

# PUBLIC SPACES FOR COMMUNITY CAMPUSES AND UNIVERSITIES

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# Forewords

*Marichela Sepe*

This volume stems from a deep interest in a topic that, in recent years, has gained increasing importance in urban and architectural design: the role of open public spaces within university campuses<sup>1</sup>. These places are not merely accessory settings for academic functions but are vital elements contributing to the quality of life for the entire community that studies, works, or simply passes through these areas. The open spaces of campuses thus become arenas for relationships, informal learning, and physical and mental well-being, acting as true extensions of the city itself.

My personal interest in this subject developed during periods of study, visits, and research across numerous university campuses, in Europe, the

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<sup>1</sup> This volume was realized within the framework of the research projects “*LOVE Sapienza: Livable, Enjoyable, and Attractive Spaces for the Community*” (under the author’s responsibility) and “*University and Urban Regeneration: Redesigning Neglected Spaces and Routes with Sapienza as a Driver, NARRATES*” (under the author’s responsibility for the Architecture and Urban Regeneration research line), both funded by Sapienza University of Rome. The contributions contained in the volume relate to the conference I organized as part of the *LOVE Sapienza* research, which was held at DICEA-Sapienza University of Rome, on July 3, 2025, in partnership with the GUDesign Network ([www.gudesign.org](http://www.gudesign.org)), founded by Heleni Porfyriou and coordinated by me since 2022.

United States, and Asia. On these occasions, I observed how the quality of open spaces directly affects the experience of those who frequent the university: students, faculty, researchers, workers, and visitors. These are not merely green areas or transit zones, but welcoming environments, carefully designed to encourage pause, outdoor study, and spontaneous socialization. In particular, it became clear how the presence of spacious, well-equipped areas with a thoughtful focus on environmental and architectural quality significantly enhances the overall livability of campuses.

At the same time, another compelling aspect is the connection between the campus and the surrounding urban fabric. In the best examples I visited, permeability and accessibility were ensured by a range of sustainable mobility options: bike paths, efficient public transportation, and safe, pleasant pedestrian routes. This network of connections not only facilitates daily movement but also fosters deeper social and cultural integration between the city and the university, overcoming the traditional physical and symbolic separation between the two worlds.

In recent times, attention to urban resilience has further expanded the scope of the discussion, making it essential to consider public spaces through a climate-oriented lens. Campuses, as genuine urban microcosms, must face challenges linked to extreme weather events—heatwaves, heavy rainfall, flooding—by designing open spaces capable of absorbing, withstanding, and adapting. Soil permeability, the presence of appropriate vegetation, and stormwater management have become fundamental design criteria, steering choices toward greater environmental and social sustainability.

The goal of this research is therefore to understand which factors make university spaces healthy, liveable, and resiliently future-oriented, as well as to identify effective design strategies to translate these factors into concrete practices.

The volume collects and analyses a series of international best practices, offering a useful tool for students, researchers, academics, designers, administrators, and all those involved or interested in the design of cities and campuses.

The structure of the book is organized into three main parts, following the cultural framework provided by Eric P. Mumford, Vassiliki Petridou, and David Grahame Shane. Each part addresses a different aspect of the relationship between public space and university campuses, yet all are closely interconnected and offer further insights for discussion. These

three parts regard: Campus and Public Spaces, which explores the issue of liveability and health in campus public spaces, examining how the design and organization of open areas can promote users' physical and psychological well-being; Campus and University Communities, which focuses on the various communities that inhabit campuses and their emerging needs; Campus and the City, which delves into the topic of connecting infrastructures and the relationships between campuses and their surrounding cities.

The ultimate goal is to propose a vision of the campus as an integral part of the contemporary city. Open public spaces can be a driving force in this transformation, creating environments that improve users' quality of life and contribute to the development of more resilient, healthy, and inclusive cities. In my introductory contribution, I therefore propose a set of guiding principles to support the design of liveable and inclusive campuses.



# Regeneration strategies from the campus to the city. A case study in L'Aquila, Italy

*Chiara Di Dato\*,  
Federico Falasca,  
Lorena Fiorini,  
Alessandro Marucci*

## *Introduction*

Although it is well established that increasing urbanization harms the liveability of cities, soil continues to be consumed and urban settlements continue to grow (SNPA, 2023). Often this trend leads to impoverishment of natural resources, increasing average temperature and worsening of living conditions in urban areas (SNPA, 2020, UN-Habitat, 2020).

Such framework produces diverse implications in terms of management of cities and quality of life. Cities' growth has been based on the increase in soil sealing due to the need for more residential and productive areas.

This trend impacts more in a city affected by seismic events and thus by reconstruction processes such as L'Aquila, Italy. Located in the Abruzzo region, the medium-sized town (475 sq. km) is the regional capital with 70231 inhabitants.

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The urban system has undergone a long process of reconstruction after the earthquake of 2009. The seismic event caused around 300 victims, and it has deeply damaged some high-urbanized areas both the historical and peripheral city. The reconstruction involved changes in the town's configuration and it fragmented the built-up areas. Instead, reconstruction should have been guided by proper planning and disaster management instruments (Forino, 2015). Both regulatory framework and technical instruments were not able at all to deal with the complex series of issues related to residences, mobility and public services (Romano et al., 2015). Also, a process of expansion has been a consequence of rebuilt processes in the damaged historical centre with rapid interventions for new housing solutions in the nearest areas, then consuming soil. Often, the damaged peripheral areas have been rebuilt as it were before the earthquake without any change in configuration (Romano et al., 2022). To this day, decisions made have reconfigured the city and many issues on complex urban assets are still unsolved (Marucci, 2021). Although the city center is almost rebuilt, the centralities that have been developed during the years of reconstruction have not lost importance.

This complex framework has impacted on multiple aspects of the reorganization of the city's services. It impacts also on education, particularly university. It has more than one location inside the city, also due to changes in location that occurred after the earthquake. The specific case study is in one of the bigger areas that hosts the university's spaces.

In 2020, University of LAquila financed the project "UniCo – Preliminary feasibility studies for the redevelopment of the Coppito University Campus" to begin a process of project rethinking on the area. The fund gave the opportunity to study the main issues on the campus and the relationship established with context. The project was followed by the municipality's commitment to implementing interventions aimed at improving roads, buildings and green areas (Il Capoluogo, 2022) . The paper aims to reflect on findings related to livability and the quality of green in the campus.

## *Study area*

A sort of prevalent linear pattern is readable in the case study area. It is a north-west fringe from the historical centre. Pettino district is the main residential settlement with a complex polygonal tissue. Functions are mixed from residential to services. On the average, actual characteristics of the area have originated after the seismic event in 2009, since it has

been one of the most compromised after the event. Since reconstruction has not gone in pair with an updated rethinking of the overall settlement and some gaps are still readable, such as lacking of parks and green playgrounds and a balance between built and open areas.

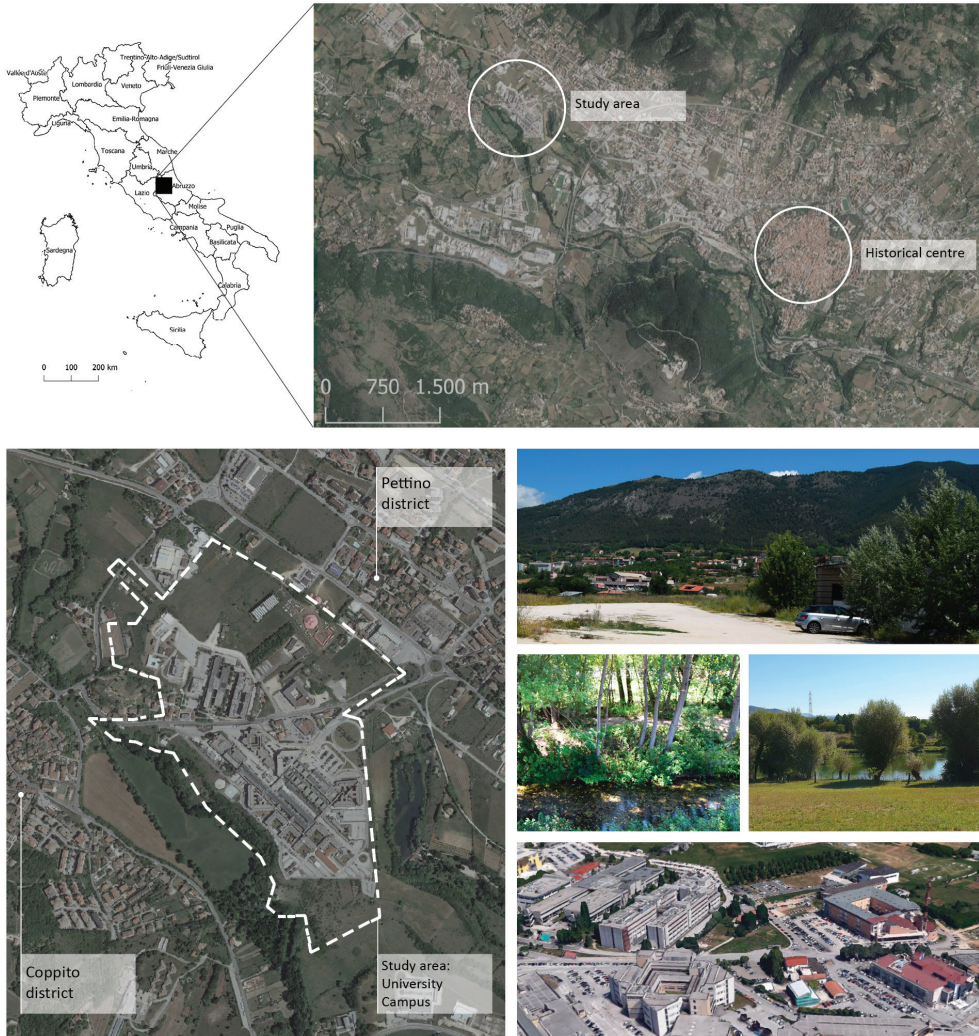
The environmental configuration of the area is noteworthy. The urban fringe stands in between two big relevant areas. From the northside, Pettino Mountain is 1147 meters high, and it extends in the northern area of L'Aquila from north-east to north-west. Its surface is covered by wood of holm oak. Aterno river is the longest river in the Region and the biggest for river basin (3190 km<sup>2</sup>). It passes through all the city crossing the southern area from west to east. It houses fish species that are under protection.

These natural elements then have influenced the expansion of the settlement, that has followed the path of the valley area between the mountain and the river. As other relevant natural elements, there are the Vetoio natural lake, and the surrounding park and the sport facilities park called Centi-Colella.

In this context, the campus was built in the late sixties due to the building of the hospital in that area. It is composed of the campus nearby the neighborhoods called Coppito and Pettino, from which the denomination "Coppito Campus" for referring to such university structure (Fig. 1).

The campus area represents a pole of interest for workers and students. The two main services (university and hospital) with some others (public offices, bar, restaurants) make the area a point of interest and commuting. It is an around 2,5 square-km wide polygonal shape between some residential neighbourhood and natural areas. The campus itself presents architectural discontinuity if compared with the surrounding area. The shape of the pole itself has been influenced by the design of the vehicular access, and it is surrounded by a series of main streets.

After the earthquake, the north part of campus housed temporary lecture halls and small emergency laboratories for research purposes. Following a brief period, temporary buildings were dismantled. Other donated structures remain, although the area paved during the emergency time has not been renovated. Over the years, no other use has been proposed for this area except for parking.



## *Materials and methods*

At least the following primary integrated goals are pursued by the feasibility project:

- Redevelopment of buildings that resulted from emergency procedures without proper design or sufficient formal inclusion.
- Rearranging the internal mobility network with multimodal differentiation of nodes and linkages, as well as reconfiguring the urban structure.

- Conversion of the green matrix from marginal areas to a functional connection for the campus and the adjacent green areas.

The primary focus of this case study is the transition from impermeable zones to a more extensive linking green initiative inside and outside of the campus. Therefore, some main issues are considered relating to the open spaces. The case study includes the pole in its entirety, including the hospital. The analysis focused on:

- Analysis of the main soil destinations for measuring the impermeable soil using the municipality's land use map.
- Analysis on presence of temporary buildings, assessment of their possible removal, pedestrian accessibility, green areas inside and outside the campus through satellite images, drone flight and on-site surveys.

**Figure 1 -**  
*The case study area in L'Aquila, central Italy. The University Campus as study area inside the dotted shape and photos of Pettino mountain, Aterno river, Vetoio Lake and a view of the University Campus (Source: photos and elaboration on Google Satellite Imagery by the authors)*

## Results

Among the preliminary studies, analysis on the use of soil highlights heterogeneous functions in the area. As expected, urbanized areas and sealing soil is dominant (37% that corresponds to around 80 hectares). The area is also characterized by crops and agricultural land that cover around 30% of the area surrounding the campus. Instead, green areas with trees vegetation are about 10-15% of the area, that is 30 hectares.

Indeed, there is more than one parking space. Also, the large usage of parking areas demonstrates the high use that users make of their own vehicles. A poor pedestrian accessibility then is encountered by users who do not use private vehicles or public transport to reach the area. Then, campus has a lack of a pedestrian use project: narrow sidewalks without a clear design and improvised pedestrian paths over flowerbeds or through parking lots.

Even if the area is surrounded by large plots of arable land, inside the settlement the presence of green is almost lacking. There are some isolated trees, no tree-lined streets while the areas covered with grassland are limited to roadsides. The existent trees are too scarce for producing environmental benefits. Then, the missing design control over the open areas can be detected in the poor relationship established with the immediately surrounding unbuilt landscape. On the contrary, it has several quality elements that could be enhanced in a coherent landscape system. From a general perspective, conditions of the main natural places are not excellent. Through



**Figure 2 -** State of the art of the area and focus on the parking lot inside the campus (left) and the scheme of green reconnection with the 1 hectare-wide forestry project (right). (Source: authors' elaboration on Google Satellite Imagery)

the years the process of conurbation has left few internal residual green areas in disconnection with the relevant ecological assets nearby. Any relevant environmental links among these main systems are lacking.

Although the presence of the river is relevant, any relationships with the campus are lacking because of the state of abandonment of riversides. Such areas are also characterized by private properties and scattered informal buildings that creates land use for housing and storage of agricultural materials in an area that is supposed to serve as expansion tank in the area close to the river. There is a general state of degradation since the area is neither maintained nor exploited according to its recreational potential.

Lastly, during the summer of 2020, the mountain area was affected by a series of fires that burned 800 hectares of forest near the Pettino neighbourhood. The disastrous event was caused by excessive temperatures and was discovered to have a dubious explanation. The event highlighted the importance of the forest in the area and its capacity of providing ecosystem services (Estreguil et al., 2019).

Then, a scheme of green reconnection is designed from north (Pettino Mountain) to south (Aterno River) connecting also the Vetoio Lake Centi-Colella sport facilities park. In such a strategic asset for green areas, the

campus stands in the center (Fig. 2). Then, an area from the campus is chosen as an example of a requalification project.

Among the open spaces, in the northwest part there is a polygonal-shaped paved area of around 1 hectare. It is used as parking and as place for temporary buildings. Among the other open spaces, such an area can be potential for its position both near some of the main university's buildings and near the other open spaces outside the campus.

The chosen area then is designed for becoming a de-sealed area. A grass-coverage with trees of native species is put in place in consideration of main winds. The restricted and confined space created by the trees ensures the windproof function, since they shield cold winds from the north. Trees also create a barrier to the adjacent road. In terms of ecosystem functions, the mass of trees can provide benefits such as CO<sub>2</sub> storage and then contributing on heat mitigation. Such a feature also creates an ideal area for climatic comfort. This is why the project also includes drainage paving and furniture for open space activities for students and workers. Also, the urban forest can be ideal also as playground for the near neighbourhood.

Then, the project of de-impermeabilization continues inside and outside the campus for connecting to the external green areas. Whereas the campus is equipped with tree-lined streets, a bicycle-pedestrian trail leads from the campus to the nearby riverbank. The river is then restored by removing informal constructions or discordant components and adding native vegetation species and street furniture. The bicycle-pedestrian path also connects the other green areas. Toward north, the ecological reconnection to the mountain is enhanced by providing the Pettino neighbourhood with open playgrounds and urban forests. Such projects provide green areas inside the residential district.

## *Discussion and Conclusions*

Low-density settlements request high mobility and transport dependence to longer commuting distances, and they can also imply fragmented communities and degraded landscapes (ISTAT, 2017; Piorr et al., 2011). Such an extensive urban model can create a mixed use of the territory at the expense of rural areas (European Environment Agency, 2006). The urban gradient which leads from the compact city to peri-urban contexts generates hybrid landscapes in which boundaries between urban and rural are difficult to manage (Geneletti et al., 2017; Shaw et al., 2020). Im-

pactful events like earthquakes and the subsequent reorganizations of city's function risk to increment such a situation. In fact, temporary solutions risk impacting on the possibility to implement long-term biodiversity strategies together with the diminishing livability of places. On the contrary, the knowledge of green infrastructures and ecosystem services embedded in planning process have become the norm for enhancing urban quality (European Environmental Agency et al., 2014; Estreguil et al., 2019; European Environment Agency, 2011).

The analysis highlighted that, although the campus appears to be provided with open spaces, the quantity and quality of the green areas inside the campus is quite poor. In contrast, the analyses have pointed out lack of green connection and relevant areas capable of providing ecosystem services' benefits. Similarly, in the past few years inhabitants have started to perceive the lack of green parks inside the neighborhood.

In 2022, the neighborhood committee of Pettino protested for different kinds of projects that would have consumed soil, such as a new shopping center's project and a new parking area. They complained about the inadequacy of locally equipped parks and proper green spaces for leisure activities.

For the same reasons, the local association has asked for the re-utilization of abandoned fields in green areas. They claimed that the potential of such areas is wasted since they are occupied by building material that is temporarily stocked following the most recent reconstruction works in the district (L'Aquila Blog quotidiano online, 2021).

In view of these needs, the forestry project inside the campus is designed to be accessible also to the residents.

The case study focuses on the campus for proposing an improved coherence among environmental elements and different parts of landscapes and with the idea of addressing further open and green spaces. Quality of open spaces to improve land management and inclusiveness of the urban district. Also, support from nature is necessary for reassessing healthier conditions and urban comfort, even though urban expansion tends to reduce the presence of green areas.

In this perspective, the de-sealing and forestry project for the campus is a concrete design for a broader strategy. The recently approved deliberation from the local administration reveals the potential importance of the campus chosen from a strategic point of view.

In conclusion, the interest through this Campus a is high because of its role in the city, and due to its peculiarities in terms of case study. The clear vocation of urban centrality (for students, workers, doctors, patients and so on) has therefore not been fully developed in the past years. Also, the area composed of the University Campus and the hospital is considered with great interest from different fields in relation to implementation of better practices and a better connection to the city. The campus has been the platform for experimentations in terms of models for simulating risk scenarios and designing environmentally hazard-conscious solutions (Eugeni et al., 2024). For these reasons, this area should be the one to be addressed by policies of greenery and implementation of Nature Based Solutions as the study has shown.

### Aknowledgment

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Marichela Sepe is an Associate Professor of Urban Planning at DICEA, Sapienza University of Rome, and a member of the Academic Board of the PhD Program in Architecture and Urban Engineering. She also joined ISMed-CNR and DiARC-University Federico II. Sepe has been a Visiting Professor: in 2013 at Peking University, and in 2024 at the Faculty of Architecture of Gdańsk University of Technology. Her research interests include sustainable urban design, place identity, healthy cities, livable public spaces, creative urban regeneration, post-earthquake reconstruction and multi-adaptation, and cultural heritage enhancement. On these topics, she has published numerous articles in national and international journals, conference proceedings, books, and book chapters, and coordinated and served as the scientific director of national and international research projects. Since 2022 she is the Coordinator of the GUDesign network. Sepe serves as the Vice President of the Campania section of the INU (National Institute of Urban Planning) and is a member of the National Board of Directors of INU, the Board of Directors of EURA (European Urban Research Association), and the Urban Design Group. From 2014 to 2023, she has won several awards, including the Ardito-Desio Prize for papers presented at the Ipsapa conferences in 2014, 2016, and 2018; the Urban Planning Literature Award of the National Institute of Urban Planning (INU) in 2014, 2015, and 2017; and the Horizon Europe Award in 2023. She has also participated in various architecture and urban design competitions, achieving two first places and one selection.

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Copenhagen: detail of the Søndre Campus (photo by Marichela Sepe)

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