

WHEN LOCALS REAWAKEN BIG EMPTY BUILDINGS

Key information

- Location: **Naples (Italy)**
- Population: **983 755**
- Involved in URBACT network: **2nd Chance**
- More information: <http://urbact.eu/2nd-chance>



In 2015, in an attempt to find ways to (re)use large, abandoned building complexes in the city, Naples initiated the URBACT 2nd Chance network gathering ten other EU cities. Thanks to this experience, a new life was given to Santissima Trinità delle Monache complex, an abandoned military hospital in the heart of the city.

Covering 25 000 m², an area the size of three and half football pitches, the Santissima Trinità delle Monache complex needed to be made more permeable. Not a straightforward task given that – unlike other buildings in the 2nd Chance network – it is listed due to its historical importance. It was established in the 17th century as a convent and was converted into a military hospital after Napoleon invaded south Italy.

Planning the first steps and actions

When entering the 2nd Chance network, Naples set up a group of local stakeholders (URBACT Local Group) to define the first steps and actions. In September 2016, local group coordinator – embedded in the local authority – published an open call on the Naples council website for expressions of interest on how the building complex might be used. 43 groups expressed their interest by presenting a project, an idea or a temporary use.

This call for ideas was a bold move which garnered new ideas for potential uses, as did site surveys by students from local architecture schools. It also gave the widest possible buy-in to reactivating a huge site which could meet multiple needs. On the constitution of the URBACT Local Group, Roberta Nicchia, coordinator of this group, says, “50% were citizens and others were representatives of associations, NGOs, social enterprises that work in



The Santissima Trinità delle Monache complex

the neighbourhood, and there was also the department of architecture from the University of Naples.” Proposals for the complex of buildings then evolved out of a very articulated participatory process that lasted more than one year and consisted of 13 plenary meetings, one open space technology event, different thematic round-tables, co-design workshops, experimentation of temporary uses and other on-site events.

Creating an incubator

Through 2nd Chance, the municipality found practical ways to feed local ideas into realistic plans for reusing the site, through enabling multiple users and securing key tenants. The URBACT group opened a physical space within the building complex in 2017 – a kind of open laboratory for the inclusion and participation of the local community. They also combined this visioning process with public events. These were then grouped under four main objectives: firstly, to initiate the green regeneration of the San Martino Hill starting from restoring the green areas within the complex; then to physically reintegrate the building into the city and restore the historical buildings; to use the building as an incubator for circular and sharing economy and finally draft an Integrated Action Plan. What would have been different without the URBACT process? “There would have been a much more bureaucratic approach in dealing with the regeneration of this large, abandoned urban complex,” says Ms Nicchia.

“If Naples had not promoted this URBACT network, our target building – the Santissima Trinità delle Monache complex – would still be a forgotten place, out of the collective consciousness. Now its regeneration has become one of the priorities in the city.”

Roberta Nicchia

The group acknowledged different timeframes within these objectives, identified figures who would be responsible, and listed interested parties. For example, to address the sharing economy in the short term, one suggestion was a repair café – a concept that originated in Amsterdam in 2009 but has spread throughout Europe – as an example of participatory, bottom-up economic activity. The group thought this resonated with the self-supporting networks in the impoverished districts of Naples neighbouring the Santissima Trinità delle Monache.



Meeting of the URBACT Local Group

From plan to practical application

As it emerged in the visioning process, the ‘sleeping giant’ of the Trinità delle Monache was never going to be replaced by one single use. Since October 2017, the URBACT group has coordinated a number of temporary uses of the building complex with existing associations like the Palazzetto Urban, a youth centre for teenagers, and the Association of the Quartieri Spagnoli which takes care of local children. Part of the structure has been purchased by the private university of Suor Orsola Benincasa and is awaiting renovation works.

This successful experiment inspired Naples to make, among other steps, a resolution (No. 458) that encourages citizens to submit expressions of interest to implement pilot projects aimed at improving underused or disused municipal assets through temporary uses. Santissima Trinità delle Monache is on good track to be financed, according to Ms Nicchia, “We identified a wide range of different financial sources”, including private and public investment.

Would all this have happened without URBACT’s help? Ms Nicchia is clear, “If Naples had not joined – actually promoted – this URBACT network, our target building – the Santissima Trinità delle Monache complex – would still be a forgotten place, out of the collective consciousness, while now its regeneration has become one of the priorities in the city”.



Open consultation on the future of Santissima Trinità delle Monache