

**Title:**

*Author:*

**Occupy Climate  
Change (OCC!)**  
*Grassroots initiatives  
entry*



FORMAS



## **Prati di Caprara: The resistant urban forest of Bologna, Italy**

*Lucia Tedesco*

**Where is this grassroots initiative implemented? Who are the promoters? Who are the beneficiaries?**

The “Rigenerazione No Speculazione” (Rigeneration No Speculation) Committee was founded by a group of Bologna’s citizens. In particular, the initiative takes place just outside Porta San Felice, in the Borgo Panigale-Reno neighbourhood (Bologna, Italy). The Committee’s action aimed to preserve the urban forest of *Prati di Caprara* (Caprara Meadows), giving birth - in the following years - to a socio-environmental movement and claiming the principles of social, environmental and climate justice (Zinzani & Proto, 2020). Thus, it not only benefits the citizens of Bologna, but also the entire ecosystem of the *Prati di Caprara*.



*Image 1: Exploring the urban forest of Prati di Caprara, April 2022 Photo by Lucia Tedesco*

### **What is the timeline? Are there already visible effects?**

The area of *Prati di Caprara*, which measures 47 hectares and is divided into two parts - east and west -, has gone through heterogeneous transformations over the last century (Zinzani & Curzi, 2020). Whereas at the very beginning of the 20th century it was used for agriculture, since the 1940s the area became a military site progressively abandoned during the 1970s.

In the early 1990s, Mayor Walter Vitali declared that *Prati di Caprara* would become a new municipal park, but the idea remained on paper and after forty years the area has become a real forest. So, *Prati di Caprara* was not on the political agenda until 2016, when the Municipality of Bologna produced a strategic document for urban regeneration (POC - Piano Operativo Comunale) *without* the participation of citizens (Zinzani & Curzi, 2020). The POC contemplated a quite radical transformation of *Prati di Caprara* area, officially owned by state enterprise INVIMIT, through the construction of new infrastructures, such as a fashion mall, residential and commercial buildings, a school and a new park. This transformation would imply the eradication of most of the forest (Zinzani & Curzi, 2020).

Faced with initial protests, Virginio Merola (the mayor at the time) said that this was not really a forest usable by citizens, but only “perceived green”. Various initiatives were organised then. In particular, after a public assembly on April 6th 2017, the “Rigenerazione No Speculazione” committee was born. Among the most significant moments, the Committee activists remember three in particular. The first, one activist recounts, is when they surrounded the forest in a huge embrace (see the picture). They write that they, 1870 people, embraced the forest, holding hands, all around the perimeter of the area (Wu Ming 2, 2022).



*Image 2: Embracing the forest, April 2017. Photo by “Rigenerazione No Speculazione” Committee.*

Then, the Committee organised *ParteciPrati*, a civic forum of participatory planning that involved a group of 100 citizens, as diverse as possible and living in Bologna, in a process that took place from January to April 2018 (Anonymous, personal communication, May 13, 2023). The Civic Forum availed itself of a technical staff and the supervision and support of a guarantee committee and a scientific commission. The process, implemented through 6 meetings, was supported by a group of facilitators and concluded with an open citizens’ assembly to present the results (10 May 2018). Also in 2018, in September, the Committee managed to obtain a public inquiry. An activist writes:

“when citizens collect at least 2500 signatures certified by a public official, the council must discuss the proposed topic. In our case, it committed to decreasing the number of flats and enlarging the green area that would remain intact. From a verge along the canal we went to a thirty-metre strip, but even thirty metres, compared to a thirty-nine-hectare forest, is very little. So we insisted, we went to the square disguised as trees, with ivy and fronds on, quoting Macbeth and the prophecy of the three witches. Those witches predict to the king that his power will end “when he sees Birnam forest advancing”, and we were advancing, like a forest, towards palazzo d’Accursio (*ed.* the seat of the municipality)”(Wu Ming 2, 2022, pp. 38-39).

Despite the fact that two hectares of forest were destroyed for the construction of a school, the “Rigenerazione No Speculazione” Committee’s actions led the municipality to re-discuss the POC and abandon previous development plans. The rest of the *Prati di Caprara* forest is still there, so the Committee has declared that it will continue to mobilize to preserve the entire *Prati di Caprara* urban forest for a more sustainable, just and ecological future.

The process and mobilisation succeeded in raising awareness of the issue and, above all, in attracting the attention of the media. From being a liminal space unknown to most, the *Prati di Caprara* became the emblem of a battle for the defense of the environment and the commons, for an alternative regeneration of abandoned areas that were renaturalised (Zinzani & Curzi, 2020). Moreover, the area is ranked among the top ten Italian places to be protected and enhanced in the annual initiative promoted by the Italian Environmental Fund (Zinzani & Curzi, 2020).

### **Who are the actors involved? What are their backgrounds?**

The Committee includes about 12 people (the founding group) and an imprecise number of inhabitants who take part in organising initiatives in different ways. The founding group, which also includes the three spokespersons, is composed of people with different backgrounds (e.g. from the fields of biology, urban planning, sociology, and forestry). They organise public meetings and make decisions on a democratic basis. The Committee also cooperates with other local associations and committees.

### **How does this initiative engage with climate? Does it tackle mitigation, adaptation, both or other dimensions of climate change?**

The “Rigenerazione No Speculazione” initiative confronts the climate on several fronts. Indeed, the presence of the *Prati* in the city contributes not only to improving public health, but also to maintaining the balance of the entire ecosystem.

First of all, the *Prati* area **helps regulate rainfall**, for example by preventing flooding, and **counteracts heat islands**. Experts have highlighted how at *Prati di Caprara* surface temperatures are almost 10 degrees lower than in the adjacent large area of the railway yard, and at least 4-5 degrees lower than in the aforementioned third wall (Trentanovi et al., 2021). The *Prati* is a “cool” and unique island within Bologna’s urbanised system.

Moreover, the *Prati* has a **positive impact on air quality**, which is extremely impaired in urban contexts (Trentanovi et al., 2021). Experts have shown how the 17.5 ha of forest in the *Prati di Caprara* are able to capture and metabolise 900 to 1800 kg of fine dust per year (Trentanovi et al., 2021). As is well known, it is precisely particulate matter that is responsible for more than 90,000 deaths per year in Italy (WHO estimates) due to cardiovascular diseases and cancer (Trentanovi et al., 2021).

At the same time, the *Prati* contributes to **carbon sequestration**. It is estimated that a permanent forest with a natural structure at our latitudes, such as the *Prati di Caprara* forest, as a whole can store between 5 and 15 tCO<sub>2</sub>/ha/year depending on the pools considered (soil, stem, roots, branches and leaves), the age of the stand and climatic conditions (Trentanovi et al., 2021). The wooded areas of the *Prati di Caprara* constitute a very efficient “sponge” capable of absorbing considerable quantities of carbon dioxide (Trentanovi et al., 2021).

Finally, the presence of diversified flora and fauna guarantees the **development and maintenance of biodiversity**.

### **What are the main objectives?**

The Committee was set up to intervene in the project for the renovation of Bologna’s municipal stadium, which envisaged commercial and building interventions in the quadrant from the Stadium to the sports center “Cierrebi” and the *Prati di Caprara* (*Rigenerazione No Speculazione*, n.d.). These interventions would have drastically changed the quality of life in the district and the city. For this reason, the Committee has two different objectives:

1) With regard to the *Prati* area, it asks that the urban forest should not be attacked or reduced to a conventional park, but that should maintain its unique qualities of biodiversity and ecological heritage. Moreover, the Committee asks INVIMIT<sup>1</sup>, current owner of the *Prati di Caprara*, to take note of the requests of the city and the administration (Zinzani & Proto, 2020).

2) Concerning the *Cierrebi*, now owned by the Bologna Football Club, the Committee calls for a reopening of its facilities and the maintenance of its sporting vocation with public uses, as guaranteed by the convention contextual to its construction (Zinzani & Proto, 2020).

### **What are the main values?**

The Committee claims that its main values include sharing a struggle, sisterhood/brotherhood and

---

<sup>1</sup> A company whose capital is wholly owned by the Italian Ministry of Economy and Finance.

friendship, as well as valuing the common goods. By valorisation, in the case of the *Prati*, the Committee means that the forest should not be turned into a municipal park, but that it should be highlighted for its spontaneous and undisciplined nature.

### **Which limits does it encounter?**

The main action carried out by the Committee is civil disobedience. In particular, as private property, the *Prati di Caprara* is not accessible to the public. This means that all the initiatives carried out within the area (e.g. exploratory walks) are liable to prosecution. However, one of the spokesmen I interviewed claims that fortunately so far no one has ever been reported (Anonymous, personal communication, May 10, 2023).

### **Are any shortcomings or critical points visible? What other problematic issues can arise from its implementation?**

The main problems have to do with the internal organisation of the committee, as some activists I interviewed claimed (Anonymous, personal communication, May 13, 2023). The committee is a spontaneous and unstructured initiative by choice, which is why they may find themselves discussing divisive topics. Currently, they are working so that the assemblies can be better managed and more organised. Above all, they are reflecting on the possibility of becoming an association.

Another activist argues that also the communication process - both through social media and the journalistic world - could be considered a critical point (Anonymous, personal communication, May 13, 2023). Some would like the initiatives carried out and the work behind each choice and action to stand out more in the eyes of the public.

### **How would it be potentially replicable in other settings?**

Activists claim that the committee's activity is replicable in other contexts, and indeed is already replicated in the Bologna area thanks to the collaboration with other groups of activists.

### **Is this initiative conducive to broader changes?**

The committee's activities have managed to change the political agenda of the municipality of Bologna (**Rigenerazione No Speculazione, n.d.**), to change the narrative on the *Prati di Caprara* (in the past they spoke of "perceived green" now they speak of "urban forest") and to involve many people, even outside the neighbourhood. the country.

## **References**

*Aria pesa.* (n.d.). <https://ariapesa.org/>

*Rigenerazione no speculazione.* (n.d.). Rigenerazione No Speculazione.

<https://rigenerazioneonospeculazione.wordpress.com/>

Comitato “*Rigenerazione No Speculazione*”. (n.d.). Info. Facebook. Retrieved

May 15, 2023 from

[https://www.facebook.com/Rigenerazioneonospeculazione/?locale=it\\_IT](https://www.facebook.com/Rigenerazioneonospeculazione/?locale=it_IT)

Trentanovi, G., Alessandrini, A., & Roatti, B. (2021). *Il bosco urbano dei Prati di Caprara: Servizi ecosistemici e conflitto socio-ambientale* (Prima edizione). Pàtron editore.

Trentanovi, G., Zinzani, A., Bartoletti, R., & Montanari, F. (2021). *Contested novel ecosystems: Socio-ecological processes and evidence from Italy*, «Environmental Development», 40, pp.

1 - 13. 100658. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envdev.2021.100658>

Wu Ming 2 (edited by, 2022). *Bologna: Deviazioni inedite raccontate dagli abitanti*. Ediciclo Editore.

Zinzani, A., & Curzi, E. (2020). *Urban Regeneration, Forests and Socio-Environmental Conflicts: The Case of Prati di Caprara in Bologna, Italy*, «ACME», 19, pp. 163-186.

Zinzani, A., & Proto, M. (2020). *L'emergere del Political nei processi di rigenerazione urbana a Bologna: Movimenti e spazi di dissenso*, «Geotema», pp. 45-54.









