

“Trust the People”

Civic Engagement and Collaborative Imagination in Bologna, Italy

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Piazza dei Colori, a sleepy, tree-lined pedestrian zone at the center of a public housing complex in suburban Bologna, might seem like an unlikely epicenter for a major shakeup of civic engagement practices. For city leaders in the Comune di Bologna (Bologna’s city government), however, the piazza was the birthplace of an urban legend: a bench that launched a thousand collaborations. In 2011, a small group of women from the neighborhood had approached civil servants in the comune with a simple request: “May we paint the bench?”¹ Their effort to accomplish this minor feat of urban revitalization led them on a journey seemingly scripted by absurdist. They approached department after department, with officials in each directing them to another. When a letter describing their experience reached Donato Di Memmo in the department of neighborhood relations, however, the seasoned civil servant decided, “This stops here.”² Rather than refer them to yet another department, Di Memmo ran their question directly up the chain of command.

The women’s request came to city government at a time when public trust in institutions was collapsing. Italy was careening towards its third major recession in six years. By 2014, voter participation in politically progressive Emilia-Romagna had dropped precipitously, falling more than 40 percent over one election cycle.³ Mayor Virginio Merola and Deputy Mayor for Economic Development and Tourism Matteo Lepore felt that a new approach was needed to counteract the apparent disillusionment and disengagement of residents.⁴ “Democracy for us is a very long tradition,” Lepore explained. “When you don’t know where to go, you have to return to the fundamentals. If the people do not trust the public administration, the administration can trust the people.”⁵

Bologna Numero Uno

Bologna took great pride in its “firsts”: the first university in the western world; the first city to abolish slavery; the first public cemetery in Europe; and one of the first municipalities to use the web for civic purposes.⁶

The capital of Italy’s Emilia-Romagna region, Bologna had been a center of culture, commerce, and industry in Europe since the Middle Ages. Medieval walls still stood around the city center, and the 800-year-old Santuario della Beata Vergine di San Luca on Monte della Guardia was a beloved landmark. The city’s ancient porticoes and cultural traditions both reflected and stood in contrast with its status as a transportation hub with an ever-changing population. Bologna was home to large numbers of students and immigrants, making it one of the most ethnically diverse cities in Italy. About a quarter of its population (approaching 400,000 in the city proper) turned over within any ten-year

period.⁷ Though tensions between longtime residents and newcomers sometimes arose, city leaders took pride in the fact that many transplants chose to stay in Bologna as “citizens by choice.”⁸

The Emilia-Romagna region was home to the headquarters of luxury brands like Miu Miu, Maserati, and Lamborghini, but it was also the historical stronghold of Italian communism. This potent mix of wealth, industry, and collectivist spirit had produced a city with a very active third sector, powerful labor unions, and a strong tradition of cooperative enterprise. Lepore, before joining city government, had worked for Legacoop, a national federation of coops established in 1886.

Creating an Office of Active Citizenship

Inspired in part by the legend of the bench, Bologna added another first to its legacy in 2014: the “Bologna Regulation on Public Collaboration for Urban Commons.” (See Appendix 1 for a summary.) The law found its rationale in Article 118 of the 1947 Italian Constitution: “The State, regions, metropolitan cities, provinces, and municipalities shall promote the autonomous initiatives of citizens. . . relating to activities of general interest, on the basis of the principle of subsidiarity.”⁹ This principle, a core tenet of Catholic social teaching, holds that the people closest to a problem are best equipped to solve it. Bologna’s new law, the culmination of over a year of conversation and experimentation with residents and within city government, aimed to put this principle into practice. It established a mechanism by which individuals or groups could pass through bureaucratic hoops with relative ease and become active co-creators of public spaces and services. The law gave the city broad authorization to engage with citizens and allowed any resident, at any time, to initiate an agreement (or “collaboration pact”) with city government to utilize city resources for a project that offered some kind of benefit to the public. The collaboration pacts often permitted use of physical spaces, but in some cases the city would provide small sums of money, client referrals, or marketing support.

To support this new law, the city created an Office of Active Citizenship with Di Memmo at the helm to serve as a one-stop shop for helping residents understand and navigate legal, bureaucratic, and operational details. The city budgeted just 150,000 euros a year to support the pacts, but the regulation also made hundreds of city-owned properties (many of them in need of rehabilitation) freely available to anyone who could imagine a public-spirited use for them. For DiMemmo, operationalizing the Office of Active Citizenship involved many conversations over coffee, dinner, or drinks with city officials skeptical of a new process that promised to bring residents’ whims into their day-to-day work. Why engage residents in the work of city hall? Who is responsible for what? Where will this end? But collaboration pacts and the Office of Active Citizenship were only one part of a broader strategy to engage Bologna residents in improving the quality of city life.

The Incredibol! Competition

In some ways, collaboration pacts built on an initiative launched by the city’s culture and creativity division in 2010. The Incredibol! competition, like the pacts, invited residents and associations with public-spirited ideas to make better use of city-owned properties and resources. Startups in arts and culture could enter the contest to win cash, technical support, and/or leases on city-owned properties. Giorgia Boldrini, director of culture and creativity, explained, “We have the gift of a very creative class of young people coming to study here in arts and culture. The reason why we started the Incredibol! project was exactly to help people coming out of the university or the conservatory make a living here

in the arts. We suffer from brain drain. We have people coming to study film in Bologna, but then they move to Rome or Los Angeles. Or they want to be designers, so they move to Milan or to New York.”¹⁰ Incredibol! was an enticement to artists and cultural entrepreneurs to stay and help the city’s creative economy thrive.

Because the comune owned buildings all over the city, these startups had a chance to grow and flourish in neighborhoods with relatively few cultural resources. For example, in 2014, an organization called Orchestre Senzaspine (meaning “without thorn” or “unplugged”) applied through Incredibol! to lease an underused produce market near the train station in a neighborhood historically populated by families migrating from southern Italy. Orchestre Senzaspine served as a professional home for young musicians exiting the conservatory who were often either excluded from or reluctant to join the elite world of symphony orchestras. According to Luca Cantelli, project manager for the orchestra, the market brought musicians and performances to a neighborhood where there was little access to (and little apparent demand for) classical music.¹¹ To draw in the locals, the orchestra created interactive and multimedia performances and established a music school offering lessons on a sliding pay scale for children and adults in the community. The old San Donato market was transformed into the Mercato Sonato.

Collaboration Pacts

While applicants for Incredibol! entered a competition and were awarded prizes based on the judgments of a small panel of experts, collaboration pacts allowed residents to negotiate directly with city government to secure resources for their projects. The most fruitful projects embodied the same innovative spirit and creativity seen in Incredibol! winners while also augmenting and improving social services and advancing sustainable practices.

A resident-led initiative, Cucine Popolari, utilized a collaboration pact to partner with grocery stores, food banks, restaurants, and schools to serve free lunches to community members in need and reduce food waste. Reuse with Love, an association of roughly one hundred women aiming for a charitable circular economy, held a popular annual pop-up market in the city to raise funds for local charities through sales of gently used clothing and upcycled accessories.ⁱ A collaboration pact allowed Reuse with Love to establish a permanent location and outlet for their inventory of donations. The city provided rent-free space in a public housing complex and referred clients to their boutique to “shop” for free clothing and accessories. Having an attractive, well-organized space with clean, private dressing rooms to try on quality-inspected clothing and make selections to their taste allowed struggling people to fulfill their needs in a way that affirmed their self-worth and autonomy. Reuse with Love Vice President Leopolda Sassoli de’ Bianchi explained that instead of passively receiving bags of ill-fitting clothing, “a very humiliating experience—especially for battered women and children, refugees, people coming from difficult familial situations—in our solidarity shop, they were treated with love, care, and dignity.”¹²

A spirit of inclusion that many residents considered unique to Bologna animated many collaboration pacts. For example, locked away within courtyards throughout the old city were hidden treasures from

ⁱ Each year, Reuse with Love members chose a different local nonprofit to receive the total revenue received through the pop-up market, which exceeded one million euros in its sixteenth edition.

the Renaissance era and earlier, including sculptures and fountains not generally open for public viewing. When the city designated a day to open the courtyards to the public, the residents of the low-income housing complex where Reuse with Love was located collaborated with the organization to beautify their own courtyard and welcomed the public just as the city’s palaces did. Similarly, Piazza Grande, a group run by and serving people experiencing homelessness in the city, partnered with a licensed Bologna tour guide to offer tours of “underground Bologna.” Initially, the only tourists were the Piazza Grande clients themselves, but after a news story ran, other residents clamored to join the tours. Men who slept on the streets and benches of underground Bologna became co-leaders of the tours, sharing their stories and collecting tips for Piazza Grande.

Between October 2016 and August 2021, the city logged roughly 750 proposed collaboration pacts from residents and associations. The majority of these were small in scope and scale and required little from the city beyond authorization and access to public spaces, like an initiative that put together free “celebration kits” for parents hosting children’s birthday parties in public parks. The projects ran on the passion, initiative, and investments of citizens and volunteer associations. Because the city generally offered little ongoing support, more ambitious projects without additional help from well-resourced entities outside city government sometimes stalled out. Moreover, for Di Memmo and his staff in the Office of Active Citizenship, the pace of approvals and coordination within the city bureaucracy could be frustrating. Despite their best efforts, people full of energy and initiative still ran into bottlenecks, failures of empathy, and municipal machinery that could not always accommodate time-sensitive plans and projects. But the sheer volume and variety of proposals suggested that the pacts and the Office of Active Citizenship had become established features of city government. “The pacts are very apolitical,” said a journalist for an arts and culture newspaper in the city. “The people that benefit come from all across the political spectrum and all parts of society, regardless of class.”¹³

Access and Proximity: Establishing District Labs

Residents could submit proposals for collaboration pacts through the city’s Iperbole (Internet PER BOlogna) portal, which combined the usual features of a municipal website with a civic network designed to facilitate interaction and participation.¹⁴ But even as city leaders worked to keep the platform up to date and expand access to free public Wi-Fi, they knew that digital tools alone could not guarantee inclusion.¹⁵ Engaging less tech-savvy residents and those with less time for new initiatives would mean meeting people where they were and making it both fun and meaningful.

In 2016, the mayor added sports and culture to Lepore’s economy and tourism portfolio to explore and take advantage of “natural synergies.” To ensure he would have broad license to engage residents in envisioning and co-creating the “urban commons,” Lepore also took responsibility for developing Bologna’s “civic imagination.” Working with the University of Bologna, he spearheaded an initiative to create a joint Civic Imagination Office within a new Urban Innovation Foundation, established as “a multidisciplinary center for research, development, co-production and communication of urban transformations.”¹⁶

A governance reform the previous year had divided the city into six administrative districts, each with its own council, president, and central office. Seeing how this model might promote accessibility and engagement, the Civic Imagination Office established “labs” in each district with a dedicated employee

to keep a close ear to the ground. These “proximity agents” organized events, coordinated engagement activities, and helped local residents understand the city’s processes and priorities. “We try to meet them in their spaces,” said one agent. “Instead of telling them, ‘Come to us,’ the proximity approach is, ‘We come to you.’”¹⁷ The district labs helped shape ideas and guide residents to the appropriate vehicle, whether a participatory budgeting proposal, a collaboration pact, or an Incrediboll submission. Monthly meetings involved discussion of community needs and strategies and always included free childcare and food for participants. The six agents liaised with other staff and leadership at the Civic Imagination Office on matters of strategy and planning and with their counterparts from the Office of Active Citizenship on logistics and practical support.

Participatory Budgeting

The Civic Imagination Office and the district labs quickly laid the groundwork for Bologna’s first participatory budgeting process, which kicked off in 2017 with listening sessions in every district to gather feedback on local needs and aspirations. Based on what they learned, the lab managers helped residents design project proposals, offering technical know-how, perspectives on the city’s broader goals, and suggestions for refining or recombining proposals. A panel of subject-matter experts from the municipality checked that proposals were complete and met criteria before opening voting. Any city resident over the age of sixteen was eligible to vote on projects through the participatory budgeting process. The city allocated 1 million euros to distribute between the six winning proposals.

In 2017, the total number of voters choosing their preferred participatory budget projects in the neighborhoods where they lived or worked was 14,584. In 2018, there were 16,348 voters. Most of those engaging were Italian adults over the age of twenty-five (women outnumbered men), but residents and lab staff worked together to devise outreach strategies for youth and immigrant communities. In 2019, there were 425 proposals submitted through the district labs and online.

The growing numbers of participants and proposals kept Michele D’Alena, director of the Civic Imagination Office, and Lepore hopeful and motivated. “My favorite project is always the next one,” said D’Alena.¹⁸ A teen immigrant from Pakistan wanted to create a cricket court; an association of residents wanted to use city-owned space to create an exercise facility for the LGBTQ+ community; an environmental group wanted to preserve and restore the urban forest. (See Appendix 2 for a map of projects initiated through the district lab.) Even when things got contentious, as they often did, D’Alena felt grateful for his fellow Bolognese: “We have a lot of conflict, but it’s good conflict. Because people want more every day from the institution. And this is good for our democracy.”¹⁹

“It’s Not Enough”

Still, D’Alena saw room for improvement:

We are trying. We are learning a lot. It is not easy. We have more people in our labs, more people voting with participatory budgeting. But it’s not enough. People don’t trust the government, don’t trust anything. We have to change. We have to listen to the new forms of activism and learn from them. We have to transform the way we engage people. In the last four years, we’ve designed new forms with our proximity approach. We have to work with the people on the ground. We have to take the time and organize policy with them, not for them.

The people know the city very well. They know the parks, the schools, the streets. With them we are organizing co-production of policies, giving the people more power, more resources, more buildings, money. But we have to change. We have to work on Saturday and Sunday, going outside the institutional spaces, exploring new ways to engage. We have to organize a lot of different instruments depending on the people and the place.

2020

On Friday, February 21, 2020, health officials in northern Italy announced the country’s first death from COVID-19. By Monday, there were over 200 confirmed cases. City officials in Bologna watched warily as neighboring towns were placed under quarantine. By March 1, officials ordered schools to close and cancelled all social, sporting, and cultural events. The next week, Bologna’s residents were ordered to stay in their homes indefinitely. For a time, a city always so alive with activity, music, art, and community fell eerily silent.

The pandemic brought almost everything Lepore had worked on as deputy mayor to a screeching halt. For the foreseeable future, there would be no concerts, no night life, no soccer, no festivals, no tourists. Construction on new playgrounds and housing complexes froze in place. The world watched with admiration and compassion as Italy’s musicians stepped onto their balconies and sang to the empty streets; Lepore watched with a heavy heart, knowing that Bologna’s artists had no way to make a living in a city on lockdown. Could years of investment in civic imagination and collaboration answer some questions left in the virus’s wake? Could Bologna find new ways to engage its residents amid extraordinary challenges?

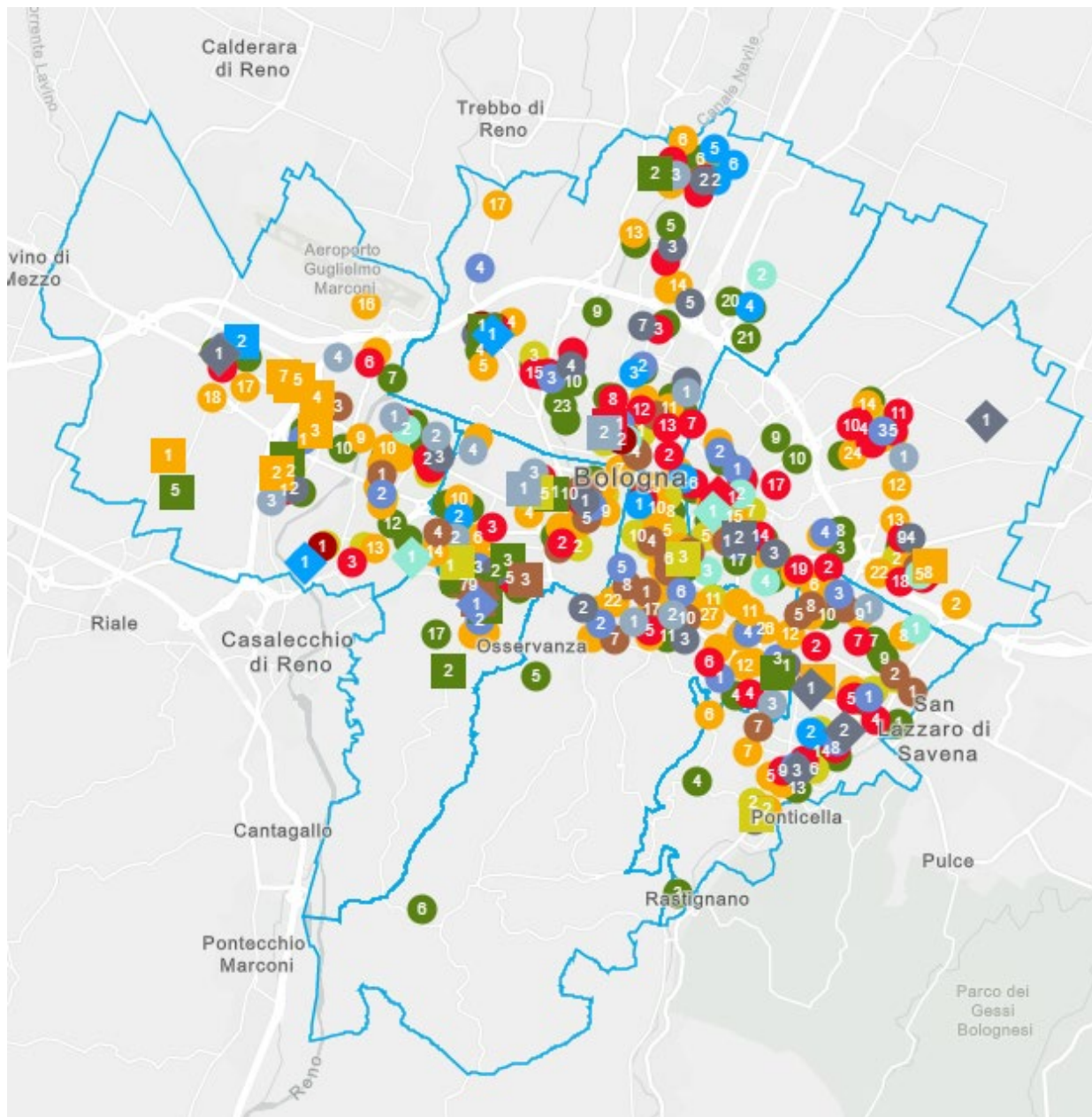
Appendices

Appendix 1 Bologna’s General Provisions from “Regulation on Collaboration Between Citizens and the City for the Care and Regeneration of Urban Commons”²⁰ (edited by case authors)

These provisions were established to govern “the forms of collaboration among citizens and the City of Bologna for the care and regeneration of urban commons.” The law, grounded in principles including mutual trust, transparency, responsibility, inclusiveness, sustainability, proportionality, and informality, provided the basis for:

- 1) Collaboration agreements stipulating the goals, duration, commitments, reporting requirements, and responsibilities of the parties as well as grounds for termination of a project or agreement.
- 2) Interventions by citizens to help maintain, manage, or rehabilitate public spaces and buildings, provided their activities improved the livability and quality of the spaces and/or ensured their collective use.
- 3) City-led action to promote social innovations and involve residents in the production of “collaborative services” by “encouraging the creation of cooperatives, social enterprises, and socially-oriented start-ups and the development of economic, cultural, and social activities and projects.”
- 4) Promotion of urban creativity by reserving city-owned spaces and buildings on a permanent or temporary basis for activities promoting artists and creative outlets for community members and youth.
- 5) Digital innovation to engage citizens in the development of the civic network and ensure a “digital commons” for sharing data and enabling individuals to contribute their skills and ideas to “the collaborative environment” and the participatory features of the civic network (Iperbole).

Appendix 2 Map of Projects Initiated through District Labs, 2017-2020



Source: <https://www.arcgis.com/apps/MapJournal/index.html?appid=4b4cc3819b174c78855e1c0cedb34e65>; Fondazione Innovazione Urbana

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| ● Natural and environmental resources | ● Athletic spaces |
| ● Public open spaces | ● Social and health spaces |
| ● Roads and infrastructure | ● Disused/underused areas |
| ● Cultural and/or historic heritage | ● Disused/underused buildings |
| ● Community spaces | ● Public housing |
| ● Educational spaces | |

Endnotes

- ¹ Cities of Service, “Bologna, Italy: 2018 Engaged Cities Award Winner,” 2018, video, 2:36, at <https://citiesofservice.jhu.edu/video/watch-bologna-italy-2018-engaged-cities-award-winner/>.
- ² Donato di Memmo, interview with Gaylen Moore and Elisa Tragni Maloney, July 14, 2021.
- ³ Cities of Service, “Co-Creating the Urban Commons,” an Engaged Cities Award case study, 2018, <https://citiesofservice.jhu.edu/resource/co-creating-urban-commons-bologna-italy/>.
- ⁴ Cities of Service, “The Power of Imagination: Engaged Cities Award Summit 2018,” August 8, 2018, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ij9-vFeqVTU>.
- ⁵ Cities of Service, “The Power of Imagination.”
- ⁶ University of Bologna, “Our History,” accessed November 15, 2023, <https://www.unibo.it/en/university/who-we-are/our-history>; Sarah Rubin Blanshei, “Politics and Justice In Late Medieval Bologna Leiden” *Medieval Law and Its Practice* 7 (2010); Anna Brini, “City of Bologna,” Bologna Tour Guide, accessed November 29, 2023 at City of Bologna - Tour Guide Bologna Italy, Natur Guide, Tour Leader, Anna Brini (bolognatourguide.com); Alessandro Aurigi, *Making the Digital City: The Early Shaping of Urban Internet Space* (London: Routledge, 2005).
- ⁷ Cities of Service, “Co-Creating the Urban Commons.”
- ⁸ “The City as a Common Good and the Paradigm of Collaboration,” remarks by Virginio Merola at the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, July 2015, posted by the Indian Institute for Human Settlements, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=atU11nzJ7Fc>.
- ⁹ Italy’s Constitution of 1947 with Amendments through 2012, Article 118, accessed in English at https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Italy_2012.pdf?lang=en.
- ¹⁰ Giorgia Boldrini, interview with Gaylen Moore and Elisa Tragni Maloney, July 14, 2021.
- ¹¹ Luca Cantelli, interview with Gaylen Moore and Elisa Tragni Maloney, July 7, 2021.
- ¹² Veronica Veronesi, Leopolda Sassoli de ‘Bianchi, Monica Magli, and Carlotta Serrazanetti, interview with Gaylen Moore and Elisa Tragni Maloney, July 14, 2021.
- ¹³ Bologna journalist, interview with Gaylen Moore, June 16, 2021
- ¹⁴ “Iperbole Civic Network,” Municipality of Bologna, May 6, 2010, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Ka5GPNLbsE>.
- ¹⁵ Cities of Service, “The Power of Imagination.”
- ¹⁶ “Who We Are,” Fondazione Innovazione Urbana, accessed in English May 8, 2023, at <https://www.fondazioneinnovazioneurbana.it/chisiamo>.
- ¹⁷ Cities of Service, “Co-Creating the Urban Commons.”
- ¹⁸ Cities of Service, “The Power of Imagination.”
- ¹⁹ Michele D’Alena and Francesca Martinelli, interview with Gaylen Moore and Elisa Tragni Maloney, June 9, 2021. All other quotes from D’Alena are from this interview.
- ²⁰ “Regolamento sulla Collaborazione tra Cittadini e Amministrazione per la Cura e la Rigenerazione dei Beni Comuni Urbani,” City of Bologna, 2014, English translation by LabGov (Laboratory for the Governance of Urban Commons), <http://www.comune.bo.it/media/files/bolognaregulation.pdf>.