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Station to Station

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Reclaiming abandoned railway infrastructure for post-progress times

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We work at a train station. Not at the ticket counter, the bar, or the toilets, but at a grassroots community academy called *La Foresta*,¹ located right next to the office of the railway police. We have worked here since 2017, first around and now in our local train station, as a group of actively engaged citizens,² freelance educators, researchers in the wild,³ and change-oriented feral entrepreneurs.⁴ In this text, we share three vignettes and the respective key learnings of the collective process of creative and transformative infrastructuring that we are driving in and around the train station of Rovereto, a town with 40,000 inhabitants in the Italian Alps.

Our context

Our processes are rooted in a shared and continuous analysis that we are living in times when progress has run out of steam, the narrative of progress simply does not hold any more:⁵ “Work intensity and the cost of living are exhausting me”; “The storm Vaia tearing down millions of trees was truly scary”; “What is going on in our schools that children are so apathetic?”; “It has not been raining for almost two years and now it does not stop. So weird”; “Where are the swallows this summer?” These snippets of conversations you can overhear on buses, in cafés and playgrounds in our town. People wonder what has become of the social contract, of stable climate and thriving biodiversity.

We acknowledge of course that affluence in Europe was built on oppression and destruction in other places in the world⁶. But still, in this scenario where we understand ourselves as working in the ruins of modernity and the capitalist economy,⁷ local infrastructure spaces where we can collaboratively

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1 “La Foresta - Accademia Di Comunità,” accessed February 23, 2021, <https://laforesta.net/>; Melissa Harrison et al., “La Foresta,” in *Urban Commons Handbook* (Ed.) *Urban Commons Research Collective* (Barcelona: dpr-barcelona, 2022).

2 Kathrin Böhm, Tom James, and Doina Petrescu (Eds.) *Learn to Act: Introducing the Eco Nomadic School* (Paris: aaa/peprav, 2017).

3 Michel Callon and Vololona Rabeharisoa, “Research ‘in the Wild’ and the Shaping of New Social Identities,” *Technology in Society* 25 (2003): 193–204.

4 Katherine Gibson, *Take Back the Economy, Any Time, Any Place: A Manual for Constituting Community Economies*, 2012.

5 Johan Rockström et al., “Planetary Boundaries: Exploring the Safe Operating Space for Humanity,” *Ecology and Society* 14, no. 2 (November 18, 2009); Jason W. Moore, “The Capitalocene Part I: On the Nature & Origins of Our Ecological Crisis,” 2014, www.jasonwmoore.com/uploads/The_Capitalocene_Part_I_June_2014.pdf; Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance* (Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press, 2020)

6 Vanessa Machado de Oliveira, *Hospicing Modernity: Facing Humanity’s Wrongs and the Implications for Social Activism* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2021).

7 Isabelle Stengers, *Au Temps Des Catastrophes: Résister à La Barbarie Qui Vient* (Paris: La Découverte, 2009); Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2015); Ulrich Brand and Markus Wissen, *Imperiale Lebensweise: Zur Ausbeutung von Mensch und Natur in Zeiten des globalen Kapitalismus* (München: Oekom Verlag GmbH, 2017); Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota

shape inventive, transformative cohesion, fostering ways of sustaining livelihoods and multispecies relations become essential. In practice, much of our collective work is supported by and unfolds in and around the left-over, abandoned infrastructures of 19th century promises of progress: empty, run-down spaces at our train station, which – despite having lost many of its functions, such as a newsagent, a delivery service, a doctor’s office, flats for railway workers – still function as a stop for regional, national and international trains.

Vignette #1 – Seeding the shared vision of a community academy (2017-2020)

When in 2015 our valley saw the consistent arrival of groups of migrants who risked their lives crossing the Mediterranean to seek international protection in Europe, we gathered around the wish to actively engage with this situation, which was being demonized by the media by falsely portraying it as an overwhelming crisis. At the time, some of us first established a community garden and later co-constructed and activated a community space in a warehouse next to a run-down hotel that was repurposed by the regional government to host 80 male asylum seekers.⁸ Already in 2017 we were forced to dismantle that independent community space, which displeased the local administration. Learning from our friends and spatial practice mentors *aaa* in Paris,⁹ we scattered our structures across other community spaces in our region. Nevertheless, the informal network of people who met via that space kept growing: artists, craftsmen, agro-ecologists, social workers, cultural producers, engaged pensioners and other active citizens. In fact, having experienced the power of such a space and missing it dearly when it was gone fortified our desire to create a community resource center that would allow us to concert our ideas, efforts and resources.

This desire for a community resource center initiated a summer of mapping empty spaces in Rovereto, which ended the moment we saw posters going up on an empty building of the train station complex which said “For Rent”. The idea of a resource center at the train station, the main mobility hub in our valley and thus key not only to people in Rovereto but also the surrounding villages and valleys galvanized our imagination. We went online to check the conditions of rent and found a description of how the owners of the space, the Italian Railway Network, wanted to connect with local municipalities, entrepreneurs and civic society association in order for them to reactivate these types of spaces all around Italy as “veritable academies at the heart of the local community”. We took that proposal at face value and crafted a two-page proposal for a three-year, rent-free trial of a community academy at the station that would combine cultural and social work. We sent that proposal off to Rome, with the vague feeling that we would never hear back. But a reply came within one week and, to our even greater surprise, it was positive: yes, the railway authorities invited us to come forward with a full proposal. Thus began the three-year process of co-creation of *La Foresta*. This process of infrastructuring included not only defining the activities, values, governance model, contractual rent arrangements and spatial redefinition of the spaces, but also bringing more actors onboard, starting with the Municipality of Rovereto.

Vignette #2 – The community academy is bubbling with activities (2020-2023)

As commuters are alighting to the platform on a late summer afternoon, they drift past a group of

Press, 2018).

8 “Comun’Orto,” accessed September 21, 2024, <https://comunorto.org/>; Bianca Elzenbaumer, “Vallagarina Valley, Rovereto, Interview with Bianca Elzenbaumer,” in *Learn to Act: Introducing the Eco-Nomadic School* (Paris: Urban Tactics, 2017), 205–34.

9 Ruth Morrow, “ECObOX. Mobile Devices and Urban Tactics,” *Domus*, November 14, 2007, <https://www.domusweb.it/en/architecture/2007/11/14/ecobox-mobile-devices-and-urban-tactics.html>.

women and kids enjoying an ad hoc spa set up in the small park wedged between platform one and the main road. Some of them are sitting with their feet in lavender perfumed water contained in kids' swimming pool, while others apply home-made face masks and yet others sip on cucumber mock-tails. Chatter and laughs frame this convivial late afternoon that has been organized as part of EcoLab, a communally structured skills sharing program taking place twice a week. EcoLab brings together people in convivial settings in a learning process. Over time, it has become central to the identity of our community academy, as it sits at the crossroad of mental health and adult education, inspired by critical pedagogy, art and agro-ecology.

Around EcoLab, the days are buzzing with people in the entrance room of the community academy, an open piazza where people pass by for a chat and to exchange free clothes in our eco-social wardrobe. Here various teams plan their next activities in the co-working room, while others cook communal lunches in the kitchen, or prepare food for one of our disco soup evenings, where we eat delicious vegan meals cooked with vegetables that have become too tired for the shops. Some of us are lending support and an open ear to homeless people and others needing an extra dose of support in their life. A community garden, workshops on climate change with teenagers, and bread baking in public squares are all ways to initiate conversations about biodiversity. Physically, the community academy is rather small with its 150m²; but the place is thriving, and people easily bump into each other while there for very different activities.

To coordinate our dense programming, we make use of an open, sociocratically-facilitated assembly taking place every second Monday evening, where for two hours we discuss and decide together on upcoming activities as well as new projects. An implementation group ensures that what the assembly decides actually finds ways into action. Once a year, we go on a three-day retreat for longer-term strategic planning, where we have time to address conflicts, problems and challenges. Experimental formats of peer-to-peer support are also honed. Despite the challenges, collaboratively running the academy is immensely exciting and empowering: we are experimenting with democracy and processes of community organizing on a daily basis, constantly learning new skills, modes of relation and practices of care, while also getting a glimpse into how life could be otherwise in a world infrastructured around the acknowledgement that progress has run out of steam.

Vignette #3 - The community academy reimagines the whole train station (2023-2024)

"What a view!" – We stand on the balcony of the train station's main building and look out at our town and valley, all enthused and a bit scared at the same time: we just started working on transforming the whole train station into a place where the public and civic actors can be brought together to address the challenges of climate and biodiversity crisis.¹⁰ In our playing around with the transformative potential of a train station, in early 2022 we came up with the idea that we could actually expand our collaboration with the Municipality of Rovereto, the Italian Railway Network and other active groups in our territory and beyond to take over the whole station. Our idea was to create a totally new function in our town and our valley that supports the local community in responding to the ecological and social needs of our times: a public-civic hub dedicated to getting together our communities' brains, hearts and hands (as well as standpoints and resources) to come up with and ground actions that mitigate the causes and adapt to the effects of climate change.

Once that rough block of idea had been cut, we sat down with our various partners and spent months

10 European Urban Initiative, "Station for Transformation - Modelling a Train Station as a Replicable Hub for Public-Civic Engagement to Tackle Climate Change and Biodiversity Challenges," *Portico*, accessed September 28, 2024, <https://portico.urban-initiative.eu/european-urban-initiative/station-transformation-modelling-train-station-replicable-hub-public-civic-engagement-tackle-climate>.

working out the details of how to subvert the functions of the empty spaces for the thousands of people traveling through the station every day. In this process, we came up with the following transformations: (a) The former newsagent next to the still functioning ticket counter will become a Biodiversity Kiosk, telling the beautiful and the ugly, the hopeful and the terrifying, the simple and the complex stories of biodiversity in our valley, along with their connections to translocal processes; (b) the former bar in front of the station will become a Climate Canteen, a cultural space organized around a kitchen that through (affordable) food works to enhance people's literacy on how what we eat is intertwined with climate change and other (trans-)local processes; (c) the empty railway workers' flats on the first floor will become a Co-Creation Space, where civic and public community members meet outside of their comfort zones in creative multidisciplinary and multisectoral thinking about the climate and biodiversity challenges and social responsibility; (d) the space of the community academy will continue to function as a Community Space, where climate and biodiversity challenges are addressed through low-threshold activities and community-led actions.

The European Urban Initiative, to whom we had proposed the project for funding, found our plan imaginative, convincing and replicable enough to actually award the Municipality of Rovereto €5M to bring this vision to life. Currently, we are lacing together the grassroot activities of the community academy and of a multitude of actors in the wider territory with this larger vision to build infrastructures and practices in our valley that enable us to take the crisis as a chance to think and act together in ways that are regenerative, both socially and ecologically.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we would like to share three out of the many micro and macro learnings we drew from the processes entailed in reclaiming abandoned railway infrastructure for post-progress times:

a) Abandoned yet iconic infrastructures of progress, such as railway stations, have a huge potential to galvanize people's imagination and desire as driving forces for territorial futures: without the community resource center at the train station it would have been much harder to keep up the tenacity and the joy necessary to drive a process which started out without money and is to this day mainly driven by active citizenship. Every time we had to work through tricky processes, or ran into major obstacles, it was the potential held by this place that kept us going.

b) Reclaiming infrastructure at the heart of a territory brings you directly onto the radar of local as well as national politics and administrative procedures. When starting out with the idea of reclaiming the spaces at the train station, we did not expect that the Municipality would take an interest in our process and that we would be sitting in meetings with a CEO of the Italian Railway Network to explore how the railroad infrastructure could be brought back as core resource of our community. Now we know: there is no flying under the radar when the infrastructure you are reclaiming is geographically central and state-owned.

c) When reclaiming already existing infrastructures, local ideas for transformation can be scaled with relative ease. *La Foresta* started out as a very local project yet we are now seeing that as we reclaim and reinvent the standard functions of a train station, our approach becomes both replicable and adaptable across other functioning railway stations. So while we see that progress has run out of steam, we also think that there is still potential to work with infrastructures that are left behind and that are often already networked across vast geographical areas.

If you are also working along similar lines, please do be in touch. You will find us in the station, probably steering a pot of soup and talking about the next steps ahead in this complex scenario. We are always happy to connect with others who are eager to grow modes of living and acting that open up to joyful, regenerative and equitable futures.