

# Mind the Gap Between City and University

Adaptive Reuse of Intermediate Spaces in West Naples

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## Abstract

Over time, Naples has become a university city. Starting from its foundation in the historic center, in a former convent, Federico II University then expanded eastward to San Giovanni a Teduccio; northward with the second polyclinic—and recently with the new location in Scampia—and westward with the Monte Sant’Angelo complex. However, the university spread across the territory presents a few shortcomings regarding the provision of services to students (eating halls, study rooms, accommodations). In the western part, in the districts of Fuorigrotta and Bagnoli, there are four university complexes, far from the center and most of the above-mentioned services. Looking at the urban fabric surrounding them, the presence of unused or abandoned buildings suggests the possibility of establishing relationships between the university and city community. The aim of this contribution is to investigate the processes of adaptive reuse of abandoned public buildings that are configured as ‘intermediate spaces’ between the university and the city and whose effects benefit both students and citizens. The chosen perspective concerns the role of architectural composition in defining actions aimed at overcoming not only physical barriers, but also economic and social ones. Through the restitution of the results of design-driven research conducted on two case studies, the paper will reflect on the ways in which synergies between university and urban policies can enhance unused spaces. By changing the function and maximizing the conservation of existing structures, it is possible to seize the potential of what already to meet the needs of the present.

Keywords: University and City Policies, Urban Regeneration, Civic University

## Introduction

From their very origins, universities and cities have shared an enduring and inextricable relationship. This interdependence is particularly evident in the European context, where the historical and evolutionary trajectories of universities have been closely intertwined with those of the urban fabrics in which they emerged (Dilorenzo, Stefani 2015). The interaction between universities and cities takes the form of a continuous dialogue at times explicit and sustained, at others more implicit or concealed.

Unlike other international models, where university campuses have often been conceived as autonomous entities separated from the city (for instance, the metropolitan universities of New York or Shanghai, or the self-contained campuses of Stanford and Berkeley), the European experience has largely been one of diffused campuses. These institutions are interwoven into urban fabric, acting as pivotal nodes within complex cultural, educational,

and research networks. In this sense, universities and cities share each other's destinies through a constant and reciprocal exchange of knowledge, resources, and human capital as two inseparable poles of the same magnet. The relationship between city and university is, indeed, an ancient one. In Europe and Italy, the first universities were established during the same historical period in which cities, having freed themselves from feudal constraints, began to constitute themselves as autonomous city-states. «For the first time, exchanges linked cities through Europe-wide circuits of relations: an intense flow not only of goods but also of ideas, considering that between 1000 and 1400 more than one hundred universities were founded in these cities—institutions which, with few exceptions, remain key components of today's academic and research system» (Haddock 2004, 37).

After many centuries, this relationship has re-emerged at the center of contemporary cultural and policy debates, driven by renewed attention to the well-being of both academic and urban communities (Martinelli et al. 2023). The Italian university system —comprising approximately one hundred institutions— recorded 1,909,400 enrolled students in the 2022–2023 academic year, a community whose presence significantly shapes urban dynamics. In recent years, universities have evolved from institutions primarily devoted to teaching into multifaceted actors engaged with enterprises, public institutions, and other universities, both within their local contexts and across global networks. Conversely, cities have once again become engines of development—spaces of encounter and interaction where proximity and diversity foster intense economic, social, and cultural exchanges. Within this framework, the university has rediscovered its civic dimension.

The term “Civic University” originally referred to an institution that designs its research and teaching programs to generate local socio-economic impact, with particular attention to widening participation and promoting technological transfer and innovation (Jones, 1988). Today, however, the term encompasses a broader vision: the potential for mutual support and collaboration between the university and the city, including their respective communities and governance structures. In the most successful cases, this reciprocal relationship «is reflected in the university system, the urban system, and the community as a whole, within the framework of strategic plans and integrated policies»(Savino 2010, 12). In the contemporary context, universities are increasingly called upon to develop forward-looking policies across cultural, social, and technological domains, by rooting themselves within the territories they inhabit and by acting as active agents within them. Such policies inevitably produce transformations within the institutions themselves, in their internal practices, and in their relationships with other institutional and social actors. Moreover, spaces of knowledge production operate, directly or indirectly, as producers of space, actively participating in urban transformation processes. Within this perspective, the university emerges as an agent of territorial transformation (Mangialardi, Massari 2024, 5), serving as a bridge between the needs of the student community and the policies of local administrations, with which it should ideally establish a constructive and ongoing dialogue. Nevertheless, this synergy is not always effective and, in some cases, entirely absent. In other instances, however, the university becomes a powerful actor capable of influencing urban policies. Such potential is increasingly acknowledged in urban strategies, where universities are explicitly integrated into planning frameworks and policy documents. Universities thus act as agents of regeneration and urban vitality, though their interventions do not always align with the public-interest objectives defined by planning policies, at times generating

unintended or distortive effects.

The physical relationship between the university and the city also remains a critical issue. While university facilities located within historic centers tend to be well integrated into the urban fabric, those situated in peripheral areas often suffer from infrastructural discontinuities, inadequate transport connections, and physical barriers that hinder interaction with their surroundings. As Bindels (2007, 80) observes, «the boundary between the university and the city must become porous or better yet, nonexistent. In a healthy knowledge society, the university becomes the city, and the city becomes the university».

### **Federico II and Naples: from the Centre to the West**

On 15 June 1224, Emperor Frederick II officially founded the University of Naples through an edict issued from Syracuse. From that moment onward, the *Federico II University*—secular and generalist since its inception—developed its facilities in the oldest part of the historic center, the Greco-Roman *Neapolis*. The university's connection with the city was evident from the outset, as the *studium* was located within pre-existing monastic complexes, of which Naples had a great abundance (Pane 2007). These spaces were thus converted to host what became the oldest secular university in Europe.

Naples itself played a central role in the Emperor's founding letter, in which students were invited to reside «in that place where everything is abundant, where the houses are sufficiently large and spacious, where the customs of the people are friendly, and where everything necessary for human life can easily be transported by sea and by land [...]»<sup>1</sup>.

The university has since grown alongside the city, serving as a vital driver of its ongoing cultural development. In 2022, the University of Naples Federico II inaugurated its new campus in Scampia, housed in a building originally designed for the Civil Protection Agency by the Italian architect Vittorio Gregotti. The conversion of this facility—now a hub for health professions—has the potential to act as an engine of urban and social regeneration in an area long marked by social marginality. In such contexts, the university emerges as an agent of social innovation (Rossignolo, Bargaglia 2023), particularly when, by investing in its *Tercia Missione*<sup>2</sup>, it succeeds in forging meaningful connections with the local community. The relationship between the university and the city also manifests in the organization of public transport networks. The distribution of university sites both in the historic center and in peripheral areas creates a dual mobility pattern. The traditional flow from the suburbs to the historic city, and a reverse stream from the center towards the periphery. This counter-flow of students may represent a key catalyst for the revitalization of peripheral districts as suggested by Fonseca (2023). Not only, it also helps to alleviate pressure on the historic university core. Within this perspective, the university complexes located outside the center are particularly interesting.

Municipality X, which occupies the westernmost part of Naples, encompasses the districts of Fuorigrotta and Bagnoli. During the twentieth century, the idea to decentralize certain university structures—traditionally concentrated in the heart of the city—gained ground. Decentralisation was pursued as a solution to reduce congestion in the city centre. This was the case for the Department of Engineering on Piazzale Vincenzo Tecchio 80 and Via Claudio 21, designed by Luigi Cosenza between 1956 and 1965; the Monte Sant'Angelo complex, whose long development (1975–1990) was undertaken by architects Michele Capobianco with Daniele Zagaria and Massimo Pica Ciamarra; and the Department of

Engineering on Via Nuova Agnano 30–38, built between 1999 and 2001 under the design and supervision of Pasquale Manduca (Castagnaro 2023). These three facilities are located along the two main axes of the Fuorigrotta and Bagnoli districts —Via Diocleziano and Via Cintia— which intersect at Piazzale Tecchio, forming a genuine diffused university hub integrated into the surrounding residential neighborhoods of Bagnoli, Rione Cavalleggeri d'Aosta, Rione Lauro, and Rione Traiano. However, the presence of major transport infrastructures physically isolate these residential districts from major service facilities. The railway connections of Metro Line 2 and the *Cumana* line separate the districts of Bagnoli and Agnano. The high-speed Via Cintia thoroughfare —oversized in scale relative to its urban context— has long constituted a barrier for residents of Rione Traiano and for students. Paradoxically, the citywide essential transport system effectively negates locally the «porous boundary» advocated by Bindels (2007).

### **Reuse of Intermediate Space to Materialize the Link between Urban and University Policies**

The Urban Regeneration Program (PRU, 2010–ongoing) is redefining the relationship between the neighborhood and its surroundings by establishing new connections and improving public services for the community. The program involves the creation of new sports facilities in the Rione Traiano area for the local community, utilizing some currently disused and degraded structures. Furthermore, it includes the regeneration of green spaces, which are presently abandoned or poorly maintained, connecting them to create an urban park. Two other programs, the POC Metro (2010–2020) and the Urban Sustainable Mobility Plan (PUMS, 2023–ongoing), are improving accessibility to the area.

For the boundary created by Via Cintia, the university complex and its community cannot benefit from the ongoing transformation. Therefore, a reflection on the threshold space between the two areas is necessary. On the other hand, the area of the complex on Via Nuova Agnano in Bagnoli is well integrated with the residential fabric and services of the area. However, this neighbourhood is adjacent to a large urban void, the result of the decommissioning of the Italsider plant. This area is currently undergoing transformation as part of the Environmental Remediation and Urban Regeneration Programme (PRARU, 2010–ongoing), which will provide the area with a new urban park and new residential developments. As in the previous case, however, the railway clearly divides the inhabited part from this area undergoing transformation.

A reflection on the space between the city and the university is therefore necessary. The bond currently severed needs to be re-established by focusing on the threshold space. This connection could be realized in those intermediate spaces, often abandoned, underutilized or neglected by urban planning, yet capable of revealing their latent potential as connectors and condensers of activities. These spaces could benefit both the university community and the urban population. The management of these interstitial elements thus becomes an essential strategy for social transformation as well as territorial development, rendering the space «prescriptively porous, permeable to contamination, deconstructible and reconstructible within spatial hierarchies that, beneath the apparent constant disintegration and reassembly, conceal long-term tendencies» (Bonomi, Masiero 2014, 19). Within these processes, the university can become a key actor in a broad social and territorial regeneration effort, aimed at creating a differentiated, inclusive, and attractive urban space.

Recently, Università Federico II, in collaboration with Regione Campania and ADISURC, under the provisions of Law No. 338/2000 and the Ministry of University and Research Decree No. 1257 of 30/11/2021, has developed a program aimed at improving the provision of university accommodation services. Nine new projects will follow the eight active university residences, adding a total of 870 new student housing units. The project also focuses on the recovery of existing disused buildings. Thus, there is a convergence between urban and university policies. The preferred actions are the regeneration and the recovery of existing buildings, which can be revitalized, giving them new functions. Starting from the idea that «the vitality of architecture is the product of heterogeneous factors, and the effectiveness of the performance of the function for which a building is intended is undoubtedly a foundational condition for its survival» (De Matteis 2009, 119), adaptive reuse represents a possible solution, understood here as «the process of reusing an obsolete and derelict building by changing its function and maximizing the reuse and retention of existing materials and structures» (Shahi et al. 2020, 4). Accommodating new uses within abandoned buildings located in the intermediate spaces between the city and the university allows them to redefine their role and extend their lifespan, taking advantage of the dual interest shown by urban programs and university initiatives. In this framework «the architect or the designer can uncover the meaning within a place [i.e. the threshold, in this case], activate, and therefore use it to instigate and liberate a new future» (Stone 2020,19).

### **Via Diocleziano 288 and Nicolò Copernico High School**

To ensure the boundary porous, it is necessary to identify potential threshold spaces. The city of Naples presents a considerable number of abandoned buildings, which constitute a critical issue within the urban fabric but also represent a significant potential, insofar as «the disused building becomes an open work, available for overlapping uses [...] capable of revealing the transformations of the context» (Menziatti 2017, 154).

On Via Diocleziano 288, among a continuous front of small villas and two or three storey single-family houses, stands a structure in Neapolitan yellow tuff, visibly in a state of abandonment (Fig. 1). The load-bearing masonry building was constructed in 1905 to house residences distributed over four above-ground floors and currently occupies only half of the original plot area. Following the 1930 Irpinia earthquake, the building suffered significant damage, and only in 1950 part of it was demolished and buttresses were added to remedy certain structural issues. After a second earth quake in 1980, the building was definitively abandoned and has remained unused ever since.

In 2018, following reports from local residents, the building was structurally secured to prevent collapse due to the reappearance of bradyseism phenomena affecting the area.

The building lies immediately adjacent to the *Cumana* railway line, which separates it from the rest of the Bagnoli neighbourhood behind it. Given its proximity to the Via Agnano university complex, the building represents a perfect opportunity to create new study rooms and student services, currently lacking within the university facilities, thereby avoiding the need for students to travel to the city centre. Moreover, its adjacency to the railway makes it particularly suitable to be transformed into a connective device, capable of overcoming the infrastructural barrier.



Fig. 1. Building in Via Diocleziano 288 (Maria Francesca Cesarano, 2022)

Along the Via Cintia axis, directly opposite the Monte Sant'Angelo University Complex, stands an abandoned brutalist-style school building constructed in the 1960s. The structure previously housed the Manzoni branch of the Marotta Comprehensive Institute until 2010, when it became the Copernico High School through a memorandum of understanding signed between the Municipality of Naples and the Province. In 2014, the Municipality requested the building's return, but never made use of it, leaving it in a state of abandonment. Only in 2015 was it temporarily occupied by the Davide Bifulco Association, which was later forced to leave the premises. Since then, the concrete skeleton has stood as an additional barrier, further isolating the residential district of Rione Traiano. The building could become an opportunity to create student and researcher housing, a function entirely absent in the nearby campus. Through selective subtractions and additions, the building can be adapted to host new functions serving both the university and the urban community, including spaces open to local associations and areas for recreation. The addition of a prosthetic structure could physically link the building to the university campus, thereby overcoming the infrastructural boundary created by Via Cintia.



Fig. 2. Nicolò Copernico High School (Francesco Annunziata, 2022)

## Conclusions

Adaptive reuse is reaffirmed as a fundamental strategy for overcoming the barriers between the city and the university, responding both to the demands of urban regeneration and to the needs of an academic system increasingly integrated within its territorial context. The conversion of disused buildings, often located in intermediate spaces between the centre and the periphery, represents a unique opportunity to revitalise marginal areas, creating new spaces for both the academic community and the wider public. In this context, adaptive reuse goes beyond mere physical rehabilitation: it becomes a process of social and cultural reinvention, enhancing the potential of existing buildings and transforming them into places of innovation. The convergence of urban and university policies makes it possible to jointly address the challenges of sustainability and urban livability, breathing new life into neglected spaces and creating places of encounter and exchange. This approach far removed from superficial or short-term logic contributes to the construction of a more inclusive, accessible, and interconnected university city, promoting a strategic and long-term vision that unites the social and urban dimensions of transformation.

## Notes

1. “[...] quibus ad inhabitandum eum locum concedimus ubi rerum copia, ubi ample domus et spatiosae satis et ubi mores civium sunt benigni; ubi etiam necessaria vite hominum per terras et maritimas facile transiebuntur [...]” Foundation Charter of the University of Naples, June 5, 1224, *Archivio di Stato di Napoli*, Diplomatico, Pergamene,

Federico II, no. 1.

2. The term Terza Missione refers to the set of activities involving scientific, technological and cultural transfer of knowledge through processes of direct interaction between the University and civil society, with the aim of promoting economic and social growth in the local area.

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