

Annales Universitatis Paedagogicae Cracoviensis

Studia de Arte et Educatione 17 (2022)

ISSN 2081-3325

DOI 10.24917/20813325.17.5

Anna Chiara Cimoli

Università degli studi di Bergamo, Italy

“Decolonising” museums through experimental practices: the case of MUBIG, a neighbourhood museum in Milan

The article reflects on the role, possibilities and agency of neighbourhood and community museums within the complex knot of themes and claims that runs through contemporary museology, which has come under severe scrutiny from many quarters, especially with regard to its ability to take into account the narrative of racialised and marginalised subjects, or more generally to “pass the microphone” in order to share curatorship and authorship.¹

In a season of widespread social protest against vertical, colonial systems of knowledge and knowledge administration, unrepresentative of the variety of society in terms of gender, sexual orientation, race, ability, etc., museums are being asked to *unlearn* their cognitive structure, self-assumptions and automatisms, and design a new epistemological statute more attentive to social justice and plurality (Azoulay, 2019). The very concept of the universal museum, the one that encloses within its walls the history of knowledge and the highest achievements of humanity, taxonomising them, is the subject of severe criticism by those – activists, researchers, artists – who question what

¹ Chynoweth, Lynch, Petersen, and Smed (eds.). *Museums and Social Change. Challenging the Unhelpful Museum*. London-New York: Routledge, 2021; Cimoli. *Musei, territori, comunità interpretative: le nuove sfide della partecipazione*, “Il Capitale Culturale,” n. 11, 2020, 249–266; Id. *From Representation to Participation: inclusive practices, co-curating and the voice of the protagonists in some Italian migration museums*, in: Watson, Barnes and Bunning, *A Museum Studies Approach to Heritage*, London-New York: Routledge 2019, 655–663; ICOM-OECD. *Culture and Local Development: Maximising the Impact. A Guide for Local Governments, Communities and Museums*, 2019, <https://icom.museum/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/OECD-ICOM-GUIDE-MUSEUMS.pdf>, accessed 15 December 2022; Janes and Sandell (eds.). *Museum Activism*. London-New York: Routledge, 2019; *Museums and Local Development. An Introduction to Museums, Sustainability and Well-being*. “Museum International,” vol. 71, n. 3–4 (2019); Scott. *Museums and Public Value. Creating Sustainable Futures*, Abingdon-Oxon: Routledge, 2013; Witcomb, Andrea. *Reimagining the Museum. Beyond the Mausoleum*. London-New York: Routledge, 2003.

forms of violence and despoliation have brought the cultural testimonies of so many peoples and cultures to so few places in the world (Raicovich, 2020).

It's time of crisis and deep, sometimes painful insights on the side of the museums: all cultural institutions have to face a deep self-reflective process that (sometimes) leads to apologies, reparative actions towards silenced subjects, transformation of displays or communication apparatuses, critical revision of the profile of their "founding fathers," and restitution of objects and human remains. Yet, the role of the museum in contemporary society remains more relevant than ever (Chynoweth et al., 2021; Heumann, 2022; Murawski, 2021). The years of the Covid-19 pandemic have amply demonstrated this: museums have been able to cultivate dialogue with their audiences, offer spaces for relief and reflection, link past, present and future, generate creative projects whose duration has gone beyond the emergency (shared gardens, community radio programs, training courses, focus groups on relevant topics, etc.).² The same can be said for the activation with respect to the so-called "refugee crisis" of 2015–16 and the arrivals of these months from Ukraine:³ museums can put themselves at the service of cultural diplomacy, they can represent "safe places" in which to learn a language or a skill, environments for socialisation in difficult moments.

In the light of this premise, in this article I argue that community museums can be an important complement to the narrative of national or city museums, by virtue of their rootedness in a circumscribed territory whose stories, desires and drives they wish to tell. I understand "decolonisation" here as a complex process affecting power relations in any political arena, in any space of the "public," from universities to museums, from libraries to schools, from the management of public space to that of gender relations, and so forth (Borghi, 2020). I also quote James Bradburne, director of the Pinacoteca di Brera, when he said that the collaboration between his museum and the Greco neighbourhood was not to be intended as a "colonial" one, but rather one based on equality and mutual exchange.⁴

The points of strength of community museums are the knowledge of the community of reference, the explicit dimension of service and listening, and the continuity of dialogue in both directions (in contrast to the episodic nature of many of the large

² *Museums in the Pandemic. A Survey of Responses on the Current Crisis*, "Museum Worlds," vol. 8, n. 1 (July 2020), 111–134; NEMO, *Survey on the impact of the COVID-19 situation on museums in Europe. Final Report*, 2020, https://www.ne-mo.org/fileadmin/Dateien/public/NEMO_documents/NEMO_COVID19_Report_12.05.2020.pdf, accessed 15 December 2022; ICOM. Museums and COVID-19: 8 steps to support community resilience, April–August 2020, https://icom.museum/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/CommunityResilience_UpdatedArticle_EN_final_20200930.pdf, accessed 15 December 2020. Mayer and Hendler. *Growing with Covid: Curatorial Innovation in Times of Uncertainty*, "Museum Management and Curatorship," vol. 37, n. 4 (January 2022), 368–382; Iervolino and Sergi. *Museums, Class and the Pandemic: An investigation into the lived experiences of working-class Londoners*, 2022, https://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/collections/about-our-collections/enhancing-our-collections/collecting-covid/museums-class-and-pandemic?fbclid=IwAR0v6q-qX0hMV2y83gmuaEeoQls-J4U_L2-S21JyusImNrRj4jhl-MSEM00, accessed 15 December 2022.

³ <https://www.ne-mo.org/advocacy/our-advocacy-work/museums-support-ukraine.html>

⁴ Public talk at MUBIG, Milan, 7 May 2022.

museum projects, which from time to time, often depending on the funding available, question this or that group, cutting off the conversation at the end of the project due to the need to devote themselves to something else). Nevertheless – it is important to emphasise – these museums are not social services, ‘Samaritans’ moved by good feelings (Lynch 2020, Bodo 2022), but cultural agents, moving within the specific boundaries of museum work with the skills, curatorship methodologies, and evaluation tools characteristic of that field. This is the condition for the museum’s work to really have an impact on the territory and be complementary to that of other actors (social, health, educational, etc.), following the intuition of the ecomuseums, which since the 1970s have valorised local traditions and knowledge (Davis, 1999, De Varine, 2017).

The relationship with the territory, even for large museums that attract thousands of tourists, is a major challenge. Leaving aside the “giants,” such as the Louvre and the Guggenheim, with their international and problematic gems, some large institutions have in recent years opened ‘satellites’ in the territory – sometimes spaces designed to last, other short-lived, *pop-up* experiences – to express a local rootedness, beyond the international vocation: this is the case, for example, of the Bethnal Green Museum of Childhood of the Victoria & Albert Museum in London (opened in 1872, recently renamed ‘Young V&A’ as part of the current redevelopment project),⁵ or cases such as Baltimore’s Museum of Art, which in 2019 opened a branch in the popular Lexington Market.⁶ The vulnus of this type of project, however, lies in the risk of delivering a counter-message with a “colonial” flavour: if it is the great museum of the centre that goes towards the periphery, be it geographical or cultural – and not vice versa – an asymmetry of power is re-proposed that risks being sterile, and indeed even harmful in terms of local spin-off. It is therefore a matter of working over long periods of time and with a focus on the nature of the context, which must be known deeply from within, outside the rhetoric of participation per se. There are many examples of this approach. Starting from the most historicised case study, that of the Anacostia Neighbourhood Museum founded in Washington DC in 1969 as an antenna of the Smithsonian Institution,⁷ a number of international cases constitute useful traces of this methodological rigour: the Kreuzberg Museum in Berlin,⁸ Imagine IC in Amsterdam’s Zuidooost district,⁹ Shadi Khampur’s Neighbourhood Museum in Delhi,¹⁰ or the more recent Trešnjevkva Neighbourhood Museum in Zagreb¹¹ are just a few examples.

⁵ Charman. *Reinventing the V&A Museum of Childhood*, “Muzealnictwo,” vol. 61 (June 2020), 117–126.

⁶ <https://artbma.org/about/press/release/bma-to-open-a-branch-location-at-lexington-market-on-thursday-june-27>

⁷ Autry. *‘The Rats Are Still With Us.’ Costructing Everyday Life at the Anacostia Museum in Washington, DC*, “Museum and Society,” vol. 14, n. 1 (June 2017), 160–177.

⁸ Düspohl. *Partizipative Museumsarbeit im FHXB Friedrichshain-Kreutzberg Museum in Berlin*, “Muzealnictwo,” Vol. 58, no. 1 (April 2017), 38–46.

⁹ <https://imagineic.nl/>, accessed 15 December 2022.

¹⁰ <https://www.delhimemories.in/index.php/Detail/collections/12>, accessed 15 December 2022.

¹¹ <https://www.muzejsusjedstvatresnjevka.org/>, accessed 15 December 2022.

In Italy, in the last decade there have been many interesting cases of neighbourhood museums, generally born through bottom-up perspectives: for example Mare Memoria Viva in Palermo,¹² MAAM-Museo dell'Altro e dell'Altrove di Metropoliz in Rome (De Finis and Di Noto, 2020),¹³ or viadellafucina16 in Turin.¹⁴

MUBIG and Pinacoteca di Brera

MUBIG is a museum born in 2020 in Greco, a neighbourhood located in the North-Eastern sector of Milan. Greco is squeezed between the railway tracks, the Martesana canal and the first peri-urban belt. Considered peripheral and quite “difficult” in terms of connection with the rest of the city, it has always felt like a “city within a city,” expressing a strong historical and cultural identity. Greco, in fact, was an autonomous municipality up until 1923 and has kept a very clear trace of its original urbanistic structure, with a XVI century church at its core, a strong “water memory” (the community used to dive in the canal and sunbathe in the small beach) and a relevant artistic and historical heritage, testifying both Renaissance traces (the *Nativity* fresco painted by Bernardino Luini for a local chapel in the 16th century was bought by the Louvre in 1867 and is currently exposed in the Aile Denon¹⁵) and more recent historical chapters, such as bombings and resistance during War War II (Banfi, 1997).

The museum, which conceives of itself as a fluid, scattered, dynamic discourse – a process, more than a place – is born out of (and within) an urban regeneration project which has transformed a portion of the neighbourhood, for many decades abandoned and neglected, into an innovative housing project. This project, called BiG and launched in 2018,¹⁶ was aimed at recovering the ancient Cascina Conti, dating back to the 16th century. The social project, developed by a collective of urban planners, architects and social designers named ABCittà, has at its heart the intergenerational collaboration; it is an experience of quality housing at low cost aimed at exerting a positive impact on the whole neighbourhood in terms of social cohesion, fight against exclusion and enhancement of tangible and intangible cultural assets.

In the hamlet, 25 mini-apartments have been created for three categories: young workers, self-sufficient elderly people and single parents with children. While the first two categories apply individually, the latter comes from the Municipality’s social

¹² <https://www.marememoriaviva.it/>, accessed 15 December 2022.

¹³ De Finis and Di Noto (eds.). *Senza Metropoliz non è la mia città*. Rome: Bordeaux 2020.

¹⁴ <https://viadellafucina16.kaninchenhaus.org/>, accessed 15 December 2022

¹⁵ <https://www.lombardiabeniculturali.it/fotografie/schede/IMM-3a010-0002179/>;
<https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010064961>

¹⁶ <https://bigreco.it/>, accessed 15 December 2022. The intervention is defined and regulated within the framework of the Integrated Intervention Programme Greco – Conti, which is the subject of an agreement between the Municipality of Milan and Borgo Cascina Conti S.r.l. with deed no. 15087 of 21 June 2011, subsequently amended and integrated with deed no. 10356/4760 of 24 October 2018 in which ABCittà is recognised as the managing body. The Convention between the Municipality of Milan and ABCittà to regulate the management of the “BiG – Borgo Intergenerazionale Greco” service is regulated by deed registered no. 3592 of 3 July 2020.

services: these are typically young single mothers with a migratory background, who are helped find a job, take care of their children and find their own autonomy, within a public-private agreement. A series of shared spaces and services – a laundry room, a condo library, a playroom for kids, a cyclo-lab – is also part of the project. All the inhabitants benefit of a low rent, and are asked to offer approximately ten hours per month for community work.

Beyond accompaniment on the more local and immediate scale (selection of tenants, periodic interviews, discussion groups with single parents, etc.), BiG operates in the neighbourhood through the co-management of sports fields and the urban gardens, as well as the re-use of the railway arches following the outputs of a participatory design process.

The first inhabitants moved in the BiG premises in 2019, just before the Covid-19 lockdown. The first, completely uncalculated stress test proved very promising: cooperation, the perception of not being alone, and mutual help were expressed fully and often in creative forms. The younger ones helped the older ones with medicines and vaccinations; the latter cooked. A social support network was never lacking, both in terms of the concrete management of daily life and in terms of mental health, at risk for everyone in such a delicate period.

Within this context, following the number of encounters between ABCittà and the former and new inhabitants of the neighbourhood, in 2020 MUBIG, the community museum, was born.¹⁷ Funded by a private foundation (Fondazione di Comunità Milano) in the framework of a competition, it is realized in partnership with Pinacoteca di Brera, the important national museum located in the center of Milan, and Stazione Radio, a radio station. The museum defines itself as “diffuse, of the present, participated.” Its actions are curated with the inhabitants and co-designed with them: nothing is decided outside of a consultation, in which a group of citizens already active in the neighbourhood (the “Greco positive” association) participate, together with others who have joined in along the way, for example the elderly active in the shared gardens, some university students, primary school teachers and professors, shopkeepers, etc.

The museum’s actions take place within the programme “Brera a Greco-Greco a Brera,” which promotes exchanges of works of art, as well as practices, from Greco to Brera and vice-versa, through a participatory dynamic and a strong emphasis on experimentation with respect to mediation tools.

Yet, what is the sense of a collaboration between a small peripheral reality and a national institution such as Brera? How to avoid the risk of “patronage,” asymmetry, or even populism? How to counteract the rhetoric that might be embedded in concepts such as “inclusion,” “co-curating,” “participation” (Bodo, 2012; Cimoli, 2020)? What is the role of visual art in this context?

James Bradburne, director of the Pinacoteca di Brera from 2015 to 2023, specified right from the invitation to participate in the competition that the methodology based on absolute symmetry between the two contexts was central. Although the disproportion is evident between a national institution founded in 1809, which exhibits

¹⁷ <https://mubig.it/>; <https://pinacotecabrera.org/brera-a-greco-greco-a-brera/>

masterpieces by Bellini, Raffello and Caravaggio, promotes scientific research and hosts around 420,000 visitors a year¹⁸ and a small neighbourhood reality born two years ago and lacking a collection, the assumption of *parity* and *equality* is here methodologically crucial. In the absence of an a-priori roadmap, the assumption is articulated on a daily basis through practice, self-evaluation, open discussion: it is more of a process than a cold statement. Several mutual training sessions were held between the two realities along the design process, each stemming from one's expertise, and much reflection was shared to ensure that the results and proposals were truly the fruit of teamwork. It was also clear from the very beginning that the two museums consider heritage as a tool for *negotiating the future*: the accent is not on the preservation and protection of collections, but on the sense of identity, identification and growth that the inhabitants recognize in the visual traces surrounding them. Therefore, investment in the youth (adolescents and young adults in particular) is a characteristic feature of this project.

To date, the museum's activities are articulated in three axes.

Participatory walks

The four itineraries, which combine documentary information with the collection of first-hand oral histories, can be explored both individually, through podcasts accessed with qr codes on a listening platform,¹⁹ and in groups, thanks to the accompaniment of citizens of the neighbourhood, some of whom – the oldest – have made themselves available to the project. Promoted since the summer of 2021, when the restrictive measures on contagion were relaxed in Milan, the walks have been a great success with the public: designed for an audience of thirty people, they have always sold out. The walks have been offered on fixed dates for now. In the future, a regular program will be scheduled, which may also include route deviations, additions and ways of collecting new voices and stories.

Discovery boxes

MUBIG provides two discovery boxes, designed together by ABCittà and Pinacoteca di Brera. The boxes contain a series of activities, proposals, conversation starters around two themes, respectively that of physical boundaries (from one's room to the city and beyond) and intangible ones (of class, gender, ability, age, etc.). Again, these themes emerged from the conversations with the inhabitants of Greco, who pointed out how the neighbourhood has always been marked by boundaries (the railway, the canal, the expressway leading to the industrial district, and so on), and how the incorporation in the city of Milan has been the object of resistance on the part of the historical inhabitants (until the 1950s, when they wanted to say "I'm going to the city center," they said "I'm going to Milan").

¹⁸ *Annual Report 2019*, <https://pinacotecabrera.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Pinacoteca-di-Brera-Annual-Report-2019.pdf>

¹⁹ <https://izi.travel/it/fe1b-mubig-museo-di-comunita/it>

The boxes contain a vademecum with proposals for activities, divided according to the age of the audience (from primary schools children to adults) and materials, including flash-cards, reproductions of old photographs made available by the inhabitants and mounted on ‘vintage’ albums, maps, writing and drawing supports, and other materials for the various activities such as balls of wool to measure distances, viewers to ‘cut out’ a portion of the landscape, and so on. The activities, which are adaptable to any context, were tested during an experiment in which two high school classes (not resident in the neighbourhood) and some citizens of BiG participated; the evaluations were very positive and are being reflected upon by the designers. Half of the boxes are stored at MUBIG; the other half at the Educational Services of the Brera Art Gallery. From autumn 2022, the boxes are lent to anyone who asks for them: libraries, schools, sports centres, parishes, leisure courses, civic centres, universities, etc. The boxes can be used either independently or with a professional facilitation.

Exhibitions+mediation

The first MUBIG exhibition, held in April 2022, compared the historical photos of the hamlet, lent by the inhabitants of the neighbourhood and digitised, with its current conformation. The exhibition was set up in the open air, in the courtyard and along the walkways, working on viewpoints and perspective telescopes in such a way as to encourage a comparison between the past and the present, and to raise questions about the future.

In May 2022 a selection of works from Brera’s Zavattini collection (small self-portraits made by prominent Italian artists of the 20th century)²⁰ was lent to MUBIG: four self-portraits – by Fausto Melotti, Dino Buzzati, Mimmo Rotella and Bruno Munari – were understood here as a tool for reflecting upon the role and the agency of the individual within a community or group. The exhibition, entitled ‘Inhabitants,’ was accompanied by a series of mediation activities. In particular, a van provided by the transport company broadcast a series of video interviews with the inhabitants of BiG and the neighbourhood made by the Brera videomaker, while in the afternoon, students from an art school made live portraits of the public, thus suggesting an ideal link between the four self-portraits from the Zavattini collection and the “living” community gathered in the courtyard.

Another relevant action took place on this occasion: the placement of the captions created by Brera in the Greco church. Here, in fact, two large paintings from the Brera collection are kept next to the altar, respectively a *Mystical Vision of Saint Catherine of Siena* by Luigi Pellegrino Scaramuccia (ca. 1655) and a *Madonna of Mercy* from the workshop of Federico Barocci (late 16th-early 17th century). Both the Napoleonic spoliations and the complex vicissitudes of the works from the convents meant that many Brera works were on loan to local churches. It was only on the occasion of the “Inhabitants” exhibition that this further, unexpected link between Pinacoteca di Brera and the city area could be rediscovered.

²⁰ *Cesare Zavattini collezionista.*

The museum was founded on the initiative of a cooperative and, although it has been visited and appreciated by politicians and administrators, it doesn't express the awareness of the social impact of the museum on the part of public governance, which on the contrary has in some cases tried to appropriate its history to present it in international contexts, as if it were its own project. Even though awareness of the social impact of art is certainly growing in Italy,²¹ I believe it is necessary to continue to design "bottom-up" activities, in some ways antagonistic, though always in an open way, with respect to those proposed by politics.

As regards the case of Milan, for example, the difference between MUBIG's method and the approach adopted by the City Council for the area known as City Life, a district in which skyscrapers have sprung up for high-end housing, which have led to an increase in the costs of the entire area, is exemplary. ArtLine, the public art programme, while being of high value from the point of view of the artists involved, ends up reinforcing the "prestige" of an already very rich area, expressing itself in terms of privilege and top-down decisions, instead of participation and distribution of resources and knowledge.

In the last fifteen years or so, with a strong impetus on the occasion of Expo 2015, Milan has been the protagonist of numerous urban regeneration processes involving individual neighbourhoods (Nolo, Isola, Affori, etc.) or disused spaces (some railway yards, the Slaughterhouse, the area where the new European Library-BEIC will be built, etc.). BIG and MUBIG's project is preoccupied by the negative impact of gentrification in terms of rising rents and the costs of everyday life: this is why it seeks not to be complicit in policies that are too top-down and do not stem from listening to the inhabitants. This is, of course, an approach fraught with contradictions and missteps, in which the daily practice of listening and networking is central.²²

²¹ Da Milano and Gariboldi (eds). *Audience Development: mettere i pubblici al centro delle organizzazioni culturali*. Milan: Franco Angeli 2019; Paltrinieri. *Il valore sociale della cultura*, Milan: Franco Angeli, 2022; Terenzi. *La dimensione culturale della società*, Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino 2018. See also the role played by magazines such as *Il Capitale Culturale* and *Economia della cultura*, as well as digital platforms such as cheFare (<https://www.che-fare.com/>, accessed 15 December 2022), Letture lente (<https://www.agenziacult.it/letture-lente/>) and the work developed by private foundations such as Fitzcarraldo (<https://www.fitzcarraldo.it/>, accessed 15 December 2022).

²² On the role of BIG and MUBIG within the dynamics of urban regeneration in Milan, see Cimoli. *Un quartiere, una corte, un museo. Il modello BiG/MUBIG a Greco, Milano*, in: Basanelli, Forino, Lanini, Lucchini (eds.) *Per una Nuova Casa Italiana. Prospettive di ricerca e di progetto per la post-pandemia*, proceedings of the national conference "Per una Nuova Casa Italiana 2," DESTEC-DASU-Politecnico di Milano, 15 June 2022, Pisa: Pisa University Press, pp. 64–73. See also Bidussa and Polizzi (eds). *Agenda Milano. Ricerche e pratiche per una città inclusiva*. Milan: Fondazione Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, <https://fondazionefeltrinelli.it/schede/ebook-agenda-milano-9788868352738/#top>, 2017, accessed 15 December 2022; Cognetti, Gambino and Larena Faccini. *Periferie del cambiamento. Traiettorie di rigenerazione tra marginalità e innovazione a Milano*, Macerata: Quodlibet 2020; Fontanella (ed). *Rigenerare periferie fragili. Posizioni sul progetto per le periferie urbane*. Siracusa: Letteraventidue 2022.

In conclusion, the MUBIG project tries to provide an alternative to the narratives typical of huge museums by working *with* a huge museum itself: in the coming and going of open questions, self-critical reflections and confrontation with the public, a new sense of community is being forged on both sides. There is no David or Goliath, here: the national museum is of course not the enemy to be defeated: on the contrary, the collaboration between two such different cultural agents enhances the awareness that the unlearning process to which contemporary cultural institutions are called must pass through courageous experimental practices, the results of which may, perhaps, give rise to new ways of understanding the museums’ agency in difficult times.

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Abstract

The article is focused on MUBIG, an experimental museum in a peripheral neighbourhood of Milan. The museum, a fluid, scattered, dynamic discourse – a process, more than a place – is born out of an urban regeneration project.

The reflection attempts to articulate a number of key questions: how are the individual histories embodied by the museum? What points of fragility are envisaged in this regard and how are they addressed, in order to prevent tokenism and the rhetoric of participation per se? What is the role of the visual dimension and of contemporary art? Throughout the article, I argue that neighbourhood museums might be one of the many actors needed on the scene of decolonisation, by this term meaning a process of space-making around the commons based on representation and radical listening.

The experience is analysed here through a double lens: while being a member of the collective who co-designed it, I also look at it from my academic position. This allows me to describe the process keeping different “points of distance,” therefore layering methodologies and viewpoints.

Keywords: neighbourhood museum; MUBIG; urban regeneration; periphery; marginality; heritage studies; Pinacoteca di Brera; ABCittà; decolonising practices; co-curating; participation.

Anna Chiara Cimoli is a lecturer in History of Contemporary Art at the University of Bergamo. Specialized in Muséologie at the Ecole du Louvre, she obtained a Ph.D. in History of Architecture at the Polytechnic of Turin. In 2012-14, she has collaborated as a free-lance researcher at the MeLa* Project-European Museums in an age of migrations, within the Polytechnic of Milan research unit, and from 2015 has been a lecturer at the Faculty of Cultural Heritage of the University of Milan. She has published extensively in the field of the relationship between museums and society (<https://unibg.academia.edu/AnnaChiaraCimoli>). Since 2020 she is curator of MUBIG, the community museum of Greco. Anna co-edits the magazine “Roots&Routes” and is the scientific director of the ‘Museologia presente’, series published by Nomos edizioni.



Fig. 1. A drawing workshop during the “Abitanti” exhibition, 7th May 2022. Ph: ABCittà.



Fig. 2. The loan boxes’ test with high school students, May 2022. Ph: ABCittà.



Fig. 3. The court during the “Abitanti” exhibition, 7th May 2022. Ph. Cesare Maiocchi, Pinacoteca di Brera.