

## JOURNAL

## PROJECT

DARE - Digital Environment for collaborative Alliances to Regenerate urban Ecosystems in middle-sized cities

📍 Ravenna, Italy

## TOPIC

Digital transition

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# DARE Journal #3: The multiple legacies of DARE

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DARE is an innovative urban regeneration project that instead of focusing uniquely on the physical environment, has invested in the skills and ambitions of its inhabitants and the digital knowledge infrastructure of the area. In the course of the project's three years, Ravenna has been cooperating with local residents, businesses, initiatives and institutions to co-create a tactic for the area, including a series of urban regeneration initiatives that would turn the Darsena into a green area with access to nature and to sports activities. This third journal by UIA expert Levente Polyak is published as the DARE partnership concluded the project and an extended period of commitment to maintaining activities, looking back to the project's achievements and multiple legacies.

## 1 Executive summary

DARE is a digital transition and urban regeneration project in Ravenna, **making use of digital tools to achieve the physical transformation** of the Darsena area. Unlike other regeneration logics that focus on the physical environment, DARE has been investing in the knowledge, skills and engagement of residents in Ravenna and the broader region, igniting ideas for the Darsena and encouraging cooperation between people and groups from various backgrounds. With a strong participatory dimension bringing together local residents, innovators, project initiators and Ravenna citizens, the project has been engaged in co-creating a new, participated narrative for the Darsena neighbourhood.

Reaching its official closure at the end of 2022, many of DARE's results became only visible in the months after, forcing the observer to take a broader perspective when describing the project's achievements. This third journal by UIA expert Levente Polyak accompanies the DARE project in its last phases, looking back from one year after the project's official closure, exploring its continuities and sustainability.

By the end of its third year, the DARE project went through its complex process of **selecting a tactic for the Darsena area**. Building on the tactics defined earlier, a call for initiatives were published to collect spatial development projects for the Darsena. Through networking at a real estate forum and an online voting process, Ravenna citizens selected the "Green Darsena" as the winning tactic for the area. The selected development projects, corresponding to this vision, have been accompanied even after the official closure of DARE. In parallel,

**proposals of entrepreneurial innovation** were selected through another call, supported with fundraising support and crowdfunding campaigns.

In order to help citizens understand the transformation of their environment, a set of **quality of life indicators** were defined and tracked throughout the project. A series of **digital tools** have also been developed in order to collect and disseminate knowledge in the Darsena area. The **website Approdo Comune**, collecting a great variety of audio-visual materials, from archive photos and videos to maps and other types of narration, has become the official storytelling device of the project. The backend database of the website, created specifically for the coordination of events in the Darsena, has been transformed into the municipality's main **tool for event management**, to be completely integrated in the administrative operation in 2024. A series of **digitalisation trainings** helped to create an inclusive digital environment allowing residents of the Darsena to join the area's digital transition.

DARE reached out to a broad audience in the Darsena and beyond. The project's **LIVE event series** attracted a great number of people: the walks and discovery tours of the Darsena were always fully booked and contributed to increasing the interest in the area. The project also mobilised Ravenna's communities to share their memories about the Darsena and contribute to a **joint narrative** about the area.

In its journey of three years, DARE established **anew way of working inside the municipality as well as with its partners** in the city and the broader region. The project helped the municipality to develop an inter-sectoral approach and methodologies: initiatives concerning development projects like the former horse race course, the bike park or canoeing in the Candiano canal all involved different departments that work with infrastructure, urban planning, sport and green areas. Similarly, in the **activities related to data collection and management** there has been inter-departmental work in the municipality, based on the identification of a work chain that concerns a plurality of sectors.

Several elements of DARE offer themselves for **scaling up**. The **methodology of selecting the tactics and initiatives for the Darsena** and the related **call for entrepreneurial ideas** can contribute to the definition of visions for other cities. The measurement of **quality of life indicators** implemented through a participatory approach, can be brought to other territories as well. The **collective storytelling** element is another part of the project that can be scaled for the definition of a joint vision for a territory. **Digitalisation trainings**, together with the **recognition of the role of the digital process facilitator** can also serve as a model for other areas.

The DARE project was completed at the end of 2022. However, all parties involved in the project agreed to **continue the project's partnership throughout 2023**. This agreement served to better stabilise the project's results and strengthen the legacy of the project, formalising and opening the governance of the project to new partners as well. Considering the project duration to be too short to have innovation settle in the municipality's modus operandi, the engagement of partners to maintain the governance of the project partnership throughout 2023 has also served to explore new opportunities to keep the partnership together and to use DARE's logic as guidelines for new strategies and funding possibilities.

## 2 Project implementation process

*"We have learned by doing, we invented new ways to work together, but such innovation could not be concluded in three years. In three years, there is no time to allow innovation to settle. Further years are needed to incorporate these new methodologies into the municipal machinery."*

Emanuela Medeghini

### 2.1 Towards the tactics of the Darsena

One of the most central processes of DARE, the **development and selection of a tactic for the Darsena's development** has been a complex participatory process at many levels including research, planning, design and implementation. The process began with the [mapping of the Darsena](#), the **exploration of practices, projects and policies**, leading to the identification of key themes in the area with the participation of over 450 stakeholders. A series of workshops with the DARE partnership and selected local actors then transformed the mapping of the territory into planning perspectives and turned the key issues into possible planning directions for the regeneration of the area.

As a result of these workshops, **five development themes** (art & culture, work & economy, inclusion & housing, sport, sociability), **five objectives** (participation and territorial integration, proximity and social inclusion, attractiveness and neighbourhood identity, environmental sustainability, territorial economic development) and **three scenarios were defined for the Darsena**: The Darsena Laboratory (a place of knowledge and experimentation), The Cosmopolitan Darsena (a place of community, inclusion and interchange) and The Green Darsena (a place of sustainable and open-air lifestyles).



Based on these scenarios, **two calls for proposals** were opened in November 2021: one focusing on new venues, spaces and the physical regeneration of the Darsena district, and the other focusing on innovative entrepreneurial ideas. The proposals were published online between November 2021 and February 2022, allowing initiators to make connections and develop synergies with each other. In March 2022, an Evaluation Commission certified the formal requirements and the consistency of the proposals with the objectives and development scenarios.

The [real estate forum](#) held in April 2022 was designed to bring together investors and real estate advisors, representatives of the construction sector, industry and SMEs, researchers and third sector operators, innovators, property owners and representatives of the Ravenna Municipality. At this event, DARE supported proponents in developing possible synergies between the project proposals that will activate the “tactics”, integrated and coordinated sets of feasible projects which can guarantee the greatest possible effectiveness in the development of the regeneration process by jointly pursuing a shared development scenario. Initiators had to re-submit their refined projects by the end of May 2022.





Collecting the proposals, the three tactics and the corresponding initiatives were presented to citizens during Summer 2022, using both the digital platform and public events, encouraging the local community to interact and comment. In September 2022, citizens of Ravenna **voted via an online democracy platform** for the “Green Darsena” as the winning tactic for the area. The green tactic for the Darsena, voted by Ravenna citizens, was composed by a series of green interventions, including the extension of the cultural centre Almagià, a bike park, and opening the Candiano canal for canoeing. Following this vote, the DARE partnership have been **supporting the initiatives** corresponding to the Green Darsena vision, by matchmaking with real estate owners or crowdfunding and other types of fundraising.

*“When we launched the calls, we didn’t describe it a competition: we intentionally wanted to stay away from a competitive mindset as we wanted to encourage cooperation.”*

Emanuela Medeghini

## 2.2 Entrepreneurial innovation for the Darsena

In parallel with the definition of tactics and the development of proposed actions for the Darsena, **call for entrepreneurial ideas** was launched, aiming at bringing new enterprises to the area. In this call, six proposals have been selected and three accompanied towards a crowdfunding process. While one of the selected projects, GreenGo, a soft mobility application did not reach the support needed, D-Arena, a multifunctional space dedicated to immersive technologies, where virtual film sets, virtual and augmented reality products, workshops and training can be created, raised over €50.000 through crowdfunding. D-Arena is now in the process of searching for a venue for realising its ambitions. The third selected initiative, the Panda project, focusing on developing tours within the Darsena area, has refrained from crowdfunding in the midst of broader crowdfunding campaigns following the floods in Emilia-Romagna in early 2023, but secured funding from the region’s Recovery and Resilience Facility funds.



While these projects were not directly related to the spatial development initiatives selected in relation to the Green Darsena tactic, connections and possible **synergies have emerged between the projects proposed for the two different calls**. For example, one of the proposals pre-selected in the entrepreneurial innovation call offered to develop a soft mobility app for the area, well connecting to the green tactic for the Darsena. Responding to the call has also made an impact on the projects not realised in the end: they have built new connections and learned about new ways of working, better understanding the needs of the territory and a better network to develop new business ideas.

*“There were two parallel calls for spatial development initiatives and entrepreneurial projects, two parallel paths and then we reflected on how to integrate the entrepreneurial projects with the urban development tactics. We strengthen the existing connections and create a narrative that holds everything together.”*

Emanuela Medeghini

## 2.3 Knowledge and data collection

Knowledge and data collection has been organised through a variety of activities in DARE. **Quality of life indicators**, defined collectively by Ravenna citizens through a series of participatory workshops in various neighbourhoods, allow citizens to measure the quality of their environment and the impact of the interventions undertaken in the project DARE. These indicators are related to the spatial development and entrepreneurial ideas in the Darsena, also connected by the tactic of the Green Darsena.

Besides the quality of life indicators, a set of tools have been collected and made available for citizens in Ravenna. The **library of digital culture** has been conceived as a resource for digital culture, consultable by all users. The **database of contacts** was designed to match property owners and financiers with the initiators of spatial development and entrepreneurial ideas, creating a network of professionals interested in regeneration issues.

A series of **digital tools** have also been developed in order to collect and disseminate knowledge in the Darsena area. The web app „Made in Ravenna” was designed for the valorisation of creative businesses in the city. The podcast platform operating from the Darsena has been turned into a podcast laboratory, allowing citizens to develop their own podcast. The open database on construction materials allows people to find leftover materials for their construction needs. These digital tools, operating in completely different areas, all support various aspects of urban regeneration.



## 2.4 Storytelling and narration

One of the key instruments of the DARE project has been the website **Approdo Comune**. By collecting a great variety of audio-visual materials, from archive photos and videos to maps and other types of narration, the website has become the official storytelling device of the project.



While the website has been relatively inactive since the project's closure at the end of 2022, it has remained an important structure to organise the communication of events as well as collect more materials about the Darsena. The database created specifically for the coordination and management of events in the back office is gradually becoming the municipality's main **tool for event management**, to be completely integrated in the administrative operation in 2024. With a filter system that allows for advanced search options, the event management system will be the first interface for users to look for events in the Darsena and in Ravenna.

## 2.5 Training and facilitation

The task of the digital facilitator was invented during the DARE project. In the past years, however, the role of the "digital facilitator" has become a recognised figure in the Italian context, also acknowledged in national development strategies and the PNRR (European Recovery and Resilience Facility). Not to be confused with the digital facilitator that helps citizens enrol their children in school, DARE focused on the figure of the **digital process facilitator**.

*"With the figure of the digital process facilitator, we have intercepted a trend. This figure is conceived to encourage collaboration between different subjects, supporting the collaborative city with digital means."*

Emanuela Medeghini

## 3 Challenges

### 3.1 Leadership

The last periods of the project did not bring any leadership challenges. The political continuity of the Ravenna Municipality ensured the continuity of the project and its values. In order to maintain the achievements of DARE after the project's official closure, consortium members decided to commit themselves to **sustain the governance of the project**, including regular communication, synchronisation between activities and the coordination of future plans and projects. The municipality's leadership in this continuity has been guaranteed by the engagement of the European Affairs Office of the Municipality that continues to act as a connector between different departments and external partners.

*„The risk is that if we don't equip ourself to maintain the partnership dynamic after the project, we won't allow*

*innovation to settle and be incorporated in our way of working. Therefore a lot will be at stake in the coming years in terms of governance and leadership.”*

Emanuela Medeghini

## 3.2 Public procurement

In the last year of the project there have been no new procurement processes that the municipality would have had to deal with. However, earlier experiences of procurement left a long-lasting impression on public servants, struggling to **match innovation and experimentation with rigid procurement rules**

*“We remain in a public procurement regime that does not correspond to innovation. Especially when you deal with intellectual work in innovative projects, it is difficult to marry with the rules of public procurement.”*

Emanuela Medeghini

## 3.3 Participative approach for co-implementation

As in earlier periods of DARE, a participatory approach to co-implementation remained the key logic of the project and it accompanied various segments of the project until its official closure. The long and well-designed **process of selecting a tactic for the Darsena** reached its consensus in the project's last year. Citizens were consulted on two different levels and two different moments in time. The call for spatial development projects and the other call for entrepreneurial ideas in the Darsena converged towards a shared vision: the Green Darsena. As seen in the complexity of these participatory processes, the selection of the Darsena tactic mobilised different segments of the Ravenna society: while associations, companies or informal groups were called to make their proposals for the Darsena, a broader circle of stakeholders were involved in defining the key tactics for the area, and all Ravenna citizens were invited to comment on proposals and vote for their preferred vision. This **layered participation structure** ensured that everyone can have a say but there are also productive outcomes in the process. The proposals for the Darsena also arrived from a variety of organisations, ranging from informal groups of two people to large research organisations. However, property owners were missing from the process as there were no proposals arriving from them and even matching initiatives with them represented a challenge throughout the process.

*“We had this double level of participation, one level aimed at those who wanted to get involved and another level inviting a more indistinct audience to inform and express themselves.”*

Emanuela Medeghini

For several phases of participation, the DARE partnership used the **digital platform of BiPart**. The first step aimed at initiators who proposed projects for the Darsena: they could publish their ideas on the platform, make the proposal known and potentially look for partners. In this phase, projects could get in touch with each other, build alliances and transform themselves. In a second step, less successful in terms of participation, citizens could comment on the three tactics and ask questions or initiate interaction with them. In a third step, the platform was used for voting, collecting over 800 votes in a week.



Participation was also embedded in other processes of DARE: the Darsena's **common storytelling** building on personal memories, personal photographs and archive videos gave a participatory aspect to the narrative of the area. The podcasts and storymaps produced within DARE gave voice to residents in shaping the common knowledge of the Darsena.

*"DARE was conceived with participatory processes of doing and not of saying. In order to distinguish this process from earlier experiences of participation without much impact, citizens, in their various capacities, were invited to do what they can for the area."*

Emanuela Medeghini

### 3.4 Municipal services - cross-departmental & integrated management

Projects with the complexity of DARE that address issues at the intersection of territorial development, digital transition, the quality of the environment, social services, education, sport, leisure, communication, as well as economic development, need a cross-sectoral approach. However, cross-sectoral work in the municipality remains a challenge and depends highly on established personal connections. While the local elections created continuity at the political level, councillors and managers who followed DARE in different departments have changed during the project.

Nevertheless, a sensitivity to integrated and inter-departmental approaches has emerged in the municipality during the DARE project. Such a sensitivity has been created by situations where a truly interdisciplinary approach was needed, such as initiatives within the Green Darsena tactic. Initiatives concerning **development projects** like the former horse race course, the bike park or canoeing in the Candiano canal all concern various departments that work with infrastructure, urban planning, sport and green areas. Similarly, in the **activities related to data collection and management**, there has been inter-departmental work in the municipality, based on the identification of a work chain that concerns a plurality of sectors. Overall, DARE helped the municipality to develop an inter-sectoral approach and methodologies that has taken root in the administration and needs to be maintained after the closure of the project.

*"The basic structure of the municipality is not interdisciplinary but sectoral. As cooperation between departments is built through persons, the change of personnel does not help an integrated approach. However, there is a greater awareness now as it is necessarily an inter-sectoral challenge to address more complex issues."*

Emanuela Medeghini



## 3.5 Monitoring & evaluation

More than an external obligation, monitoring and evaluation have been a key project action, organised around the **quality of life dashboard and related indicators**. This dashboard has been defined as a tool for evaluating the impacts of regeneration on the lives of inhabitants over time. One of the partnership's working hypotheses was to identify and study indicators that could interpret the issue of quality of life at neighbourhood level: this is not a trivial task given that the neighbourhood scale usually lacks adequate statistics from regional or national surveys. A key challenge of monitoring and evaluation was also to make findings collected in the quality of life dashboard more user-friendly through visualisation and display. Throughout its duration, the project arrived to a proof of concept with a first demonstrator to be presented, a solid basis to build on in the coming years.

*"Our work on evaluation and quality of life indicators included the reinterpretation of how to work with data, its visualisation and its representation for better comprehension among citizens."*

Emanuela Medeghini

## 3.6 Communication with target beneficiaries and users

Similarly to the participatory aspects of DARE, communication with beneficiaries and users has been at the centre of the project. Certain elements of the outreach plan have been **compromised by the Covid-19 pandemic**: the first public events had to be brought online and the first digitalisation training sessions were also held online instead of in-person.

*"The pandemic forced us to turn the logic of our project upside down, and while we wanted to bring people together and connect them with digital tools, we had to start directly with digital. Approaching digitalisation through digital means felt as a contradiction."*

Emanuela Medeghini





Nevertheless, once holding larger events in the physical public realm became a possibility again, DARE's **LIVE event series** attracted a great number of people: the walks and discovery tours of the Darsena were always fully booked and contributed to increasing the Ravennati's interest in the area and generating new bonds and meanings connected to the neighbourhood.

DARE has also looked into a variety of means to mobilise Ravenna's communities in sharing their memories about and relationships with the Darsena, in order to create a **well-participated narrative** about the area. The photography exhibition [Guardare dentro](#) was organised in May-June 2022 in various locations across the Darsena. The exhibition, based on family archives of private photographs, created a more diverse and more tangible image of the neighbourhood.

*"It is certain that our events strengthened the city's latent love for the Darsena. But the link between discovering the area and passing the message of what we're doing in the DARE project has been less evident. We realised that we shouldn't impose the complexity of our journey on people: instead, we focused on communicating small steps and small pieces of what we're doing here. Communication on social or traditional media works when one tries to promote an initiative or an event, but we needed another approach to talk about the complex trajectories of DARE."*

Emanuela Medeghini



The main website of DARE, **Approdo Comune** has been developed as another key interface with the broader public, as people's first encounter with the project. Conceived as a showroom, Approdo Comune has been a means to bring people to the Darsena physically as well as digitally, by offering a great variety of information, ranging from news, events and opportunities to archive audio-visual materials, storymaps and podcasts.

*"Communicating and inviting people to the Darsena is one thing, but to invite them to spend time on a website is not a simple operation: we had to offer people the sense of discovery through Approdo Comune."*

Emanuela Medeghini

## 3.7 Scaling up

DARE, focusing on the Darsena area of Ravenna, was conceived that it can be replicated in other neighbourhoods, multiplied in a series of neighbourhoods at once, or can be scaled up to a whole city. There are several elements in DARE that support the logic of transfer. Through its complex participatory structure, the **methodology of selecting the tactics and initiatives for the Darsena** and the related **call for entrepreneurial ideas** can contribute to the definition of visions for other neighbourhoods, cities or entire regions. An **urban regeneration toolbox** helps structuring and organising the used methodologies into coherent trajectories. The integration of experiences in **collaborative crowdfunding**, match-funding and other forms of fundraising into the development trajectory is a helpful and replicable combination.

The approach to **data collection and management**, as well as the measurement of quality of life indicators implemented through a participatory approach, can be brought to other territories as well. The **collective storytelling** element, building on personal archives, memories as well as new audio-visual means like **podcast laboratory** helped by training and new media channels including **digital collaboration platform** is another part of the project that can be scaled for the definition of a joint vision for a territory. **Digitalisation trainings**, together with the **recognition of the role of the digital process facilitator** can also serve as a model for other areas. A key proof of concept for DARE is the applicability of the project's methods and results to new funding applications and territorial strategies developed by the Ravenna Municipality together with other partners.

## 4 Conclusions and lessons learnt

By the third year, DARE concluded many of its activities but the partnership decided to commit to the **continuity of activities** for at least another 12 months. Partners felt the need to build on the momentum and keep the key stakeholders together with the help of an established but open governance structure. New objectives such as new funding opportunities or territorial strategies did strengthen partners' engagement to keep the partnership together and cooperate towards these opportunities.

DARE's complex agenda helped the Ravenna municipality to get out of its intra-disciplinary, silo structure. Non-routine tasks such as establishing new venues at the intersections of infrastructure development, sports, green areas, social inclusion and economic development, helped in the creation of new sensibilities towards **interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral approaches** that translated at the operational level as inter-department cooperation.

DARE conceived **digital transition as a transversal approach**. Using the project's digital platform Approdo Comune to create a **joint narrative** for the neighbourhood successfully connected digital communication with a physical location. The fact that the narrative for the Darsena, created through a variety of audio-visual content, largely based on stories, photographs, videos and other memories shared by Ravenna citizens, was created in such a participatory and multi-directional way made it more open and inclusive towards a plurality of interpretations and identifications.

The digital storytelling process was complemented by **participatory platforms** used for collective decision-making and crowdfunding pages to gather support. However, the use of these platforms in different processes did not prove unanimously successful. While Ravenna citizens engaged in high numbers with contributing their memories, voting for a tactic or contributing with financial resources, they were more reluctant to comment and shape proposals for the Darsena. This shows that the digital trainings and empowerment need to develop further the residents' digital literacy, to help them engage in more dialogical activities online as well.

Participatory activities, organised in different phases and modalities, assured the **involvement of a great variety of subjects**. While a broad circle of stakeholders contributed to a better understanding of existing practices, projects and policies, formalised groups, associations, companies or temporary groupings made their proposals for development projects and entrepreneurial ideas in the Darsena, and individuals were invited to vote and comment on proposals via a digital platform. This **layered participation structure** opened different entry points to the process, allowing a diversity of people to contribute with their proposals or opinions.

DARE conceived its **innovative actions in a broader context**. As innovation, including experimentation, trial and error processes and feedback loops takes time, it is important to locate innovation projects in longer trajectories, building on earlier projects and establishing a follow-up process that guarantees a certain kind of continuity. Such a longer term perspective allows municipalities to integrate new, innovative ways of working in their regular modus operandi, within their administrative bodies as well as with their partners.



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