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## Article

# They Like to Do It in Public: A Quantitative Analysis of Culture-Led Regeneration Projects in ITALY

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**Abstract:** This paper presents and discusses a quantitative analysis of culture-led urban regeneration initiatives in Italy. It draws on a database of projects built using the filter of the national funding schemes launched between 2012 and 2018. The main objective of the research is to build an overview of the phenomenon of culture-based urban regeneration in Italy, recognizing common trends and recurring dynamics. The projects in the database are analyzed quantitatively on the basis of 28 attributes, taking into consideration different aspects such as the projects' localization, the typology, dimension and ownership of the spatial assets mobilized, the relationship with public policies, and the scale of actors and networks involved in the projects. The findings show that culture-led regeneration initiatives “like to do it in public”; namely, to achieve their objectives—to “do culture”—they seek to connect with the public sector to receive forms of economic, material, and organizational support, such as public spaces in which to host their activities. Therefore, the interaction with the public administration is interpreted as the *sine qua non* condition for the success of culture-led urban regeneration initiatives and to ensure that these are able to generate strong and durable impacts on the revitalization and regeneration of distressed urban neighborhoods.

**Keywords:** culture; urban regeneration; social infrastructures; public administration



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## 1. Introduction

The relationship between culture and sustainable urban development has increasingly gained attention in both scientific debate and policy documents. Culture is identified as a crucial dimension when addressing contemporary challenges; as a source of well-being, social inclusion, innovation, and sustainable growth for societies; and as a catalyst promoting processes of urban regeneration. In particular, some scholars [1,2] have analyzed the link between culture and sustainability, proposing three roles of culture in sustainable development. The first, “culture *in* sustainability”, sees culture as the fourth pillar of sustainability, in addition to the ecological, social, and economic dimensions, highlighting the importance of the conservation and preservation of cultural assets in their various forms. The second is a mediating role, “culture *for* sustainability”, where culture is conceived as an essential resource to achieve sustainability, particularly in local and regional development. The third, “culture *as* sustainability”, is an overarching role that considers culture as the foundation of all other pillars of sustainability. Likewise, with respect to the policy discourse starting from the post-2015 Development Agenda process, international organizations such as the United Nations [3,4], the UCLG [5], and the European Commission [6] have advocated for the central role of culture in the paradigm of sustainable cities and territories. Thus, culture has been recognized in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development [7] and in the New Urban Agenda [8] for its transformative role and contribution both as a sector of

activity and transversally as driver and enabler of the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of development, making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable.

Within this framework, in the last few decades, urban regeneration—understood as a comprehensive and integrated vision and action that leads to the resolution of urban problems and seeks to bring about long-lasting improvements in the economic, physical, social, and environmental conditions of an area that has been subject to change [9]—has been increasingly associated with the notion of culture.

Urban regeneration processes, plans, and policies have, in fact, increasingly adopted culture as an instrument to transform cities. The ideas of culture that actors mobilize, however, are diverse and contrasting, ranging from a creative-class approach [10] to an everyday-life [11] understanding of culture. While several authors have focused on the former approach to culture in urban regeneration—to promote or criticize it—recent research has explored culture-led regeneration processes adopting the latter perspective. These are usually small-scale cultural interventions and initiatives, activated and promoted by citizens or local cultural organizations, that generate and sustain processes of regeneration in urban spaces by, for instance, improving the quality of public spaces in a neighborhood or promoting local heritage [12]. In particular, this type of process has grown considerably in the Italian context in the past decade, with the diffusion of practices, the creation of networks, and the launch of funding programs.

However, research on these experiences has focused so far on the analysis of their internal mechanisms, processes, and actors, adopting mostly qualitative methods like single- [13] or multi-case studies [14,15].

Indeed, the extent and nature of culture-based urban regeneration at the national scale lacks empirical exploration and systematic analysis. Within this context, this paper aims to give a systematic analysis of the phenomenon by identifying transversal traits and underlying issues emerging from culture-led urban regeneration projects. Focusing on ongoing experiences capable of providing a long-term dialogue with the city that allows for the expansion of the local public sphere [16], and its integration with existing social infrastructures [17], the paper analyzes the salient forms of the phenomenon in terms of its geographical diffusion, the relationships between the activities offered, the types of actors involved, and the modes of urban action. The research questions that this contribution aims to answer are the following: What dynamics, approaches, and challenges distinguish culture-led urban regeneration processes in Italy? Who are the promoting organizations and the actors involved? What kinds of relationships do they establish with the public administration and with public policies? What spatial assets do culture-led urban regeneration projects mobilize?

Drawing from a database of 579 projects, the research is based on the descriptive analysis of 195 Italian experiences of culture-led urban regeneration. The dataset was derived from several funding calls focused on culture-based urban regeneration, among which the “Creative Living Lab” call of the Italian Ministry of Culture and the “Culturability” call by the Unipol Foundation stand as the most significant in terms of the number of projects and diffusion in the national territory.

The paper is divided into six sections. The next section introduces the relations between urban regeneration and culture, analyzing the current scientific debate, and highlights the need to explore the topic through a quantitative approach. The third section presents the data sources for this research and the methods adopted to analyze them. The fourth section illustrates the main results of the research, which are then discussed in the fifth section. Finally, the sixth section summarizes the paper and draws the conclusions.

## 2. Literature Review on the Relationship between Culture and Urban Regeneration

The recent debate has widely explored and experimented with the relation between culture and urban regeneration. Both in science and policy, the topic has been dominated by an approach strictly related to economic development goals, which has pervaded

the political agendas of several European cities [18]. Nonetheless, since the 2007–2008 global financial crisis (but even before) [19], alternative practices led by collective citizens' initiatives have increasingly established a different approach to the role of culture in urban regeneration processes. Despite being seen as marginal and minoritarian by some scholars, this type of practice has played an influential role in the broader field of culture-based urban regeneration processes. In particular, these processes have been the object of widespread attention by scholars and policymakers in Italy in the last twenty years [20].

Culture first entered the debate about urban regeneration in the United States and the United Kingdom around the 1980s, and then emerged widely throughout Europe in the 1990s [21], when an entrepreneurial approach based on competitiveness and economic growth started to prevail in urban policies [22]. Thus, the idea that culture could become the key resource for economic growth and competitive advantage in cities spread rapidly [23], thanks to its resonance with the turn of cities towards the so-called "symbolic economy" [11], characterized by the redevelopment of spaces to attract investments and the establishment of new industries, such as creative and service industries, and based on the production of symbols and images to transform the identities of cities, increasing their levels of vitality and vibrancy [24]. In this context, the notion of culture has moved from a form of heritage to be preserved to an economic asset with market value [21].

Within this context, the wide and rapid diffusion within urban agendas of culture-based regeneration strategies has been often linked to the adoption of Florida's [10] theories about the creative city and the creative class. According to Florida [10], the creative class represents a key driver of attractiveness and innovation for cities. This theory has been the cornerstone of the widespread adoption of policies pursuing culture-based urban regeneration, which Peck [25] has labeled «fast urban policy», namely «replicable policy practices that are easily disembedded and deterritorialized» [25] (p. 767), whose attractiveness and mobility are linked to the proposal of a discursively distinctive and seemingly achievable development agenda.

This approach is deeply embedded in two of the three models of culture and regeneration identified by Evans [26], in which different connections and conceptualizations of these terms emerge. In processes of "culture-led regeneration", culture is used as a catalyst of regeneration and it is mainly associated with the construction of flagship cultural places, either from scratch or from the renewal of abandoned industrial buildings or complexes. These are generally high-profile cultural infrastructures located in peripheral areas, which act as investment attractors to generate new job opportunities, and they trigger processes of regeneration or densification across the whole area, redefining its image [27]. Here, the focus of attractiveness is mainly linked to spatial renovation.

In the second model, the one of "cultural regeneration" processes, instead of focusing mainly on one emblematic facility, cultural activities are integrated into an area strategy, supporting artistic and cultural production to establish creative districts or neighborhoods. Included here are the previously mentioned models of the creative city and cultural districts. Both these models are clearly oriented towards the physical transformation and redevelopment of the city, economic growth, and the improvement of the city's competitive position in the global market from a branding perspective, with a role played by culture that is instrumental and mainly limited to the economic dimension [18,27,28].

Several authors have raised issues concerning the prevailing use of culture that these two models promote in urban regeneration processes. Indeed, the emphasis on culture as a panacea [23] in countering the post-industrial decline of cities has led to its instrumentalization and commodification [29]. Culture has been used as a label to legitimize and "humanize" redevelopment and upgrade interventions in neighborhoods [11], increasing property value, and resulting in gentrification, social polarization, and spatial segregation [29,30]. The goal of stimulating economic growth presents itself with strong limitations as the benefits produced are selective and unequally distributed across the local community [21,26]. What prevails is a narrow and limited understanding of culture as a commodity, referring to "Culture" with capital "C" [31].

The third model, “culture and regeneration”, takes a different stance. It refers to small cultural interventions and initiatives, activated by citizens or local cultural and social organizations, that generate, promote, and sustain processes of regeneration by, for instance, improving the quality of public spaces in a neighborhood or promoting local heritage conservation and enhancement [12]. Evans [26] considers this third model a marginal orientation compared to the prevailing top-down approach to regeneration via cultural production. This model is instead resonant with different and broader ideas of culture that allow regeneration processes to fully realize the sustainable development potential of culture by holding together economic and social dimensions [32,33]. This broader view of culture, the culture of everyday life, is based on the idea of «public culture as socially constructed on the micro-level» [11] (p. 11), produced by the social interactions that occur in everyday life, in the spaces where public life is experienced, and, as such, constantly evolving and containing a plurality of cultures. The active involvement of the population in regeneration processes mobilizes intangible resources related to the interactive dimension of culture, fostering participation and increasing social and human capital [34,35]. Indeed, the importance of evaluating citizens’ satisfaction in terms of quality of life and social sustainability in people-oriented regeneration projects emerges, and the community environment as well as social connections result as important factors to be considered in regeneration initiatives [36]. Similarly, embracing a multi-dimensional and socially innovative perspective, Moulaert et al. [31] propose a socially rooted view on the role of culture in urban development. «Culture as a mode of communication, as a ground for rediscovering social identity, as a day-to-day activity in community-building, as creativity of local artists» [31] (p. 234) can play a significant role in empowering people and innovating/transforming social relations.

As pointed out by some authors [26,37,38], in order to understand the potential of culture as a factor of vitality, cohesion, and social inclusion in urban development, it is necessary to change the researcher’s viewpoint and focus on those community-based projects and spaces that integrate cultural resources and mobilization capacities. An alternative approach to culture-based urban regeneration [14,18,38] therefore implies considering alternative cultural actors to those traditionally understood as cultural institutions; it means identifying and rediscovering those actors capable of mobilizing cultural resources anchored to the living fabric of the city through the analysis of their daily social practices [16]. As highlighted by García et al. [18], the power of culture represented by these collective actors differs from Florida’s creative class since they are oriented towards the satisfaction of the collective needs of the neighborhood and they are acknowledged by the communities themselves [36]. These new actors can be considered as “social entrepreneurs” [39] or “territorial entrepreneurs” [40], as cultural practices are directed towards creating collective value and work as an «enabling factor in developing new social and economic ties with the city and the territory» [41] (p. 95).

In short, this means focusing on the small-scale interventions that, in Evans’ classification, appeared marginal. However, as highlighted by Vicari Haddock and Moulaert [22], Evans’ classification underestimates the role of the small-scale interventions, adopting a narrow view of the actors involved in culture-based regeneration, as well as a limited definition of culture.

These small-scale interventions, characterized by an understanding of culture alternative to top-down processes, are instead on the rise across Europe and, in particular, in Italy. Culture plays, in fact, a pivotal role in the processes of the reappropriation and adaptive reuse of abandoned spaces by groups of citizens or third-sector organizations, which have proliferated in Italy over the last decade [14,42,43]. A common and recurring feature in these processes is the cultural element as a «central ingredient for reactivating mechanisms of social reproduction» [44] (p. 44), as a «social engine and coagulant» [16]. Culture hybridizes with welfare services and forms of social entrepreneurship [44], giving rise to social infrastructures [45] that bring together people, institutions, actors, and services and create «affordances for social connection» [17], see also: [46]. The borders between the



State, the market, the third sector, and society are blurred [14], and a third dimension that encompasses the dichotomies of public–private and government–market emerges.

Some authors [47–49] relate these cultural practices to the creation of «common spaces», referring to the «realm owned and governed neither by the state nor by private individuals or companies. A space that is owned by no one but available to all who contribute to the perpetuation, reproduction, and governance of this space; it is a collectively generated and governed source of wealth and a necessary condition for social reproduction» [47] (p. 21). The common space is therefore not defined by its ownership, legal characteristics, or economic perspectives, but by the practices that are generated around the space itself [47]. These cultural spaces often play the role of «permanent laboratories» [48], where new forms of political participation, citizenship, and governance are experimented with. They stimulate a different response by public administrations that is more flexible, transversal, and needs-based, constituting a “bottom-linked” approach to urban regeneration. A bottom-linked approach recognizes the centrality of these experiences and emphasizes the need for public administrations that enable and support them through sound, regulated, and lasting practices [18]. The cultural values driving this approach to urban regeneration are related to democratic participation, empowerment, and social cohesion and are directed towards changing social relations, holding together the micro-dimension of the single space with the macro-dimension of the territory and its needs. New values, other than profit/rent, are therefore generated by heritage reuse processes [43], thus requiring new alliances between public administrations and bottom-up processes to stimulate opportunities for economic, social, and cultural development.

Nonetheless, how relevant are these initiatives? How widespread is this approach? While Moulaert and Vicari Haddock argue that Evans underestimated the role of these small-scale interventions, we still do not have a full understanding or measurements of the extension and characteristics of this approach. Research has mostly focused on the internal dynamics of these spaces through single- [13] or multi-case studies [14,15], neglecting the identification of broader trends, features, and dynamics across experiences and territories.

As of now, the public relevance of small-scale interventions adopting an alternative understanding of culture and transforming urban spaces is therefore merely a claim promoted by these same actors and their networks. These claims have been particularly prominent and influential in the last decade in the Italian context, where the emergence of networks, funding grants, and training opportunities on the subject [50,51] has led to the suggestion that the number of these processes is on the rise.

However, again, while we know the internal dynamics and the effects that these processes are able to generate, we do not know much about the transversal characteristics common to these projects across the country. This paper thus aims to fill this gap in the literature by presenting a quantitative inquiry into culture-led urban regeneration processes in Italy. Through this exploration, the objective is to understand the relevance and scale of these processes, aiming to recognize common trends and recurring dynamics and to build an overview of the urban regeneration initiatives via cultural production in Italy.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Database Archival Analysis

This research aimed to describe the characteristics of culture-led urban regeneration processes in Italy. Considering the diffusion of these processes in the country, we opted to explore the topic through a quantitative approach [52].

The research unfolded in two phases of archival analysis, drawing from databases of project application files sent in response to a call for projects on culture-led urban regeneration. First, we identified and mapped the largest possible number of culture-led urban regeneration processes; second, we analyzed their main features through 28 variables.

To identify a relevant number of culture-led urban regeneration processes, we used, as primary sources of data, the project proposals submitted to three of the main national funding schemes on the topic. We acquired the following.

- All the project applications for three calls for projects by the Direzione Generale Creatività Contemporanea (DGCC, General Secretariat for Contemporary Creativity) of the Italian Ministry of Culture. It contained 478 project applications from three calls by the DGCC: the Creative Living Lab 2018, Creative Living Lab 2019, and PrendiParte 2018.
- The project applications of the finalist projects in three editions of the CheFare call for projects (2012/13, 2014/15, 2015) of the CheFare association, with a total of 25 project applications.
- The project applications of the finalist projects in five editions of the Culturability call for projects (2014/15, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2020) of the Unipolis Foundation, with a total of 76 project applications.

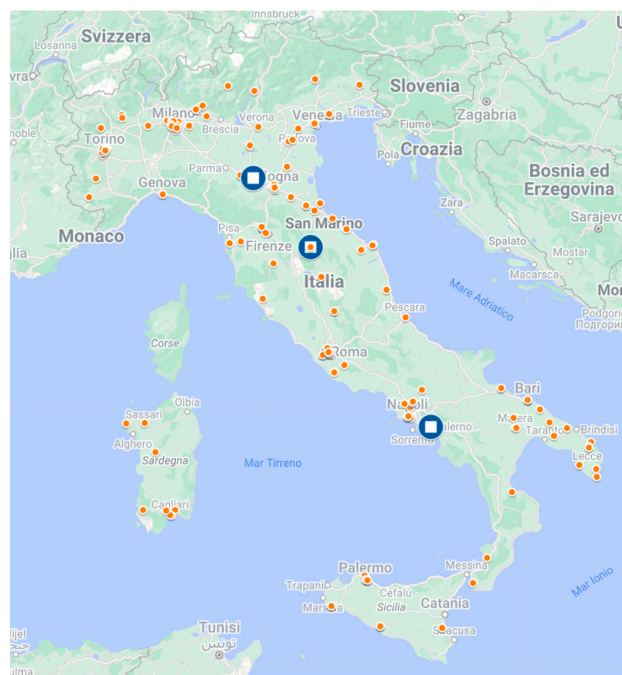
The DGCC calls for projects were selected for their breadth and relevance at the national level on the topic of culture-led urban regeneration. The Creative Living Lab was the first and main nationwide public call for projects on the topic. PrendiParte was chosen for its focus on marginal urban areas. The CheFare and Culturability calls were selected because, even if they were limited in number and breadth, they focused on aspects that broadened the database beyond the focus of the DGCC: Culturability traditionally focuses on entrepreneurial culture-led urban regeneration processes, valorizing the combination of welfare activities and economic sustainability; CheFare instead gives more value to processes focused on cultural innovation. Combining the project applications from the three calls, we assembled a database of 579 project applications.

The project applications were then screened to identify unique processes of culture-led urban regeneration. This screening adopted two criteria.

- The processes had to be long-lasting or at least have the intention of being continuative and lasting on the territory. This criterion was due to the fact that, for culture-led urban regeneration to be effective, it should include residents in processes of cultural participation [34] and should produce effects over a long-term period. These processes are most relevant when they endure over time. Therefore, the researchers excluded from the database one-shot and ephemeral activities.
- The processes had to present a direct spatial dimension. They had to associate their cultural activities with spatial transformations, ranging from the refurbishment of buildings to the transformation of public spaces to the implementation of urban acupuncture interventions at the urban or neighborhood level. This criterion excluded initiatives working only on immaterial and cultural dimensions, generating spatial effects only indirectly.

This screening led to the identification of 235 project applications linked to culture-led urban regeneration processes. Some processes sent project applications to different calls for projects. To avoid overlapping or repetition, we then merged the project applications sent in relation to the same processes, reducing the dataset to 195 culture-led urban regeneration processes (Figure 1).

The second step of the research consisted of the analysis of these projects through 28 variables associated with the concept of culture-led urban regeneration, listed in Table 1.



**Figure 1.** The localization of the 195 culture-led urban regeneration processes in the Italian peninsula. In orange are all projects and in blue are the illustrative case studies (see Section 3.2). Source: elaboration of the authors.

**Table 1.** List of variables used to analyze the dataset.

	Variable
General information	Name of the project
	Name of the leading organization
	Year of project start-up
	Year of project conclusion
Localization features	Municipality of intervention
	Region of intervention
	Macro-region of intervention
	Population of the municipality of intervention
	Localization in the municipal territory (Italian Revenue Agency)
Features of the spaces of intervention	Geolocalization
	Number of spaces of intervention
	Type of spatial intervention
	Type of contractual agreement to use the buildings
	Surfaces of the refurbished buildings
Features of the regeneration activities	Ownership of the refurbished buildings
	Previous uses of the buildings
	Problems that the project wished to tackle
	Main activities developed
Partnership and organizational features	Main target audiences
	Degree of consolidation of the operations of the project
	Administrative status of the leader organization
	Number of organizations involved in the project
	Management format
	Types of active partnerships
	Scales of active partnerships
	Types of involved professionals
Number of different professionals involved	
Relations with public policies	



The list of possible values for these variables was defined through two different processes. For variables with a limited set of values, like the possible regions of intervention or the position in the municipal area, we defined the values beforehand. For variables whose single values could instead potentially take wider ranges of values, like the population of the municipality, we defined classes of values, such as ranges for the building size and the degree of consolidation of the project, through a first test analysis of 30 random project applications. The single values of these project applications were used to define classes able to describe all the project applications in the database.

The main sources of data for this analysis were the project application files sent to the calls for projects. We integrated this source with publicly available resources like the websites of the projects, grey literature, secondary literature, and additional archival research.

### 3.2. Illustrative Case Studies

The analysis of the database through these variables led to the identification of trends, characteristics, and features, which are presented in the next section. In order to give depth to these descriptive statistics, we complemented the analysis of the database with the exploration of three case studies.

The three cases were selected by balancing the geographical distribution between Northern, Central, and Southern Italy, in order to represent the main territorial differences of the country. We also considered the population size of the municipality, the size of the buildings of intervention, and the composition of the network of actors mobilized. Through these criteria, we identified three cases: Ovestlab, CasermArcheologica, and iMorticelli. The cases were explored through interviews, conversations, and archival research.

Ovestlab is a multidisciplinary cultural center operating as a civic factory interweaving art, craftsmanship, urban regeneration, and citizen participation to support processes for the collective reimagination of the city of Modena. It has been run since 2017 by the Amigdala association and the Archivio Architetto Cesare Leonardi association, in collaboration with the municipality of Modena. The cultural center is based in a former mechanical workshop in the Villaggio Artigiano, a former industrial area. It offers activities like training, artistic production, urban transformation, and the stewardship of public spaces, which aim to initiate a virtuous cycle capable of increasing the quality of life in the area, restarting a dialogue with economic activities, and engaging the local community in processes of change.

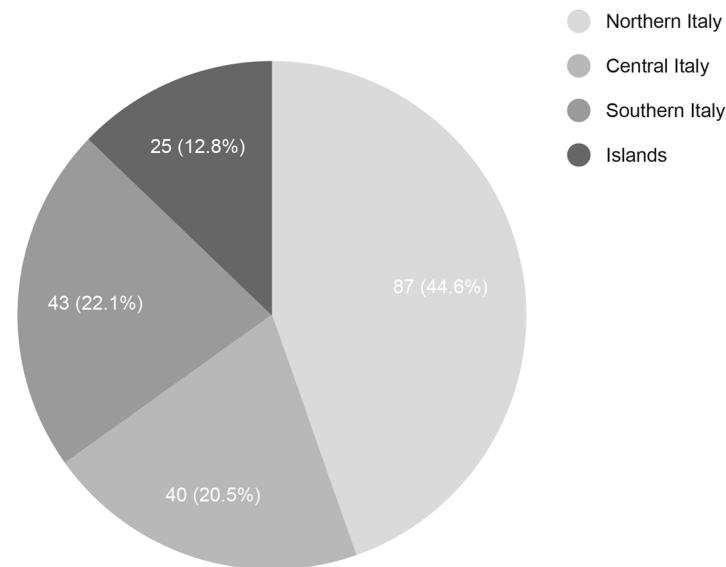
CasermArcheologica is a process of urban regeneration based in an XVI-century palace in the historical center of the town of Sansepolcro. It is managed by an association with the same name. The process was started in 2013 by a bottom-up movement launched by high school students; they started organizing contemporary art exhibitions, concerts, and activities, attracting an intergenerational and proactive community and gaining the informal support of the municipality. After the conclusion of some renovation works, since 2017, the association has managed two floors of the building, using it as a contemporary art center and as a training and co-working space for young professionals.

iMorticelli is a cultural production center and a community hub. It is based on the culture- and community-led regeneration of the baptistery of the XVI-century San Sebastiano del Monte dei Morti church, located in the historical center of the city of Salerno. It is managed by the Blam collective, in collaboration with the owner of the municipality of Salerno and the Department of Architecture of the University Federico II of Naples. Through an action–research process aimed at experimenting with the adaptive reuse of a public heritage asset, since 2018, the team has explored the possible reuses of the baptistery and launched co-production activities involving professionals, citizens, and the administration. The action–research process is connected to the urban regeneration of the whole historical center of Salerno [13].

#### 4. Findings

The identification of 195 projects of culture-led urban regeneration across the country testifies to the significance of this approach to urban transformation in Italy. Considering also that the Italian association of culture-led urban regeneration processes, “Lo Stato dei Luoghi”, only counts around a hundred members, the extension of this research offers a wider representation of the phenomenon in the country.

While this approach has a significant presence in Italy, these processes are not distributed equally across regions, municipalities of different sizes, and different parts of the municipality; rather, they tend to be localized in Northern Italy (Figure 2). Central and Southern Italy each account for about one fifth of the processes, while the Islands have a smaller share.



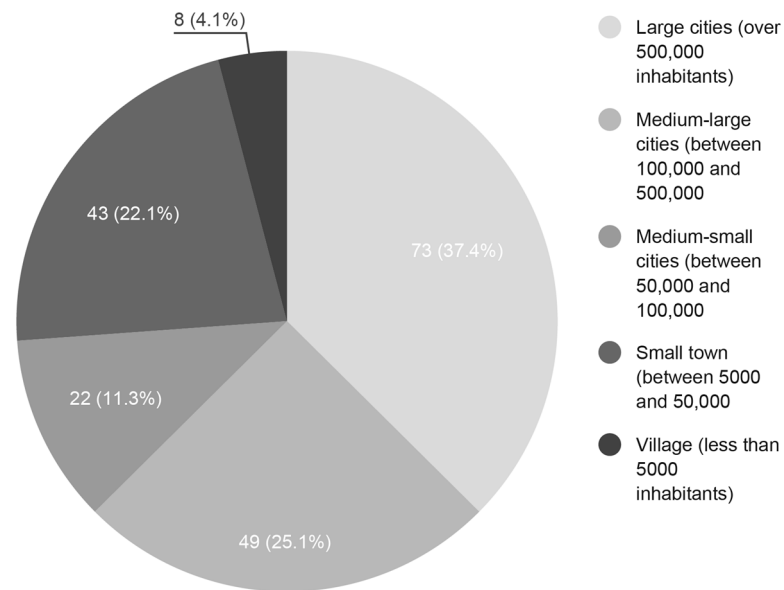
**Figure 2.** The localization of processes in the Italian macro-regions. Source: elaboration by the authors.

Projects also tend to be located in large urban areas (Figure 3). More than half of them are located in municipalities with more than 100,000 inhabitants, with a considerable share in municipalities with more than 500,000 inhabitants. Considering that only six Italian municipalities have more than 500,000 inhabitants (Rome, Milan, Naples, Turin, Palermo, and Genoa), the value indicates an important concentration of experiences in these more populous administrative units.

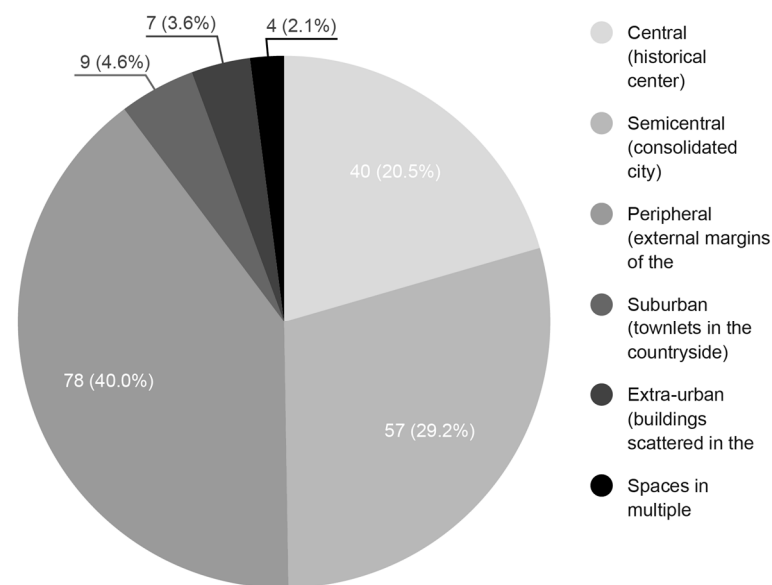
The positioning of regeneration processes in the different parts of the municipal territory—as classified by the Italian Revenue Agency (Figure 4)—yields three main results: the relative majority is located in peripheral areas, outside the consolidated urban fabric; at the same time, about half of the processes are activated in the central and semi-central areas of municipalities; finally, only a minority share is localized in suburban or in areas outside the built-up area.

The three case studies offer an exemplification of how these three variables may combine. Ovestlab is localized in Villaggio Artigiano, a formerly industrial peripheral area of Modena, a medium-large municipality in Northern Italy; CasermArcheologica is localized in the historical center of Sansepolcro, a small town in Central Italy; iMorticelli is localized in the historical center of Salerno, a medium-large municipality in Southern Italy.

Most of these experiences center their activities in a single building (81%), with smaller shares operating simultaneously in multiple different buildings (11%) or without a fixed location (8%). Although often located in a single building, in 61% of cases, their cultural activities are oriented towards the spatial transformation of a broader urban area. In 39% of cases, they focus solely on the regeneration of the building.



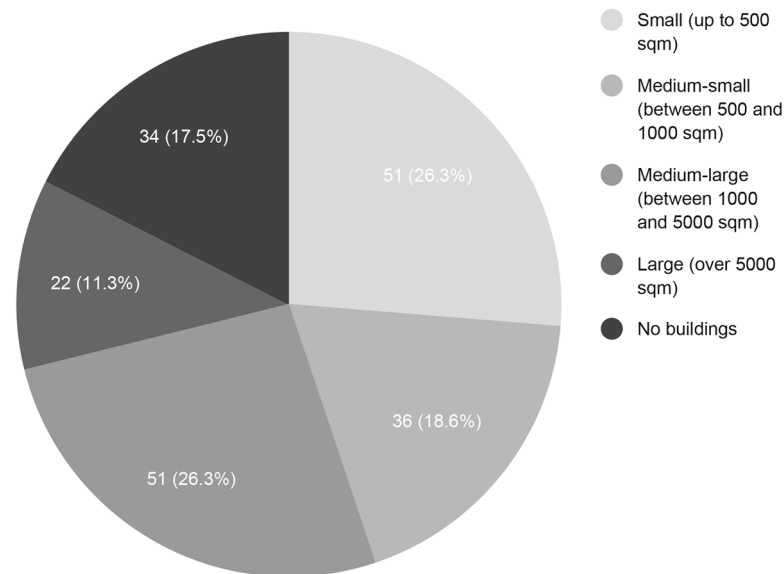
**Figure 3.** The classes of the population of the municipality involved in interventions. Source: elaboration by the authors.



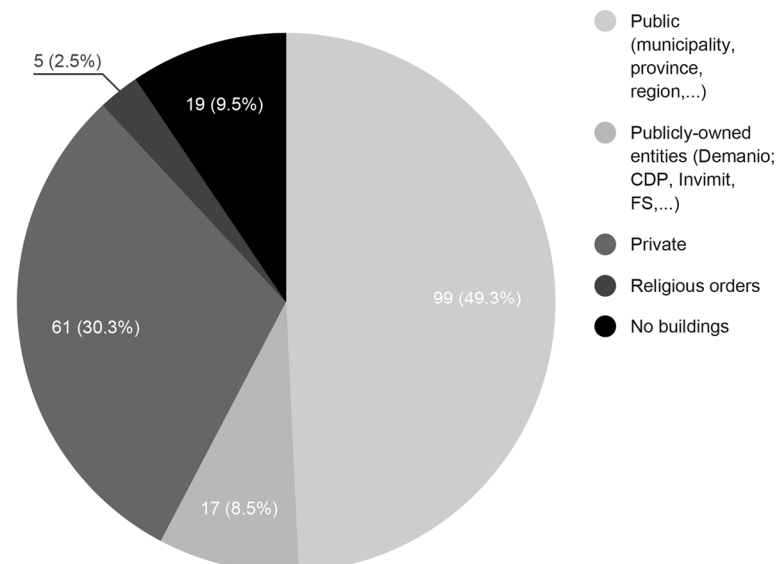
**Figure 4.** The localization of projects in the different parts of the municipal territory as categorized by the Italian Revenue Agency. Source: elaboration by the authors.

Concerning the experiences taking place in one or more spaces, the buildings that these processes use (Figure 5) have mainly small (under 500 sqm) or medium–large (between 1000 and 5000 sqm) floor areas. In descending order, the remainder are medium–small spaces (500–1000 sqm), experiences without stable buildings, and large properties (over 5000 sqm).

In almost half of the cases, the spaces used by these initiatives are owned by public authorities (Figure 6), particularly municipalities or other local public administrations. An important share of the properties is owned by private individuals and companies.



**Figure 5.** The floor areas of regenerated real estate. Source: elaboration by the authors.



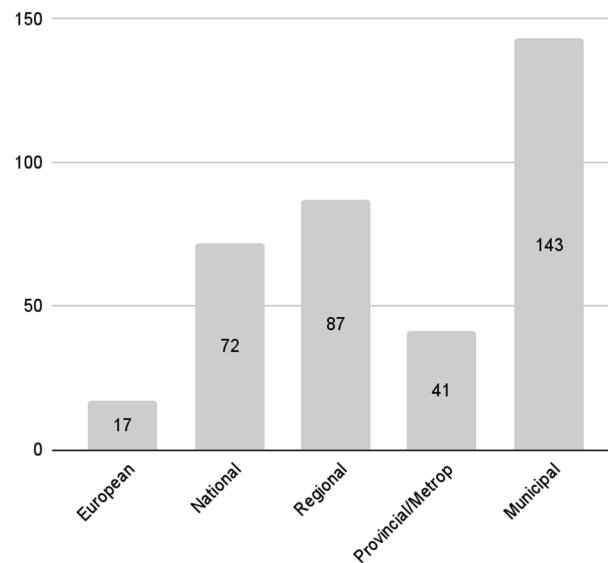
**Figure 6.** The ownership of the regenerated real estate. Source: elaboration by the authors.

The cases suggest some additional insights into these results. Ovestlab bases its operations primarily in a medium-sized, privately owned industrial building. Over the years, its activities have been oriented towards the regeneration of its neighborhood, with the reactivation—temporary or permanent—of 30 spaces around the Villaggio Artigiano. CasermArcheologica activates processes of social and economic development in the whole Valtiberina valley, like the project “La repubblica delle Foreste”, funded by the National Recovery and Resilience Plan, while also curating its main venue, a publicly owned heritage building formerly used as Carabinieri Station; iMorticelli is based in a small XVI-century church owned by the Salerno municipality, but its activities and architectural experimentations address the whole historical center of the city.

In total, 90% of the processes that we mapped have been supported by or collaborated in the past with public policies. Among these policies, we find forms of economic support, access to the use of public buildings, or collaboration in land transformation processes. All three cases that we explored had won, at least once, the Creative Living Lab national grant. They also received grants from other public organizations, like the Fermenti in Comune grant, which iMorticelli received from the National Association of Italian Municipalities

(ANCI). CasermArcheologica and Ovestlab also received the Culturability grant from the private foundation Unipolis. The initiatives also take a more active role in the co-development of public policies: for instance, Ovestlab has actively collaborated with the Emilia Romagna region within the Temporary Reuse Hub to develop training activities for these projects in the region.

Looking at the scale of intervention of these policies (Figure 7), the experiences investigated have often collaborated with policies at the municipal level, with secondary shares of national and regional policies. All three cases have, for instance, obtained their main buildings from their municipalities.

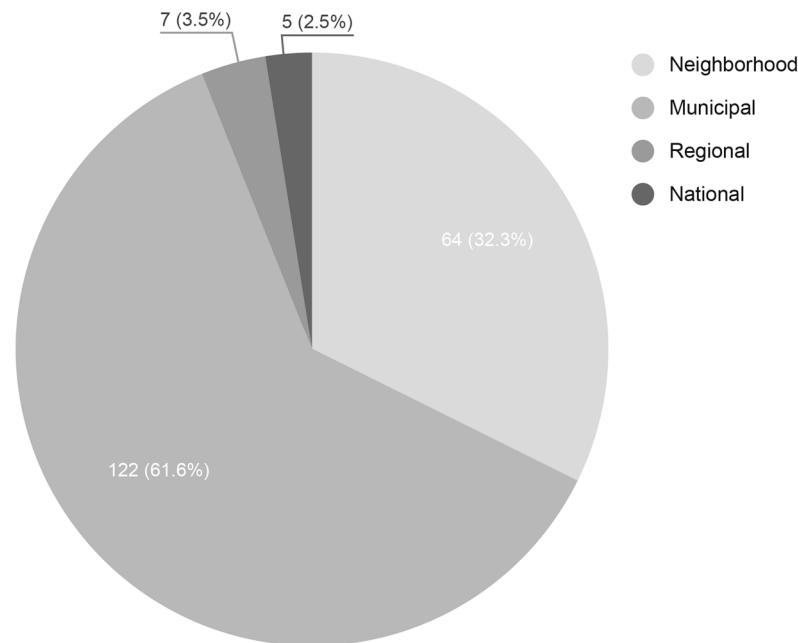


**Figure 7.** The scales of the public policies with which the initiatives interacted. Source: elaboration by the authors.

The main target audiences of these urban regeneration experiences are also rooted at the municipal scale (Figure 8), with secondary audiences at the neighborhood scale. These two scales are related to similar approaches depending on the size of the municipality of intervention: CasermArcheologica, operating in the town of Sansepolcro, is primarily oriented towards its municipality, and then to the people living in the surrounding Valtiberina Valley. OvestLab and iMorticelli, operating in larger cities, target primarily audiences in their spatial proximity, and then the residents of their municipality at large. All three seldom host regionally or nationally relevant activities.

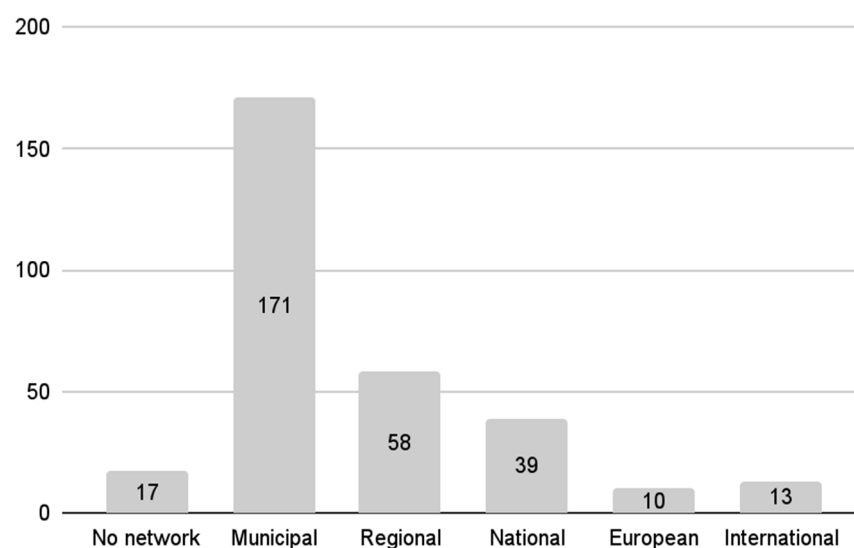
Confirming the findings of Micelli and Mangialardo [43], these regeneration processes are often led by individual organizations (72%) rather than by collaborative consortia of organizations sharing responsibilities (28%). Nonetheless, in 91% of cases, the leading organization or the consortium is backed by a network of secondary supporting actors, with an average of 6.2 partners per process. Most of these collaborative networks feature actors from the third sector, followed by public administrations, enterprises, and universities. Some combinations of different types of actors are more frequent than others: in 32% of cases, the network of partners involves third-sector organizations and public administrations; in 26% of them, it includes third-sector organizations, public administrations, and enterprises; and in 11% of cases, the network is composed exclusively by third-sector organizations.





**Figure 8.** The scales of the main target audiences. Source: elaboration by the authors.

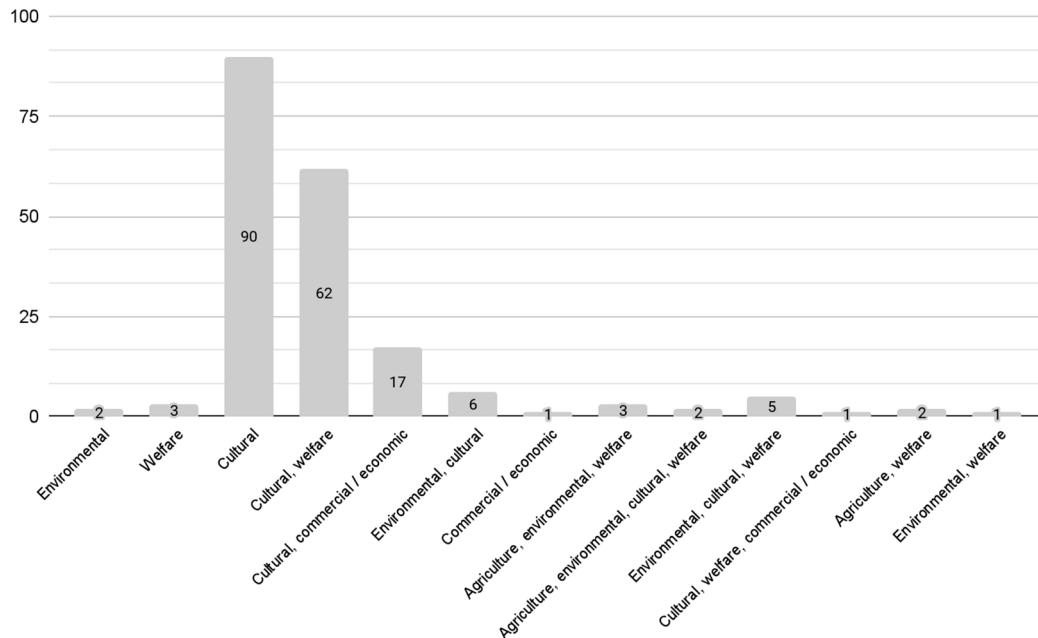
The actors included in these networks operate at multiple scales of action (Figure 9). Collaborative networks often see at least one partner at the municipal scale, with smaller shares at the regional or national scale. For instance, iMorticelli has collaborated with the Departments of Urban Planning, Culture, Social, and Youth Policies of the Municipality of Salerno, as well as with the Department of Architecture of the University Federico II of Naples. Like Ovestlab and CasermArcheologica, it is part of the national network of culture-led regeneration processes, “Lo Stato dei Luoghi”. International collaborations are limited to a few cases, like the inclusion of Ovestlab in the Trans Europe Halles network of grassroots cultural centers.



**Figure 9.** The scales of the networks of partnerships. Source: elaboration by the authors.

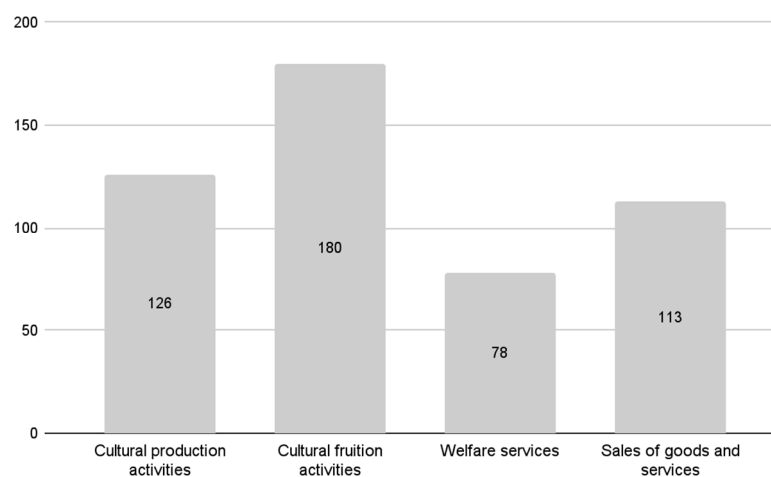
These culture-led urban regeneration processes orient their operations towards the resolution of some problematic situations that they perceive or face. Overall, 93% of the processes are primarily oriented towards the resolution of cultural issues, like a lack of cultural services or the limited diversification of cultural activities. This orientation is often combined with other challenges, like welfare or economic topics (Figure 10): for

instance, CasermArcheologica reflects on forms of cultural welfare, and Ovestlab supports the development of forms of social economy [46]. Each process presents, on average, 1.6 project orientations, demonstrating the importance of the combination of different action themes.



**Figure 10.** The thematic orientations of the processes. Source: elaboration by the authors.

These processes offer multiple and diverse activities. On average, each of them develops 2.5 different types of activities, combining artistic practices and the provision of welfare and business services. As illustrated in Figure 11, production activities (training, workshops, artistic residencies) and cultural dissemination (concerts, exhibitions) are the most widespread. At the same time, they are combined with the sale of goods and services (the management of coworking spaces, consultancies, coffee bars) and with welfare services (after-school, mutual aid activities, social support).



**Figure 11.** The classes of the main activities developed by the processes. Source: elaboration by the authors.

### 5. Discussion

The survey illustrated in the previous section allowed us to build a database of culture-led urban regeneration projects in Italy using the filter of the national funding schemes

launched between 2012 and 2018. These projects were then analyzed quantitatively on the basis of the above-mentioned categories, aiming to recognize common trends and recurring dynamics and to build an overview of the urban regeneration initiatives via cultural production in Italy.

Among the results, we believe that it is relevant to highlight the concentration of culture-led urban regeneration projects in large and medium-sized cities in the country. This confirms the dominant narrative in the literature that interprets cities as the main engines of innovation, creativity, and experimentation [10,53,54], where a combination of different factors, such as resources, capital, skills, and talent, provides fertile ground for the emergence of cultural projects [12]. Indeed, as other authors have highlighted [41,42], the presence of a wide array of abandoned or underused material assets with potential to be mobilized with relatively low effort and economic sources plays a significant role in explaining this geography.

In this regard, the analysis of the localization of these projects within cities is emblematic. The survey revealed that while a limited number of projects are localized in suburban and rural areas, the majority of them are instead situated in the central, semi-central, and peripheral neighborhoods of cities, such as in those areas where, in the past few decades, the dynamics of social and demographic transition have resulted in the production of a number of abandoned, vacant, or underused spaces [14,55,56]. These may include factories left abandoned after the reorganization or delocalization of manufacturing, public facilities such as schools, community centers, hospitals, markets emptied by a retrenching welfare system or the changing social needs of local communities [57], or other types of buildings whose spatial and functional arrangements are particularly suitable to be readapted to host new cultural and social uses or functions. Indeed, these spaces have played the role of incubators for the emergence of culturally and socially innovative initiatives, and the three illustrative cases presented in Section 3.2 demonstrate that the buildings' functional and typological articulation can act as a constraint for project development but also as an enabling factor to sustain the collective action. For example, a former mechanical workshop in a semi-peripheral industrial area of the city of Modena became a multidisciplinary cultural center in the case of Ovestlab, an old palace in the historical center of Sansepolcro became a space for contemporary arts in the case of CasermaArcheologica, and the XVI-century baptistry of an old church, located in the historical center of the city of Salerno, was transformed into a community center with a concierge and social café serving the neighborhood in the case of iMorticelli [13].

One interesting point concerns the dimensions of the spaces mobilized and regenerated by the projects. Almost half of the mapped projects have taken place in small (up to 500 sqm) (26.3%) and medium-sized (between 500 and 1000 sqm) (18.6%) spaces. This highlights that cultural production initiatives do not require large spaces to emerge. Indeed, they need spaces that are suitable, adaptive, and functional regarding the types of cultural activities to be implemented. Moreover, projects are particularly sensitive to the economic sustainability of the activities carried out, in a context in which the expenses related to the management and maintenance of the space may be a critical factor in their success. Related to this aspect, the ownership of the space appears to be another significant condition influencing the success of projects. The recurring public ownership of the building means that the public administration is increasingly inclined to collaborate with civil society actors to regenerate and reuse its material legacy [58]. Moreover, the research has shown that former public buildings, as pointed out in Section 2, can become commons [59] able to generate new social or cultural economies [46], with a strong orientation towards answering the collective needs of increasingly vulnerable or fragmented communities. Therefore, serving the double purpose of animating and/or revitalizing deprived or distressed urban neighborhoods and of shaping new values, where social and cultural objectives become as important as economic ones, these are interpreted as a distinctive feature of the interactive growth process that local administrations are increasingly experiencing [60,61].

Nevertheless, the research highlights that the relationship with public administrations goes well beyond the patterns of property estate underlying the projects. The support or interaction with public policies that can be found in the majority of the projects confirms that the input of the public sector is a crucial condition to highlight when considering the emergence of culture-based regeneration projects. The important role of support by public administrations, through policies, regulations, or actions, may be explained by considering the relationship of proximity that administrators at the municipal level often have with the promoters of cultural initiatives, as well as the ownership of the public buildings managed directly by the municipality, thus easily mobilized through specific agreements, loans, or public tenders. This condition of proximity can be beneficial for the success of the project because the problems and difficulties that arise from the project's development are tackled by the joint efforts of an arena of actors involved in the project's activities. Indeed, the input by the public sector can be monetary, as a form of initial investment for the refurbishment of the space or a contribution to cover some expenses, but also logistical and operational. The research highlights that the input often consists of setting out forms of mobilization of the space where the project takes place, such as the creation of specific agreements between the public administration and the project promoters for its use, which can, for instance, consider low rent or rent-free use.

Therefore, the research has illustrated that culture-led urban regeneration in Italy strongly relies on the public sector due to the important role that the multiple resources mobilized by public administrations play in the emergence of the projects. The public sector and the resources mobilized can thus be defined as catalysts for the emergence of culture-led urban regeneration projects. Indeed, these resources are of different typologies: spatial resources, namely the spaces owned by public administrations where the project activities take place; financial resources, such as the initial investments needed to readapt the spaces, making them suitable to host project activities; and logistical and organizational resources, in terms of the practical support that local administrations can offer to solve the problems or difficulties faced by project promoters. Moreover, the majority of projects are also endowed with a strong "public orientation" in the sense that the activities or services provided are mostly devoted to answering collective needs and contrasting dynamics of socio-spatial marginality. Thus, the wide array of assets mobilized by public administrations for culture-led regeneration projects stands as one of the critical factors for the success of such initiatives.

Beyond cooperation with public administrations, it is also important to recognize the contribution that the network dimension has in shaping cultural activities [50]. As some researchers have already shown [40], a pivotal role in these networks is often performed by the so-called "territorial entrepreneurs", namely young and creative entrepreneurs and innovators, who become promoters of cultural initiatives that activate and sustain regeneration processes. The distinctive feature of these innovators lies in their capacity to shape new territorial relationships and configurations, reassemble local expertise and assets [62], build synergies with public administrations, and produce with their activity a socio-spatial impact on the surrounding local community that results in improving its internal cohesion [28]. Although the presence of territorial entrepreneurs in the networks shaping the projects can be considered a relevant condition of culture-based regeneration projects, we agree with Tricarico et al. [63] that a territorial entrepreneur can act successfully only if he/she is able to build effective alliances among actors and activate what several scholars define as «platform spaces», namely «cultural and creative places where social innovation plays a key role in community engagement activities as well as generating horizontal/collaborative interactions among different stakeholders and their interests while aligning with territorial development targets» [63] (p. 2). The emphasis of these platform spaces is often oriented towards providing multi-actor and bottom-linked action arenas where different actors and networks collaborate, (co)produce, and exchange knowledge via collective and creative learning [15,61,64]. In other terms, the purpose of these arenas is to shape collaborative spaces where the collective initiatives of citizens and innovators

can flourish, building agreements and collaboration with local administrations that can enable such initiatives through sound, regulated, and lasting practices [18]. One potential benefit of these initiatives is their capacity to work across scales, which means both to gather actors from various political levels, geographical scales, and sectors that come together to share decision making [65] and to connect different scales of urban regeneration intervention. In doing so, many of the culture-based regeneration projects mapped show an underlying tension in combining the regeneration and restoration of the single asset where the project takes place with the promotion of a set of micro-activities and actions sustaining the regeneration of the surrounding area or neighborhood, ensuring that the project is able to reach a wider audience and that its benefits are distributed fairly among more members of the community [66]. In other words, what is evident is the commitment of the already mentioned networks of actors promoting the cultural activities to make an effort to scale up the project activities, exploring culture as an “enabling device” [12] and a “social infrastructure” [17,45] to contrast different forms of socio-spatial vulnerability in distressed urban neighborhoods, to sustain the rehabilitation and improvement of public spaces, and to improve levels of social cohesion.

## 6. Conclusions

The research led to the creation of a database of 579 culture-led urban regeneration projects in Italy by using, as primary sources, three main national funding schemes dealing with this policy field. We then screened 195 projects and investigated them quantitatively on the basis of 28 variables covering different attributes, such as the projects’ localization; the typology, dimensions, and ownership of the spatial assets mobilized; the relationship with public policies; and the scale of the actors and networks involved in the projects.

The originality of the research lies in two main aspects. The first concerns its methodological and operational dimension, which allowed us to collect and organize a significant amount of data from national institutions acting in the field of culture and urban regeneration. Through the data that we collected, we built a sample that served to represent a comprehensive picture of the phenomenon of culture-led urban regeneration in Italy in the last decade. The second aspect relates to the contribution of the present research to the current theoretical debate introduced in Section 2. Indeed, the picture emerging from the survey highlights the prevalence of the third model of culture-based regeneration as highlighted by Evans [26], namely the one of small-scale projects promoted by third-sector associations and groups of citizens with strong roots in the local context and sustaining an idea of culture as a «central ingredient for reactivating mechanisms of social reproduction» [44] (p. 44). We have described the capacity of these initiatives to hold together the economic and social dimensions by interpreting culture as a factor of vitality, cohesion, and social inclusion in urban development, able to have a strong impact on the revitalization and regeneration of distressed urban neighborhoods and on the production of solutions to answer collective unmet social needs. Moreover, the research has shown that these initiatives “like to do it in public”, namely that, to achieve their objectives—to “do culture”—they search for public spaces in which to locate their activities and connect with the public sector to obtain forms of economic and organizational support. Here, the view is taken that the interaction with the public sector is the *sine qua non* condition for the success of culture-led urban regeneration initiatives. The local public administration is often the central actor providing the needed resources for the emergence of these initiatives. In other terms, culture-based regeneration projects need the public sector for their emergence and, at the same time, the public administrations need these initiatives to promote urban regeneration processes that are truly effective, durable, and able to produce strong impacts at the social level. This is particularly true in vulnerable or distressed urban neighborhoods, where the complexity of the social and economic problems requires the involvement of different networks of actors and the combination of different typologies of resources to catalyze successful regeneration processes.



One future development of the research may concern the integration of qualitative methods in the quantitative survey to examine more closely the dynamics of culture-led urban regeneration, analyzing in greater depth a sample of projects through different methodologies, such as semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and participant observation sessions, able to look both at their content and process dimensions. This would allow us to describe the everyday and micro-practices of cultural production and examine how they incrementally contribute to regenerating and revitalizing urban spaces in deprived or distressed urban neighborhoods.

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