Off Campus San Siro

Submitted By: Politecnico di Milano, Department of Architecture and Urban Studies (DASTU)



Organization Profile

Organization Name: CRAFT-DASTU Politecnico di Milano

Organization Type: University and research institution

Website: www.dastu.polimi.it

Practice Details

Country(ies): Italy

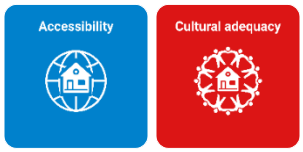
City(ies): Milan

Start Year: 2013

Ongoing: Yes

End Year: N/A

Main Adequate Housing Components:



Housing Thematic Areas:

- Social Housing
- Housing, Land & Spatial Planning
- Housing Data & Monitoring

Relevant SDGs:



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Problem & Context

Milan has the largest stock of public housing in Italy. This historical heritage, dating back to the early ‘900, carries significant social, cultural, and architectural value, and it is a crucial urban resource providing affordable homes to thousands of residents and mitigating the risk of displacement from the city center. Over the past 30 years, this stock has undergone a profound decline, highlighting the difficulties faced by local institutions in rethinking their role within a changing society marked by homeownership orientation, international migration, and job insecurity. Social and spatial dynamics in these places are hard to grasp, as they are linked to poverty and informal dwelling, and to complex, multilayered governance. This complexity is one of the main obstacles to public policies, leading to inertia and territorial stigmatisation. Thus, an in-depth understanding of these contexts is necessary to inform housing policies and guide sustainable urban regeneration strategies.

Solution Developed

Off Campus San Siro consists of a permanent participatory observatory on Milan’s public housing based in the San Siro neighborhood, the city’s largest housing complex (6,000 units, 12,000 inhabitants), and one of the poorest and most diverse areas. A physical space run by a multidisciplinary team of DASTU-Polimi. Its goals are to renovate the knowledge on public housing, developing a situated and bottom-up perspective on the inhabiting conditions within these estates, and to reinforce local actors’ capacity to act and collaborate. The core innovation is the creation of an Urban Living Lab on housing issues, combining academic research with community engagement. Linking official data, inhabitants' perceptions, everyday knowledge, and local actors' resources, it aims to produce new insights for public policies, addressing San Siro both as a specific case and a learning ground on the city’s housing dynamics.

Researchers engage in co-research activities by mixing planned research (interviews, data collection, observations, workshops, and meetings), counseling on housing rights (in collaboration with the Legal Clinic of the Bocconi University Law School) and everyday encounters.

Implementation

Over more than 10 years, the initiative has evolved in response to local demands and political shifts, implementing actions in 3 main fields. Across all, collaboration with local and institutional actors has been key to strengthening their capacities.

Fields, action&resources:

a) Historical heritage and memories: Ethnographic research on elderly residents’ memories, resulting in an exhibition and theatre performance (national public grant, 2018); Digital archive of historical architectural drawings and a temporary exhibition (own funding, 2025); Support to

local committees for a petition to the Heritage Authority to protect the estate from future demolition (own funding, ongoing).

b) Inhabiting conditions and coexistence: Atlas of the housing dynamics elaborating the regional housing agency's data of the housing stock (institutional agreement, 2014–16); Co-research on housing conditions and practices with 7 local organisations and 2 universities + multilingual survey submitted to over 350 inhabitants, resulting in an open-access report and a series of public seminars (own funding, 2023-24).

c) Housing policies: Urban Living Lab to co-design regeneration strategies in large social housing estates (EU grant, 2017-19); Pilot policy of reactivation of vacant commercial spaces co-designed with the regional housing agency (institutional agreement, 2019); Support to the Municipality in reactivating 44 vacant dwellings under the PNRR PINQUA program (institutional agreement, ongoing).

Enablers & Obstacles

Enablers and obstacles are diverse, since the practice addresses housing issues at both the neighborhood and city levels, connecting actors across scales.

Key enablers were: local organisations sharing knowledge and linking researchers with inhabitants; interdisciplinarity allowing a complex understanding of the housing issue; the everyday presence in the area fostered trust, facilitating long-term engagement. The university's credibility and independence favoured recognition by local actors and institutions.

Main obstacles included: the scarcity of public resources for housing at regional and local levels, limiting the development of concrete actions; limited access to information and data on the housing stock, creating barriers to collaboration; the difficulty in inter-institutional cooperation, hindering integrated policies. As they are structural obstacles to housing practice in Italy, they require long-term engagement to fulfill the goals: a critical challenge for the university.

Results & Impact

Over 10 years, Off Campus San Siro has become a platform for innovative teaching and research, a Living Lab improving local actors' competencies, and a community hub supporting inhabitants' housing needs and claims. Results include: 15 research projects involving about 90 local, national, and EU organisations; 10 strategic agreements (3 universities, 2 institutions, 5 non-profit organisations), and 10 project partnerships; 50+ public cultural initiatives and more than 600 students engaged and trained.

About €520,000 was raised through competitive research funding (2019–24), and €350,000 was directly invested in local projects, with additional support from the university through the

Polisocial Award (€1M, 2023–24). Off Campus was awarded Milan's Civic Award 2022 as one of the most prominent civic and cultural initiatives.

Impacts on vulnerable groups include: improved access to housing rights; access to education and training opportunities for low-income youth; strengthened solidarity and mutual help networks.

Broader impacts related to research and advocacy are: on the neighbourhood the reuse of an underutilized public asset, the increased political and institutional attention to San Siro, and the consolidation of long-term partnerships across institutions (memorandum of understanding); on the university: increased recognition of social responsibility and knowledge co-production practices for housing research within the Politecnico di Milano, innovation of academic profiles.

Replication & Scale Up

Key factors for replicability include: the avalbility physical space(s) in the area, making the practice visible and reacheable; local actors willing to collaborate beyond their usual practices; 3) flexibility to engage in unusual contexts, adapting research methods and languages to non-expert audience; 4) the availability of long-term human resources, to build trustful relations rather than immediate results. Critical contextual factors include political willingness to support participation, availability of basic resources, and recognition of local knowledge for policy innovation.

The practice is scaling up in two directions. First, through the ongoing co-research Beyond the Threshold in Milan’s Via Padova–Viale Monza, an area marked by increasing housing costs triggered by public and private real estate investments and fragile informal housing. The project engages about 20 local organisations, making official data accessible to local actors and co-producing qualitative insights on housing demands and displacement processes.

Second, the Housing Justice School, a training program for community leaders, researchers, and civil servants, to be launched in summer 2026.

Policy Uptake

This housing practice has informed or been partially integrated into policy discussions, strategies, or pilot-level policy instruments.

Off Campus has been recognized as a relevant stakeholder and involved in the interinstitutional management table of the Memorandum of Understanding for the San Siro neighborhood (2021–ongoing), with the Municipality of Milan, Lombardy Region, ALER, and the Prefecture, to inform strategies on housing, welfare, and urban regeneration. It has also been embedded in the Politecnico di Milano’s Strategic Plan 2026–2028, ensuring three-year institutional and financial support, and has consolidated as a multidisciplinary hub by establishing partnerships with Bocconi, Statale, and Bicocca universities.

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Lessons & Takeaways

Given its situated nature, Off Campus is a constantly evolving practice, designed to generate both results and self-reflection. This incremental approach is a value but also a limitation. In hindsight, we would have structured a mid-term intervention plan from the outset, reflecting on the conditions for longer-term programming. The project has also been difficult for vulnerable people to fully grasp; greater attention to communication and the early use of informal and relational tools, such as community services and community leaders (activated only recently), would have improved engagement.