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PROJECT

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

📍 Ravenna, Italy

TOPIC

Digital transition

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After RADAR: long-term perspectives for development in the Darsena

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Property development is a long-term genre, with processes between vision, programming, design, development and inauguration that may take years if not decades. While temporary actions might explore and test new uses for abandoned or underused spaces, to bring back industrial buildings, warehouses, or port facilities to life usually requires more investment and therefore, longer-term planning. The Urban Innovative Actions-funded project DARE set itself to engage with processes that go well beyond the official duration of the project. With the transformation of Ravenna's former port, the Darsena in its centre of attention, DARE partners designed a process most of whose results can only be seen once the project is officially concluded. In this article, UIA expert Levente Polyak revisits the urban regeneration process conceived in DARE, introduces the tactic selected for the Darsena and looks into the evolution of the area's transformation and the legacy of the DARE project.

The long and complex **process of selecting a tactic for the Darsena** reached its consensus in the project's last year. As in other phases of the DARE project, a participatory approach to co-implementation remained a core value of the project and it accompanied the real estate development process until the project's official closure and beyond. 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. 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. In this "*double level of participation, one level aimed at those who wanted to get involved and another level invited a more indistinct audience to inform and express themselves,*" explained to me Emanuela Medeghini, coordinator of the DARE project.

This **layered participation structure** provided everyone with the possibility to have a say, but also led the process towards productive outcomes. The proposals for the Darsena 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.

More than a year passed since [RADAR, the real estate forum](#) organised in Ravenna's Darsena district that brought together the initiators of projects for the Darsena with property owners, potential financiers and other interested parties. The projects have later been refined and clustered into three tactics, Darsena Laboratory (a place of knowledge of experimentation), Cosmopolitan Darsena (a place for diversity and multiculturalism) and Green Darsena (a place for sustainable and open-air lifestyles). In September 2022, citizens of Ravenna **voted via an online democracy platform** for the "Green Darsena" as the winning tactic for the area.

While the platform, developed by DARE partner BiPart, did not fulfil the expectations during the commenting phase where the initiators could engage in discussions with interested citizens and build connections with each other, it worked perfectly in the voting process: more than 800 votes were collected from citizens who had to register with their ID card to prove that they are resident in the city and more than half of them voted for the Green Darsena. This development scenario envisions a healthy and responsible lifestyle in an environmentally conscious, pedestrian- and bicycle-friendly neighbourhood with sports, festivals and outdoor activities.



The **green tactic for the Darsena**, voted by Ravenna citizens, was composed by a series of interventions, ranging from a *Centre and Festival for Performing Arts* in the Almagià cultural centre; the *Bicigrill*, a service point for cyclists; *Il Canottaggio torna* in Darsena, an initiative to help the return of water sports and canoeing in the Candiano Canal; *DarsenaPark* to offer space for skateboarding; the *Darsena Youth Space*, a multifunctional centre dedicated to young people; *Inclusivity* for accessible accommodation and sports services; the festival *Legante* combining literature with scientific dissemination on the sea and its ecosystems; the *Ravenna Bike Park* with tracks for road cycling, for BMX, cyclocross and mountain biking in the former horserace track; *SUSPORT* for the construction of an integrated system of photovoltaic panels and a charging station for electric cars at the Port Authority premises; and the *ZamenhOFF* project for the recovery and enhancement of personal and neighbourhood histories.

One year after the vote for the Green Darsena, I was curious to see how do these project do – if they have reached their objectives or have been abandoned. I called Emanuela Medeghini to learn that **many projects have been continued** and further developed since the official closure of DARE. Throughout the project, though one-to-one dialogue and particularly with the help of the events [RADAR](#) and *Guardare dentro e guardare oltre* (*Looking within and looking beyond*), the municipality developed many new connections with property owners and established a **database with key stakeholders** of the Darsena. Building on these contacts and expertise in the DARE partnership, the municipality has been **supporting the initiatives** corresponding to the Green Darsena vision, by matchmaking with real estate owners or crowdfunding and other types of fundraising.



One of the flagship projects of the Green Darsena, the **Bike Park** has been developed to an important extent. The initiative, born from the idea of private citizens, has brought to life an association of cycling enthusiasts thus structuring the group. The city agreed to build the infrastructure for the Bike Park by 2025, with over 2 million euro funding from the Recovery and Resilience Facility budget. The association is ready to collaborate for the promotion of cycling and the management and use of the Bike Park. The project to renovate the spaces of the **Almagià** has been developed as well. The municipality identified this project for ERDF funding linked to the urban transformative agenda, and received funding for making the building safer and more in line with national and international technical standards as well as for developing outdoor functions adjacent to the building. Some processes go less quickly. Initiators of the **Darsena Youth Space**, for example, went on to pursue their project but haven't found the right location, despite an ongoing dialogue with the owner of a warehouse.

There have also been **surprises in the processes** that sometimes have gone beyond the plans. *"Thanks to the stimulus of DARE, new synergies were also created with other actors,"* Emanuela explained to me. *"An organisation offering sailing for disabled people joined the canoeing association with the ambition to develop sailing courses on the Candiano Canal, thus extending the scope of the initiative."* Addressing the needs of the project, the Ravenna Municipality is engaged to develop new access points to the water to help water sports organisations use the canal, making the project **Il Canotaggio torna in Darsena** (Rowing returns to the Darsena) a reality.

A series of **public investments** have been approved in the area: all schools in the Darsena go through an energy efficiency-oriented renovation, together with the Almagià and the Pala De André, a multi-functional event venue. In the meanwhile, **negotiations with private property owners** revealed the complexities of public-private cooperation in urban regeneration. Despite the dialogue developed with some owners, RADAR did not automatically open paths of cooperation between them and the municipality. Discussions with investors confirmed that large-scale developers are not interested in the Darsena as it doesn't offer profit rates they're used to in Milan, for example.



However, **investors and developers fond of atypical spaces** have begun to discover the Darsena. Some of these investors and developers have *“in some way benefited from the work done with the DARE project,”* explains Emanuela. *“They had contacted us when they were looking for a space in the Darsena but couldn’t find their way among the properties. The DARE project team could direct them to the right interlocutors.”* For instance, there is interest in the Orangerie: the infrastructure is essentially ready but the original company to manage the space withdrew from the project. A new company, looking for an emblematic venue, is interested to bring to the Orangerie a fashion showroom focusing on recovering and recycling materials. The CMC complex, the historical headquarters of an important local construction cooperative is another opportunity for the area: *“the transformation of the CMC area will probably be a further lever for other owners as well,”* Emanuela predicts.

The municipality’s work around the Darsena is not limited to supporting the projects corresponding to the green tactic. While the DARE partnership remains engaged to support the initiatives selected throughout the project’s participatory processes, there are also *“further discussions, meetings, visits, hypotheses of new projects, even hypotheses of sales,”* explains Emanuela Medeghini. *“There is now an open dialogue, and as a side effect of the collaborative platform we created, various new dynamics are developing that are beyond the projects included in the tactics.”*

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