



# Temporary Urbanism and Community Engagement: A Case Study of Piazza Scaravilli in Bologna

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## Abstract

In the contemporary urban context, the concept of Temporary Urbanism is debated due to its different names, definitions, and heterogeneity. This type of intervention makes use of empty spaces—private, public or open—for a short period of time. This article explores the importance of citizen participation, associated challenges and opportunities, and focuses on the construction process of a temporary “SLAB” intervention erected in the summer of 2018 in Bologna, Italy. An understanding of the level of community engagement achieved, and the social and physical effects of a city’s life are established. The urban intervention was introduced into an existing installation, at Piazza Scaravilli, as an urban transformation in response to its needs. An ethnographic study approach was conducted at Piazza Scaravilli on the urban interaction before and during construction. This study demonstrates this installation’s influence, focusing specifically on the social impact on the spatial, temporal, economic and cultural contexts, and the possible solutions that temporary urbanism can provide for unused spaces.

## Keywords

Urban identity • City transformation • Temporary urbanism • Community engagement

## 1 Introduction

Temporary urbanism is the organic evolution of “temporary uses” (Talen, 2014). It is defined as a small-scaled intervention constructed for a short period of time, for public or private areas without a specific use.

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Today, this trend is known as “everyday urbanism”, “loose spaces”, “guerrilla urbanism”, “do-it-yourself urbanism” or “ad hoc urbanism” (Benner, 2013). The term “everyday urbanism”, specifically emerged in the 90 s as a way to encourage informal engagement in social and cultural spaces. These events paved the way for new categories such as “Guerrilla Gardening” which are based on ecology and sustainability (Adams & Hardman, 2014). As a result, temporary urbanism came from the idea of experimental interventions, where the need for change in our cities left room for similar activities which adapt to the needs and desires of citizens (Haydn & Temel, 2006).

The projects are internationally recognised. However, it is more common in today’s contemporary society that temporary proposals are presented as short-term solutions for public spaces where fundamental changes can be seen in the urban landscape. It is important to note how the integration of community participation in temporary urbanism can help strengthen a city’s identity; a process where the citizens are in control of the changes that are being made and therefore assume leading roles.

This case study is based on a variety of temporary actions held at the Piazza Scaravilli, Bologna, Italy. Located in Via Zamboni, The Pizza Scaravilli was used as an experimentation site. Its implementation of a variety of temporary activities transformed the urban integration. Currently, the historical centre has had a substantial impact on the development of the city, which is organised by the Bologna City Council, and is known as ROCK PROJECT and UniBo.

This article’s focus is on in-depth investigation of the interventions located in Piazza Scaravilli providing an understanding of the temporary uses and the influence of community participation in Urban Planning. The evidence presented in the article are supported by the data taken from relevant articles based on temporary urbanism and community participation. In addition, included are the visual examples of methods, which help establish a critical framework that addresses the goals of this research.

Therefore, in order to understand the benefits and consequences of temporary urbanism, ethnographical methodologies are used as an approach to investigate the area, noting participants' behaviours on a daily basis.

In that sense, this method helped to establish an understanding of the city–citizen relationship in Piazza Scaravilli in addition to the socio-cultural and economic influence that could be generated by temporary urban planning.

This paper highlights the limitations and benefits of temporary urbanism. The resilience demonstrated by the citizens within the experimentation site, proves that with each global misfortune experienced, public spaces regain their strength as protagonists of our cities. Today, communities, neighbourhoods and sectors in deplorable conditions have come back to life, thanks to communities or social groups that took over empty or abandoned spaces, squares or parking lots, and converted them to usable public areas through temporary urbanism. Communities are collectively reclaiming their environments. It is true that, together with other disciplines, temporary urbanism provides the opportunity to create scenarios where people's living conditions can improve and enhance community engagement.

## 2 Temporary Urbanism, the City and the Community

The term “temporary” is understood as a finite moment with a defined beginning and end (Bishop & Williams, 2012) It is followed by the concept of “urbanism”, which is defined as the combination of design and planning, taking into account different aspects of the city (Chase et al., 2008). Since the beginning of history, temporary urbanism, originally known as “temporary uses”, had an important impact on cities. Its influence remained unnoticed until the modern age during which different terms emerged and notorious changes were reflected in cities (Oswalt et al., 2014). Figure 1 shows the first temporary interventions in Europe and America that gave rise to this type of urbanism.

At present, “temporary urbanism” is understood as the application of experimental actions, or activities, to test strategies in an attempt to transform the city. Those actions are first studied through investigation of the process of the space, the culture, inhabitants and user needs to respond appropriately to each aspect through a temporal approach (Bishop, 2019).

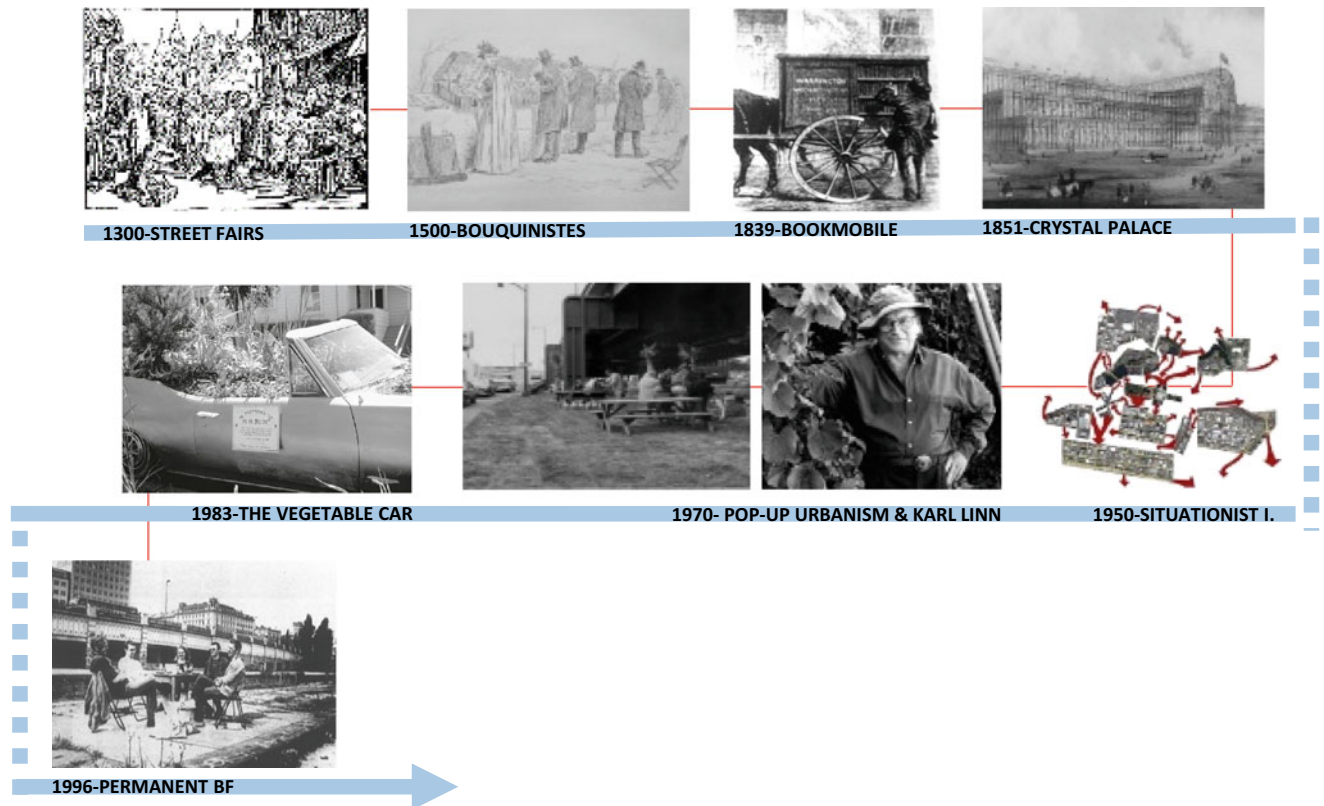


Fig. 1 Temporary urbanism timeline

## 2.1 The Importance of Community Engagement: Challenges and Opportunities

In recent years, the temporary use of spaces has become a significant trend, playing an essential role in exploring identity, innovation and the study of disused spaces. This phenomenon represents an urban development opportunity for urban planners, designers and the creative industry (Oswalt et al., 2014); one where the shape, spatial identity and idea of creating a neoliberal urban development through interdisciplinary discourses are adopted and named a “magical” trend (Ferreri, 2015).

As much as the understanding of the city is vital for the designer, the temporary revitalization of urban gaps is also a part of that participatory conception. The need to empower the neighbours to act as promoters of projects in their coexistent space or, at least, make them feel “creators of place” is also of significance (Rueda, 2018).

An example of the theory explained is the Open Sky Museum, an artistic intervention located in San Miguel—Chile, proposed by citizens to enhance the identity of the neighbourhood using narratives that represent it (Contreras & Garcia DelaVega, 2019).

Figure 2b shows a sample of the murals and graffiti made by national and international artists. The initiative emerged to restore the San Miguel area, taking inspiration from the Bicentennial of Chile, financed by the National Fund for Cultural Development and the Arts Bicentennial of 2010, “FONDART”. The museum began to come to life through a series of participatory activities involving the community, where the main attractions were the walls of the buildings found on the main avenue, which can be seen in Fig. 2a (Rodríguez, 2017).

According to Bishop and Williams, the implementation of temporary interventions in the city cannot occur without

the community's participation. The author states that as a result of the urban planning in San Miguel, the heritage created between the artists and the residents of the San Miguel community transformed a humble and destroyed neighbourhood into an arts complex with the ability to attract tourists from all parts of the world (Contreras & Garcia DelaVega, 2019). Consequently, the regeneration of the buildings was achieved, in part, and attracted the state government's attention to the improvement of public spaces (Urzúa Martínez, 2016). Nonetheless, working together with a local community can be challenging, especially when citizens are trying to decide on how best to represent the neighbourhood through imagery. This explains why the first proposal was rejected by the community (Rodríguez, 2017). Several elections held, however, it was recorded that there was a lower percentage of participants who engaged with the artist's initial proposals. The sense of permanence was also one of the challenges to overcome when carrying out this project. This case study is an example where community participation has substantially helped shape the way in which their neighbourhood is represented and how their cultural identity is viewed by others (Andres et al., 2019). Temporary urbanism is generally related to areas with poor conditions, humble communities or projects without sufficient financial funds and with time constraints as its strategies stemmed from an idea of solving problems immediately. Theories of resilience (Katz, 2004) expose groups that work together to implement renewal strategies in their communities independently from any government entity (Keck & Sakdapolrak, 2013). The purpose of community resilience aims to find its strengths, understand where and what its challenges are, and eliminate its weaknesses. It is here that these citizen groups understand the power and prominence they have in their community. In that manner, many branches arise in temporary urbanism, each



**Fig. 2** a Community participation (Rodríguez, 2017). b Chilean Workers Mural (Rodríguez, 2017)



one with its goals, opportunities and proposed solutions for each conundrum and context, reflecting the needs of the spaces (Lydon & Garcia, 2015).

### 3 Introduction to Piazza Scaravilli

A historic road, known as Via Zamboni, is located in the centre of Bologna and the University, and is heavily used and noticed by the population. This road hosts various forms of culture and entertainment activities, such as the Teatro Comunale Palazzo Poggi, among other historical venues around the University of Bologna. Figure 3a represents the central axis, capturing the essence of coexistence between students and citizens. Different uses, needs, styles and representations exist simultaneously, however, the different road uses bring about varied criticisms.

Piazza Scaravilli, located on Via Zamboni, has undergone significant changes after the area was transformed from a parking space into a public space. The site hosts different activities daily, contributing enormously to Via Zamboni. Figure 4 shows Piazza Scaravilli before the transition into a public space.

#### 3.1 Malerbe: “From a Parking Space to a Public Space”

By: ROCK, University of Bologna, Centro Antartide, Beyond Architecture Group “BAG” and EU Community and the Municipality.

Personal Communication: Professor Danila Longo, Jul 2018—University of Bologna

The ROCK project carefully considers the transformation, or creation of public spaces, to increase and improve the value of the city and develop cultural collaborations in a sustainable municipality. Together with other collaborators, ROCK Bologna has decided to create a virtual public space



Fig. 4 Parking (Google\_earth, 2015)

in Piazza Scaravilli. The selected site takes advantage of the attractive area, being the only space in Bologna with four sides of porticoes near the main street, making it a valuable architectural heritage.

As a result, Malerbe was born: “From a parking space to a public space”. The project was originally proposed by students, where phrases such as “Let me breathe” and “do not park” became the focus of the space. Constructed in 2016 by students, with the help of a cooperative “Centro Antartide”, the project took the form of a co-design workshop, a “Utopia Concreta”, with the participation of Paolo Robazza “BAG”, the architect.

The project consisted of a temporary garden seating, built with recycled materials and weeds known as “Malerbe”; a wild garden that prevents people from stealing it. By



Fig. 3 a Via Zamboni (BO2ND, 2018). b Via Zamboni

developing the Piazza, the community gained a free public space to socialise, relax and host public events, with the goal of attracting visitors of varying ages and backgrounds. Piazza Scaravilli has hosted prestigious events such as the “ROCK Arena” or the “Bologna Design Week”.

Despite its significant progress, there was an additional need to improve the space and increase community participation, which is why U-LAB “ROCK Living Lab” worked in the Piazza to define the priorities and potential of the place. Consequently, an initiative to create a Co-designing workshop, known as the “Utopia Concreta - Malerbe # 2”, was born (Fig. 5).

Personal Communication: Architect. Paolo Robazza, Jul 2018—BAG.

The idea was born during the summer of 2017 when the plaza hosted numerous events and the organisers realised that instead of designing a platform and seating area for each event, it would be more beneficial to request a proposal for a “temporary intervention”. The process was carried out in the form of a co-designing workshop called “Utopia Concreta - Malerbe # 2”, in collaboration with Architect Paolo Robazza from “BAG” the University of Bologna and ROCK Bologna.

The main goal in Piazza Scaravilli was to use the area as a “permanent laboratory” and the host of temporary activities for the transformation of the area. The temporary structure represents the last phase of the Utopia project and the name “SLAB” means, “*a type of powerful wave generated from the sea’s deep waters, breaking into shallow water*”. It hosts part of the performance review that animates the summer in prominent places in the university. By hosting this new space, the university area has become one of the prominent places in the centre calling for interaction among the community.

The second part is explained in detail in Sect. 5 with an ethnographic documentation of the construction process of SLAB (Fig. 6).

## 4 Methodology

As (Rockwell, 1980) indicates, an essential characteristic in the ethnographic application is to understand the spaces from the same point of view of the community as they experience them in their everyday lives and describe them in a socio-cultural sense through the interaction between the citizens spaces within a specific population (Geertz, 1974).

According to (Werner & Schoepfle, 1987), this methodology (Fig. 7), as part of an urban study, focuses on the process of directing observations and describes three types of techniques (Angrosino & Rosenberg, 2011):

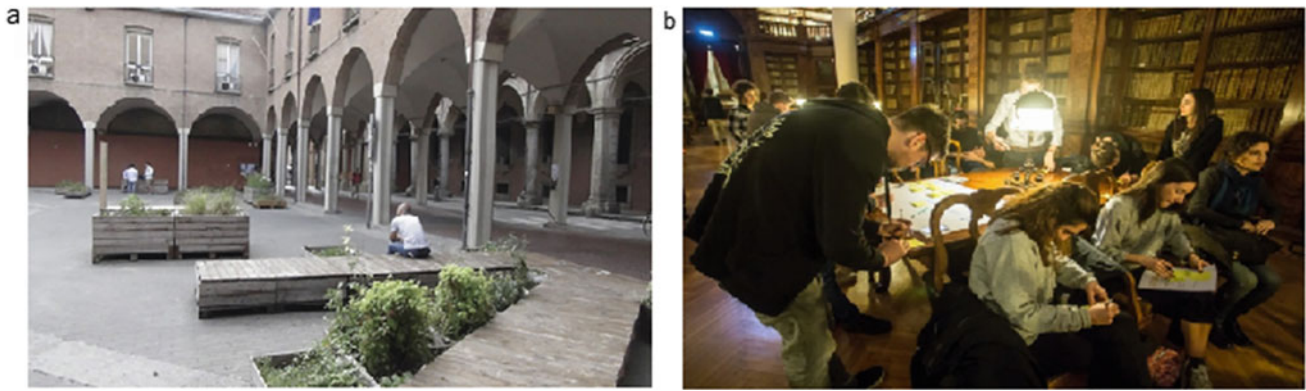
The first is a descriptive observation in which you observe anything and everything. Assuming you ignore everything, the downside of this model is that it can lead also to the gathering of irrelevant information.

The second type—focused observation—emphasises interview-based observations, in which the opinions of the participants guide the researcher's decisions on what to observe.

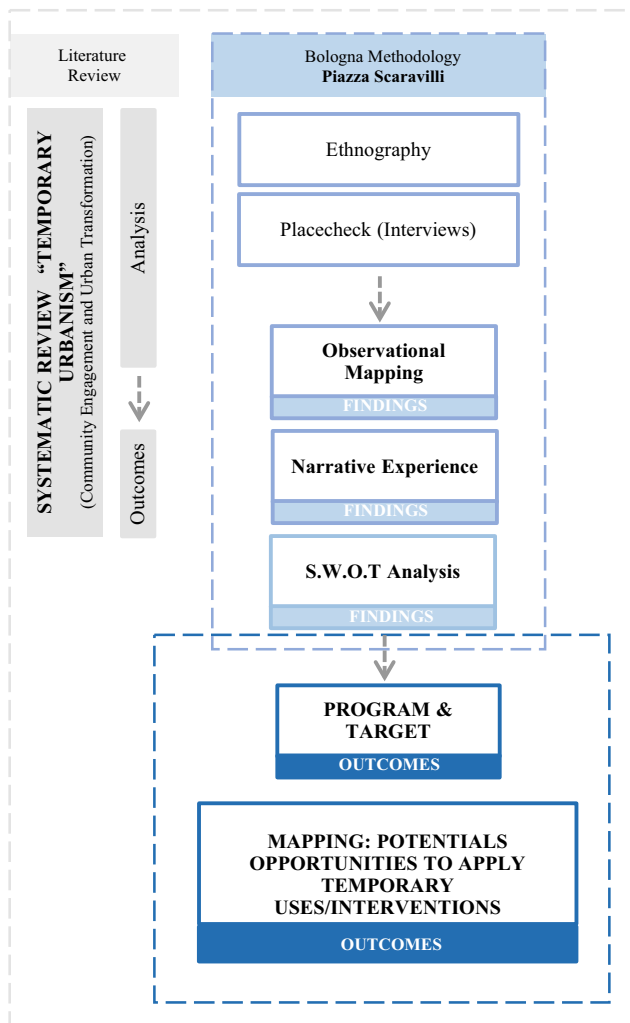
The third type of “observation”, considered more systematic by Angrosino & Deperez, is selective observation, in which the researcher focuses on different kinds of activities to help delineate the differences in these activities. According to (Mariampolski, 2006), the information collected from this methodological approach is undoubtedly effective as its investigation reveals much more information than what could



**Fig. 5** a Pilot “Do not park” (Longo, 2016). b Malerbe Pilot Action (Longo, 2016)



**Fig. 6** a Malerbe (Longo, 2017). b Co-design workshop (Longo, 2017)



**Fig. 7** Designed methodology

be obtained through documented sources or other types of research. On a contradicting note, (Klima, 2019) states that ethnography is limited in application to bigger communities and is only useful to smaller areas with a behaviour and

structure that is easy to understand and describe. Similarly, the observer's prejudices and experiences could influence their ethnographic descriptions or affect the community's behaviour forcing them not to act naturally. Therefore, objectivity will always be an existing theme among the limitations of ethnography (Boellstorff et al., 2012).

Moreover, (Banks & Vokes, 2010) state that utilising more images in the ethnographical approach can help add to the context of the study and complement the researcher's textual descriptions. Photographic ethnography presents the participant with specific situations and moments, and the combination of these together with the scenography may help communicate and express certain circumstances (Brisset Martín, 1999). However, ethnography, in the urban landscape, offers active participation, visual crossing techniques and interviews to understand and reformulate the way to observe the city (Duneier et al., 2014).

## 5 Case Study: "SLAB" Assembly Process—Part II

The case study goes into the construction of "SLAB", a temporary installation in Piazza Scaravilli. The workshop was held in July 2018 and was directed by Architect Paolo Robazza and his team from "BAG", in collaboration with a group of students and teachers from the University of Bologna.

A considerable amount of the work was observational and focused on the urban analysis, activities and community documentation before and during the "SLAB" construction process, all the while capturing the community's engagement and responses. The objectives are to use the area as a laboratory to host activities, take advantage of its privileged location and improve its quality by integrating a socially diverse society.

Ethnography (Table 1) was chosen as a research method as this approach allows for exploration through anecdotal living experiences. This created the potential to address observational concerns and detect the impact that this type of



**Table 1** Ethnography approach in Piazza Scaravilli

Component	Variables of analysis
Users: Bolgna Students Local Community	Recognise the expectations of the community and its belonging to the city Understand socio-economic and cultural dynamics of the population involved Identify the habitat needs of the community
Area: Piazza Scaravilli	Study the accessibility and integration of the specific sector in the city Explore the insertion of temporary interventions Investigate the agents involved Add the position and participation of the community

urbanism makes on the city, the impressions and the community's behaviours.

In this context, it was not only interesting to examine the influence of student participation but also the thoughts and intentions of the local community. On the other hand, this also helps to understand the relationship between the temporary, cultural and architectural interventions along Via Zamboni.

**Data Collection:** From Monday, July 2 to Friday, July 6, 2018: The construction process recorded each day through interviews and observation techniques for data collection as recommended by (Kawulich, 2005). The techniques were applied as follows:

In phase 1, daily photographic documentation was conducted, creating a series of photographs that portrayed and documented the creation of the space. See Fig. 8 for day one and two of the workshop.

Secondly, the direct observation technique was undertaken under the Piazza porticoes. Photographs were taken from a variety of perspectives to avoid interruptions and allow for direct participation to capture all visual angles. Figure 9 shows a series of words and symbols that narrate the situation on day three.

Finally, I was fortunate to be a participating observer. For 2 h, I was present during this assembly process this has made my experience radically different when compared to the other techniques because the observer perception was united with the feeling of belonging. In particular, in the field of community work, you will understand leadership skills, communication, working well in a team and finding solutions to problems, in bringing the best to the city. The integration between the student community and the emotions that are evoked by each piece assembled give shape to that wooden Wave called "SLAB". See links to a video



**Fig. 8** Photographic narrative

**Fig. 9** Narrative experience



summarising the construction process of the project here: [https://youtu.be/NSq\\_5TVL9bo](https://youtu.be/NSq_5TVL9bo).

### 5.1 Observational Summary

#### Results from the case study

The analysis helped establish an understanding of the situation and the impact of the temporary interventions in the Piazza, whilst taking the community's experiences and opinions into consideration.

Phase 1 was divided into three parts and is explained in detail in Sect. 4. The language barrier signified a major limitation during interviews conducted and in communicating with

the participants. However, the volunteers were very interested in collaborating. The following analysis (see Table 2) utilises the SWOT Analysis technique and applies it to the Piazza Scaravilli case to understand and evaluate the place. Humphrey explains through this exercise how potential opportunities are enhanced when you have a complete outlook on future weaknesses and threats. In this case, Piazza Scaravilli is given an advantage by its location in terms of accessibility and positioning between two essential axes of Bologna's centre, generating a meeting point for the community. The presence of art and the university environment keeps the area alive most of the time. On the other hand, existing weaknesses, such as crime and lack of green spaces in good condition, predict future threats in the area (see Appendix A).

**Table 2** S.W.O.T analysis

Bologna "Via Zamboni"	
Strength	Weakness
Permeability between the university campus and the centre Public spaces in use Proximity to the city centre The arcades and the passages Artistic value Cultural value Appreciation of medieval architecture	Areas with poor lighting The cycle line does not respect the pedestrians Lack of the private sector engagement Public spaces used as garbage area The need for green areas
Opportunities	Threats
Strong creative activity Big potentiality in open spaces Potential to develop urban areas with community participatory process Opportunity to increase the footfall-taking advance of urban traditional activities	Poor lighting will generate crime, low footfall at night and more homeless Lack of green areas in the centre may force people to do not stay in open areas in the hot weather Informal commercial zones



Phase 2 of the ethnographic study was designed as a semi-structured interview by way of a place check. A place check is a simple way of assessing what a place and its inhabitants are trying to convey (Cowan, 2000). The objective was to ascertain the citizens' needs and their views on the current situation of their city, its problems and shortcomings.

In summary, 20 interviews indicated that 70% of interviewees between 18 and 35 years old support the participatory process. In comparison, almost 80% interviewees aged 35–60 believe that the local government and the university should take responsibility. In its entirety, the community asks for more green spaces and equipped public spaces that host enjoyable public events for all ages. Finally, it was interesting to observe how the population living on the outskirts of the centre began to appreciate and think about how they could creatively utilise empty or disused spaces within their community. They began associating these empty spaces with temporary urban planning and exploring how they could improve the appearance of their neighbourhoods (see appendix B).

To sum up, the different observation phases helped explain the area's current situation and provided before and after perspectives of the “Malerbe” intervention in the square. Following the methodology, attention then turns to the response of the citizens', their opinions and behaviours within ethnographic explorations while getting to know, exploring, and enjoying the site and experiencing local activities.

The conception of projects such as “Malerbe” and “SLAB” demonstrate that they have the potential to bring life and create an engaging space that had previously only been used as a parking lot, regenerating the area and offer Via Zamboni and the community a permeable, healthy and adaptable public space. This intervention introduced the idea of citizen participation (see Appendix B).

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## 6 Conclusions

Through the observation and analysis of current urban characteristics, Piazza Scaravilli and Via Zamboni aim to capture the attention of the university area's diverse population; to welcome it, to challenge it, and to host various forms of culture and entertainment. The reflection is drawn upon the significant change that took place when the parking

lot was transformed into an open community area. The area now hosts different daily activities and contribute to Via Zamboni massively. Yet, there are also negative aspects to the study such as follows: (a) some seating areas attract homeless people in the Piazza, thus increasing insecurity. (b) Empty spaces along Via Zamboni (c) Absence of community participation (d) lack of green spaces (e) Loss of identity (f) Economy (g) Regeneration of public spaces.

This study is of relevance for temporary urbanism as it makes a remarkable contribution through dense descriptions of specific experiences and activities and insight into concerns within communities. Through a primary investigation, this study was able to verify situations in current contexts. By utilising proposals and hypotheses found in contemporary literary writings, this study has established a better understanding of the potential of temporary urbanism. After observing daily customs, needs, and behaviours, it was easy to understand the city as a place full of culture, art, and tradition. Simultaneously, to analyse it from an urban and social point of view: it was necessary to investigate spatial, temporal, economic and cultural contexts as they are key to the transformation and evolution of a city. Thus, the collected data and the theoretical knowledge on temporary urbanism are reflected in Fig. 10 where a social mapping of the area indicating uses, community, and social impact come together to generate a diagram that adds to the application of temporary interventions for the city and community.

The diagram in Fig. 11 explains how temporary urbanism, when studying the city, can be adapted to each situation, thus allowing community integration and ideas, an exchange of ideas to address the needs of the city from the perspective of the community.

Cities worldwide have been promoting temporary interventions that offer quick and effective alternatives for empty or unused public spaces. Nevertheless, today, and more than ever, the concept of “temporary” has gained momentum. In considering the COVID-19 pandemic and its ongoing global impact, Social Distancing has forced us to stay at home while the economy has forced us to leave it. Therefore, even the “new normal” encompasses a temporary trend that is adaptable to the needs of society.

In summary, the future of cities is not an independent or a sole objective for governments. Cities and citizens need to evolve ecologically, while taking into consideration the associated strengths and weaknesses, demographic factors and the essential needs to begin the transformation of a city.

Fig. 10 Program and target

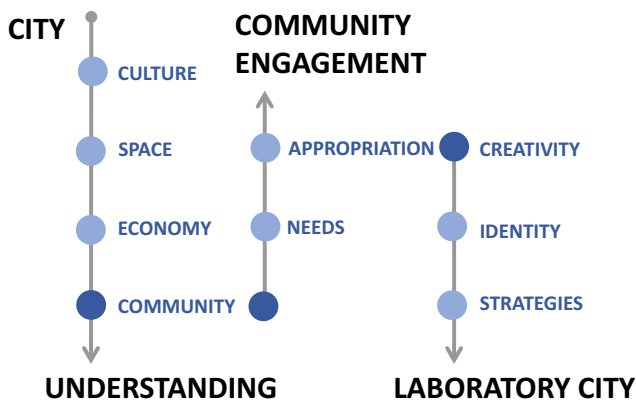
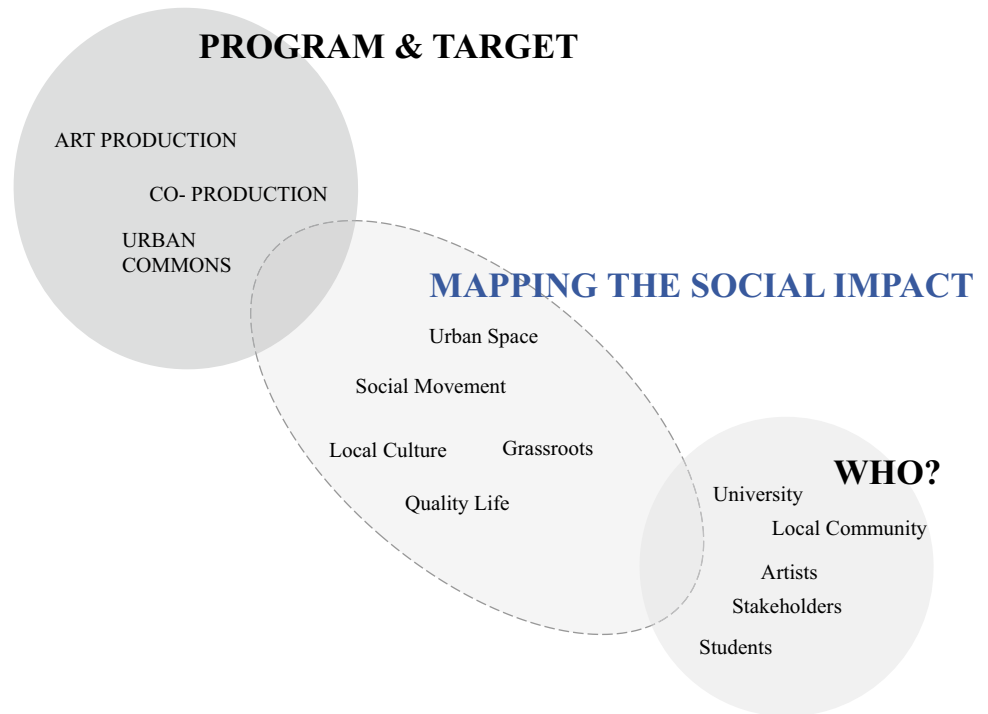


Fig. 11 Mapping temporary opportunities and engagement

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**Appendix A**

*A.1 Comments collected during interviews or engaged conversation with the local community:*

Personal Communication: Emanuel Bombardini, Jul 2018

I considered the new design of the Piazza as an evolution in Via Zamboni; the piazza is now an important meeting place for students, artist's organisation and the community, we organise several free activities here.

Personal Communication: Sandra Lucchini, Jul 2018

Good job from the university; this is what Bologna needs, free seating spaces.

Personal Communication: Political Sciences Student-Mario Mirabile, Jul 2018

I am a participant in this project to contribute something to the city before my graduation

Bologna has a low level of inhabitants in summer and needs free social spaces so that this intervention will help as a meeting point for many, regardless of social class.

Personal Communication: Architecture Student- Eleonora Savini, Participant in workshop 1 and 2, Jul 2018

At the state one of these projects I had a great experience in team working with the design process

This summer, looking at the success of the current intervention on Piazza, as people are enjoying it every day, the SLAB pavilion will have a good response from the community.

## Appendix B

### B.1 Placecheck Piazza Scaravilli

Date: 02 Jul 2018 (Morning) 03 Jul 2018 (Afternoon) 05 Jul 2018 (Afternoon)

Participants: Local Community: 10 citizens—Students: 10 citizens

### Questions:

What do you like or dislike about Malerbe?  
Did the intervention produce any impact on the quality of community's life?

Will you participate in the application of any urban intervention?

Do you have any suggestion of how to improve the piazza?

See Fig. 12 and Table 3.

Fig. 12 Placecheck Results

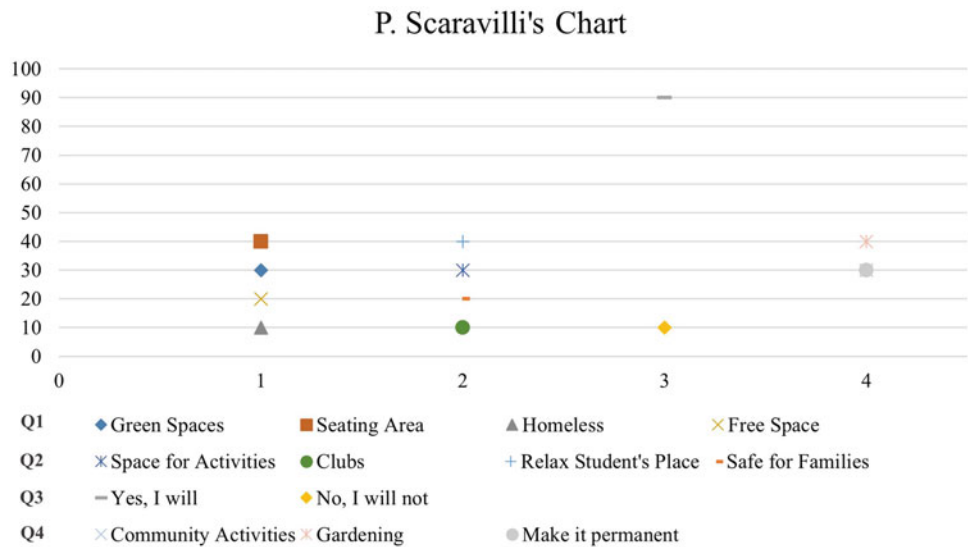


Table 3 Placecheck Q&A

Question 1	Question 2
<p>Green Spaces: “Via Zamboni needs more vegetation, the University did a good job putting some flowers at Scaravilli”</p> <p>Seating Areas: “The right choice, before this space used to be a university parking, now as you can see this is full of people, better use of the space”</p> <p>Homeless: “This is a good idea; the only negative point is the homeless people who are coming every night”</p> <p>Free Space: “As students, we need free-seating (public seating) places like this one, we now come here every day for lunch”</p>	<p>Space for Activities: “Yes, the piazza is now hosting plenty of activities”</p> <p>Clubs: “University clubs started to meet here because is better, free and easy for different club’s activities”</p> <p>Relax Student place: “I like it very much, we came here just for chill after class”</p> <p>Safe for families: “It a safe place for families to come with their children and let them play”</p>
Question 3	Question 4
<p>Yes: “Yes, I see this process very interesting. (Interview during SLAB build process)”</p> <p>No: “No, but the idea of public spaces like these is good”</p>	<p>Community Activities: “The city should organise free activities for the community (children, oldies or parents) at the moment the majority of the events here are for students or young people”</p> <p>Gardening: “The idea of add vegetation together with seating was good but, do the council also organise gardening activities with us”</p> <p>Make it permanent: “We all like this place, and think that it should be permanent”</p>



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