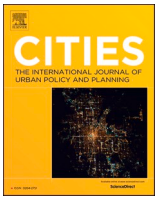
Cities 135 (2023) 104234

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Cities

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/cities



The joint contribution of grassroots artistic practices to the alternative and vital city. The case of Bologna and Venice (Italy)

Valeria Morea [a,b,*], Francesca Sabatini [c]

[a] Iuav, Department of Architecture & Arts, Santa Croce 1957, 30135 Venezia, Italy
[b] Erasmus University, Erasmus School of History Culture and Communication, Rotterdam, the Netherlands
[c] Alma Mater Studiorum Bologna, Department of Architecture, Viale del Risorgimento 2, 40136 Bologna, Italy

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Grassroots artistic practices
Vital cities
Socially engaged art
Cultural economy

ABSTRACT

The article explores grassroots artistic practices as stances of vital urbanism, intended as the urban dynamics activated from below and from outside established institutions that make a city lively thanks to the heterogenous, adaptive, and ultimately transformative initiatives of its citizens, especially when aggregated in the form of organised associations. Specifically, it focuses on how and why grassroots cultural organisation contribute to the vitality of their city. The research analyses the grassroots cultural *milieux* of two Italian cities, Bologna and Venice. Despite the local specificities, a thematic analysis has developed themes coherent across the two cases. They are: (1) political conflict; (2) imagining the alternative city; (3) making the alternative city; and finally (4) a discourse about the cultural economy. Ultimately, the findings illustrate how their visions and motivations shape a collective imagery of an alternative city and that their ideals and actions aim not just to keeping the city alive, but to let it evolve and develop.

1. State of the art: planning the city

Urban planning, the systematic attempt to rationalize the development of cities and urban conglomerates, has been oriented by socio-economic aims which have changed over time; health, safety, social control, the development of the industrial economy have been the dominant pivots of planning throughout the XIX and the XX century (Sennett, 2018).

After the XX century, the shift from an industrial to a post-industrial economy has also shifted the interest of urban planners and policy-makers towards other drivers of urban growth. The new dominant urban concepts, underlying cross-cutting strategies, are the global city, the sustainable city, the resilient city, the creative city, and the smart city (Hatuka et al., 2018). Creativity and culture, thus, stand among the main drivers of the urban economy and have, consequently, made the creative economy the new major pivot of urban policies.

Culture-led urban policies aimed at rebranding the city image, boosting tourism and developing an art- and creative-based urban economy - in other words, to generate "creative cities" (Yencken, 1988), which are known for their vibrancy (Nicodemus, 2013), for their spill-over effects over other sectors (Landry & Bianchini, 2012), for their impact on social welfare and well-being (Blessi et al., 2016), and for their contribution to broader domains such as sustainability, innovation and territorial competitiveness (Montalto et al., 2019).

Acknowledging the benefits of the creative industries and of culture-led development, planners have attempted to control these domains to generate positive impacts. Policy stimuli have been manifolded, ranging from the attraction of a creative class through cultural amenities (Audretsch & Belitski, 2021; Florida, 2005), to the planned establishment of creative clusters in districts (Chapain & Sagot-Duvauroux, 2020; Yoon & Currid-Halkett, 2015), flagship cultural projects, and the regeneration of brownfields and industrial areas through culture (Andres & Golubchikov, 2016; Evans & Shaw, 2004).

While creating these benefits at the upper grounds, however, these policies failed to acknowledge the dangerous downturns of their own designs. The rise of 'cognitive capitalism' led in fact to two parallel mechanisms of inequality: on the one hand, the so-called creative class (Florida, 2005) became subject to a new condition, characterized by increased precarity (Corsani & Lazzarato, 2009) and exploitation (Keucheyan, 2014). On the other, the flows of creative workers in cities and the planning mechanisms activated to satisfy their needs have redefined access to the city space itself and to its services, producing the marginalization of poorer fringes (Leslie & Catungal, 2012; Scott, 2007; Sharp et al., 2005; Zukin, 1989).

* Corresponding author at: Iuav, Department of Architecture & Arts, Santa Croce 1957, 30135 Venezia, Italy.
E-mail addresses: morea@eshcc.eurl.nl (V. Morea), f.sabatini@unibo.it (F. Sabatini).

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2023.104234
Received 21 February 2022; Received in revised form 26 January 2023; Accepted 1 February 2023
Available online 21 February 2023
0264-2751/© 2023 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

In cities, critical labor conditions and the abandonment of some neighbourhoods have been tackled by policies that adopted privatisation, devolution, liberalisation, and some large-scale projects seeking positive spillovers instead of implementing social programs (Nussbaumer & Moulaert, 2002). Operations of city branding attempt to appropriate the local culture towards what has been termed a "hegemonic 'creative city'" (Novy & Colomb, 2013: 1834); urban policies across the world seek the status of creative city through problematic strategies that cause tensions in the social, creative, and economic settings (Pollio et al., 2021; Zheng, 2021).

Besides and below the hegemonic creative city and the planning attempts to rationalize city-making, however, lies a fertile substrate of creative individuals and practices. This substrate, which can be broadly identified as 'grassroot' urban ecosystem, is indirectly (and, what is more, either positively or negatively) affected by the policies and resources mobilized by the creative city paradigm - and aims, conversely, at interfering and influencing urban policies (Vallaster et al., 2018) as a means of correcting the imbalances produced by the present urban planning modalities.

The article explores grassroots artistic practices as stances of vital urbanism, intended as the urban dynamics activated from below and from outside established institutions that make a city lively thanks to the heterogenous, adaptive, and ultimately transformative initiatives of its citizens, especially when aggregated in the form of organised associations. Specifically, it contributes to the scholarship on the vital city by interpreting grassroots organisations as catalysers of relational practices which contribute to making a city vital in a twofold way: first, they provide alternative spaces for action and creation, and second, they operate across levels (grassroots, intermediary, institutional) to build an alternative and vital city. By investigating how the grassroot practices in two Italian cities, Bologna and Venice, contrast and influence local urban policy by their imagery and actions, this research shows how grassroot urban systems contribute to crafting a more just and sustainable city.

2. Vital urbanism: from planning to grassroot creative production

The notion of vitality derives from research about life systems and biology, as vitalism postulates the impossibility of controlling (if not even understanding scientifically) living beings' vital impetus, inexplicable by means of only chemical and physical principles (Amati, 2021). Such perspective has been applied to the urban dimension, whose dynamics, based on inter-agent relations, are hardly explained without a "mysterious, immaterial power that variously generates life, enables survival, produces growth, and gives health, energy and vigour" (Adams & Tiesdell, 2007).

Research on urban planning tends to see how top-down efforts and, possibly, citizen engagement in formal policy programs contribute to urban growth and to urban vitality (Elliott et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2021). The incipient scholarship on vitalism adopts a symmetrical and complementary approach, illustrating how social processes, relational practices, and informal levels of urban life play a dominant role in city making - and, by so doing, it has the potential to illustrate how urban vitality affects policymaking and the urban planning process.

The question, for theory and for planning, was and still is what attributes a city should have to be vital, to flourish economically and socially. Historic analyses of cities have noted that, in the urban context, it is hard to trace - and, consequently, plan - exactly all the determinants of urban growth. Urban planning concepts have, for long, been rooted in the mechanical consequentiality of action-result: once changes in spaces were applied, economic incentives adopted to boost certain productive segments, and services provided in strategic areas (Schatz & Rogers, 2016), the creative class and other target social groups would be attracted (Florida, 2005) and urban growth would be inevitably triggered. This consequentiality was further strengthened by the technocratic and data-driven drifts of planning (Becker, 2021), where algorithms, data collection and platform urbanism have scaled the possibilities to predict, control, influence and monitor urban life, resulting in a hyper-rationalistic and AI-reinforced presence of urban planning in the urban space of the XXI century (Ruhlandt, 2018).

Within this framework, therefore, vitality was understood as the effect of urban top-down policy, rather than the cause and the context in which policymaking was formulated. For example, Unsworth (2007) discusses planning instruments and strategies that make city life more sustainable, framing mixed-use property development, brownfield regeneration, soft mobility, and the control and regulation thereof, as instances of vital urbanism. Similarly, Tunström (2007) explores the attributes of Swedish vital cities, limiting the analysis to the urban planning discourse. In the organicist approach, opposed to the mechanistic view that sees the city as the result of a series of planned actions, thus making it known and controllable (as in Le Corbusier's elaborations), the city exists somehow independently from individuals, it is conceived as a spontaneous order based on interconnected relations, similarly to Adam Smith's conception of the invisible hand in markets (Adams & Tiesdell, 2007). Cities are complex, large-scale organisms, whose distinctive features of vibrancy and vitality do not originate from the top-down mechanistic inputs but from the processes and relational interactions which have a generative power (Periton, 2018) and which confer the city its ability to adapt and transform according to its own needs and the changing environment. While planning has seen the city as a progressively more predictable entity, vitalism places an emphasis on its evolutionary nature and on its creative *élan* (*élan vital*, as Bergson put it; Bennet, 2010) - in other words, "The default state for a city [is] not one of quiet equilibrium which planning was intended to restore, but instead one of constant turmoil" (Amati, 2021: x). Thus, while the current theorizations of urban vitalism make a plea for more attention to "bottom-up pluralistic spontaneity and dynamism" (Adams & Tiesdell, 2007: 676), the applications thereof appear still limited to looking at how to plan more vital cities.

The role of spontaneous, unpredictable, alternative initiatives in making cities vital and as a creative force has been addressed by the literature in various forms (Leontidou, 2020), and often in opposition to technocratic planning - starting from Jane Jacob's "vital little plans" (Jacobs, 1961, 2016), which underlined the importance of street life, pedestrian flows, nightlife, cultural events, and festivals for the thriving of urban places. Richard Sennett identified the stances of dwelling the city as opposed to "building" (i.e. planning) (Sennett, 2018). Similarly, Peter Hall has analysed cities' golden ages in history and noted that they occurred in contexts of transition, where societies were undergoing a transformation and were "deeply concerned about what was happening to them" (Hall, 1998: 285). In other words, these authors have posited that the best cities are those who are vital.

These practices are at the core of a creative city's *genius loci* - i.e., its identity and distinctiveness (Landry & Bianchini, 2012). The role played by creativity as a social collective phenomenon in contributing to urban vitality has been variously explored, but never under the explicit lens of vitalism. Törnqvist has developed the notion of *creative milieu* to indicate the local cultural and intellectual ferment often expressed in knowledge circles and demonstrated that innovation is best achieved in conditions of plurality, variety, and free exchange of ideas (Törnqvist, 2004). Thus, it is possible to look at grassroots cultural *milieux* as vital ecosystems, defined as "hybrid systems [that] are continually reconfigured, representing the makeshift, adaptive pulse of the city" (Simone & Pieterse, 2018: 38). This means that the cultural *milieu* of a city is not solely an infrastructure of relations and a flux of practices, but a material infrastructure, consisting of spatial nodes and a groin of interactions (Sennett, 2018) which articulate the life of residents, produce meaning, and generate value for neighbourhoods and local clusters: as such, they are both spatially and economically relevant in the urban domain. Grassroots cultural organisations, being characterized by both intangible attributes and material operations, put in place an aesthetic/discursive

and an enacting mode of action: in other words, they could provide their "discursive and material contribution" (by means of prefigurative strategies and actions) to cultural justice (Cantillon et al., 2021: 75) and to the vitality of cities.

Independent and bottom-up arts organisations are constitutive of the buzz of the local creative economy (Currid-Halkett, 2020) and identify and sympathize with other groups which have been excluded from the institutional discourse, the urban space, and the creative city policy, constituting the body of "non-conforming individuals, non-mainstream sub-cultures and various sorts of marginalized social groups" (Nadal, 2000: 149). They promote an alternative paradigm of the city "shifting their strategies by partially (if not completely) disengaging their behaviour, identity and resource-seeking from the state, and by developing an alternative vision to civil integration as citizens in an inclusive state" (Yiftachel, 2009: 241). While there is no univocal definition of the term 'alternative' in the literature on grassroot movements, the alternative usually stands in opposition to the 'current' in a very exact and connoted way in a series of domains - encompassing "alternative development strategies, from economic, social and environmental perspectives" (Özkaynak, 2008: 47). In this respect, artists promote urban change and bring a dialectic *élan* in the corroborated discourse over the established creative city. The creative city itself, then, appears layered, although the two systems, the hegemonic and the grassroot, necessarily inform and influence each other, while remaining two distinct facets of the same, though fragmented, economic domain (Miles, 2013).

While the *élan vital* escapes the logic of top-down planning, this does not exclude a creative leap responsible for making the city. On the one hand, an interstitial apparatus of scholarship focuses just on the contribution of bottom-up, i.e., grassroots, to the making and transformations of cities (Murzyn-Kupisz & Działek, 2017; Zilberstein, 2019), highlighting the engagement of such practices with public agendas at the local and global scales (Kirchberg & Kagan, 2013; Lee & Han, 2020; Sánchez Belando, 2017; Zilberstein, 2019). On the other hand, scholarly and policy discourses, as in the creative city and cultural capital initiatives (Montalto et al., 2019) attribute to artists and cultural organisations the vibrancy and liveliness of cities. In both cases, these discourses do not make the theoretical and operational connection to the notion of vital urbanism; similarly, the incipient theorisation of such a concept is still missing a focus on the cultural and creative *milieu* of cities. The lens of vitalism might, therefore, contribute to providing a coherent framework to the vast body of literature on grassroots stances and their role in city making - and, conversely, benefit from the cross-fertilisation with the scholarship on creative cities and grassroots cultural organisations as constitutive to urban vitality. Vital urbanism, in facts, reverses the assumption adopted by the literature on creative cities and sees the vital city as a dynamic and pulsating organism, collectively produced and maintained by its diverse dwellers.

3. The alternative city in Bologna and Venice: methods

The previous section has explored the existing literature on grassroot cultural organisations and their role in the politics and the creative economy of cities, and how these can inform and be informed by the notion of vitalism and its literature. Drawing from these conceptions, the paper addresses the following question: How and why do grassroots cultural organisation contribute to the vitality of their city? In particular, it analyses the grassroots cultural *milieu* of two Italian cities, Bologna and Venice, and produces a twofold observation: first, how their visions and motivations shape a collective imagery of an alternative city; second, that their ideals and actions aim not just to keeping the city alive, but to let it evolve and develop. Ultimately, these groups contribute to their cities' vitalism.

The methodology followed a series of steps. First, the choice was adopted to do a comparative study between two cities. Research is experiencing a "renaissance of comparative case study research approaches in urban and regional studies" (Krehl & Weck, 2020: 1859). The benefits of comparative urban studies are manifold: first, comparison shows how variables work differently in diverse settings; second, comparison allows to understand how the discovery of anomalies within different social systems can be refined, and ultimately enhance theoretical understanding; and third, comparison provides contrast models that point up crucial distinctions within a given set of findings (Kantor & Savitch, 2005: 135).

While the lack of a clear and univocal framework for comparative urban studies represented a limitation, the strong focus on grassroots cultural *milieux* allowed for a consistent basis upon which to ground the comparison. For the purpose of the study, depth was preferred over scope: it was chosen to limit the cases to two, in order to allow for a more thorough analysis of the individual realities operating within a given city and context.

Two cities were selected according to a set of criteria:

- Demographics: the size of the two cities had to be comparable.
- The 'density' of the creative economy: the two cities should qualify as 'creative cities', characterized by a distinct and lively creative economy which shapes its overall economic life.
- Geographical position: while every city can be said to have a development of its own, connected to that of its territorial surroundings, a broader boundary can be drawn around specific areas that are said to share similar characteristics (in the Italian case, South, Centre, North).

Considering these criteria, Bologna and Venice were chosen. Within the Italian scenario, they are two mid-sized Italian cities: Bologna has 395,416 residents and Venezia 258,685 (ISTAT, 2019). The two cities share a prominent disposition towards the arts and culture although with their own peculiarities that shape the collective imagination: Bologna is grounded in the independent arts and in mixed media productions, Venice is a historically established centre for arts patronage and trade and today epitome of the touristic city. Notwithstanding such specificity, they both qualify as creative cities: they score similarly in the Cultural and Creative Cities Monitor, 34,5 Venice and 29,7 Bologna[1] (Montalto et al., 2019) and in the Italian most influential ranking about quality of life, in the cultural sub-ranking, with Bologna at the 14th position and Venice 16th.[2] Moreover, the two municipalities show an analogous average per capita expenditure on culture in the past two decades that far exceeds the national average.[3] They are both located in the Centre-North of Italy, thus making it possible to assert their respective cultural and urban fabric is similar, unlike it would be between, for example, a southern and northern city. Finally, an additional criterion for the selection was based on the idea that the analysis of the grassroots cultural *milieu* of two "diversely" creative cities would have been a fruitful one regarding the insights obtained.

To answer the research question, a cultural mapping of the two cities' grassroots cultural organisations has been carried out (Duxbury et al., 2015; Freitas, 2016). Literature describes cultural mapping as "an instrument for collecting, locating and systematizing information concerning the distribution of cultural expressions within a certain territory" (Freitas, 2016: 9). Thus, the analysis aims at offering an annotated map of Bologna and Venice's grassroots cultural *milieux*, which

[1] In the European Commission's Cultural and Creative City Monitor, Bologna and Venice belong to the "large" population group, together with Florence, that has the highest score in the whole ranking. This supports the choice of selecting Bologna and Venice, instead of, for example, Florence.

[2] See: https://lab24.ilsole24ore.com/qualita-della-vita/tabelle/2021/cultura-e-tempo-libero (last accessed: 18th Febraruay 2022).

[3] Between 2001 and 2019, Bologna and Venice municipalities have spent in culture respectively 79 and 84 Euros per capita, while the national average in the same period is 34,8 Euros per capita (data available under subscription at Bureau Van Dijk Aida Pa).

allows to understand how these collectives are phenomena of vital urbanism and what motivations drive them in doing so. The design of the research is displayed in Fig. 1. The first phase aims to build an overview of the grassroots cultural organisations active in each city at the time of research. This is a first original contribution insofar no previous systematization of this information is available.[4] Moreover, this map is instrumental in the further stage. In the second phase, all possible information regarding the cultural practices enacted by the mapped organisations were collected and analysed following reflexive thematic analysis methodology (Braun et al., 2018). The software Atlas.ti was used. Thematic analysis is 'a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data' (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 79): the reflexivity of the method allows for induction and deduction to mutually inform each other, moving back and forth from the grounded elaboration of codes and their re-elaboration in the light of an established analytical framework. In sequence, the two phases allow to unveil the imagery of an alternative city as they see it and depict the discursive features as well as practices through which they constitute a phenomenon of vital urbanism.

The first phase has started with a preliminary round of unstructured interviews (six for each city) with local experts, activists, and artists; purposive and snowball sampling (Goodman, 1961; Palinkas et al., 2015) was used with the aim to familiarize with the *milieux* and to collect a sample of organisations for each city as much comprehensive as possible. Although snowball sampling is a limited kind of non-random sampling, it has been the best way to navigate the two cultural environments, with the objective of getting acquainted with them and obtaining a first understanding of Bologna and Venice's grassroots cultural *milieux*. Interviews were held in informal settings and focused on the features of the cultural *milieu* of the city, their "moral temperature" (Hall, 1998), and the organisations active at the grassroots level. Names of collectives and further contacts were the most important outcome of each interview, and they constituted a key element to mapping the cultural grassroots organisations. This information was triangulated with secondary data, mainly sourced online, to complete the dataset (Corti, 2018; Freitas, 2016). The criterion for mapping the organisations accounted for different parameters: grassroot and bottom-up organisations were selected, regardless of their legal structure (they are artists collectives, cultural associations, social cooperatives), whose mission is both societal and cultural; organisations only performing socially engaged activities - and, conversely, profit-seeking cultural associations - were both left out of the analysis. Similarly, large institutions which were created by (or with) a strong endorsement and/or financial support from the municipality and other institutional players were not included in the sampling, but the bottom-up organisations which partnered with other institutions at a later stage of their development were still included in the sample. The first phase resulted in a dataset of 70 grassroots organisations, 28 in Venice and 42 in Bologna.[5]

The construction of the sample within the two cities represented a second confirmation step for the choice of the two cases, because the mapped cultural *milieux* proved coherent with each other, and therefore comparable, from a series of identified criteria with which it was possible to categorise the mapped organisations:

- Position: their diffusion in the urban fabric and their position with respect to the city centre.
- Organisational structure: while it seemed reductionist to classify the organisations according to their legal status, some broad categories were identified.
- Type of activity: here, again, many organisations developed mixed activities and produced multimedia artworks, yet a typology was set that could comprise the organisations' main activities.

In the case of Bologna, the cultural organisations were equally distributed between the periphery (42 %) and the centre, articulated into the city centre (29 %) and the city walls (the peri-central area located around the trace of the city's medieval walls, where 29 % of the other associations is located). Many of the mapped organisations define themselves as "cultural associations" (30 %) and "artists collective" (22 %), followed by cultural centres (18 %) and "centri sociali[6]" (12 %). While theatre companies only accounted for 10 % of the sample, theatrical and performing activities are among the most practiced (25 %); most of the organisations developed a multifarious and open set of cultural activities (20 %) and proposed works that enabled active citizenship (27 %). The visual arts were practiced by 18 % of the mapped organisations (See Table A1).

In Venice, the majority of the organisations are located in the historical centre (69 %), and the rest distributed in the peripheral areas of Mestre (21 %) and Marghera (11 %) - with the exception of one organisation that has two branches, in Mestre and the historical centre. Regarding the forms of organisation, most are "cultural associations"

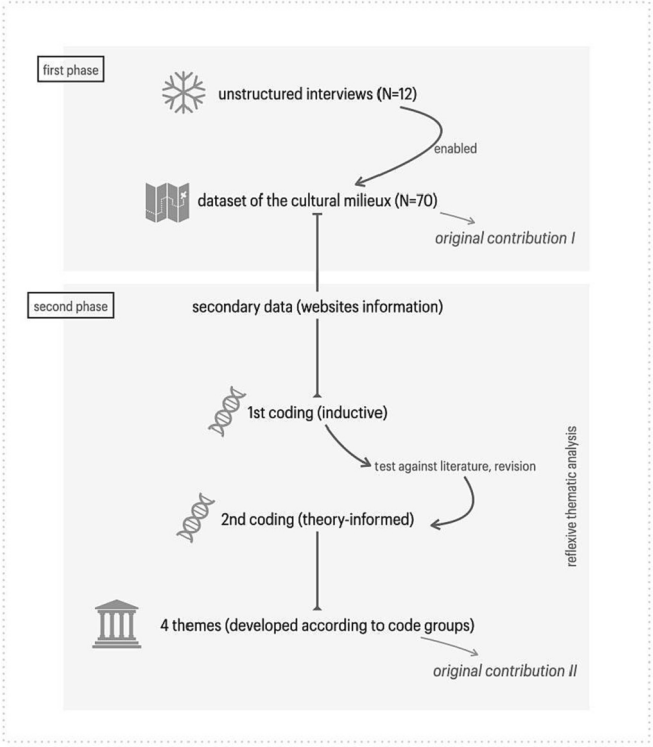


Fig. 1. Research design: a visualisation of the cultural mapping. (Source: elaboration of the authors).

[4] A possible exception may be the Map of the Commons proposed by LabGov to which our mapping could positively contribute even though they do not focus directly on grassroots cultural organisations. See: https://labgov.city/tag/map-of-the-commons/ (last accessed 15 February 2022).

[5] Bologna has 1,06 grassroots organisations per 10,000 inhabitants; Venezia 1,08 per 10,000 inhabitants.

[6] *Centri sociali* have a strong tradition in Italy. Born as mutual aid societies and cooperatives, in the 1970s they became spaces for political contestations (Mudu, 2004). Being a distinctively Italian phenomenon, *centri sociali* do not find a proper translation. As noted by Borchi (2017: 68), the term […] is not "squats", as in English it usually defines occupation for social housing purposes only. Italy's *centri sociali*, like squats, are spaces that offer shelter to the occupiers, but they are aimed at the organisation of political activities and are themselves a form of protest against governmental powers.

(39 %). Other diffused shapes are that of the "collective" (18 %) and "centri sociali" (14 %). The rest of them work as cultural centres (7 %), action research projects (7 %), networks (7 %), student collective (4 %), and artist association (4 %) (See Table A2). The organisations mapped deal with a variety of cultural and artistic activities: 25 % of them are multifunctional cultural spaces, 18 % are involved in various activities termed here as 'art&craft' and that entail books crafting and crossing, upcycling, historic artisanship, illustration and graphic design, whose products are often sold in the same locations; 14 % engage in visual arts; 11 % are performing arts organisations; same share of the population (11 %) is occupied by initiatives of active citizenship; and the remaining are into multimedia arts (7 %), urban art (7 %), urban regeneration (4 %), and heritage (3 %).

The second phase of the research aimed at annotating the overview of which organisations are out there in order to tackle the research question. Thus, texts[7] were gathered from the organisations' webpages, featuring their "about" sessions, the events and projects they have organised within the past two years and/or those they are developing. The two datasets regarding the two cities were initially elaborated inductively, as codes were created that identified and described the views, actions, ethos, and projects of the organisations. Following the applied method, codes have been revised based on the theoretical framework and the research question. Coding is, indeed, an "organic and open iterative process", insofar the aim of thematic analysis is "to provide a coherent and compelling interpretation of the data, grounded in the data" (Braun et al., 2018: 6). Therefore, while for the two cities different codes were developed which matched the different specificities of their organisations, it was possible to read them through an organic and common analytical lens (cf. Table 1). Many topics covered by the organisations matched current literature on the role of cultural and grassroots practices in the city, planning for the creative city, grassroots movements and "artivism", and the political economy of urban development. The idea of contributing to an alternative, meaning a more just, more sustainable, in sum, better urban future recurred distinctively across the texts analysed. As such, this concept has also informed the narration of the themes. Such notions have been used as sensitizing concepts to develop the four final themes. Despite the local specificities, themes were coherent across the two cases and allowed for a comparison of the cultural *milieux* of Bologna and Venice and of what emerged as their "alternative cities". They are: (1) political conflict; (2) imagining the alternative city; (3) making the alternative city; and finally (4) a discourse about the cultural economy. Before diving into the four themes and how they develop, the following section will provide context, illustrating the topical features of the two cities.

Table 1
A table summarizing the findings and the relative theoretical framework. (Source: elaboration of the authors).

Vitality as	Description	Literature
Dwelling	practices of dwelling as opposed to building; not just a planned city but a lived one	Jacobs, 1961 Adams & Tiesdell, 2007 Tunstrom 2007 Unsworth, 2007 Amati, 2021 Sennett, 2018
Counteracting	social engagement rooted in shared political views to offer an alternative to the drifts of the city	Özkaynak, 2008 Sánchez Belando, 2017 Cohendet et al., 2011 Chandler & Reid, 2016 Lee & Han, 2020 Kaddar et al., 2020 Cantillon et al., 2021
Being creative	local artistic and cultural practices bring vitality and local buzz in the city	Landry & Bianchini, 2012 Nicodemus, 2013 Zilberstein, 2019 Currid-Halkett, 2020

[7] Length of the text thematically analised on Atlas.ti: 19,130 words.

The empirical stages of this research bear some limitations. Given the highly informal nature of the organisations, this research is bound to be non-exhaustive. Moreover, the thematic analysis proposed concerns secondary data, thus it should be remembered that conclusions deal with how organisations see and position themselves in the urban context and what practices they envision to enact such visions. In fact, thematic analysis is appropriate in addressing interpretation of experiences lived by specific social groups, as well as "identify views about particular phenomena" and "interrogate dominant patterns of meaning surrounding particular phenomena" (Braun et al., 2018: 8). Thus, although hard to generalise, the purpose of this research is to understand in a preliminary manner the role of grassroots artistic organisations and to support further investigations that will take a closer look at the themes developed here. Considering the exploratory nature of this endeavour, the use of secondary data, although reductive in some extents, has allowed us to take into consideration the views and practices of all the mapped organisations, whereas interviews or surveys would have not allowed for such a systematicity.

4. Contexts and empirical findings

Bologna and Venice, it has been said, share some elements which allow for comparison: their position, demographics, local cultural economy, and patterns of historical development; despite such similarities, however, contexts vary, and some specific characteristics contribute to delineate two distinct situations.

Venice is renowned all over the world for its cultural and architectural heritage. Historically, its liberal republic used to be a cultural and commercial excellence (Ruskin, 2020). Its morphology, together with some of its most idiosyncratic monuments, is largely imitated all over the world (Settis, 2014). Venice's geography is a rather peculiar one. The historical heart lies in the lagoon, whose celebrity largely drives the city's economy. However, Venice expands in the mainland with Mestre, where most Venetians reside and that functions as an urban periphery. Moreover, the petrochemical centre of Marghera has been developed after the second World War and is now a depressed post-industrial area. Today, Venice faces a multiple challenge: the valorisation and protection of its heritage (human-made and natural) and the increasing abandonment of both the historical centre and Mestre, strictly connected to a local economy based on mass tourism and government's attempts of Disneyfication (Rosin & Gombault, 2021; Salerno, 2018). In this regard, social movements in Venice concern predominantly the preservation of the historical centre and the lagoon's natural environment, with Comitato Grandi Navi being probably the most notorious instance. In the mainland, Mestre and Marghera used to host several *centri sociali*, some of them still active, connected to a network that coordinates the activities of many other groups in the Veneto region.

Located in a strategic, central position, Bologna has historically been a hub of cultural and economic exchange, a lively cluster of music and the epicentre of many political conflicts - suffices it to say that, even in the XIII and XIV centuries, Bologna was a student-controlled university where free organisations of students opposed teachers' guilds (Cardozier, 1968). The university, pivotal to the city's knowledge economy, creative life, and social environment, has hosted, since the 1970s, the first course dedicated to "Dance, Arts, Music and the Performing Arts" (DAMS), a pioneering venture which was then replicated in other cities.

Bologna's University attracts the greatest number of students from all over the country.[8] These conflicts echo up to the present day, as Bologna holds a renowned primacy for its student riots and for the number of occupations and *centri sociali*, whose density, compared to the relatively small size of the city, is quite relevant - it is the only city in Italy with less than a million inhabitants to have had 20 active social centres between 1995 and 2003 (Mudu, 2004). Bologna even developed its own peculiar entrepreneurial modality, with local economic development being grounded in a cooperative environment of manufacturing SMEs and cooperatives, i.e., jointly owned enterprises which align social and economic goals (Selloni & Corubolo, 2017). Today, Bologna is characterized by a solid economy rooted in knowledge, creativity and, to a lesser extent, tourism (Beghelli, 2020), and a lively political debate. Such debate is pivoted around citizenship from a twofold perspective: the first concerns political participation, as participatory and decentralized modes of governance are being developed by the administration,[9] while radical fringes of grassroots movements still push for more radical urban policies. The second concerns inclusion: due to its lively manufacturing economy and its central position, the city has progressively become more and more multi-ethnic, with 60.000 non-Italian citizens living in the city - 15 % of the whole population.[10] And yet, it still faces strong inclusion problems.

4.1. Political conflict

In the two cities, grassroots cultural organisations manifested a political orientation which opposed neoliberal governmentality. The mapped realities attempt to resist unsustainable economic mechanisms through mutualistic practices and solidarity, in some cases overtly denouncing the political decisions of local administrations, manifesting against them or with antagonist statements on their websites.

In Bologna, political conflict has taken the tangible form of occupations: the most influential organisations are located in illegally occupied spaces. In some cases, such as that of Atlantide and XM24, this has resulted in violent evictions from the part of the municipality, while in some others the administration has negotiated with the occupiers and has agreed to provide them spaces for their activities, as it happened with Làbas (Carlini & Perticoni, 2017) and with TPO. The focus is on antifascism (TPO, Vag61, Circolo Arci Guernelli), on *autogestione* (a politically connoted act of self-management, as stated by TPO, Mercato Sonato, Vag61, Associazione Mattei Martelli), on conflict and resistance (Làbas, La Conserva and Crash; the latter summarises its 'about' with the succinct and eloquent words 'within and against the metropolis, for a mestizo society!'), on political debates and practical initiatives to defend migrants rights and right to migration (Associazione Mattei Martelli, TPO, Farm, Centro Interculturale Zonarelli, Làbas), while many have set up workers' unions to ensure labor rights (Instabile Portazza, Làbas, Vag61, Centro Sociale G. Costa).

In Venice, the organisations are often concerned with possible ways to dwell in the city and resist the monoculture of tourism as the sole driver of socio-economic development. Like Bologna, political conflict often entails occupation of abandoned spaces, as it is the case of Argo 16, Lisc, Lo.Co., Sale Docks, Morion, and Rivolta, or contentious spaces, as in the case of La Vida, for which, unlike in other mentioned experiences, the negotiation process failed to bring the space back to the community. These groups collectively organise initiatives in the public space to claim the right to a more sustainable life in the city, as in the "Curiamo la Città!" (in English: "let's take care of the city"), a series of demonstrations mixed with cultural activities underpinned officially and unofficially by many of the collectives and held in 2022. Yet, beyond this, political conflict emerges in other less obvious manners. Most of the organisations express coyness towards the functioning of the artistic system as well as urban policies in a way that implies a conflict with the powers that be. For example, Sale Docks states: "our purpose is to reverse those processes that privatize the cultural commons" such as "the relation between capital invested in the arts and the inherent precariousness of cultural labor, the neoliberal use of the arts as a means towards control over free though and (...) gentrification of the space".

4.2. Imagining the alternative city

The term 'alternative' is a "latent codification" (Braun et al., 2018) of implicit meanings found in the data. Though not directly stated by the organisations, the idea of an alternative to be invented, imagined, and enacted emerges from the statements of the grassroots artistic organisations mapped. The organisations express more or less explicitly their own image of the alternative, different city, and this happens with some distinctions in the two contexts.

The alternative Venice is a caring and livable city. Here, organisations engage in rethinking ways to cope with the artistic, cultural, and environmental heritage, and sustainable and just ways of inhabiting the city. Venice appears as a city to be taken care of. We Are Here Venice, for example, engages in formulating ways to protect and enhance Venice as a "living and real city". Artist collective Zolforosso similarly states that "Venice is a peculiar city and as a matter of fact we dwell in it, because it is home to us". DoppioFondo works together with other associations to "offer an alternative and new type of artistic and cultural activities to the city". In Mestre, Urban Rise, Osservatorio Marghera, and Gruppo di Lavoro via Piave aim to revitalise the community and take care of the disadvantaged in the neighbourhoods, as well as La Vida and Il Provvisorio in the historical centre. Projects and initiatives organised by Venetian collectives entail events to strengthen the local community around values of diversity, pluralism, solidarity, accessibility, and environmental protection.

The alternative Bologna appears instead as a just and inclusive city, able to integrate different cultures, include people at the margins, activate processes of solidarity and mutualistic practices. The coexistence of diversity is acknowledged as an added value and tackled through dialogue: Instabile Portazza solicits the encounter between people with different visions, Ya Basta highlights the need to cope with the contradictions which characterize the city of Bologna. Almost the totality of the organisations features the mention of specific groups on their webpages: migrants (Centro Interculturale Zonarelli, TPO, Làbas, Cantieri Meticci, Associazione Mattei Martelli), children (Teatro del Pratello, Senza il Banco, Associazione Mattei Martelli, Teatrino a Due Pollici, Instabile Portazza), elders (Make in Bo, Associazione Mattei Martelli, Senza il Banco). As said by the cultural association Senza il Banco, "we think of an *open city* [emphasis added], inclusive and welcoming, and of shared projects, built for and in schools"; similarly, Làbas aspires to "radically transform a present made of poverty, exclusion, racism, precariousness, environmental and cultural devastation".

4.3. Making the alternative city real

This theme is a direct consequence of the previous one and collects the practical aspects suggested by the grassroots artistic organisations in Venice and Bologna to implement the imagery of the alternative city, that is their actions. While being tied to the visions and motivations of the organisations, this theme is grounded in the practical activities carried out by the organisations. In both cities, togetherness appears as the only possible way to overcome a status quo by which the participants

[8] Source: https://www.istat.it/it/files/2016/11/Studenti-e-bacini-universitari.pdf (last accessed: 18th February 2022).

[9] Bologna is the first Italian city that has approved, in 2014, the Regulation on civic collaboration for the urban commons, a normative instrument that allows informal groups, NGOs, and private entities to govern common goods such as green spaces, squares, or neglected buildings in partnership with the local authorities. An analogous regulation has been adopted by Venice Municipality in 2019.

[10] http://inumeridibolognametropolitana.it/cittadini-stranieri-bologna

do not feel represented. Collective action, active citizenships, participatory practices are at the core of their methodologies. Furthermore, they engage in reappropriation of neglected spaces and/or local cultural heritage. They foster the creation of collaborative spaces that can function as aggregators of ideas and relations and organise events and initiatives that involve not just the members but also the local population.

Specifically, the Bologna case is firmly human-centred, and shows a prominent orientation towards mutualistic practices, an attention to education and lifelong learning and to cultural practices as the drivers for human development and self-affirmation. Access to work (Make in Bo, Eta Beta, Associazione Mattei Martelli, Mercato Sonato), sustainable urban mobility (L'altra Babele, Dynamo), the creation of spaces of socialization and cultural projects for fostering inclusion and sociability (Cantieri Meticci, Casa Larga, Circolo ARCI Guernelli). Some projects stand as exemplary of the worldview commonly displayed by local associations, organised around various themes, for instance lifelong learning. Some examples: Make in Bo is a makerspace which provides the spaces and tools for developing prototypes and implementing ideas, with the objective of making innovation available to everyone, from elders to children; Senza il Banco promotes learning activities for all ages and for mixed groups of learners in informal or semi-formal settings; social inclusion and the integration of migrants emerge in the projects of Cantieri Meticci, with the Art & Ground Railroad event organised in migrant camps; Approdi uses the performing arts to overcome migratory traumas. Great attention is placed on cultural activities as catalyzers of relations among diverse people: Instabile Portazza has developed, in a shared space, the 'Community Creative Hub' (CCH) where 'people can implement their capabilities through relations with others'; Cantieri Meticci organised several co-creation workshops, performances and projects, from the co-design with middle-school students of unconventional cartographies to battles of rap vs. poetry. A particular emphasis is placed on the enhancement of human capabilities: TPO has a language school, Kalima, where migrants can learn Italian to search for work and self-determine themselves, Vag61 organises a "solidarity afterschool" where peer learning among students with diverse backgrounds is encouraged, Làbas has an IT and coding lab, Làbug, for both practicing and learning digital skills.

In Venice, the cultural and creative *milieu* consists of endeavours towards the revitalization of the city and movements that tackle urban issues such as labor and student life (Lisc, Lo.Co., Argo16, Morion, Atelier 3 + 10), regeneration (Urban Rise, BURB), social inclusion and community making (Gruppo di Lavoro via Piave, Lo.Co., About, La Vida, Casa Punto Croce) as well as artistic associations whose aim is rather mutualistic and can be framed specifically into the 4th theme (mostly the case of: Extragarbo, Zolforosso, Ghiaccio Nove, DoppioFondo, Spazio-Punch, Giudecca Art District, V.E.R-V., Pase, Awai). Nonetheless, it is hard to cluster the various organisations into one specific realm of activity. In most cases, actions deal at the same time with artistic production and a social dimension. For instance, BURB is a "trans-local agency" that "assembles formal and informal entities, local and international institutions, social and cultural operators, visitors and inhabitants, towards a common action of change" and one of their projects is about regenerating a historic public building through artistic practices and joint curatorial projects to rethink how to dwell in the Venetian lagoon. Similarly, the cultural association About aims to be an open and shared urban lab that promotes artistic exchange, solidarity, and self-organisation. Microclima is a "research program" with a focus on "the natural world, cultural heritage, and the public sphere" and every year sets up a floating cinema that Venetians can access by boat. Casa Punto Croce and Morion organise exhibitions, concerts, and other events to promote queerness and transfeminism rights. Many of these groups organise recurring activities such as workshops, book presentations, concerts, showings, clean-ups, and debates, which stress the importance of being together in the city and being aware of the important aspects of a Venetian lifestyle as opposed to the ongoing over tourism drift: small productions, solidarity among the associates, circular economy, the housing situation, ecological awareness.

4.4. Discourse about the cultural economy

The last theme identified belongs to the same realm of the previous one, as it describes the contribution of artistic and cultural practices to a twofold objective: on the one hand, the achievement of an alternative city, in which multicultural dialogue and interactions through culture and the arts enable democracy and social justice, and on the other, the emergence of spaces and contexts for practicing cultural and creative activities and for creating job opportunities in the creative sector.

In Bologna, the arts are seen as pivotal in fostering socialization and the emergence of human and urban capabilities. Togetherness, mutual learning, and cross-cultural forms of expressions as the drivers of social inclusion and integration are at the core of the organisations' activities: most of them directly address the emerging needs of migrants in acquiring language skills and the necessary knowledge for entering the world market. This theme features the exchange of cultural practices and the co-production of new creative forms (CACCA, Liberty, Legàmi, Ateliersi, Hospites, Panem et Circenses), the creation of shared spaces for independent creatives and makers, especially active in the field of music and new media (HMCF, Make in Bo, Link, Zimmerfrei). What is crucial in the cultural economy of Bologna is space - more exactly, the existence of multifunctional centres and shared spaces co-used by the organisations, which happen to be fertile platforms for multicultural and cross-cutting exchanges. As an example, the CACCA collective indicates its "willingness to dialogue and share reflections and visions", Liberty states that "their projects originate from the sharing with artists and companies", while for Ateliersi "dramaturgy becomes a meta-discipline which enables dialogue between sound, humanities and the visual arts". Interestingly, the economic dimension of grassroot cultural activities in Bologna is oriented towards the creation of alternative markets and exchange circuits: the Era Ora market (Làbas) promotes the sale of vintage and handmade clothing, Ya Basta proposes direct trade events as a mode of overcoming exploitation mechanisms and of upcycling goods, Vag61 has a "popular self-managed shop", where to "experience a different conception of the economy and society, whose end is not profit but mutual support". Cantieri Meticci holds artisanal labs with the works co-produced with people with various fragilities. Again, the creation of valuable relations through exchange without platform or system intermediation appears as valuable as the goods exchanged.

In Venice, a greater importance is placed on the importance of being creatively independent yet able to exchange ideas and experiment. The grassroots organisations involved in this analysis are socially engaged but at the same time embedded in their art worlds (Zilberstein, 2019) and this implies the artists' position in the art market. In fact, emphasis is placed on the importance of getting together to create opportunities to not just dwell in the city, but to do so as artists being able to make a living. Zolforosso, for example, was born because some students "have decided to stay, to live, dwell in, and practice the dreams of the lagoon town, experimenting a way to remain together in order to resist the centripetal force of the metropolis, through sharing a space for research and common debate". They pursue such an ideal promoting exhibition and collaborative events that are "open to the independent art scene present in the area and interested in creating a different narrative of and for Venice: no longer just the prerogative of major global events, but also a living place inhabited by a new generation of artists who work and research here". The Venetian cultural economy faces a polarization between the presence of strong higher education institutions in the arts (University Iuav, Accademia di Belle Arti) and the Biennale establishment. Paradoxically, this makes it hard for emerging artists to stay put, because the Biennale catalyses international movements and contributes to the local economy of the city as a festival, yet the local art worlds do not benefit from it. In this regard, some organisations such as Spazio Punch and BURB engage directly in crafting relationships and

opportunities between emerging artists and the highbrow cultural institutions, for instance involving graduate students in their projects. Others, such as Extragarbo, are in close connection with the university (Iuav) and organise contentious workshops directed at arts students in their transition "between school and precariat". Some of them, especially the most conflictual entities such as *centri sociali*, instead, try to offer alternative cultural opportunities such as concerts, both to producers and to consumers.

5. Discussion

The two case studies of Bologna and Venice prove relevant for the theorisation of vital urbanism from a twofold viewpoint: first, they empirically illustrate the contribution of the creative *milieu* to the vitality of the city, updating the literature on vitalism with that on artistic and cultural organisations; the latter, in facts, explores the contribution of the creative sector to urban growth and to a thriving economy (Currid-Halkett, 2020; Montalto et al., 2019), but without delving into the topic of vitalism explicitly. Second, they complement this concept with the element of collective action. With specific reference to the latter, the literature has mainly focused on what policy stimuli could be adopted to produce a vital city (Elliott et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2021); conversely, grassroots artistic practices show how these practices are, first, unplannable and uncontrollable, as part of a vital system (Amati, 2021); second, very often in open antagonism with local policies, showing a commitment towards alternative local and global agendas (Kirchberg & Kagan, 2013; Lee & Han, 2020; Sánchez Belando, 2017; Zilberstein, 2019) and acting in contrast to official policies for the hegemonic creative city (Novy & Colomb, 2013); third, despite this agonistic commitment, they shape the genius loci of the city, giving it its creative distinctiveness (Landry & Bianchini, 2012) and, consequently, producing spillovers not only over other sectors (Nussbaumer & Moulaert, 2002) but also on urban policymaking.

The findings illustrate that grassroots cultural organisations in Bologna and Venice contribute to the vitality of their cities by dwelling, counteracting, and being creative (see Table 1). These organisations, in their way of contrasting and shaping urban dynamics, unravel the paradoxical and complex relationship between dwellers and the city; through their manifold actions and the alternative relational spaces for action and creation which they create, they produce the adaptive pulse of the city which is at the core of urban vitality (Simone & Pieterse, 2018). What is more, by providing prefigurative strategies and imageries and by performing activities (as broken down in the 4 themes) they generate a "discursive and material contribution" to the urban ecosystem (Cantillon et al., 2021).

The themes imply that grassroots cultural organisations are aimed towards a public agenda, imagine better local conditions for many urban stakeholders, and they reflect upon and aspire to influence the status quo by means of cultural production mixed with activism, solidarity, and collaboration. Their *modus operandi* escapes the logic of planning as a top-down activity, yet they contribute to the vitality of their cities.

The thematic analysis has made it possible to identify a distinct landscape of grassroots artistic organisations committed to counteract the drifts of their city: in Venice, opposing the consequences of mass tourism and Disneyfication of the city; in Bologna, enacting circuits of solidarity and mutualism through artistic practices. In particular, Bologna's vitalism is related to a just discourse, while Venice's cultural *milieu* is inscribed in the sustainable discourse. The four themes narrate how and why grassroots cultural organisations contribute to the vitality of Bologna and Venice; moreover, while the accounted organisations do not always or necessarily cooperate in open synergy, they are nonetheless connected by views, aims, and modalities of their practices. They are entangled in an environment in which they operate and which they contribute to shaping, as highlighted by recurring codes regarding collaboration and exchange of ideas.

The relational emphasis, the recurring reflections over, and actions on, the city in order to respond to chronic urban problems, proposing an alternative, more just and more environmentally sustainable, allow for an inscription of these practices in the emerging scholarship on vitalism, where sustainability, equity, and relational dynamics all intertwine in a new, process-oriented interpretation of the urban ecosystem (cf. Tunström, 2007, Unsworth, 2007). These organisations make the "lived city" through their intentions and activities. More interestingly, what emerges is the "coping" of the grassroot *milieu* with an urban environment which they perceive as both hostile and fertile, making them adaptive subjects to the climate crisis, migrations, policy changes in a way which is coherent within the samples (and, to some extent, across them).

In the observed *milieux* of Bologna and Venice, similarities have allowed for the development of themes that are coherent across the two cities, thus showing a common political background and common artistic and societal objectives - these similarities made it possible to build a comparison between the cases and hypothesise that this type of study can be transferred to other urban settings to explore the composition of the cultural *milieux*. A feature of both *milieux* was the strong emphasis on connections, hybridizations, and the will to cooperate with people who shared the same view, in a constant effort to produce a shared alternative ecosystem. The tensions emerged in Bologna and Venice can be found in other cities, such as Barcelona (Cohendet et al., 2011; Sánchez Belando, 2017), Seoul (Lee & Han, 2020), Hamburg, Hanover, Jerusalem, and Tel Aviv (Kaddar et al., 2020).

At the same time, however, the cities' *milieux* differed in approaches and in the perspective with which they looked at artistic practices: in Bologna, most grassroots organisations see the arts as a relational process, a platform for creating moments of sociability, a common ground where people with different origins and background could meet and merge; objectives of inclusiveness, social justice, and cultural democracy are placed at the forefront of their actions. In Venice, organisations are looking for new ways of inhabiting the city, and for resisting as independent artists in a city dominated by mass tourism and established art institutions that hardly look at local talents. The effects of Venice's development pattern on the environment and on the wellbeing of its citizens are persistently born in the minds of local creatives. Therefore, in Bologna the arts were more instrumental, and artistic expression becomes part of a social dialectic between different groups of people in a shared space; in Venice the 'art for art's sake' approach prevailed: most of the mapped organisations aim to affirm their artistic production and conquer a space for the artists in the city's rich yet contradictory panorama.

These findings can be interpreted as a mutual influence of the cultural *milieu* of a city with its *genius loci*. On the one hand, the two clusters of organisations are coherently embedded in the history of their cities: the topical features of the respective urban environments were well represented in the observed samples, with Bologna's creatives being overtly political over matters of justice, equality, integration, and accessibility, and Venice's *milieu* being attentive to the environmental, social, and economic issues produced by mass tourism and the established, superstar arts market dominating the scene. On the other hand, the relationship of the cultural *milieu* with this genius loci is not static, but rather dynamic - they do not simply adhere to it, but shape it and sustain it constantly, while proving coherent with respect to its topical features. With respect to the *genius loci*, Landry and Bianchini (2012: 40) have observed that.

> "The limit to all these expressions of creativity is that although they are wonderful for the duration, they do not transform the overall structure of daily life in the city nor the way city governments operate. Politicians and policy makers are rarely prepared to learn from the organisations which run events such as these."

While the study did not cover the factual relationships between institutions and grassroots organisations, it has indeed illustrated the complementary and antagonistic engagement of these organisations in

local policy and their efforts towards the definition of alternative paths of development for the cities in which they operate: regardless of the differences, the tensions of the grassroots organisations in both cities lead to rethinking the current state of their respective city and to proposing and enacting an alternative vision for it. In fact, they express vital urbanism in a flux of imagery and actions.

Their material provision of an alternative, by means of both imageries and actions, is inscribed in a general transformation of urban power structures, where urban dwellers are filling the voids left by institutional authority (Yiftachel, 2009). In other cases, they seek to implement an alternative way to be artists or to be involved in the cultural sector: righting the wrongs of 'cultural injustices', as Fraser (1995) termed them, they seek a way for local cultural expressions to emerge, in a perspective of cultural justice - even when a greater emphasis is placed on the cultural and artistic dimension, crucial social issues are addressed, including access to work and urban regeneration. What is more, these practices are defined as both discursive and material (ibid.), thus echoing the two contributions of grassroots cultural organisations to the vitality of cities: imagery and actions. In any case, such an alternative spurs from the refusal of the status quo and it could be framed in a post-capitalist conceptual stage. Such an 'alternative' has the power to shape urban policies, and, in the long term, to alter power relationships in the urban economy, leading towards more sustainable and just urban futures. In particular, the emphasis on the alternative, as both imagined and implemented, combined with the other thematic aspects identified, is best understood through the notion of vital urbanism, of which grassroots artistic organisation are expressions, proving the city to be constantly enacted and collectively shaped by the organisations themselves among others. The role of the observed organisations is not just that of the mere recipients of urban cultural policies, to which they adapt in aims and scope, but rather that of urban actors, thus uncovering their agency, as urban dwellers, in making and remaking cities, and as actors of the local cultural economy. These modalities of coping with the makeshift city (Simone & Pieterse, 2018) are indeed a phenomenon of vital urbanism which encourages further exploration.

6. Conclusions

The paper has observed why and how grassroots cultural organisations contribute to the vitality of their city. In particular, it has analysed the grassroots cultural *milieu* of two Italian cities, Bologna and Venice, and produced a twofold observation: first, how their visions and motivations shape a collective imagery of an alternative city and, second, how their localized actions, within the framework of such an imagery, produce a more just and sustainable city.

It has built the theoretical framework by observing three main bodies of literature: (1) that on planning and its technocratic development in the contemporary scenario, which has further exasperated the mechanistic and sequential view that, to specific policy stimuli, predetermined effects would correspond. This tendency has been observed through the lens of (2) urban vitality, which has most often been seen as the outcome of policies aimed at producing vital cities. Reversing this trend, vitalism understands the city as a complex vital system which cannot be fully managed and controlled. The same relationship between planning and vitality has been observed between planning and creativity: (3) creative city policies and cultural capitals have been used with the aim of generating flourishing creative economies, while the role of grassroot creative practices, which are not grasped by the hegemonic creative city, are often unaccounted for in the role they play in city-making.

The research has thus shown the interrelations between the concept of urban vitality and bottom-up creativity in cities and has presented grassroots cultural organisations as stances of urban vitality.

Using snowball sampling and reflexive thematic analysis, it has then developed an annotated map and an empirical analysis of the grassroots creative ecosystem of the cities of Bologna and Venice. It has identified four themes which are common to both creative *milieux* and which, nonetheless, show peculiar developments in each city: political conflict, the discourse about the cultural economy, the making of the alternative city, and the imagining of the alternative city. With specific regards to the two latter dimensions, the original contribution of the research is identified, in that these organisations engage in a "discursive and material contribution" (Cantillon et al., 2021) to the alternative city. The idea of 'alternative', while being ascribable broadly to "alternative development strategies, from economic, social and environmental perspectives" (Özkaynak, 2008: 47), has its specific connotation in each of the two cities: Bologna's idea of 'alternative' is that of a just, socially inclusive city, while Venice's *élan* is towards the sustainable livable city.

This contributes to the theory of vitality in a twofold way: first, it enriches the literature on cites as vital systems by illustrating not only that policy stimuli serve as drivers of vitality, but also that, conversely, the alternative, independent and grassroots systems, precisely because of their unpredictability, originate from an endogenous force which shapes the city and gives it its *élan*, contributing to the *genius loci* and, ultimately, to how policies are developed within a given city. Second, it illustrates the contribution of the creative sector specifically to urban vitality, showing how artistic practices, being place-based, relational and political, can confer the city its ability to pulse and adapt to changes.

Author statement

The authors have seen and approved the final version of the revised manuscript. This is the authors' original work, and it has not been submitted to any other journals nor published previously elsewhere. No conflict of interest has been devised, and no funding has been used to carry out this research.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Valeria Morea (corresponding author): conceptualization, methodology, investigation, data curation, writing original draft, writing review and editing, visualization, supervision, project administration.

Francesca Sabatini: conceptualization, investigation, data curation, writing original draft, writing review and editing, visualization.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

Acknowledgements

The authors have shared this research with many colleagues from whom they have gained important insights. In particular, they are thankful to Erwin Dekker, Anna Mignosa, and Francesco Della Beffa. Moreover, they would like to acknowledge the crucial help received by the various interviewees in Bologna and Venice involved in the initial stages of this work.

Appendix A

Table A1
Mapping of grassroots artistic organisations in Bologna (source: the authors' elaboration).

	Name	Location	Core activity	Organisation
1	TPO	City walls	Active citizenship	Centro sociale
2	Vag61	City walls	Active citizenship	Centro sociale
3	Làbas	City centre	Active citizenship	Centro sociale
4	Crash	Periphery	Active citizenship	Centro sociale
5	Associazione Mattei Martelli	Periphery	Active citizenship	Centro sociale
6	Yabasta	City walls	Active citizenship	Cultural association
7	C.U.A.	City centre	Active citizenship	Students collective
8	Prometeo	City walls	Active citizenship	Students collective
9	FARM	City centre	Active citizenship	Cultural association
10	Senza il banco	Periphery	Active citizenship	Cultural association
11	L'altra Babele	City Walls	Active citizenship	Cultural association
12	Equi-libristi	Periphery	Books	Cultural association
13	Amici della certosa	City centre	Heritage	Cultural association
14	La conserva	Periphery	Heritage	Cultural association
15	Make in Bo	Periphery	Multifunctional cultural space	Cultural association
16	Centro interculturale Zonarelli	City walls	Multifunctional cultural space	Cultural centre
17	Dynamo	City centre	Multifunctional cultural space	Cultural centre
18	Mercato Sonato	City walls	Multifunctional cultural space	Cultural centre
19	Circolo Arci Guernelli	City walls	Multifunctional cultural space	Cultural centre
20	Centro sociale G. Costa	City centre	Multifunctional cultural space	Cultural centre
21	Casa Larga Spazi di Socialità	City walls	Multifunctional cultural space	Cultural centre
22	Instabile Portazza	Periphery	Multifunctional cultural space	Cultural centre
23	Link	Periphery	Multimedia arts	Cultural association
24	Zimmerfrei	City centre	Multimedia arts	Artists collective
25	HMCF	Periphery	Multimedia arts	Artists collective
26	Ateliersi	City centre	Performing and visual arts	Artists collective
27	Cantieri meticci	Periphery	Performing arts	Artists collective
28	Artisti irregolari bolognesi	Periphery	Performing arts	Artists collective
29	Hospites	City walls	Performing arts	Artists collective
30	Panicarte / Instabili Vaganti	Periphery	Performing arts	Cultural association
31	Eta Beta	Periphery	Performing arts	Cultural association
32	Teatro del Pratello	City centre	Performing arts	Social cooperative
33	Legàmi	Periphery	Performing arts	Theatre company
34	Compagnia Creazione	City walls	performing arts	Theatre company
35	Liberty	Periphery	Performing arts	Theatre company
36	Teatrino a Due Pollici	Periphery	Performing arts	Theatre company
37	Planimetrie culturali	City walls	Urban regeneration	Cultural Association
38	CACCA	City centre	Visual and performing arts	Artists collective
39	Panem et circenses	City centre	Visual and performing arts	Artists collective
40	Xing	City centre	Visual arts	Artists collective

Table A2
Mapping of grassroots artistic organisations in Venice (source: the authors' elaboration).

	Name	Location	Core activity	Organisation
1	La Vida Antico Teatro Anatomico	Historical centre	Active citizenship	collective
2	Li.S.C.	Historical centre	Active citizenship	Student collective
3	We are Here Venice	Historical centre	Heritage	Cultural association
4	Il Provvisorio	Historical centre	Active citizenship	Cultural association
5	Awai	Historical centre	Art&craft	Cultural association
6	Casa Punto Croce	Historical centre	Art&craft	Cultural association
7	Doppiofondo	Historical centre	Books	Cultural association
8	Officina Marghera	Marghera	Art&craft	Cultural association
9	Soto Acqua	Historical centre	Art&craft	Cultural association
10	Lo.Co.	Mestre	Multifunctional cultural space	Centro sociale
11	Via Piave aps	Mestre	Multifunctional cultural space	Cultural association
12	About	Historical centre	Multifunctional cultural space	Cultural association
13	Argo 16	Marghera	Multifunctional cultural space	Cultural association
14	Morion	Historical centre	Multifunctional cultural space	Centro sociale
15	Rivolta	Marghera	Multifunctional cultural space	Centro sociale
16	Pase	Historical centre	Multimedia arts	Artist association
17	Ghiaccio 9	Mestre	Multimedia arts	Collective
18	Extragarbo	Historical centre	Performing arts	Collective
19	Ver-v	Historical centre	Performing arts	Network
20	Fuoriposto	Mestre	Performing arts	Cultural centre
21	Biennale Urbana	Historical centre	Urban art	Action research project
22	Microclima	Historical centre	Urban art	Action research project
23	Urban Rise	Mestre	Urban regeneration	Collective
24	Sale Docks	Historical centre	Multifunctional cultural space	Centro sociale

(*continued on next page*)

Table A2 (*continued*)

	Name	Location	Core activity	Organisation
25	Zolfo Rosso	Historical centre and Mestre	Visual arts	Collective
26	Spazio Punch	Historical centre	Visual arts	Cultural centre
27	Atelier 3 + 10	Mestre	Visual arts	Cultural association
28	Giudecca Art District	Historical centre	Visual arts	Network

References

Adams, D., & Tiesdell, S. (2007). Introduction to the special issue: The vital city. *The Town Planning Review, 78*(6), 671–679. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23803564.

Amati, M. (2021). *The City and the super-organism*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Andres, L., & Golubchikov, O. (2016). The limits to artist-led regeneration: Creative brownfields in the cities of high culture. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research, 40*(4), 757–775. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2427.12412

Audretsch, D. B., & Belitski, M. (2021). Towards an entrepreneurial ecosystem typology for regional economic development: The role of creative class and entrepreneurship. *Regional Studies, 55*(4), 735–756.

Becker, J. (2021). The city as data factory: notes on tech urbanism. In P. Mörtenböck, & H. Mooshammer (Eds.), *Platform Urbanism and its Discontents* (pp. 297–310). nai010 Publishers.

Beghelli, M. (2020). Sharing economy: The relationship between Airbnb, the accommodation industry and new tourist flows. The case of Bologna Metropolitan Area (Italy). *Almatourism-Journal of Tourism, Culture and Territorial Development, 11*(21), 79–107.

Bennet, J. (2010). *Vibrant matter: A political ecology of things. 2010*. Duke University Press.

Blessi, G. T., Grossi, E., Sacco, P. L., Pieretti, G., & Ferilli, G. (2016). The contribution of cultural participation to urban well-being. A comparative study in Bolzano/Bozen and Siracusa, Italy. *Cities, 50*, 216–226.

Borchi, A. (2017). *Culture and economic crisis: Cultural value in Italy from 2008 to the present day*. Doctoral dissertation. University of Warwick.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101.

Braun, V., Clarke, V., Hayfield, N., & Terry, G. (2018). Thematic analysis. In P. Liamputtong (Ed.), *Handb. Res. Methods Health Social Sciences* (pp. 1–17). Springer Nature.

Cantillon, Z., Baker, S., & Nowak, R. (2021). A cultural justice approach to popular music heritage in deindustrialising cities. *International Journal of Heritage Studies, 27*(1), 73–89.

Cardozier, V. R. (1968). Student power in medieval universities. *The Personnel and Guidance Journal, 46*(10), 944–948.

Carlini, M., & Perticoni, G. (2017). "Riapriamo Làbas", la manifestazione per le strade di Bologna, La Repubblica Bologna, 9th September 2017. https://bologna.repubblica.it/cronaca/2017/09/09/foto/_riapriamo_la_bas_la_manifestazione_per_le_strade_di_bologna-175013736/1/ Accessed Aug. 19th, 2021.

Chandler, D., & Reid, J. (2016). *The neoliberal subject: Resilience, adaptation and vulnerability*. Rowman & Littlefield.

Chapain, C., & Sagot-Duvauroux, D. (2020). Cultural and creative clusters–A systematic literature review and a renewed research agenda. *Urban Research & Practice, 13*(3), 300–329.

Cohendet, P., Grandadam, D., & Simon, L. (2011). Rethinking urban creativity: Lessons from Barcelona and Montreal. *City, Culture and Society, 2*(3), 151–158. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ccs.2011.06.001

Corsani, E., & Lazzarato, M. (2009). *Intermittents et précaires*. Paris: Amsterdam.

Corti, L. (2018). Data collection in secondary analysis. In U. Flick (Ed.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative data collection*. London: SAGE.

Currid-Halkett, E. (2020). The warhol economy. In *The Warhol Economy*. Princeton University Press.

Duxbury, N., Garrett-Petts, W. F., & MacLennan, D. (Eds.). (2015). *Cultural mapping as cultural inquiry*. Routledge.

Elliott, H., Eon, C., & Breadsell, J. K. (2020). Improving City vitality through urban heat reduction with green infrastructure and design solutions: A systematic literature review. *Buildings, 10*(12), 219.

Evans, G., & Shaw, P. (2004). The contribution of culture to regeneration in the UK: A review of evidence. A report to the Department for Culture Media and Sport. *Culture*, 1–17. January.

Florida, R. (2005). *Cities and the creative class*. Routledge.

Fraser, N. (1995). From redistribution to recognition? Dilemmas of justice in a 'Post-socialist' age. *New Left Review, 212*, 68–93.

Freitas, R. (2016). Cultural mapping as a development tool. *City, Culture and Society, 7*(1), 9–16. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ccs.2015.10.002. ISSN 1877-9166.

Goodman, L. A. (1961). Snowball sampling. *The Annals of Mathematical Statistics*, 148–170.

Hall, P. (1998). *Cities in civilization: Culture, technology and urban order*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.

Hatuka, T., Rosen-Zvi, I., Birnhack, M., Toch, E., & Zur, H. (2018). The political premises of contemporary urban concepts: The global city, the sustainable city, the resilient city, the creative city, and the smart city. *Planning Theory & Practice, 19*(2), 160–179.

Jacobs, J. (1961). *The death and life of great American cities: The failure of town planning*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Jacobs, J. (2016). In S. Zipp, & N. Storring (Eds.), *Vital little plans. The short works of Jane Jacobs*. New York: Random House.

Kaddar, M., Kirchberg, V., Barak, N., Seidl, M., Wedler, P., & de Shalit, A. (2020). Artistic city-zenship: How artists perceive and practice political agency in their cities. *Journal of Urban Affairs, 00*(00), 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1080/07352166.2020.1792312

Kantor, P., & Savitch, H. V. (2005). How to study comparative urban development politics: A research note. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research, 29*(1), 135–151.

Keucheyan, R. (2014). *The left hemisphere: Mapping critical theory today*. Verso Books.

Kirchberg, V., & Kagan, S. (2013). The roles of artists in the emergence of creative sustainable cities: Theoretical clues and empirical illustrations. *City, Culture & Society, 4*, 137–152. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ccs.2013.04.001

Krehl, A., & Weck, S. (2020). Doing comparative case study research in urban and regional studies: What can be learnt from practice? *European Planning Studies, 28*(9), 1858–1876.

Landry, C., & Bianchini, F. (2012). *The creative city: A toolkit for urban innovators*. Routledge.

Lee, S. Y., & Han, Y. (2020). When art meets monsters: Mapping art activism and anti-gentrification movements in Seoul. *City, Culture & Society, 21*, Article 100292. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ccs.2019.100292

Leontidou, L. (2020). Mediterranean cities of hope: Grassroots creativity and hybrid urbanism resisting the crisis. *City, 24*(1–2), 263–275.

Leslie, D., & Catungal, J. P. (2012). Social justice and the creative city: Class, gender and racial inequalities. *Geography Compass, 6*(3), 111–122.

Miles, M. (2013). A post-creative city? RCCS annual review. *A Selection from the Portuguese Journal Revista Crítica de Ciências Sociais*, 5.

Montalto, V., Moura, C. J. T., Langedijk, S., & Saisana, M. (2019). Culture counts: An empirical approach to measure the cultural and creative vitality of European cities. *Cities, 89*, 167–185.

Mudu, P. (2004). Resisting and challenging neoliberalism: The development of italian social centers. *Antipode, 36*(5), 917–941.

Murzyn-Kupisz, M., & Działek, J. (2017). Theorising artists as actors of urban change. In M. Murzyn-Kupisz, & J. Działek (Eds.), *The impact of artists on contemporary urban development in Europe. GeoJournal library* (vol 123). Cham: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-53217-2_1.

Nadal, L. (2000). *Discourses of urban public space: USA 1960–1995. A historical critique*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Nicodemus, A. G. (2013). Fuzzy vibrancy: Creative placemaking as ascendant US cultural policy. *Cultural Trends, 22*(3–4), 213–222.

Novy, J., & Colomb, C. (2013). Struggling for the right to the (creative) city in Berlin and Hamburg: New urban social movements, new 'spaces of hope'? *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research, 37*, 1816–1838. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2427.2012.01115.x

Nussbaumer, J., & Moulaert, F. (2002). Integrated area development and social innovation in European cities. *City, 8*, 249–257. https://doi.org/10.1080/1360481042000242201

Özkaynak, B. (2008). Globalisation and local resistance: Alternative city developmental scenarios on capital's global frontier—The case of Yalova, Turkey. *Progress in Planning, 70*(2), 45–97.

Palinkas, L. A., Horwitz, S. M., Green, C. A., Wisdom, J. P., Duan, N., & Hoagwood, K. (2015). Purposeful sampling for qualitative data collection and analysis in mixed method implementation research. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health, 42*(5), 533–544. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10488-013-0528-y

Periton, D. (2018). Generative history: Marcel Poëte and the city as urban organism. *The Journal of Architecture, 23*(4), 580–594.

Pollio, A., Magee, L., Ang, I., Rowe, D., Stevenson, D., Swist, T., & Wong, A. (2021). Surviving gentrification in inner city Sydney: Adaptive spaces and makeshift economies of cultural production. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research, 45*, 778–794. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2427.13015

Rosin, U., & Gombault, A. (2021). Venice in crisis: The brutal marker of covid-19. *International Journal of Arts Management, 23*(2), 75–89.

Ruhlandt, R. W. S. (2018). The governance of smart cities: A systematic literature review. *Cities, 81*, 1–23.

Ruskin, J. (2020). *Le Pietre di Venezia [Original title: The stones of Venice]* [1851]. Milano: BUR Rizzoli.

Salerno, G. M. (2018). Estrattivismo contro il comune. Venezia e l'economia turistica. *ACME An International Journal of Critical Geography, 17*, 480–505.

Sánchez Belando, M. V. (2017). Building alternatives to the creative turn in Barcelona: The case of the socio-cultural Centre can Batlló. *City, Culture & Society, 8*, 35–42. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ccs.2016.11.001

Schatz, L., & Rogers, D. (2016). Participatory, technocratic and neoliberal planning: An untenable planning governance ménage à trois. *Australian Planner, 53*(1), 37–45.

Scott, A. J. (2007). Capitalism and urbanization in a new Key? The Cognitive-Cultural Dimension. *Social Forces, 85*(4), 1465–1482.
Selloni, D., & Corubolo, M. (2017). Design for Social Enterprises: How design thinking can support social innovation within social enterprises. *The Design Journal, 20*(6), 775–794.
Sennett, R. (2018). *Building and dwelling: Ethics for the city*. New York: Farrar Strauss & Giroux.
Settis, S. (2014). *Se Venezia muore*. Einaudi editore.
Sharp, J., Pollock, V., & Paddison, R. (2005). Just art for a just city: Public art and social inclusion in urban regeneration. *Urban Studies, 42*(5/6), 1001–1023.
Simone, A., & Pieterse, E. (2018). *New urban worlds: Inhabiting dissonant times*. Hoboken (NJ): John Wiley & Sons.
Törnqvist, G. (2004). Creativity in time and space. *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography, 86*(4), 227–243.
Tunström, M. (2007). The vital city: Constructions and meanings in the contemporary Swedish planning discourse. *The Town Planning Review*, 681–698.
Unsworth, R. (2007). City living' and sustainable development: the experience of a UK regional city. *The Town Planning Review, 78*(6), 725–747. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23803567.
Vallaster, C., Von Wallpach, S., & Zenker, S. (2018). The interplay between urban policies and grassroots city brand co-creation and co-destruction during the refugee crisis: Insights from the city brand Munich (Germany). *Cities, 80*, 53–60.
Yencken, D. (1988). The creative city. *Meanjin, 47*(4), 597–608.
Yiftachel, O. (2009). Critical theory and 'gray space': Mobilization of the colonized. *City, 13*(2–3), 246–263.
Yoon, H., & Currid-Halkett, E. (2015). Industrial gentrification in West Chelsea, New York: Who survived and who did not? Empirical evidence from discrete-time survival analysis. *Urban Studies, 52*, 1.
Zhang, A., Li, W., Wu, J., Lin, J., Chu, J., & Xia, C. (2021). How can the urban landscape affect urban vitality at the street block level? A case study of 15 metropolises in China. *Environment and Planning B: Urban Analytics and City Science, 48*(5), 1245–1262.
Zheng, J. (2021). Structuring artistic creativity for the production of a 'creative city': Urban sculpture planning in Shanghai. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research, 45*, 795–813. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2427.12986
Zilberstein, S. (2019). Space making as artistic practice: The relationship between grassroots art organizations and the political economy of urban development. *City and Community, 18*, 1142–1161. https://doi.org/10.1111/cico.12458
Zukin, S. (1989). *Loft living: Culture and capital in urban change*. New Brunswick (NJ, US): Rutgers University Prints.