



Sport in the periphery: public space and private capital. The case of Scampia

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Abstract

The UN Agenda 2030 underscores the transformative potential of inclusive, safe, and accessible urban spaces, particularly for marginalized communities. This study investigates the sociological dimensions of urban regeneration through the redevelopment of a football pitch in Scampia, a peripheral district in Naples characterized by socio-economic challenges and limited public investment. Focusing on the intersection of private initiatives and public governance, the research explores the implications of a bottom-up effort led by two professional footballers in the context of the municipal “Restart Scampia” project. Semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders reveal the role of sports as a catalyst for social cohesion, youth engagement, and urban renewal, while also exposing tensions between private actions and the responsibilities of public institutions. By situating the case of Scampia within broader sociological debates on urban marginality, welfare systems, and hybrid governance, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the dynamics shaping urban peripheries. It argues for a critical reassessment of the interplay between public and private actors in fostering sustainable and equitable urban transformation.

Keywords Periphery · Urban renewal · Sport · Naples

Introduction

In recent years, the city has emerged as a key focal point in political discourse. There is a discernible trend to confine social issues within the dimensions of urbanity. This shift is attributed to the Fordist city, where the factory served as the locus of both conflict and solidarity, contributing to the formation of class consciousness. The disappearance of the latter (Alteri 2014; Agustoni et al. 2017) shifts the focus on the

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city, specifically on its margins, favoring the emergence of collective identities based on socio-spatial configuration (Morlicchio 2017) and identifying common needs. As Morlicchio states, the social question has not disappeared. However, there is no doubt that the spatial segregation of the most marginalized segments of the population has been a worryingly growing phenomenon, which has been occurring in America for several decades already, but also in Europe (Wacquant 2008). While the banlieues in France and the English inner cities are configured as «places of exile» (Dubet and Lapeyronnie 1992), Italy has been affected by this issue to a lesser extent, although it is not completely immune to it. Major Italian cities, including Rome, Milan, Turin, Naples, Bari, and Palermo, have varying degrees of marginalized peripheries where the presence of the State and its institutions is lacking. This phenomenon has prompted policymakers to enact policies that prioritize specific regions, with the European URBAN program standing out as a prominent example. (Agustoni et al. 2017; for a focus on the URBAN program in Naples, Laino 1999). This program between the second half of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s involved several European and Italian cities, including Naples; in urban regeneration, projects specifically aimed at at-risk neighborhoods in these metropolises. The fundamental concept of the program is to approach social issues through an urban lens, as previously highlighted. Urban redevelopment and regeneration interventions are embedded in a political framework that saw a progressive dismantling of the European welfare system in the second half of the 20th Century. This trend ended up increasing inequalities and exacerbating social problems. Kazepov and Barberis (2017) emphasize the importance of recognizing the strong relationship between social issues and their concentration within specific geographic areas: «Especially since the 1990s, social policies have undergone important changes, re-drawing the boundaries of ‘social citizenship’ and giving a more prominent role to cities. Intense reform activity has addressed the social policy arena from two different directions. This has been evident, on the one hand, with the changing territorial dimension at which social policies are designed, managed, funded and implemented, and, on the other hand, by increasing the number and type of actors involved in these very same activities. The joint effect of these two processes brought about (vertically) a decentralization of regulatory powers and (horizontally) an increased role for non-governmental actors» (p. 302). Interventions that are targeted toward specific territories are exposed to the risk of shifting the responsibility for existing challenges onto those neighborhoods. This can exacerbate the stigma associated with these areas (Wacquant et al. 2014). In addition, contemporary societies are influenced by several significant dynamics. These include reduced public spending, leading to diminished services such as healthcare and education; cities facing the imperative to position themselves as attractive investment opportunities, drawing in investors, tourists, and sponsors; a recent substantial increase in inflation resulting in reduced purchasing power for households; and complex phenomena like gentrification.

The theme of urban regeneration, spearheaded by both public and private entities such as companies and non-profit organizations, is steadily gaining traction within this framework. Temporarily setting aside the issue of participation—a much sought-after yet infrequently realized aspect, in practice—prompts one to contemplate the extent to which such interventions might align with the objectives of a neoliberal

system; which has cut services for the weaker sections of the population, and uses the private social sector and interventions to shift responsibility for solving urban areas' social problems onto the areas themselves, while mitigating growing inequalities. Alietti (2004) stresses the importance of recognizing that interventions, while appearing feasible on paper, require a significant investment of time, resources, and effort. This encompasses financial investment, labor, potential setbacks, and effective negotiation. The underlying idea behind these actions is the widespread belief that the targeted groups lack social ties and are seen as lower-quality citizens, thus not considered deserving of participating in the intervention's design and implementation. While this approach may streamline the process, it raises questions about the validity and impact of such interventions on the targeted areas. Punziano (2018) emphasizes the interconnectedness of urban redevelopment and regeneration initiatives with the imperative to address urban voids. The author introduces a classification system that delineates a continuum spanning two extremes: renewal, characterized by interventions seeking to fill these voids through physical modifications, and regeneration, which entails a comprehensive process aimed at enhancing lifestyle and social interactions to improve overall quality of life. The latter category encompasses top-down interventions, driven by political or private entities, as well as bottom-up actions initiated by local communities, citizen groups, or individual contributors. Although these approaches are not inherently contradictory, top-down interventions often overlook the needs and successes of bottom-up actions, which necessitate acknowledgment and careful consideration for potential integration.

In the work by Cellamare (2018), the author explores the concept of reappropriation of space by local inhabitants as a form of self-organization. This phenomenon often stems from top-down actions that do not consider the input of the local population or from the necessity arising from state abandonment. It encompasses a range of activities, from small-scale reclamation of green spaces for redevelopment to the occupation of entire buildings, with a significant portion falling under the category of illegal practices. These micro-level initiatives not only lead to the physical renewal and social revitalization of spaces but also redefine the meaning and purpose of these areas, presenting an alternative narrative to the dominant one.

The case study of the Scampia neighborhood serves as an illustration of the issues discussed. Over time, the community has experienced adverse political decisions, a lack of dialogue with residents, and subsequent strategies of reappropriation. However, the public administration has made efforts to initiate a comprehensive redevelopment and regeneration project titled Re-Start Scampia (hereinafter, we will refer to it as RS) (Comune di Napoli 2016) by engaging in dialogue with the local community.

For the purpose of this study, we will focus on the redevelopment of a small soccer pitch within the "Vele"¹ complex of Scampia to exemplify the reappropriation practices highlighted by Cellamare. This specific case extends beyond the physical transformation of the field, shedding light on the community's demand for dignified living spaces and exploring the intricate interplay between informal practices and formal power structures.

¹ "Vele" in Italian means sails. The complex takes this name because the shape of the buildings is reminiscent of sails.

In the subsequent sections, we will utilize the redevelopment of the football pitch as a framework to delve into the multifaceted situation within the “Vele” residential complex. This approach will be complemented by a detailed methodological exposition, the findings obtained from fieldwork, and the ensuing reflections.

Historical and social context

As previously indicated, our focus will be on the revitalization of a small football field situated within the “Vele” housing complex in Scampia, a neighborhood of Naples falling under Municipality VIII in the northern area of the city. This endeavor is an integral part of the comprehensive urban redevelopment program sponsored by the Municipality, supported by national and European funding, and reflects collaborative engagement between the Municipality and the local community, as mentioned earlier, RS.

The discourse surrounding the redevelopment of the “Vele” complex in the city has historical roots. Established in 1964 following the approval of the Area Plan and expanded in the 1980s to accommodate individuals displaced by the Irpinia earthquake, the area has been a subject of ongoing debate.

The aforementioned Area Plan was conceived with the objective of integrating diverse socio-economic groups, particularly from the lower and middle classes, to foster social cohesion and ensure housing accessibility for all segments of the population. Furthermore, the plan sought to facilitate the development of burgeoning neighborhoods in peripheral areas relative to established urban contexts. However, during the implementation phase, notable challenges surfaced. These included substandard housing quality attributed to cost considerations and the tangible isolation of newly developed neighborhoods from the established urban core. These issues have prompted scrutiny of the Area Plan’s efficacy in realizing its social and economic objectives.

The construction of the “Vele”, or “Seven Housing Units”, started in 1968. The project designed by Francesco di Salvo aimed to provide low-cost housing for the economically disadvantaged. The project was completed in 1980. However, the resulting structure was immediately deemed uninhabitable due to its experimental design. The dwellings are situated within an urban layout characterized by large road axes and a lack of commercial activities in the vicinity (Santoro 2018).

The substandard and unsafe living conditions within the “Vele” were expeditiously brought to the attention of residents’ committees. In 1988, the first protests were initiated to call for the establishment of a Technical Commission to thoroughly investigate the possibility of intervening in these emerging issues. As part of their requests, the committees sought an assessment of the structural stability and integrity of the buildings in order to make a detailed evaluation². The focus of this task was to enhance building safety through thorough engineering analyses. The objective of

² On July 23, 2024, the iron balcony on the third floor of the “Vela Celeste” detached and collapsed onto the balconies of the lower floors, resulting in the deaths of two people and injuring 13 others, including 7 children aged between 2 and 8 years. In an interview with the newspaper InterNapoli, Don Aniello emphasizes the “negligence” of the Neapolitan institutions and criticizes how this “Vela”, along with the other two, which people continue to occupy illegally, should have been inspected by the public administration before being made available to families.

the assessment was to identify any structural issues such as cracks or subsidence, assess the overall resilience of the buildings, and inspect materials for any irregularities. Furthermore, the committees requested an evaluation of the thermo-hygrometric characteristics of the structure in order to address thermal and humidity conditions inside and outside the building, mitigating potential health and sanitary concerns. Additionally, residents, through the committees, requested assessments of the functionality of technological systems, including electrical, hydraulic, heating, and ventilation systems, as well as safety systems, such as fire alarms and evacuation systems. A properly designed and functioning system could significantly improve the overall functionality of the structure to meet residents' needs. Lastly, the committees sought interventions to enhance the living and urban conditions of the entire structure with the aim of optimizing spaces and urban context to improve residents' quality of life. Additionally, requests included promoting effective connectivity with public services and surrounding infrastructure within a broader urban regeneration framework. The mobilization of the Committees led in 1995 to the approval by the City Council of the Redevelopment Plan drawn up in partnership with the University of Architecture of Naples "Federico II"; the demolition of the first three "Vele" occurred on 11 December 1997, 22 February 2000, and 29 April 2003³. During the period from 1994 to 2011, the "Vele di Scampia" Committee (hereinafter, "Vele" Committee), actively advocated for and proposed various interventions to the City of Naples administration aimed at enhancing the living conditions within the "Vele" complex. Subsequently, in 2016, the approval of the RS call for tender resulted in the allocation of 18 million euro for the comprehensive demolition of the last three out of four remaining "Vele" structures. Additionally, plans were set in motion to repurpose the fourth "Vela" from functioning as a temporary accommodation to serving as a hub for public administration offices.

The call outlines aspects to be redeveloped, including the construction of the new Metropolitan City and Metropolitan Council headquarters in "Vela B". It also involves creating facilities for the production of services, from artisanal workshops to small shops, through the construction of new buildings aimed at fully or partially replacing existing structures. Other aspects include the provision of social housing and the construction of nurseries, preschools, and secondary schools, as well as the expansion of social services for women and families. Moreover, the proposal encompasses requirements for commercial, cultural, and specialized educational structures, along with leisure facilities. This will serve to improve accessibility to the public park and optimize connections with the city center and surrounding areas through the rail mobility network.

³ For an extensive study of the process that led to the current situation see Santoro (2018).

Methods

In order to advance with the research, it was essential to conduct a qualitative analysis. The decision arose from the crucial need to break down the individual processes of organizations and groups in order to analyze the phenomenon and also examine the interpretations of individuals.

Qualitative data was collected through semi-structured face-to-face interviews. The intervention of the researcher was necessary to address and touch upon themes and topics of interest during the discussion. The decision to carry out this survey emerged from the need to analyze the phenomenon under in-depth investigation. The objective was not only to review the redevelopment process over time but also to analyze its impact on the residents' lives and to capture its complexity.

The initial phase of sample selection involved identifying primary stakeholders who were directly involved in the project, as well as secondary stakeholders who had indirect involvement or held positions of authority in the local social context, such as local politicians and the parish priest. Furthermore, individuals possessing a deep understanding of the context and prior experience collaborating with authorities on similar projects were sought. Following stakeholder mapping, we proceeded by confirming their willingness to participate in an interview. It was imperative to approach this process with sensitivity, especially in an unfamiliar environment, to avoid disrupting the established equilibrium among the involved parties. The careful approach was not only rooted in ethical considerations, aiming to maintain respect for local balances and established practices, but also served a practical purpose of building trust with the interviewees. For instance, this was particularly noticeable in the relationship between the "Vele" Committee and the public administration. On one hand, the "Vele" Committee expressed the residents' requests and dissatisfaction to the public administration (as indicated in the subsequent part of this work). On the other hand, local politicians were keen on maintaining a good relationship with the Committee and residents, while also avoiding appearing solely responsible for the current situation.

Seven stakeholder interviews were conducted following the selection principles outlined earlier. Each interviewee was asked to provide their consent for the interview, its recording, and the publication of the transcribed conversations. This consent was obtained after explaining the motives and purposes of the research:

1. Antonio Letizia; one of the two footballing brothers, Antonio and Gaetano Letizia, who financed the renewal of the playground for the children of the "Vele" of Scampia.
2. Rosario; a member of the "Vele" Committee, a committee fighting for the rehabilitation of spaces and the improvement of the quality of life of the inhabitants of the "Vele" and in general of the whole Scampia.
3. Nicola Nardella; the President of the Municipality VIII of Naples.
4. Alfonso Avino; one of the protagonists of the crowdfunding launched for the redevelopment.

5. Vincenzo Strino; the protagonist of the redevelopment and opening of another sports facility in the Secondigliano neighborhood, funded by “Fondazione Il Fatto Quotidiano (Fondazione Il Fatto Quotidiano 2023)”.
6. Lucio Acciavatti; Council Member, responsible for Financial Statements, Sports, Heritage, Staff, and Transport.
7. Don Aniello Manganiello; the neighborhood priest⁴.

Results

The decision to interview the Letizia brothers, who grew up in Scampia around the football field, provided an initial insight into the origins of the “Vele” structure. In addition to the Letizia family, Alfonso Avino was interviewed to analyze the social impact, as he contributed to the financing of the field through crowdfunding. It was also necessary to interview the organization of the “Vele” Committee, which has been advocating for the improvement and safeguarding of the lives of residents in the «Vele» since the 1980s. The interviews also highlighted the need to consult Municipality members to gain a comprehensive view of the situation from an administrative perspective, especially regarding timelines and updates, and to compare the RS project with Vincenzo Strino’s input.

To analyze the relationships between the interviews, a multidimensional qualitative reduction analysis was developed, building a framework of the narratives and perceptions of risk contained within the various interviews. For this purpose, two main dimensions, referred to as factors, were delineated. These factors were then cross-referenced to construct new dimensions for analysis. The cross-referencing of dimensions aims to establish attraction and repulsion relationships between themes, along with the active variables used in this analysis, such as types of public administration and citizen actors, public versus private comparisons, and thus areas for future perspectives.

The analysis of the interviews revealed four factors. The first factor relates to the public-private sphere, particularly deducing the partnership agreement that the Municipality of Naples has initiated for the management of sports and green spaces in collaboration with the private sector. The second factor concerns the positive and negative perspectives emerging from the interviews with the involved actors. The third and fourth factors encompass the «Vele» Committee and the administration as the main protagonists involved in the field’s redevelopment.

On the semi-positive axis, the interviews primarily address the individual and private sphere (such as the impact of the field and sports on the neighborhood) and the future sphere (such as the reduction of crime due to the importance of sports as a gathering place, the usability of the playing field, its improvement, and investment in sponsors ready to redevelop it). On the semi-negative axis, public issues and their role in the field’s redevelopment emerge (for example: the lack of administrative contribution to the redevelopment, the absence of the administration in the urban periphery over time, the cumbersome bureaucracy related to the field, the ongoing

⁴ All interviewees have agreed to have their real names appear in this work.

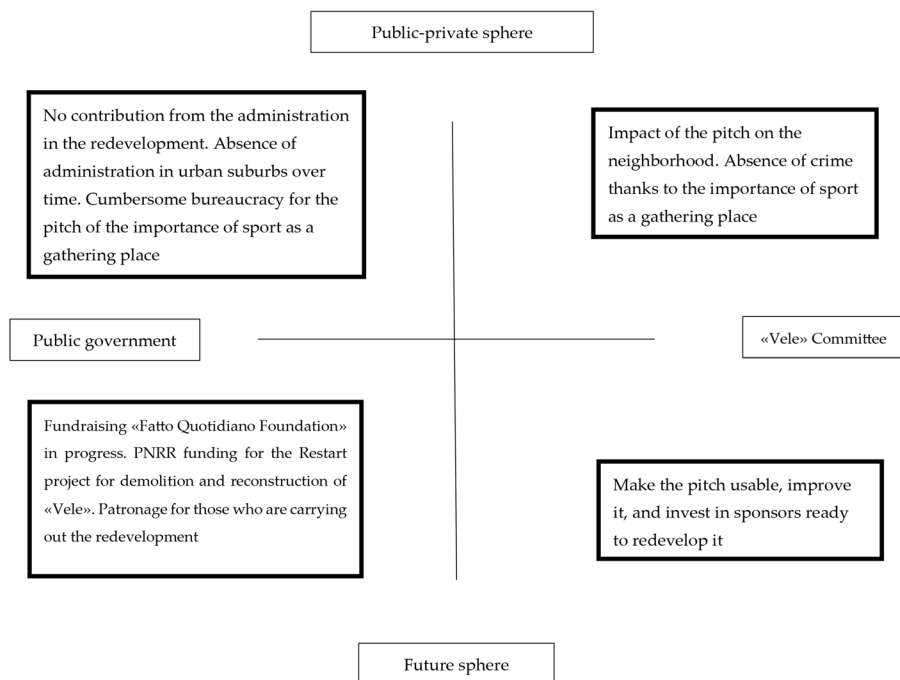


Fig. 1 Dimension analysis of interviews

fundraising by the “Fondazione Il Fatto Quotidiano”, the PNRR funding for the RS project for the demolition and reconstruction of the “Vele” complex, and the patronage for those involved in the redevelopment).

The analysis of these interviews and secondary sources, such as municipal resolutions and newspaper articles, aims to identify the main themes and factors discussed by both public and private entities. The next step involves a more detailed analysis of the interviews and key themes to address the main research questions. This study seeks to answer the following questions: What is the impact of the redevelopment of the football pitch in the “Vele” complex in Scampia on the local community, and how does it align with broader urban regeneration initiatives managed by the public and private sectors?

Furthermore, the research aims to explore the potential of sport as a tool for community transformation (Fig. 1).

Discussion

The RS project is thus the result of a process initiated by the demands and protests from the neighborhood, involving negotiation and consultation tables in a participatory dynamic that included not only the Municipality and the Municipal Administration but also local Committees and Associations, including the “Vele” Committee. In an interview with Rosario, a committee member, the long history accompanying the

current situation emerges. This suggests a dimension that extends beyond political activism and has contributed to the creation and strengthening of social relationships, fueling residents' claims, and educating new generations.

Rosario states⁵: «The 'Vele' Committee has existed for almost 47/48 years, more or less. (...) Vittorio Passeggio was 'the man with the megaphone,' right? He had a megaphone because there were no social media (...) when we were younger, we saw Vittorio with this megaphone saying: 'Today, meetings at...', you know, with this megaphone, and we were young, you know, we teased him, 'look at that guy shouting,' we didn't even understand the meaning of, let's say, that thing. Then, after years, we grew up, we went in that direction because then you start to understand, at 17, 18 years old, you start to understand a bit how things work, right? And why that man was shouting through the megaphone, right? And we heard many of Vittorio's meetings where he taught us to appreciate life, to not discriminate based on skin color, to not discriminate against the kid who wears shoes worth 10 euros, and the one who wears shoes worth 1000 euros, he taught us the real values of life, Vittorio Passeggio was great» (Rosario 06/07/2023).

The history of the Committee, as evident, is inseparable from the life trajectories of its members, who were born and raised in the Committee and have inherited the protest and now continue it: «He's our general (referring to Vittorio Passeggio), he's great, someone who knows how to carry on the fight. We grew up with Vittorio's teachings, we knew where to go, why to go, because many, at a certain point, had given up, saying: 'This is our life now,' but we were good».

This story of activism spanning generations illustrates the complexity of the neighborhood situation, specifically the "Vele" complex, which has accumulated over decades of claims and unfulfilled promises within the folds of an evidently incapable (or at best, minimally responsive) public administration to address the demands from the community. In this context, the concept of «violence from above» discussed by Wacquant (2008) comes to mind. Wacquant addresses the creation of neighborhoods that concentrate the most marginalized classes, deprived of essential services and infrastructure. Consequently, their rights are neither recognized nor addressed. This situation creates a power dynamic that perceives specific segments of the population as possessing a weakened form of citizenship. Rights that should serve as the foundation for communal life become contested achievements, resulting from the advocacy efforts of these marginalized social groups.

As mentioned earlier, in this sense, the history of the redeveloped football field becomes a device capable of revealing with extraordinary clarity the contradictions of this system. Within a bureaucracy engulfed by norms that define the boundary between legal and illegal and effectively hinder political action, the lives of the residents of the «Vele» complex persist.

In a landscape where bureaucratic congestion impedes the State's ability to address citizens' issues and in a historical context where the welfare system has been progressively dismantled, forms of self-organization represent, for some marginalized social groups, the only means to respond to needs requiring swift solutions.

⁵ All interview excerpts have been translated by the authors from Italian to English in order to make them more accessible to read.

The preceding sections have shown how the micro-social practice of redeveloping the field functions as a device for broader reflections. Indeed, as Small (2004) also emphasizes, this fact allows us to challenge certain prejudices (often inherent even in social research) which suggest that marginalized peripheries suffer from a lack of social ties and planning and/or design capabilities. On the contrary, as also highlighted by the interviews: «In the ‘Vele’ there was a lot of humanity, there were people whom we, as the ‘Vele’ Committee, would take groceries to, because at the time everything was closed, do you remember? You remember that you couldn’t go around, but we tried to do our part, as many local associations did, which gave a lot of help» (Rosario 06/07/2023).

This form of capital seems to be widespread and not exclusive to collectively organized groups like the “Vele” Committee. More precisely, the social capital generated within political activist groups, such as the Committee, has been able to positively influence social connections beyond its immediate scope. This includes relations between activist groups and residents, as well as among residents themselves, as demonstrated by: «And then Mario called us as the ‘Vele’ Committee to get help to sort out the situation, let’s say, to give it back to the young people because they have nothing, they have a desert around them (...) And then Mario, he called the Letizia brothers, who are two guys born right in the ‘Vele,’ you have to say they are children of the ‘Vele,’ both Antonio and Gaetano, and they made themselves available, let’s say, 360 degrees, even though a general appeal was made on social networks, at the level of those who wanted to help, but the only ones who came forward were the Letizia brothers, and then there was a guy named Alfonso, a guy who loves Naples and is a big Napoli fan, who also did a fundraising» (Rosario 06/07/2023).

The Committee has likely functioned as a force capable of channeling over the years the frustration and anger from experienced inequalities into constructive activism. Certainly, as stated, it shaped a generation that has been able to inherit this legacy; but today, this social capital has also reached environments beyond activism, which effectively use relational networks among current residents and emigrated residents to address small needs, such as in the case of the pitch. Punziano (2022) asserts that this mode of action helps consolidate the relationship of these actors with the territory in which they operate. These are projects of broad and shared participation that not only focus on improving the city but also on determining the most appropriate measures for it. (This is framed as a strategy of social renewal)» (Punziano 2022; p.13).

However, the risk of these actions, as commendable as they may be, is that they might reproduce and even reinforce the dynamics of the neoliberal system in dismantling the welfare state, absolving it of the responsibility to address growing inequalities.

The presence and role of the State in peripheral areas like Scampia is a complex issue. Residents of Scampia feel abandoned by the State, perceiving its presence as not only insufficient but also hostile. This emerged as a prominent theme in interviews. Although it is difficult to cite all the cases in which this sentiment appears, some notable examples include: «We did it with our own hands, but actually, we were never given anything, rather, they took from us (...) No, no one came forward, we did everything on our own without the help of anyone, neither politicians nor insti-

tutions. We did everything, everything, everything, between the ‘Vele’ Committee, Mario Peluso’s page ‘Le Vele di Scampia,’ and the help of the Letizia brothers, who unloaded a lot of stuff. And Alfonso’s help. And then there are these kids I mentioned who have always supported Alfonso’s initiative, who did a fundraising on the Internet, on Facebook» (Rosario 06/07/2023).

The absence of the State is a recurring theme in the stories of the interviewees, as it becomes oppressive by choosing to withdraw and redirect resources elsewhere, immobilizing lives and marking bodies and memories: «The Municipality of Naples did not help us at all, but what we were doing was something not only for the children of the ‘Vele’ but something for the Municipality of Naples, for various reasons. First, if there is a child in Scampia or anywhere else in Naples who takes the wrong path, this becomes a problem for the Municipality of Naples (...) If someday a child who does not have the opportunity to play and grow up healthily takes the wrong path, let me give you an example, becoming a delinquent, when they become delinquents it becomes a problem for the Municipality of Naples and for all the citizens of Naples» (Alfonso 13/07/2023).

Vincenzo and Alfonso have confirmed that the redevelopment project in question is facing long delays and complicated procedures, which have led the public administration to abandon the intervention. The administration also cites a lack of funds, as stated by the President of the Municipality, Nardella: «The Municipality does not have spending power for this kind of thing. So, we supported it more with moral support than with funding for the project. Because, you know, we have a budget of 800,000 euros, of which 350,000 euros are dedicated to schools. Because when operating in a truly complex context, the first thing you do is to allocate most of the resources to schools» (Nardella 08/08/2023). The President himself acknowledges this: «So it was more of a moral support than concrete, let’s say, and this translated into constant dialogue with the Committees, because that football field, in my opinion, if we are to be honest, is a great victory of the Committees» (Nardella 08/08/2023).

In relation to the concept of sport linked to the importance of social inclusion and urban regeneration, Cimagalli (2017) emphasizes that sport can strengthen identities within communities, nurturing and reshaping differences within social groups. Indeed, sports participation fosters the construction of social ties within groups or communities. Additionally, sports practice can strengthen bonds within a single group while also establishing connections between different social groups. In neighborhoods like Secondigliano, where the school dropout rate is among the highest in Europe, sport can serve as a social lever to ensure that children are cared for by figures with authority different from their parents, and thus could play a leading role in the lives of children and adolescents who only have negative references at home and outside» (Vincenzo 13/08/2023).

Sport plays a key role in urban regeneration also thanks to its integrative force, which allows it to convey feelings of identity, belonging, and respect in areas with higher levels of distress (Palazzolo & Rivolta 2020). Thus, sport becomes a fundamental tool for community development, also to counteract forms of social distress: «We redeveloped the field so that the kids can still play and have fun, in a very, very special situation» (Letizia 09/08/2023).

As noted by Battaglia and Faroldi (2021), attention to sport has emerged as a phenomenon related to the qualitative increase that time has on the city's perception, promoting urban regeneration practices. The function of sport plays an important role in acting as a social glue in the context dictated by the regeneration of urban systems. It becomes crucial, however, to frame the theme of regeneration within a process of integration not only horizontally across policy domains but also vertically across different levels of government, as Pultrone (2017) explains, to ensure the urban space's redevelopment considering relational dynamics: «Informal processes not only create a livable space and a relationship between children and nature, but they do so innovatively, keeping up with the times. It is a community experience that must be preserved. At the same time, the football field (...) becomes a major community event, it would be, let's say, an act of self-destruction not to recognize it» (Nardella 08/08/2023).

Di Somma and Di Guida (2017) highlight the importance of sport in a challenging context like Scampia, characterized by increasingly pronounced social decay scenarios that have, consequently, led to the creation of territorial networks by citizens and associations engaged in the neighborhood's redevelopment. An aspect that also emerges from the interviews: «And so we started this work (...) We did everything from the ground up, and the people who worked to cut the weeds, to get rid of the mattresses that were there, we started to do what we wanted to do, which was to recover this football field, of course, with 2,000 euros we would have done nothing. Fortunately, Gaetano Letizia came to help us, and from there we began to buy materials, metal nets, etc. Then we were also lucky, because when you do these things ... Luck helps those who share their luck, the more you share it, the more luck you get, and we were fortunate to meet Ciro, who is a man with a huge heart, who dedicated himself body and soul to this project, taking care of almost all the work» (Alfonso 13/07/2023).

Of course, what has been discussed so far does not imply that sport alone is capable of solving social issues such as marginalization and urban violence, as referenced by Wacquant. While sport is undoubtedly an important vehicle, it should be part of integrated policies for which policymakers must take responsibility. It is important to clarify this to avoid the misconception that social capital and private initiative alone can resolve complex situations without addressing structural inequalities and the lack of public services, thus shifting responsibility to the private sector and citizens. As Don Aniello articulates, the distinction is also clear:

Football and sports are a red herring (in jargon, a 'pretext'); you find the kids in the facility or you go looking for them ... Our place is a parish; football is one of the main activities, and they come only for football, they are not interested in the other disciplines at all. If you do not add a serious educational project to the mere sports activity that leads the kids to other cultural experiences, attention to the environment, to creation, to green spaces, education on recycling, theatre, music. As a priest, if I do not add spiritual experiences, football becomes an end in itself (...) Maybe you take them off the street, which is already a good thing, but if there are no contents sooner or later (...) if you do not have a serious proj-

ect in which parents, associations, schools ... come into play (...) But if there is no alliance, everything goes to hell» (Don Aniello 17/04/2024).

Conclusions

This paper explores the impact that the redevelopment of a football pitch has had within a context of social degradation such as that of the «Vele» complex in the Scampia district, and also about the aspect of urban regeneration, one of the themes investigated within the article. The interviews collected and the results achieved highlight the importance of the sports facility also as a tool for community development in contrasting forms of social deprivation. In this context also emerges the valuable contribution of the territorial networks involved in the redevelopment of the neighborhood, starting with the «Vele» Committee, and thus of the social capital present there, a manifestation highlighting not only organizational but also planning skills. Moreover, the ethnographic work carried out, and the study of materials from secondary sources also reveal the territory's capacity to configure itself as an actor in a dialogue on an equal footing with the public administration. It offers possibilities for dialogue on the one hand, forms of control and pressure on the other; and if necessary, opposition. It should be noted, however, that forms of private initiative or public-private partnerships are critical. When intervening in urban redevelopment and regeneration, they may end up absolving, or at least relieving, public authorities of their responsibilities as providers of essential services and rights necessary for creating a decent living environment. Remaining, however, on the action under study, as gathered from the interviews, the playground near the «Vele» complex represented in the past an important place of aggregation for the neighborhood's youngsters, fighting against forms of social discomfort and also able to generate feelings of identity and belonging. It is undeniable that the redevelopment of the structure from this point of view plays a key role for the Scampia community and its social groups. It also lays the foundations for possible future proposals related to the urban regeneration of the neighborhood. This is why it has been said that the case of the pitch represents a device capable of explaining broader and more complex phenomena. They are concerned not only with the single renovation of the small sports facility but also shed light on the relational and organizational resources available to the neighborhood. Furthermore, it should always be highlighted that this single event should be included in the broader framework of the large urban regeneration project planned with RS, which promises to intervene not only in physical space but also in the social texture. This project, the latest in a long series of attempts to intervene in the redevelopment of the area (so far without great success), seems to be the result of a long dialogue between public administration and territorial stakeholders. This could be a turning point for the project, and probably its strongest point. During the interview with the President of the Municipality, when asked about the future of the pitch after the RS project, he replied that, although it was not initially included, the pitch will remain as it represents a virtuous example of bottom-up redevelopment. Such an approach seems forward-looking to us.

It streamlines the bureaucracy of the administrative machine to engage with citizens as equal actors. Regardless of the success of the RS project, this approach could potentially serve as a model for future intervention, regeneration and redevelopment policies. Finally, without wishing to go beyond the scope of this work, we feel it is important to point out how inseparable it is to intervene in the structural lack of public services or failure to observe fundamental rights such as health, education, and a job that allows one to live with dignity. This need for integration, and not to operate by implementing territorial regeneration policies as if these would solve problems that concern other domains and other levels, also emerges strongly from the ethnographic work and the words of the interviewees.

The research presented in this paper was conducted with a very small sample that did not allow for more in-depth analysis and studies. Among the future developments related to the research, it would be interesting to be able to analyze a larger sample that could consider a larger number of social actors affected by the process of redevelopment of the field, also analyzing in detail the reference scenario and the impact of the structure on the social well-being of families in the area. The research presented in this paper was conducted with a very small sample that did not allow for more in-depth analyzes and studies. Among the future developments related to the research, it would be interesting to be able to analyze a larger sample that could consider a greater number of social actors affected by the process of redevelopment of the pitch, also analyzing in detail the reference scenario and the impact of the structure on the social welfare of families in the area. If the football pitch of this analysis can be seen as a lens through which to approach the broader issue of the redevelopment of the RS project, it might be interesting to consider analyzing the broader context and the impact that RS will have on the neighborhood.

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Data availability Transcripts of the interviews conducted for the research and included in our study can be requested by sending an e-mail to the following address: f.calicchia@studenti.uniroma4.it.

Declarations

Ethical approval Informed consent was obtained from all participants. The research was conducted in accordance with the guidelines set out by the Ethics Committee of the “Foro Italico” University, with the progressive code CAR 198/2024.

Conflict of interests On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interests.

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