

‘I don’t care if they put trees on it, it’s still a skyscraper’

Exploring activists’ dissensus against Milan’s urban greening and sustainability approach

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Abstract

Eco-urbanism is today's mainstream approach to urban greening and sustainability. This approach, however, remains disconnected from issues of social justice. As a reaction, urban political ecology (UPE) argues for greater engagement with urban activists' dissensus as a strategy to develop more just sustainable cities. Through a UPE lens, and drawing on green gentrification and right to the city theories, this thesis explores activists' dissensus against eco-urban interventions and the "alternative" model they envision instead. I do so through a case study analysis on the conflict behind *Porta Nuova*: Milan's largest re-urbanization project, characterized by the eco-urban symbols of the Vertical Forest towers and the vast Library of Trees park.

My results show that activists frame *Porta Nuova* as a top-down (i.e. vertical) privatization project which led to exclusion and gentrification. They denounce *Porta Nuova*'s greening agenda as an expedient to hide its real unspoken agenda: (a) fulfill the exclusive (and excluding) city vision, (b) satisfy new comers and outsiders through esthetically pleasant scenarios, (c) ensure and justify profit-making. As a reaction, activists engage in dissensus-based practices which embody their alternative vision of urban greening – based on the values of democracy and inclusion.

Drawing on the activists' dissensus, I argue that esthetically attractive green spaces are not necessarily excluding and gentrifying *per se*. However, these are possible outcomes when only a restricted elite assert the right to the "vertical green" city. As eco-urban spaces like *Porta Nuova* incorporate, perform and reproduce exclusion, activists respond with dissensus-driven alternatives which incorporate, perform and reproduce their vision of sustainable and just city and which reassert their right to the city.

My thesis highlights that there is a potential for a mutual knowledge exchange between urban movements and sustainability science. Through the creation of synergies and collaborations, together, they can create more inclusive and sustainable cities based on the needs and interests of locals.

Key words: Eco-urbanism, urban political ecology, green gentrification, right to the city, urban dissensus, exclusion, sustainability science

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Table of Contents

1 Introduction	1
1.1 Research problem	1
1.2 Research questions	2
1.3 Relevance to sustainability science.....	2
1.4 Thesis structure.....	2
2 Case study context.....	3
2.1 Porta Nuova and Isola: a new district and an old neighborhood.....	3
3 Setting the scene: eco-urbanism.....	6
4 Theoretical analytical framework: Urban political ecology.....	8
4.1 Green gentrification.....	9
4.2 Right to the City	10
5 Methodology.....	11
5.1 Research design	11
5.1.1 <i>What is this a case of?</i>	11
5.2 Research method	12
5.2.1 <i>Data collection</i>	12
5.2.2 <i>Data analysis</i>	13
5.3 Limitations	14
6 Empirical results	15
6.1 <i>Why is the re-urbanization project of Porta Nuova contested?</i>	15
6.1.1 <i>A combination of undesired changes in Isola</i>	15
6.1.2 <i>Contested politics behind Porta Nuova</i>	17
<i>Milan's vision: exclusive, but excluding</i>	17
<i>"Social washing"</i>	18
<i>Privatization and absent public bodies</i>	20

6.2 In light of the reasons for contestation, how is Porta Nuova’s urban greening agenda framed and assessed by the activists?	21
6.2.1 <i>Fitting the global discourse</i>	22
6.2.2 <i>Profits in disguise: Certification of “green rentability”</i>	22
6.2.3 <i>A green “cosmetic surgery” for others.....</i>	23
6.2.4 <i>Excessive energy use versus urban deforestation.....</i>	24
6.3. What are the tactics used by the activists to resist Porta Nuova and its urban greening agenda?	26
6.3.1 <i>Direct tactics of resistance.....</i>	26
6.3.2 <i>Squatting the urban space.....</i>	26
6.3.3 <i>Institutionalizing community uses of the space.....</i>	27
6.4 What are the “alternative” models of urban greening and sustainability locals push for?. 28	28
6.4.1 <i>“Usable green”: a place to interact and share</i>	28
6.4.2 <i>Horizontal green</i>	29
6.4.3 <i>Just urban sustainability.....</i>	29
7 Discussion	30
7.1 Right to the “vertical green” city	30
7.1.1 <i>Vertical-green gentrification and exclusion.....</i>	31
7.2 An alternative model: Vertical versus horizontal sustainability.....	33
7.2.1 <i>Environmental sustainability: a (socio-political) mean, not an end</i>	34
7.3 A dissensus based urban future? New directions for planning and research.....	35
8 Conclusion.....	36
9 References	37
Appendices	44
Appendix I: Respondents information	44
Appendix II: Interview questions	45

List of abbreviations

EJ	Environmental justice
EM	Ecological modernization
IPV	Isola Pepe Verde (Isola's community garden)
IPBES	Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services
LULU	Locally unwanted land use
NUA	New Urban Agenda
PE	Political ecology
UN	United Nations
UPE	Urban political ecology
USGBC	United States Green Building Council

Prologue

“The city of Leonia refashions itself every day: every morning the people wake between fresh sheets, wash with just-unwrapped cakes of soap, wear brand-new clothing, take from the latest model refrigerator still unopened tins, listening to the last minutes-jingles from the most up-to-date radio. On the sidewalks, encased in spotless plastic bags, the remains of yesterday’s Leonia await the garbage truck [...]. So you begin to wonder if Leonia’s true passion is really, as they say, the enjoyment of new and different things, and not, instead, the joy of expelling, discarding, cleansing itself of a recurrent impurity. [...] Leonia’s rubbish little by little would invade the world, if, from beyond the final crest of its boundless rubbish heap, the street cleaners of other cities were not also pushing mountains of refuse in front of themselves. [...] The boundaries between the alien, hostile, cities are infected ramparts where the detritus of both support each other and, overall, mingle. The greater its height grows, the more the danger of a landslide looms: a tin can, an old tire, an unraveled wine flask, if it rolls toward Leonia, is enough to bring with it an avalanche [...] submerging the city in its own past, which it had tried in vain to reject. [...] In the nearby cities they are all ready, waiting with bulldozers to flatten the terrain, to push into the new territory, expand, and drive the new cleaners still farther out.” (from Italo Calvino’s book ‘Invisible Cities’¹, 1972).

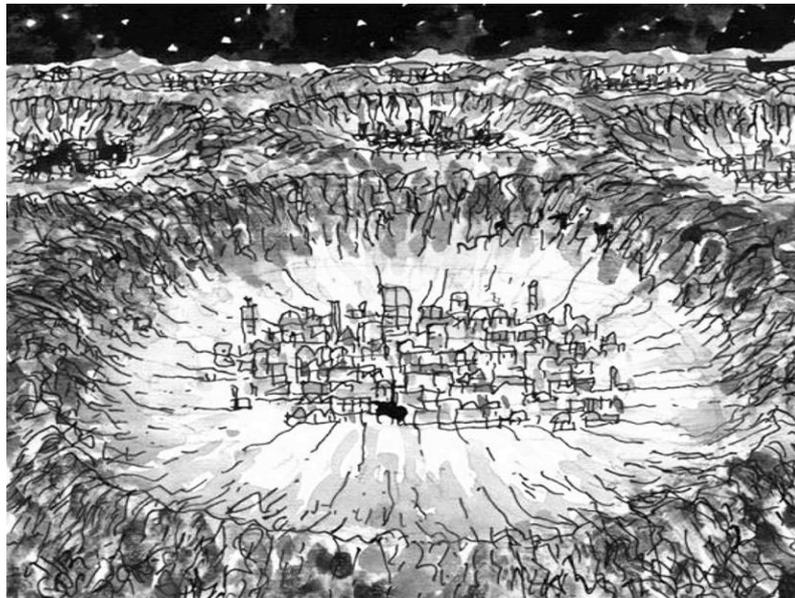


Figure 1. Illustration of Calvino’s Leonia invisible city by Armando, Ballarini and Nuozi (Corriere, 2017)

“Milan is like Calvino’s invisible city. It’s like Leonia.” (A.S., personal communication). A.S. is a Milanese activist opposing the metamorphosis his city is undergoing. He contests the paradox where Milan’s vision to become a green and sustainable city triggers undesired environmental and social effects. To avoid ending up like Leonia, submerged by the “avalanche” of its own externalities, Milan needs to revise the premises of its vision, or like Calvino would put it, of its true passion.

¹Translation Italian to English by: Weaver, 1974

1 Introduction

1.1 Research problem

The established threat of climate change has induced global organizations, national governments and local authorities to commit to sustainable development in the environmental, economic and social spheres (Brundtland Report, 1987). The United Nations (UN) has given special attention to implementing sustainable development in cities as they host 54,5% of the world population – a figure that is expected to grow to 60% by 2030 (UN, 2016; New Urban Agenda, 2016). As a result, an expanding number of cities are committing to urban sustainable development through the implementation of urban models such as the Green City and the Smart City (New Urban Agenda, 2016). These urban models build on the principles of the ecological modernization (EM) approach, which sets to solve the ecological crisis through technological progress (Beretta, 2014). Eco-urbanism, in particular, indicates an EM policy approach to urban planning (Beretta, 2014).

An increasing body of scholars, however, argues that eco-urbanism neglects the *social* sphere of sustainable development: it risks to accommodate only one category of the public while leaving another one behind (Hodson and Marvin, 2010; Cucca, 2012; Roso, Béal & Mössner, 2013; Caprotti, 2014; Cugrullo, 2016). The authors from the field of urban political ecology (UPE) are particularly critical, applying a Marxist lens to investigate how urban projects, are shaped by capitalistic power structures, which tend to exclude and subordinate locals from decisions concerning the city development (Quastel, 2009; Robbins, 2012; Kaika, 2017). As a reaction, UPE argues for a greater engagement with locals' dissensus to develop more just cities (Kaika, 2017). One academic stream grounded in UPE examines the phenomena of green gentrification (Dooling, 2009; Quastel, 2009; Checker, 2011; Cucca, 2012). Literature on green gentrification studies how urban greening and sustainability projects can lead to, or exacerbate, social justice issues such as gentrification, displacement, exclusion and inequity (Dooling, 2009; Quastel, 2009; Checker, 2011; Cucca, 2012; Holgersen & Malm, 2015; Gould and Lewis, 2018; Anguelovski et al., 2018).

Although the field of green gentrification studies is expanding, relatively little research has been conducted on how urban activists assess and oppose green discourses and what kinds of “alternatives” they envision instead (Pearsall & Anguelovski, 2016). To fill this gap, this thesis studies the local activists' dissensus and conflict against the large-scale eco-urbanization project *Porta Nuova*, in Milan. Milan brands itself as the biggest Smart City in Europe, openly embracing eco-urbanism as an approach to the city's development (Beretta, 2014). Between 2004 and 2015, Milan has undergone its largest urban redevelopment project to date, *Porta Nuova*, placing urban greening and sustainability as central components to the project as symbolized by the Vertical Forest towers and the Library of Trees park (Comune di Milano, 2019).

1.2 Research questions

The broader question underpinning this research is the following: How do local activists contest urban greening interventions and propose “alternative” green models? The more specific questions driving my research process are:

- RQ1. *Why* is the re-urbanization project of Porta Nuova contested by the activists?
- RQ2. In light of the reasons behind contestation, how is Porta Nuova’s urban greening agenda *framed* and *assessed* by the activists?
- RQ3. *What are the tactics* used by the activists to resist Porta Nuova and its urban greening agenda?
- RQ4. What are the *alternative models* of urban greening and sustainability activists and locals push for?

I deemed it necessary to investigate RQ1 before asking RQ2 because the arguments behind contestation are interconnected and do not necessarily concern the greening aspect of the project. Similarly, I ask RQ3 before asking RQ4 because as my results show, the tactics of resistance often serve as a basis for building an alternative approach to urban greening and sustainability.

1.3 Relevance to sustainability science

My research is positioned in the broader field of sustainability science. Sustainability science is interested in understanding the relations between society and nature to induce sustainable transformations in society (Kates et al., 2001). Indeed, the field is problem-driven and solution-oriented (Jerneck et al., 2011; Miller, 2013). As cities are the most densely populated areas in the world, they also face a high density of sustainability problems which need to be tackled. The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) has recently shown that urban areas have doubled since 1992 (IPBES, 2019). High levels of urbanization increasingly challenge the capacity of urban systems with environmental externalities (e.g. air pollution) and social segregation (Lang et al., 2011). Therefore, sustainability science has placed growing interest in understanding urban problems and the solutions needed to alleviate them (Gibson, Ostrom & Ahn, 2000; Wiek, Ness, Schweizer-Ries, Brand & Farioli, 2012; Polk, 2014). With a UPE standpoint, I argue that by building on locals’ and activists’ knowledge, opinions and dissensus, sustainability science has the potential to make cities more sustainable and inclusive.

1.4 Thesis structure

I start my thesis by drawing an exhaustive picture of the case study, as it will be helpful to better understand the results. Second, I elaborate on the literature on eco-urbanism to highlight the problem this approach

entails. Third, I present my theoretical background and justify how it helped me to guide my research. Fourth, I outline the methods used to conduct my research. Fifth, I present the results according to my research questions, followed by a discussion of my findings in relation to the theoretical background. I conclude by elaborating on the contribution of my thesis to the broader field of sustainability science.

2 Case study context

2.1 Porta Nuova and Isola: a new district and an old neighborhood

Milan's most unpopular characteristic is its bad air quality. A study from 2019 shows that Milan is the 6th most polluted city in Italy (Legambiente, 2019). Committed to solving this issue, Milan's Government Plan for 2030 sets urban greening as one of its top priorities (PGT, 2018). It is within this context that the municipality endorsed the re-urbanization project of Porta Nuova, which placed greening and environmental sustainability as its central theme (Anselmi, 2014; Porta Nuova, 2018). The project was developed, financed, and managed by the real estate company Hines and led by Hines' CEO Manfredi Catella - a key figure. With the construction works starting in 2005 and extending until 2015, Porta Nuova was the biggest re-urbanization project in Europe in its time, involving an area of 290.000 mq². Figure 2 highlights the new infrastructures of Porta Nuova, located in a semi-peripheral area encompassing three existing neighborhoods: Garibaldi, Varesine and Isola. In the eyes of the private developer this area was "degraded" due to its peculiar urban fabric. The railways of the nearby Garibaldi train station created a divide causing poor connectivity and the abandonment of old housing structures (Porta Nuova, 2018).



Figure 2. The figure highlights the new building and infrastructure of Porta Nuova. The central park connecting the district is the Library of Trees (Land, n.d.).

Hines defined Porta Nuova as “Milan’s gate of green” and a “heaven for pedestrians and cyclists” (Porta Nuova, 2018, p. 8); they defined Porta Nuova as a unique example of urban greening and sustainability given the use of green innovative technology and materials:

The buildings incorporate the latest energy saving solutions and sustainable materials so as to introduce a model of innovation to be taken up and shared across the entire spectrum of Italian urban development (Porta Nuova, 2018, p. 8).

Porta Nuova’s focus on green technology and sustainable development resonates with eco-urbanism as an approach to achieve sustainability in cities. There are two eco-urban symbols in Porta Nuova: The significantly vast park, the Library of Trees, designed by the Dutch studio Inside Outside, and the Vertical Forest residential towers, designed by Boeri studio², which specializes in designing vertical forests. These buildings entirely covered by trees and plants are designed as a measure to mitigate climate change, increase urban biodiversity of birds and insects, and reduce the sprawl effect of urban expansion (Boeri, 2019). However, by materializing urban sustainability as infrastructures that provide only green and environmentally friendly spaces and buildings, they have neglected considerations of social inclusion or well-being of existing residents.

The municipality and private investors had made attempts to redevelop the area where Porta Nuova stands today since World War II (Anselmi, 2014). One of the reasons why previous projects had not been successful, is the resistance from locals and activists of the existing neighborhood *Isola*. In the 1990s, they successfully appealed against two urban plans not in full compliance with city regulations on permitted building cubage (Anselmi, 2014). Hereby, the sensitive historical context of *Isola* and its residents are worth mentioning. The neighborhood gained this label (“*Isola*” in Italian means “island”) because of its isolated location, which is behind the long walls of the rail yard of Garibaldi train station. The resulting poor connectivity made *Isola* relatively unattractive and rent prices low (Brizioli, 2015). After World War II, a wave of Southern Italian immigrants moved to *Isola* to access industrial jobs in Milan. The working class shaped the active political connotation of *Isola*, which became well known as a manifestation of Italian partisans’ resistance³ (Brizioli, 2015). Moreover, since 1990s *Isola* hosted several *centri sociali* –political and cultural community centers usually characterized by left-wing politics. In 2001, for instance, *Isola*’s locals as well as artists and associations from Milan squatted in an old factory which was located in the only public park area of the neighborhood: *La Stecca* (figure 3). *La Stecca* became an artistic, cultural and political hub also denouncing the municipality’s scarce attention towards bottom-up movements and opposing its general top-down

² Re-named in 2008 Stefano Boeri Architetti

³ In Italian, Resistenza Partigiana. It was the Italian resistance movement against the fascist regime before and during World War II.

attitude towards re-urbanization (Brizioli, 2015). It was the symbol of Isola's identity: a neighborhood with a strong and engaged civil society.

Yet, Isola's unique profile made it increasingly attractive to the public and real estate developers (Brizioli, 2015). Despite successful attempts by locals to defend the neighborhood from large-scale re-urbanization projects throughout most of its history, the municipality approved and supported Porta Nuova in 2004. In spite of resistance and locals' suggestions for an alternative development, La Stecca and nearby old buildings were demolished in 2007 to make space for Porta Nuova's skyscrapers. This event epitomized the biggest defeat of the resisting groups (Brizioli, 2015). Moreover, the green area around La Stecca used to be the only public park in Isola. However, as figure 4 illustrates, today the Vertical Forest towers and other buildings replaced La Stecca and the surrounding park. Although resistance against Porta Nuova started before the beginning of constructions, activists still engage in contesting Porta Nuova and its negative social and spatial consequences which affected Isola and its surroundings. As I will outline in my results, resistance developed in different ways and forms.



Figure 3. South to north view of the park-area between streets *Via Confalonieri* and *Via Castiglia* before 2007. The white building standing in the middle is *La Stecca* (Brizioli, 2015).



Figure 4. West to east view of the area between streets *Via Confalonieri* and *Via Castillia* today. *La Stecca* and the park were replaced by several buildings, two of them are the Vertical Forest towers (Ronchi, 2019).

Even though Porta Nuova encompasses two other neighborhoods (Garibaldi and Varesine) for the scope of my research, I chose to mainly focus on the neighborhood of Isola for two reasons. On the one hand, the new infrastructures which were built in Isola (the Vertical Forest towers and Library of Trees park⁴) had the strongest greening agenda of the whole Porta Nuova project. On the other hand, it encountered the strongest local resistance from the activists and locals (Brizioli, 2015). The two contrasting elements provide an opportunity to investigate the research problem I set to explore: how urban civil society assesses large-scale urban greening interventions and what kind of greening they envision instead.

3 Setting the scene: eco-urbanism

In this section I briefly highlight eco-urbanism's characteristics and critiques to conceptually contextualize Porta Nuova.

Among the most influential political tools setting the sustainability agenda for cities worldwide is the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 11 and The New Urban Agenda (NUA) Habitat III (UN, 2016b). SDG 11 aims at making "cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable" (UN, 2016b). The NUA, adopted by the UN in 2016, builds upon SDG 11 and presents itself as an innovative shared vision of the sustainable cities "we" want to live in in the upcoming future. The UN itself refers to this vision as a real

⁴ The Library of Trees park is not inside Isola, but borders with it. However, as I better explain in the findings, the park was promoted by the developers as a way to compensate the loss of public green spaces once the park around *La Stecca* was replaced by Porta Nuova's infrastructures. Therefore, it is particularly relevant for the scope of my research in Isola.

“paradigm shift” (UN, 2017, paragraph III). In practice, the NUA commits to adopting “a smart-city approach” (UN, 2016b, p. 19).

A vast body of literature argues that the urban sustainable development strategies of the UN endorse a vision of what is usually referred to as eco-urbanism or green urbanism (see: Hadson and Marvin, 2010; Beretta, 2014; Cugrullo, 2016). This is practically exemplified by models such as eco-cities, eco-towns, sustainable cities, green cities, and smart-cities, among others (Beretta, 2014). Despite the different names, these “methods” of urban greening and sustainability share similar principles. Firstly, they see technological innovation and engineering solutions as main channels to reach environmental sustainability (Caprotti, 2014; Joss & Molella, 2013). Secondly, eco-urbanism projects tend to rely on technocritical knowledge produced at the global level, which is then exported to local settings (Hodson and Marvin, 2010; Roso, Béal & Mössner, 2013). Thirdly, the evaluation of development and implementation of eco-urban projects relies on fixed indicators, labels, rating systems, certifications and awards (Mössner, 2015; Roso, Béal & Mössner, 2017; Kaika, 2017). As these three features suggest, the concept of eco-urbanism reflect an ecological modernization (EM) approach (Hodson and Marvin, 2010; Beretta 2014; Cugrullo, 2016).

Much of this research claims that eco-cities are branded by urban planners and local authorities as a “win-win” for both the environment and the economy. However, as Hodson and Marvin (2010) defined them, they are “ecologically secure premium enclaves” (p. 299), granting access only to a restricted elite, capable of affording the high costs of its high-tech infrastructures. Moreover, in a case study of Masdar City, Abu Dhabi, Cugrullo (2016) and Caprotti (2014), showcase how eco-cities are built by poorly paid and exploited labor, unable to afford access to the urban spaces they build. They extend the argument to different scales, claiming that eco-projects rely on materials often grabbed in the “developing” world which tend to not be accounted for or purposely forgotten and replaced with the pleasant imaginary of the green and sustainable city. In a similar vein, Mössner (2015) and Xie, Tan-Mullins and Cheshmehzangi (2019) argue that eco-city projects tend to exclude local residents in the planning phase and are characterized, instead, by a top-down approach.

Eco-urbanism is the current mainstream approach to urban greening and sustainability and Cugrullo (2016) defined it as “the utopia of the few and dystopia of the many” (p. 2431). Issues of equity, social justice and inclusion are relegated to the background to prioritize managerial-scientific knowledge and labor and resource intensive technology that meets the needs of private investors and, ideally, of high-income residents. In such contexts, it becomes urgent to reintroduce questions of *social* sustainability in urban sustainability and environmental governance. As several authors have suggested, we can do so by listening and learning from activists and grassroots movements concerned with issues of social and environmental justice within urban greening interventions (Hadson and Marvin, 2010; Roso, Béal & Mössner, 2017; Kaika, 2017; Anguelovski et al., 2018).

4 Theoretical analytical framework: Urban political ecology

“What do cities have to do with political ecology? Everything!” (Heynen, 2014, p. 598)

For the scope of my research, I identify urban political ecology (UPE) as an umbrella framework which, with its normative attitude, opposes the mainstream approach of eco-urbanism and its pitfalls. In turn, it offers the mindset to analyze and explore alternative ecological practices which have emerged in cities (Heynen, Kaika & Swyngedouw, 2006; Robbins, 2012; Xie, Tan-Mullins and Cheshmehzangi, 2019). At its origins, political ecology (PE) focused on untangling power-relations behind environmental conflicts in rural areas (Robbins, 2012). With the years, it has expanded its scope to study the relation between urban nature and society, giving birth to the relatively new field of UPE (Robbins, 2012). This expansion comes from the realization that there is nothing unnatural, or “un-ecological” about cities. In fact, UPE researchers prefer to talk about an urbanization of nature rather than the construction of cities (Heynen, Kaika & Swyngedouw, 2006). Urban centers are the result of what UPE metaphorically defines as an urban metabolism: Intense socio-political-environmental relations, processes and flows which have transformed natural resources into the urban environment (Robbins, 2012). UPE views materials in the city, i.e. “a glass of water, an orange, or the steel and concrete embedded in buildings”, as the result of capitalist relations and flows which encounter in the city but come anywhere from the close environment to the other side of the world (Heynen, Kaika & Swyngedouw, 2006, p. 5). This is in stark contrast with the eco-urbanism tendency to disregard global socio-environmental externalities behind (local) urban projects that are meant to create “green”, sustainable cities.

In addition, UPE is a helpful framework to analyze the “invisibilization” of social justice issues such as inequity and exclusion within eco-urban projects, or EM in general (Kitchen, 2013; Xie, Tan-Mullins and Cheshmehzangi, 2019). It is concerned with questions on who loses, who wins and how resources can be fairly distributed (Kitchen, 2013). It calls for the enhancement of democratic city planning and an active research of the strategies which can create more equity and inclusivity through a fair distribution of power (Heynen, Kaika & Swyngedouw, 2006). In practice, Kaika (2017) suggests that an effective way to create just decision making and just cities is to listen to the “dissensus” of citizens. Instead of presenting fixed projects and involving citizens to decide over minor elements, institutions should listen to citizens’ demand from the start (Kaika, 2017). In fact, PE has a tradition to engage with the everyday context and knowledge of subordinated social groups involved in ecological conflicts (Leach, Scoones & Stirling, 2010; Robbins, 2012; Cornea, Véron and Zimmer, 2017). Building on this, UPE provides the theoretical grounding as to why it is relevant to explore conflicts and counter visions through the eyes of urban movements and locals. For the scope of my research, I now explore concepts which rest on and explain various facets of UPE. As table 1 summarizes, these concepts strengthen the motivation and relevance of my research questions.

Table 1. Theoretical framework informing and guiding my research. In bold, I highlight the most important motivations behind my research (own illustration).

Concepts	Why is this theoretical framework helpful for my research?
Urban political ecology	It scrutinizes capitalist power structures behind urban projects; it teases out who wins and who loses; it provides a justification as to why it is important to engage with locals' opinions and perceptions; it suggests local authorities to listen to citizens' "dissensus" ; it is interested with how to enhance democracy in cities.
Green gentrification	Builds on environmental justice: it is concerned with how urban greening and sustainability projects affects the most vulnerable social classes and leads to issues of exclusion, displacement, gentrification and inequity; it is most interested in understanding how activists oppose the greening sustainability discourse, green gentrification and how they reassert their vision of sustainability
Right to the city	Critique of the capitalist neoliberal city which hinders equal access to the city; it reasserts the power of citizens over democratic decision-making on the development of the city.

4.1 Green gentrification

The theoretical link between UPE and green gentrification rests on environmental justice. Environmental justice (EJ) is both a social movement and a theoretical framework of analysis (Robbins, 2012). It emerged in the urban context of the United State in 1980s as people of color and the urban poor demanded cleaner and healthier neighborhoods to live in (Robbins, 2012). The field of EJ was able to prove that environmental “bads” and goods are unfairly distributed within cities and that racial and classist minorities generally suffer from negative externalities, such as poor air quality from close by waste dumps (Robbins, 2012). In principle, therefore, urban activists have opposed negative environmental externalities from locally unwanted land uses (LULUs). However, in the last decade it has become obvious that green LULUs can also be the cause of urban environmental justice struggles (Anguelovski & Martínez Alier, 2014; Anguelovski, 2016). Not only toxic sites, but also environmental goods such as new green infrastructures and parks can be the source of urban conflicts which leads to “inequity, privilege, gentrification and exclusion” (Anguelovski, 2016, p. 23). The research field which is most interested with how (green) infrastructure threaten citizens’ urban territories studies the phenomena of green gentrification.

In my thesis I use the term “green gentrification” (Gould & Lewis, 2012), however, other authors have interchangeably used the term “eco gentrification” (Beretta, 2014), “ecological gentrification” (Dooling, 2009) and “environmental gentrification” (Checker, 2011). The most cited definition is the one from Dooling

(2009) who defines ecological gentrification as “the implementation of an environmental planning agenda related to public green spaces that leads to the displacement or exclusion of the most economically vulnerable human population while espousing an environmental ethic.” (p. 630).

Historically, questions of sustainability, environmentalism and greening were seen as possible obstacles to private investors interested in urban projects (Anguelovski, 2016; Gould and Lewis, 2018). However, in the last decades urban planners and private investors have co-opted the concept of sustainability and have integrated it into the urban agenda to increase profits while at the same time finding consensus among the public (Checker, 2011; Holgersen & Malm, 2015). In fact, the “sustainable” component of green planning seems to justify and conceal the questionable morality of negative social consequences such as displacement and inequity (Dooling, 2009; Quastel, 2009). Yet, urban social movements have not been silenced by green urban projects just because they were sponsored as environmentally sustainable. Regardless of their level of “greenness” they have opposed (green) LULUs because of their lack of attention for social sustainability issues (Anguelovski, 2016).

As a reaction, green gentrification research has been increasingly interested in understanding how residents oppose the green discourses of city planning and resist against green gentrification processes (Pearsall, 2012; Pearsall & Anguelovski, 2016; Anguelovski et al., 2018). In some instances, urban activists and residents of green gentrified neighborhoods have employed the traditional tactics and strategies of the environmental justice movement (Pearsall & Anguelovski, 2016). Other studies have found that although processes of green gentrification reduce resilience, residents have been successful in resisting gentrification through the exertion of home ownership or governmental tools such as rent stabilization (Pearsall, 2012). Yet, these studies call for further research “to better understand how activists oppose the a-political, post-political, and technocratic discourse of sustainability and reassert the social and political dimensions of the sustainability concept – and their right to the city” (Anguelovski, 2016, p. 31; Pearsall & Anguelovski, 2016, paragraph 4.2). In this sense, my research questions contribute to this stream of research by understanding how urban activists contest the greening intervention of Porta Nuova and what alternative greening they demand instead. Building on these results, in my discussion I come back to the green gentrification literature by highlighting how green spaces can become manifestations of exclusion and gentrification.

4.2 Right to the City

The notion of a right to the city has been first coined by Lefebvre in 1960s. Still, the imminent capitalist critique characterizing it, makes the right to the city one of the foundations of UPE and environmental justice. Lefebvre’s right to the city is exemplified through two primary rights for citizens (Nuvolati, 2011). The first is the right to participation; citizens should be involved in all decisions which contribute to the production and

re-production of the urban space. Contrary to simply involving citizens in deliberation and participation processes of an existing agenda, citizens need to be actively contributing in processes regarding the production of space in the city - they need to be the ones setting the agenda (Nuvolati, 2011). Second is the right to appropriation; it refers to the liberty of citizens to enjoy free access to urban spaces (Purcell, 2003; Nuvolati, 2011). Harvey (2008) argues that in today's neoliberal cities the right to the city is in the hands of private and semi-private elites. Cities, he asserts, are the result of a high concentration of social relations and *surplus product*, which are transformed into the density of infrastructures and services which characterize urban centers. Under capitalism, and in particular under neoliberalism, only few get to decide how the surplus product is employed and distributed (Harvey, 2008). Whether we as citizens accept or oppose such decisions (e.g. privatization) depends on the kind of consumers we are. In other words, not all citizens would necessarily mind to be excluded from decision-making when they will benefit from those decisions regardless (Harvey, 2008). Yet, the right to the city is about increasing the democratic control over the use of the surplus product for every citizen, without classist discrimination.

5 Methodology

5.1 Research design

The research design of my thesis is the single case study. "Single" because I do not compare my case to others, but I solely focus on Porta Nuova in Isola. Gerring (2011) defined a case as "a *spatially delimited* phenomenon (a unit) observed at a single point in time or over some period in time. It comprises the sort of *phenomena* that an inference attempts to explain" (p. 5). The spatial limit of my case study is represented by the new Porta Nuova district, with a focus on the area that was built inside, and borders with, the neighborhood Isola. I chose to focus on this particular spatial area for two reasons. First, it includes the two Vertical Forest towers and the Library of Trees park, which are the two interventions with the strongest greening agenda of the whole project. Second, as the strongest resistance came from Isola's locals and activist groups, it becomes relevant to look at the aspects of Porta Nuova which influenced Isola's the most. Yet, this does not mean that the activist groups were only concerned with the way the spatial limits of Isola would change or be affected. As I will outline later, much of the resistance was against different aspects of Porta Nuova as well as how it would affect nearby neighborhoods and the city as a whole.

5.1.1 What is this a case of?

This study is a case of contestation and alternative framings against the eco-urbanist revitalization project of Porta Nuova. Porta Nuova can be defined in many ways; the municipality and the private developer describe it as a unique and innovative example of urban greening and sustainability. The problem emerges in the

moment where Isola's locals oppose and contest this framing. The clash between the two counterparts represents the phenomena in this case study I aim to explain through my research questions.

5.2 Research method

My research questions and theoretical framework clearly define the research methods I employ. My aim is to explore the views, perceptions, and dissensus of those who resist urban greening interventions, not of private developers, the municipality or urban planners. To do so I had to retrieve direct information from actors engaged in the resistance, which is not always as available as that of the developers.

As highlighted by UPE, power structures are reproduced in communications (Robbins, 2012), which means that on a practical level, it is easy to find out how Hines or Milan's municipality envision Porta Nuova. Their economic capital power allows them to allocate resources in communication strategies (e.g. media articles, official website, etc.). Unsurprisingly, their positive framing reflects mainstream perceptions of the project given the support of the majority of national and international media. This may be verified through online searches about the components of Porta Nuova, from "Vertical forests" to "green city" or "green Milan". Conversely, Italian media have given some attention to the struggle of active citizens. The activists themselves have also created blogs and social media accounts to communicate their protesting initiatives and events as well as the reasons for their dissensus. Generally, however, the view point of resisting civil society in Porta Nuova remains underrepresented and, for the purpose of my research, it only offers an incomplete view since I could not find answers to my questions. To overcome this gap, I conducted interviews with locals and activist groups in the headquarters in which they are active.

5.2.1 Data collection

I conducted semi-structured interviews with 14 people. Except for two interviews which were conducted on the phone, all the meetings happened in Milan and most of them in Isola. The main sample of respondents is represented by Isola's urban activists. In appendix I, I summarize the profile of my respondents highlighting why interviewing them was relevant to answering my research questions. I conducted the interviews during my stay in Milan between the 6th and 13th of February 2019. The interviews followed the set of questions in appendix II; they lasted approximately 45 to 70 minutes and were held in Italian. I was always invited to meet the respondents in the place where they are active, most of them in Isola, which helped me to better understand many of their references.

5.2.2 Data analysis

I conducted a thematic analysis as a method to analyze the interviews. A thematic analysis helps the researcher to identify themes and patterns in qualitative data which are relevant to the research focus (Bryman, 2012; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Following Bryman’s (2012) suggestion, I identified my themes keeping my research questions in mind, which in turn were informed by my theoretical background. In figure 5 I visually exemplify how my theoretical background informed by thesis aim and, in turn, my research questions. In practice, I operationalized my analysis following Braun & Clarke’s framework on how to conduct a thematic analysis (Bryman, 2012; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Throughout the whole process of analysis, I used the qualitative data analytical software Nvivo. First, I became familiar with the data by transcribing interviews and notes and reading through them several times (Bryman, 2012). Second, I started generating codes by labeling respondents’ statements which would capture and summarize the empirical reality of their answers (Bryman, 2012; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017; Mortenses, 2019). As Mortenses (2019) suggests “the most important thing in your [thematic] analysis is that you *respect* the data and try to present your interview as *honestly* as possible”. Third, I fitted the codes into bigger themes which would relate to my research questions (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Finally, I reviewed and defined the themes in descriptive memos (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017).

In line with this final step, I structured the result section around the main themes I identified as most relevant to answer each research question. However, themes (e.g. concepts, events, and processes) are often interlinked and come back to answer more than one question. My results section attempts to be reflective of the language and terminology used by the activist – since I am focusing on dissensus. In the discussion, I come back to my results and discuss them in light of my theoretical background.

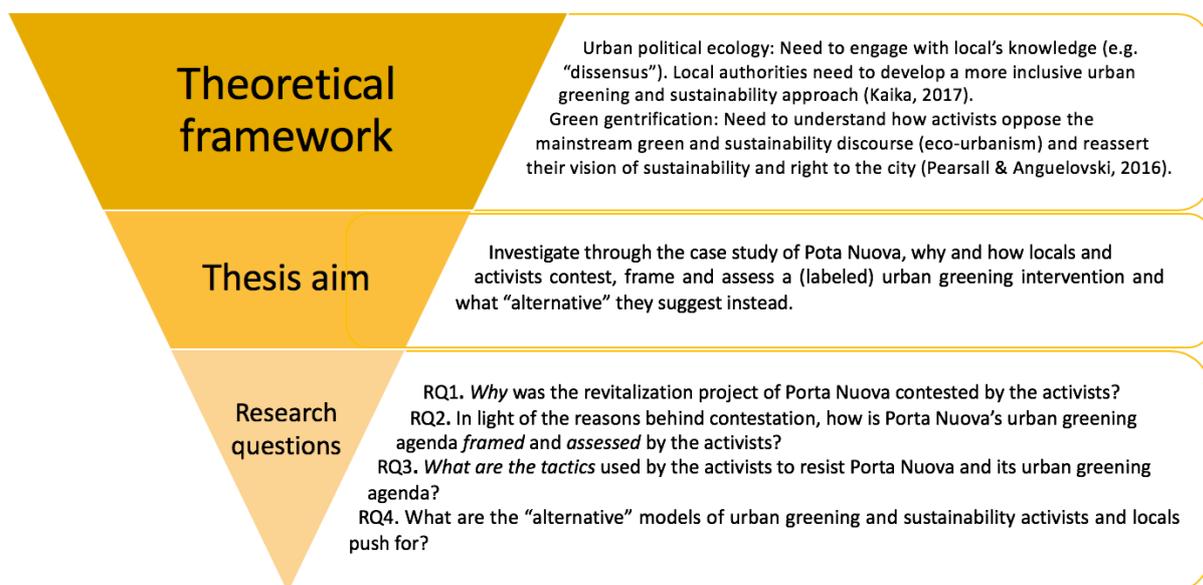


Figure 5. Summary of the theoretical framework informing my thesis aim and research questions (own illustration).

5.3 Limitations

Research in the field of political ecology is predominantly case study based (Robbins, 2012). One of the biggest limitations of case study research is that results cannot be easily generalized (Gerring, 2011; Bryman, 2012). Although eco-urbanism is the mainstream approach to urban greening and sustainability, the ways in which activists from different case studies respond to eco-urbanization projects might vary greatly. This variation might even occur within Milan itself. This is particularly true in my case study where Isola has a peculiar historical context. Moreover, even within Isola, my interviews were limited to a small sample of activists and locals. In fact, a distinction should also be made between these two categories of respondents. One of my questions to the activists was to what extent their views were representative of Isola's historical residents.⁵ They affirmed that even if engagement differs greatly (as I show in my results), the activists' demands largely represent the locals needs and interests. Yet, I cannot be absolutely certain that my findings are representative of all Isola's residents and of other activists.

Another limitation of my thesis concerns the limited assessment of the actual environmental sustainability performance of Porta Nuova or the activists' "alternative". Although I was able to notice specific environmentally sustainable practices (in the community garden: composting, reuse of rain water, unemployment of fertilizers...), I mainly focused on the ways in which locals frame sustainability and future vision of nature. In retrospect, I can see how a follow-up in-depth research on the environmental sustainability may further strengthen arguments against green gentrification and social exclusion.

Finally, given my theoretical justification to contribute to the green gentrification literature, my discussion illustrates how Porta Nuova's green spaces lead to different types of exclusion. Since the increase of prices is central to gentrification arguments (Gould & Lewis, 2012), I validated the information from my interviews on Isola's gentrification with quantitative data from the Italian tax agency⁶ (see figure 7). However, I did not conduct a quantitative, spatial and chronological attentive analysis to see how green spaces led to gentrification, displacement and exclusion. Therefore, the discussion on the link between greening and

⁵ By historical I refer to the locals who moved in before Porta Nuova's construction works begun. I did not include residents who had only recently moved in for two reasons. First, the history of mobilization against Porta Nuova is almost 20 years old. The answers to my interviews are based on contestation, mobilization and resistance of these past 20 years; thus, I cannot refer to today's residents. Second, residents who moved to Isola in recent years might have been attracted by the re-urbanization that the neighborhood underwent. Therefore, they might have different demands than the residents who lived in Isola before the transformation begun. Yet, this second point should not be generalized as I am aware of "new" residents who are critical to the ways in which Porta Nuova changed Isola.

⁶ In Italian: Agenzia delle Entrate (2019)

exclusion, is primarily based on the information of my interviewees (e.g. local activists' knowledge and perceptions). There are also strengths in processing this data, as some forms of exclusion can be measured with greater accuracy using qualitative analysis (e.g. identity loss, environmental trauma, etc.).

6 Empirical results

6.1 Why is the re-urbanization project of Porta Nuova contested?

The answer to this question can be summarized in the following simplified statement: because Porta Nuova would irreversibly change the identity of Isola. My respondents, however, were aware that the transformation of Isola cannot be solely traced back to new services, residents, green areas or other physical changes. As an UPE approach would suggest, behind a re-urbanization intervention there are distinct political decisions. Thus, the way Isola changed and is still changing is the result of *political decisions* on how to (re)urbanize the physical space; I illustrate this logic in figure 6. Consequently, I will answer the first research question by first briefly highlighting how Isola has transformed over the past 20 years and then I highlight the political moves and processes challenged by the local activists.



Figure 6. Logic I follow in structuring the answer to my first research question (own illustration).

6.1.1 A combination of undesired changes in Isola

For the activist groups the observable changes in Isola constitute undeniable evidence to oppose Porta Nuova. Isola started becoming attractive at the end of the 90s because of its “underground dimension” (A.M., personal communication). Many residents who arrived in the 1990s or in the very beginning of the 2000s bought a house in Isola because of its charm (I.I., personal communication). However, when the construction works of Porta Nuova began in 2006 housing prices in Isola increased dramatically (figure 7) and the neighborhood underwent drastic changes (Semi, 2015; E.L., personal communication). Most of the respondents pointed out that although Isola is still a socially diverse neighborhood, said diversity is increasingly in decline due to the lack of social housing and high rents which limit access to only middle- and high-income class residents (I.I., personal communication). Overall, as figure 8 shows, the activists share the idea that Isola underwent a process of gentrification and as a reaction they express dissatisfaction.

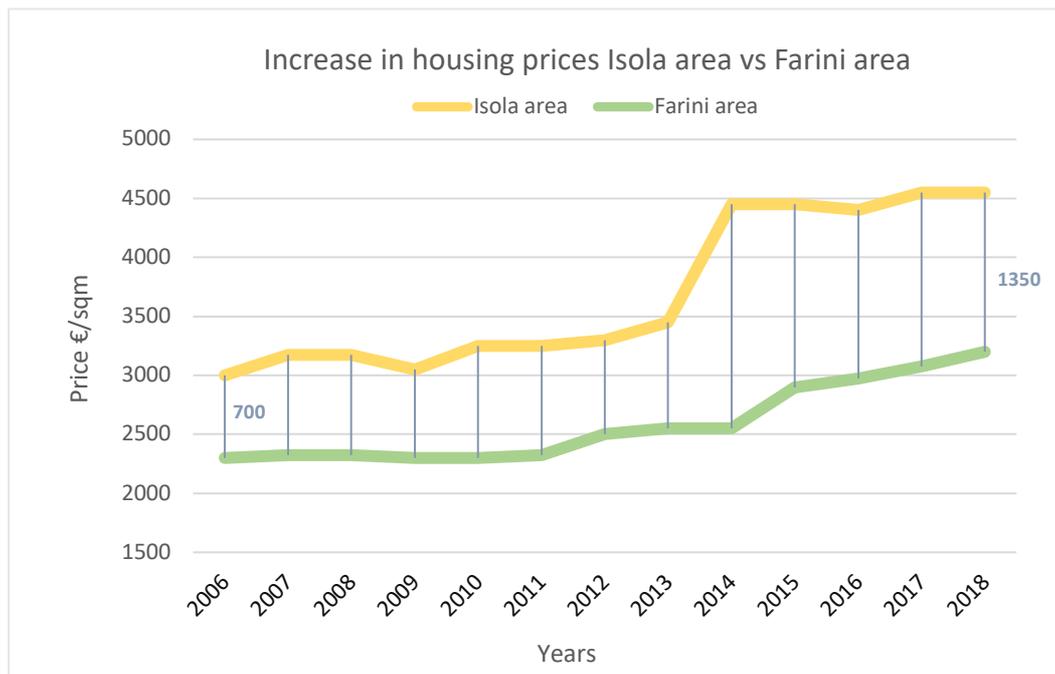


Figure 7. The figure shows the increase of price (€) per square meter in the Milan’s C12 zone (Isola area) in comparison with the C01 zone (Farini area). I compare Isola and Farini because they are both semi-peripheral neighborhoods and are adjacent to each other but are separated from the train station railway. The main difference between the two areas is that between 2006 and 2015, the area C12 (Isola’s) was affected by Porta Nuova’s constructions. Official data from *Agenzia delle Entrate* only date back to 2006. However, the residents I interviewed confirmed me that prices between the two areas in comparison used to be the same at the end of the 90s (M., F., personal communication). Therefore, there was no significant prices difference before 2006, when Porta Nuova constructions started. However, between 2006 and 2018 the price difference increased from 700 €/sqm to 1350 €/sqm. There has been a peak in prices between 2013 and 2014; this could be attributed to the fact that in those years the first buildings of Porta Nuova were completed and rented (own illustration based on *Agenzia Entrate*, 2019).

In concurrence with the beginning of Porta Nuova’s constructions, Isola became “the place to be” at night for both tourists and people coming from other parts of the city (E.L., personal communication). The new demand for nightlife led to a change in Isola’s commercial offerings. Small shops and retail stores rapidly shut down and dozens of restaurants and bars opened instead (E.L., M.S., A.A., personal communication). It was ironic to hear most of the respondents using the same example of the opening of many hamburger restaurants. In Italy, sandwiches are traditionally sold in *panineria* (i.e. sandwich place). However, *amburgheria* is a more recent concept, influenced by an American-global trend. The new commercial offer in Isola aims to satisfy a new “radical chic” demand (A.M., personal communication). In a nutshell, some of the most undesired changes in Isola are: the noise at night; the unaffordable prices of both



Figure 8. Poster in one of the activists’ headquarters (*Isola Pepe Verde*, Isola’s community garden which I introduce later) (own picture).

housing and shops; the space taken up by restaurants' tables on public streets; and most of all, the loss of a genuine underground identity which made Isola a unique neighborhood.

6.1.2 Contested politics behind Porta Nuova

Milan's vision: exclusive, but excluding

"Milan competes with Los Angeles and not with Pavia" (A.M., personal communication). This was one recurrent theme during the interviews. In the years between 1996 and 2011 the municipality of Milan was led by center-right parties which strongly shaped the development agenda of the city for the years to come (Anselmi, 2014). During this time, the city committed to large-scale projects which reflected the vision of Milan as an international and European capital, a Smart, sustainable and developed city; a high-tech metropolis and an urban center for design, art and cultural events (PDG, 2018). It is within this vision that Porta Nuova was developed. As, A.M. put it, the municipality "fell in love" with the project of Porta Nuova. According to A.M., before, the city used to identify itself with the postcard of the cathedral, today it identifies with the skyscrapers of Porta Nuova (figure 9 and 10). As such, one part of the activist's dissatisfaction with Porta Nuova is to be found in their wider critique against the city vision; a vision of wanting to grow fast and internationally, while looking modern and creative.



Figure 9. Milan's cathedral square: Milan's old "postcard" (Portalinoweb, 2019).



Figure 10. The skyscrapers of Porta Nuova: Milan's new "postcard" (3giorniamilano, 2019).

The main reason why the activist groups challenge this vision is that it only accommodates one category of public, leaving another behind, as I.C. pointed out with the example of housing prices:

Milan needed to clear the vision of a cold, harsh and rapid city [...] So they created a new stereotype, a new urban postcard of a city of design, of creativity. Isn't it the most beautiful thing you can think of? In Milan you can create things! If you are not from Milan...you cannot. If you are from Naples and were not born with the gift of creativity, you have to come to Milan to create! And look for a room at 800 euros a month to attend a private university. You see...it's a paradox!

The city continuously aims to attract a new public of foreign students, foreign investors and tourists (I.C., B.R., personal communications). In fact, Milan hosts a multitude of events during the year, e.g. fashion week, design week, etc. The city councilor B. R. emphasized that this has led to the increase of housing prices in Milan. During these weekly events, rents in the city peak to 900 euros per night (B.R., personal communication). While this makes temporary rental agreements through Airbnb a profitable business for land lords, it makes it harder for the less wealthy segments of society to find housing.

To sum up, one of the reasons why Porta Nuova is contested is to be found in the dissent with the vision of Milan to become an international capital; some activists define it as the vision for an "exclusive but excluding" city (A.S., personal communication). As Porta Nuova culturally and visually exemplifies this vision, it becomes a symbol of the excluding city politics and is therefore contested.

"Social washing"

In the years between 2006 and 2009, the private developer Hines organized a participatory process of more than one hundred meetings with the spoken intent to meet the needs of locals (G.A., V.C. personal communications). Some activists saw this as Hines' strategy to gain approval and consensus among Isola's locals (G.A., V.C., I.I., personal communications). In these meetings, Isola's residents could advance requests

and concerns. Overall, however, the activists assessed the participation process as negative for three main reasons.

Firstly, they saw it as a tool to gain citizens consensus and legitimization and not as a way to develop the planning together. I.I. elaborated on this:

The participation process was a method to create consent and not a method to go back to the project and re-postulate the project together. It was like saying 'this is how things are...let's see in how long I can convince you, and if I don't convince you, I have to find a way to split the groups and recreate consensus by organizing fun parties and stuff like that'.

As I will further explain in answering the third research question, the activist groups did split during the participation process.

Secondly, many of the locals' requests could not be satisfied and some promises were not kept. An important dispute concerned La Stecca, the squatted ex-factory used for cultural purposes. The activists made it clear that it was their top priority to keep the building for cultural purposes. However, in 2007 Hines took the final decision to demolish it (I.I., personal communication). This was one of the main events which led a majority of people to lose faith in the participatory process. M.S. and I.I. remember:

The sorrow to see La Stecca being demolished, which symbolically led to many other destructions, the sorrow of seeing something that is part of Milan's energies not being recognized...was so strong, that many people decided never to come back to this area.

La Stecca was testimony of an industrial past [...] And they did not only destroy La Stecca, but also other beautiful ex-factories around it which were dismissed but were beautiful buildings. All those buildings were destroyed. They only kept one which became Catella's foundation, all the rest is gone. This is like violence, it is an act of violence. It means to delete history.

Moreover, during the participation process locals asked for the creation of public cultural spaces as a way to compensate the disproportionately higher number of Porta Nuova's private spaces. One example worth mentioning is the civic center, a public cultural space accessible to Isola's residents, which was promised by Hines and the municipality but it still has not been built. The absence of cultural spaces in Isola such as a civic center or public library is heartfelt by the locals (A.A., E.L. personal communications).

Thirdly, a faction of the activists was skeptical to the participation process from the very beginning because the interests were too different and therefore impossible to reconcile. For them, the participation process could, at best, be a negotiation over "details" (G.A., personal communication) As A.M. said:

If one has to build a skyscraper in front of social housing buildings, maybe he can negotiate whether to build 22 or 24 floors. But essentially if I live in the social housing across the skyscraper today I don't see the sun anymore. What I mean is, there are some interests which cannot be reconciled.

To conclude, not only was the participation process criticized because of the way it was conducted, it was also contested as a political move of “social washing” that attempted to mask the real nature of the project, which had little to do with meeting the residents’ needs.

Privatization and absent public bodies

The municipality had attempted to redevelop the area where Porta Nuova stands today for more than 60 years (Anselmi, 2014). The scenery changed in 2003 with the arrival of Hines, which given the strong capital available managed to unify a highly fragmented area into one landownership and gain the support of the municipality (Anselmi, 2014; G.A., personal communication). This led to the activists seeing the municipality welcoming Hines with “open arms” (V.C., personal communication). As A.M. stated very clearly, the activists have criticized this accommodating attitude:

The municipality instead of safeguarding the public interest, became regulator of the private interest (Hines), and the private interest designed the city in its image and according to its economic interest.

City officials have argued that their lack of financial capital limited their authority in opposing the private interest (B.R., personal communication). As M.S. said:

We asked the municipality to intervene, not to leave us alone with them [Hines]. And Masseroli, the city councilor responsible for town planning, once told us what he thought: That the municipality does not have any money and so it is the private actor who decides.

Following similar reasoning, the municipality entrusted the management of the Porta Nuova’s park, the Library of Trees (in figure 11) to the private developer Manfredi Catella⁷ last year. The park was only finished in 2018, 14 years after its planning. It was the last piece of Porta Nuova to be completed. According to E.L. this was due to it being the least profitable part of the project. Although the park was designed to be public, and it officially still is, the maintenance costs would be too high for the municipality to finance (B.R., V. C., M.S., personal communications). Therefore, the municipality decided to assign the park maintenance through a call for tender, which was won by Catella. In exchange for maintaining the park, Catella can use the park to host events and is allowed to place temporary stands for commercial purposes. This was a common concern among the activists:

It took them 10 years to complete the Library of Trees park, and it’s all oriented on the other side [Porta Nuova district], not on our side [Isola]. If you read the call for tender, you will see that is made

⁷ Manfredi Catella was Hines’ CEO during the years of the negotiations and construction of Porta Nuova. Since 2015 he is Coima’s CEO and is still highly involved with Porta Nuova (e.g. Library of Trees park maintenance).

ad hoc for Catella, aside for maintenance and security, the municipality gave him the possibility to put kiosks, booths and so on. He can use the park as if it was private! (E.L., personal communication).

The (in)formal semi-privatization of the park came as a surprise to me because it is the only public green area of the whole Porta Nuova project. While I was writing the thesis, one of the activists let me know that for the Milan Furniture Fair (9th – 14th of April) the public functions of park were limited because the space was occupied by exhibition booths (A.A., personal communication).

Overall, the activists argue that the municipality has overshadowed their needs and has instead prioritized the interests of the private developer. This was done through formal political tools, like the call for park maintenance, and through the use of informal arguments, like the lack of financial capital to administer public spaces. As a consequence of this attitude, the private developer has enjoyed large decision-making powers on how to manage the project. The strong presence of the private developer is an important point to highlight as it determines the ways in which green spaces are developed; I further expand on this in the discussion section.



Figure 11. The Library of Trees park. The maintenance costs are high because it has a size of 90.000 sq2, containing 450 trees and 90.000 plants (Milan Repubblica, 2018)

6.2 In light of the reasons for contestation, how is Porta Nuova's urban greening agenda *framed* and *assessed* by the activists?

From the interviews it became clear that the activists do not evaluate Porta Nuova as a green heaven, as Hines would call it. The results to the first research question show that the activists see Porta Nuova as

another (unwanted) large-scale project of “new re-urbanization” (A.M., personal communication). Yet, they acknowledge that Hines and the municipality framed the project as an outstanding example of urban greening and environmental sustainability. The activists disagree with this framing and identify four unspoken purposes behind Porta Nuova’s greening agenda.

6.2.1 Fitting the global discourse

The first point relates to the activists’ contestation on Milan’s exclusive-excluding vision; to avoid repetition, I will only briefly mention how “greening” relates to this vision. Porta Nuova has the potential to fulfil Milan’s dream to become an international capital by displaying specific characteristics. The majority of the activists agree that these characteristics are to be found in the hot topics of the international debate, and “urban greening” and “sustainability” are one of them. A.M. made this very clear:

Milan is attempting this discourse: ‘now we are ready to present ourselves to the world, no longer as an Italian financial capital which is a parochialism outlook, but as a metropolis who winks at Europe and the world. To do this, we have to say that this transformation [Porta Nuova] is made with extreme attention to the national and global debates. For instance, what can we do? We can guarantee that in the middle of all these skyscrapers we put a big park we call the Library of Trees; [in addition] we can make sure that two among all the skyscrapers, which are the smallest because look how tall the others are, will have 200 plants on top [refers to Vertical Forest].

This indicates that Porta Nuova’s green agenda is one of the enablers which can change Milan’s image from monotonous “Italian financial capital” to an exciting, modern, green and innovative world city. As extensively explained above, the activists strongly criticize and oppose this vision because it excludes vulnerable parts of society.

6.2.2 Profits in disguise: Certification of “green rentability”

Most of the activists I interviewed articulated an argument along the following lines: greening and sustainability were labels used as a way to *justify* an intervention that in essence constituted a privatization project ultimately made for profit. I stress the term “justify”, because justification was a recurring word throughout the interviews. What seemed to genuinely frustrate some activists was the awareness that the project constituted a business-as-usual approach disguised as a greening intervention. It thus made it even harder for them to resist it. A.S. said:

This is business. A huge business. And it is a business based on large territorial marketing operation [of “greening”]. And it is very smart, unfortunately. It is a smart and sharp concealment.

This brings us back to the notion that “social washing” was one of the contested politics behind the Porta Nuova project. As in the case of “social washing”, activists contest green washing because it depicts a

dishonest reality. Moreover, it makes it more complicated for them to argue against it because the true nature of the project from their point of view, i.e. the privatization of the public space, is concealed.

For the activists, the case of sustainable certification is an example of this. Several of Porta Nuova's skyscrapers, including the Vertical Forest towers, obtained the LEED (sustainable building) certification, developed by the United States Green Building Council (USGBC). On their website, USGBC lists why real estate developers should aspire to obtain a LEED certification: their buildings will consume a "lower use of energy, water and other resources" and be "better for building occupants, the community and the environment", and at the same time they would obtain "faster lease up rates" and "higher release value" (USGBC, 2019). Overall, a real win-win-win scenario for the environment, the residents and profits. Most of my interviews, however, argue that Porta Nuova did not obtain the LEED certifications because it was environmentally sustainable, but the other way around: they (claimed to) work with sustainable construction techniques to obtain the certification (G.A., V.C., A.M., personal communication). According to G.A., Porta Nuova's skyscrapers will mainly be rented, and the LEED certification guarantees to the tenants that they will pay low prices for water, heating and electricity. In sum, the activists argue that Porta Nuova adopted claims of environmental sustainability in order to obtain a LEED certification, which will ensure them greater rentability of their buildings and, in general, profitability.

6.2.3 A green "cosmetic surgery" for others

M.S. said the municipality and the developer do not always share the same view when it comes to urban greening. One of the reasons the municipality is interested in the development of a green district is to make Milan look more beautiful, as it attracts a wider public and improves the image of the city. Many of the people I interviewed, and myself included, agree that the Library of Trees and the Vertical Forests are a beautiful and pleasing scenery. However, these interventions are still questioned because they are unable to offer meaningful advantages to the locals. A.M. defined the Vertical Forests as a "cosmetic surgery": it tries to transform what in essence is a skyscraper into something which alludes to the dimension of a forest. He said he does not care how "green" the effort is, the Vertical Forests will always be two skyscrapers non-accessible to most Milanese because the rents are out of reach⁸: "I don't care if they put trees on it, it still a skyscraper" (A.M., personal communication). Differently from the Vertical Forests, the Library of Trees is open to the public and could in principle satisfy the locals needs; yet the park is also negatively assessed for three main reasons.

⁸ The luxurious apartments of the Vertical Forest towers cost around 15.000 euro per square meter. Moreover, the monthly expense including the maintenance of plants is around 1.500 euros (Milano events, 2016)

The first explanation directly relates to the results of the first RQ on privatization: a park should be public, but the activists contest that the park was semi-privatized. Secondly, they do not share the philosophy behind the park. The park was designed by the Dutch studio Inside Outside and conceived as an “urban connector, cultural campus and botanical garden” (Inside Outside, n.d.). A.A., however, told me that the park “is always empty. It is not a crossable space”. Similarly, A.M. said:

The Library of Trees park has a design cut. It is not a multi-functional space where you can play, run, have a picnic or hang out in the evening. First of all, it is fenced, it's precluded. Then, it has its own rules which tell you what you can do and what you cannot do. It's a space where to take pictures of yourself, not a space where to get to know nature.

This means that no matter how green and beautiful the park is, it does not offer residents a place to socialize. It functions as a place for recreation and visit of outsiders and tourists strolling through the city rather than for the recreational uses of residents (A.A., personal communication). Isola used to have a public park: the one around La Stecca, where the Vertical Forest towers stand today. The old residents remember *that* park as a real place for socialization (E.L., M.S. personal communications). Thirdly, locals do not fully appreciate the park as it is not located where they would have wanted it to be. Hines had framed the park element as a way to compensate for the lack of green areas in Isola (M.S., personal communication). Yet, the Library of Trees is not really inside Isola, it only borders with it and is projected towards the skyscrapers of Porta Nuova (E. L., personal communication).

To recap, the greening agenda of Porta Nuova is seen by the activists as a beautification intervention, i.e. a “cosmetic surgery”. It attempts to make a space esthetically pleasant and “manicured” on the surface for the outsiders, but is in fact empty of real meaning and values for the activists and long terms residents.

6.2.4 Excessive energy use versus urban deforestation

The activists do not recognize any relevant examples of environmental sustainability in the whole Porta Nuova district. On the contrary, they believe that it is more energy intensive than others. The tall skyscrapers of Porta Nuova required a significant amount of natural resources to be built and significant levels of energy in order to function (V.C., personal communication). In fact, this occupies a central place in the activists' questioning of how sustainable the whole new district really is: the terraces of the Vertical Forests, for instance, need to hold hundreds of kilos of trees and plants, and therefore “require an excessive amount of concrete and steel compared to normal civil constructions” (A.S., personal communication). Moreover, some of the activists pointed out that *if* the municipality was truly interested in supporting an environmentally sustainable urban project, it would not be involved in projects which entail the deforestation of abandoned

naturalized areas in the city⁹. Put simply, they do not believe in Porta Nuova’s environmental sustainability because they see a paradox in the municipality endorsing the construction of a building which produces “an oxygen cylinder per day” (Vertical Forest) while at the same time supporting the deforestation of Milan’s “real lungs” (abandoned naturalized areas) (I.I., A.M., personal communication).

In sum, Isola’s activists assess Porta Nuova’s greening agenda as an agenda for other purposes than a genuine ambition to clean Milan’s air or to mitigate the ecological crisis: They do not see in Porta Nuova an urban greening intervention, but they do see a “green washing intervention” (A.S., personal communication). I visually summarize the findings to the second research question in figure 12.

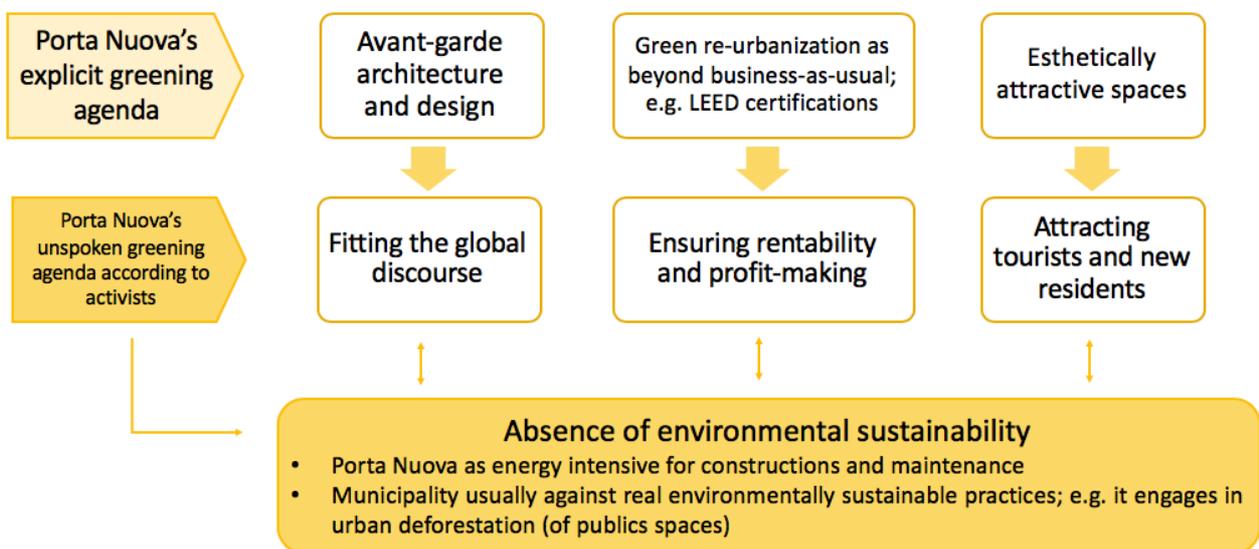


Figure 12. Results of the second research question. The first line shows the aspects used by private developers and municipality which prove the “greening” performance of Porta Nuova. The line below shows how activists reframe the real (unspoken) agenda behind these aspects. They identify four ways to re-frame the (unspoken) greening agendas of Porta Nuova. They are: (a) greening as a way to fit into the global discourse and rebrand an urban image, (b) greening as a way to obtaining “sustainable” certification standards that ensure rentability and profit-making, (c) greening as beautification and usage of the open space for outsiders. Moreover, they claim that the project is in fact not even environmentally sustainable (own illustration).

⁹ Some of Isola’s activists are also engaged in other conflicts which see the municipality engaged in the re-urbanization of abandoned naturalized areas in the city such as the revitalization project of the abandoned rail yards in Milan. At the time I conducted my interviews the project was in the middle of the planning process and was often mentioned as example which shows how the municipality is not interested in endorsing real environmental sustainability.

6.3. What are the tactics used by the activists to resist Porta Nuova and its urban greening agenda?

Since 2001, the mobilization against Porta Nuova involved thousands of people as well as numerous organized groups which were either focused on Isola or active in other parts of the city showing their support. The civil society resisting Porta Nuova homogeneously shared the desire to save Isola from a large-scale re-urbanization project which was going to change its identity. However, as the results to my first research question show, for some activists the reasons for contestations go beyond undesired changes in the neighborhood, they challenge the city politics or the economic model behind the project. Therefore, the activists present different characteristics, employed different tactics and used different ways of arguing. Some groups share synergies and support each other, others find themselves disagreeing on certain issues. One particular conflict emerged during the years of the participation process, when the activists became divided over La Stecca's destiny. Below I elaborate on this conflict while highlighting the different categories of the activist groups. This division is not exhaustive, but helpful to understand the different ways in which Porta Nuova was resisted and contested.

6.3.1 Direct tactics of resistance

The activists that undertook direct tactics of resistance are mainly the ones active in *Piano Terra* (appendix I). During the years when Porta Nuova was a construction site, they employed tactics such as squatting, protests, boycotting and acts of civil disobedience in the attempt to stop construction works while showing their dissent (A.M., personal communication). They did not take part in the participation processes because, as they explain it, their interests were irreconcilable with Hines's (A.A., personal communication). Their actions do not only represent resistance, but also the realization of a space which represents their counter vision. In 2012 they illegally squatted a vacant ex-shop which became *Piano Terra* and where they are still active today. Piano Terra hosts numerous associations and bottom-up groups engaged in themes such as feminism, environmentalism, precarious workers' rights, and other social justice issues. Moreover, Piano Terra is open to the public and it hosts free musical and cultural events. Piano Terra, therefore, as explained by its organizers, is not simply a place for people to meet and discuss resistance, but it aims at filling the absence of public cultural spaces in Isola. It does so by trying to embody the values they would like to see reflected in society: inclusion and equality.

6.3.2 Squatting the urban space

When La Stecca was going to be demolished, a group of bottom up artists fought against its demolition. After La Stecca was dismantled, some of these art associations became "scattered realities" (M.S., personal

communication). This was the case for Isola Art Centre: although the private developers offered them to find a space where they could move to, they did not accept it as a sign of protest. Yet, they kept existing as scattered reality and later on engaged in the creation of a community garden in Isola, which opened in 2013: *Isola Pepe Verde* (IPV) (appendix I). IPV differs from Piano Terra in the degree of agonism. Activists from Piano Terra illegally squatted a vacant space. In contrast, IPV occupies an abandoned area of public space in Isola thanks to a local authority decision. IPV's activists never received any financial support and communications with the municipality has often been difficult, but they are all in all legally using the space (M.S., personal communication). IPV also shares similarities with Piano Terra as they both engage in offering a practical counter vision against Porta Nuova's. They do not only promote a counter vision against the politics of privatization and mainstream re-urbanization, they also engage in an "alternative" greening model compared to the one Porta Nuova pursued. I further elaborate on IPV's model to answer my last research question.

6.3.3 Institutionalizing community uses of the space

The third group is represented by the activists from *Cantieri Isola* (appendix I) who also used to be operating at La Stecca. Cantieri Isola included Isola's residents as well as urbanists and architects from Milan. Their main ambition was to offer a counter-vision to the current model of urbanization: a bottom-up approach based on the involvement and cooperation of citizens (I.I., personal communication). According to other activists, Hines co-opted Cantieri Isola's activists during the participation process (A.M., M.S. personal communications). They agreed to have their headquarters moved to a new building re-named *La Stecca 3.0*, which today stands about 20 meters further away from where the original La Stecca used to be. However, La Stecca 3.0 officially belongs to Catella and the associations legally rent it for a cheap price. Today's president of La Stecca 3.0, an active member of Cantieri Isola, is aware that their decision to accept Hines' offer was not supported by other activists. She explained that as an architect and urbanist she knew that La Stecca was going to be demolished no matter how much they would resist:

We explained to people who did not have [our] architectonic and urbanist knowledge that it was impossible to ask for the maintenance of whole area as it was because...because it was just impossible! (I.I. personal communication)

As she explains, although she loved and strongly identified with the original La Stecca, she thinks that coming to terms with the enemy by accepting to move to La Stecca 3.0 was "better than nothing" (I.I., personal communication).

6.4 What are the “*alternative*” models of urban greening and sustainability locals push for?

As illustrated so far, Porta Nuova’s green areas and infrastructures have not brought major positive advantages to Isola’s locals. Paradoxically, they have brought disadvantages. The only public green park, the one surrounding La Stecca, was wiped out to host the Vertical Towers and other buildings. The paradox stands where a private greening infrastructure is used to wipe out a public greening area. However, activists do not limit themselves to contest these unwanted practices. They engage in the creation of alternative greening models and are informed on what urban greening should look like and what purposes it should fulfill. Regarding this, even if my respondents engage in different forms of activism, they share a similar vision. Following my respondents’ answers, I summarized the three main features of the alternative model of urban greening they push for.

6.4.1 “*Usable green*”: a place to interact and share

Hines and Isola’s locals have a different view on what purposes a green space should fulfill. As I explained, the Library of Trees does not satisfy the recreational needs of Isola’s long-term locals. Contrarily, the activists argue that green spaces should function as arenas to facilitate interaction among people, and between people and nature. A.M. explains:

There are two types of green: “usable” green and esthetic green [...] IPV is a wonderful laboratory for the neighborhood. It gives people the opportunity to come close to that alive experience of contact.

On a similar note, M.S., one of the funders of IPV, said:

For us the most important aspect is sociability. We value doing things together. And even if someone tries to tell the story that the Library of Trees is the like us [IPV], the types of green are very different. Theirs is a type of green where you can go and consume, but you cannot use your hands, you cannot touch it. And there you cannot organize an event like we do here, here we host birthday parties for children, because the neighborhood school does not have a place to celebrate.

These quotes show that a “usable green” is preferred over an aesthetic one. A “usable green” is a place where members actively participate to its evolution, where they can use their hands, where they can touch nature, where they come into contact and play with friends. In fact, IPV offers a (volunteer) job for whoever wants to join and people are welcome to maintain the place or to take care of its plants. IPV also sees that green spaces can have an important role for children and their education (M.S., E.L., personal communications). The aim is not only teaching children how to take care of plants, but rather teaching them the values of a close and supportive community: respect, inclusion and sharing responsibilities. A “usable green” does not automatically exclude the beautification of space, but that is not the main aim. About this, I.I. remembered

“Wild Island”, a project launched in 2002 in the old La Stecca’s park, that aimed at bringing people close to their territory while denouncing the soon to come top down re-urbanization of Isola:

Wild Island was a community garden project where the residents would bring the plants to plant from home. But it was wild because a landscaper designer would have fainted to see it! I mean... there was a cactus next to an azalea and a white rhododendron [laughs].

In sum, the alternative model of urban greening as envisioned by my respondents’ place at its center human interactions and interactions with nature, serves educational purposes and has very little to do with the beautification of the space.

6.4.2 Horizontal green

Activists defend that urban green spaces should be public, which goes beyond them being open for people to go there and spend time. It includes that people democratically decide over the development and design of a space (M.S., personal communication). It means that a place should be co-managed and self-organized by its residents. In their statute, IPV’s states that they believe in citizens’ active participation as a way to govern the neighborhood and the city. This also applies to environmental goals: “IPV achieves sustainable development through environmental protection, it believes that environmental objectives can be pursued through democratic local action” (Isola Pepe Verde, 2018, p. 16). They put this belief into practice when it comes to take decisions about the development of the garden itself. In one publication about IPV, they write:

Usually decisions are taken unanimously. We do not vote against people, but we look for a solution which allows everyone to be satisfied. This leads to discussing for hours where to put the cat’s kennel, but the aim is that nobody feels resentful about the decision taken (except for maybe the cat?)

The right to access, use and take decisions about a green space should coincide with concomitant duties and responsibilities. As IPV’s members have established “IPV is a sharing project, as such it belongs to everyone, in the pleasure to use it as well as in the responsibilities to preserve it” (Isola Pepe Verde, 2018, p. 12). To sum up, an alternative green space embodies political values such as democracy and duty-sharing; and residents should have the opportunity to “co-construct” its imaginary over time.

6.4.3 Just urban sustainability

Activists consider their general understanding of sustainability different from the one of Hines or the municipality. They place arguments such as affordability, inclusion, transparency, and equality at the center of sustainability (A.A., M.S., personal communications). A.M. argued:

Sustainability is made of transparency. Sustainability is doing social housing. It’s using construction techniques which stay below normal market threshold. It is making an efficiency available to everyone, that is quality of life! When I take an innovation and I make it available to the city.

Their alternative model of urban greening and sustainability prioritizes themes such as affordable housing and inclusion. For the activists, a sustainable neighborhood is a neighborhood where everyone has the right to housing (A.A., personal communication). As the activists see urban sustainability as a right to housing, one last aspect worth mentioning is how to make this possible. The municipality of Milan is fairly transparent about the considerable amount of vacant buildings in the city (B.R., personal communication; Comune di Milano, 2018). However, they are mostly abandoned and need to be renewed to be habitable. Some activists argued that the city often seems more interested in starting projects like the one of Porta Nuova, than investing money in renewing vacant places or damaged social housing structures (A.M., I.C., personal communication). In other words, urban sustainability should not be pursued by building new “sustainable” buildings, but it should be about making sure that existing housing is habitable and accessible.

7 Discussion

The results show the activists’ dissensus with the eco-district of Porta Nuova, framed as a top-down (i.e. vertical) privatization project which has led to social injustices such as gentrification and exclusion. Building on my results, in the first part of my discussion I explore the paradox of the green and unjust city. I contribute to the green gentrification literature by discussing how *exclusive* green spaces lead to *exclusion*. Secondly, I elaborate on the implications of an alternative urban greening model embodied in dissensus-driven practices. Finally, I discuss why focusing on dissensus is important for sustainability science and I suggest further avenues of research.

7.1 Right to the “vertical green” city

One of the most recurring arguments in my results is that Porta Nuova’s greening agenda concretizes Milan’s exclusive city vision. Clearly, Porta Nuova’s imaginary does not match the historical “underground” identity of Isola deeply embedded into its residents. On the contrary, Porta Nuova reflects the vision of the private developers which, supported by the municipality, enjoyed full power to shape and design the new district according to their interests. This shows how in eco-urban projects private developers take on the new role of green spaces designers, builders and managers. Moreover, as the case of the Library of Trees park shows, private developers also become the controllers of spaces initially conceived as public.

The activists’ view, on the other hand is based on Lefebvre’s idea: urban dwellers should enjoy a right to the city, which is the right to determine the city’s vision (Purcell, 2003; Harvey, 2008). Of course, Lefebvre thought of this right as to be equally shared among urban residents. Yet, the case of Porta Nuova confirms Harvey’s (2008) argument that in today’s neoliberal cities, the right to the city is shared amongst a selected few— and this holds true also for eco-districts like Porta Nuova. As privileged private developers enjoy the

right to the city, they build services and infrastructures which embody and reproduce this uneven power structure (Heynen, Kaika & Syngou, 2006; Hadson and Marvin, 2010; Anguelovski, et al. 2018). In other words, as few people design the city, the city only meets the needs of selected categories of people (Harvey, 2008). Green “sustainable” spaces are not exempt from this process. My results confirmed the general premise of green gentrification literature (Quastel, 2009; Dooling, 2009; Gould & Lewins, 2012), namely, that many oppose eco-urban greening and sustainability because it produces exclusion and gentrification in the urban fabric. I now discuss how these forms of exclusion manifest.

7.1.1 Vertical-green gentrification and exclusion

In this section, I contribute to the green gentrification literature by drawing on activists’ dissensus to show how green exclusive spaces produce social injustices such as exclusion. The sole “green” or “sustainable” characteristic does not necessarily lead to social injustice (Anguelovski at al., 2018). Isola’s community garden, for instance, ensures free access to anyone. Therefore, it is important to understand what the characteristics of “greenness” are and which are responsible for gentrification and other forms of exclusion (Anguelovski at al., 2018, p. 13). Here I discuss six of these characteristics that emerged from the results:

1. **(Vertical) privatization.** As the private actor has the power to shape the project in a vertical top-down fashion, locals are excluded from the process to assert the right to (plan) the city. In the case at hand, locals felt that the private developer deceptively included them in a fictitious participation process, which seems to be a common aspect of eco-urban projects (Kaika, 2017). As power is unequally distributed, “social washing” takes place: the focus is on details, promises are not kept, and less powerful parties are co-opted.
2. **Beautification.** The private actor develops a type of green “nature” which fails to meet the needs of the residents, thus their access and use of these spaces is limited. In the case of Porta Nuova, the park and the Vertical Forests are developed as an esthetically beautiful and well-maintained green “nature”. They do not allow residents to meaningful forms of socialization or human interaction. They are rather conceived for the passive use and satisfaction of outsiders (e.g. tourists) and not for long-term residents.
3. **Price restriction.** The private developer needs to ensure rentability of elitist buildings. It does so with the support of certifications such as LEED which increase their financial attractiveness (Kaika, 2017). The prices of new residential areas like the Vertical Forests are absolutely prohibitive. This is particularly true in Isola, where historical residents come from the working class. As a result, these buildings are, again, rented by outsiders and newcomers and not by long-term residents, which has

also been a trend extensively reported by the literature debating eco-urban greening (Hodson & Marvin, 2010).

4. **Excessive metabolization.** Activists called attention to how Porta Nuova claims to be sustainable, but the material, technology, transports, energy, and labor required to build all its skyscrapers goes beyond “normal civil constructions” (A.S., personal communication). With this they align with what political ecologists have emphasized about forms of exclusions that the social and environmental urban metabolism of projects like Porta Nuova entail – even outside the scale of the neighborhood or the city (Robbins, 2012). In fact, as critical eco-urban literature claims, the employment of more natural resources for elitists constructions implies an uneven distribution of those resources (Caprotti, 2014; Cugrullo, 2016).
5. **Demand evolution.** The exclusivity of green spaces is not only limited and embodied in those places *per se* (e.g. Gould and Lewis, 2012). Although neither me nor the activists have evidence to show the exact causality, the increase of housing price in Isola still shows that the development of greening spaces is not immune from accelerating gentrification of existing old spaces. Moreover, food gentrification (Anguelovski, 2016) can also lead to long-term shop owners not being able to afford rent. Or, as it noticeably occurred in the case of Isola, they shut down because they cannot meet the demand of new consumers.
6. **Identity demolition.** The complex of the old La Stecca and the big park around it, was a symbol of Isola’s unique identity. Its demolishment and replacement with new esthetic and semi-privatized green spaces led to a sort of traumatic identity loss of activists and locals. This has two implications. First, spatial exclusion occurs as the old good green is replaced by a new alien green. Second, exclusion is perceived cognitively and emotionally as symbols of identity are lost. This confirms that the development of new green spaces can also lead to experiences of “environmental trauma” (Anguelovski et al., 2018, p. 9).

Overall, the activists’ main contribution is to show how eco-urban projects like Porta Nuova present a paradox. Private developers design esthetically beautiful and “manicured” green infrastructures claiming to contribute to an innovative sustainable city. However, these green infrastructures incorporate, perform, and reproduce spatial, social, emotional and political exclusion on different scales – drastically undermining social justice and the locals’ right to the city. This conundrum is highlighted by the title of this thesis: “it doesn’t matter if you put trees on it, it still is a skyscraper” (A.M., personal communications).

Finally, I want to stress that the problem does not lie in the “greenness” of the space because when green is esthetically attractive it will not necessary lead to exclusion. It is when green infrastructures are developed by a restricted group of people for a restricted group of people, that these places can only satisfy the needs of the few. If the Vertical Forest towers or Library of Trees park satisfies the needs of few high-income

residents or tourists, it is not for their enjoyment. It is because the private developer drives profits and advantage from their enjoyment. The real issue, therefore, lies in the neoliberal attitude of the public authorities to let the private sector be the only one enjoying the right to the “vertical-green” city.

7.2 An alternative model: Vertical versus horizontal sustainability

Activists’ dissensus is not only about contestation (Kaika, 2017). Activists engage in dissensus-based practices which embody their alternative counter visions of urban greening. As local activists have different values and knowledge, there is no one single vision. However, they do share similar characteristics, which I use to make some generalizations about one alternative urban greening model. This alternative vision builds on the robust integration of political, social and environmental values such as local democracy; inclusion; transparency; human-human and human-nature interactions; access to housing; access to “usable” spaces; environmental protection and the sharing of responsibilities. These values are enacted and embodied by norms such as horizontal, unanimous and transparent decision-making processes; education; the creation of public and “usable” spaces; affordable housing; or the setup of internal rules (e.g. IPV Statue) which establish duties and responsibilities. As illustrated in figure 13, values lay the foundation of co-constructed norms which in turn give shape to physical spaces and practices.

From a Lefebvrian perspective the values represent the locals right to the city (Purcell, 2003; Nuvolati, 2003). Whereas the norms represent their right of participation and right of appropriation (Nuvolati, 2003). In the case of Isola, infrastructures such as the Vertical Forests or the Library of Trees expropriated locals from these rights. As a reaction, Isola’s activists and locals reclaim these rights through the creation of spaces based on their own values and norms. The community garden, for instance, gives the opportunity for its members, to take decisions horizontally and unanimously – executing people’s right of participation. Similarly, activists and locals are physically engaged in the development of the space - enacting their right of appropriation. As the value of democracy is enacted by the norms of horizontal decision making, from a Lefebvrian perspective the right to the city is enacted by right of appropriation and participation (Nuvolati 2003).

Finally, as figure 13 shows, an alternative approach to urban greening and sustainability is not narrowed to the creation of urban spaces such as the community garden. The same values and mechanisms lay the foundations for other practices such as social housing or a more holistic approach to city planning which “recycles” old housing and renews it to make it habitable. Certainly, beside the mentioned values and mechanisms there are several other inputs which are needed for an alternative approach to be implemented. Yet, the aim of my discussion is not to list all the enablers of an alternative approach to urban greening and sustainability, but rather show what it would look like and how it is funded by (socio-political environmental) values and norms.

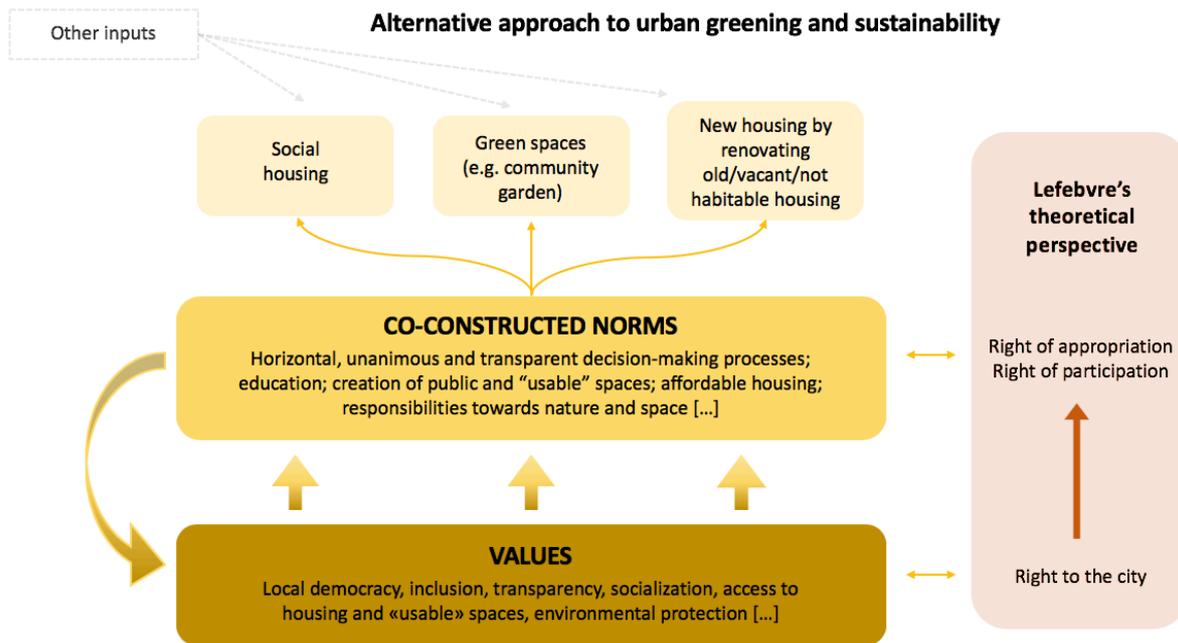


Figure 13. A dissensus-based alternative approach to urban greening and sustainability lays its foundations on values and co-constructed norms. From Lefebvre’s perspective, it functions as a strategy for activists and residents to reassert their right to the city (own illustration).

7.2.1 Environmental sustainability: a (socio-political) mean, not an end

Activists are aware that Milan’s air is polluted and that green areas have the potential to mitigate this problem, and with the community garden they want to contribute to fix it. However, before an environmental sustainability agenda, their idea of green space prioritizes socialization and interaction with other humans and with nature. They are places which embody and display social justice - or as Lefebvre would put it, they are places which embody and reassert their right to the city. This forms a net contrast with eco-urbanism, which prioritizes achieving environmental sustainability through technological progress (Beretta, 2014; Cugrullo, 2014; Caprotti, 2016). These contrasting priorities, highlight the incompatibility of both approaches. For the activists, urban sustainability cannot simply be achieved through the integration of some social measures into greening practices. On the contrary, *greening practices should be part of a socially just approach to city development.*

Against the construction of exclusive parks and vertical forests as a way to “green” the city, activists respond with the creation of horizontal green spaces which incorporate, perform and reproduce their (violated) right to the city and vision of a socially just city.

7.3 A dissensus based urban future? New directions for planning and research

UPE researcher Kaika (2017) suggests that an effective way for public authorities to create equitable sustainable cities is to listen to the “dissensus” of citizens. Instead of presenting a fixed project and involve citizens in a later stage, institutions should listen to what citizens demand from the beginning. The rules and methods over how decisions are taken should be decided jointly and different parties should enjoy equal power (Kaika, 2017). On paper, the NUA and SDG 11 promote participative processes to urban planning (UN, 2016; UN, 2016b). However, as Porta Nuova’s “social washing” shows, institutions and the private sector have so far understood participation processes as a way to legitimize their own interests and find consensus over pre-established projects. Public authorities should step in to limit the power of the private urban developers. At the same time, municipalities should converge their attention on citizens’ dissensus, rather than on finding their consensus.

With this in mind, my thesis contributes to the field of sustainability science by analyzing and explaining citizens’ dissensus as a way to create more just and sustainable cities. As a second step, sustainability science can draw on dissensus-based research like my thesis to develop solution-oriented tools based on its core principle: transdisciplinarity; which allows a greater integration of civil society actors and researchers from different backgrounds and disciplines (Lang et al., 2012; Polk, 2014). First, sustainability science research on citizens’ dissensus can advise public local authorities with practical tools (e.g. policies) to improve their systems (e.g. legal frameworks) to actively and directly include civil society in city planning. My thesis, already provides some inspiration on the values and mechanisms needed to develop a more inclusive urban greening model (see figure 12). Second, as today’s mainstream approach to urban sustainability gives scarce attention to social justice issues, transdisciplinarity tells us that the knowledge of sociological experts is needed as much as the one of designers, architects and engineers.

Moreover, this has the potential to be taken a step further. Lately sustainability science has been particularly interested in studying social movements as it identifies in them a viable agency to bring about positive change for sustainability (CIVICSUS, 2019; Pelenc et al., 2019). These studies aim at providing suggestions and scientific knowledge to environmental movements in order to enhance their chances of success (Pelenc et al., 2019). Therefore, future sustainability science research could advance suggestions on how urban activists, like the ones in Isola, can be more effective in achieving their goals. Based on my field experience in Milan, however, I want to emphasize that activists are knowledgeable and prepared. Therefore, the exchange of knowledge between urban activists and sustainability scientists should be reciprocal rather than unilateral.

8 Conclusion

Eco-urbanism - the mainstream approach to urban greening – risks to undermine the social sphere of sustainability proving to be the utopia of the few and dystopia of the many. As a response, the UPE and green gentrification literature advocates for greater engagement with the dissensus of locals and activists to develop more just cities. Building on this theoretical framework, I analyzed the conflict behind Milan’s eco-district Porta Nuova - with its esthetic Vertical Forests and Library of Trees – to understand how local activists contest urban interventions and propose “alternative” green models. My results show that Porta Nuova is framed as a top-down privatization project which leads to exclusion and gentrification. On the one hand, activists contest the politics behind it: the exclusive/excluding vision of a global city; the “social washing” of a fictitious participation process; and the excessive power of private developers. On the other hand, they denounce Porta Nuova’s greening agenda as an expedient to hide its real unspoken agenda: to fulfil the excluding city vision; to justify privatization for profit making with the use of “sustainable” certification labels that ensure rentability; and to serve esthetic purposes for outsiders and high-income residents. Drawing on the activists’ dissensus, I argue that attractive green spaces are not excluding and gentrifying *per se*. The problem emerges when they are designed, managed, and controlled by a small elite, who creates spaces which only fulfill the needs and enjoyment of the few - and exclude long-term residents. Eco-urban spaces like Porta Nuova are the expression of a small elite asserting their right to the “vertical green” city.

As a reaction, activists engage in dissensus-based practices embodying an alternative urban sustainability model which incorporates and reflects the values they deem most important such as democracy, inclusion, meaningful social interactions and access to use, share and develop spaces together. From a Lefebvrian perspective, these values reflect their right to the city and they execute it by practicing their right of appropriation and participation. Environmental protection is also seen as fundamental value, but rather than being an end *per se*, it is seen as a means to achieve greater social inclusion. In summary, eco-urban spaces like Porta Nuova incorporate, perform and reproduce exclusion on different levels and scales. Activists respond by engaging with dissensus-driven alternatives which incorporate, perform and reproduce their vision of a sustainable and just city and reassert their right to the city.

Finally, there is the potential to establish a reciprocal learning process between sustainability science and urban social movements. With my research I contribute to sustainability science drawing on urban movements’ knowledge as a basis to create a more inclusive and “socially sustainable” urban greening model. Future research can, humbly, provide urban movements with scientific knowledge on how to be more effective and successful. Future cities should re-direct their attention to the needs and demands of civil society. In this way, cities can become more just and sustainable and will not run the risk to end up like Calvino’s city Leonia: Submerged from the avalanche of its negative social and environmental externalities.

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Appendices

Appendix I: Respondents information

Summary information about respondents. The names of the institutions are in original language, the translations are my own. I exclusively highlighted the role and the organization/institution of the respondents that is relevant for my research, or in other words the role they covered in answering my questions. Clearly, they all cover different roles in their lives, they are workers, students, members of other associations and so on.

Name initials	Relevant role, group /institution	About the group/institution
A. M. A. S.	Activists, Off Topic	Off topic is a activists' lab which research, highlights and opposes the social, spatial and political "metamorphosis" Milan is undergoing. Off topic headquarter is <i>Piano Terra</i> .
A. A.	Activist, <i>Piano Terra</i>	<i>Piano Terra</i> is a squatted ex-shop in Isola which hosts political and cultural associations and activist' groups and is located in front of the Vertical Forest towers. <i>Piano Terra</i> in Italian means "ground floor", the name itself is a provocation against the construction of skyscrapers. Their decision to be located in Isola stems from the will of denouncing the top-down re-urbanization and privatization process the neighbourhood has undergone.
M. S.	Activist, <i>Isola Pepe Verde</i>	<i>Isola Pepe Verde</i> is a community garden created in 2013 in Isola. It was conceived as a public area for socialization as a reaction to Porta Nuova's constructions.
E. F.	Shop owner (Isola) & activist <i>Isola Pepe Verde</i>	E. F. is the owner of the book shop <i>Isola Libri</i> , located in the neighbourhood Isola. She opened the shop as a reaction against the lack of cultural public spaces in Isola.
I. I.	Activist, Cantieri Isola & Architect, La Stecca	<i>Cantieri Isola</i> , in Italian "Construction Sites Isola" is an activist group formed by architects, urbanists and locals from Isola created in the early 2000s. They opposed Porta Nuova's planning top-down approach and advocated for higher inclusion of residents and grassroots movements in urbanization processes.
I. C. F. A. G. P.	Activists, LUME	LUME is a mainly student-led group of activists who denounces Milan's inclusion issues. From lack of accessible cultural events to the lack of integration policies for migrants. Although not focused on Isola, they were helpful in explaining the main critiques against Milan's social housing policies.

V. C. G. A.	Urban PhD researcher, University of Bicocca- Milan Urban Post Doc, University of Bicocca- Milan	Both researchers have conducted empirical research in Isola concerning Porta Nuova. They were helpful in indicating relevant actors to interview and providing me with background information.
M. F.	Residents Isola	These interviews provided me with perceptions and views on how Porta Nuova changed Isola from the perspective of locals who have not been actively involved in resistance and contestation.
B. R.	City councillor, left wing party (ex green party member)	Interviewing one actor working in close contact with the municipality provided me with an internal perspective on the municipality attitude towards the project. The respondent was generally sympathising with the activists and was critical to the way in which previous municipalities conducted Porta Nuova's planning and constructions.

Appendix II: Interview questions

Below, the questions guiding my interviews. The questions were written with the support and suggestions of the Barcelona Lab for Urban Environmental Justice and Sustainability.

Questions for activists and residents

I asked all the questions below to the activists. The questions with a star (*) were also asked to the “non-activist” residents.

- 1) Going back to 15 years ago, what kind of sustainability issues (environmental, social and economic) you would have liked to see addressed? To what extent have your desires and wishes for Isola become real?
- 2) In the most recent years, which have been the sustainability issues (environmental, social and economic) in Isola?
- 3) What are your current priorities and objectives as social movement? Are environmental and social sustainability part of your objectives? What is your idea of sustainability?

About the project Porta Nuova, in Isola

- 4) What has been the first time you heard about the project? What did you initially think and how did you perceive it?*
- 5) To what extent the project had the objective to create a more green, healthy, sustainable and inclusive city?*

- 6) What is the vision and intention of Milan's municipality and the investors behind the project Porta Nuova in Isola? In your opinion, what is their idea of sustainability?*
- 7) What is your opinion concerning the process of development and implementation of the project? Did you take part in the participation process? Do you feel it has been a democratic and inclusive process?*
- 8) Since the project has started, how has the relationship of your group with the city changed and evolved? And with the investors? And the urban planners? Did you have any contact with them?
- 9) In your opinion, who has benefitted the most from this project? And how?*
- 10) Do you know of policies and decisions from the municipality (or other actors) to make the project Porta Nuova a more inclusive one from the social aspect? For instance, have they invested in social housing?*
- 11) What are other positive and negative general impacts associated with Porta Nuova? How did they influence you?*
- 12) How do you think that the quality of life of Isola has changed since the development of the project? How have the prices of rents or access to housing changed? How has the profile of residents in Isola changed? (age, gender, education, nationality, employment)?*
- 13) Do you know anyone who had to move away from Isola because of the increase in prices?*
- 14) What do you think could be measures and policies necessary to face issues such as gentrification and access to housing?
- 14) What are your strategies and tactics to make this situation more bearable?
- 15) There are other groups of different natures which are critical to the project (give examples). What is your relationship to them? In what way you think you are similar and in what ways you think you are different?
- 16) What are the major barriers and obstacles that you as an activist or your group has encountered?
- 17) How much do you think the opinion of your group is representative of the historical population of Isola?
- 18) Who would you suggest me to talk further about this topic?

Questions for city councilor

- 1) What has been the municipality attitude towards environmental sustainability in the last 10 years? How was it pursued?
- 2) What have been the incentives to make Milan greener and more sustainable?
- 3) In general, how much has the municipality integrated social aspects (e.g. equity, housing) in environmental sustainability?
- 4) Have social issues emerged around projects and policies aimed at urban environmental sustainability?

- 5) To what extent have these issues been contested and resisted by the activists?
- 6) What has the municipality done to make Porta Nuova's private and public spaces accessible to all?
- 7) There is a field of research showing that sustainability initiative might accelerate social exclusion. Could you notice anything similar in Milan? What are the factors contributing to this issue?
- 8) How is the municipality dealing with these issues?