Metropolitan Lab 1



PROXIMITY WITHOUT DENSITY

Project funded by the European Union
under the Driving Urban Transition programme

Proximity, accessibility and everyday life: beyond the 15-minute city · METREX Autumn Conference, Rome · Thursday 12 November 2026, 14:00–16:15

Premise and guiding question

In recent years, the 15-minute city has become a prominent reference in debates on urban proximity. However, its application to suburban and low-density contexts raises important question about how to address everyday needs territories characterised by dispersed settlements, fragmented infrastructure and uneven access to services. The PROWD project explores how proximity can be strengthened by building on existing local resources, practices and networks, rather than seeking to reproduce the spatial conditions of compact urban centres.

These practices are often specific to their contexts and may not fit established planning frameworks or conventional service provision. The challenge is therefore not to standardise local responses, but to understand how institutions can recognise, support and connect them over time.

The composite character of extended urbanisation challenges established repertoires of urban welfare and calls for responses tailored to specific contexts and their evolutionary trajectories.

How can metropolitan institutions develop flexible and stable policy frameworks that enable locally rooted initiative to respond to different territorial needs, while ensuring continuity and coordination across levels of governance?

PROWD - A short profile

A challenge for Italian and European cities

How can proximity be ensured in areas where population density is low, settlements are dispersed and public infrastructure is limited? How can residents access services and everyday opportunities in suburban and peri-urban territories that do not conform to the spatial and infrastructural conditions of compact cities? PROWD project explores an alternative approach to proximity in four European contexts: Rome, Lisbon, Bucharest and Vilnius. Rather than reproducing the compact city, the project investigates show existing local initiatives, informal networks and underused space can contribute to meeting everyday needs. Residents, associations and local institutions are directly involved in developing context-specific solutions and exploring new form of cooperation between local actors and metropolitan authorities.

Objectives and planned activities

PROWD does not aim to turn the periphery into a city centre, but to understand and enhance what already works: associations that manage public spaces, schools open to other initiatives, open spaces frequented by young people. In the four pilot areas, the project builds "everyday ecosystems" based on what already works: networks of local services and initiatives that respond to people's concrete needs without waiting for major infrastructure investment.

Through digital tools, collaboration pacts and transferable strategies, PROWD develops innovative pathways tailored to peripheral and suburban areas.

Main objectives

- Test concrete solutions for low-density areas, different from those designed for large cities
- Reuse existing facilities, integrating their functions
- Build strategies that foster social proximity, aimed at the most vulnerable: children, the elderly, women and newcomers.

Our approach

- Root proposals in real sites, located in diverse contexts
- Pay the utmost attention to understanding what already exists: residents' habits, stakeholders' opinions, and a review of grassroots initiatives (associations, social enterprises, private actors) to understand how to integrate them with public services
- Co-design the transition pathway involving residents, associations, SMEs and municipalities

Expected Results

Collaboration pacts involving local administrations, metropolitan cities and territorial stakeholders, aimed at sustaining social proximity over time.

Digital tools to make the everyday ecosystem visible and highlight theiir potential

Documented transferable solutions that can be adapted to the needs of other low-density peri-urban areas across Europe.

The Tiber Valley: the Roman pilot case

The Rome pilot area focuses on the Tiber Valley, particularly in the municipalities of Riano, Castelnuovo di Porto and Fiano Romano. The Tiber Valley is the functional living area of approximately 100,000 people, distributed across a weakly polycentric settlement structure. The three municipalities considered have experienced the same intense cycle of residential growth. Riano and Castelnuovo are structured around outlying settlements arranged in linear configurations along the ridges. Fiano has a single urban centre, divided between its consolidated core and a more recent extension. Residential growth has transformed the social structure and generated new demand for services, which local administrations and associations have sought to address to overcome the initial imbalances.

It is an emblematic context: geographically distant from the urban centre, yet rich in local resources, initiatives and relationships that are not always fully recognised by formal planning instruments. The strategic plan and the Integrated Urban Plan (PUI) - promoted by the Metropolitan City of Rome Capital and supported by Italy's National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) - provide an opportunity to explore how public policies and investments can respond to local needs. Relevant interventions include the "House of Knowledge and Volunteering" in Riano, the Ponte Storto sports field in Castelnuovo di Porto, and the social cycling track in Fiano Romano. The PROWD pilot investigates existing initiatives, and planned interventions can be connected to local needs and everyday practices, and how institutional cooperation can help sustain proximity over time.

Planned activities

- Mapping of existing and planned initiatives (2026)
- Resident survey (spring 2026)
- Stakeholder interviews (summer 2026)
- Co-design workshops (winter 2026)
- Urban talk open to the main stakeholders in Rome (spring 2027)
- Definition of a transition scenario with priority actions (summer 2027)
- Signing of the collaboration pact (summer 2027)

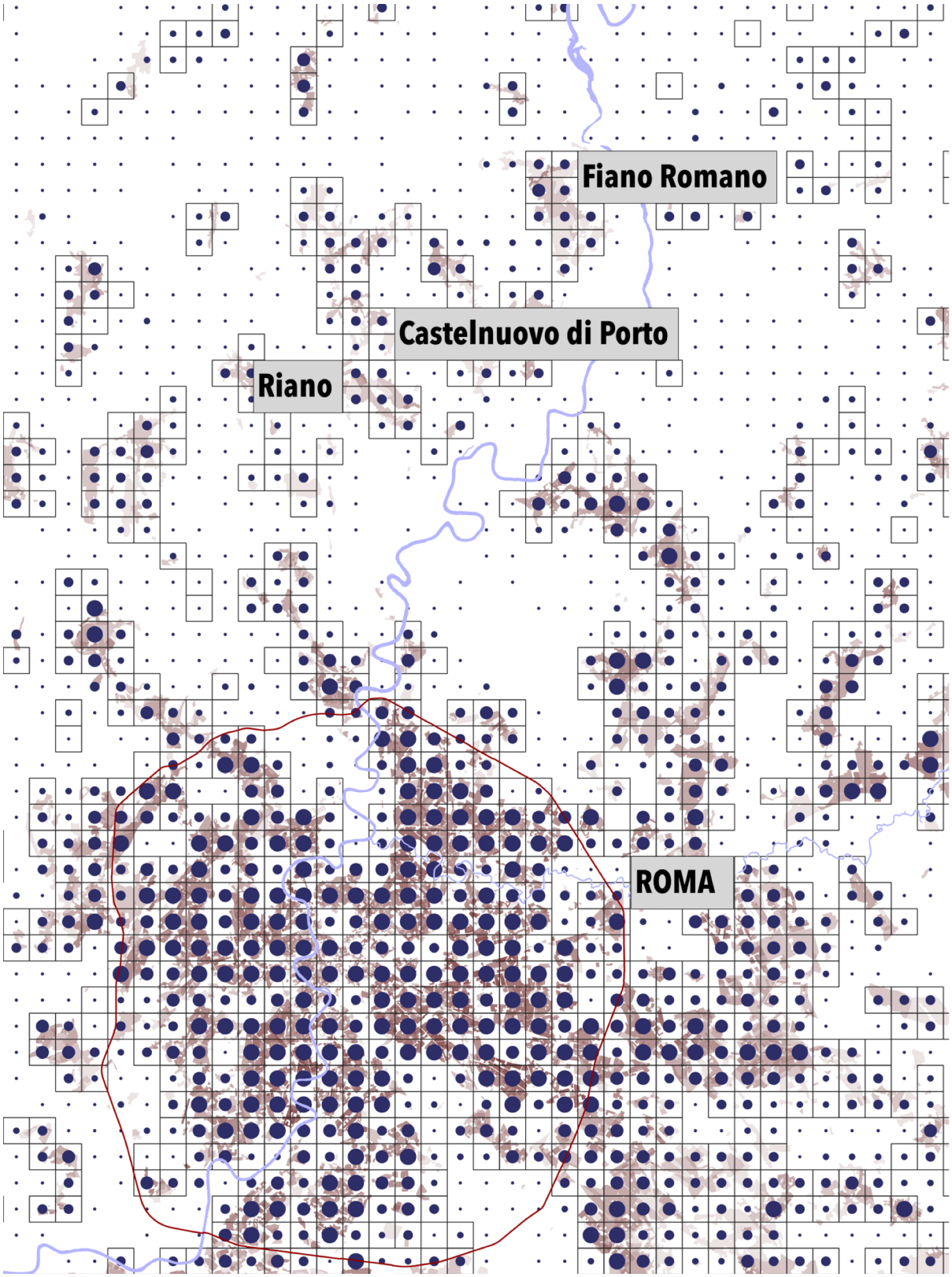
The working group

PROWD is a project promoted by an international consortium coordinated by Roma Tre University, Department of Architecture. The consortium is made up of Urban 2020 Association, Faculty of Geography, University of Bucharest, Lithuanian Centre for Social Sciences, Metropolitan Research Institute, Institute of Geography and Spatial Planning, University of Lisbon, Bucharest Metropolitan Area Intercommunity Development Association, Metropolitan City of Rome Capital, Vilnius City Administration and the support of Commission for Regional Development and coordination of Lisbon and Tagus Valley

The Rome unit working group is composed of:

Giovanni Caudo (scientific coordinator), Mauro Baioni, Mario Maiorani, Flaminia Vannini, Federica Fanelli (Roma Tre University)

Rosanna Capone (Director), Lorenzo Tonnarelli Grassetti, Roberto Marcelli, Stefano Del Medico, Chiara Calicchia, Anna Maria Rosaria Eremitaggio (Metropolitan City of Rome Capital, Planning Office – Department IV "Strategic Planning and Land Governance")



Rome and the Tiber Valley. Dots represent population density.

The case study

In Castelnuovo, the Municipality bought a second-hand golf cart through the social project Bene Comune and offers a free service on a fixed circuit, driven in rotation by people enrolled in a support programme and used mainly by elderly women. The clues about the generation of proximity mostly concern a reversal of roles: the drivers, people who lost their jobs after the age of fifty, are not offered “naked, raw handouts” but a chance to re-enter into relationships; the riders arrange to meet at the stop to have coffee, a spillover that goes beyond the service itself. The local interviews also reveal its limits. The transport service depends on a predetermined source of income (the methane royalties) rather than on the extent of the need. The route does not reach the people who live farthest away, in the scattered settlements of the countryside.






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Roles

Role	Who	Task
Chair and moderation		Leads the three steps and presents the project and the case together with the councillor
Rapporteur	Roma Tre team	Observes the session, drafts the recommendations and presents them to the 16:45 plenary; foreseen by the programme
External observer	prof. Alessandro Coppola (Politecnico di Milano)	Offers a critical interpretation of the discussion and reflects on how local practices can inform public policies.
Local actors	Valentina Piredda and Licia Capannolo (councillors in local municipalities)	Present the case and bring the voice of the territories

Roma Tre team Giovanni Caudo, p.i. of the Prowd Project; Mauro Baioni, senior researcher of the Prowd Project; Flaminia Vannini, Mario Maiorani, Federica Fanelli, junior researcher of the Prowd Project.

Running order (14:00–16:15)

Time	Phase	Content
14:00–14:10	Opening	Premise, guiding question, and links to the conference thread and to the contribution to the Rome Declaration
14:10–14:20	PROWD	Presentation by Roma Tre team
14:20–14:35	The case-study	Presentation by Councillor Piredda and/or the team
14:35–14:45	**Question to the room - mapping experiences**	**Via QR code: "Which local initiative in your area responds to a proximity need without being recognised by policy?" participants identify a local initiative that responds to proximity need and indicate a challenge affecting its recognition or continuity.** Response appears on screen.
14:45–15:05	**Step 1: needs and responses practices and barriers**	**"In your city or institution, do needs and responses of this kind exist, or is something else happening?" Participants discuss local initiatives, the needs they address, the obstacles they face, and the conditions required to sustain them.**
15:05–15:25	**Step 2: institutional recognition – group feedback**	**"Are there institutional responses to this kind of need? Who governs what falls between the municipality, associations and the metropolitan level? How can such initiatives be recognised and supported without acting case by case?" Each group shares its main findings. The moderator identifies common issues and differences across territories.**
15:25–15:45	**Step 3: how would you address it – from practices to policies**	**"How would you address the case-study? What can the metropolitan level do?"**
15:45–16:05	Policy recommendations	The rapporteur proposes 3–4 formulations; the room checks whether anything is missing; the external observer reflects on the discussion.
16:05–16:15	Closing	The rapporteur announces what will be taken to the plenary