

Article

Background Conditions for Revitalisation Processes in the Case of Unused Public Buildings in Italy: An Ostromian Perspective

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Abstract: In Italy, the number of buildings that have fallen into disuse is huge. Moreover, the normative and regulative framework promoting the public portfolio's re-use and revitalisation is still unclear and ambiguous. Nevertheless, over the past decade, these buildings have become fertile ground for innovation and creative experiences led by civic actors. The rise of this new category of civic actors plays an important role, both in terms of the institutional dynamics and the kind of initiatives and practices they undertake. Although they act in different manners, they share similar patterns of behaviour validated through an in-depth analysis. This research pinpointed that, regardless of the diverse operating contexts, institutional performances can be successful only if certain kinds of conditions are considered. This paper has a twofold aim: (i) to establish an analytical framework for analysing the emerging streamlined phenomenon of revitalisation processes in unused public buildings, (ii) and to critically discuss these processes, providing key insights into behaviour and institutional civic actors' performances, as well as the necessary conditions for successful revitalisation. By doing so, this paper aims to enhance our understanding of civic actors and their role in revitalisation processes, contributing to discussing and identifying crucial factors for achieving a successful outcome.

Keywords: urban regeneration; civic actors; revitalisation processes



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1. Unused Publicly Owned Buildings and Civic Actors: A Fertile Combination for Social Innovation?

The economic crisis has exacerbated the phenomenon of unused and abandoned buildings, both private and public, and it has revealed how traditional planning policies are no longer adequate. Furthermore, the concepts of urban resilience and adaptive re-use have gained significant attention and are extensively discussed in the contemporary literature [1–5]. This situation is shared across Europe, but specifically, the issue of disused publicly owned buildings is urgent in the Italian context. Unused public properties, either because of inefficiency [6–9] or for speculative reasons [10], are a problem in themselves. The ethical issues are not the same as those for private buildings [11–13] precisely because the property is 'public'. The current Italian situation presents some deficiencies in desired outcomes based on the general definition of public sectors' obligations and duties. In addition, the economic downturn shows how financial shortage influences private interventions [14–16], speculative and strategic intentions, and government policies. In response to this challenge, new approaches considering public portfolios (and buildings in particular) have been emerging. In particular, Italy is facing a shift towards new economic, financial and social conditions [11,17]. These kinds of 'experimentations' using unused public buildings might be considered new and different ways to address social, economic and environmental changes [18,19].

This paper adopts a twofold approach in considering this new trend of revitalisation and renovation experiences in public buildings [20–22] and the role 'civic actors' play in driving these initiatives. On the one hand, there is a general acknowledgement that

some management policies and regulations of public buildings must be rethought. This phenomenon is also important in considering the Italian context since the after-crisis situation has highlighted how traditional planning models are inadequate for renovating and regenerating buildings [16]. Additionally, considering these practices are an emerging phenomenon, it is important to understand their role in either reinforcing a status or generating new opportunities for rethinking regulatory and physical contexts [18].

On the other, there is a progressive awareness that public spaces (in this case, public buildings) might be considered relevant places, as they are an expression of people's claims, freedom and rights (see also) [23].

From a preliminary screening, what emerges is a variety of bottom-up and top-down activities that combine social needs with governmental purposes [24,25]. This field is where civic actors have a strong pull. This phenomenon has been observed in Italy since the mid-2010s, with different attempts to define and promote temporary uses (for the Italian case, see) [26] through many public policies (at both the regional and local levels) [27–29], and new regulations (see *Regolamento dei beni comuni* and *Patti di Collaborazione*, promoted by Labsus) [30,31]. This emerging trend considers bottom-up experiences and temporary uses as a trigger for revitalisation [32,33]. Furthermore, there has been increasing focus on communities, their potential to self-govern creative practice, and provide services, facilities and local welfare [34–37].

This paper presents a concise segment of a broader research, and it aims to provide a brief exploration of the key elements that contribute to enhancing the current debate on these initiatives. On the one hand, it acknowledges that the overproduction of laws and regulations hardly influence and limit this phenomenon; on the other hand, it recognises that these emergencies and urban experiments are highly and inherently political [18], which means that their role is directly connected—or not—to more systematic and structural changes.

This paper illustrates the Italian context and presents a sample of cases to examine the emerging revitalisation of 'civic' experiences in unused public buildings. The aim of this paper is to critically discuss the similarities and dissimilarities of the cases, with specific emphasis on the background conditions that foster such practices. Moreover, this paper suggests policy guidelines highlighting conditions and limitations for these experiences to thrive.

2. Institutional Performances and Methodology

This paper adopts Ostrom's framework towards institutionalism and the case studies analysis [38,39]. This phenomenon of the role of civic actors in revitalisation processes is still under investigation, as this paper aims to disentangle and categorise these activities to clarify crucial aspects. Alternatively, the risk is to over-regulate those experiences with a general regulatory framework. This attitude has been reiterated by public governments for more than thirty years, introducing various tools and measures almost annually to respond to public buildings' disuse.

The self-organisation embedded within civic actors' nature can be analysed in terms of institutional performances and incentives, drawing upon Ostrom's work [38]. Moreover, these processes are likely recurring in different contexts, and institutions are used and crafted by individuals "to organise all forms of repetitive and structured interaction" [39] (p. 3).

Although it is not so well spread in urban planning concerns [40,41], the importance of having a new institutional approach is based on three elements. First of all, the analysis of institutions provides a different perspective for understanding and examining complex systems, including cities and governance processes [38,42,43]. Second, it delves into specific contexts and activities at the local level, which can reveal complex practices that are hard to acquire through a broad qualitative and comparative generalisation [40,44,45]. Third, this framework reveals how institutions have contributed to creating and recreating a robust setting for successful cases [18,46]. In general, this approach underscores that "the

application of empirical studies to the policy world leads one to stress the importance of fitting institutional rules to a specific social-ecological setting” [47] (p. 642).

Overall the Ostrom framework emphasises the significant moving from the ‘one fits all’ position in urban planning, which proves to be ineffective in practices, particularly in the field of revitalisation processes led by civic actors. By focusing on Ostrom’s work, attention is drawn to institutions, dynamics and behaviour as crucial elements for achieving a successful process.

This approach is combined with a case-based method of investigation. This paper will discuss what emerges according to the analysis of a sample of different Italian experiences about revitalisation processes by civic actors. The use of a sample to present the phenomenon is helpful because it (i) provides a certain degree of generalisation and representativeness for the phenomenon, and it (ii) allows separation between theory and testing [48] (p. 125). The sample includes 45 cases¹. In particular, the research is grounded on the Qualitative and Comparative Analysis methodology (QCA) [49,50]. This method contributes to a better understanding of the complexity of each case and establishes comparable foundational categories for generalisation. The use of this methodology, in association with the Ostromian approach, is crucial in distinguishing peculiarities and unique aspects of individual cases through an in-depth analysis (based on a semi-structured questionnaire and interviews²) and a more ‘generic’ investigation of the configuration of different variables, which focus on essential elements within the process.

This combination facilitates the understanding of mutual and shared incentives and patterns of behaviour across different experiences that would have otherwise remained unclear without the inclusion of the Ostromian approach.

Also, this perspective and method of analysis aid in identifying the conditions and incentives that can encourage and guide these types of practices. By applying this analytical framework to the different cases and to the sample, it becomes possible to identify the critical determinants that contribute to the positive outcome and efficacy of the revitalisation processes.

3. Civic Actors and Revitalisation Processes: The Result of an Italian Investigation

As already mentioned, the case studies have been extensively discussed in broader research³. This paper focuses on the crucial and fundamental factors of revitalisation processes led by civic actors in Italy. The cases (revitalisation processes) are organised in a sample of 45 Italian heterogeneous revitalisation experiences made up of civic actors (Figure 1).

| Region | Municipality where the case study is located | Name of the project | Region | Municipality where the case study is located | Name of the project |
|----------------|--|-------------------------------------|------------|--|---------------------------------------|
| Piemonte | Torino | 1. Becozanam | Lazio | Roma | 26. Teatro Valle |
| | | 2. L'imbarchino del Valentino | | | 27. Rampa Prenestina |
| | | 3. Cavallerizza Reale | | | 28. Palestra Popolare San Lorenzo |
| | | 4. Mufant | 29. CAOS | | |
| Lombardia | Milano | 5. Casa Bossi | Campania | Napoli | 30. Ex Asilo Filangieri |
| | | 6. Cascina Monluè | | | 31. Ex OPG |
| | | 7. Fabbrica del Vapore | | | 32. Lo Scugnizzo Liberato |
| | | 8. Tempio del Futuro Perduto | | | 33. Domus Ars |
| | | 9. Macao | | | 34. Il Giardino Liberato dei Marteddi |
| | Bergamo | 10. Edonè | Puglia | Lecce | 35. Manifatture KNOS |
| | | 11. Complesso del Carmine | | Bari | 36. Young Market Lab |
| | | 12. EXSA (Ex Carcere di Sant'Agata) | | San Vito dei Normanni (Brindisi) | 37. Ex Fadda |
| | Cremona | 13. CRAC | Taranto | 38. Officine Tarantine | |
| Veneto | Livorno | 14. Ex Caserma Occupata | Basilicata | Potenza | 39. Moon – La luna al Guinzaglio |
| | Venezia | 15. Sale Docks | Calabria | Lamezia Terme (Catanzaro) | 40. CRAC |
| | Belluno | 16. Caserma Pepe | | Rosarno (Reggio Calabria) | 41. Civico Trame |
| | Treviso | 17. Hangar 11 (Caserma Piave) | Sicilia | Palermo | 42. FaRo |
| | 18. Caserma Piave | Catania | | 43. Cantieri Culturali della Zisa | |
| Emilia Romagna | Parma | 19. On/Off Officine | Sardegna | Cagliari | 44. ZO – Centro Culture Contemporanee |
| | Ferrara | 20. Factory Grisù | | 45. Sa Manifatture | |
| | Bologna | 21. Dynamo | Forlì | | |
| | | 22. Mercato Sonato | | | |
| | | 23. Instabile Portazza | | | |
| | | 24. XM24 | | | |
| | 25. ExATR | | | | |

Figure 1. List of the case studies within the sample in analysis. Ri-elaboration of the author.

Some of the cases are still ongoing (64%), others are pending (13%), and another portion is concluded (23%)⁴. This kind of categorisation is important to understand the different dynamics and to acknowledge the fact that there might be issues limiting or hindering the processes. On this premise, the following analyses are based on comprehending how civic actors interact within an urban and an institutional environment and how those processes might be considered, structured and eventually handled.

The first impression, based on the sample, is that more than one-third of these experiences have encountered complications. This is the reason why this analysis is based on empirical evidence. They have been investigated through the QCA analysis, with the introduction of comparable basic categories that might help in generalising some of the features⁵.

These studies are made to better understand the different typologies of cases of revitalisation processes, and, on the other hand, the categorisation within the same arrangements helps in thinking about these practices with a more critical and systematic approach. Moreover, the need to structure these experiences through regulations and norms might lead to entirely unexpected outcomes [51].

This section aims to discuss the findings that have come to light by analysing the sample.

The following findings have been subdivided based on some key elements, such as (i) the location of the unused (and then renovated) building, (ii) the patterns of behaviour, civic actors' institutions and public sphere's attitudes and (iii) the uncertainty. All these elements are derived from the QCA study of the sample in analysis. Besides granting a common language to understand the heterogeneity of the cases, the methodology conveys this synthesis, which is a helpful device in deriving the essential background conditions necessary for investigating the institutional performances civic actors have in revitalising unused buildings.

3.1. Location of the Building

The sample underscores that a large part of the experiences is located in the central or semi-central area of the cities (64%); the other portion is located in suburban or peripheral areas, despite the size of the cities (Figure 2).

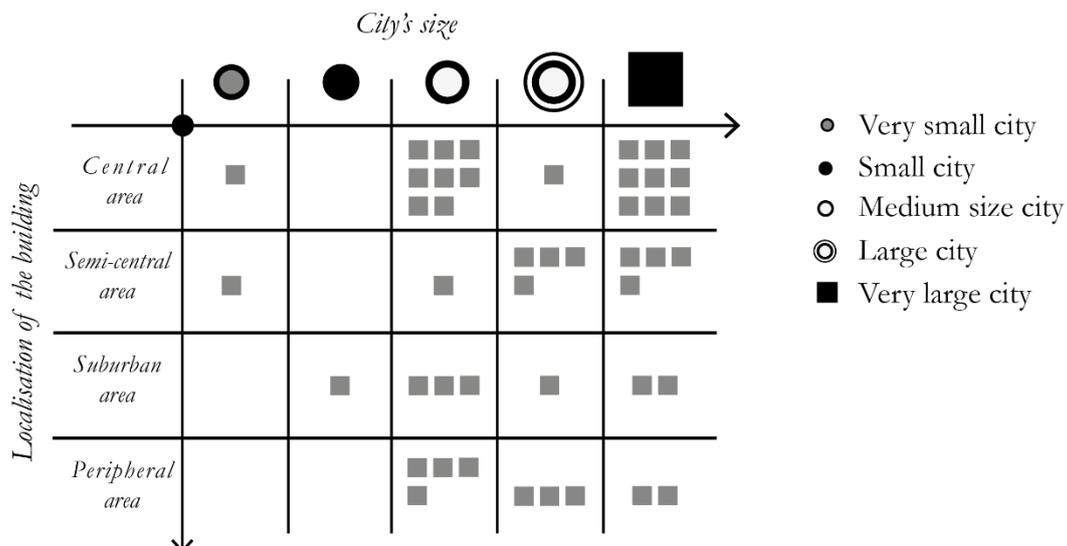


Figure 2. Location of the analysed cases, based on the size of the city. Ri-elaboration of the author (very small: less than 20,000 inhabitants; small: 20,000–50,000 inhabitants; medium: 50,000–200,000 inhabitants; large: more than 200,000 inhabitants; and very large: more than 600,000 inhabitants).

The kinds of activities are similar, but the services provided in the latter locations concern social services and answer more local needs (e.g., FaRo in Rosarno, Palestra Popolare di San Lorenzo in Roma). In general, the buildings in city centres are more likely to be ‘cultural hubs’ (e.g., Fabbrica del Vapore in Milano; Manifatture KNOS in Lecce [52,53]). Public buildings that function this way are large and flexible enough to enable civic actors’ experiences within the building. This condition is also linked to the building typology, with over 55% of the public buildings analysed being former military barracks, industrial buildings or historical/heritage assets. This presents a significant opportunity but also a potential threat in terms of available space that can have positive or negative externalities on the environment (as 76% of those particular buildings are located within central or semi-central areas).

In most cases, the former condition of the public buildings was either abandoned or ‘dismissed’—but not abandoned—which means that the building is no more performative for specific functions. There are a few examples in which the public building might be considered ‘empty’. However, the restoration of public buildings does not have a direct connection with full use, as some of them are still partially unused. The reasons are two: one is related to the users, and the other is a structural condition. Firstly, civic actors are non-profit, so they do not have enough resources to revitalise and restore large buildings, limiting their effort to specific sections. Secondly, assets’ rationalisation by public administrations influences property rights and parcellation, also for speculative reasons ⁶.

3.2. Patterns of Behaviour, Civic Actors’ Institutions and Public Sphere’s Attitudes

Civic actors are analysed, focusing on three main features, as outlined by Bellè [11]. From an Ostromian perspective, these pattern of behaviour that emerges are shaped and derived from those key features: the nature of the group, the nature of the action and the nature of the trigger.

In general, for what concerns the nature of the group, the distinction is quite standardised (either formal or informal); however, when introducing the analysis of their action (bottom-up or top-down) and the trigger (licit or illicit), it is important to clarify the processes. Here, the boundaries are more nuanced and equivocal, as these aspects pertain to the specific dynamics observed on a case-by-case basis. This analysis delves into the investigation and the study of the patterns of behaviour and the establishment of robust—or fragile—institutions, given the complex and challenging nature of civic actors’ role in revitalisation processes.

On this concern, civic actors’ and the processes they pursue have been divided into three clusters of the interface. The clusters are based on the revitalisation processes in unused public buildings, and they are derived from identifying the essential steps of the single case studies within the sample. What emerges is that all the processes present different combinations of actions that might be described according to this a posteriori distinction. The clusters are intended to present different combinations of ‘actions-trigger’ that might describe what nowadays happens when revitalisation processes take place in unused public buildings. The interface clusters are divided into three main categories: (i) traditional, (ii) cooperative and (iii) non-traditional. This distinction is important because each case is unique and, although similar patterns of behaviour or context, the outcome might be unexpected.

The first cluster relates to *traditional* patterns of behaviour. This category includes ordinary and streamlined processes of revitalisation (it is around half of the experiences in the analysis). It involves cases where the public administration decides to entrust public buildings to civic actors for social and cultural purposes. Frequently these are addressed to the formal organisation of civic actors. According to the different dynamics, the traditional cluster highlights that the intervention in unused buildings is frequently initiated by the public sector, and civic actors only become involved after a public call. In general, the traditional cluster consists of formal civic actors who act in a top-down manner and have a

legitimate basis for their action, as they operate within the legal framework by participating in a public call (e.g., CAOS in Terni; Fabbrica Grisù in Ferrara; Mercato Sonato in Bologna).

The second cluster is the *cooperative*. It consists of cases where cooperation and ‘co-production’ [54] are the key elements of the revitalisation processes (around one-third of the whole cases). The label “cooperative” is, in fact, because civic actors and public administrations are collaboratively shaping patterns of interaction able to convey a common idea of revitalisation [45]. In this case, civic actors may take responsibility and present their revitalisation process initially, indicating a bottom-up approach to the process. In general, the *cooperative* cluster is modelling the bottom-up experiences that have been spontaneously emerging and without any public guidance. Once civic actors start the process, they might (but not always) encounter public interests; it means that the conditions and the arrangements could be tailored specifically for *that* case. The mutual arrangements and pattern of behaviour in this cluster are very important and can lead to interesting outcomes. In this cluster, the trigger might be both licit or illicit [11], but the result is a tailored and customised agreement (e.g., Asilo Filangieri in Napoli; Edonè in Bergamo).

The third cluster is called *non-traditional*, in opposition to the *traditional* one. In general, it has a bottom-up approach to actions, but the nature of the trigger initially stems from illicit sources (outside the legal domain and in opposition to the *licit* actions, accounting for less than 20% of the sample). In this case, civic actors do not adhere to any legal framework, either because that experience is not taken into consideration by public administrations or because they are in conflict with them. There are two different directions that non-traditional experiences might have: (i) Convey into more *cooperative* clusters (e.g., Sale Docks in Venezia), and (ii) remaining in a conflictual situation (XM 24 in Bologna). This is also related to civic actors’ attitudes: (i) moderate and (ii) extreme. The main difference is how they express themselves and their beliefs. Moderate civic actors are willing to cooperate for the collective interest; extreme civic actors possess a strong tendency towards an unconventional, politically oriented approach [20].

These clusters of interfaces should be regarded as ‘fluid’ categories as the patterns of dynamics are highly heterogeneous. However, they highlight two key elements related to the notion of ‘perfect-timing’: first, the settlement of civic actors in the building, and second, their temporary (or more stable) presence there. By combining these elements and considering the time-related steps, this distinction among the clusters helps in understanding the complexity of the cases and facilitates further investigations. Overall, the sample provides valuable insight and helps in having an important outlook in relation to revitalisation processes.

These clusters of interfaces are a categorisation of a variety of different dynamics that share two common elements: (i) civic actors’ behaviour and its consequences and (ii) the public administrations’ attitude. In general, public administrations’ attitude is very important in revitalisation processes, and its bias can introduce risks and uncertainty.

There are three different attitudes identified: (i) Promoter but neutral, which means the public sector initiates the process but does not interfere with civic actors’ activities in any way (this is the case in the *traditional* cluster); (ii) promoter and collaborator, that is the tendency of the public sector to cooperate with the civic actors, either to reach an agreement or to enhance and strengthen the process (this is the typical case of the *cooperative* clusters); and (iii) conflicting, which indicates that civic actors and public administrations do not agree on specific aspects of the revitalisation processes (this can potentially arise in *non-traditional* clusters, as well as in the preliminary stages of the *cooperative* clusters).

These ambiguities and the need for an initial primary categorisation are linked to the lack of a comprehensive understanding of these practices from governments and the persistent reliance on copy-paste and generic regulations that do not accommodate flexibility or address *ad hoc* situations [21]. The clusters of interface and the public administrations’ attitudes have highlighted how civic actors’ activities might be reliant on external situations without being entirely dependent on them. In general, the level of temporariness they

might have (which can span from years to months) influences how they undertake and perform revitalisation processes. These elements contribute to creating uncertainty.

3.3. Uncertainty

Ostrom [38] discussed this situation of uncertainty as an element that institutions have to challenge to evolve and strengthen themselves. She underscores the importance of having a problem-solving attitude, which contributes to cases' success [38,55]. Here, two different levels of uncertainty might arise. On the one hand, there is uncertainty in managing a building that is publicly owned (public reliance); on the other, the process itself might take unpredictable directions, adding further uncertainty.

It is possible to work in advance on civic actors' reliance on public administrations to lower the level of uncertainty. The extent of their dependency is influenced both by the nature of the cluster and the public sector's attitude. The more the clusters of interfaces are conflicted, the more civic actors are likely to strive for a change in the political administration. In the case of conflictual situations and non-traditional clusters, the level of uncertainty is already high, so they are more prone to face changes and interact with different public organisations. In contrast, less conflictual situations might have a higher level of uncertainty, as a change in political government might either enhance or worsen the revitalisation process. Knowing in advance the costs and benefits of any situation might help in organising the revitalisation processes more deliberately. This analysis is significant as it highlights the continuous evolution and unpredictability of revitalisation processes [44,56]. Using the clusters of interface and understanding the kind of dynamics, it becomes possible to decrease the degree of uncertainty, activating alternative forms of interactions and different patterns of behaviour.

In general, the sample of revitalisation processes has highlighted three shared and important elements.

Categorising the patterns of behaviour and exploring potential alternatives of revitalisation processes can provide relevant insights into the interventions that policy-makers, civic actors or public administrations might adopt (co-creative planning [46]). Likewise, the analysis of the experiences highlights similarities in the organisations and practices that might happen in different contexts, influenced by specific local conditions [57]. This condition is also depending on the specific attitude of each stakeholder, as they shape rules that might affect outcomes. Nevertheless, acknowledging those experiences as complex can help and assist in navigating uncertainty [58]. As revitalisation processes are very diverse and respond to very specific institutions and contexts [59], it is crucial to underscore the importance and uniqueness of the processes, highlighting how diversity and complexity are clear conditions in contemporary urban contexts [39].

4. The Role of Background Conditions in Revitalisation Processes

After analysing shared and recurring elements that are common across the case studies in the sample, the investigation shifts its focus to the role of the process itself. In this regard, the application of Ostrom's framework becomes crucial, and the comparative analysis is necessary to identify the 'principles' that influence the outcome of a revitalisation process: successful or not successful [38]. A total of 22 civic actors engaged in revitalisation processes were selected from the sample to examine the outcome of these processes. The aim was to gain a more detailed understanding of revitalisation processes and form a dynamic and processual perspective. A semi-structured questionnaire was used to collect data, and all the civic actors' responses were compared and analysed with the QCA methodology. This analytical framework was crucial to understanding the different and peculiar dynamics of each revitalisation process. However, despite the heterogeneity of the responses received, certain patterns and commonalities emerged, allowing for some degree of generalisation.

To distinguish a successful from a not successful process, the key elements under examination are (i) the structural improvement of the building in question (functional aspects), (ii) the innovative, social-friendly and culturally-driven activities in the building

(the meaning of the building), (iii) the community participation and (iv) the continuity of the process throughout the time. That is important as 'revitalisation' relies both on physical and social/participatory aspects.

This paper refers to Ostrom's principles [38], redefining them as 'background conditions' as they are related to the contextual and institutional domain. In general, the background conditions can be distinguished between *case-based conditions* (internal to the process and the stakeholders) and *framework conditions* (derived from the environment).

These elements interact in complex ways and influence the dynamics and potential 'trajectories of governance transformation', which are highly diverse and contingent. Moreover, the different *case-based* and *framework* conditions are not isolated; rather, they interact and influence each other reciprocally [44].

The *case-based conditions* are (i) the localisation of the building, (ii) the community building and (iii) co-production.

The *framework conditions* are related to the local situation where the revitalisation process takes place. These are related to (i) political continuity, (ii) legal and administrative frameworks and (iii) the socio-economic environment.

4.1. Case-Based Conditions

The different case-based conditions influence the revitalisation processes either in positive or negative ways. In particular, one important element is the localisation of the building. Being in the city centre, in contrast with being in a peripheral area, is potential and has its benefits. Civic actors involved in revitalising a public building in the central city area (for large cities) may also contribute to creating economies of scale. This goes beyond the limits of transaction costs and extends to operating in a more active context. The flow is different and provides greater exposure to the project, allowing more individuals to become acquainted with it and actively participate.

This element is related to the second *case-based* condition, which is the civic actors' ability and capacity to build their own reputation. The community-building condition relates to the actors' capacity to be recognised as civic agents and also be considered as such by the community. It entails the creation of a solid network within and outside the community. This element might be more challenging, although not impossible, in situations where social capital is low [60,61]. In fact, reputation building tends to be more successful when there is a favourable positioning. While in peripheral and suburban areas, revitalisation processes might face certain difficulties. The recognition from both the public administration and citizens is crucial for the success of revitalisation processes. As these activities are non-profit, they rely on other kinds of revenues and require a certain level of demand. If the demand is not reciprocated with a corresponding supply, these experiences are more likely to be unsuccessful in the long run.

Another crucial case-based condition is co-production [54]. This process can be considered a consequence of civic actors' expertise and capacities to work within another field of action (e.g., the relationship with the public administration). Co-production might occur in varying degrees [54,62], but this condition is essential to grant revitalisation processes more chances of success. Co-production contributes to lowering uncertainty. In particular, there are two different kinds of 'uncertainty': 'policy ambiguity' and 'polity ambiguity'. The 'policy ambiguity' refers to concerns about the legal framework and specific tools for revitalisation processes, whilst the 'polity ambiguity' is more related to the precarious nature of these experiences and the possibility that they may be interrupted due to public administration actions and decisions.

4.2. Framework Conditions

As with the *case-based*, the *framework* conditions might influence the outcome of the revitalisation. They largely depend on normative frameworks and planning policies, on public administrations interface and attitude, and, in general, on the socio-economic environment.

Overall, the legal and normative framework the crucial element is the necessity for specific tools and a transparent legal background. This allows civic actors—but also public administrations—to recognise these experiences as potential. Moreover, there is no shared and unified national framework that encompasses all the different local tools and public devices. This lack of a cohesive framework creates ambiguities and overlapping norms. The bureaucratic and the legal framework concerning these experiences remains blurred, and the kind of contracts and agreements sometimes are not flexible enough to allow civic actors to be forward-looking. In this regard, political continuity is one key background condition that influences the success of these experiences. It is a crucial element because its absence could lead to uncertainty. Regardless of rhetoric and political beliefs, having a stable political environment encourages (or discourages) these activities [4,62].

The last framework condition is the socio-economic environment, which might be favourable for social entrepreneurship [53]. The incentive derived from the market plays a significant role in stimulating civic actors to promote cultural activities and innovative and hybrid services that are not present in the context. By responding to the market's incentives, they are also able to overcome supply-oriented policies that have been prevalent since the 1990s. Additionally, it is an opportunity for public administrations to test [18,23] new activities without costs or investing additional time and resources. The opportunity for the public administrations to promote these activities rely on the possibility of re-activate abandoned or unused space from a collective and public perspective without incurring substantial expenses. Furthermore, the renovation and revitalisation of such spaces can serve as a catalyst for public administration to deliberately reconsider and update land-use policies and tools, responding to the evolving needs of the community.

Background conditions have been 'evaluated' based on the insights of institutions and patterns of behaviour to understand revitalisation processes and institutional performances. The criteria used for the assessment are derived from the questionnaires and subsequently refined within the qualitative and comparative approach, enabling meaningful comparison across the various responses. Roughly, considering Ostrom's framework, the cases might be considered from their institutional performance as (i) robust, (ii) fragile and (iii) failure. The 'robust' are the ones that have three or more background conditions (with a positive absolute value) occurring at the same time. The 'fragile' cases are those presenting less than three conditions or a medium level in absolute value. The 'failure' are the ones that do not have a positive degree based on the conditions (Figure 3). It has to be noted that the crucial and highly influential background condition determining the success or failure of revitalisation processes is the level of co-production. Figure 3 clearly illustrates that 'fragile' cases are prone to 'failure' if co-production is absent or insufficient. This highlights the importance of collective and joint commitment to the revitalisation processes in creating sustainable development in unused public buildings.

To sum up, the background conditions are an important element that contributes to understanding the institutional performances, also considering aspects that might negatively impact a revitalisation process. This might depend, for example, on the location of the building, the low degree of co-production, a discontinued political interface, the lack of contextual conditions or the inadequacy of the civic actor to promote itself. Their absence increases the likelihood of failure, as well as their presence is crucial for the revitalisation processes. These conditions can serve as a checklist to guide and improve civic actors' institutional performances. By continuously working towards meeting these conditions, civic actors can enhance their effectiveness and increase the chance of achieving a successful revitalisation outcome (Table 1).

| Case study | | Background conditions | | | | | | Revitalisation process |
|---------------------|--|--|--------------------|--------------|---|---|---------------------------|------------------------|
| Name of the project | Civic actor that answered to the questionnaire | Building location | Community-building | Coproduction | Political continuity | Socio-economic environment (social capital) | Institutional performance | |
| 1 | Fabbrica del Vapore, Milano | The Art Land Via Farini | C | Y | High | Y | High | Robust |
| | | | C | Y | High | Y | High | Robust |
| 2 | Tempio del Futuro Perduto, Milano | Acropolis | C | Y | Low | N | High | Fragile |
| 3 | Edonè, Bergamo | Nutopia s.r.l | SB | Y | Medium | Y | High | Robust |
| 4 | Crac, Cremona | CRAC Associazione | SB | N | Non-Present | N | High | Failure |
| 5 | Caserma Pepe, Venezia | Burb | P | Y | High (with the owner Agenzia del Demanio) | Indifferent | High | Robust |
| | | | | | Non-Present (with the local administration) | Indifferent | High | Fragile |
| 6 | Sale Docks, Venezia | Marco Baravalle, co-founder of the artists community | SC | Y | Medium | N | High | Fragile |
| 7 | On/Off Officine, Parma | Cooperativa Sociale Onlus Doposcuola | SC | Y | High | Y | High | Robust |
| 8 | Factory Grisù, Ferrara | Consorzio Grisù | C | Y | High | Y | High | Robust |
| 9 | ExATR, Forlì | Città di Elba and Spazi Indecisi | C | Y | High | Y | High | Robust |
| 10 | Dynamo Velostazione, Bologna | Associazione Salvaciclisti | C | Y | Medium | N | High | Fragile |
| 11 | Instabile Portazza, Bologna | Leonardo Benvenuti, founder of the project | P | Y | High | Y | High | Robust |
| 12 | XM24, Bologna | Collettivo | SC | Y | Low / Non-present | N | High | Failure |
| 13 | Teatro Valle, Roma | Collettivo | C | Y | Non-Present | N | N | Failure |
| 14 | Palestra Popolare San Lorenzo, Roma | Collettivo | C | Y | Low | N | Medium | Failure |
| 15 | Rampa Prenestina, Roma | Sebastiano the co-founder of the activity | SB | N | Low | Indifferent | N | Failure |
| 16 | Ex Asilo Filangieri, Napoli | Abitanti dell'Asilo | C | Y | High | N | Low | Fragile |
| 17 | Il Giardino Liberato dei Martedei, Napoli | Collettivo | C | Y | High | N | Low | Fragile |
| 18 | Manifatture KNOS, Lecce | Associazione Culturale Sud Est | SB | N | Low | Y | Low | Fragile |
| 19 | Young Market Lab, Bari | Kreattiva | P | N | Medium | Y | Low | Robust |
| 20 | Ex Fadda, San Vito dei Normanni (Brindisi) | Sandei s.r.l. | SC | Y | Medium | N | Low | Fragile |
| 21 | Faro, Rosarno (RC) | Associazione Kiwi | C | Y | Low | Y | Low | Robust |

Figure 3. Some examples of background conditions' performances [building location: C (central); SC (semi-central); SB (suburban); and P (peripheral)]. The selected cases refer to the civic actors responding to the semi-structured questionnaire.

Table 1. Summary of background conditions and combinations for successful cases. Suggestions have been described using questionnaires feedback.

| Background Conditions Combinations | Outcome | Suggestions |
|---|---------------------|---|
| Three or more background conditions with high qualitative value | Robust (successful) | Building location: work on the communication of the process and maintain close contact with the neighbourhood to address its needs. |
| Medium qualitative value within three conditions | Fragile | Community-building: civic actors have to be recognised, and each step is dedicated to building trust with local authorities and citizens. |
| Less than three conditions with high qualitative value | Fragile | Co-production: The role of civic actors is strengthened through ‘community building’, and their commitment needs to be recognised by the public administration. It is necessary to work on communication and establish arenas and discussions for creating a ‘win-win’ scenario. |
| Low qualitative value conditions | Failure | Political continuity: the revitalisation process needs to be attentive to potential risks continuously, and civic actors have to anticipate them through co-production and other communicative activities. |
| | | Socio-economic environment: Revitalisation processes have to be considered in the long run, recognising that some contexts are more prone to these activities than others. The development and feasibility of the process should be carefully assessed before activating, taking into account potential failure. All the other background conditions should be taken into account. |

5. Discussion and Policy Implications

The background conditions are crucial. Considering them is important to define policy guidelines and derive general discussion about the phenomenon. All the different criteria described might be a catalyst to discuss the outcome and the institutional arrangements, with particular reference to revitalisation processes. Moreover, background conditions identified in this paper are derived from specific cases, offering a heterogeneous range of experiences. While these conditions serve as a starting point to identify the pattern of behaviour and challenge it, this paper aims to provide a structured framework for further investigations.

In general, these processes are happening because of a shift in socio-economic and political contexts. The background conditions highlight the importance of some crucial elements in principle. The analytical framework serves (i) to define key elements able to provide a general understanding of the very nature of these experiences and (ii) to highlight how urban planning issues are rarely discussed in those terms. The need to reflect upon the normative framework arises for two main reasons. Firstly, the current Italian regulative structure is highly fragmented, leading to uncertainty and difficulties in understanding revitalisation processes and their potential. For instance, the effort performed with Legislative Decree No. 117, approved in 2017, about the Third Sector

Organisation does not adequately respond to the contemporary situation of the civic actors. This happens because civic actors have a hybrid nature that does not easily fit those pre-arranged categories. Whilst it would be more beneficial to consider them as they share similar aims, they act in similar manners, and they do share similar patterns of behaviour. This 'gap' contributes to increasing the level of uncertainty, and it highlights the importance of clarifying and updating regulations to better accommodate and support these actors

Secondarily, considering both civic actors and the role of public administrations in revitalisation processes offers a different way to consider these practices. Acknowledging the fact that these processes are not 'standardised' but rather context-specific, it becomes clear that the 'one fits all' regulations may not be the most effective solution. Nevertheless, the focus has to be continuously and incrementally on the background conditions, improving the process. In this way, there is a need to shift from formal rules and norms to the ones extensively discussed by Ostrom [35,36]. The operational rules are the ones improving community-building from the perspective of civic actors. These rules directly impact day-to-day activities and also shape the interaction with public administrations. Collective choice rules pertain to co-production and political continuity: these rules are particularly important in achieving collective benefits. They, on the one hand, indirectly influence the operational rules and how civic actors evolve and initiate the revitalisation process; on the other hand, collective rules are used to craft policies. In this case, it becomes evident that each revitalisation process is different, and the policy framework needs to be flexible enough to accommodate a variety of operational rules within the process. Last, the constitutional choice rules are defined by their impact on the other two levels, which means that they might change and adapt accordingly to the operational level while also enforcing them. That is the case of the background condition related to the socio-economic environment.

Overall, it is essential to work on background conditions as a tool both for civic actors and public administrations. This includes integrating operational rules and collective choice rules to ensure the successful outcome of a revitalisation process. The constitutional choice rules might face more problems, as they are not focussed on standardisation but rather diversification. Additionally, considering the location of the building and its surroundings, it is crucial to acknowledge the physical impact that revitalisation processes may encompass. This includes the activities and social needs that should be collectively addressed and shared within the community. By taking into account these aspects, the revitalisation processes can be better aligned with the specific context and contribute to the overall well-being and development of the area.

It is essential to define specific policies that provide flexibility for civic actors to activate those unused buildings with fewer limitations to enhance these experiences without assuming that they will address the whole demand (e.g., planning regulations and tools or bureaucracy). This means, for instance, creating codes providing general but fundamental rules that can support different kinds of experiences and are based on background conditions.

6. Conclusions

This paper investigates the role civic actors have in revitalisation processes, in particular for what concerns unused publicly owned buildings. It is important to acknowledge these practices as a potential alternative to the long-standing tradition of privatisation. However, these experiences are the unique solution to the issue of unused public buildings. There are still a variety of processes that might be considered fragile or a failure for different reasons. It is not straightforward for a civic actor to invest and undertake a revitalisation process in such assets.

It is crucial to approach this phenomenon with critical tones, avoiding optimistic or exaggerated rhetoric characterising these civic processes. In this regard, it is also fundamental to structure a flexible regulative framework to enhance the cases' heterogeneity and local peculiarities. This framework should avoid redundant and generic tools and norms that are detached from the current context. Moreover, creating strong ties and commitments from both civic actors and public administration sides is crucial.

This new model/code needs to be: (i) Inclusive, which means that formal (legal framework) and informal rules (day-to-day activities and patterns of behaviours) might be jointly used for creative outcomes; (ii) simplified, meaning that it is necessary to clarify objectives and guidelines, based on background conditions and clusters of an interface, and on the contrary, to avoid unnecessary and resources/time-consuming rules; and (iii) decentralised, which means that the local level should be the most appropriate level for enhancing institutions and to support revitalisation processes and their outcomes [37]. Furthermore, the cases analysed in the sample demonstrate the diversity and heterogeneity of these processes, both in terms of their components and dynamics. Nevertheless, two factors are crucial in understanding the nature of these processes. On the one hand, it is important to identify the basic elements involved and their nature (e.g., civic actors, the building itself or the kind of agreement or collaboration); on the other hand, the quality of the process, the patterns of behaviour and the evolution of these processes cannot be predetermined or foreseen, but they can be guided and influenced. While the outcomes might not be fully predictable, the analytical framework gives the opportunity to shape and direct the processes in a desired direction through specific knowledge and analysis, effective management strategies and engaging stakeholders in a targeted manner.

In conclusion, it is important to acknowledge that revitalisation processes activated by civic actors might not completely solve the phenomenon of unused public buildings in Italy due to their scale and magnitude. Nevertheless, these practices, along with the analytical framework presented in this paper, might be considered a manifesto for social inclusion and public participation in a broad sense. They contribute to creating a diverse and non-standardised approach to considering planning processes, incorporating the institutionalism perspective, discussing uncertainty and considering patterns of behaviour.

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Notes

- ¹ The selected cases respond to a twofold analysis: the presence of a civic actor (in line with the features discussed by XXX [11]) and its activities in a former unused public building. The selected cases are based on different dynamics that are significant and valuable to report. The selected cases are located in different Italian regions (namely, Piemonte, Lombardia, Veneto, Emilia Romagna, Toscana, Lazio, Umbria, Campania, Puglia, Basilicata, Calabria, Sicilia and Sardegna). They provide an overview of examples, dynamics and kinds of activities. Although the list is not exhaustive, it encompasses a variety of cases that contributes to a general understanding of the phenomenon.
- ² The questionnaire was distributed to half of the civic actors involved in revitalisation processes within the selected case studies in the sample. The questionnaire is organised in two sections. The first section consists of general questions pertaining process and the revitalisation programme they are engaged in (with both open-ended and close-ended questions). The second section includes 'orientative questions' that inquire about their expectations and vision for the revitalisation process.
- ³ They are extensively analysed in the PhD thesis, discussed in July 2021.
- ⁴ Last updated February 2023. The first research was conducted within 2019–2020, and the average was a bit different, with 64% of cases ongoing, 18% of cases 'pending' and 18% concluded.
- ⁵ The cases are investigated based on the deductive method, introducing key features of generalisation: public building (property, location, typology and condition of maintenance); civic actors (name of the group, nature of the group, nature of the action, nature of the trigger, social entrepreneur and composition of the group); kind of agreement (if present, cooperation with the public administration); economic sustainability (public intervention on the building, kind of funds); and duration of the case. In this way, the cases are grouped in the same scheme, and the categories can be comparable
- ⁶ In general, rationalisation of publicly owned buildings started in the early 1990s to facilitate the free-market sale of those assets. This process was pursued for two main reasons: On the one hand, there was a decrease in the need for military garrisons after the abolishment of the military services obligation; on the other hand, there was a need by the State to sell buildings on the market due to growing public debt.

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