating** between residents, local organizations, informal practices, and institutional actors.

Primary Users: Residents and Everyday Populations

The first and most structurally relevant group of users is represented by local residents, whose socio-demographic composition reveals a heterogeneous yet coherent set of needs. Pietra Alta hosts approximately 3,600–4,000 inhabitants, with a predominance of small households, an aging population alongside a significant presence of young adults and families, and an above-average incidence of residents of foreign origin. This demographic configuration suggests that the community hub should respond simultaneously to:

- Elderly residents, for whom the lack of proximate aggregation spaces exacerbates conditions of social isolation;
- Families and caregivers, requiring accessible spaces for informal childcare, educational support, and intergenerational interaction;
- Young adults and adolescents, who currently face a scarcity of non-commercial spaces for cultural, recreational, and social activities.

Survey data and qualitative interviews collected by Torino Urban Lab emphasize that sociality and aggregation are perceived as among the most fragile dimensions of neighborhood life, despite the presence of a strong sense of belonging and identification with Pietra Alta as a “luogo a misura d’uomo”(“human scale place”). The community hub thus emerges as a critical spatial device for transforming latent social capital into active **collective practices**.

Secondary Users: Transient and Non-Resident Populations

In addition to residents, the hub is likely to attract a broader population of non-resident users, including workers, students, and individuals who **traverse** Pietra Alta due to its infrastructural positioning near major mobility axes and the Stura railway node. The research highlights the neighborhood’s historical role as a **place of transit** rather than **destination**, a condition that has limited the consolidation of shared public spaces.

A community hub positioned within this fragmented urban environment can function as a point of **anchorage** for transient populations, a soft interface between neighborhood-scale life and metropolitan flows and a space capable of extending its relevance beyond strictly local boundaries without losing its rootedness.

Local Associations and Third-Sector Organizations as Core Collaborators

A crucial role in both the activation and **long-term sustainability** of the hub is played by local associations, cooperatives, and third-sector organizations already operating in Pietra Alta and the surrounding areas. The Torino Urban Lab analysis identifies a constellation of actors engaged in social support, housing, cultural mediation, and community development, often operating under conditions of spatial scarcity and programmatic fragmentation. These actors represent natural collaborators for the community hub, which could offer:

- Shared and flexible spaces for activities and services;
- Opportunities for cross-sectoral collaboration;
- Increased visibility and accessibility for existing initiatives.

In this sense, the hub acts as an enabling platform, reducing duplication of services and fostering synergies among organizations that currently operate in **parallel** rather than in **coordination**.

Social Enterprises and Micro-Entrepreneurship

Another key group of potential users and collaborators consists of social enterprises and forms of local micro-entrepreneurship, particularly those linked to proximity services, cultural production, education, and care. The Torino Urban Lab survey explicitly notes an expressed interest among residents in services related to social entrepreneurship, community caretaking, and hybrid economic models that combine **social impact** with **economic sustainability**.Within this framework, the community hub can:

- Host co-working or shared production spaces;
- Support informal economies and experimental business models;
- Serve as an incubator for locally rooted initiatives.

Architecturally, this implies the need for **spaces** that are neither strictly institutional nor purely commercial, but capable of accommodating evolving forms of work and service provision.

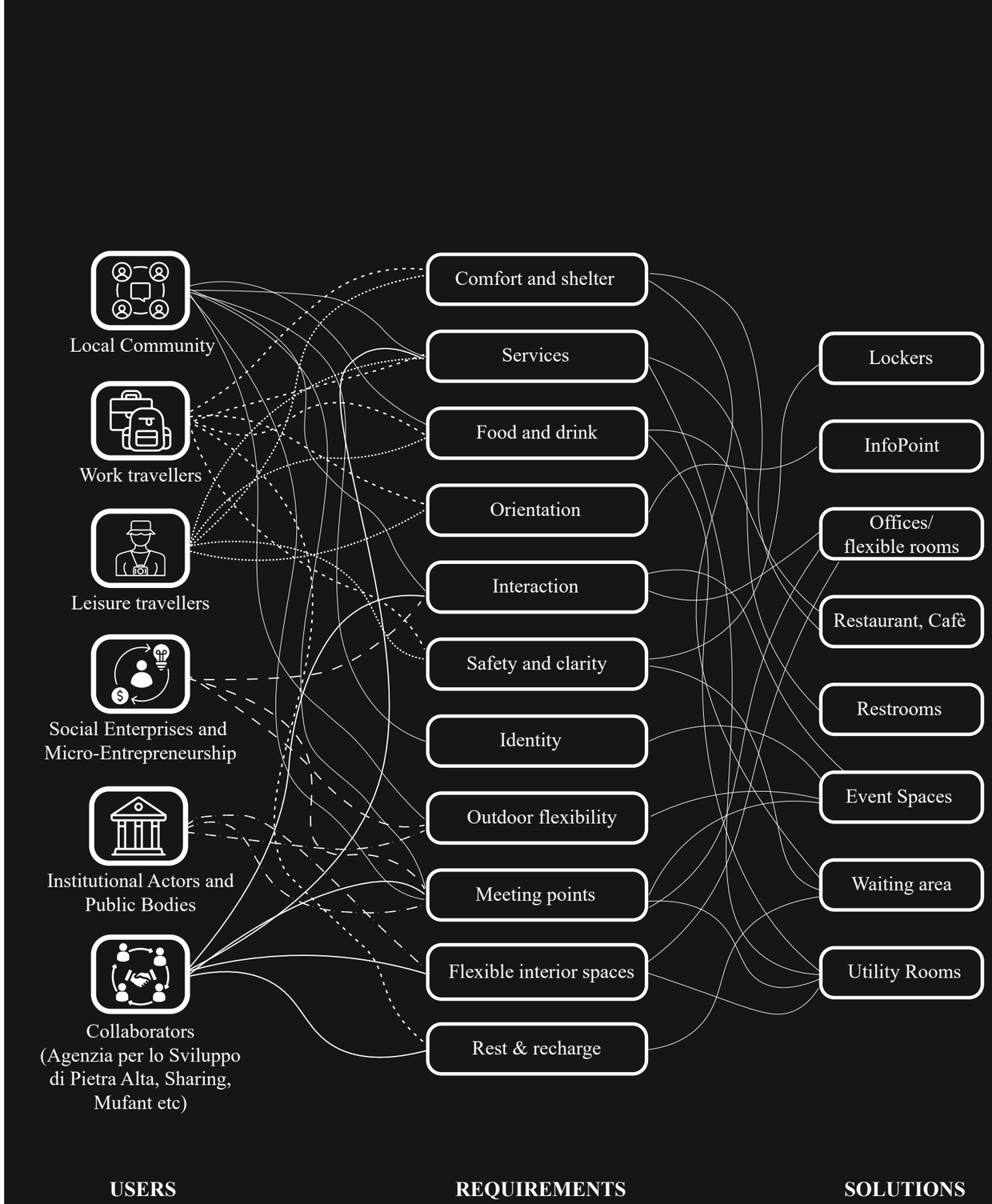
Institutional Actors and Public Bodies

Finally, institutional stakeholders—including the **Municipality of Turin**, the **Circoscrizione 6**, and agencies such as the **Agenzia per lo Sviluppo di Pietra Alta**—constitute essential collaborators in governance, funding, and strategic alignment. While the research highlights a perceived distance between residents and public institutions, it also underscores the importance of **mediation structures** capable of translating local needs into actionable policies. The community hub can thus function as:

- localized governance interface;
- testing ground for participatory processes
- spatial framework for co-design and co-management practices

Implications for Architectural Design

From an architectural perspective, the multiplicity of users and collaborators requires a spatial system characterized by programmatic indeterminacy, allowing spaces to be reconfigured over time;accessibility and permeability, both physical and symbolic;gradients of publicness, accommodating informal use alongside organized activities.The community hub in Pietra Alta must therefore be conceived not as a fixed typology, but as an **adaptive social infrastructure**, capable of evolving in response to changing user constellations and collaborativve arrangements.



3.4 Governance Model of the Community Hub: A Hybrid Approach

The **governance** of a community hub represents a critical dimension of its long-term viability, social impact, and spatial effectiveness. Beyond architectural configuration, the capacity of such a hub to function as a stable yet adaptive social infrastructure depends largely on the way responsibilities, decision-making processes, and resources are distributed among stakeholders. In this perspective, the proposed community hub in Pietra Alta is conceived under a **hybrid governance** model, integrating public institutions, third-sector organizations, community actors, and semi-economic initiatives within a shared management framework. Hybrid governance is increasingly recognized as one of the most effective models for **community-based infrastructures**, as it combines the institutional stability of public actors, the operational flexibility of civil society, and the innovative capacity of grassroots and entrepreneurial initiatives. Rather than relying on a single managing entity, this model promotes co-responsibility, negotiated decision-making, and adaptive management mechanisms.

Rationale for a Hybrid Governance Model
The choice of a hybrid governance model is grounded in the specific socio-spatial conditions of Pietra Alta, as well as in the comparative analysis of existing community hubs. The neighborhood is characterized by a **fragmented** service landscape, **limited** public facilities, and a strong presence of **informal** and associative practices. In such a context, neither a fully institutionalized public management nor a purely bottom-up, informal model would be sufficient to address the **complexity of needs** and actors involved. A purely **public governance** model risks **rigidity**, bureaucratic inertia, and limited responsiveness to evolving community practices. Conversely, exclusively grassroots or **volunteer-based models** often struggle to ensure long-term economic sustainability, continuity, and formal accountability. The **hybrid approach** positions itself as an **intermediate** and integrative solution, capable of balancing structure and openness, stability and experimentation

3.5 Stakeholder Categories and Roles

Public Institutions
Public actors—such as the Municipality of Turin and the local Circoscrizione—play a strategic yet non-dominant role within the governance structure. Their primary functions include: **ownership** or concession of the building and land, definition of **regulatory frameworks** and legal agreements (e.g., conventions, collaboration pacts); provision of initial funding, **maintenance** support, or access to public programs; oversight and guarantee of public interest.
Rather than exercising direct operational control, **public institutions** act as **enablers** and guarantors, ensuring that the community hub remains accessible, inclusive, and aligned with broader urban policies.

Third-Sector
Organizations and local associations, social cooperatives, and non-profit organizations constitute the operational backbone of the community hub. These actors are typically responsible for:daily **management** of spaces and activities; **programming** of cultural, educational, and social initiatives; **mediation** between residents, institutions, and external partners; **activation** of participatory processes and community engagement. Their role is not limited to service provision, but extends to **co-defining** the identity and evolution of the hub. Through **shared management** agreements, third-sector actors contribute to governance decisions, reinforcing a polycentric and collaborative management structure.

Community Members and Informal Users
Residents and informal user groups represent the **primary** beneficiaries of the hub, but also play an **active role** in its **governance** through participatory mechanisms. Their involvement may include: participation in assemblies, consultations, or advisory committees; co-production of activities and events; informal appropriation and everyday use of spaces. While not directly responsible for management, community members influence the hub's **evolution** by shaping its patterns of use and social relevance. Their involvement ensures that governance remains situated and responsive, preventing the hub from becoming detached from local needs.

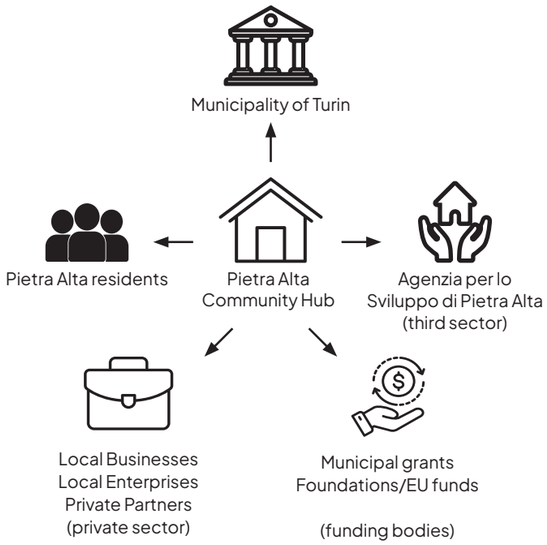
Social Enterprises and Hybrid Economic Actors
Social enterprises, micro-entrepreneurs, and hybrid economic initiatives occupy an intermediate position between social and economic logic. Their role within the hub includes: **activating** productive or service-oriented spaces (e.g., co-working, training labs, social catering); contributing to the **economic sustainability** of the hub; experimenting with new forms of proximity economy and **social innovation**.

These actors introduce a productive dimension that supports financial resilience while remaining compatible with the social mission of the hub. Their presence reinforces the idea of the hub as a multifunctional infrastructure rather than a mono-programmatic facility.

3.5.1 Interaction and Decision-Making Structure

The interaction between stakeholders is structured through a **multi-level governance** system, typically articulated as follows: strategic **coordination** body (e.g., steering committee) including representatives of public institutions and core managing organizations; operational management group responsible for day-to-day activities and space allocation; periodic **participatory** moments (assemblies, workshops, public meetings) open to residents and users. Decision-making is based on principles of **shared responsibility** and negotiated consensus, with clear attribution of roles to avoid overlap or conflict. This structure allows the hub to remain **adaptable** over time, accommodating changes in users, programs, and partnerships.

The **hybrid governance** model proposed for the community hub in Pietra Alta positions the project at the intersection of public responsibility, civic engagement, and social innovation. By distributing roles across a network of stakeholders and embedding governance mechanisms within both organizational and spatial structures, the hub can function as a **resilient** and **inclusive** social infrastructure. This model not only enhances operational efficiency but also reinforces the hub's capacity to **adapt** over time, aligning architectural ***flexibility*** with evolving **community dynamics**.



Example of adaptation of the Hybrid Governance Model to the Pietra Alta Case Study

3.6 Design Approach

3.6.1 Existing Building Assessment

The project focuses on the Former Custom House (Ex Dazio), located at the intersection of Corso Vercelli and Corso Giulio Cesare. Built in 1936 as part of Turin's customs infrastructure, the building originally served administrative and operational functions related to the control of goods entering the city. Over the years, it has undergone several changes, the most significant being the refurbishment carried out in 1987 (Città di Torino, Ufficio Tecnico Lavori Pubblici, 1987). Despite this intervention, the building has gradually lost its original function and today remains in a state of abandonment, unable to respond to the contemporary needs of the neighbourhood.

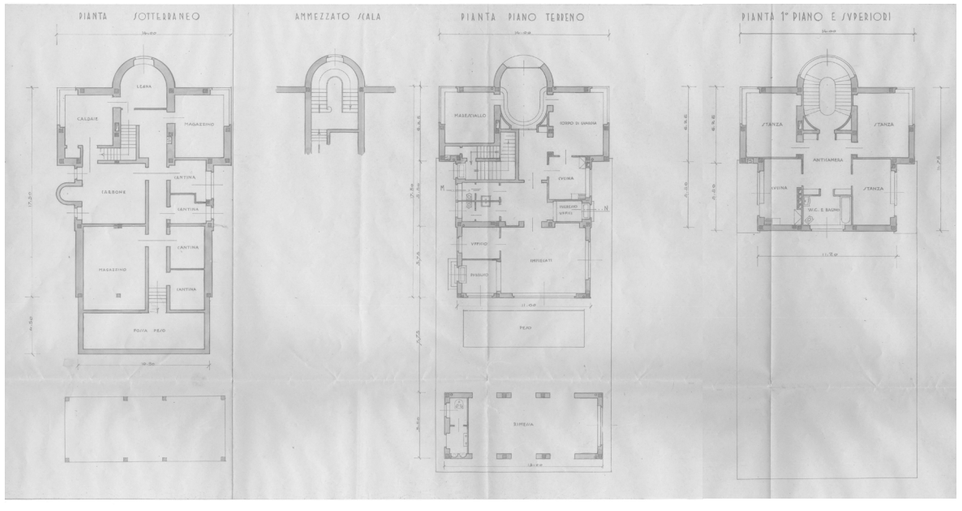
Understanding the existing building was the starting point of the design process. Although access to the interior was not possible due to its current occupation, the combination of archival material, refurbishment drawings, and repeated site visits made it possible to reconstruct its spatial organisation and understand its architectural logic. The project is therefore based on the original drawings preserved at the Archivio Storico della Città di Torino, the refurbishment drawings produced by the Città di Torino – Ufficio Tecnico Lavori Pubblici in 1987, and direct observations of the building and its surrounding urban context (see Appendix A).

From a constructive perspective, the building is organised around a regular structural grid composed of 40 × 40 cm columns (dimensions confirmed by the expense records-Appendix A), combined with external masonry walls ranging from 50 to 60 cm in thickness. In some areas, particularly around the main staircase, the structural columns are incorporated within the masonry walls, making the structural system almost invisible from the interior. This creates a solid and robust construction, but also contributes to the rigidity of the existing spatial layout. The internal organisation clearly reflects the building's original administrative function. Small office rooms are arranged along a central circulation system, resulting in a sequence of enclosed spaces with limited flexibility. This rigidity is reinforced by the thick masonry walls, the regular structural grid, and the repetitive rhythm of the façade openings, all of which make spatial adaptation more challenging. At the same time, these characteristics represent an important part of the building's identity and therefore become elements to work with rather than simply remove.

The building is composed of a five-storey tower that defines its architectural image. From the first floor upwards, the floor plan remains almost unchanged, repeating the same office layout on each level. Attached to the rear is the former technical area, originally separated from the tower by the fossa peso, where vehicles entering the customs area were weighed. Today, this space has been enclosed, creating the elongated rear volume that characterises the building's current configuration.

Beyond its physical condition, the building presents several functional limitations. The absence of an accessible vertical circulation system, together with the compartmentalised layout and the limited dimensions of many rooms, no longer meets contemporary standards for public buildings or collective uses. Nevertheless, the structural system remains remarkably clear and legible, providing a solid framework capable of accommodating new functions without compromising the architectural character of the building.

Rather than seeing these constraints as obstacles, the project considers them as the starting point for the design process. The challenge is not to replace the existing architecture, but to reinterpret it by introducing new spatial relationships, improving accessibility and flexibility, and adapting the building to contemporary community needs while preserving the qualities that define its identity.

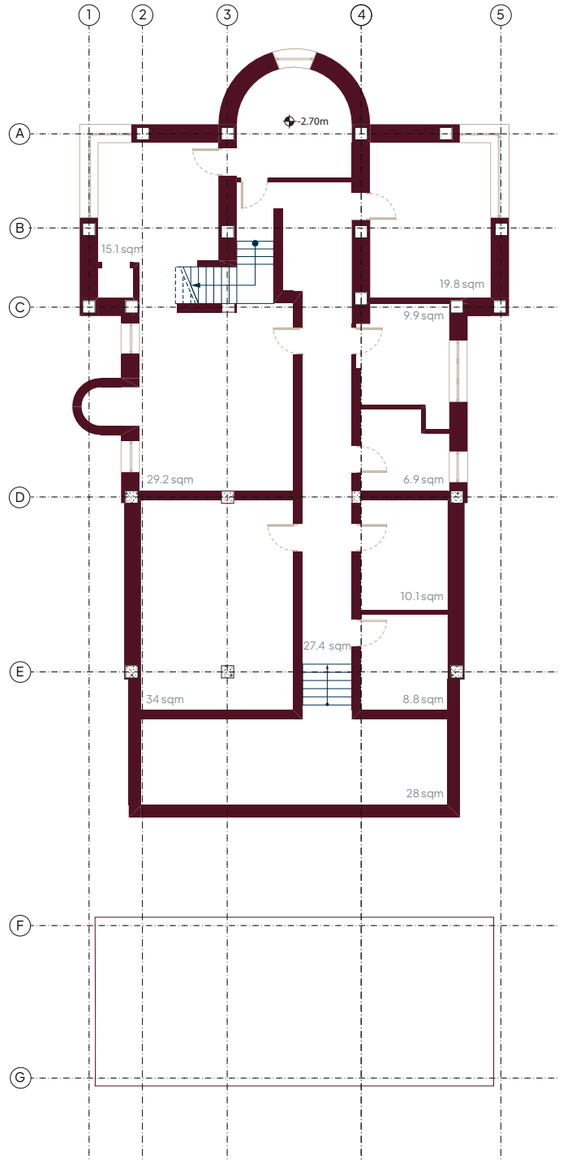


1936 Original floorplans drawings
(Full set of drawings -Appendix A)
Source: Archivio Storico della Città di Torino. (1936)

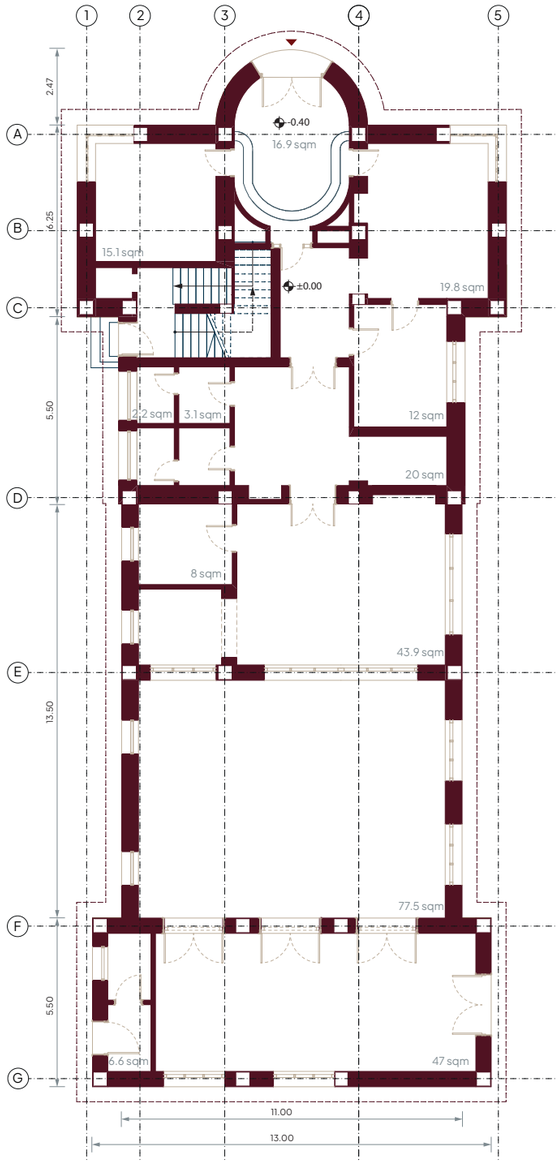
Methodological note:

The following drawings represent a reconstructed interpretation of the building's current configuration. They were developed through the integration of three complementary sources: the original architectural drawings preserved at the Archivio Storico della Città di Torino, the 1987 refurbishment drawings prepared by the Città di Torino – Ufficio Tecnico Lavori Pubblici, and direct observations carried out during repeated site visits.

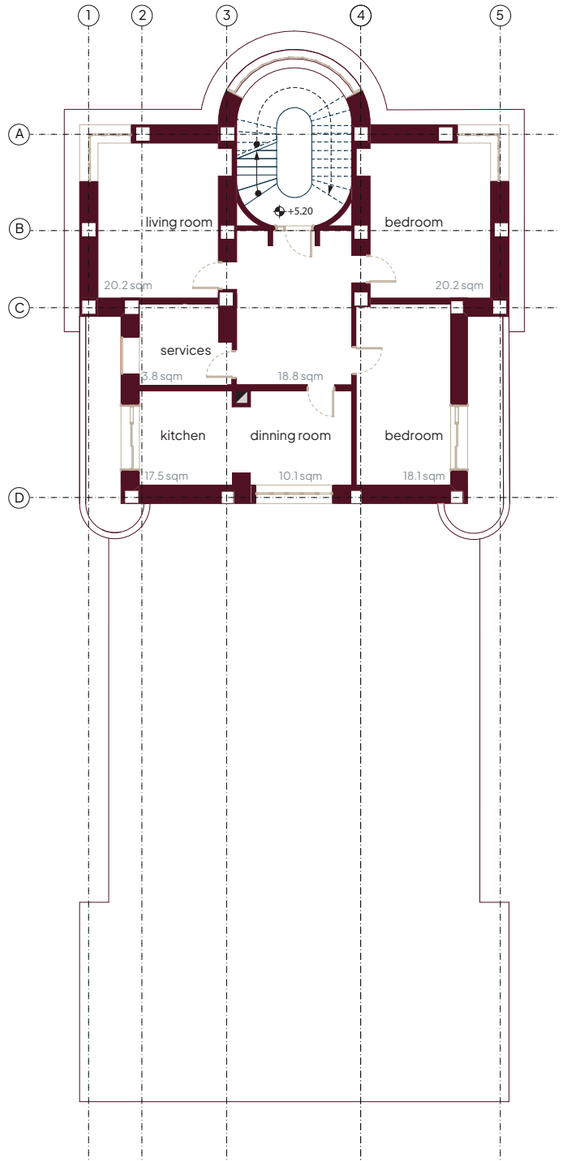
As access to the interior of the building was not possible due to its current occupation, the drawings should be understood as a reasoned reconstruction of the existing condition rather than a measured survey. By layering archival documentation with subsequent refurbishment records and external site observations, it has been possible to develop a coherent representation of the building's likely current state, providing the graphic basis for the proposed adaptive reuse project.



Underground level
Scale 1:200



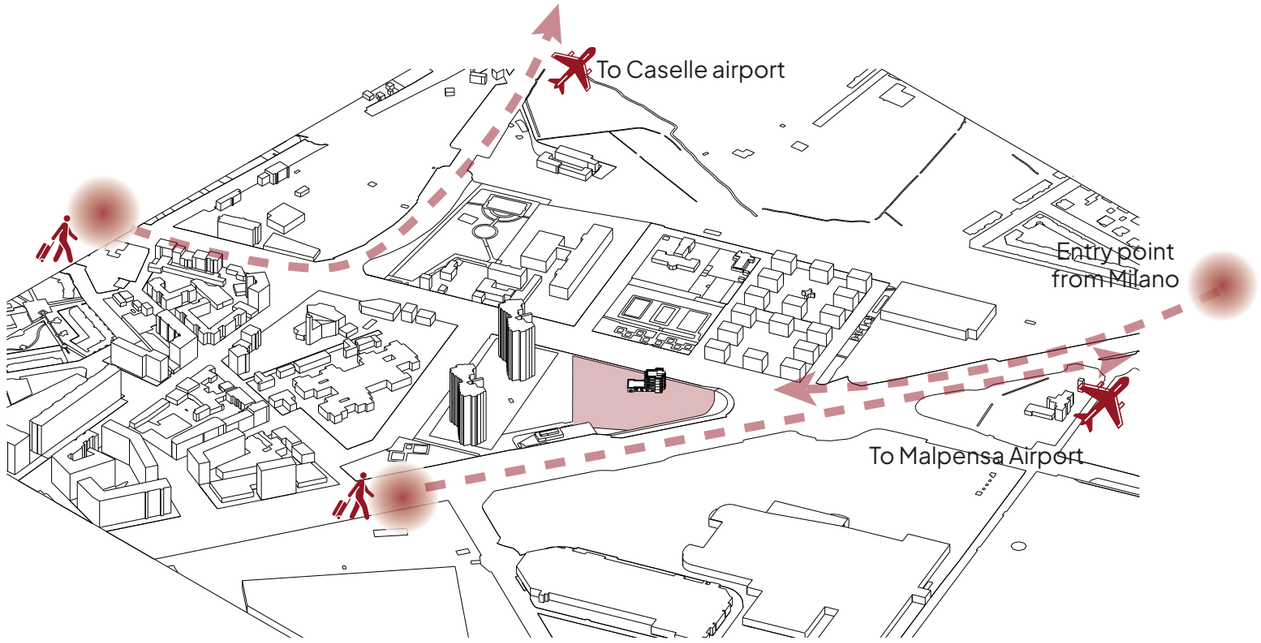
Groundfloor level
Scale 1:200



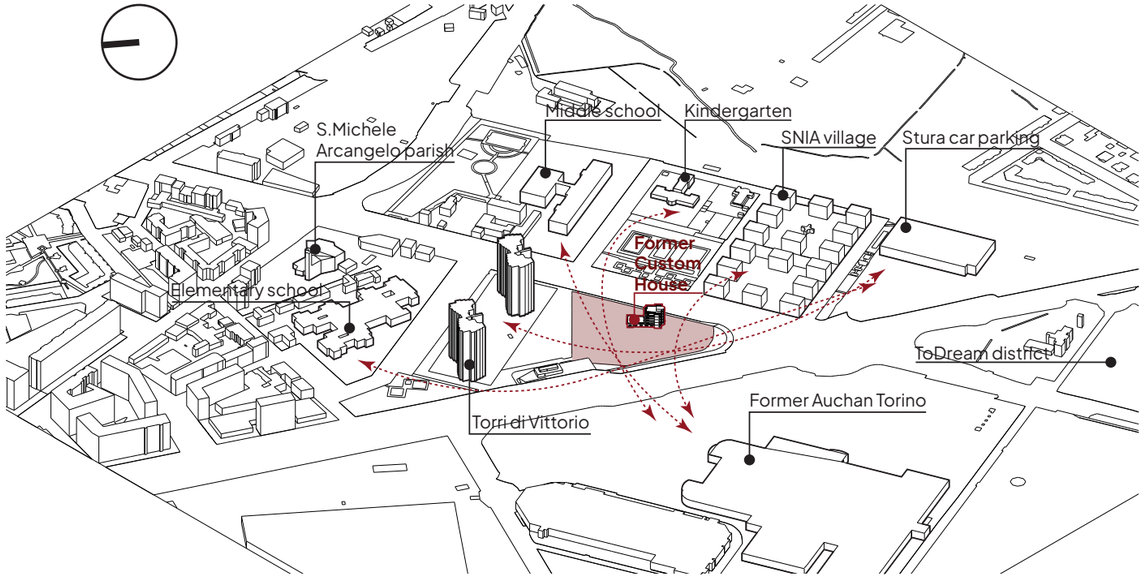
Typical floor
Scale 1:200

3.6.1.2 Existing strategic urban position – a multi scalar approach

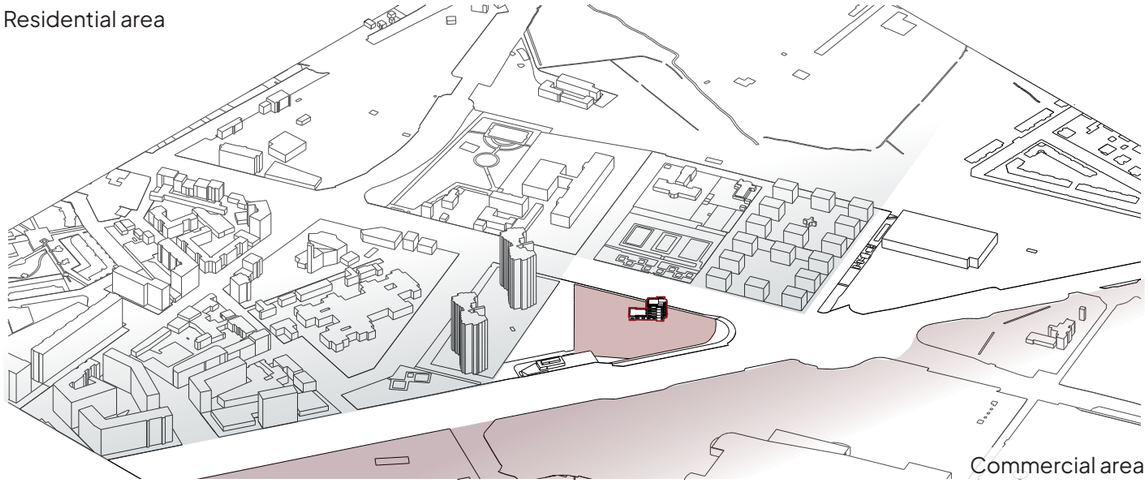
As it is mentioned before through the analysis on this paper the project does not aim to be developed as an isolated project but the goal is to inlfluence as much as posssible the surrounding in order to improve the fragmented situation. The positive thing about it is its location as a quite strategic urban position for an urban suture. However, the strategic role of the site is understood through a three-scalar approach that examines its position within the metropolitan, urban, and local contexts. This layered reading reveals how the site functions simultaneously as a gateway to Turin, a connector between key urban destinations, and an interface between contrasting urban fabrics, highlighting its potential to become a catalyst for wider urban transformation.



URBAN GATEWAY



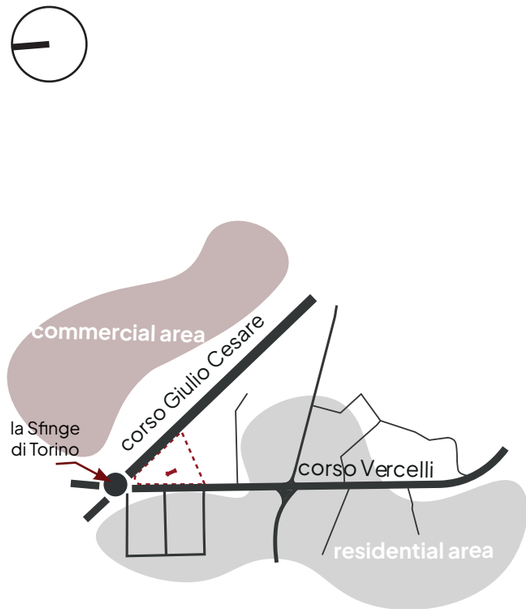
CATALYTIC URBAN NODE



URBAN THRESHOLD

3.6.2 Design Strategies and Architectural Hypotheses

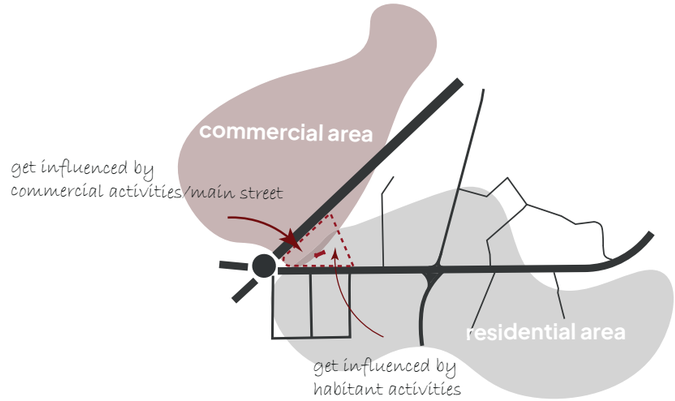
The architectural proposal is grounded in a set of interrelated design strategies that collectively aim to transform the existing building into a **community-oriented** spatial infrastructure. These strategies address issues of spatial rigidity, accessibility, continuity, and urban connectivity, translating theoretical hypotheses into concrete architectural actions. Rather than proposing a singular formal gesture, the project operates through **layered interventions** that restructure the building's internal logic while simultaneously redefining its relationship with the surrounding **urban fabric**.

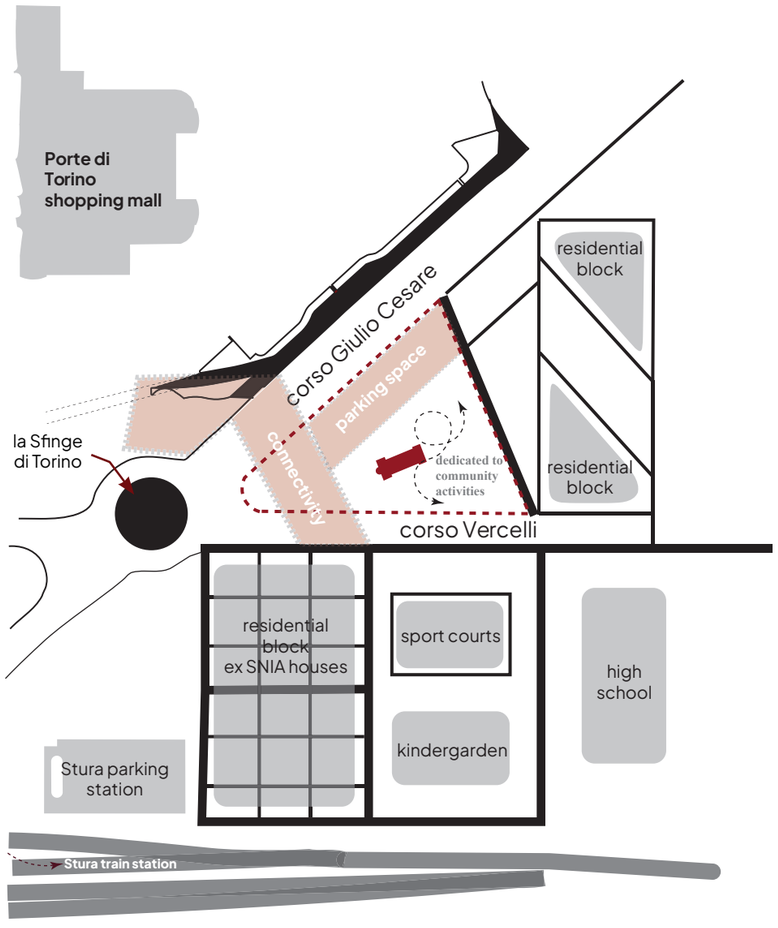


1) Urban Connectivity and Slow Mobility as Design Tools

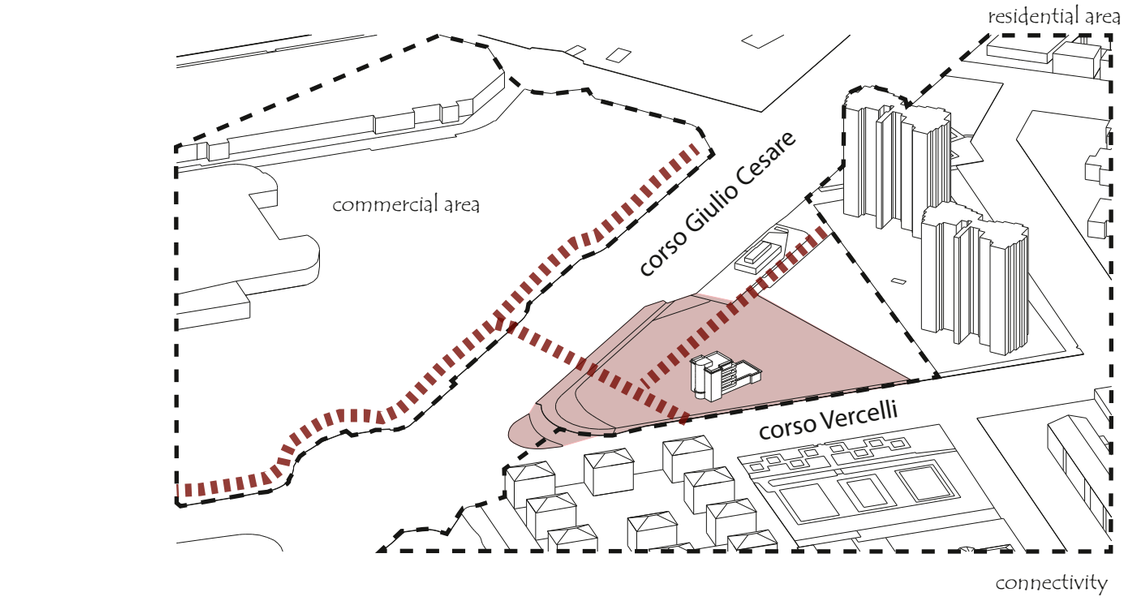
At the urban scale, the project extends beyond the building footprint to redefine the relationship between the site, Villaggio SNIA, and the adjacent commercial area. The front portion of the site becomes a ***connective urban surface***, where architectural intervention is expressed through the redesign of pavement, pathways, and ground treatments.

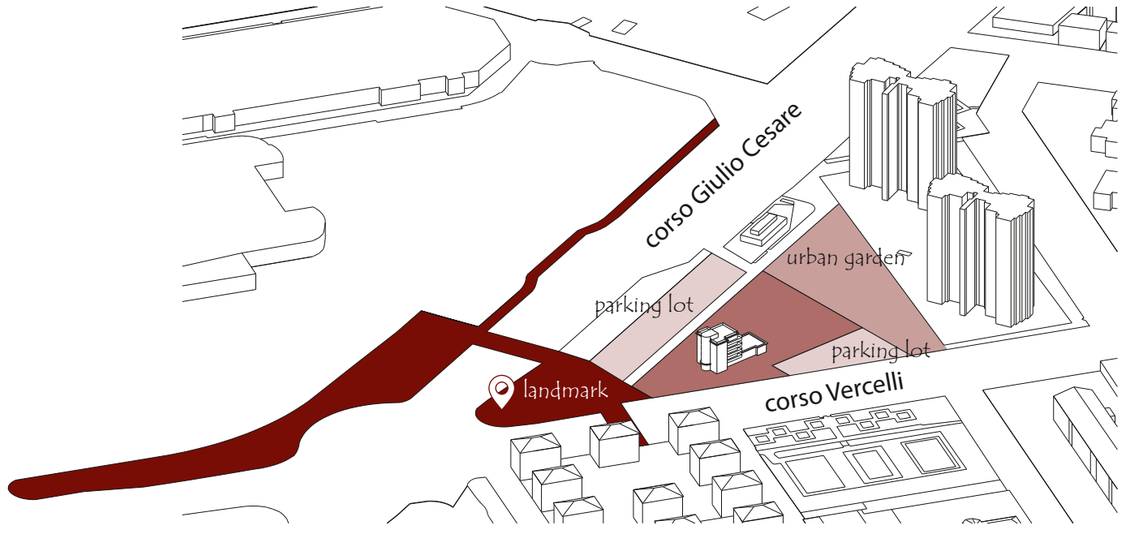
Through continuous pavementation and material coherence, the project establishes a smooth and readable **pedestrian network**, while simultaneously functioning as a traffic-calming strategy for vehicles approaching from the highway. The **modulation** of surfaces, textures, and alignments implicitly reduces vehicular speed, prioritizing pedestrian safety and accessibility. This strategy transforms the ground plane into an active interface between architecture and city, where mobility, safety, and public space converge.



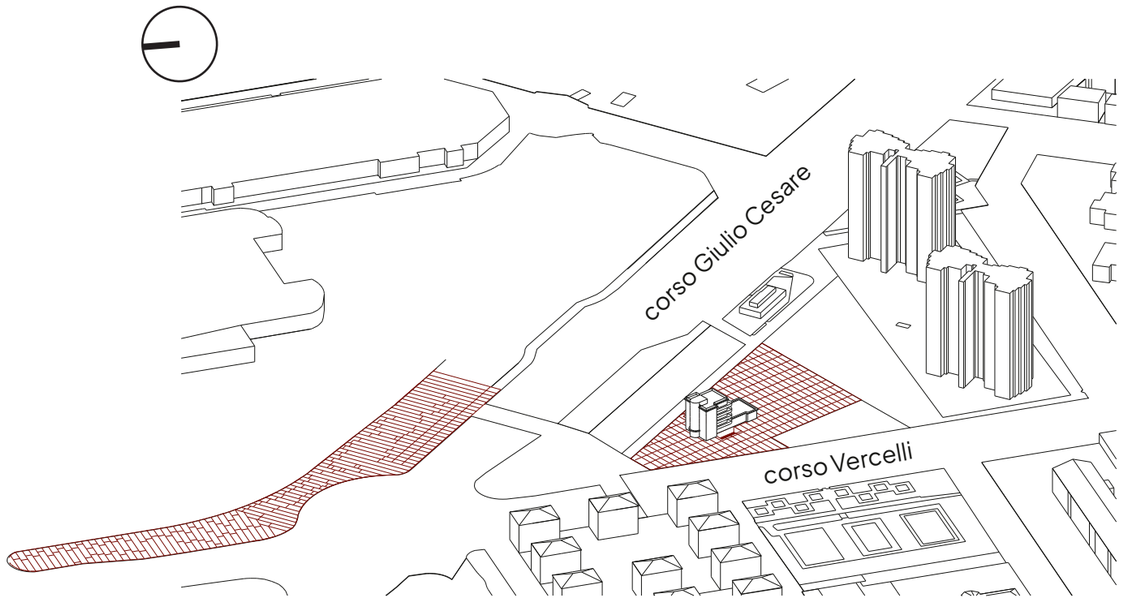


Schematic urban condition

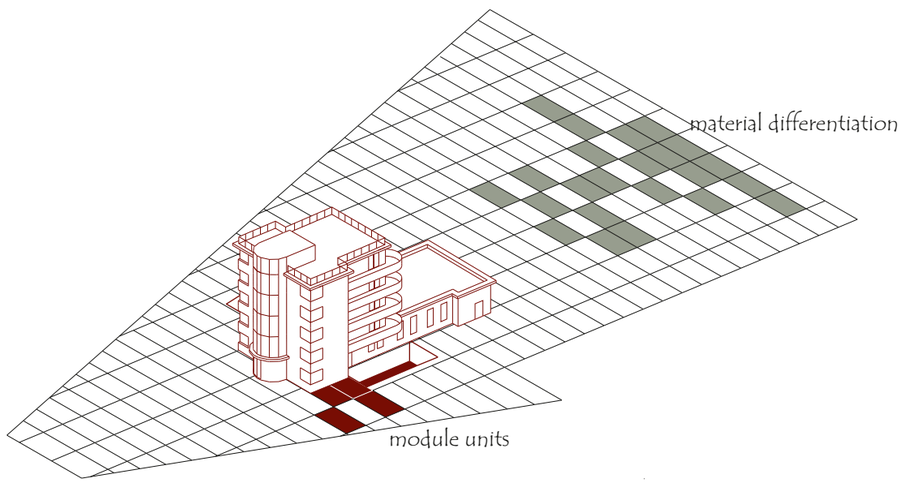




Site development
(neighbourhood scale)



grid application



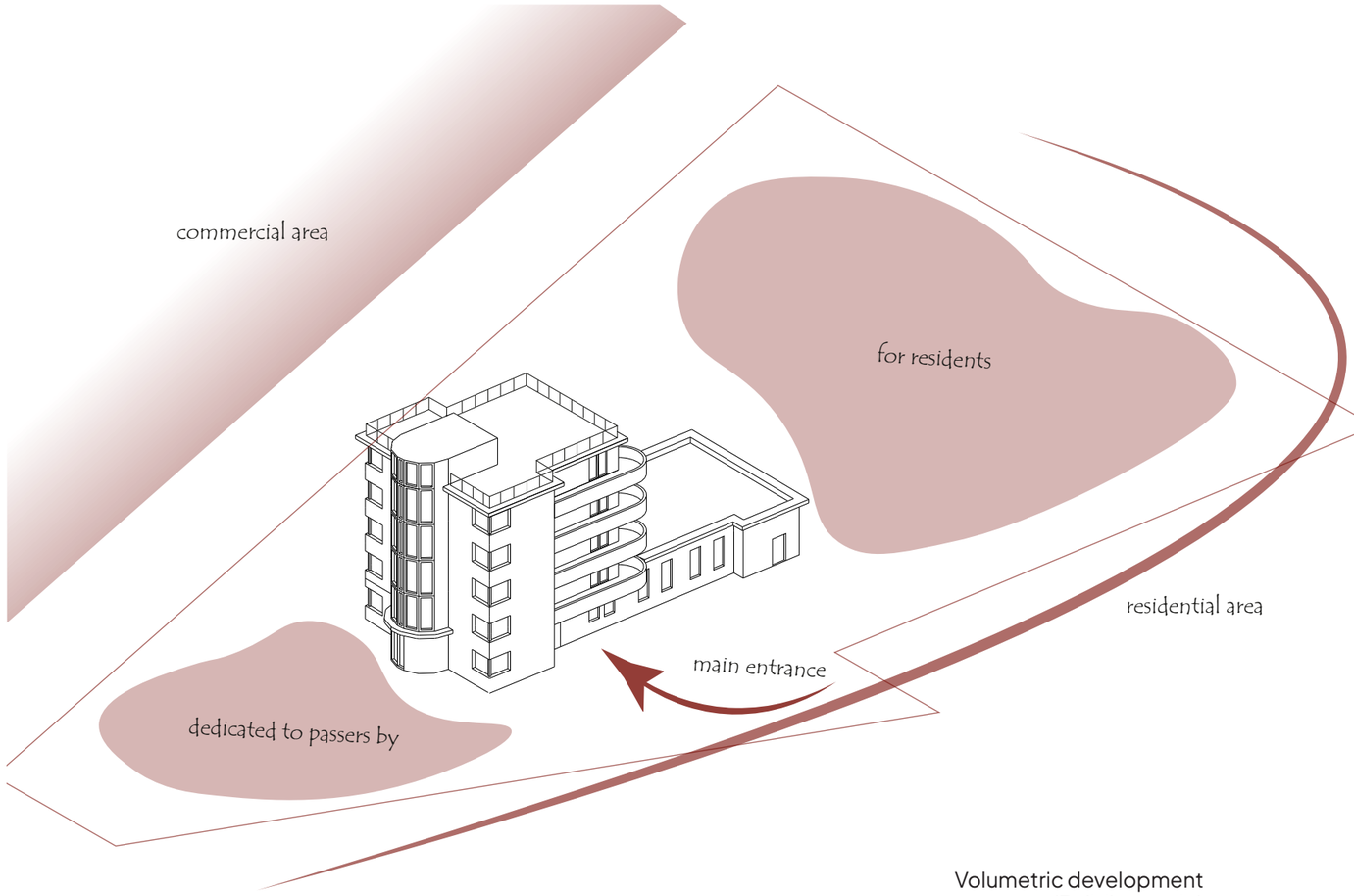
Site development

2) Volumetric strategy

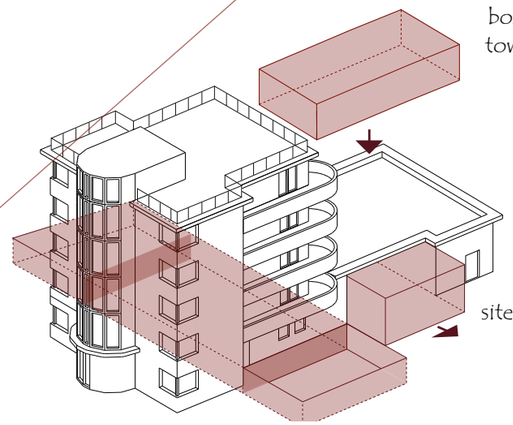
The volumetric strategy develops progressively from the relationship between the building and its surroundings towards the definition of its **architectural identity**. The first interventions establish a clear dialogue with the site by defining the main entrance, strengthening the connection between the residential neighbourhood and the adjacent commercial area, and introducing new volumetric additions that improve **spatial continuity** and rebalance the relationship between the tower and the lower rear wing.

The transformation then focuses on the building itself. A new **external circulation** core improves accessibility and connects all levels, while also providing access to a new roof terrace. The rear **volume** is subsequently visually opened to create a triple-height atrium that introduces natural light, strengthens visual connections, and becomes the main collective space within the building.

The sequence concludes with the activation of the roof as an **accessible green space**, completing the transformation by introducing a new outdoor area for community activities while enhancing the environmental performance of the building.

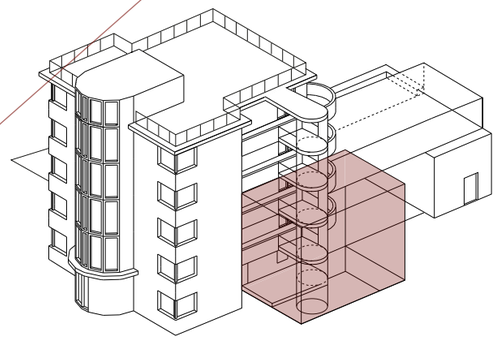


Volumetric development
(Building scale)

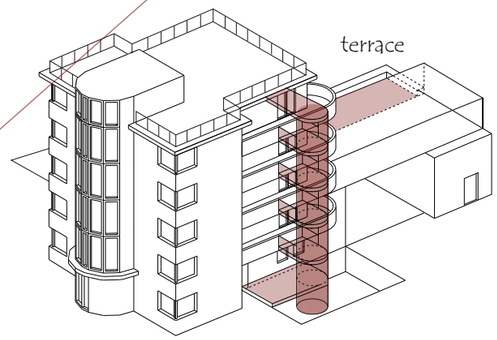


box addition,
tower height balance

site fluidity

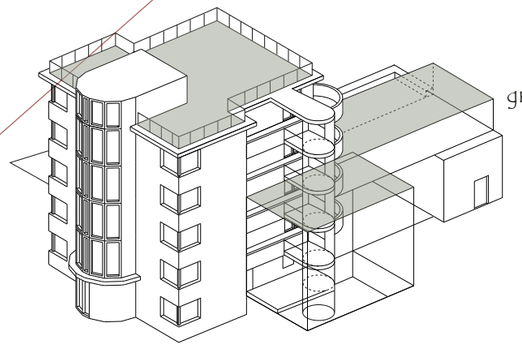


triple height-quality space
natural light,
visual connection
identity



terrace

external vertical circulation

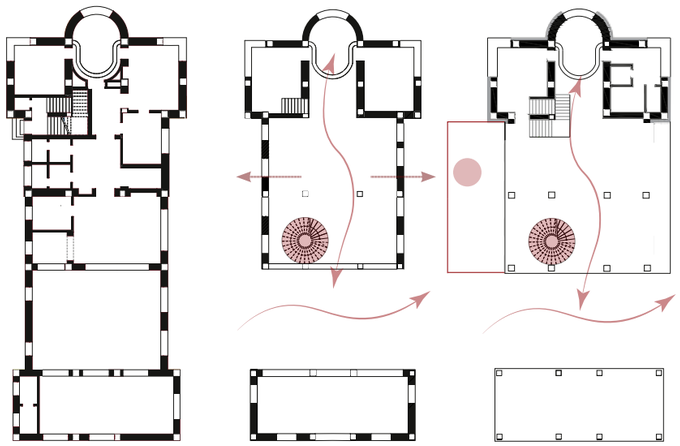


green roof

Volumetric development

3) From Rigidity to Spatial Fluidity
This strategy confronts the existing condition of spatial rigidity, characterized by seperated interiors and hierarchical circulation systems. The project proposes a deliberate **breakdown** of internal **boundaries**, particularly on the ground floor, where the removal of interior walls becomes an operative act of **spatial liberation**.
This intervention transforms the ground floor into a **fluid**, continuous field, capable of accommodating **multiple programs** and modes of use without predetermined hierarchies. Rather than organizing space through enclosed rooms, the project adopts an open spatial grammar in which movement, visibility, and interaction define the architecture.

The insertion of a circular staircase and an external elevator introduces **new geometries** that intentionally contrast with the existing structural logic. These elements do not merely serve circulation needs but act as spatial devices that symbolize openness, inclusivity, and vertical connectivity. Their expressive forms **disrupt** the former **rigidity** of the building, making circulation a visible and active component of the architectural experience.



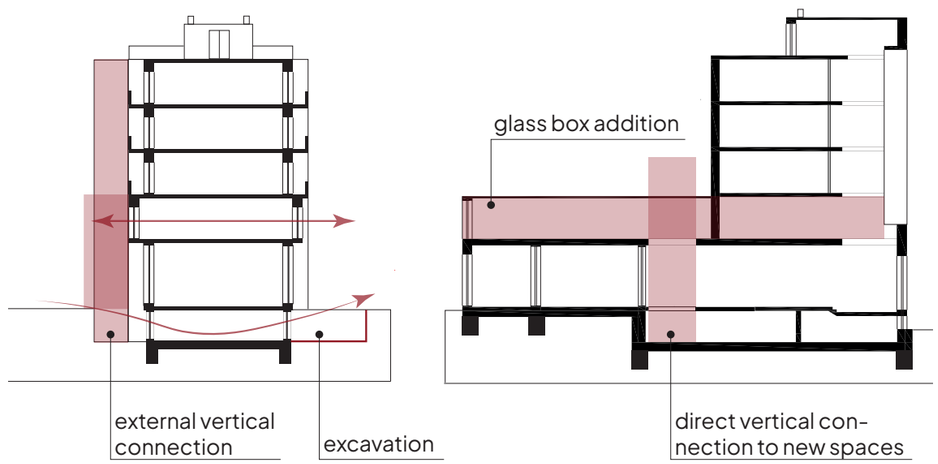
current layout

expected layout

4) Vertical Continuity and Sectional Connectivity
A second strategy focuses on the **redefinition** of the **vertical section** as a continuous and accessible system. Traditionally conceived as a residual or technical space, the underground level is reinterpreted as an active component of the public realm.
Through selective **excavation** and regrading, the underground floor is opened and directly connected to the ground level, eliminating physical and perceptual barriers.

This sectional manipulation produces a multi-level **spatial sequence** where ground floor, underground, and outdoor spaces are experienced as a single continuous system. The underground is no longer hidden but becomes an extension of the public interior, benefiting from natural light, visual connections, and climatic advantages.

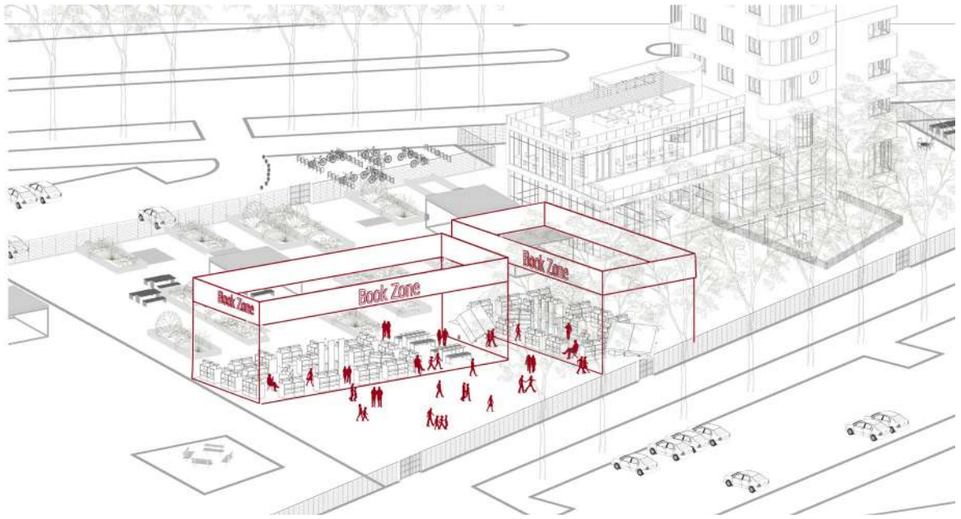
4.1) Interior–Exterior Integration as Spatial Infrastructure
The project is structured around the idea of total **spatial connectivity**, where interior, exterior, and underground spaces are interwoven rather than treated as separate domains. This integration is achieved not through symbolic gestures but through precise architectural operations: visual permeability, multiple access points, and **overlapping** circulation paths. The courtyard plays a crucial role within this system, acting as a **hinge** space between levels and programs. Its southern orientation ensures optimal solar exposure, reinforcing the courtyard's role as a climatic, social, and spatial mediator. The result is an architecture that supports multiple trajectories, encouraging informal use, appropriation, and cross-program interaction.
To address the visual and functional imbalance between the extended horizontal ground-floor volume and the relatively compact five-storey tower, the project introduces a glass box volume positioned above the ground-floor extension.



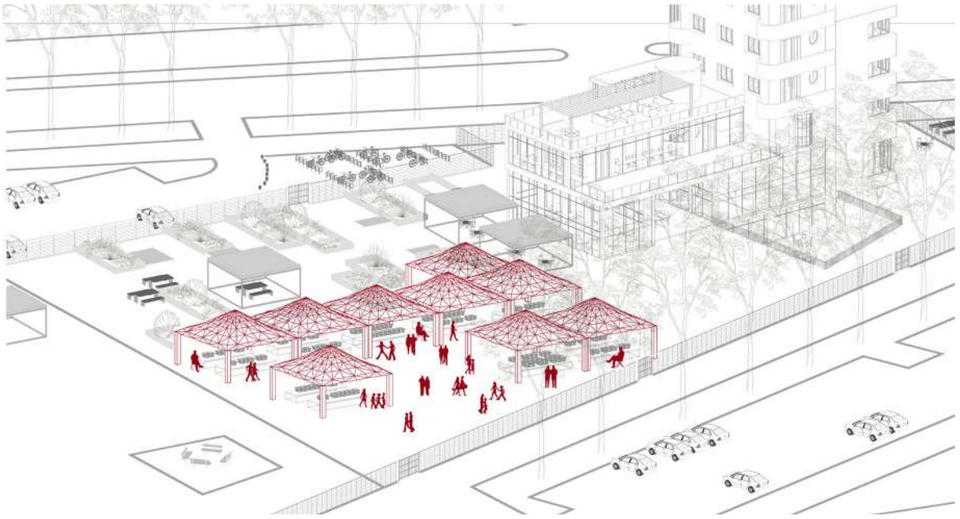
5) The Productive Void: Open Space as Programmatic Potential

At the rear of the building, the project introduces a large, intentionally underdesigned open space. Rather than assigning a fixed function, this area is conceived as a productive void—a spatial reserve capable of hosting **temporary, seasonal**, or **evolving** activities. This strategy challenges the conventional opposition between "void" and "program." The space remains **undefined** by design, allowing it to adapt over time to cultural events, informal gatherings, outdoor workshops, or community-led initiatives.

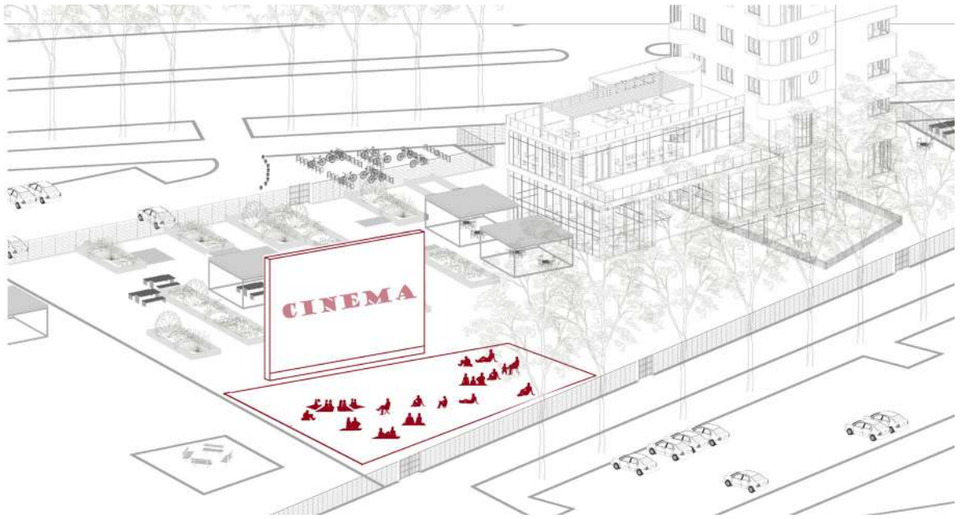
By granting architectural relevance to indeterminacy, the project reinforces the idea of the community hub as a flexible and evolving infrastructure. Importantly, this intervention rebalances the **spatial hierarchy** of the site, giving equal importance to the back of the building and transforming it into an **active** and visible component of the overall spatial system.



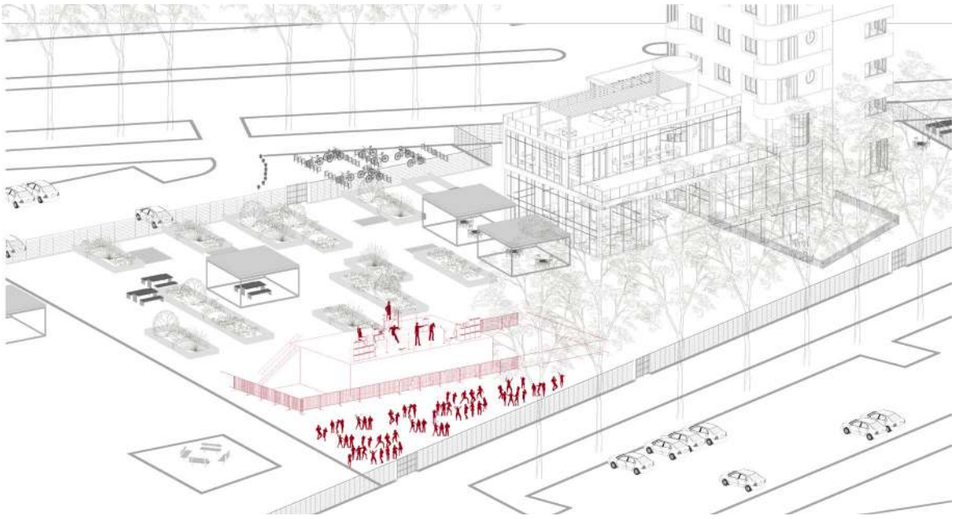
Open fairs



Open markets



Outdoor activities



Outdoor concerts

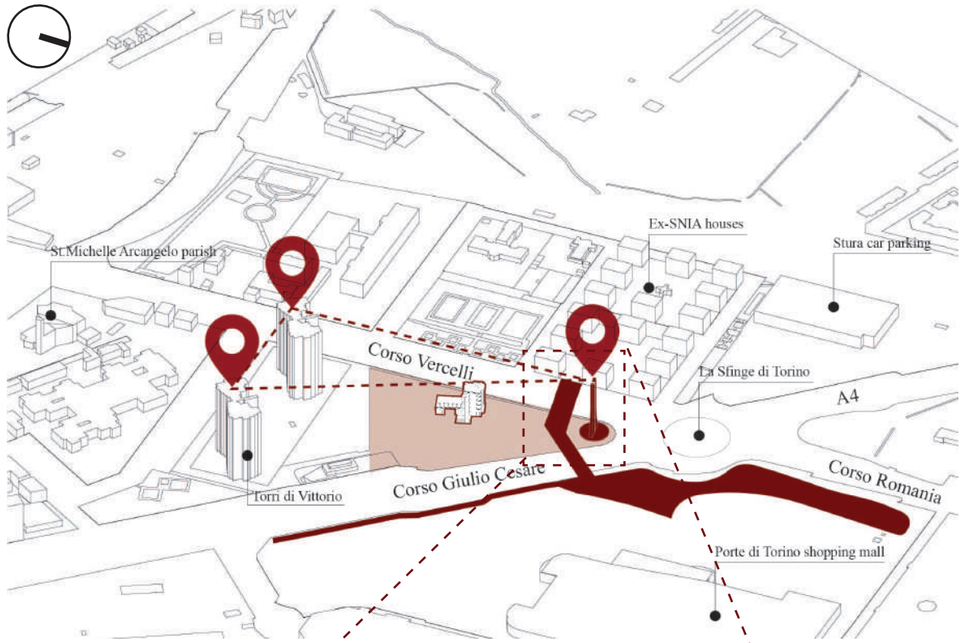
Possible uses of the "void"

6. Visibility, Lighting, and the Construction of a Landmark

The final strategy addresses the symbolic and perceptual dimension of the project through the construction of visibility, orientation, and urban recognition. Rather than relying on monumentality alone, the intervention establishes a recognizable identity through **light**, spatial openness, and the articulation of a coherent **nighttime presence** within the surrounding urban landscape.

Suspended lighting elements integrated along the pedestrian paths create a continuous visual guide across the site, reinforcing movement, safety, and perceptive continuity between different **public spaces**. Complementing this horizontal lighting strategy, a vertical lighting tower positioned at the entrance roundabout acts as an urban landmark and orientation device visible from the surrounding infrastructural network and highway. Conceived in dialogue with the existing residential towers that historically mark the entrance to the city, the intervention avoids formal competition through a restrained and legible architectural language based on verticality, proportion, and controlled illumination.

At night, the integrated light cut transforms the tower into a subtle but recognizable signal within the urban field, reinforcing the **presence** of the **community hub** while mediating between infrastructural scale and pedestrian experience. Lighting therefore operates simultaneously as an infrastructural, spatial, and narrative element, enhancing accessibility and safety while contributing to the construction of a shared **civic identity** that remains active and legible throughout different times of day.

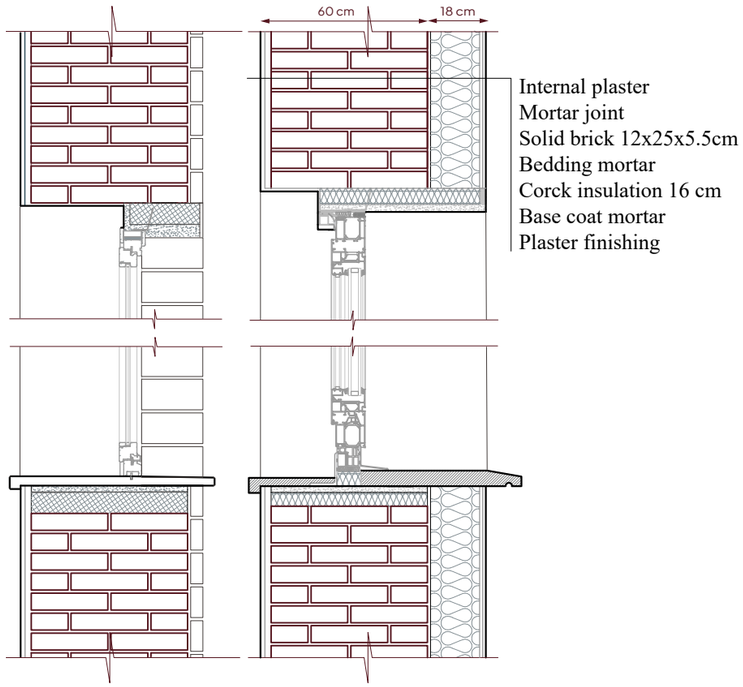


3.6.3 Design Choices

The architectural project is developed through a careful dialogue with an existing building constructed in 1936 in Turin, originally conceived within the framework of Italian Rationalist architecture. The building is characterized by **brick masonry** combined with a reinforced concrete **column grid**, a construction system typical of the period. As was common at the time, the building was designed without **thermal insulation**, relying instead on wall thickness and material mass for climatic performance. This condition necessitates a comprehensive strategy of **envelope requalification**, addressing both energy performance and contemporary standards of comfort.
Rather than pursuing a radical transformation, the project adopts a strategy of **selective preservation** and targeted intervention, allowing the original architectural logic to remain legible while adapting the building to new public and community-oriented uses.

1) Envelope Requalification and Energy Upgrade

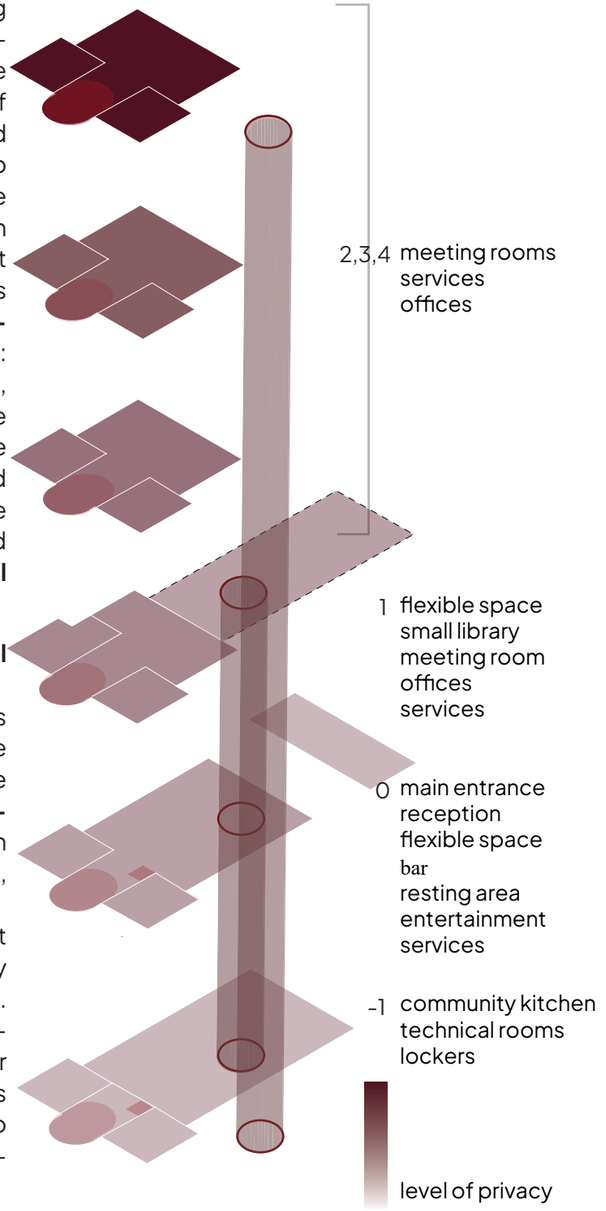
Given the absence of insulation in the original construction, the project introduces a full r**equalification** of the building envelope, including external wall insulation systems and the upgrading of **openings**. This intervention is conceived not merely as a technical necessity, but as an opportunity to **redefine** the building's external expression while respecting its rationalist origins. The intervention balances performance requirements (thermal efficiency, durability, maintenance) with formal coherence, ensuring that contemporary materials do not obscure the architectural identity of the original structure. The thermal insulation is thought to be placed outside not only as a better thermal insulation strategy but also to not occupy the space.



3) Preservation and Reinterpretation of Openings

One of the defining characteristics of the building lies in the rhythm, proportions, and positioning of its openings, particularly within the vertical tower element. These **openings** are largely preserved in their **original dimensions** and **locations**, reinforcing the historical legibility of the façade and maintaining continuity with the building's original compositional logic.

The most significant transformation occurs at the **ground floor**, where the former opaque envelope is replaced by a fully **glazed volume**. This intervention establishes a clear dialogue between the existing masonry structure and the contemporary addition, while enhancing the visual and physical permeability of the building. The transparent ground level strengthens the relationship between the interior functions and the surrounding public realm, creating an open and welcoming interface that activates the base of the building. This strategy introduces a **gradual transition** from transparency to solidity: the ground floor expresses openness, accessibility, and interaction, while the upper levels—particularly within the tower—retain their more enclosed and controlled character, preserving the historic **identity** of the structure and responding to the specific **functional requirements** of the program.



4) Gradient of Publicness and Spatial Hierarchy

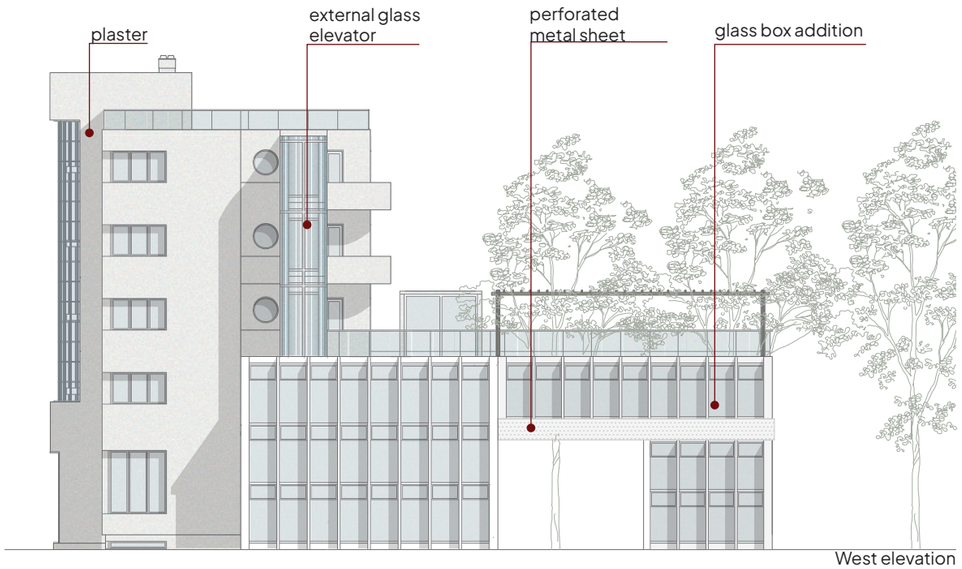
Although the building is conceived as a public facility, not all spaces require the same degree of openness. The project therefore introduces a **gradient of publicness**, articulated through façade transparency, access control, and spatial configuration.
The **ground floor** operates as the most open and **accessible** layer, directly connected to outdoor public spaces. In contrast, the **tower volume** accommodates functions that require greater **privacy** or environmental control. This differentiation allows the building to host diverse programs while maintaining clarity in circulation and use

5) Façade Continuity and Material Selection
Given the fragmented condition of the existing façade and the significant number of openings introduced through the intervention, the project seeks to establish a more **continuous** and cohesive architectural envelope capable of visually **unifying** the building despite its internal transformations. To achieve this, plaster is adopted as the primary façade finish, allowing the intervention to read as a **homogeneous** and integrated surface rather than a composition of separate applied elements. This approach allows the architectural expression to remain calm and restrained, avoiding further **visual fragmentation** within an already complex composition defined by voids, openings, and layered spatial conditions.
The material strategy therefore supports a contemporary reinterpretation of the existing rationalist character of the building through simplicity, abstraction, and surface continuity. Rather than emphasizing tectonic articulation or material contrast, the intervention prioritizes coherence, proportion, and the legibility of the overall architectural form, allowing light, shadow, and the rhythm of openings to become the primary elements defining the façade identity.

6) Volumetric Balance Through a Glass Addition
To address the visual and functional imbalance between the extended horizontal ground-floor volume and the relatively compact five-storey tower, the project introduces a glass box volume positioned above the ground-floor extension.
This addition serves multiple purposes:

- rebalances the overall massing of the building;
- introduces lightness and transparency as a counterpoint to the solidity of the existing structure;
- accommodates flexible programmatic uses while remaining visually distinct from the historic fabric.

The glass volume operates as a contemporary layer that enhances rather than competes with the original architecture



West elevation
Scale 1:200

7) Exterior Circulation as Architectural Disruption
A further distinctive intervention is the introduction of an external circulation element(external glass elevator), connected to the main building via a lightweight bridge. This element intentionally **disrupts** the original **symmetry** of the building, introducing a sense of **movement** and playfulness into an otherwise rigid composition. The exterior circulation system reinforces the concept of **interior–exterior connectivity**, makes movement visible and expressive, enhances the building's identity as a dynamic and accessible public space. By externalizing part of the circulation, the project emphasizes the role of movement as an architectural feature, transforming a functional requirement into a spatial and visual asset.

8) **Landscape strategy and material choice**
The landscape strategy is based on a **modular system** derived from the **building footprint**, generating a grid of 3.10 × 6.00 m units that organizes the open spaces and establishes a coherent relationship between the architecture and its surroundings.
Within this framework, a combination of permeable and low-impact materials is employed to differentiate levels of use and accessibility.

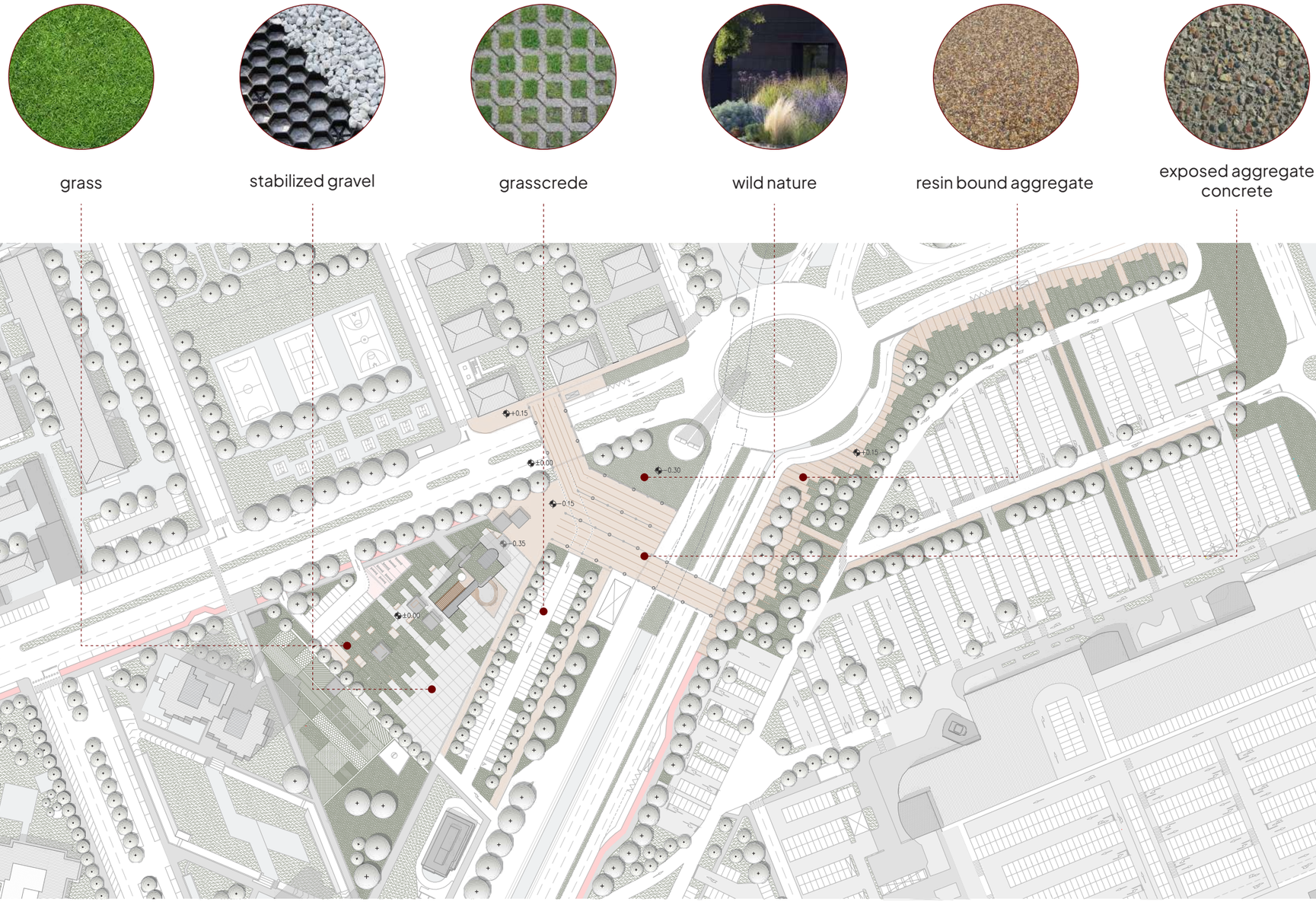
Areas intended for frequent pedestrian circulation are treated with **stabilized gravel**, providing a durable, walkable, and permeable surface while maintaining a natural appearance. These surfaces are interspersed with mown **grass** plots, creating a balanced transition between built and vegetated spaces and reinforcing the site's ecological character.

The main pedestrian and cycling routes extend across the existing road network through a series of raised crossings designed as continuations of the landscape system. To ensure durability while accommodating vehicular traffic, these crossings are realized in exposed **aggregate concrete**, whose texture and color are selected to maintain visual continuity with the stabilized gravel surfaces. This approach prioritises pedestrians and cyclists, reducing the dominance of road infrastructure.

Towards the roundabout and the adjacent highway infrastructure, the landscape gradually shifts into a more **naturalized environment**. Here, the introduction of shrubs, grasses, and diverse green species creates a buffer zone that visually and environmentally separates the working and social areas from the surrounding traffic corridors. The vegetation belt improves biodiversity, microclimate, and protection from noise and visual impacts.

Along the edge between Corso Giulio Cesare and the ToDream Shopping Mall parking area, the intervention enhances soft mobility by widening the existing pedestrian route to accommodate both pedestrians and cyclists. The resulting shared mobility corridor acts as a transitional buffer between the commercial area and the project site. A permeable resin-bound aggregate surface ensures accessibility, durability, and rainwater infiltration while maintaining landscape continuity.

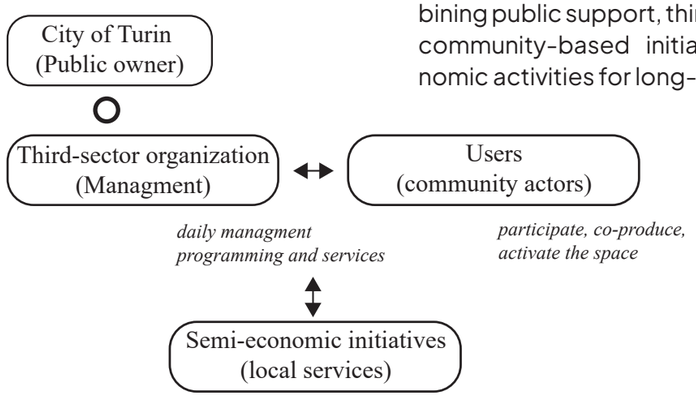
The parking areas are reorganised using grasscrete paving, replacing impermeable surfaces with permeable vegetated ones. This solution improves rainwater infiltration, reduces the urban heat island effect, and enhances the site's green character, allowing parking functions to coexist with ecological objectives and reinforcing the continuity between built and natural elements

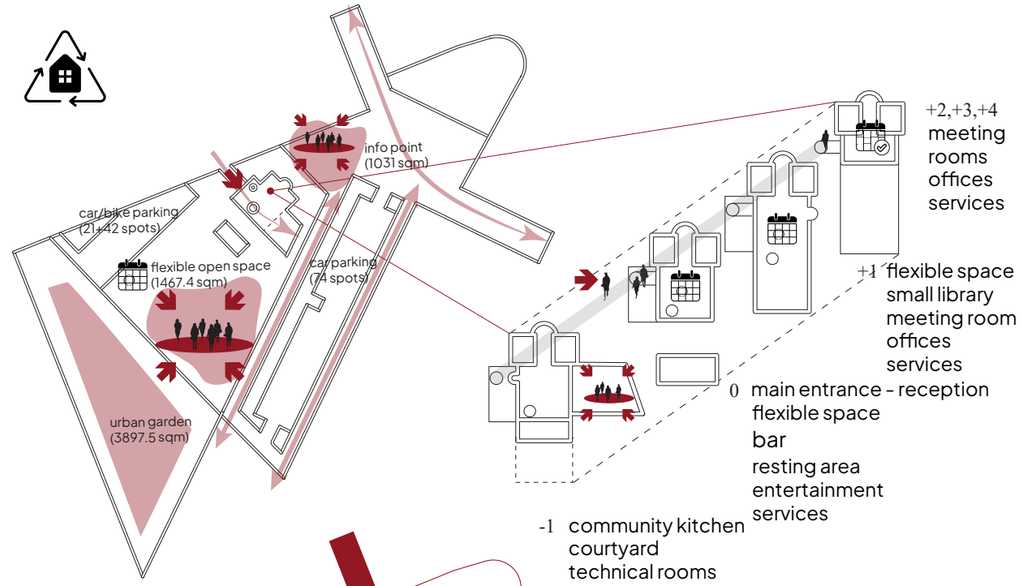

grass
stabilized gravel
grasscrede
wild nature
resin bound aggregate
exposed aggregate concrete
+0.15
±0.00
−0.15
−0.35
±0.00
−0.30
+0.15

3.6.4 Design Implications

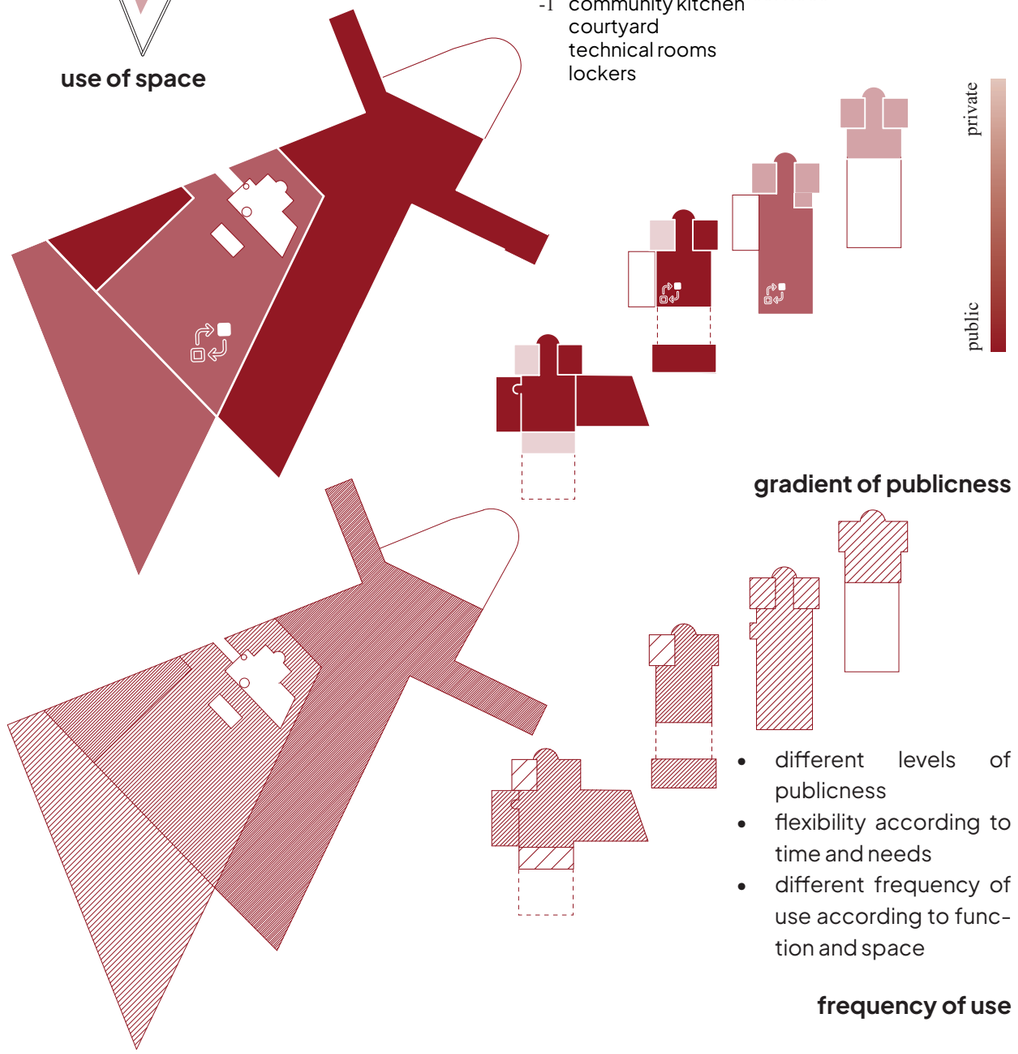
Following the theoretical framework and the comparative analysis of the selected case studies, the design proposal for the **Former Custom House** in Pietra Alta can be understood as the spatial **translation** of the principles, governance logics, and architectural strategies previously discussed throughout the thesis. The project does not seek to reproduce specific precedents or adopt a fixed typological model of the community hub; rather, it reinterprets the operational conditions identified through the case study analysis within the particular urban, social, and infrastructural context of Pietra Alta. In this sense, the intervention emerges as a situated **response** informed by the broader discourse on community hubs as adaptive social infrastructures and urban commons. The following analytical **framework** therefore reintroduces the methodological criteria established in the first chapter—governance, publicness, spatial flexibility, accessibility, adaptability, and urban integration—not as external evaluative tools, but as **design drivers** embedded directly within the project itself. Similar to the previously examined case studies, the proposal is approached through a relational reading that considers architecture, open space, circulation, and collective use as interconnected components of a larger socio-spatial system. The diagrams and strategies presented in this section are thus intended to demonstrate how the theoretical principles explored throughout the research are translated into concrete **spatial configurations** and **urban interventions** capable of supporting long-term collective use, negotiation, and transformation over time

Case study: Pietra Alta Community Hub
Location: Turin, Italy
Type: Community hub / social infrastructure and civic innovation space
Governance model: Hybrid (public institutions + third-sector organizations + community actors + semi-economic initiatives)
Administration: Shared management framework involving municipal actors, civil society organizations, and local community stakeholders
Status: Proposed project / co-governance model under development
Financial model: Hybrid funding structure combining public support, third-sector partnerships, community-based initiatives, and semi-economic activities for long-term sustainability





use of space



gradient of publicness

- different levels of publicness
- flexibility according to time and needs
- different frequency of use according to function and space

frequency of use

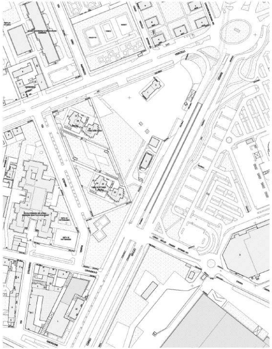
The Community Hub as Urban Strategy

The adaptive reuse of The Former Custom House as a catalyst for the regeneration of Pietra Alta district in Turin

The project proposes a community hub in Pietra Alta located at the former Custom house at the Rotonda della Sfinge, a strategic yet neglected threshold within north Turin. The site lies at the intersection of major infrastructural corridors and ongoing urban transformations, including commercial developments and public space regeneration projects. Despite this concentration of investments, the area currently lacks a local civic anchor capable of supporting everyday social life.

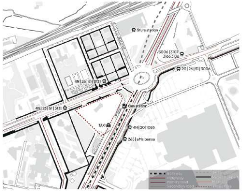
Rather than competing with large-scale metropolitan interventions, the project positions itself as social infrastructure: a space for gathering, learning, informal exchange and collective use. The Community Hub is conceived as a connector between flows and performance, between mobility-oriented urban systems and the daily practices of residents. Its role is to translate large infrastructural transformations into human-scale spatial experiences, offering a place to stay, meet and participate

The architectural intervention operates through spatial openness, permeability and programmatic flexibility, enabling different degrees of publicness and use over time. By reactivating an existing building and redefining its relationship with the surrounding public space, the project establishes a new urban landmark that is both accessible and adaptable. The hub functions as an interface between interior and exterior, ground and underground, formal and informal activities. Through a hybrid governance model the project supports collaboration between public institutions, local associations and informal user groups, allowing the space to evolve in response to community needs. In a context dominated by top-down infrastructural and commercial developments, this Community Hub introduce a hybrid dimension, reinforcing social cohesion and reclaiming the area a shared civic environment.



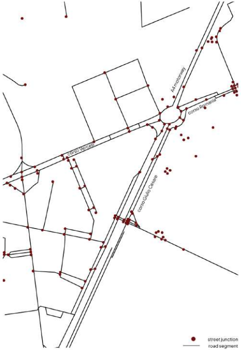
Base map From city of Turin
Scale 1:2000

URBAN CONTEXT ANALYSIS


Stura station
3006 | 3107
3166 3136
20 | 26 | 51 | 3006
4N | 26 | 51 | 3131
4N | 26 | 51 | 3131
Gas station
TAXI
4N | 20 | 1085
265 | aMalpensa
Tramway
Motorway
Primary road
Secondary road
Project site

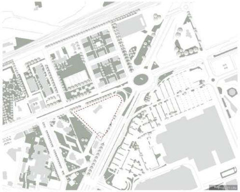
Integrated Mobility Network

The diagram illustrates the multimodal transport network surrounding the study area, including the hierarchy of the road system, pedestrian and cycling routes, tram infrastructure, and public transport services. The convergence of these mobility networks highlights the site's strategic position at the intersection of local and metropolitan movement corridors, providing direct accessibility for residents, commuters, and visitors. Beyond ensuring efficient connectivity, this network reinforces the site's potential to function as an accessible public destination capable of linking surrounding residential neighbourhoods with commercial activities, public facilities, and future urban developments. The combination of multiple transport modes establishes the site as an important mobility node and creates favourable conditions for the proposed community-oriented intervention.


A4 motorway
corso Romania
corso Vercelli
corso Giulio Cesare
street junction
road segment

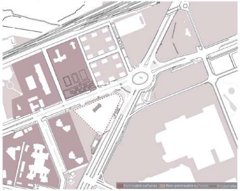
Street Network Connectivity

The graph represents the topological structure of the road network. Nodes correspond to street junctions, while links represent road segments, illustrating the degree of connectivity and permeability within the study area.


Project site

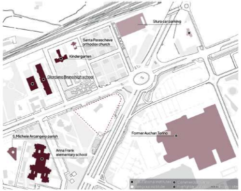
Green Infrastructure and Existing Vegetation

Identification of the existing network of green areas and tree-lined streets around the intervention site. The surrounding vegetation plays a key role in defining spatial character, environmental comfort, and potential ecological connections for the future project.


Permeable surfaces
Non-permeable surfaces
Project site

Spatial Permeability

The map illustrates the degree of pedestrian permeability within the study area. Publicly accessible spaces are distinguished from enclosed or fenced areas with restricted access, highlighting the continuity of pedestrian movement and the physical barriers surrounding the project site.

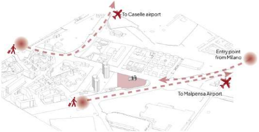

Stura car parking
Santa Paraschena orthodox church
Kindergarten
Giordano Bruno high school
Former Auchan Torino
S.Michele Arcangelo parish
Anna Frank elementary school
Educational institutes
Religious institute
Commercial
Project site

Services

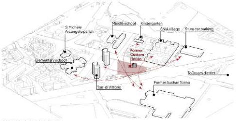
This diagram identifies the main services and public institutions located within the study area. Their distribution reveals the site's integration within an active urban environment supported by educational, commercial, and community facilities.

0 10 20 40m

STRATEGIC URBAN POSITION – MULTI-SCALAR APPROACH

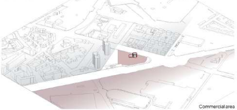

To Caselle airport
Entry point from Milano
To Malpensa Airport

URBAN GATEWAY


S. Michele Arcangelo parish
Middle school
Kindergarten
SNIA village
Stura car parking
Elementary school
Former Custom House
ToDream district
Torri di Vittorio
Former Auchan Torino

CATALYTIC URBAN NODE

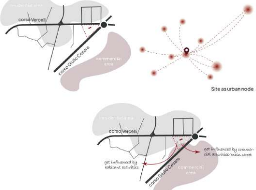
Residential area



Commercial area

URBAN THRESHOLD

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

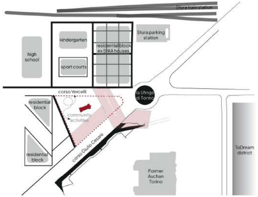

residential area
corso Vercelli
corso Giulio Cesare
commercial area
residential area
corso Vercelli
corso Giulio Cesare
commercial area
get influenced by commercial activities/main street
get influenced by habitant activities

Site as urban node

Urban influences

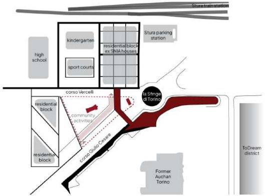
The site is influenced by the coexistence of residential and commercial activities. Daily neighbourhood use and destination-oriented commercial flows converge around the site, defining its role within the surrounding urban context.

URBAN STRATEGIES


Stura train station
kindergarten
residential block
ex SNIA houses
Stura parking station
high school
sport courts
corso Vercelli
la Sfinge di Torino
residential block
community activities
residential block
corso Giulio Cesare
ToDream district
Former Auchan Torino

Functional zoning

The site's strategic location between residential, commercial, educational, and transport functions creates the conditions for a context-responsive functional organization. The proposed zoning reinforces its role as a **public interface**, connecting different urban activities and supporting the **transformation** of the surrounding area.


Stura train station
kindergarten
residential block
ex SNIA houses
Stura parking station
high school
sport courts
corso Vercelli
la Sfinge di Torino
residential block
community activities
residential block
corso Giulio Cesare
ToDream district
Former Auchan Torino

Urban connectivity and slow mobility

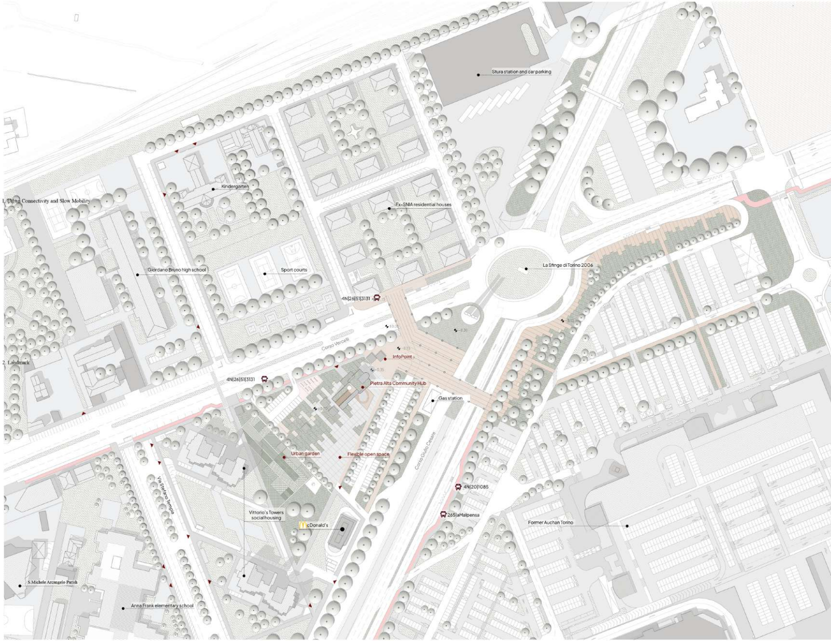
Through continuous pavementation and material coherence, the project aims to establish a smooth and readable **pedestrian network**, while simultaneously functioning as a traffic-calming strategy for vehicles approaching from the highway.

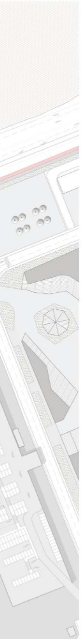
Corso Vercelli
A4 motorway
Torri di Vittorio
Corso Giulio Cesare
Corso Romania

Landmark

The final strategy addresses the symbolic and perceptual dimension of the project through the construction of visibility, orientation, and **urban recognition**. Rather than relying on monumentality alone, the intervention establishes a recognizable identity through light, spatial openness, and the articulation of a coherent nighttime presence within the surrounding urban landscape.

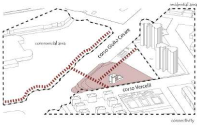
FROM STARTEGY TO MASTERPLAN


Stura station and car parking
Kindergarten
Ex-SNIA residential houses
1. Urban Connectivity and Slow Mobility
Giordano Bruno high school
Sport courts
La Sfinge di Torino 2006
4N|26|51|3131
Corso Vercelli
InfoPoint
2. Landmark
4N|26|51|3131
Pietra Alta Community Hub
Gas station
±0.00
-0.15
-0.30
-0.35
Urban garden
Flexible open space
Corso Giulio Cesare
Via Stefano Tempia
4N|20|1085
265|aMalpensa
Vittorio's Towers social housing
McDonald's
Former Auchan Torino
S.Michele Arcangelo Parish
Anna Frank elementary school



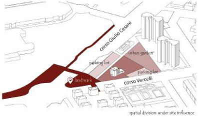
Masterplan
Scale 1:1000

Site development


residential area
commercial area
corso Giulio Cesare
corso Vercelli
connectivity

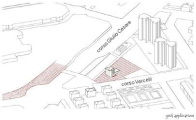
Strengthening Urban Connections

The masterplan reinforces existing movement corridors and introduces new pedestrian connections, transforming the site into a link between the residential neighbourhood, the commercial district, and surrounding transport infrastructure.


corso Giulio Cesare
urban garden
parking lot
parking lot
landmark
corso Vercelli
spatial division under site influence

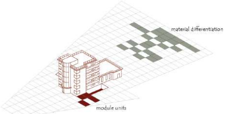
Context-Responsive Spatial Organization

The functional organization responds to the site's strategic position, allocating activities according to surrounding uses while establishing a public interface that connects residential, commercial, and community functions.


corso Giulio Cesare
corso Vercelli
grid application

Grid integration

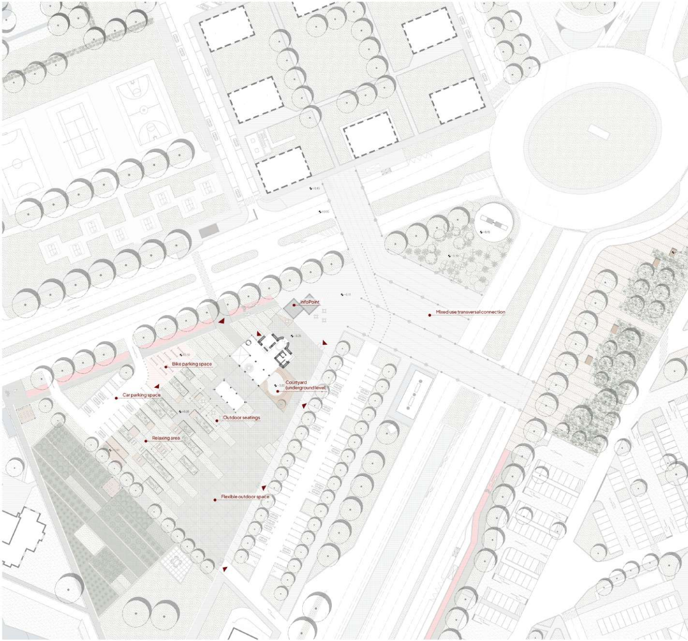
A modular grid provides the organizational framework for the intervention, ensuring spatial coherence while allowing flexibility in the arrangement of public spaces, landscape, and built elements.

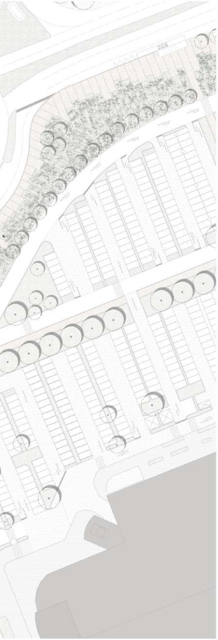

material differentiation
module units

Modular framework

The modular grid is derived from the proportions of the existing building, extending its geometry across the site to establish a coherent spatial framework. This approach creates a continuous relationship between architecture and landscape, using the building as the organizing element for public spaces, circulation, and material differentiation.

FROM THEORY TO DESIGN
NEIGHBOURHOOD SCALE


InfoPoint
Mixed use transversal connection
Bike parking space
Courtyard (underground level)
Car parking space
Outdoor seatings
Relaxing area
Flexible outdoor space

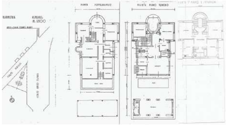


Site plan
Scale 1:500

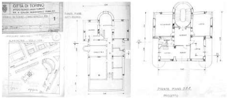
FORMER CUSTOM HOUSE AS A COMMUNITY HUB

From passage to place

The former customs house is the historical and spatial anchor of the site. Preserving and adapting the existing structure with the support of archival material documents, allows its architectural identity to become the foundation of a new community hub, reinforcing the transformation of the area from a place of passage into a place of everyday life.

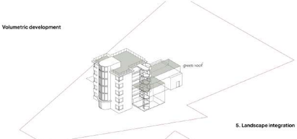


Selected original drawings from 1936

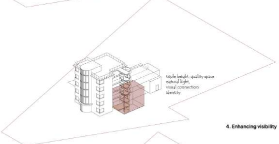


Selected refurbishment drawings from 1987

Volumetric development

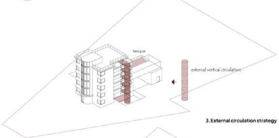


5. Landscape integration



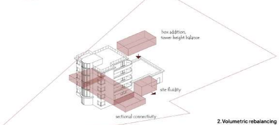
triple height-quality space
natural light,
visual connection
identity

4. Enhancing visibility



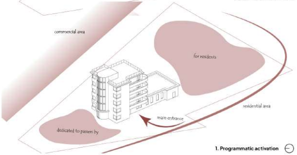
terrace
external vertical circulation

3. External circulation strategy



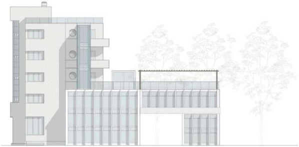
box addition,
tower height balance
site fluidity
sectional connectivity

2. Volumetric rebalancing

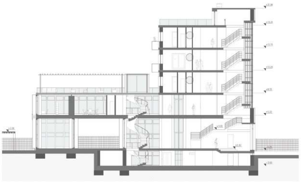


commercial area
for residents
residential area
main entrance
dedicated to passers by

1. Programmatic activation



West elevation
Scale 1:200



Section A-A
Scale 1:200

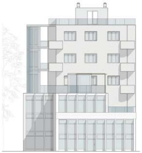
Internal building transformation

The project transforms the ground floor into a continuous and adaptable spatial field, where movement, visibility, and interaction replace conventional room-based organizatio.

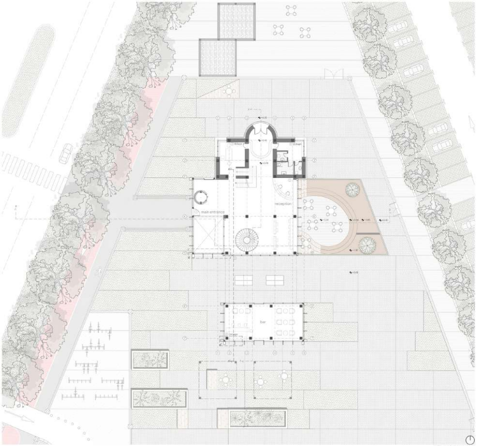
Through sectional manipulation, the ground floor, underground level, and exterior landscape are interconnected as a single spatial system. Natural light, visual permeability, and multiple circulation paths extend public activity below grade, dissolving boundaries between interior and exterior while fostering spatial continuity and collective use.

The project proposes a deliberate **breakdown** of internal **boundaries**, particularly on the ground floor, where the removal of interior walls becomes an operative act of **spatial liberation**.

North elevation
Scale 1:200

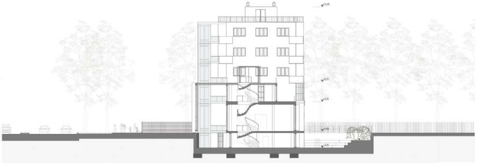


South elevation
Scale 1:200

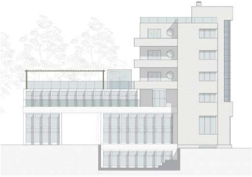

main entrance
reception
bar

Groundfloor level
Scale 1:200

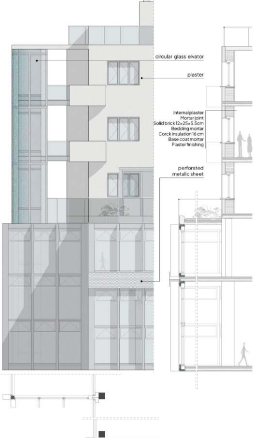
▨ Stabilized gravel
▨ Mown lawn
▨ Exposed aggregate concrete
▨ Timber cladding
▨ Concrete paving
▨ Colored asphalt - bicycle lane
▨ Resin bound aggregate
▨ Grasscrete



Section B-B

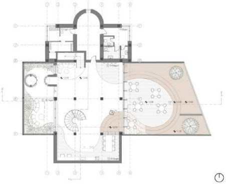


East elevation
Scale 1:200


circular glass elevator
plaster
Internal plaster
Mortar joint
Solid brick 12×25×5.5cm
Bedding mortar
Corck insulation 16 cm
Base coat mortar
Plaster finishing
perforated metalic sheet

Section A'-A'

South facade detail
Scale 1:50

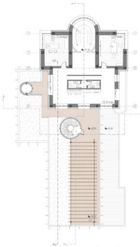


Underground level
Scale 1:200

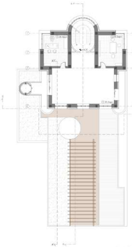
Intermediate floor

Room key:

1.Main entrance
2.Reception
3.Office
4.Services
5.Outdoor entertainment space
6.Bar
7.Lockers
8(9)Informal seatings
10.Community kitchen
11.Courtyard
12(14) Offices
13. Multi-Functional Space
15. Office kitchen and services
16.Meeting rooms



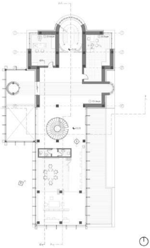
Second floor
Scale 1:200



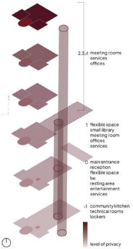
Third &

View 1

View 2



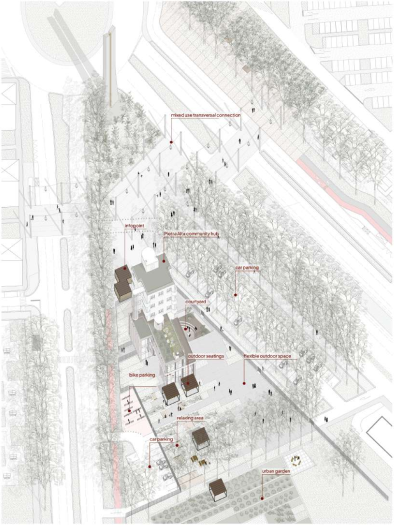
First floor
Scale 1:200



2,3,4 meeting rooms
services
offices
1 flexible space
small library
meeting room
offices
services
0 main entrance
reception
flexible space
bar
resting area
entertainment
services
-1 community kitchen
technical rooms
lockers
level of privacy

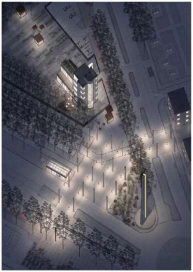
fourth floor
Scale 1:200

Functional scheme

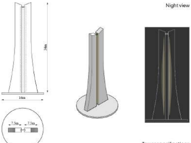


mixed use transversal connection
infopoint
Pietra Alta community hub
car parking
courtyard
outdoor seatings
flexible outdoor space
bike parking
relaxing area
car parking
urban garden

Monometric view
Scale 1:500

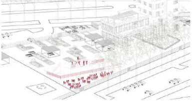


Night view



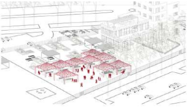
34m
16m
7.5m
7.5m

Tower specifications

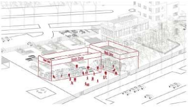


Outdoor concert

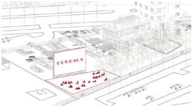
The Productive Void: Flexible Ooutdoor Space as Programmatic Potential



Open market



Open fair



Outdoor cinema

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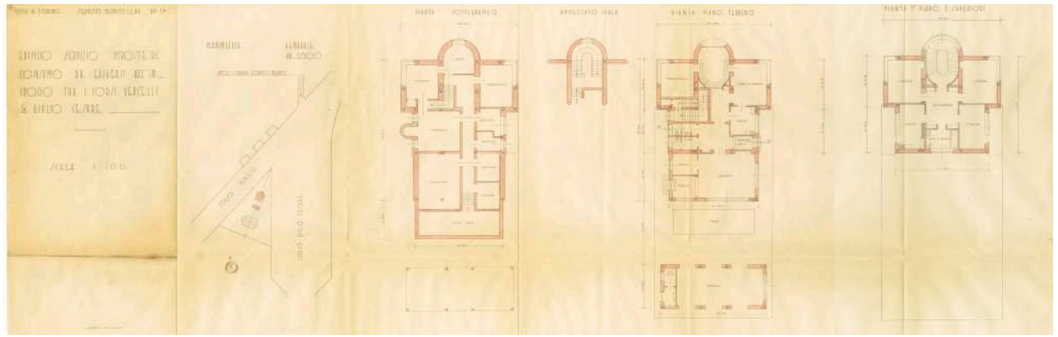
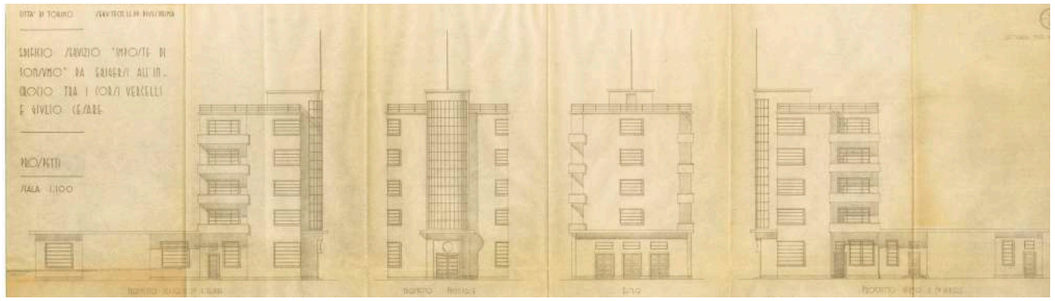
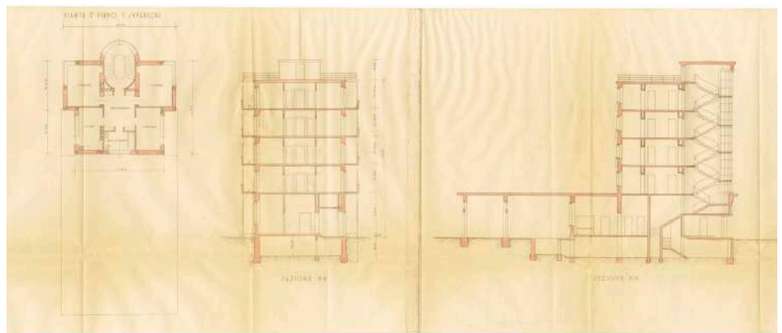
Chapter 3:
Torino Urban Lab. (2022). Pietra Alta: *Un'indagine sull'offerta di servizi. https://urbanlabtorino.it/pubblicazioni/pietra-alta/*

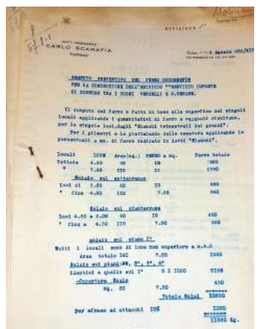
Appendix A – Original Documentation

This appendix contains the original architectural drawings consulted during the archival research at the Archivio Storico della Città di Torino as well as the refurbishment technical drawings from Ufficio Tecnico Lavori Pubblici. Selected drawings are discussed throughout the thesis, while the complete documentation is presented here for reference.

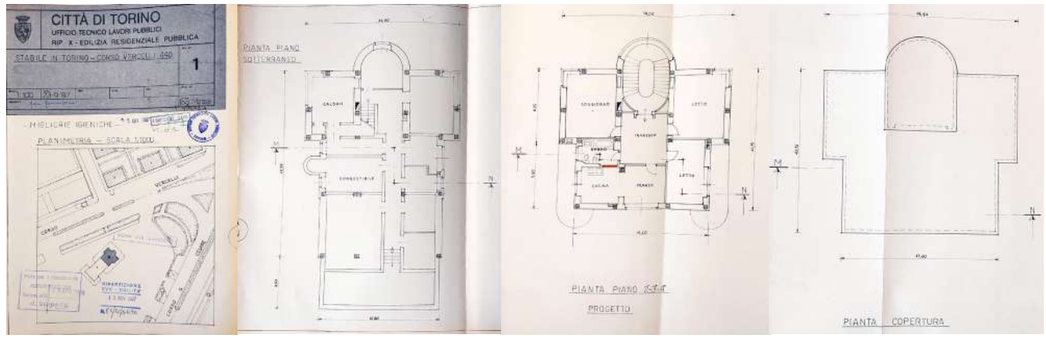


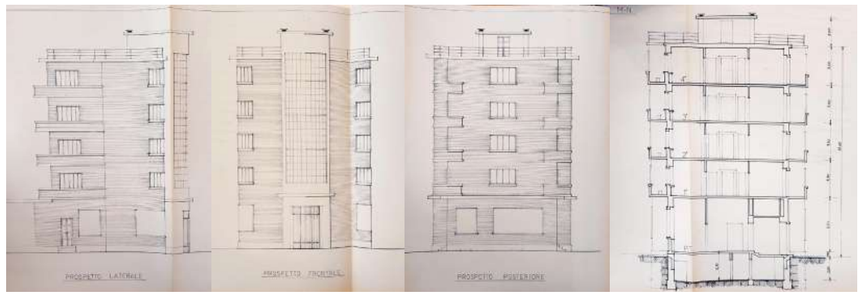






1936 Original drawings and expenses records
Source: Archivio Storico della Città di Torino. (1936)





1987 Refurbishment Drawings
Source: Città di Torino, Ufficio Tecnico Lavori Pubblici. (1987)