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Territories and Community Resilience: The Role of Universities as Orchestrators of Innovation in Networked Ecosystems

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University institutions are fundamental players for cities and territories in the direct or indirect promotion of innovation, in a broad sense, and approaches to the regeneration of built spaces in a sustainable way. This is especially true for situations where there is a strong connection and interaction between universities and territories. Universities, first, by their decision to use buildings of architectural and historical value reveal a strong aptitude for enhancing the material and immaterial heritage and fighting the misuse or abandon of the buildings. Secondly, because of the cultural and teaching activities they provide and the very qualified populations they attract (students, researchers, administrative workers, etc.), they can produce positive effects on the urban context in which they are inserted by favouring processes of revitalisation or re-functionalisation of used or underused buildings and public spaces. A third area of operation concerns teaching that, through education that is attentive to current issues (climate change, spatial justice, urban resilience, etc.) and provided through different methodologies (collaborative learning, living labs, twin – digital and green – transition tools, etc.), contributes to the growth of a generation of experts equipped with the capability to operate in connected local and global contexts according to an innovative vision. Finally, Universities through applied research, third mission, and dissemination activities carried out outside the ‘university borders’ can contribute to the growth of local communities, stakeholders, and stockholders by transmitting new values and knowledge.

The paper, starting from the case of the University of Bergamo (Bergamo, Italy) presents and qualitatively analyzes the different scientific, educational, and cultural domains in which this institution has operated in recent years, recognizing the spatial effects of the many activities undertaken through an interdisciplinary and multiscale perspective of analysis. The University of Bergamo is an interesting case because it is: i) a small-medium sized university; ii) inserted in one of the most densely inhabited territories in Europe (the Po Valley); iii) inserted in a city with a high number of inhabitants and buildings; iv) extremely connected at a European level, especially via the airport; v) it is also one of the most polluted and pathological areas in Europe and with climate change. Within this framework, it is important to emphasize the centrality of universities as orchestrators of innovation within the territories in which they are based and the territories they connect with their integrated research, teaching and third mission activities.