Power to the people: when culture works as a social catalyst in urban regeneration processes (and when it does not)

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Power to the people: when culture works as a social catalyst in urban regeneration processes (and when it does not)

Guido Ferilli, Pier Luigi Sacco, Giorgio Tavano Blessi and Stefano Forbic

ABSTRACT
This article focuses upon the relationship between culture, urban regeneration schemes, and their impact on socio-cognitive assets – namely, social and human capital. It examines three major urban regeneration projects in the districts of Saint Michel (Montreal, Canada), Auburn (Sydney, Australia) and Bicocca (Milan, Italy), where culture has been invoked as a main transformational driver at the economic and socio-environmental levels, but with different approaches and results. Through comparative analysis, we develop a more general reflection on the social impact of culture-led urban transformation processes, questioning the actual role of cultural initiatives – particularly those related to the creation of new cultural facilities and the programming of big cultural flagship events – and participation as a means to improve the local social milieu. We find that a key role for social efficacy is played by projects’ capacity to elicit the commitment of residents through inclusive cultural participation, as opposed to instrumental top-down initiatives mainly addressing city and neighbourhood branding and real estate marketing purposes.

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KEYWORDS
Urban areas; culture-led urban regeneration processes; cultural capital; human capital; social capital; social sustainability

1. Introduction
The regeneration of post-industrial urban areas, such as those exposed to de-industrialization processes and thus loss of value at economic and social level (Martinez-Fernandez, Audirac, Fol, & Cunningham-Sabot, 2012), has been for some decades a key theme of urban policy, generating a massive stream of research, a lively policy debate and a wealth of more or less successful case studies. There are many ways in which culture can make a difference within urban regeneration processes: renewing the image of the city and of its neighbourhoods, fostering the pride and sense of belonging of residents, attracting investments and tourism, improving quality of life and social cohesion, creating new jobs in the cultural and creative sectors and so on. As these beneficial effects have become apparent and documented, culture has entered the toolbox of urban planners from the main door. As a consequence, cultural strategies and initiatives have been addressing an increasingly wide range of policy targets, becoming scrutinized more and more often as a possible key factor of success for urban regeneration processes, after a long period of substantial neglect, or marginal attention in best cases.
Among the many issues raised by such phenomena, one that has attracted attention but still remains problematic is how such transformations co-evolve with the local endowment of intangible resources such as human and social capital, and more specifically, how culture contributes to the achievement of this goal in the context of urban regeneration schemes. As far as regeneration processes are concerned, however, is culture really able to have systematic impact? And if so, is this the case not only in terms of infrastructural upgrading and economic stimulus, but also in terms of social and human dimensions such as, among others, sociability, diversity, openness and quality of life? Does its culture make any difference in terms of crucial aspects such as social empowerment, social cohesion and capability building in the context of urban regeneration programmes? And what are the critical conditions for effectiveness and mobilization of the local community?

Giving a comprehensive answer to such difficult questions is outside the scope of the present paper, but here we make an attempt at shedding light on some specific effects by evaluating the differential impact of culture in specific, comparable examples of urban regeneration processes from similar social, economic and dimensional contexts: Saint Michel (Montreal, Canada); Auburn (Sydney, Australia); Bicocca (Milan, Italy). The three cases all fall into the general category of urban regeneration, that is, physical renewal projects for sub-central, socially deprived post-industrial areas, while being characterized by different planning approaches, and correspondingly by different conceptions of the role and function of culture in the regeneration scheme.

We develop our arguments along two axes: First, a meta-review of the relevant literature concerning the relation between urban regeneration processes and culture, with a specific focus on the role of the latter on some specific dimensions of urban development. Subsequently, a comparative analysis of the three case studies aiming to highlight the implicit approach to regeneration, and in particular the role that culture plays in creating value in the production of certain types of human and social capital, which makes a significant difference in terms of both effectiveness and social sustainability. We will see in particular how effectiveness is (negatively) depending upon the level of instrumentality of the culture–sociability nexus – a result that has some interesting implications for future urban regeneration programmes. The paper concludes with a final discussion and suggests future avenues for research. We believe that this perspective will help us elucidate some critical conditions that play a key role in boosting or thwarting the developmental potential of culture in urban transformation processes, with effects reaching well outside the cultural sphere.

2. Theoretical background: the developmental role of culture in urban regeneration processes

In the last 30 years, many cities located in advanced industrial societies have been facing new challenges, as a consequence of major changes in the social and economic scenario, which have visibly impacted city structures at both tangible and intangible levels, from their built and natural environment, to all of their social, human and cultural dimensions. In order to tackle these pressuring challenges, as well as many others such as, for example, the reclamation of previous industrially polluted areas or the recovery of vastly rundown ones, cities have experimented with a wide range of urban planning strategies, based upon different theoretical approaches and conditional upon the quantity and type of available
local resources. Starting from the classical urban redevelopment approach prevailing in the 1960s and 1970s, which was essentially focused on the physical changes in the urban structure (Hyra, 2012), attention has then shifted to multi-sector, multi-layer approaches on the basis of a more comprehensive idea of urban renewal through revitalization (Camarinhas, 2011). According to this planning philosophy, the focus extends to the whole urban organization, from its physical morphology to its social architecture, so as to freshen up not only the visible face of a city, but also its more ineffable aspects, including those more deeply related to economic and social dimensions (Doratli, 2005).

In both instances of the above-mentioned urban planning approaches, the cultural dimension, when explicitly considered, has been generally invoked as an instrumental tool in relation to general policy aims (see Krueger & Buckingham, 2012). Specifically, cultural-related investments, activities and infrastructures have been advocated in respect to physical refurbishment issues – for example, say, redesigning and beautifying the infrastructural endowment of transformational areas (Gunay & Dokmeci, 2012); or social issues – for example, more effective inclusion of urban dwellers in marginalized neighbourhoods (Sasaki, 2010); economic issues – for example, spotlighting and marketing urban areas in the global market place (Landry, 2000/2008); and also tourism and leisure issues – for example, revitalizing and improving the attractiveness of the local leisure and entertainment economy (Richards & Wilson, 2007).

The new planning approach that has emerged since the late 1990s has started to address urban regeneration within a broader perspective: from the mere revitalization of cities and neighbourhoods towards a major strategic rethinking of their economic, social and even cultural profile so as to achieve a complete repositioning according to the new emerging logic of global competition (Couch, Sykes, & Börstinghaus, 2011). One of the key differences between this new approach and the previous ones has to do with the governance of the whole regeneration process. If in the cases of urban redevelopment and renewal the distinctive governance principle follows a top-down logic and is related to a circumscribed set of goals (Grodach & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2007), the breadth of scope of urban regeneration calls for a drastic change. As noted by Porter and Shaw (2013), urban regeneration projects need a participative turn, primarily involving all kinds of local stakeholders into a cooperative re-weaving of the city fabric, from the early stages of the ideation process to the final plan. In this perspective, Savini (2011) noted that the regeneration project and programmes may became the participatory endowment in order to potentially enhance the management of social criticalities and supply outcomes related to community empowerment, Furthermore stimulating the local player to actively participate in the local transformation process, from the planning to the operative phases. In this new framework, the potential contribution of culture to urban planning naturally becomes much richer and more diversified than ever before, and classical themes of economic, social and cultural development are again fully spanned, but in a much wider and interconnected perspective, thus meeting growing interest and consensus in local constituencies (Evans, 2009).

According to Evans (2004), one can rationalize this evolution in the planning approach in terms of three different variants:

- Culture-led regeneration, where culture is seen as the main catalyst and engine of the regeneration;
• Cultural regeneration, where culture is fully integrated into a wider strategy alongside with other activities in the environmental, social and economic spheres;
• Culture and regeneration, where culture plays a specific but circumscribed role and is not fully integrated at the strategic planning and development stage.

Each one of the three variants has different implications in terms of the role of culture in urban regeneration processes, and has distinct consequences that can be appreciated on a number of relevant dimensions, as summarized in Table 1.

It goes beyond the aim of this paper to carry out a critical analysis of all the abovementioned dimensions, as well as of other relevant ones such as the nature of the impulse that sparked the regeneration process, whether community- or administration-ignited and so on. Here, we take the most fully evolved variant, that is, culture-led regeneration, as the benchmark, and focus our attention on three specific dimensions: the link between culture-led regeneration and the production of certain forms of social and human capital; how cultural initiative is harnessed and reflects into specific planning actions; how to measure and assess the impact of culture-led urban regeneration processes specifically on the social and human capital dimensions.

As noted by Ferilli, Sacco, and Tavano Blessi (2012), the synergy between culture and urban regeneration may function optimally if it manages to provide a new basis to subsume apparently diverse economic, social and environmental issues into a same framework. Culture-led regeneration is effective if culture is enabled to function as a ‘translation device’ among different spheres of the urban realm that deploys new problem-solving strategies to key planning problems. Consequently, no culture-led regeneration project may reasonably succeed at this scale without a real attempt at mobilizing and involving the local community in order to generate substantial and permanent changes as to how urban issues are perceived, tackled and solved (Scharenberg & Bader, 2009). This is to a large extent a self-catalytic process, whereby the accumulation of the assets that are needed to support the needed change in attitudes, such as certain types of human and social capital, crucially depends in turn on a sustained mobilization capacity and so on (Sacco & Tavano Blessi, 2009; Tavano Blessi, Tremblay, Pilati, & Sandri, 2012).

Among the types of social capital favoured by culture-led regeneration, we find community bonding forms of capital linked to shared pride and sense of belonging about local cultural identity (Miles, 2005) and to common participation to initiatives that

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Culture and urban regeneration models.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Role of culture in the planning approach</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Purpose of cultural initiative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main impacts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shared governance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Legacy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

enhance the community’s cohesiveness and self-confidence (Nakagawa, 2010). Community bridging forms are instead related to initiatives about intercultural dialogue that promote mutual awareness and understanding, the sharing of experiences, and an improved knowledge of each other’s heritage of symbols, traditions and stories, among others (Ball-Rokeach, Kim, & Matei, 2001). On the human capital side, regeneration projects are generally not targeting directly individual educational opportunities, but they may contribute substantially to experiential forms of training and capability building that encourage embracing new ideas, getting more familiar with forms of divergent thinking, reconsidering familiar modes of thought and perception under a more self-critical light, making new associations between fields and ideas, and so on (Guhathakurta, 2002). More generally, successful regeneration projects may instil a stronger motivation in local inhabitants as to personally (and sometimes collectively) investing in the acquisition of new skills and capacities, with a consequent positive impact also on the accumulation of other, more traditional forms of human capital (Sacco, Ferilli, & Tavano Blessi, 2014).

The synergetic effect of culture-led regeneration is then ultimately depending on the extent to which the process manages to create a shared and inclusive social representation within which the various local constituencies learn to expand their capacity of interaction, to create and share information and ideas, to cooperate and to compete while maintaining a pro-social spirit and so on (Knox & Pinch, 2014). In this way, the shared ‘sense of place’ that emerges from accomplished examples of urban regeneration is not fabricated through savvy marketing gimmicks, but through an organic bottom-up growth, enabled by the specific socio-cognitive nature of cultural experiences, challenging individuals and the whole community to rediscover the sense-making and community dimensions of the urban space as a social and cultural arena (Nussbaumer & Moulaert, 2004).

This is far from easy goal to achieve, and there are limits and contradictions in the use of culture in urban regeneration processes, even in cases where ambitions and expectations are set at high levels. In many cases, despite sophisticated forms of lip service to the transformational and inclusive potential of culture, we run as a matter of fact into ‘cosmetic’ attempts at the instrumentalization of culture, by deceivingly tweaking the logic of cultural initiative so as to reflect the needs of the local real estate market (Kleinhans, Priemus, & Engbersen, 2007). Furthermore, as noted by Lysgård (2012), there is often a misunderstanding concerning how policy-makers treat the cultural and the creative class dimensions within urban regeneration scheme, often overlapping the two concepts in the direction of an instrumental employment of the both notions aiming to attract globally mobile, highly paid professionals (Peck, 2005) with the consequent social sustainability problems due to sudden, relentless gentrification (Seo, 2002). Culture-led regeneration processes can be overturned by rhetorical manipulations, up to the point of promoting a mono-dimensional logic of commodification of the local cultural resources according to the convenience of major local vested interests, with the effect of depriving culture of its credibility to the eyes of the weaker local players (Groth & Corijn, 2005). Participative practices can accordingly turn into empty rituals, where the main decisions have been taken in advance by the major public and private stakeholders, and public consultation and debates are then only functional to consensus-making and persuasive communication, with the eventual effect of vaccinating the weakest part of the community against co-creation and inclusive practices, which come to be regarded as deceitful tricks to point the attention of the community away from the real issues, and from the
real decisions being made (Peck, 2005). Thus, if, in the good cases, regeneration becomes a platform for stable, solid, widely supported urban development (Miles, 2005), in the bad cases, it becomes a social wound when culture became an empty or instrumentalized signifier, employed merely for redevelopment scope (Mathews, 2014).

But how to implement culture-led regeneration, concretely? Bottom-up planning sounds nice and appealing, but the truth is that, in practice, keeping the planning process under control from the top down seems much safer and practical. Having to deal with multiple stakeholders, each of whom puts forward its own views, often conflicting with those of the others, is time consuming and could be regarded as inefficient. In order to try and implement a participatory, inclusive approach, there must be a firm intention, and an equally firm determination to go through until the end despite the momentary difficulties. As noted by Silver, Scott and Kazepov (2010), in order to present the better condition for participation and deliberation from the social dimension – community – within urban contention, the distinction between bottom up and top down need to be updated, as both approaches must be considered as two mostly coincident moments, in which bottom-up initiatives are accompanied by top-down actions part of the same deliberation cycle. This requires a careful ex ante planning, as to the governance model and its public deliberation and monitoring aspects, in order to guarantee accountability and meet community values, expectations and aspirations; and an equally careful ex post implementation which keeps the pressure on the regenerative drive of culture, be it about opening up new cultural facilities, creating new culture-related jobs or fostering new culture-driven forms of sociality, as well as about creating new contaminations and opportunities outside the cultural sphere (Degen & Garcia, 2012).

In this direction, little attention has been given so far, at both theoretical and policy levels, to the role of cultural regeneration processes on the production and accumulation of intangible assets, such as the specific forms of human and social capital mentioned above, in making the process socially sustainable and in supporting community recognition and adoption (Sharp, Pollock, & Paddison, 2005). It is also important to stress that the role of culture within urban regeneration goes much beyond the aspects of ethnicity, traditions or social norms that social sciences usually identify with the term, giving to it a socio-anthropological interpretation (e.g. Guiso, Sapienza, & Zingales 2006). The production of cultural contents, and the community participation to such processes, is an essential component of culture-led regeneration because it is the plasticity of meanings and of ideas that has a transformational effect, rather than the representation of a frozen up sociocultural landscape, however proper, rich and deeply rooted. In a sense, failed culture-led urban regeneration projects, when not instrumentally motivated, can be traced back to the insufficient generation of such assets so as to fully ignite the self-catalytic process (Plaza & Haarich, 2015). As a consequence of this myopic perspective, impact assessment of culture-led urban regeneration has mostly concentrated upon the material/tangible components (Hemphill, Berry, & McGreal, 2004) rather than upon changes in attitudes and habits, or upon evolutions in the local relational networks that can be traced back to some extent to the cultural impulses from the project. Our comparative analysis of three recent urban regeneration projects where culture has played a prominent role aims at filling this gap and to inspire further, more systematic research on this topic.
3. Three cases of (culture-led?) urban regeneration: Montreal, Sydney and Milan

We carried out a comparative analysis of three case studies of urban regeneration projects in which culture has been advocated as a key strategic factor in relatively comparable situations for socio-economic status at the urban level: Montreal (Canada) and the Saint Michel District; Sydney (Australia) and the Auburn District; and Milan (Italy) and the Bicocca District.

The three cases are similar in their localization on the metropolitan margins, and for the de-industrialization process they went through. The regenerative planning process for all of them was initially conceived in the 1980s, and then started and completed in the 1990s–2000s, with a focus on cultural-related projects and initiatives as generators of environmental quality, improved living conditions and economic opportunities for residents. Furthermore, all three cases faced serious brownfield reclamation challenges as a consequence of the land contamination and environmental damage provoked by the areas’ past history of heavy industrialization, with the related, almost inevitable economic and social deprivation and fragmentation issues accompanying the later de-industrialization phase. These critical conditions were clearly identified and spelled out in all three cases at the beginning of the planning phase, and targeted as main issues to be tackled. The intense industrial activity that characterized the recent past of the areas, however, was not only a source of pollution and socio-economic degradation, but, for all three of them, also an important, recognizable component of their identity and urban landscape, and as such, an industrial heritage asset to preserve and to maintain throughout the regeneration process. Finally, the three cases present ample similarities in the socio-demographic stratification of the resident population at the beginning of the planning process.

The three cases are also different in many respects, for example, the social and cultural context of cities like Montreal and Sydney, with their vast urban sprawl, their social fragmentation and ethnic diversity as compared to Milan, a compact European city with a quite homogeneous social stratification. Overall, the three cases provide us with an interesting sample in relation to the menu of strategic alternatives presented in Table 1 above and main actor involved in the regeneration scheme.

In the Saint Michel – Montreal case, the strategic actor involved in the regeneration process was Cirque Du Soleil which in 1997 decided to move into the area establishing its new international headquarters for 1500 employees and the realization of the TOHU and the ‘Cité du Cirque’, setting the course for the transformation of the neighbourhood in collaboration with the Montreal Council and local social associations/stakeholders. Established in 2001, TOHU was given a twofold objective, to regenerate the area and to become the major circus pole in North America. Since then, TOHU has engaged more than 100,000 people every year, thanks to activities that can be subdivided into four main areas:

- **Circus actions**: producing commercial circus shows and promoting the circus sociocultural milieu;
- **Cultural actions**: performances and exhibitions aimed at promoting an increasing level of social engagement among Saint Michel communities and groups through cultural activities;
• **Environmental actions:** TOHU has received a mandate by the municipal government to manage all local environment-related activities, transforming itself into the ideal official gateway to the environmental complex (CESM);

• **Social actions:** giving economic and social impulse to the Saint Michel district, working with NGOs to develop a new social economy sector.

The CdS and TOHU attract creators, artists and, more generally, circus and performing art professionals, and at present, the various organizations settled employ about 2000 people. Since specialized artistic human capital and know-how are needed to create innovation in the field, which is essential in the circus business even on a year-to-year basis, this has contributed to the dynamism of the area. Today, Saint Michel is, at the global scale, one of the largest districts for the training, production and promotion of circus arts.

In the Auburn – Sydney case, the event prompting the regeneration process was the 2000 Olympics, hosted in the Homebush Bay area of Auburn district. The event aimed to transform the site into the Olympic Park by the year 2000 given the creation of new sport, leisure and cultural venues, as well as a new suburb (the Olympic village) called Newington. After the 2000 Olympics, the Sydney Olympic Park Authority (SOPA), in accord with the NSW Government, sought to extend the Park’s role as a leisure and cultural centre, by creating new cultural facilities and activities such as museums, cultural festivals, education complexes and a centre for creative industries, aiming to improve access to cultural opportunities for residents from across Sydney. The involvement of local residents in the Park’s development process changed quite significantly before and after the Games. During the early years (1993–2000), the promotion of the site’s expanding set of cultural assets and resources, as a tool to improve local conditions, was not a priority. It was only after the Games that Auburn Council, which is in charge for both Auburn and Newington, together with SOPA, shifted the focus towards seeking a deeper involvement in the Park development and activities of the (old) Auburn community and (new) Newington community (previous Olympic Village).

Finally, in the Bicocca – Milan case, a private company, Pirelli, became the main player in order to renovate the site. The plan worked out between the company and the Municipality of Milan, the Province of Milan and the Region of Lombardy, was aiming to deliver an innovative functional mix, not only to transform the built environment but also to take specific action in the economic, social and environmental fields, and thus set out some developmental guidelines, including the definition of new economic opportunities relating to services (IT, educational/cultural activities) and a scientific thread. A crucial aspect of the district’s transformation dynamics has been its characterization in terms of a major university campus, the city’s second public university, residential infrastructure and cultural pole. In 2000, the new ‘Arcimboldi Theatre’, an innovative cultural facility with 2500 seats, was completed. Furthermore, in 2004, a huge industrial archaeology site dedicated to contemporary visual art, ‘Hangar Bicocca’, opened, and both were financially supported and managed by the private developer (Pirelli).

The redevelopment has revolutionized the economic and socio-demographic profile of the site, but overlapped the existing population. Several large companies operating in the ‘new economy’ sectors (services, technologies, R&D) have settled in the area, and over 4000 new inhabitants have arrived in the new residential facilities, whereas during the day, the university and the area’s various economic activities attract more than 60,000
people (of which 26,000 are students, academics or university employees). In addition, in the area or in its immediate vicinities, a multitude of residential services such as cinemas, bars, shops and fitness clubs have opened.

4. Methodology

Although the three cases show similarities in terms of area profiles and features of the transformation process, they need not agree as to the underlying approaches to urban regeneration as depicted in Section 3, and in particular to the role of culture in the process. The leading organizations have different nature (in Montreal, public–private collaboration; in Sydney, public institutions; and in Milan, private companies), and there are also significant differences in the participatory approach, and likewise for the actual level of integration of the cultural element in the overall strategy. To evaluate this latter point, we have carried out a quantitative analysis, based upon data collected from a survey on a sample of the local population in each area in 2008. The comparison between collected data, and the analysis of the planning approaches, enables us to appreciate how in the three cases the cultural component (creation of new cultural facilities, cultural programmes and activities) has contributed to the regeneration process in several spheres: physical, economic, social and cultural. Table 2 presents the structure of the sample.

The questionnaire employed has been divided into three areas related to:

(a) individual awareness of the cultural initiatives, as well as actual participation and perception/judgement;
(b) perceptions of the outcomes of the regeneration process, in terms of economic opportunities, social enhancement, cultural atmosphere and quality of the environment;
(c) opportunities (economic and social) created specifically as a consequence of investment in cultural facilities, thanks to the presence of a lively, animated cultural environment.

The reference time frame for evaluation was the comparison of situations before and after the completion of the project, based on a Likert scale (with three possible responses). Given the exploratory aim of the project, the samples have been treated descriptively, without carrying out statistical analyses.

Table 2. Sample profile.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic data from survey respondents</th>
<th>Saint Michel</th>
<th>Auburn (old area)</th>
<th>Newington (new area)</th>
<th>Bicocca (old area)</th>
<th>Bicocca (new area)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total survey respondents</td>
<td>201</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Males</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Females</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age range</td>
<td>18–n</td>
<td>18–n</td>
<td>18–n</td>
<td>18–n</td>
<td>18–n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Unemployed</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>No data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Working</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>No data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of residential population that were born overseas</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>No data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of respondents holding education qualifications</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range of time that respondents have lived in the suburb</td>
<td>From 1997 or before</td>
<td>From 1997 or before</td>
<td>From 2001</td>
<td>From 1997 or before</td>
<td>From 2000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5. Evaluation and discussion

We note that no standardized performance indicators and quantitative benchmarks currently exist for investigating the impact of cultural regeneration processes on human and social capital. Though indicators for impact at tangible levels are used in practice (see Hemphill et al., 2004), as it has been claimed, for cultural regeneration projects, a ‘pick and mix’ approach is required, as there is no universally applicable set of indicators (Office of Deputy Prime Minister, 2003, p. 164).

Given the exploratory aim of this study, we decided to refer to a simple and small set of indicators such as:

- For social capital: civic participation and the density of horizontal relational networks (see e.g. Jeannotte, 2003);
- For human capital: access to the local menu of educational, recreational and cultural activities (assuming that they enable participants to acquire new skills and competences; see e.g. Jaeger, 2011).

The selected elements refer to specific aspects of human and social capital, and can be taken as indicators of the extent of the impact of the projects on the respective intangible assets. We are not interested in treating them as two different dimensions but, in the attempt to measure the incidence and impact of culturally powered urban regeneration processes, we consider them as a single, composite, intangible asset. Consequently, we consider the following two aspects:

(A) The extent to which local residents are aware of, and actually participate in, local cultural and social events promoted in the context of the regeneration process;
(B) The extent to which local residents perceive actual changes in various dimensions of local life in relation to the regeneration process.

These two elements can be taken as proxies of the transformational impact of the urban regeneration process, and in particular of its cultural component, in terms of actual participation and commitment of the local community. Specifically, levels of participation measure to what extent the local community is involved in, and takes advantage of, new cultural opportunities, and therefore of culturally mediated sociability (on the social capital side) and skills (on the human capital side). Perception rates measure local community awareness and evaluation of the differential impact of the cultural component of urban regeneration in terms of neighbourhood liveability, for example, social relationships, education and employment opportunities, providing us with a synthetic picture of the social ‘momentum’ of the area. In the positive case, good levels of perception and participation are likely to be reinforced through social influence mechanisms, feeding a virtuous, positive feedback social dynamics, and establishing the area as an attractive, liveable place. In the negative case, the social sustainability of the urban transformation project is endangered by the local communities’ negative feelings and attitudes, calling for countervailing policy interventions.

The results concerning perception and participation rates have been measured once the regeneration process has taken place, and the percentage of respondents for each item
refers to those who have perceived actual changes in the corresponding dimensions. This allows us to track the perception of the changes brought about (or not) by the regeneration project. The main results of the surveys are reported in Tables 3–5.

5.1. (A) The extent to which local residents are aware of, and actually participate in, local cultural and social events

High levels of perception are found in particular in the Saint Michel and Bicocca districts, and less so in Auburn. Cultural activity seems to be more visible and attractive than social activities. In Saint Michel, we found the highest levels of participation both in cultural and in social activities, although, in terms of perception, Bicocca is clearly superior, while at the same time presenting the lowest levels of actual participation in social activity and the lowest level of participation in cultural activity in the oldest part of the district. In Saint Michel, those who are actually informed about the activities also participate, whereas in the case of Bicocca, information is well widespread but corresponding participation is low. The Auburn case is intermediate between the two. In the Saint Michel case, therefore, we have a clear evidence of cultural and social activities which are well ingrained into community life, whereas in the Bicocca case, there is a significant gap: although the community is aware of the opportunities, it fails to participate.

The Saint Michel results reflect the fact that the regeneration project has successfully harnessed a collaborative effort from most local associations and institutions, leading to the creation of an innovative ‘culture hub’ (TOHU) through which culturally and socially oriented initiatives have been effectively delivered. The Auburn case reflects the fact that, although the Olympics represented a great opportunity to launch a new development

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**Table 3. Perceptions and increased participation in cultural activities after the project.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Saint Michel</th>
<th>Auburn (old area)</th>
<th>Newington (new area)</th>
<th>Bicocca (old area)</th>
<th>Bicocca (new area)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cultural events perception</td>
<td>52.2%</td>
<td>36.1%</td>
<td>38.2%</td>
<td>62.2%</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural events participation</td>
<td>50.7%</td>
<td>34.3%</td>
<td>46.4%</td>
<td>26.5%</td>
<td>42.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 4. Perceptions and increased participation in community activities after the project.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Saint Michel</th>
<th>Auburn (old area)</th>
<th>Newington (new area)</th>
<th>Bicocca (old area)</th>
<th>Bicocca (new area)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community activity perception</td>
<td>38.9%</td>
<td>33.9%</td>
<td>32.7%</td>
<td>45.5%</td>
<td>49.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community activity participation</td>
<td>37.3%</td>
<td>20.4%</td>
<td>10.7%</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 5. Perception of change in educational, economic and social fields (increased opportunities for).**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Saint Michel</th>
<th>Auburn (old area)</th>
<th>Newington (new area)</th>
<th>Bicocca (old area)</th>
<th>Bicocca (new area)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Educational activity</td>
<td>31.8%</td>
<td>20.2%</td>
<td>37.4%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>40.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local employment opportunities</td>
<td>29.6%</td>
<td>10.9%</td>
<td>37.8%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>52.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of the environment</td>
<td>28.9%</td>
<td>29.1%</td>
<td>44.9%</td>
<td>42.9%</td>
<td>40.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Places for social interaction</td>
<td>40.2%</td>
<td>35.1%</td>
<td>39.6%</td>
<td>16.1%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acquaintance with other people</td>
<td>35.9%</td>
<td>10.9%</td>
<td>30.4%</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acquaintance with other communities</td>
<td>39.9%</td>
<td>10.2%</td>
<td>10.7%</td>
<td>6.6%</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
cycle, the community was involved in the project only at a relatively late stage. A lack of strategic vision from SOPA and Auburn Council, as well as poor coordination in capability building and community empowerment actions in the context of the regeneration process are clearly recognizable. It was only in 2005, five years after the Olympics, that SOPA actually tabled a cultural and social plan. Data show greater participation in cultural events in the new community compared to the old one. This is due to two elements: spatial proximity to the Olympic precinct, and the results of mobilizing action carried out by a private company involved in community participation actions, hired by the developer. The latter promoted participation in cultural events as the main instrument for creating a sense of place and local identity in the new community that settled in the Olympic Village (Newton) after the Games. Data from the survey show that compared to the Montreal case, rates of participation in cultural events and social/voluntary work are considerably lower.

The Bicocca case clearly reflects a strategic failure to motivate a large share of the local residents to think of cultural participation not as a mere entertainment activity but as an essential component of social inclusion and community building. A large proportion of the community is aware of what is going on, but mostly remains inactive and shuns participation – whose level is, however, significantly higher in the area where cultural initiative is concentrated. Although the social fabric in the Bicocca district is still weak and fragmented, some differential impact of culture as a potential driver of change, and probably one among the most important, is visible enough. The relatively small impact of cultural initiative, despite a massive targeted communication by the developer, reveals a limited understanding of the role of culture in the whole economy of the renewal process. The developer, like in the Auburn case, created a specific organization – Bicocca-è – in order to promote cultural initiative and mobilize residents. But the shortcoming has been that, according to sample respondents, instead of rooting into community practice, the Bicocca-è programme has been developed and communicated as a form of ‘image promotion’ for the district: an outcome that is at odds with the stated intention of the developers, but that nevertheless calls for a serious reconsideration of the entire approach to cultural regeneration implemented here.

5.2. (B) The extent to which local residents perceive actual changes in various spheres of local life

Table 5 highlights perceived changes in several dimensions of the urban environment, tracking the multi-dimensional influence of the urban regeneration process, in particular its culture-driven component, in the educational, employment, environmental and social spheres.

Data clearly show that the Saint Michel case is the most successful project. There is a clear perception that the regeneration process is providing opportunities in the social sphere, in terms of both community cohesion and intercultural dialogue. Participation in cultural events and social activities is conducive to the creation of new social relations between individuals and groups. The effects of community involvement in social and cultural experiences are then clearly recognizable, and are likely to leave a permanent legacy in terms of social and possibly human capital.

The Sydney Olympic Park project case in the Auburn area shows some critical elements. The reclamation and redevelopment strategy adopted has produced
considerable results on the economic and environmental sides, though more in the Olympic precinct (the Newington area) than in the old area. However, in the older suburb (Auburn), little or no attention has been given to the local community’s involvement in the project. In Newington, there is a significant impact on the creation of new social relationships, which is considerably lower in Auburn. In the case of Newington, the activity carried out by the community development company, achieved significant results. In a suburb of new settlement, whose resident population is entirely made of people who moved there after the Olympics, not only from Sydney metropolitan area but from the rest of the country as well and perhaps from abroad, more than the 30% of the interviewees declared increased acquaintance with other people living in the area, vis-à-vis a 10.9% figure for the Auburn area.

The case study of Milan somewhat shows the opposite of what we observed in Saint Michel. In Milan, the developer has merely sought to optimize its return on invested economic resources. Investment in cultural facilities and activities was aimed at creating an appealing image for the area, while substantially ignoring implications in terms of social cohesion or capability building. The big relevance of educational activities is due to the opening of a large new university campus, but interaction with the community of residents is very weak and not a primary concern. Through the interviews and survey, it clearly emerges how residents regard local cultural facilities as ‘commodities’ for entertainment, and likewise for activities. Functional integration has low priority and the economic driver overarches all other ones. Cultural assets are a way to raise real estate values and attractiveness for potential residents, as well as a bonus to improve the feel of the urban environment, pointing towards a massive gentrification effect. The social governance and community empowerment dimension is almost non-existent and entirely top-down, and stakeholder participation issues are eschewed. Local identity-building strategies are pursued through commodification rather than through social exchange. Although the physical component of the regeneration process is successful and its economic impulse is appreciated, the intangible dimension is wanting and raises concerns in terms of social sustainability in the long term.

6. Results: from the instrumental to the functional value of culture in urban regeneration processes

The three case studies can be classified in terms of a reverse order of instrumentality as to the role of culture in the urban regeneration process. In the Bicocca case, the role of culture is almost explicitly instrumental. Regeneration is driven by a private developer, which is mainly focused upon maximizing returns, and thinks of culture as a benefit to improve the area’s appeal on potential residents and investors. It would probably be more correct to describe the whole operation as urban redevelopment, in which culture plays an analogous role than in the pioneering projects carried out in England during the 1980s (see Pratt, 2010). The planner’s lack of awareness of the importance of cultural resources in relation to the urban transformation process is recognizable, particularly as regards the intangible stock of cultural resources. The idea of culture as an ‘accessory’ to the project is also confirmed by the marginality of culture in the overall strategic approach, and by lack of concern for social sustainability issues. The local community viewpoint is substantially disregarded, as for the participatory approach to the planning
process and to the corresponding initiatives – that is, one of the main elements found in the literature review as markers of an effective culture-led regeneration process. The social governance is a classical top-down one, where the process affects local stakeholders rather than involving them as co-designers, both *ex ante* and *ex post*. This instrumental approach seems to generate very little local pride and identification in residents, which, as shown by the data, tend to live in their own social bubble rather than contributing to community life. The pre-existing community is gradually expelled, as the gentrification process pervades the whole area without specific concern both from the developer and from the public administration. There is therefore little surprise that the impact of cultural interventions in terms of social capital is neglected, and paradoxically, the fact that the new university campus is a big part of the regeneration process basically saturates all attention towards production of human capital, and pays little attention, if any, to the social integration between the students community and the residents. To sum up, in terms of the taxonomy of Table 1, the Bicocca case may be seen as a clear example of the culture and regeneration approach.

The Sydney case is ambiguous, in view of the very different results of the regeneration process in the two areas of reference. We are again faced here with a top-down governance process, but the actual impacts in the old area (Auburn) vs. the new one (Newington) diverge substantially. The strategy aimed at the regeneration of the site via a cultural driver (the Olympics) was primarily oriented to reach outside the area and within the precinct, but not particularly upon the neighbourhood itself (Auburn), or upon the municipalities surrounding the site. The area has seen an impressive growth in the stock of tangible cultural capital, sports facilities but also natural ones and infrastructure focused on knowledge-based activities (IT, industrial parks). However, the stocks of intangible cultural capital remain very low. It is true that, thanks to the Olympics, the project has improved the area’s environmental (green an built environment) sustainability, but the social dimension has been taken seriously into account only in the period after the Games, and the project itself did not make the necessary steps to ensure a possible legacy in this specific realm. No policy was adopted to deeply ingrain new forms of culture-related sociability and social learning activities, or even more generally to strengthen social cohesion of the community, also considering that in the Newington area such community was just entirely made of new incomers. Furthermore, culture did not play a major role in the definition of the social governance framework. The survey reveals that the district is not building a real sense of belonging and identity in residents, and is not developing advanced sociability functions in its public spaces – with the partial exception of the Newington area, where this is mainly due to spatial proximity to the Olympic area and to the social animation activity developed by the private company hired by the Olympic village builder. In this case, it would then be fair to classify the project as cultural regeneration in the terminology of Table 1, where culture works as one of the possible drivers of the regeneration process, but mainly with a short-term impact perspective, and an almost exclusive focus on the regeneration process itself.

Finally, the Montreal example clearly reflects the culture-led regeneration paradigm as of Table 1, with a clear functional and developmental role for culture and legible impacts at many levels. Here, we find a mix between top-down and bottom-up governance processes, a participatory process as from the model depicted by Silver et al. (2010). It is recognizable a truly participatory approach and an early and substantial involvement of local
stakeholders, as noted from interviews to key local stakeholders, and with a full range of economic, social and cultural impacts – to the point that a cultural industry itself (circus and performing arts, in particular) becomes a main local economic driver. The project also addresses the high level of cultural diversity represented by many communities of immigrants from a variety of foreign countries, and makes of intercultural dialogue a major element in the creation of bridging social capital. Community empowerment in terms of the creation of both social and human capital is a central feature of the project, as also described in the TOHU mission statements, and social cohesion is also achieved by offering opportunities for learning and acquisition of new skills in circus and performing art professions to people from cultural minorities and/or from socially marginalized groups.

In the Saint Michel case, culture is then conceived as a start-up and structural element in the regeneration process, and for this reason, it plays a part in all sorts of spheres. The area has gained a higher level of both tangible and intangible cultural capital stock, which has been directed at the improvement in the social, economic and environmental dimensions. In addition, there is evidence that such a new stock of capital is also oriented to a proactive governance for the entire local system in a long-term perspective, as it encourages residents and communities to take an active part in the strategic deliberation about the future of the area. The project is reorienting the perception of the population quite substantially, and cultural activities contribute to shape up a true sense of belonging and local identity, thus fostering even stronger involvement. These results are coherent with the policy premises and objectives, and to a degree even go beyond them. It would have been difficult, for example, to imagine in advance to what extent the cultural specialization of the area would contribute to a very powerful place branding. The Cirque Du Soleil, on the one hand, and TOHU, on the other, together with the National Circus School and the other facilities related to the circus milieu, have been adopted as flagships for a new concept and image of Saint Michel, and have greatly contributed to promote Saint Michel as a potential exciting place to live and work, avoiding at the same time massive gentrification and maintaining on the place many of the original residents.

7. Conclusion

The measurement of the impact of culture-led urban regeneration processes has been mostly oriented on tangible aspects, for example, real estate value, environmental indicator levels and tourism flows. Quite rare are, at the moment, the quantitative measurements concerning intangible forms of capital such as social and human ones – a remarkable asymmetry given the increasingly recognized mediation role played in culture-led development by physical facilities, cultural institutions, cultural activities and educational and community platforms. But if cultural players and their initiatives get enough credit to be recognized as engines of urban development, they can produce valuable assets, also in key areas as health and well-being (see e.g. Grossi, Tavano Blessi, Sacco, & Buscema, 2011), which in turn boost the drive of urban regeneration.

Our comparative analysis of three major cases of urban regeneration processes, although not based on statistical representative samples, given the exploratory nature of the study, is helpful in drawing some preliminary conclusions.
Culture may play a distinctive role where a well-balanced mix of ‘hardware’ (facilities) and ‘software’ (cultural initiatives and events) components are called for, this in the context of a governance model where top-down and bottom-up components coexist. Furthermore, culture may operate for the development of local areas where economic goals do not overcome cultural development ones, also in terms of production of local skill, sociability and identity assets. Moreover, our analysis confirms that successful regeneration should put proper emphasis on the intensity of social participation, cohesion and intercultural dialogue, as well as on inclusive skills and capabilities building at the community level.

We see from the theoretical analysis and the evaluation of the case studies that cultural participation may generate a variety of valuable assets. If the goals of an urban regeneration project contemplate human and social development targets as strategic milestones, there is the possibility to work with culture in effective, innovative ways, but this calls for a real understanding of cultural dynamics and of its strategic complementarities with other levels of human activity, and by no means can be taken for granted by mechanically applying predetermined schemes from an entirely top-down perspective.

Our findings suggest that culture will be effective in regeneration processes if there is a good balance between pursuit of short-term outcomes and a vision of functional integration of all kinds of dimensions in a general, long-term urban sustainability framework. To achieve this, some room for actual experimentation is needed; every urban context will have different local assets and talents whose potential is as yet untapped, and which have to be found and helped to grow organically. The proof is in the long-term outcomes, however brilliant or promising the start. Therefore, the quest for a deeply structural and solidly rooted approach to culturally empowered urban transformation is going to be long and complicated. The scientific and policy community needs further extensive theoretical and empirical research in this field, with a sharp focus on testing specific methodologies and measurement tools to favour a cumulative learning process with a strong evidence base. We hope that this piece of research may provide a small step in such direction.

Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

References


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