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Learning from a garden. Reframing sustainability in a participatory community museum

Anna Chiara Cimoli*, Željka Miklošević**

Abstract

The paper reconsiders the main theoretical and methodological principles of urban heritage and museology from a post-humanist perspective, aiming to view sustainability in community- and territory-based museums from a new angle. This has been carried

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out through the case study of MUBIG, a territory-based community museum in a Milan suburb. The goal of the paper is to explore the possibilities of engaging with posthumanism and post-anthropocentrism and their implications for heritage management, while simultaneously adhering to the principles and critical aspects of the humanist approach to heritage. Taking a garden as a metaphor as well as concrete open-air museum room, and a "thinking-through-nature" tool, the interpretation of the data gathered through various sources for a year-long period opens up space for the unlearning, or re-learning, of the conventional postulates of museum management in a sustainable key. This process has been shaped into six "lessons" whose key concepts are organicity, relationality, coexistence, grafting, seasonality and slowness.

L'articolo affronta i fondamenti teorici e metodologici della conservazione del patrimonio urbano e della museologia da una prospettiva post-umanista, con l'obiettivo di guardare alla sostenibilità dei musei di comunità da una nuova prospettiva. Per fare ciò, si appoggia al caso di studio di MUBIG, un museo di quartiere alla periferia di Milano. L'obiettivo dell'articolo è quello di esplorare le possibilità di confrontarsi con le sfide suggerite dalla cornice teorica del post-umanesimo e del post-antropocentrismo, rispetto alle loro implicazioni per la gestione del patrimonio, senza rinunciare alla cornice critica dell'approccio umanistico. Assumendo il giardino come metafora, oltre che come sala museale *en plein air* e come strumento per "pensare attraverso la natura", l'interpretazione dei dati raccolti lungo un anno genera la possibilità di un dis-apprendimento, o ri-apprendimento, dei postulati della gestione museale in chiave di sostenibilità. Il processo viene qui tradotto in sei "lezioni", i cui concetti chiave sono organicità, relazionalità, coesistenza, innesto, stagionalità e lentezza.

1. *Introduction*

Considerable challenges facing contemporary cities, such as increased demographics, migration or unbridled urban growth, prompted sustainable urban development to become a crucial discourse in research and local, national and international policies. In 2015, the UN adopted the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* focusing on 17 goals, the 11th of which is to «make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable»[1] and it contains, among others, targets that emphasise heritage protection in cities. An important international frame of reference for urban heritage is also UNESCO's *Recommendations on the Historic Urban Landscape* (2011)[2] which have been disregarded and interpreted as having been founded on «a narrow view of urban heritage and its conservation with serious social consequences»[3]. Gentrification, which in some countries such as the USA has been present

[1] UN 2015.
[2] UNESCO 2019a.
[3] Fouseki 2019, p. 36.

since the 1960s[4], develops as a worldwide consequence of urban exploitation, affecting most grievously low-income residents and inciting intense public discussions around housing problems[5]. Cultural institutions, such as local museums, whose work is conducive to identity construction, memory transmission and the development of a sense of belonging are under strong economic pressure[6]. While barriers to social and cultural sustainability have been interpreted as resulting from the late capitalist condition, a growing literature calls for alternative approaches to heritage practices[7], blaming anthropocentrism for the imminent climate and environmental collapse.

In an effort to explore the concept of sustainability and the human-nature relationship from a "more than human" perspective, this paper focuses on the particular case of MUBIG, a Milan-based community museum, which was generated from an urban planning project and whose management indicates distancing from the dominant concepts of heritage-based economic sustainability and anthropocentrism. Aiming to contribute to the ongoing discussion about the need for alternative heritage management approaches, the research presented in this paper describes MUBIG's practices concerning sustainability issues. Drawing on heritage and museology literature and their discursive research tradition, the research aims to present managerial practices in a new light and attempts to contribute to the understanding of how more-than-human thinking can inform and potentially change the approaches to managing community museums whose core rationale has traditionally been human-centred and human-oriented.

2. *Literature review: merging human-centred and post-human approaches*

The path towards recognizing heritage values beyond disciplinary expertise has been a long one and paved with different scales of reception in both theory and practice. Community museums, founded from the 1960s onwards, were among the first to implement practices that favour social values and use common heritage as a development resource[8].

Neighbourhood museums are such institutions or organisations created to serve communities in particular urban areas[9]. Enmeshed with the physical and social fabric of urban centres, their activities effect the formation of place-

[4] Zukin 1987.
[5] Ferro *et al.* 2024; Khoo, Woo 2024.
[6] Moreno 2004; Porsché 2018.
[7] Harvey, Perry 2015a; Harrison *et al.* 2020; Harrison, Sterling 2020a; Cameron 2024.
[8] De Varine 1996.
[9] Simpson 1996.

based identities and social cohesion among the residents, primarily through participative practices[10]. Heritage-making through interpretation has played an important role in affirming marginalised communities, both culturally and socially[11], and in the fights against urban development projects[12]. The very foundation on which these museums were built was their critical outlook on mainstream heritage values, as well as their activist attempts to give voice to marginalised cultures and reinforce social ties among members of particular communities. Today, they face another set of challenges generated by contemporary socio-political and economic circumstances such as migration, demands for ethnic, gender or racial equality, movements for the right to land and housing etc[13]. These issues impact the notion of "community" that nowadays needs to be addressed in the plural form: communities based on practices, interests, ethnicities, geographies and their overlapping, intersectional relationships[14].

Unlike the community museums, historic environment conservation and management in the 1960s focused on scientific expertise and tangible heritage[15]. Today, however, researchers in the field recognise the need to integrate intangible aspects of physical urban elements highlighting their values, which are transgenerationally transmitted, «dynamic and constantly evolving and adapting to changing needs»[16], which form complex systems of urban heritage with tangible elements[17], and allow a more comprehensive territorial approach to planning[18]. As socially constructed meanings, urban heritage necessitates the participation of not only professionals but various stakeholders – multiple social and cultural agents, governments, the public sector, civil society and individuals[19]. Ignoring the rich knowledge of citizens and focusing solely on financial return, as is often the case with over-tourism, turns urban places into theme parks or spaces devoid of social significance[20]. The important issue, therefore, is what values are being taken into consideration and «how they are discerned, acted upon, reshaped by myriad actors»[21]. Value-based heritage management, when and where applied, has been studied on an operational level in terms of finding ways to activate and include communities in the pro-

[10] Morales Lersch 2010; Auclair 2015.
[11] Moreno 2004; Hochmuth 2017; Porsché 2018; Soudien 2019.
[12] Hochmuth 2017; Soudien 2019.
[13] Moutinho, Primo 2018; Primo 2019; Chynoweth *et al.* 2020.
[14] Waterton, Smith 2010.
[15] Jones 2017, p. 26.
[16] Jigyasu 2014, p. 134.
[17] Ripp, Rodwell 2015.
[18] Abouelmagd, Elrawy 2022.
[19] Avrami, Mason 2019; De León *et al.* 2020; Abouelmagd, Elrawy 2022.
[20] Ashworth, Tunbridge 2000; Fouseki 2019.
[21] Avrami, Mason 2019, p. 9.

cess[22]. In addition to evaluative studies, a large segment of research has dealt with social inclusion and participation in different aspects of management from a critical standpoint, often centring on the issues of power relations and representation[23]. However, in focusing on social, cultural, and economic sustainability, conservation and management have given insufficient attention to environmental concerns[24].

Both contemporary heritage practices that place humans at the centre of all activities and the research that is based on social constructivism and the discursive nature of heritage have been criticised for their exclusive human perception, on the one hand, and their transformation into a value-making tool that privileges humans while disregarding all the rest, on the other[25]. This criticism mainly comes from post-humanist and post-anthropocentric views, which deny the (artificial) boundary between culture and nature and the anthropocentric values within which nature has been treated solely as a resource. These two modes of thinking have gained currency in the last decade across disciplines, prompted, among other things, by a heightened ecological consciousness and urgency to introduce measures that would somehow stop or revert the negative human impact on nature. Posthumanism provides an alternative to a longstanding predominance of humans over all living and non-living things by rejecting binaries such as humans-animals, humans-machines, or human-non-human entities in general, as well as a clear division between life and death, and natural and artificial. Agency is recognised as an important feature not only of humans but also of non-human entities[26].

A strand of research that has adopted tenets of posthumanism and new materialism has created room for the reconsideration of heritage practices[27]. It arose from the necessity to develop a sense of heritage that is «present-centred» and «future-oriented»[28] in that the notion of stability has been compromised and requires a reconceptualisation in order to ensure sustainability through adaptation in the state of imminent ecological instability. At the heart of this is a critical view of capitalism as a distinctly human-made system in which a constant increase in commodification results in altered and destroyed relations between people and places[29]. That is why Harrison and Sterling insist on «thinking differently about the temporalities and territories of heritage»[30].

[22] Avrami, Mason 2019.
[23] Nelson 2020.
[24] Fouseki 2019. The exceptions are institutions such as natural history museums, cf. Oliva, Piber 2023.
[25] Fredengren 2015.
[26] Ferrando 2019, p. 5.
[27] Harrison 2015; Harvey, Perry 2015b; Harrison, Sterling 2020a; Harrison *et al.* 2020.
[28] Harvey, Perry 2015a, p. 10.
[29] Braidotti 2019.
[30] Harrison, Sterling 2020b, p. 22.

The values of heritage should in equal measure include both natural and cultural, human and non-human elements of a territory, similar to the practices informed by indigenous knowledge, which offers itself as an important source of insight into the topic[31].

While research approaches epistemologically tied to the concepts of social constructivism, such as critical heritage studies[32], and new or social museology[33], bring together the human and non-human entities, they are presented in overlapping, not enmeshed relationships[34]. Conversely, discussing heritage in the context of posthumanism and new materialism necessarily entails thinking about complex entanglements between people, animals, plants and other non-living objects and phenomena, and concepts such as flux, uncertainty, the openness of interpretation, transformation, mutability etc.[35]. Despite their differences, the discursive tradition and posthumanism, as Collin Sterling points out, share certain values and approaches and it is up to further research to create connections between the critical humanist views on heritage management and a post-humanist position[36] that has a more affirmative, creative and productive outlook on future[37].

Starting from this theoretical framework, we now describe the method through which we analyse the case study which is the object of this paper and explain which characteristics, knowledge-sharing processes and management models make it relevant to the framework described above.

3. *Methodological framing – researching practice through a post-humanist prism*

As a museum that does not operate from within a building but across a territory, MUBIG merges management principles of urban planning and museum management, dealing with different views of sustainability that find inspiration in the realm of both nature and culture. It has been conceived based on connectivity and unpredictability[38] – as a voice from the margins of the city[39], not as a loudspeaker of its administration. In order to better explain the

[31] Harrison 2015; Cameron 2024, p. 142.
[32] Smith 2006; Waterton, Smith 2010.
[33] Jones 2017; Moutinho, Primo 2018; Primo 2019; Janes, Sandell 2019.
[34] Cameron 2024, p. 245.
[35] Harvey, Perry 2015a; DeSilvey *et al.* 2020; Cameron 2015.
[36] Sterling 2020.
[37] Braidotti 2019.
[38] Tzortzi 2024.
[39] In the sense indicated in Hooks 1989.

idea of sustainability that lies at the heart of MUBIG, a case study research approach is applied to the museum's management practices, and its seemingly "fragile", precarious, or episodic[40] management model[41].

The research question steering the research has been formulated as: What characterises MUBIG's management practices when observed from a post-anthropocentric point of view? Answering this question necessitates a deeper understanding of the particular context, and its description in a multi-layered way, for which we rely on the methodology of descriptive case study[42], since, as Yin writes, it «allows an investigation to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events – such as individual life cycles, organisational and managerial processes, neighbourhood change, international relations, and the maturation of industries»[43].

As community museums are conglomerates of numerous actors who are explicitly or implicitly involved in its management, the case study methodology, which supports numerous data sources, and embraces different tools aimed at exploring the inner complexity of the process[44], was judged to be the most suitable for this research.

Data, collected since 2020, relate to the views of both the ABCittà facilitators and the neighbourhood residents, perceptions and attitudes concerning different aspects of their work and life in the neighbourhood, their relational behaviours and their connection with the local landscape. Data also represent the views of various stakeholders regarding management options or responses to management issues arising from the museum projects.

One set of qualitative data stems from a series of internal meetings among the museum's curators and designers (ABCittà), organised on a bimonthly basis since October 2020 and dedicated to evaluating the process in its impact, relevance, effectiveness, and dissemination, reflecting on the relationship between the museum and the neighbourhood[45].

Another significant set of data was generated during the monitoring process conducted by the University of Milan-Bicocca team, a partner on the project in its second iteration, that entailed qualitative and quantitative research[46] articulated as follows:

[40] Gosselin 2019.

[41] Crane 2011.

[42] Hammersleyet *al*. 2000; Yin 2014.

[43] Yin 2014, p. 14.

[44] Yin 2014; Patton 2002.

[45] The evaluation was carried out with qualitative tools: informal conversations, SWOT analysis and since April 2024 a self-assessment tool that proved to be particularly useful for the context, MOI-Museum of Impact, developed by BAM! Strategie Culturali, <https://www.bamstrategieculturali.com/moi/>, 24.09.2024.

[46] Monitoring and evaluation are coordinated by Prof. Franca Zuccoli with the collaboration of Alessandra De Nicola ("Riccardo Massa" Human Sciences Department). Funding received

– 3 focus groups with primary and secondary school teachers who took part in the project through a series of workshops[47];
– an ex-post survey with all the students and teachers of the schools involved (sample of 84 responses)[48];
– 33 in-depth interviews with local citizens on the perception of safety in the neighbourhood[49].

Additionally, a range of observational data, consistent with ethnographic fieldwork (participant-observation)[50] as a useful way of learning more about people's interactions with one another and the environment[51], has been gathered by the ABCittà members involved in the project[52], including one of the authors of this paper and Prof. Franca Zuccoli of the University of Milan-Bicocca. In these two instances, the researchers «inhabit the world they investigate […] enter the networks of practice and produce engagements with all

by the university enabled the activation of two grants to conduct a qualitative and quantitative evaluation of the project (entrusted to Alessandra De Nicola and Maria Luisa Sbarra).

[47] February-September 2024. In addition to the primary and middle school referents, a group of 4 to 8 teachers participated (the turnover linked to the precariousness of teachers represents a point of weakness for this kind of processes).

[48] October 2024; the questionnaire was designed by Franca Zuccoli, the results were processed by Maria Luisa Sbarra.

[49] The interviews on the perception of safety in the neighbourhood were conducted by Alessandra De Nicola in September 2024. The questionnaires were administered to passers-by. They were given the option of choosing whether to write themselves on a tablet, or to entrust the researcher with the transcription. Most of the interviewees chose the second option. The questions were as follows: 1) Do you perceive the neighbourhood as safe? 2) What do you attribute safety or insecurity to? 3) In your opinion, are safety and maintenance of public space linked? 6 interviews out of 31 offer a positive reading of the environmental redevelopment interventions in the neighbourhood, while 25 highlight the dirt, the presence of homeless people under the arcades felt as an element of "insecurity", the improper use of the public fountain (used by the latter to wash themselves), the bad smells and the perception of danger. Here are a few quotes: «It's very beautiful here, but I ran away in desperation because of the people who live under the arches. There are really too many of them. The Martesana canal is horrible: people who wash and shampoo themselves in public». «I feel a great lack of confidence: the transformation of the area has brought more degradation. The garden is beautiful, but it should have more trees. It's new, but it's degraded. The homeless even go to sleep behind the vegetable gardens». «Children need to be educated, here they climb everywhere to go and get the ball. This is a wonderful place, but education is lacking!».

[50] Yin 2014, pp. 92-93.

[51] Ingold 2011.

[52] ABCittà's members involved in MUBIG are Diego Bombardieri, Simone Zamatei and Cristian Zanelli; Marta Vireca is the graphic designer, while Valentina Scalzo is the social media manager. Monitoring is coordinated by Prof. Franca Zuccoli with the collaboration of Alessandra De Nicola. Marta Begna is a PhD candidate; Darinka Antonioli, a freelancer, facilitated the workshops in the schools. There are no human resources allocated entirely to MUBIG: four of the ABCittà associates who follow the project most closely, particularly with respect to project management, relations with its funders, the residents, and graphic design, dedicate about 20% of their time to it on a monthly basis. The PhD candidate devotes 100% of her time. The university has allocated two grants to conduct a qualitative and quantitative evaluation of the project (Alessandra De Nicola and Maria Luisa Sbarra).

types of actors of the research context»[53]. In an attempt to draw closer to the post-humanist views, this paper does not shy away from such subjective takes on the organisational and management process as a way of expanding the field of possible non-hierarchical views, and reflecting this dynamic and shifting methodology that has, among other characteristics, been described as relational, processual, situated, and partial[54].

The data analysis has been based on post-humanist and post-anthropocentric thinking serving as a framework for interpreting the data and steering the process of illuminating MUBIG's practices along the lines of the major themes stemming from the framework.

4. *MUBIG – a community museum and an urban planning project with the right to housing at its core*

4.1. *Foundation, vision and mission*

MUBIG is a neighbourhood and community museum born in 2020 in Greco, in the northeastern suburbs of Milan[55]. Its establishment stemmed from a housing project initiated in 2011 by a public-private partnership that, as part of a larger residential project, renovated an old farmhouse in a disused and degraded urban context[56] (Figg. 1-2). Two blocks of this complex form BiG (Borgo Intergenerazionale Greco), a residential structure subdivided into mini-apartments and rented to three types of tenants: young workers, self-sufficient elderly people, and single parents with children[57]. The coordination and management of the process were entrusted in 2018 to the social cooperative ABCittà, a collective of experts in participatory social and urban planning, who, against a 30-year loan, have moved its headquarters here to take care of the day-to-day operation – the flow of incoming and outgoing tenants, organisation of social events accessible to the neighbourhood, and the maintenance and care of common spaces[58].

[53] Rubini, Viteritti 2023.

[54] Ferrando 2013; Braidotti 2019.

[55] Cimoli 2022, 2023a, 2023b, 2023c e 2024; Zanelli 2020. To place the MUBIG project within ABCittà's projects, see the cooperative's *Ethical and Social Responsibility Report* (2023), <https://abcitta.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/BRES2023_low1.pdf>, 29.09.2024.

[56] This is the City of Milan's Greco-Conti Integrated Intervention Program: <https://bigreco.it/>; <https://www.comune.milano.it/aree-tematiche/rigenerazione-urbana-e-urbanistica/attuazione-pgt/greco-conti-programma-integrato-di-intervento>, 29.09.2024.

[57] Parents with children are the only group that has been reported by the Social Services of the City of Milan

[58] Zanelli 2020.

The inhabitants of BiG share some resources and services: the laundry, the social concierge who mediates and assists in social interactions and services, the condominium archive-library that can become a co-working space, a climbing wall built through crowdfunding[59], a cycle workshop, etc. Courses, workshops, readings, performances and similar events are organised on the spur of the moment, depending on the offer in the area and the initiative of each individual. Within a logic of circular economy, in exchange for a lowered rent compared to the average prices in the city of Milan, among the highest in the world[60], residents sign a pact through which they make available a certain number of volunteer hours per week for babysitting, care of common spaces, opening the library to the public, organising events, etc. It is requested that inhabitants participate in the meetings, run by ABCittà, which are considered important moments of encounter between different people who have become neighbours, with all the critical issues and challenges that this entails. Listening to the expectations of the new inhabitants and observing their mixing with the "historical" inhabitants of the neighbourhood led to the idea of the museum in 2020. It sprang from a long observation period, from the first dialogues and meetings at the construction site, from the difficult decisions made during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown, and from the meetings with the many actors in the project and the relationships cultivated through time.

The purpose of MUBIG is not its preservation, nor its ability to generate employment, but, following Monica Amari's definition of cultural sustainability, to «preserve and generate those conditions deemed indispensable to the reproduction of cultural processes»[61]. MUBIG identifies with the thinking of Robert Janes and Richard Sandell, when they write:

> We believe that the relentless focus on money, consumption, and marketplace ideology continues to diminish the museum as a social institution and a key civic resource. […] Museums already have a boundless capacity to act with intelligence and sensitivity – money is not required to do this[62].

All MUBIG's exhibitions and events are free and accessible to all, with special attention paid to the readability of the texts, both in terms of graphic layout and content organisation[63].

Being a museum with no fixed location, MUBIG has no energy costs. However, BiG, of which it is conceptually a part, is committed to environmental sustainability through the use of electricity from renewable sources only, heat pumps for heating and cooling (class A), photovoltaic panels that cover 1/3

[59] Borin, Crepin 2022; Di Giuseppe Di Paolo *et al.* 2022.
[60] Baglieri *et al.* 2024.
[61] Amari 2017, p. 47.
[62] Janes, Sandell 2019, p. 2.
[63] Perondi 2024.

of consumption, the abolition of disposable plastic for internal consumption and in public events, hosting a weekly market of local producers at km. 0, the promotion of energy-saving culture among the building's residents as well, e.g. through courses on creative recycling, sustainable fashion, etc. MUBIG is committed to printing as little paper as possible.

Last but not least, by placing the issue of contemporary living at the heart of its philosophy, MUBIG takes seriously its role as a guardian of social justice. It represents the frictions brought to the surface by housing issues, in a city that communicates its wealth but hides large pockets of poverty and marginality: its costs, the class imbalances it highlights, the shortcomings of public policies, the distortions of an aggressive gentrification that accentuates the growing social divide in the name of a supposed urban "appeal" that is entirely imagined, and in any case intended only for the rich[64]. The research and actions promoted by MUBIG deal with the issue of housing and do so in dialogue with BiG and local stakeholders, within the theoretical framework of the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (2005)[65] and the Treaty of Lisbon (2007)[66], consistently with ICOM's most recent definition of a museum (2022)[67].

4.2. *MUBIG: partners, stakeholders, programs*

Since its foundation, MUBIG has involved in its activities a range of stakeholders that contributed to its management and projects, as can be seen in Table 1.

It was funded by "Call for Proposals n. 57" promoted by Fondazione di Comunità Milano[68] for the period from October 2020 to June 2022, with a renewal from October 2023 to March 2025. For the outset, the museum project declined the concept of economic sustainability based on the traditional approach to heritage conservation, i.e., commodification and opted for the

[64] Lareno, Ranzini 2021; Tozzi 2023. For a nationwide reading of the extractive cultural policies conducted by Italian governments in recent decades, see Settis 2002 and Montanari 2015.

[65] <https://www.unesco.org/creativity/en/2005-convention>, 29.09.2024>; Ferri 2015.

[66] <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A12007L%2FTXT>, 29.09.2024.

[67] <https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/>, 29.09.2024.

[68] The call is so named because it supports socially useful projects carried out by nonprofit organisations in the City of Milan and 56 municipalities. The projects cover the following areas: social and socio health care; education and training; promotion of culture and historical and artistic heritage; and nature and environmental protection. On the occasion of the second call, a percentage of the co-funding amount was tripled by the Community Foundation (having raised through crowdfunding 1,000 euros, the Foundation disbursed 4,000 euros, this also in a logic of verifying the existence of a community behind the project. This mode of fundraising was evaluated very positively by both ABCittà and the Foundation).

economies of exchange, relationships and systematisation of the many forms of creativity present in the neighbourhood[69] .

In the first cycle of the museum's life, ABCittà partnered with Brera National Museum and with Stazione Radio, a communications company specialising in podcast production. During this season, MUBIG developed three main lines of activities:

– the creation of a participatory map marking places of affection in the neighbourhood accompanied by a series of podcasts describing their history, which are downloadable online and from QR-codes printed on a paper map and the stickers that have been placed at different points on the urban walkway[70];
– temporary exhibitions (Fig. 3);
– two sets of discovery boxes aimed to explore material and immaterial boundaries, created in collaboration with Brera National Museum[71].

Thanks to the positive evaluation of the work of this first cycle, MUBIG has benefited from a second funding. The activities developed in this iteration (2023-25) entail partnerships with Stazione Radio on the production of new podcast episodes co-designed with school pupils, and with the University of Milan-Bicocca on monitoring the educational work and carrying out qualitative research on the impact of the museum on the neighbourhood (Fig. 4). In 2023, the university also activated a doctoral fellowship dedicated to MUBIG. The cost of the monitoring work by the University of Milan-Bicocca is co-funded.

The activities that have been funded by the second call are articulated as follows:

– co-design workshops with the local elementary school aimed at learning about the neighbourhood's history and sharing visions about its future (school years 2023-24 and 2024-25);
– implementation of the participatory map, linked to a series of podcasts produced by Stazione Radio, with a focus on places of subsidiarity and care (a soup kitchen for low-income people and a night shelter for refugees and the homeless) and the addition of places indicated by elementary school children[72];

[69] In the first cycle, ABCittà received 35,000 euros, partner Radio Station 15,000 euros; various actors collaborated (FAS Group, Greco Positiva, Locatelli-Quasimodo Elementary School, Associação de Antigos Alunos da Universidade de Aveiro). The period set at the time of the call was extended due to the Covid-19 pandemic. For the second cycle, ABCittà received 37,000 euros; the University of Milano-Bicocca, in the role of partner, 10,000 euros (with a cofinancing, evaluated in hours of work, worth 25% of this amount).

[70] Izi.travel, storytelling portal, <https://izi.travel/it/fe1b-mubig-museo-di-comunita/it>, 10.10.2024.

[71] The participation of the Pinacoteca di Brera in the first cycle was strongly desired and supported with great intellectual generosity by James Bradburne, whom we thank for his support and vision.

[72] <https://izi.travel/it/fe1b-mubig-museo-di-comunita/it#tour_details_first>, 29.09.2024.

– the creation of a public artwork through co-design with schools and citizens. This activity took the form of a cycle of murals created by the Orticanoodles collective in the railway arches adjacent to the museum managed by the Italian Railways Network and granted on loan for use to the cooperative (September 2024). These arches have become an integral part of the museum;
– online publication of the first section of MUBIG's collection, in the form of a virtual museum intended to grow over time[73].

Central to the activities of this phase was the reflection on the museum's relationship with the nearby garden, a residual area of land with spontaneous vegetation. Until the pandemic, it had been abandoned and perceived as unsafe due to, among other things, the presence of the numerous homeless that occupied the spaces under the arches and the existence of not even a much-hidden drug market. The garden was reclaimed, redeveloped and promoted by the citizens' association "Greco positiva", an umbrella organisation of which ABCittà is also a member, aimed at promoting social and cultural events for the inhabitants and through these a stronger social cohesion[74] (Figg. 5-6).

HIGH POWER AND LOW INTEREST RFI-Rete Ferrovie Italiane (Italian Railways Network)	HIGH POWER AND HIGH INTEREST Borgo Cascina Conti (property developer) Fondazione di Comunità Milano (funding agency) ABCittà (museum facilitators) University of Milan-Bicocca Greco Positiva (network of local associations) Legambiente (garden manager of behalf of the City Council) Local City Council (Municipio 2)
LOW POWER AND LOW INTEREST Refettorio Ambrosiano (canteen for disadvantaged people) Shops, bars, restaurants	LOW POWER AND HIGH INTEREST Stazione Radio (radio station/podcasts producer) Orticanoodles (Street artists) Cinevan (association for the promotion of cinema) Individual residents Schools Associazione Caracol (performances for kids) Alveare che dice sì (farmers' market) Local church

Tab. 1. Power-interest grid, as of September 2024 (produced by ABCittà based on data collected in the internal bimonthly monitoring of the BiG and MUBIG projects)

[73] <https://mubig.it/collezione/>, 29.09.2024.

[74] The garden was created owing to BinG / Binari Greco, a project for citizen involvement and neighbourhood transformation through culture, environment and sports, with the contribution of the Municipality of Milan-Bando alle Periferie (the Collaboration Pact was signed in 2018 and renewed after three years). The group is composed of ABCitta/BiG, Gruppo FAS, Legambiente Lombardia, Social Street Greco Positiva, Società Borgo Cascina Conti SRL, and individual citizen volunteers. Legambiente serves as the manager on behalf of the Municipality.

5. *Lessons from nature – research results and interpretation*

The re-appropriation of the garden by the citizens has represented a very strong process both on a concrete and symbolic level. The shared decision-making process that established which areas to leave to spontaneous growth, which to dedicate to dogs, which to the cultivation of fruit and vegetables has allowed the creation of new connections between people and stakeholders who otherwise would not have come into contact. The almost daily observation activity conducted by ABCittà and summarised in the reports of the periodic meetings has highlighted how, despite the diversity of objectives and views, the garden has become a public and daily accessible platform for informal exchanges of opinions, beyond rigid commitments and affiliations[75].

Due to the agency of the garden, which re-established relationships between nature and culture in the neighbourhood, we have chosen it to serve as a metaphor for the post-anthropocentric considerations on the relationship with nature in the era of climate change, in particular, repairing the disturbed interspecies balance and the crisis of the relationship with nature[76]. As Janet Stephenson writes,

> these perspectives challenge the conceptual boundaries around the scope of culture. Including nature (or aspects of nature) within an understanding of culture has important implications for sustainability transitions. By offering the understanding that culture can be inclusive of nature, possibilities arise for resetting problematic Western ideologies that underpin the divided way we think about the world and how we act in it[77].

The interpretation of data led to the inferences that are shaped into individual "lessons", which are explained in the following paragraphs and supported by concrete findings. In keeping with Braidotti's de-familiarisation from normative values and dominant representations[78], these lessons represent a tentative path towards those processes of unlearning or, rather, re-learning museum management processes from an ecological, post-human, non-binary perspective.

[75] As highlighted in the meetings' reports from February 2022 to September 2024.
[76] Haraway 2016; Moore 2016; Tsing 2015.
[77] Stephenson 2023, pp. 74-75.
[78] Braidotti 2013, p. 89.

5.1. *The garden is much more than the sum of individual plants (and the animals that live there): it is a complex body whose renewal and transformation are supported by the entire organism*

The lesson in organicity, the interrelated development of all elements in a particular system, be that a garden or a museum plays a central role in post-humanist literature. In Braidotti's view, «all human and non-human entities are nomadic subjects-in-process, in perpetual motion» giving birth to new circumstances[79]. Stability and continuity as traditionally perceived characteristics of heritage have been reframed into transformation and change[80] together with the rigid and fixed institutional structures that need to enter into a state of fluidity in contemporary circumstances[81].

This generative aspect, in which every element, even the smallest or most peripheral, is functional to the development of the entire organism, emerged very clearly from the workshops in the local schools, as revealed by the focus groups with the teachers and by the questionnaires with students and professors.

Regarding the question of organicity, which is applied to the relationship with schools[82], as shown by the ex-post questionnaires with students and professors[83], the process has had a very significant impact on a more organic conception of heritage. It is interesting to note that three classes along the process created *their own collection*, understanding that heritage is not something external to everyday life, but that it is strongly rooted in practices, relationships, and symbolic representations.

The encounter with the visual materials linked to Greco's history shown in the classroom (vintage photographs in discovery boxes, slideshows, books,

[79] Braidotti 2019, p. 36.

[80] DeSilvey *et al.* 2020; Cameron 2015.

[81] Cameron 2015.

[82] The workshops took place from February to April 2024. They involved four classes from the "Gianni Rodari" primary school (two third grade classes, two fifth grade classes) and two from the "Salvatore Quasimodo" secondary school (first grade), for a total of 156 children, plus 12 teachers (two per class). Each class dedicated five school days to MUBIG, at the beginning familiarising with its contents and languages, then codesigning the contents of the new interactive map (and the podcasts that accompany it) and imagining subjects to propose to street artists for the works of art under the railway arches. The contents of the workshops were articulated as follows: 1) what is MUBIG; how is our neighbourhood shaped; 2) exploration through the discovery boxes; 3) neighbourhood walk (sensory walk for elementary school; guided tour with a local historian, Gianni Banfi, for middle school); meeting with the expert. This meeting was a great success with the younger kids, who asked for his autograph and wanted to hug him, while with the older kids' communication was less immediate, also for generational and linguistic reasons (according to the teachers' feedback); 5) wrap up and feedback.

[83] 80% of participants said their perception of heritage, from something foreign to something close to the community, changed "a lot" during the journey; 20% said it changed "significantly".

postcards...) resonated with other images that were very present in the kids' visual horizon, such as the photographs hanging in schools, which until then had been meaningless and "mute", but which were recognised and connected to a still existing specific place.

From the children's feedback (free evaluation at the end of the course using Post-it notes), it emerged that the most appreciated activity was the walk in the neighbourhood, particularly along the Martesana canal, carried out following the interactive map. They particularly liked listening to the "soundscape" (the water, the bells, the train...) and the physical encounter with spaces and places that had been presented in class[84]. As professor Franca Zuccoli states[85]:

> Once again, the value of sharing the same territory between the school and the "external" operators emerged. An added value we had not foreseen was the encounter with the neighbourhood by new teachers, often coming from other cities (especially from Southern Italy): focus groups revealed that they discovered spaces and places that became part of their teaching program.
> After the process developed with the school groups to discover the neighbourhood and bring out the subjects of the murals to be painted under the railway arches, each child received an invitation to the inauguration party (October 2024) to deliver to their families. The message was: I am the protagonist of this process, and in some way I am and will be linked to this process of transmission of memory. In short, the goal is again to root in the territory, to pass the baton to those who live in Greco every day. It is about developing a "culture of reliability". Of course, it is complex because teachers move, but ABCittà remains, Gianni Banfi remains, the murals remain – and above all the website with the collection (and the school's collection in particular) remains online and can be implemented over time.

5.2. *A garden is a crowd of beings. The apparent spontaneity with which plants grow and relate to each other conceals complexities dictated by their different needs, attitudes, posture, "personality"*

The second lesson, that of relationality, lies at the core of posthumanism with the rejection of dichotomies in various forms, from race and gender as socially most prominent to the polarity between human and non-human entities in the matter of ascribing agency[86]. Explaining the railway as a thing invented by men that has changed the human perception of the landscape

[84] Here are several of the children's answers to the question "What did you like the most?": I liked discovering new places; Listening to what's around closing my eyes; The noises that come from outside; I liked it because at last I can walk; I really liked the environment and going for walks; I liked when we were close to the wall that saved many lives; The environment, the big house with the garden; I liked being with you; Listening to the noises, I liked it because I let all the problems slide; The canal and listening; I liked exploring the places; I liked being outdoors.

[85] Interview made by Anna Chiara Cimoli as part of the research, 20 September 2024.

[86] Harrison, Sterling 2020b.

into panoramic seeing, Andrew Pickering illustratively explains a «reciprocal production of subjects and objects»[87] that exists between humans and non-human entities. The reverted agency of men-made objects often emerges in the heritage-making process when elements in the territory exert their influence on both people's senses and cognition.

This lesson in relationality is perhaps the one most in tune with the profile of ABCittà, which is very aware of this asset, and with the sustainability profile of the museum. The human capital conveyed by MUBIG is its greatest strength, as shown by all the self-assessment documents made by the team and the survey conducted in the schools.

MUBIG's team profile itself is conceived as a collective that moves within a complex constellation of actors: local associations, educational agencies, stakeholders, political representatives, law enforcement, cultural centres, and so on. From time to time, depending on the single actions, a project coordinator is chosen, based on skills and availability[88]. Leadership is shared and distributed – there is neither a director nor a single manager. However, as emerges from the results of the periodic meetings of the team members, this flexibility and fluidity are made possible by the experience of teamwork and mutual trust[89].

5.3. *Plants and animals know how to overcome borders, fences and enclosures, finding new possibilities for existence and co-existence*

Using the concept of *natureculture*, Nadia Bartolini explains that heritage-making practices in landscapes should not be understood as «delineated and bounded areas, but rather as pathways that gently carve through the landscape and reveal a combination of physical features (such as geologies and vegetation types) and cultural heritage (memories and post-industrial remnants)»[90]. Following this hypothesis, the third lesson, about adaptation, concerns resistance and survival, and supports the post humanist view of de-singularised centre of interest[91].

[87] Pickering 2001, p. 177.

[88] To date, this leadership model has proven to be sustainable, and we have been able to carry out all the actions envisaged by the call on time and to the good satisfaction of both the operators and the territory, as evidenced by qualitative and quantitative evaluations, presence in the press, citizen participation, and the number of solicitations received regularly (invitations to participate in national and international conferences, to conduct lectures and seminars as part of university courses, etc.).

[89] As emerges from the reports of the bimonthly meetings, it cannot be denied that the transfer of tools, theoretical frameworks and relational styles to the younger collaborators are the most delicate and time-consuming aspects of the process.

[90] Bartolini 2020, p. 285.

[91] Ferrando 2013.

The theme of material and immaterial boundaries is a central object of research for MUBIG: it is a very sensitive issue for the inhabitants, since the neighbourhood, squeezed between the railway tracks and the Martesana canal, perceives itself as an island in the city[92].

The garden is a lesson in boundary crossing. In the beginning, it was divided into three functional zones: private gardens for growing fruit and vegetables, fenced areas for dogs, and open areas for recreation, sports, walking, etc. Life experience brought elements exceeding these functions, dictated, among others, by the sociability and the sedimentation of memory (trees were planted to remember some volunteers who died because of Covid-19).

This lesson is important for the sustainability of the museum: adaptation was of vital importance during the Covid-19 pandemic, when it was necessary to move many activities from off to online; equally in the pause between the first and second funding. Embracing the limit and transforming it into a resource, moving fluidly between the different project areas and outputs is an experience that the museum has already lived, and from which it can draw further lessons.

5.4. *The logic of grafting teaches us to start from what is already there*

Creative adaptations are called for when there are breaks in what was a continuous experience in an environment[93]. Merging the old and the new to create fresh relationships, meanings and possibilities, and optimising the already existing capital of experience, knowledge, and trust, the logic of grafting considers heritage not as a fixed set of meanings and practices to be preserved forever, but as a process aimed at evolution and growth, with respect of both human and non-human subjects[94].

This concept is central to MUBIG's decision making and management processes, which from the very beginning have chosen to rely on the existing relationships of collaboration, trust and complementarity. The relationship between ABCittà and the University of Milan-Bicocca, which is geographically close to the museum, was born in 2021 in the occasion of a shared project[95]. Mutual trust allowed these two parties to collaborate in an effective and shared way. In designing the workshops with the schools, they embraced the concept that knowledge of the territory – unknown to most teachers who come

[92] Ouassak 2023. The in-depth interviews that allowed ABCittà to produce the first series of podcasts (2020-21) highlighted the importance of the topic of borders. In fact, as already explained, it was decided to the activities of the discovery boxes.

[93] Guernsey 2017.

[94] Bartolini 2020.

[95] MAPSMI, 2021-23, <https://abcitta.org/portfolio/maps-mi/>, 24.09.2024.

from other cities or districts – is an asset that remains in the school's possession and can therefore be spent independently in the future, even without the presence of the experts, and consequently, without external funding. However, that imposed a problem regarding the teachers' workload. This was partly solved by inviting (of course not exclusively) those teachers who had previously collaborated with both ABCittà and the University, in order to capitalise on the legacy of trust and mutual knowledge.

The grafting logic can also be observed internally, at ABCittà since the museum is grafted onto the older and more stable work of BiG. It was possible to experiment with a certain courage because MUBIG is a satellite of a stable, long-term project, now characterised by little risk on a financial level – the risk assumed with MUBIG could be minimised by all BiG's actions. Furthermore, the experimentation, including new tools developed *ad hoc*, has a positive impact, in terms of skills and knowledge, on the whole of ABCittà: the capacity building process undertaken with MUBIG also reverberates in the other areas of the cooperative in terms of thinking, vision and culture, within an organic understanding of knowledge.

Finally, the concept of grafting also involves an intergenerational approach: how to graft on the knowledge of the most experienced people? How to take the baton from them to pass it on to others? One of Greco's most active citizens as well as one of the museum's most active curators, 85-year-old Gianni Banfi, was hosted by the school classes and accompanied the urban walks. Many pupils knew him because their grandparents had played sports or done other activities with him and with the various associations he promoted, and they were very happy to welcome him into the classroom as if he was a celebrity (they also asked him for autographs). As expressed in one of the bimonthly meetings' reports[96], sustainability also means to accompany the growth and awareness of the "Gianni Banfis of tomorrow": the kids who draw on the knowledge of the older and more experienced.

5.5. Seasonality defines a rhythm that should not be forced: pauses, dead times, and moments of apparent latency must be respected because they are physiological and generative

Rhythmic exchanges of periods underline the concept of temporality, which can be seen in opposition to linearity and continuity, the latter of which needs to be reconceptualised if alternative heritage futures are about to be created[97]. There are always periods of collapse and confusion in which what

[96] 24 June 2024.
[97] Harvey, Perry 2015a, p. 14.

is considered normal, both things and relationships, are upended. However, these periods nevertheless need to be treated as productive because they might lead to unpredictable or transformed arrangements[98]. Seasonality reinforces process-oriented thinking in management and allows for practices to emerge spontaneously.

Just like the garden, MUBIG also has its own temporality, linked to the funding lines, the human resources available, the possibility or otherwise of active collaboration by the partners, the alternation of research times and formalisation times, and so on. Between the first and the second funding, there was a pause, and despite the incertitude about the future of the museum, it proved to be productive in terms of self-reflection, identification of work prospects, dissemination of the work done so far (scientific and popular writing, participation in conferences, networking, etc.)[99].

Depending on the presence or absence of funding, moments of greater productivity have so far alternated with moments of quiescence, that have been used as precious self-reflective moments. This anti-capitalist reading of full and empty times, of success vs. failure, of productivity vs. inaction, can help us to read more organically, in the long term, MUBIG's life perspective and its impact on the community. The driving force of the project and its future sustainability lie not in the amount of funding, nor in the continuity of it over the medium to long term, but in the solidity provided by the network of neighbourly relationships patiently built over time[100].

MUBIG accepts temporality – and also the possibility of a definitive closure – as a fundamental methodological fact. Even though there is hope for its long duration and its progressively stronger rooting in the territory, which could guarantee a transformation in terms of democratic openness, protection of diversity and promotion of socialisation, all the operators agree that the museum may close, or perhaps become something else, without anything being lost in terms of experience, knowledge, relationships.

6. *Conclusion – a (possible) model of growth and sustainability in a logic of organic co-learning*

The research presented in this paper explored the management practices of MUBIG, which merge attempts to bring together the cultural and heritage significance of the people living in Greco and wider societal and ecological

[98] Wakefield 2018, p. 85.
[99] As stated in the bimonthly meetings' reports.
[100] Oliva, Piber 2023.

concerns in the contemporary museum and heritage discourse. These concerns are largely focused on issues related to cultural, social, environmental and economic sustainability that can no longer be seen in isolation, but as producing a complex of diverse effects on people's lives.

As a participative undertaking in an urban neighbourhood, the museum's entire sustainability approach to management relies heavily on multiple and multidirectional relationships between a variety of people and stakeholders. Adopting post humanist thinking sheds a different light on management issues such as leadership, decision making processes, the management of work time etc. It most certainly creates an alternative foundation from which to consider participation in museums.

The research of MUBIG's management model has highlighted five themes that have been interpreted as lessons from nature, and they include organicity, relationality, adaptation, grafting, and temporality. The garden served as a metaphor, but also as a field of observation and of re-learning possible non-hierarchical forms of coexistence, based on the respectful coexistence of others' space, in a logic of collaboration. Nature teaches a holistic approach to thinking about our role in the decision-making process and organisations of activities with unpredictability of behaviours and consequences as its constituent parts. Actions have their effects that might be sometimes difficult to foresee but they, in fact, show a logic that arises from the mutual interconnection of people and their environment. Reliance on the pre-existing elements in space and histories as well as capacities to form new ones within the boundary on the territory makes an important aspect of the project's longevity that needs to take into consideration the natural rhythms of activities and interests, as well as the respect for diversities. Therefore, we believe these lessons can also be understood as guiding principles for a post-humanist approach to community museum management.

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Appendix



Fig. 1. MUBIG headquarters in the Greco district, 2022 (Source: Cesare Maiocchi, Brera National Gallery)



Fig. 2. A public meeting for residents, garden growers and citizens (Source: ABCittà, Milan)



Fig. 3. A photo exhibition at MUBIG, April-May 2022 (Source: ABCittà, Milan)



Fig. 4. A film screening organised by Cinevan at MUBIG, 2022 (Source: ABCittà, Milan)



Fig. 5. Members of "Greco positiva" in the garden, 2022 (Source: ABCittà, Milan)



Fig. 6. A theatre performance for kids by Associazione Caracol, 2022 (Source: ABCittà, Milan)

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