

Reclaiming Public Space Through Governance Transformation: The Case of Piazze Aperte, Milan

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Abstract

This article examines Piazze Aperte—the tactical urbanism programme promoted by the Municipality of Milan—as a policy device that reconfigures how streets can be reclaimed, governed, and collectively used. Drawing on three strands of urban theory—tactical urbanism, temporary uses, and collaborative approaches—the analysis adopts an embedded research perspective to investigate both spatial outcomes and institutional effects. Rather than treating temporary street redesigns as provisional experiments, Piazze Aperte has employed low-cost and reversible interventions to accelerate implementation, stimulate civic initiative, and establish new forms of cooperation between residents, schools, associations, and municipal offices. The programme has contributed to redefining streets as public social infrastructures, linking spatial transformation with shared stewardship and administrative adaptation. The case of Piazzale Bacone—one of its implementations—shows how tactical measures can generate everyday appropriation, conviviality, and visible change within a short timeframe while also revealing material fragilities, quality weaknesses, maintenance challenges, and uneven territorial coverage. These tensions expose the strategic ambiguity of temporary interventions when long-term consolidation is not ensured. The article argues that Piazze Aperte provides substantive evidence for ongoing debates on the institutionalisation of experimental planning practices and on the governance of public space as a negotiated commons. From a policy perspective, the programme illustrates the transformative potential of temporary uses and civic collaboration in reshaping urban spaces, supporting liveability, and reforming institutional practice while simultaneously highlighting two key challenges for future development: ensuring the durability of interventions over time and extending their reach to less organised yet equally disadvantaged urban areas.

Keywords

collaborative governance; Milan; public space; street reclamation; tactical urbanism

1. Introduction

“Public space matters,” affirms Low (2024)—a view widely shared across both research and practice. Public space shapes the urban form and provides the material foundation for collective life, social interaction, and commercial exchange. It embodies and symbolises civic power and spiritual values. The quality of public space reflects, more broadly, the quality of urban life. However, whenever public space is discussed, its urban nature and role must be clarified as these vary according to multiple factors: its spatial and formal characteristics; the geography and history of the contexts in which it is situated; the cultural, social, and economic profiles of its users; as well as the modes of management, maintenance, and care (Carmona et al., 2008; Gehl, 1987; Madanipour, 1996). Public space has long been central to reflections on the city (Gehl, 1987; Hajer & Reijndorp, 2001; Jacobs, 1961; Lefebvre, 1974; Sennett, 1977; Whyte, 1980). In recent years, however, it has re-emerged as a renewed focus of attention, both in academic literature and in planning, regeneration, and design practice. The Covid-19 pandemic, in particular, offered a direct experience of the deprivation of public space, making its importance for everyday life even more evident (Radović et al., 2020) and reinforcing the need for high-quality, accessible, and equitably distributed public spaces (Fainstein, 2010).

Streets constitute one of the largest reservoirs of urban public space: common areas that accommodate both movement and pause, for vehicles and pedestrians alike. The intense industrial development that followed the Second World War unfolded under the dominance of the automobile, reshaping streets around the needs of car traffic and consolidating their perception as car-oriented environments, where pavements and pedestrian spaces were reduced to marginal remnants. In recent years, however, this trend has shifted. Although car ownership levels remain high (particularly in Italy compared with other European countries), interest in sustainable mobility, support for car-free policies, and awareness of the spatial imbalance between cars and pedestrians have all increased. Consequently, the street—or rather, specific streets or portions thereof—has been progressively reinterpreted as a potential site of transformation: a contested space reclaimed for multiple uses and returned to pedestrians (Bertolini, 2020).

Within this trajectory are numerous recent European and North American experiences of pedestrianisation and street-space recovery. Many share experimental, temporary, and low-cost approaches, albeit pursuing different objectives: in Barcelona, the Superilles prioritised the reorganisation of vehicular mobility; in Paris, the “15-minute city” model promoted proximity; and in New York, the DoT Plazas Program aimed to increase the provision of pedestrian areas. Milan has also advanced along this path through the *Piazze Aperte* programme, launched by the Municipality in 2018, which has since completed more than 50 tactical urbanism interventions across the city using similar experimental, temporary, and low-cost strategies.

This article examines the Milanese programme, with specific reference to several cases located in Milan’s District 3 (*Municipio 3*)—in which the author played an active role, as explained below. The programme is understood here as an “urban experiment” (Evans et al., 2021), undertaken by a public administration through temporary and tactical interventions making use of various forms of citizen collaboration. In progress for seven years, the programme has evolved over time and now enables the identification of institutional learning processes in the governance of street-recovery interventions.

Three closely intertwined areas of research—temporary uses, tactical urbanism, and collaborative practices—provide the theoretical framework guiding three research questions. First, the *Piazze Aperte*

interventions were realised through temporary uses typical of tactical urbanism. What role do these temporary and tactical uses play in the processes of street-space recovery and the reclaiming of public space? What do they enable, and what limitations do they reveal? Second, the Piazze Aperte programme engaged residents in various ways in the process of transforming streets. What form and role does collaboration with citizens take in the implementation of such interventions? Third, the Piazze Aperte experience began as an experiment by the public administration and has been ongoing in Milan for seven years, showing a notable evolution. What effects do such experiments have on governance and institutional learning? Together, these questions allow the Piazze Aperte case to inform broader reflections on how public administrations reclaim streets as public spaces. Specifically, the case provides useful evidence for considering the significance of urban experiments and their temporalities; the different forms of citizen collaboration involved; the institutionalisation of certain urban transformation practices; and their effects on institutional learning. In doing so, the article contributes to the ongoing debate on the institutionalisation of tactical urbanism, the governance of urban experimentation, and the evolving role of citizens as co-producers of public space.

2. Theoretical Framework: Temporary, Tactical, and Participatory Approaches to Urban Space

The Piazze Aperte programme—a set of temporary interventions inspired by tactical urbanism and explicitly oriented towards citizen engagement—is relevant to at least three strands of research that, over recent decades, have explored forms of urban transformation within regeneration processes. The first concerns the body of work on *temporary uses*, which in their various forms are increasingly recognised as effective strategies of intervention (Bishop & Williams, 2012; Mehrotra & Vera, 2023). The second relates to *tactical urbanism* and its temporary, low-cost, and originally bottom-up interventions, which are now increasingly adopted by public administrations (Cariello et al., 2021; Lydon & Garcia, 2015; Salvador, 2023). The third addresses *collaborative practices* in the design of public space and in the governance of the commons (Borch & Kornberger, 2015; Foster & Iaione, 2016).

These thematic domains correspond to three approaches to urban transformation—temporary, tactical, and collaborative—which are deeply interconnected and frequently overlap or interact. Temporary uses often adopt tactical logics and rely on forms of collaboration; tactical urbanism, by its very nature, is both temporary and collaborative; and many forms of collaboration apply to temporary uses precisely because they are reversible and comparatively easier to put into practice. Although their theoretical frameworks appear distinct, it is precisely in their mutual relations that they offer a valuable lens through which to critically examine the Piazze Aperte programme in Milan.

Temporary use refers to the short-term activation of urban spaces—buildings, underused sites, or abandoned areas—pending a permanent function or redevelopment. Initially, such uses emerged as informal practices occupying disused spaces or as brief artistic and cultural initiatives (public art, festivals, temporary gardens). On these foundations, the first experiments of the early 2000s in Berlin, Amsterdam, Helsinki, and Vienna took shape (Bishop & Williams, 2012; Overmeyer, 2007), representing genuine forms of urban pioneering (Misselwitz & Oswalt, 2013). These initiatives were characterised by lightweight, easily dismantled, and reusable structures, often associated with social creativity and bottom-up regeneration, combining low costs with adaptable urban environments. Over time, and through repeated experimentation, temporary uses have

acquired new functions and meanings. Alongside the *ephemeral* (Mehrotra & Vera, 2023) and the *reversible* condition—in which temporary uses occur in situation A, then cease to exist, returning to situation A—a *transitional* condition has emerged, in which temporary uses occur in situation A, propose new spatial or urban configurations, and lead to a new situation B. In the first case, they fill a spatial and symbolic void; in the second, temporary uses become instrumental to processes of urban transformation, capable of anticipating future functions and testing design hypotheses. Contemporary research now recognises these practices as genuine instruments of urban experimentation, able to generate social and cultural value under conditions of uncertainty (De Smet, 2013; Lehtovuori & Ruoppila, 2012). In parallel, many cities and countries have integrated into their policy frameworks tools that support temporary uses, such as specific permits, transitional clauses, or urban leasing contracts (Andres, 2025; Galdini, 2020; Turku et al., 2023), while others have codified operational procedures (Inti et al., 2014). Within this framework, the process involving temporary uses (situation A → temporary use → situation A; or situation A → temporary use → situation B) is rarely linear, and the duration of the temporary use itself significantly influences the overall process—as the Milan case will later illustrate.

Tactical urbanism is, in many respects, a practice that overlaps with temporary uses. Over the past decades, it has emerged as a rapid, light, experimental, colourful, participatory, and low-cost (Finn, 2014; Németh & Langhorst, 2014) form of public-space transformation. Its roots lie in the informal appropriation of underused or degraded urban areas by citizen groups seeking new spaces for sociability and encounter. Between the 1990s and 2000s, these practices gained international resonance, described through expressions such as “do-it-yourself urbanism,” “guerrilla urbanism,” or “pop-up urbanism” (Finn, 2014; Lydon et al., 2012; Lydon & Garcia, 2015). Lydon and Garcia (2015) helped codify them under the term “tactical urbanism.” Originally—as Brenner (2017) observed—tactical urbanism developed under conditions of weakened urban governance, in which neither public institutions nor the market were capable of providing essential collective goods such as infrastructure or accessible spaces. In such contexts, it took shape as a set of bottom-up initiatives driven by diverse cultural, organisational, and ideological motivations. Although institutional actors—designers, public administrations, and developers—could sometimes be involved, the main impulse often originated outside formal structures. Over time, however, these practices have undergone processes of institutionalisation, whereby initiatives that began as “alternative” or “bottom-up” have been adopted and managed by public authorities (Berti, 2021; Fisker et al., 2019). Notable examples include the pedestrianisation of Times Square, launched in 2010 under Mayor Bloomberg and later becoming an international model replicated in numerous cities, and the street-space reclamation projects in Barcelona, implemented within the Superilles mobility framework to promote active and sustainable mobility (Suslowicz & Hillnhütter, 2025). Milan’s Piazze Aperte programme fits within this broader trajectory of institutionalising “tactical” practices. This shift entails certain opportunities in terms of institutional learning, but it also demands careful scrutiny, since, when such practices are promoted by public administrations, both the nature of the process and the role of citizens change, with direct implications for the very character of the public spaces being transformed.

The relationship between public administration and active citizens lies at the heart of debates on *collaborative practices* in the governance of the commons—a further analytical lens through which to interpret the Piazze Aperte programme in Milan. Research has identified several forms of collaboration between citizens and institutions in urban transformation processes: Collaboration occurs not only at the decision-making stage (co-design), but in many cases—including the Milan experience—also during execution

(co-creation) and subsequent maintenance (co-management; Foster & Iaione, 2016; Manzini, 2015; Ostrom, 1990; Sanders & Stappers, 2008; Voorberg et al., 2015). This is particularly significant when applied to the transformation and upkeep of public space, conceived as a common good, since such collaboration can help redefine both the status of public space itself and the modalities of its management (Carmona et al., 2008). Collaboration—especially in the co-creation and co-management of public spaces—can have an ambivalent nature: On the one hand, it generates belonging and symbolic appropriation; on the other, it risks blurring distinct categories such as *public good*, *common good*, and *collective good* (Borch & Kornberger, 2015; Harvey, 2012; Németh & Schmidt, 2011). Moreover, it can produce implicit forms of exclusion: Communities that take care of a space may, consciously or not, become excluding communities (Bianchetti, 2016, 2020). This risk is particularly relevant in public spaces, where publicness—understood as accessibility, openness, and non-exclusivity—is fundamental (Marcuse, 2004, 2014; Nissen, 2008). This dimension of publicness, albeit expressed in different terms, lies at the core of the *Piazze Aperte* programme, which explicitly declares the goal of pursuing a just city (Fainstein, 2010).

Against this theoretical background—and the critical issues it raises concerning the effectiveness of temporary uses, the institutionalisation of tactical urbanism, and the forms of citizen engagement—the *Piazze Aperte* programme in Milan can be examined as a case from which to draw reflections on the quality of reclaimed street spaces and, above all, on the governance of the processes that produce them.

3. Methodology

The case analysis presented in this article adopts a methodological approach that combines participant observation (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007) and reflection-in-action (Schön, 1983). This approach is made possible by the author's dual position as both an academic researcher—who has long investigated public space—and, simultaneously, a temporarily elected local administrator (2016–2021) within the Municipality of Milan, serving as councillor with executive responsibility for urban planning, mobility, and public space (the Italian term *assessore* has no exact equivalent in English), and as vice president of District 3 (*Municipio 3*).

The Municipality of Milan is administratively organised into nine Districts (*Municipi*), each governed by a president and an elected council of 31 members. The president appoints three district councillors (*Assessori municipali*), who are entrusted with executive responsibilities in specific policy areas and collaborate closely with the City Council (*Giunta Comunale*) in overseeing local projects and initiatives.

The role of Councillor for Public Space enabled the author, on the one hand, to participate directly in the evolution of the *Piazze Aperte* programme at the city scale, engaging in dialogue with multiple stakeholders and accessing documentation throughout its development; and, on the other hand, to promote and accompany four local projects throughout their entire life cycle (Via Reni, Via Pacini, Piazzale Bacone, and Via De Nora). One of these—Piazzale Bacone—is discussed in detail later in this article. In other words, from a local leadership position, the author directly experienced every stage of the street-space recovery interventions: conception, design, authorisation, support, implementation, and management.

It is also important to highlight that the intermediate nature of the *Municipio* institution—positioned between citizens and the central municipal administration (Bruzzese, 2024)—allowed for close proximity and intense exchange with all the actors involved in the implementation process. This institutional position enabled the

author to observe the formulation of the Piazza Aperte programme and to practise the execution of several interventions from an internal, practice-based perspective, continuously between 2017 and 2021. This positioning can be described as that of a researcher–practitioner, in which observation and action are deeply intertwined (Karner & Bobbitt-Zeher, 2018; Schön, 1983). As an institutional actor, the author developed context-specific, expert knowledge (Crosta, 1998); as a researcher, she reflected critically on decisions and interactions as they unfolded. Such a perspective requires prolonged immersion in the field and an awareness that all observation is inherently situated (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007).

The case is presented below at two distinct scales: the urban scale (illustrating the evolution of Piazza Aperte, which led to the implementation of more than 50 interventions) and the micro scale (focusing on the specific project in Piazzale Bacone). At the urban scale, the analysis of the citywide programme was conducted using qualitative methods, drawing upon three types of sources: (a) Direct experience, gained in the role of councillor, through participation in different phases of programme definition, attendance at internal meetings and public events, and exchanges with institutional and civic actors; (b) Documentary analysis, including municipal reports, technical documents, and informal communications, aimed at reconstructing decision-making processes; and (c) Observation of outcomes, including monitoring media debates and direct observation of transformed spaces, which, although not systematic, provided valuable insights. Table 1 summarises the activities carried out, the sources employed, the actors involved, and the purposes for which the collected materials were used.

Table 1. Sources and materials used for the analysis of the Piazza Aperte programme (citywide scale).

Type of source / activity	Specific description	Actors involved	Period	Use in the analysis
Institutional documents	Analyses of official reports by the Municipality of Milan and AMAT: e.g., urban plan PGT 2030, Piazza Aperte call (2019), Piazza Aperte in ogni scuola call (2022), Piazza Aperte report (2022), Public Space Guidelines (2022)	Municipality of Milan, AMAT	2019–2023	Analysis of the programmatic framework and declared strategies
Datasets and technical materials	Analyses of project plans and technical data sheets of interventions	AMAT	2018–2022	Verification of design consistency and spatial transformations
Internal institutional meetings	Participation in operational meetings and technical coordination tables	AMAT, Municipality of Milan, Districts	2017–2021	Reconstruction of decision-making processes
Informal internal exchanges	Exchange of emails, chats, and non-public technical minutes	AMAT, Municipality of Milan, Districts, associations	2017–2023	Understanding of negotiations and micro-decisions
Public meetings and workshops	Active participation in project presentations (Via Reni, Via Pacini, Piazzale Bacone, Via De Nora) at the District 3 Council; Piazza Aperte in ogni quartiere workshop; Triennale (25.01.2020)	AMAT, associations, proponents, District 3 Council	2018–2020	Observation of dynamics of discussion and co-design processes

Table 1. (Cont.) Sources and materials used for the analysis of the Piazze Aperte programme (citywide scale).

Type of source / activity	Specific description	Actors involved	Period	Use in the analysis
Local press and social media	Analyses and personal involvement in articles, posts, and public debate	Local media outlets, citizens	2018–2023	Identification of controversies and public perception
Direct observation on transformed sites	Site visits across interventions implemented in all nine Districts; repeated site visits in those within District 3	Public space users	2018–2024	Empirical assessment of uses and spatial vitality

Note: AMAT = Agenzia Mobilità Ambiente Territorio.

At the micro scale, Piazzale Bacone was selected as a case study to be examined in depth, exemplifying specific noteworthy dynamics. It is one of the interventions carried out in District 3 within the Piazze Aperte programme. The author's involvement in this case was even greater as her institutional role enabled her not only to follow but also to influence the entire process. The case is therefore observed through the same embedded, practice-based approach.

Here, the reconstruction of decision-making and design processes took the form of reflection-on-practice and encompassed the activities listed in Table 2, from preliminary exchanges with project proposers and participation in co-design activities to the drafting of institutional documents and responses to comments and controversies arising in local debate. This is complemented by participant observation during the implementation and management phases, as well as ongoing monitoring of spatial use over time.

Table 2. Types of activities carried out by the author and other stakeholders, and their use in the case analysis (micro scale).

Type of activity	Specific description	Actors involved	Period	Use in the analysis
Verification of initial reporting and problem definition	Preliminary discussions on road safety issues	District 3, associations, residents	2017	Identification of critical points in the street junction
Participation in the evaluation of proposal	Consultations regarding proposed solutions	AMAT, Municipality of Milan, District 3	2018	Analysis of types of proposed interventions
Co-design of selected tactical projects	Meetings between proponent associations, municipal technicians, and AMAT	AMAT, Municipality of Milan, District 3, proponents	2018	Analysis of the design negotiation process
Collaboration in the development of the final project	Preparation of the definitive plan alongside the tactical phase	AMAT, Municipality of Milan, District 3	2018–2019	Study of the relationship between tactical and consolidated phases
Participation in the implementation of the intervention	Collective installation day with volunteers	Proponents, volunteers, residents, AMAT, Municipality of Milan, District 3	2019	Observation of the collective activation phase

Table 2. (Cont.) Types of activities carried out by the author and other stakeholders, and their use in the case analysis (micro scale).

Type of activity	Specific description	Actors involved	Period	Use in the analysis
Drafting of the resolution supporting the Pact	Institutional approval of the Collaboration Pact	District 3	2019	Study of governance instrument
Review of the Collaboration Pact	Signing of the formal agreement for shared care and maintenance	Municipality of Milan, proponent associations	2019	Study of governance instrument
Informal internal exchanges	Emails and chat communications among stakeholders involved in the case	AMAT, Municipality of Milan, District 3, proponents, associations	2018–2021	Understanding of operational dynamics
Post-intervention monitoring	Verification of maintenance requests	Residents, District 3, Municipality of Milan	2020–2023	Assessment of long-term durability
Responses to feedback and controversies	Complaints regarding parking, safety, and aesthetics	Non-participating residents, local press	2019–2021	Analysis of resistance and conflict
Observation of the space	Repeated site visits in different seasons and times of day	Public space users (children, adolescents, adults, elderly)	2019–2023	Documentation of usage practices

Note: AMAT = Agenzia Mobilità Ambiente Territorio.

The aim of this methodological positioning is not to claim neutrality but to mobilise situated knowledge as a resource for interpretation, bridging research and practice. In this sense, the article seeks to valorise the knowledge accumulated over time and to reframe it through conceptual tools, offering a semi-internal and critically engaged contribution to the debate on public space transformation.

4. The Piazze Aperte Programme in Milan

4.1. Urban Context and Programme Objectives

For cultural, morphological, and climatic reasons, Milan has not traditionally been perceived—either in academic literature or in the collective imagination—as an extroverted city characterised by a lively outdoor public life. Unlike other Italian contexts, where squares, arcades, or generous pavements host vibrant social activity, Milan's historical urban fabric and building typologies have long conveyed an image of introversion, centred around private courtyards (Bottoni, 1945; Rossi, 1966).

From the early 2000s onwards, however, a renewed focus on public space began to take shape through a series of large-scale interventions. Among the most significant were the pedestrian areas created as part of the Porta Nuova redevelopment project—which reshaped the city's skyline with the Bosco Verticale and the Unicredit Tower—and the renewal of the Nuova Darsena in preparation for Expo 2015, which became a central node within the Navigli system. Owing to their accessibility and strong iconic character, these spaces rapidly attracted both residents and tourists, initiating new forms of urban conviviality in Milan's main squares. During the same period, the 2012 Piano di Governo del Territorio (Territorial Government Plan) introduced

the concept of Nuclei di Identità Locale (Local Identity Nuclei), with the aim of recognising Milan's polycentric structure by enhancing neighbourhood public spaces. Since then, public space—both in central representative areas and in more “domestic” settings—has become a stable component of municipal policy.

Within this context, the *Piazze Aperte* programme was launched in 2018, promoted by the Municipality of Milan and developed by Agenzia Mobilità Ambiente Territorio (AMAT) with the support of Bloomberg Associates and the Global Designing Cities Initiative. Its stated objective is to “redesign the streets and squares of neighbourhoods as places of social interaction, vitality and encounter, returning urban spaces to public life” (Comune di Milano, 2022). While many European programmes—such as the already mentioned *Superilles* in Barcelona—have used street-space reclamation primarily as a mobility strategy, *Piazze Aperte* explicitly framed tactical interventions as instruments of proximity welfare and neighbourhood social infrastructure. The programme addressed multiple needs: the creation of inclusive social spaces for groups underserved by existing ones (such as adolescents, migrant communities, and the elderly); the growing demand for proximity-based public spaces (later amplified by the pandemic); and the political intention to involve residents in urban transformation processes. The adopted approach follows the principles of tactical urbanism (Andres, 2025; Lydon et al., 2012; Lydon & Garcia, 2015), based on temporary, low-cost, and reversible interventions that allow empirical testing of solutions prior to potential permanent transformation. This strategy positioned Milan alongside other European cities engaged in tactical experimentation while simultaneously strengthening its international profile through networks such as C40. From both political and operational perspectives, it offered a pragmatic path: interventions that could be implemented swiftly, at low cost, and, where necessary, easily reversed.

4.2. Programme Evolution and Implementation

The *Piazze Aperte* programme evolved through three main phases: an initial stage of top-down experimentation; a subsequent opening to civic participation through a public call; and, finally, a focus on interventions in school areas. Originating from a predominantly administrative and centralised logic—with pilot projects selected internally by the Municipality—it gradually transformed into a more participatory instrument capable of mobilising local networks of collaboration.

The first tactical experiments were conducted in 2018 in the neighbourhoods of Dergano and Corvetto. Their stated objectives were to expand pedestrian areas, foster social interaction, and test new forms of cooperation between institutions and residents. In both cases, on-street parking areas were converted into spaces for rest and social encounter, using colourful ground markings and movable furniture supplied by AMAT. Although widely used and appreciated, these transformations also generated immediate opposition, mainly due to the loss of parking spaces and the perception of an excessively provisional aesthetic. Rather than representing mere resistance, these reactions acted as early stress tests, helping to refine the programme's subsequent evolution towards a more inclusive format. Figure 1 shows the transformations of Piazza Dergano, one of the first interventions realized.



Figure 1. Piazza Dergano, (a) before and (b) after tactical intervention. Source: Comune di Milano (2022).

In 2019, the programme was opened to bottom-up proposals through a public call, which received 65 applications from more than 200 associations and around 800 citizens (Comune di Milano, 2022). The selection criteria—technical feasibility, local embeddedness, and territorial balance—introduced an initial form of shared governance among AMAT, municipal technical offices, and the Districts.

A second call, launched in 2022, reoriented the programme towards school squares, in response to the large number of proposals submitted by parents and educational institutions during the first edition. *Piazze Aperte per ogni scuola* (“Open squares for every school”) received 87 applications, involving approximately 600 local groups and 250 schools (Comune di Milano, 2022), confirming educational communities as the main catalysts of transformation.

In addition to the interventions realised through the two calls, further proposals were collected over the years through other channels—both via the Districts and through alternative funding programmes. According to AMAT’s director of the urban planning and public space sector, who initiated *Officina Urbana*, an office specifically devoted to the implementation of the *Piazze Aperte* program (interviewed in October 2025), a total of 60 interventions had been completed by 2025, reclaiming more than 55,000 m² of public space. The installed features include 700 benches, 175 bicycle racks, 85 picnic tables, 70 table tennis tables, and about 600 green elements, including potted plants and trees. Table 3 summarises the main features of the programme’s evolution and its key figures from the first to the second call (2018–2022).

Table 3. Evolution of the Piazze Aperte programme.

Phase	Start year	Implementation mode	No. of projects/ proposals	Proponents	No. of realisations
Pilot experiments (Piazza Dergano, Piazzale Corvetto, Porta Genova)	2018	Top-down	3 interventions	Municipality of Milan, AMAT	3 (all completed)
First open call (Piazze Aperte in ogni quartiere)	2019	Public call	65 proposals	Over 200 associations, around 800 citizens	35 (13 in 2019 + 22 in 2020–2021)
School open call (Piazze Aperte per ogni scuola)	2022	Thematic call	87 proposals	Around 600 groups, 250 schools	4 (2 in 2022 + 2 in 2023)
Other implementations	2019–2025	Other channels	18 proposals	N/A	18 (2018–2025)

Three main types of intervention were adopted in the programme for street reclamation, as indicated in Table 4. The creation of new pedestrian spaces represents the most substantial type of intervention, involving street closures, changes in traffic direction, or the removal of parking spaces to create parklets with lightweight furnishings in 30 km/h zones. The expansion of existing pedestrian areas required only a rationalisation of the carriageway, sometimes achieved through lane narrowing, the removal of some parking spaces, and traffic-calming measures. Finally, the equipment and activation of underused spaces constitute the lightest form of intervention, involving temporary setups with new furniture (benches, tables) and the organisation of social activities. The map (Figure 2) shows the distribution of tactical interventions and the different typologies in Milan.

Table 4. Types of interventions within the Piazze Aperte programme.

Type of intervention	Main mechanism	Typical actions/tools
Creation of new pedestrian spaces	Changes to traffic circulation or conversion of parking bays into parklets (in 30 km/h zones)	Street closures/direction changes, removal of parking spaces, installation of parklets, use of lightweight street furniture
Expansion of existing pedestrian areas	Rationalisation of roadway layout	Lane narrowing, removal of low-turnover parking spaces, traffic-calming measures
Equipment and activation of underused spaces	Temporary installations and new functions	Ground paintings/surface decorations, installation of benches and tables, small-scale uses and social activities

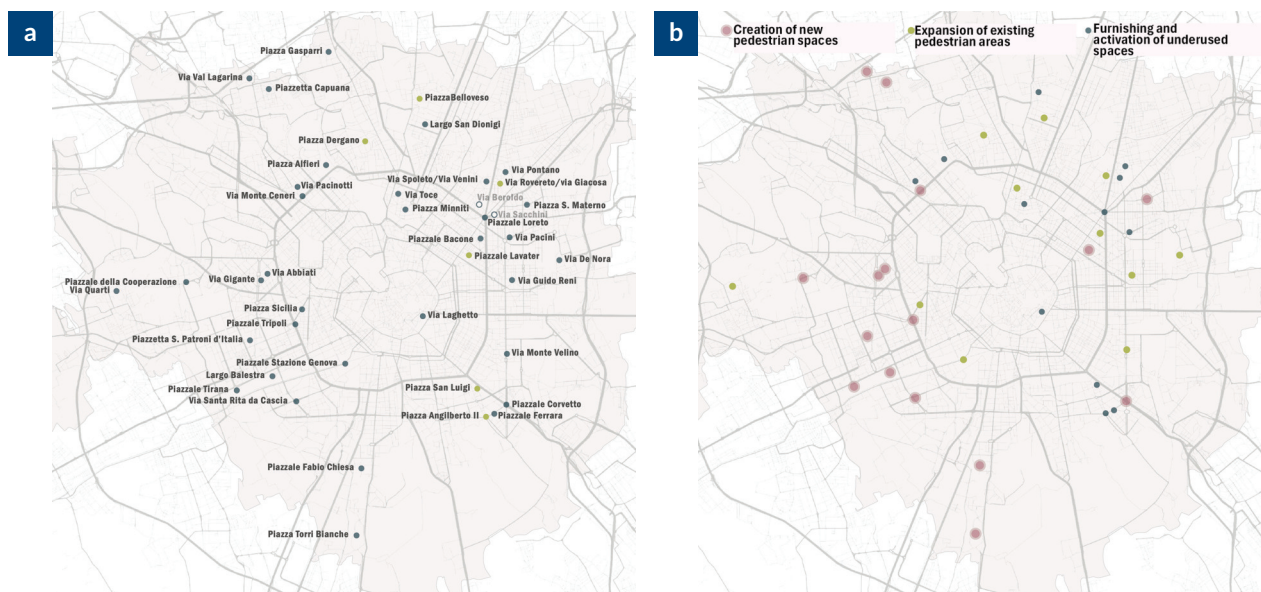


Figure 2. Piazze Aperte (a) locations and (b) types of intervention. Sources: Comune di Milano (2022); Municipality of Milano website; elaboration by G. Corbetta and E. De Rosa, Politecnico di Milano.

Only slightly more than 10% of these projects—six in total—have been so far consolidated into permanent configurations through redevelopment works that formalised pedestrianisation and introduced new paving, vegetation, and urban furniture. Among these are the first pilot sites of Angilberto and Dergano, as well as four other spaces located in peripheral areas: Piazza Belloveso, Piazza San Luigi, Piazza Lavater, and Via Giacosa. The remaining cases continue in a tactical or semi-permanent condition, raising significant questions regarding transition times and long-term durability. Table 5 summarises the timelines of transition from the tactical phase to the permanent configuration for the six cases mentioned.

Table 5. Conversion of tactical interventions into permanent public spaces in Milan (2018–2023).

Square/Area	Tactical phase	Start of permanent works	Final completion
Piazza Angilberto II	2018	Early 2021	Autumn 2021 (finalised by 2023)
Piazza Dergano	2018	Late 2020	Mid-2021
Piazza San Luigi	2018	Late 2019	End of 2020
Piazza Belloveso	2019	Early 2021	Mid-2022
Piazzale Lavater	2019	Late 2020	Late 2022
Via Rovereto – Giacosa (Parco Trotter)	2019	Early 2021	Late 2022

4.3. Phases, Actors, and Governance Structure

The implementation of the interventions selected through the calls followed a multi-phase process, within which different forms of collaboration between citizens and the public administration became visible, as summarised in Table 6.

Table 6. Implementation phases of the Piazze Aperte calls.

Phase	Main actors	Output
Submission of proposals	Associations, schools, local groups	Application dossier
Evaluation of proposals	AMAT, Municipality of Milan, Districts	Selection of approved projects
Technical review and co-design	Proponents, AMAT, Municipality of Milan, Districts	Shared tactical project/project kit
Institutional approval	Municipality of Milan, Districts	Authorising resolution
Implementation of the intervention	AMAT, associations, volunteers, citizens	Installation and activation of the space
Collaboration Pact	Municipality of Milan, proponents	Agreement for shared care and maintenance
Monitoring and/or development of final project	Municipality of Milan, AMAT, proponents	Definitive project (in cases where implemented)

The process began with the submission of proposals, in which applicants were required to justify the intervention, outline an initial idea for the transformation, and establish partnerships with other local actors. The proposals were then jointly evaluated by AMAT, the municipal technical offices, and representatives of the Districts, based on criteria of technical feasibility, territorial balance, and degree of local embeddedness. Approved proposals subsequently proceeded to a phase of technical review and co-design, during which proposers met with AMAT staff, municipal technicians, and District representatives to define shared objectives, equipment, and management methods. During this stage, a modular design kit was prepared—typically including benches, planters, game tables, and bicycle racks—that could be tailored to the specific needs of each context. Once the project design was finalised, the process entered the institutional approval phase, which involved a public presentation and an authorisation by the competent District, followed by a resolution of the City Council, particularly in cases involving modifications to traffic circulation. The physical implementation often took the form of a collective installation day, involving residents and volunteers coordinated by experienced associations, and usually concluded with a public inauguration. In many cases, the opening was accompanied by the signing of a Collaboration Pact, which assigned citizens an active role in the care of the space while maintaining its status as public property. These pacts regulated shared responsibilities and forms of light maintenance, framing the interventions as urban commons (Labsus, 2017). Only in a minority of cases did the process lead to the formulation of a permanent project, based on evidence gathered during the experimental phase.

Overall, the two calls—which collected a total of 152 proposals—attracted three main types of actors (Fung, 2006): structured civic organisations, such as non-profit associations, social cooperatives, trade associations, and religious organisations; institutional actors, particularly schools (17 in the first call and 250 in the second), together with museums, foundations, and universities; and self-organised groups, including neighbourhood committees, tenants' associations in public housing, and design professionals collaborating on a voluntary basis.

The programme was financed primarily through public funds and the essential contribution of voluntary work, but it also benefited from technical sponsorships (for instance, the provision of materials or services), financial support from businesses located in the transformed areas (such as the Ascom Niguarda traders' association in

the case of Piazza Belloveso), and, in some cases, European funding (for example, the CLEAR – City LiveAbility by Redesign urban mobility programme, supported by the European Institute for Innovation and Technology).

5. Piazzale Bacone: Field-Based Insights From a Tactical Intervention

Piazzale Bacone is located in District 3, and its transformation took place while the author was serving as district councillor. As previously noted, this position enabled her to follow the process from an internal and grounded perspective, observing it directly and continuously between 2017 and 2021, maintaining constant dialogue with the actors involved and monitoring the evolution of space use over time. Situated in a semi-central area of the city, the site—although formally designated as a *piazzale*—functioned primarily as a traffic junction, with narrow pavements and traversed by cars, buses, and trams. The area hosts a large school complex and a nursery attended by approximately 750 children aged between 0 and 13, supported by particularly active parents' associations. Prior to the intervention, the street space was clearly dysfunctional: Oversized carriageway segments were improperly used for parking, while pedestrian crossings were long and unsafe. District 3 had long called for an intervention for road safety reasons, initially regarded as the main concern.

The Piazze Aperte programme made it possible to *reframe the issue* not only as a question of safety but also as a lack of spaces for social interaction. The project selected through the first call in 2019, titled *Liberi Passi* ("Free Steps"), was promoted by a broad coalition including school associations, architectural and design studios, and a cultural organisation. Following the process described in Section 4.3, the intervention reshaped vehicular circulation by introducing new traffic directions, shortening pedestrian crossings, and reducing the width of the carriageway. Across a total surface area of approximately 5,000 m², about 1,200 m² were reclaimed for pedestrian use and equipped with 14 benches, 3 picnic tables, 1 table tennis table, 24 potted plants, and 8 bicycle racks, as shown in Figure 3.



Figure 3. Aerial views, spaces, and pedestrian areas of Piazzale Bacone (a) before and (b) after the tactical intervention (2018–2020). Sources: Comune di Milano (2022); Google Maps; elaboration by G. Corbetta and E. De Rosa, Politecnico di Milano.

The road junction was rapidly transformed into a recognisable and inhabitable space from the earliest stages of tactical implementation, as shown by images collected over time (a selection of which is included in Figure 4). Continuous observation of how the space was used—although not conducted systematically—revealed a wide variety of users: elderly people resting on benches; children and teenagers playing table tennis; young adults gathering at the picnic tables during the day and in the evening; adolescents studying together; and families or groups (including those of different ethnic backgrounds) organising small celebrations. Late in the evening, small groups were often observed drinking on the benches. The diversity of facilities, combined with the proximity of schools and local businesses (including a wine bar, an ice-cream parlour, and neighbourhood shops), significantly contributed to the vitality of the space. As noted in the literature, the co-presence of different social groups is itself an indicator of well-functioning public space (Gehl, 2010; Lloyd & Auld, 2010).

Piazzale Bacone thus presents itself as a space of implicit conviviality, where different users coexist through parallel practices.

At the same time, alongside the positive outcomes, several controversies also emerged. During the implementation phase, complaints were submitted to District 3. Some residents who had not been involved in the project criticised the loss of parking spaces in an already congested area. Certain parents expressed concern that children were playing in the street under conditions they perceived as unsafe. Numerous comments focused on the low aesthetic quality of the tactical intervention, considered by some to be inappropriate for the context—particularly in the early years, when *Piazze Aperte* was still relatively unknown in the city. The maintenance of the potted plants was, at times, deemed insufficient. The activities envisaged in the Collaboration Pact were indeed carried out, but not always with the frequency required to ensure continuous activation of the space. Finally, the failure to execute the permanent project—already prepared by the technical offices and approved by District 3—was frequently mentioned. Its absence weakened the experimental narrative of the process, making it necessary to repaint the surface only two years after the inauguration.

Within the broader context of the *Piazze Aperte* programme and its evolution, Piazzale Bacone is widely regarded by public opinion in Milan as a successful example of tactical urbanism and citizen participation in transforming a street space into a public one. However, analysis of this case in light of the three theoretical domains introduced earlier, and of the research questions outlined at the beginning, highlights several key issues related to the quality of urban spaces, different temporalities, and governance which will be further discussed in Section 6.



Figure 4. Piazzale Bacone uses. The top-left image shows the situation before implementation. The other images illustrate different moments after the intervention carried out in September 2020. The photographs were taken by the author between 2022 and 2025 on both weekdays and weekend, and during both daytime and nighttime.

6. Discussion

The analysis of the Piazze Aperte programme and the case of Piazzale Bacone allows for broader reflections on the conversion of street space to social uses and points towards several directions for future development. The three theoretical frameworks adopted—temporary uses, tactical urbanism, and collaborative practices—provide a lens through which to reinterpret the Milanese experience and to address the questions posed at the outset: What role do the temporary uses typical of tactical urbanism play in the transformation of street space into public space, what do they enable, and what limitations do they reveal? What form and role does collaboration with citizens take in the implementation of such interventions? What effects do these experiments have on governance and institutional learning? In the background lie questions concerning the effectiveness of these tools and the conditions required for their long-term consolidation.

6.1. Temporary Urbanism, Tactical Experimentation, and Long-Term Urban Quality

The temporary uses activated through the tactical interventions of Piazze Aperte enabled the rapid execution of numerous street-space reclamation projects that would not have been feasible through standard municipal procedures. The combination of low costs, operational simplicity, and immediacy fostered a shared perception—among both administrators and residents—that change was possible, generating further demand, as demonstrated by the success of subsequent calls for proposals.

However, several critical issues remain in the medium and long term. As noted above, the literature often distinguishes between two different typologies of temporary uses: ephemeral uses, characterized by reversible interventions that restore the status quo (Mehrotra & Vera, 2023), and transitional uses, which accompany permanent transformations (Darchen & Simon, 2022). The experience of Piazze Aperte, and specifically that of Piazzale Bacone, demonstrates the effectiveness of this approach but occupies an intermediate position: It is neither ephemeral (as it lasts for years) nor entirely transitional (as permanent projects are not yet on the agenda). Tactical installations have proven highly effective in the short term but, as is well known, present a high degree of material perishability: Painted surfaces and lightweight furnishings are not designed to endure and must be restored or removed after a few years. At the same time, permanent pedestrianisation or redevelopment projects have progressed slowly and still account for only a small proportion of cases (around 10%). This issue cannot, however, be resolved simply by demanding faster delivery of “permanent” designs. In light of what Milan has achieved citywide over seven years of street-recovery interventions, the case suggests that tactical experiments should be embraced as ordinary tools of public action, conceived not merely as provisional stages awaiting permanence but as transformative devices with their own temporal logic. From the very beginning, they should include medium-term maintenance plans and long-term adaptation and transition strategies. This confirms the importance—in both planning and design—of considering the temporary and tactical uses differently, addressing not only their spatial and functional aspects but also their inner temporalities of transformation.

The relationship between tactical interventions and permanent transformation brings into focus the question of urban quality throughout all stages of the process. Rapid and low-cost interventions have effectively addressed long-standing spatial problems—as in the case of Piazzale Bacone—but they also raise at least three methodological considerations.

First, urban quality must be redefined beyond purely aesthetic criteria. From Jacobs (1961) and Gehl (2010), who grounded it in everyday uses and social presence, through Lynch (1981), Carmona (2010, 2019), and Madanipour (1996, 2003), to the critical readings of Lefebvre (1968) and Amin (2008), the quality of public space is defined by its capacity to meet real needs, accommodate diverse practices, and sustain coexistence. In *Piazze Aperte*, some residents criticised the tactical interventions as “poor” or lacking decorum, assessing them on aesthetic rather than functional grounds. This highlights the need to bridge the perceptual gap by reaffirming that, in such cases, quality lies in use and in the social relations that space enables.

Second, transferring the “situational energy” generated during the tactical phase (Tardiveau & Mallo, 2014) into permanent projects remains a challenge. Once formalised, many spaces tend to lose their symbolic recognisability and participatory intensity. Although permanent conversions in Milan are still relatively few, this suggests that physical redesign alone is insufficient: Maintenance and activation strategies are essential to ensuring long-term vitality.

Third, attention should be paid to the relationship between punctual interventions and broader urban policies. Although the calls for proposals mobilised wide participation, they inevitably favoured areas with higher levels of social capital. The challenge remains to ensure an equitable distribution of interventions, including in less organised yet more disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Moreover, it is necessary to connect the logic of urban acupuncture (Lerner, 2014) with a broader strategic vision of public space. Municipal tools such as the Public Space Guidelines (Comune di Milano, 2021) and the forthcoming Atlas of Neighbourhoods represent initial steps in this direction, but the issue remains open.

6.2. Collaboration and the Publicness of Public Space

Piazze Aperte has experimented with an innovative mode of public space production, combining the reclamation of street space with citizen involvement through calls and Collaboration Pacts. This approach aligns with a broader orientation of Milan’s urban policies towards models of hybrid governance, in which public authorities enable civic participation in the management of collective assets—such as the adoption of green areas, private sponsorships for park management, and the entrusting of abandoned sites to associations for conversion into shared gardens. However, unlike other collaborative schemes that focus on semi-private or enclosed spaces, *Piazze Aperte* operates within fully public and freely accessible spaces, where the principle of *publicness*—understood as accessibility, inclusivity, and non-exclusivity (Marcuse, 2004)—must remain a central reference point. Within this framework, collaboration with residents has taken shape in three distinct forms.

Co-design emerged following the selection of proposals, through meetings between proponents and municipal staff. While essential for aligning objectives and verifying feasibility, its effectiveness varied according to the composition of the groups involved and the technical complexity of individual cases, highlighting the need for more systematic evaluation. In any case, the conceptual contribution gathered from citizens who submitted proposals proved significant, as it required the technical offices to engage in dialogue regarding demands arising directly from the local context.

Co-creation took shape during collective implementation days involving volunteers. This form of collaboration most clearly defined the identity of the programme, contributing both to its public

recognisability and to the embedding of the new spaces within the social fabric. Beyond their symbolic value—representing the interventions as “made by citizens”—these events also played a pragmatic role, helping to overcome bureaucratic constraints and visibly reducing execution costs.

Co-management is the least prominent form of collaboration, developing mainly through light-maintenance activities and social events, particularly in school contexts. The shared management of public space, however, raises a delicate question: Can collaboration strengthen collective responsibility without undermining the *publicness* of space? While part of the literature warns that community care may lead to subtle forms of exclusion (Bianchetti, 2016), the case of Piazzale Bacone—characterised by the coexistence of users heterogeneous in age, class, and ethnic background—suggests that this risk has, so far, not materialised. Rather than acting as a mechanism of exclusion, citizen collaboration in the street-transformation project has, in this instance, functioned as an effective means of reinforcing the openness and inclusivity of public space.

6.3. Institutionalisation and Organisational Learning

One of the most significant issues highlighted by the *Piazze Aperte* case concerns its effects on governance and institutional learning. *Piazze Aperte* introduced a new working method within the Municipality of Milan. Through the adoption of tactical urbanism, the municipal administration appropriated practices that were originally bottom-up in nature (Lydon & Garcia, 2015) and often emerged as conflictual responses to the absence of adequate public policies (Brenner, 2017). The institutionalisation of such practices—as has occurred in many other European cities and has been codified in several globally circulated manuals and guidelines (Arup, 2020; C40 Cities & Arup, 2021; NACTO & Global Designing Cities Initiative, 2020; “*Piazze Aperte*: How Milan gave its piazze back,” 2022)—has had implications not only for the types of spaces created and their intentionally “poor” and low-cost aesthetics, but also for the governance mechanisms through which they were produced.

Piazze Aperte was initially conceived in 2018 in Milan as a flagship, top-down, experimental pilot project, with strong political support. Its initial institutionalisation did not entail stable collaboration with citizens, except in a very limited form—the participation of volunteers in collective implementation days—and it was criticised by some local media commentators as mere “window dressing.” Over time, however, the programme evolved towards more collaborative and inclusive forms, moving towards a hybrid model of cooperation between citizens and the administration, as discussed above. This evolution required substantial organisational and cultural adjustments to become embedded within the ordinary practices of the municipal administration:

- Programme structure: The transition from top-down projects to open calls marked an initial turning point, signalling a shift towards a more participatory and collaborative approach.
- Dedicated office: A further key step was the establishment of a dedicated technical unit within AMAT, called *Officina Urbana*, which grew from a handful of staff members in 2019 to around 30 today.
- Administrative reorganisation: The municipal technical departments responsible for public space interventions were reorganised into a new department (*Direzione Infrastrutture e Spazio Pubblico*), explicitly including “public space” in its title to emphasise the strategic importance of the issue. During the co-design phases of *Piazze Aperte*, moreover, technical staff were required to interact directly with citizen groups—an unprecedented occurrence in administrative practice.

- Regulatory adaptation: Certain regulatory frameworks were also revised, allowing, for instance, the conversion of parking spaces into parklets within 30 km/h zones.
- Formalisation of co-management: Finally, the introduction of Collaboration Pacts formalised shared management and care arrangements, further integrating these practices into ordinary procedures.

Collectively, these developments represent adaptive responses by the public administration to the growing diffusion of tactical urbanism interventions. Notably, in 2020—during the Covid-19 pandemic—the Municipality of Milan drafted a document titled *Milano 2020. Adaptation Strategies* (available at <https://partecipazione.comune.milano.it/processes/milano2020>), outlining how temporary and reversible interventions could serve as tools to address unprecedented and dramatic circumstances (Bruzzese, 2022). Years later, although the emergency has passed and tactical interventions are no longer emergency measures, they have nonetheless catalysed a reorganisation of public space governance, fostering adaptation. Viewed from within the public administration, the adoption of tactical approaches in Milan can thus be interpreted as a form of urban experimentation (Evans et al., 2021)—albeit not formally labelled as such—which has reshaped established procedures and, seemingly, activated processes of institutional learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978; March & Olsen, 1989). Whether these innovations will achieve lasting consolidation, however, remains to be seen.

7. Conclusions

Piazze Aperte demonstrates that tactical urbanism can operate not only as a design approach but also as a governance device capable of mobilising civic initiatives, reshaping administrative routines and redefining the publicness of street space. By reclaiming streets as infrastructures of proximity and encounter, the programme shows that urban quality does not necessarily depend on material permanence but on the capacity of space to support everyday and multiple uses, and the coexistence of different people. At the same time, the case exposes the structural fragility of temporary interventions. Tactical approaches are effective in generating rapid change but require clear transition mechanisms to avoid remaining indefinitely suspended between experimentation and permanence. Likewise, the use of bottom-up calls raises fundamental questions of territorial justice, as participation tends to concentrate where social capital is already present. Two conditions therefore appear crucial for the long-term consolidation of such practices: (a) ensuring the lasting quality of interventions, preventing the tactical phase from turning into a state of perpetual suspension; and (b) guaranteeing equitable territorial distribution, moving from a model that responds to the demands of those who already have a voice to one capable of reaching less organised and more disadvantaged contexts. In this sense, the Piazze Aperte case provides valuable evidence for the broader debate on the institutionalisation of tactical practices and the possibility of conceiving public space as a negotiated common good—provided that the experiment does not remain an exception but becomes a stable form of governance, capable of combining urgency with long-term vision.

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Conflict of Interests

The author was involved in the implementation of the Piazze Aperte programme as an elected municipal councillor. As outlined in the Methodology section, this role entailed elements of participant observation and may therefore represent a potential conflict of interest. The author affirms that all reasonable efforts were made to ensure objectivity and transparency throughout the analysis. In this article, editorial decisions were undertaken by Jenni Cauvain (Nottingham Trent University) and Andrew Karvonen (Lund University).

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