

Drift spaces: design research in eastern Naples

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In critical contexts, architectural design can be interpreted as a form of knowledge whose operative capacity emerges when consolidated spatial, institutional, and environmental frameworks reveal conditions of crisis and discontinuity. Operating across marginal conditions – peripheral territories, dismissed industrial landscapes, and interstitial urban spaces – the project becomes a critical device for reading, recognising, and transforming complex spatial configurations.

The eastern area of Naples constitutes the field of investigation of this paper. During the twentieth century, this territory played a central role in the industrial development of Southern Italy. Subsequent processes of deindustrialisation and abandonment have produced a condition in which urban, infrastructural, and environmental systems overlap without stable hierarchies. Rather than approaching these conditions through conventional planning strategies (Twemlow, Cardoso, 2024), the research¹ investigates residual spaces as transitional environments in which fragility becomes an active dimension for design inquiry (Easterling, 2014).

In particular, the coastal area of San Giovanni a Teduccio is assumed as a critical case study. Marked by infrastructural discontinuities, residual industrial landscapes, and fragile public domains, the waterfront reveals a fragmented spatial condition that resists unified planning visions. In this place, the project operates through processes of adaptation and small-scale interventions aimed at revealing latent structures and redefining the relationships between land, water, infrastructure, and collective use (Sennett, 2018).

The adopted methodology is grounded in the interaction between teaching, research, and action, understanding design as a device for knowledge production. Napoli Est becomes an urban laboratory in which students, researchers, public institutions, and local organisations participate in processes of collective investigation and negotiation. Through design studios, workshops, seminars, and field-based activities, the research explores marginal territories as spaces capable of activating incremental and situated transformations.

These experiences outline a research model applicable to other critical and fragile contexts. Knowledge emerges through direct engagement with material conditions and cooperative processes, re-anchoring research within an empirical and exploratory dimension (Ingold, 2015; Spahn, 2025).