

The economic impacts of con(temporary) urban regeneration processes: the case of Milan

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ESSAYS AND
VIEWPOINT

Leopoldo Sdino¹, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2933-7817>
Francesca Torrieri¹, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4879-1919>
Marta Dell'Ovo², <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6933-236X>
Marco Rossitti¹, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8620-624X>

leopoldo.sdino@polimi.it
francesca.torrieri@polimi.it
marta.dellovo@polimi.it
marco.rossitti@polimi.it

¹ Department of Architecture, Built Environment, and Construction Engineering, Politecnico di Milano, Italy

² Department of Architecture and Urban Studies, Politecnico di Milano, Italy

Abstract. Considering the growing importance and widespread adoption of temporary approaches to urban transformations, the paper deals with the open research challenge of understanding the economic impacts of tactical urban interventions. Moving from a literature review on the impacts of urban regeneration projects, it proposes an investigation approach from a local economy growth perspective. This approach is applied to the “Piazze Aperte” programme, which was implemented by the municipality of Milan in 2018. Its preliminary results return a possible positive contribution of tactical urban experiences on the reference neighbourhoods’ business dynamics. It seems to unfold about the different neighbourhoods’ specificities and the intervention area’s urban morphology.

Keywords: Economic; Impacts; Tactical urbanism; Urban Regeneration; Evaluation.

Introduction

Urban planning has undergone substantial transformation in recent decades, driven by emerging environmental, social, and economic phenomena (Haghani *et al.*, 2023). These phenomena have redefined the objectives, actors, methods, and tools involved in urban regeneration processes, thus shifting from traditional, hierarchical top-down models toward more flexible, participatory, and integrative approaches (Concilio *et al.*, 2021). The need to address and adapt to the complex challenges posed by contemporary urbanisation, including pandemics, climate change, and geopolitical conflicts, has highlighted the growing importance of reuse, reversibility, and temporary interventions in urban regeneration. These approaches help conserve resources and allow for greater flexibility in adapting to changing needs. This shift aligns with sustainability, resilience, and inclusivity goals (Nijkamp *et al.*, 2023). Sustainable urban planning addresses global challenges like climate change, economic inequality, and social justice by prioritising adaptive infrastructure reuse to minimise waste and reduce environmental impact. Temporary interventions, such as pop-up parks, open streets, and tactical urban projects, enable cities to experiment with innovative solutions before committing to long-term investments, while fostering dynamic and people-centred environments. These efforts involve diverse stakeholders, including governments, private sectors, and communities, using innovative tools and methodologies to address urban challenges and ensure resilient, liveable cities (Urban Regeneration|UN-Habitat, 2022). However, ongoing challenges and rapid urbanisation require continuous refinement of planning strategies to ensure long-term success.

In this cultural context, tactical urbanism and, more generally, the multiple forms of reuse or temporary use of the existing city can play a role that overcomes the response to random circum-

stances but can be planned as a method to face and manage contemporary urban dynamics (Madanipour 2017).

Tactical Urbanism was introduced in North America in the early 2010s through the work of Mike Lydon and Anthony Garcia in their book “Tactical Urbanism: Short-Term Action for Long-Term Change” (2015). They define Tactical Urbanism as “an approach to neighbourhood building that uses short-term, low-cost, and scalable interventions and policies to inspire long-term change.” This concept builds on earlier practices like DIY Urbanism (Finn, 2014), Guerilla Urbanism (Hou, 2010), and Urban Acupuncture (Lerner, 2014). Governments, non-profits, community organisations, or residents can spearhead these initiatives.

Starting from the earliest experiences of tactical urbanism, the concept has evolved and spread across various global contexts, adapting to each location’s unique social, cultural, and urban challenges. This global proliferation highlights the flexibility and universality of tactical urbanism as a tool for urban regeneration, community engagement, and sustainable development. In recent years, urban regeneration and tactical urbanism in Europe, particularly in Italy, have emphasised walkability (Speck, 2013) and the development of cycling infrastructure.

A recent study by Gorrini *et al.* (2023) highlights Bologna as a key example in this area. The Bologna Pedonale project created temporary public spaces and pedestrian pathways to encourage socialisation and safe access to urban areas. Key interventions included pedestrianising central zones and installing temporary infrastructure to reduce traffic and promote active mobility, thereby improving quality of life (Gorrini *et al.*, 2023).

In Palermo’s Ballarò district, tactical urbanism addressed urban decay through temporary design interventions, artistic installations, and community engagement. These efforts aimed to revitalise public spaces, reduce social inequalities, and enhance neighbourhood safety.

Similarly, Milan advanced walkability and cycling through initiatives like the Ciclovía, a dedicated bike lane network, and the Piazze Aperte project, transforming neglected areas into car-free zones, enhancing pedestrian access, and fostering a bike-friendly environment. Given the growing interest in tactical urbanism interventions, scholars have tried to understand their impacts and their indubitably added value to urban transformations. Scholars have recognised social and cultural impacts of tactical urbanism in enhancing social inclusion and community engagement (Santamaría-Hernández, 2018), promoting public health (Abdelkader *et al.*, 2023), and creating spatial support for cultural vibrancy (Stevens and Dovey, 2022). Instead, their

economic impacts have not been fully understood and assessed (Cariello *et al.*, 2021; Rossitti *et al.*, 2023).

Even if the economic impacts are not the driving force behind these small-scale interventions, given their consequences on social dynamics, their understanding is also crucial to comprehensively assess tactical urbanism's contribution to urban transformation and regeneration (Lu and Wang, 2024). Based on these premises, the study's objective is to evaluate the impact of tactical urbanism interventions on the economic system, thus providing a knowledge ground to compare the investment costs with the benefits generated, and to enrich the understanding of their social consequences. To this aim, the paper explores the economic impacts of temporary urbanism intervention, focusing on the case of Milan "Piazze Aperte".

The paper is structured as follows:

- The first section will examine existing research based on a literature review to highlight the main economic impacts of urban regeneration interventions in the short and long term.
- Based on the literature review findings, the paper proposes an investigation of tactical urbanism's economic impact from an economic growth perspective.
- The third section adopts such a perspective to focus on the "Piazze Aperte" project by analysing the specific economic outcomes of tactical urbanism experiences in terms of variation of local businesses at the neighbourhood scale.
- The final section will summarise the findings, reflect on the implications for future urban planning, and suggest areas for further research.

The economic impacts of urban regeneration projects: a literature review

A literature review has been developed to understand the correlation between the "temporary urbanism" initiatives and the economic impact on an urban environment. Still, since only a few papers discuss the role and influence of temporary urbanism or small-scale interventions, the analysis has been expanded to the broader realm of urban regeneration projects. With the support of the SCOPUS database, the following keywords have been combined: "urban project" OR "urban intervention" OR "urban regeneration" AND "economic impact" OR "economic criteria*" OR "economic effect" OR "economic consequence" limiting the subject areas at Social Sciences; Environmental Science; Engineering; Business; Management and Accounting; Economics, Econometrics, and Finance; Decision Sciences; Multidisciplinary, resulting in 87 papers. After two phases of filtering by Title and Abstract, 48 papers were selected, and then, considering the coherence with the objective of the contribution, 13 were fur-

ther analysed. This literature review summarises the main findings and analyses urban regeneration projects' goals, and outcomes, focusing on economic impacts. In addition, the review of the other essential dimensions impacted by the urban projects (i.e., social and environmental implications) and their scalability to a minor scale are explained.

Considering other scholars' experiences, the primary objectives of these initiatives are economic revitalisation, cultural enhancement, and sustainable urban development. Papers explore various interventions, from heritage preservation to innovative, creative spaces, by underlying economic and social goals. Revitalisation projects often aim to attract investments and stimulate economic activity within economic development. Pareti and García Henche (2021) discuss how the transformation of the Barrio Matadero-Franklin into a cultural hub leveraged tourism and creative industries to enhance the local economy. Similarly, cultural clusters, such as the case study in Barcelona presented by Zarlenga *et al.* (2016), facilitate social interaction and innovation, driving economic dynamism. At the same time, social and cultural integration is highlighted. Indeed, the Szczecin's cultural developments (Sochacka and Rzeszotarska-Pałka, 2021) promote social identity and cohesion, demonstrating that cultural initiatives can be powerful tools for place-making and community building. Moreover, events such as the European Capital of Culture in Liverpool (Liu, 2019) and cross-border cultural programmes (Turşie and Perrin, 2020) underline the potential for cultural initiatives to enhance the quality of life and foster economic growth. Environmental sustainability is also considered. Ruiz-Pérez *et al.* (2019) propose the HERVEEA tool to evaluate urban projects' ecological and economic impacts, emphasising the need for sustainable planning in housing and infrastructure. Fig. 1 shows the most important keywords from the literature review and their correlation.

Focusing on the economic dynamics, three main outputs can be underlined, namely implications for local economies, property values, and long-term growth. Urban improvements often raise the desirability of neighbourhoods, driving property value increases. Devaux *et al.* (2018) quantified how heritage policies boosted property values in Quebec's historic districts. Also, linear parks like Gyeongui Line Forest Park in Seoul positively affected property prices and local businesses (Park and Kim, 2019). With concerns about the impact on local economies, Booth and O'Connor (2018) describe how cultural hubs, like the Museum of Old and New Art in Australia, acted as economic magnets, attracting tourism and creating employment opportunities. Other examples include festivals and events, conceived as economic drivers that increase local revenues and tourism (Devesa *et al.*, 2012). Conversely, these economic dy-

- the growth of the local economy, intended as the increase in economic activities, leading to improved living standards, job creation, and overall economic development;
- tourism growth, interpreted as an increased capacity to attract and host new tourists.

Among these dimensions, the growth of the local economy is the most interesting one to analyse the economic impacts of tactical and temporary urbanism interventions that, given their nature of small-scale and minimum intervention approach to urban transformation, struggle to influence the neighbourhood scale.

Case study analysis: the “Piazze Aperte” programme in Milan

Prologue

The willingness to understand if and how tactical urbanism interventions can generate economic

impacts in their reference territorial context can benefit from dealing with a case study where these approaches have found wide application.

From this perspective, the Milan municipality emerges as an appropriate observation field for research purposes. Indeed, in 2018, the Milan municipality launched the “Piazze Aperte” (Open Square) programme, aimed at enhancing neglected public spaces to foster community interaction and connection within neighbourhoods through tactical urbanism techniques (Comune di Milano, 2024). After an initial testing phase, this programme was relaunched in 2019 with the call “Piazze Aperte in ogni quartiere” (Open Squares in Every Neighbourhood), and again in 2022 with the call “Piazze Aperte per ogni scuola” (Open Squares for Every School). To date, it has led to the implementation of 52 interventions that, after an initial temporary phase to test local communities’ response, have, in most cases, become permanent, thus returning more than 56,000 sqm of public spaces to the city (Fig. 2). Furthermore, the suitability of the “Piazze Aperte” programme as an “economic impact” case in terms of real estate market dynamics has already been investigated (Rossitti *et al.*, 2023). The analysis revealed a “weak” influence between these interventions and property prices, thus suggesting the need for other metrics to understand their possible economic impacts.

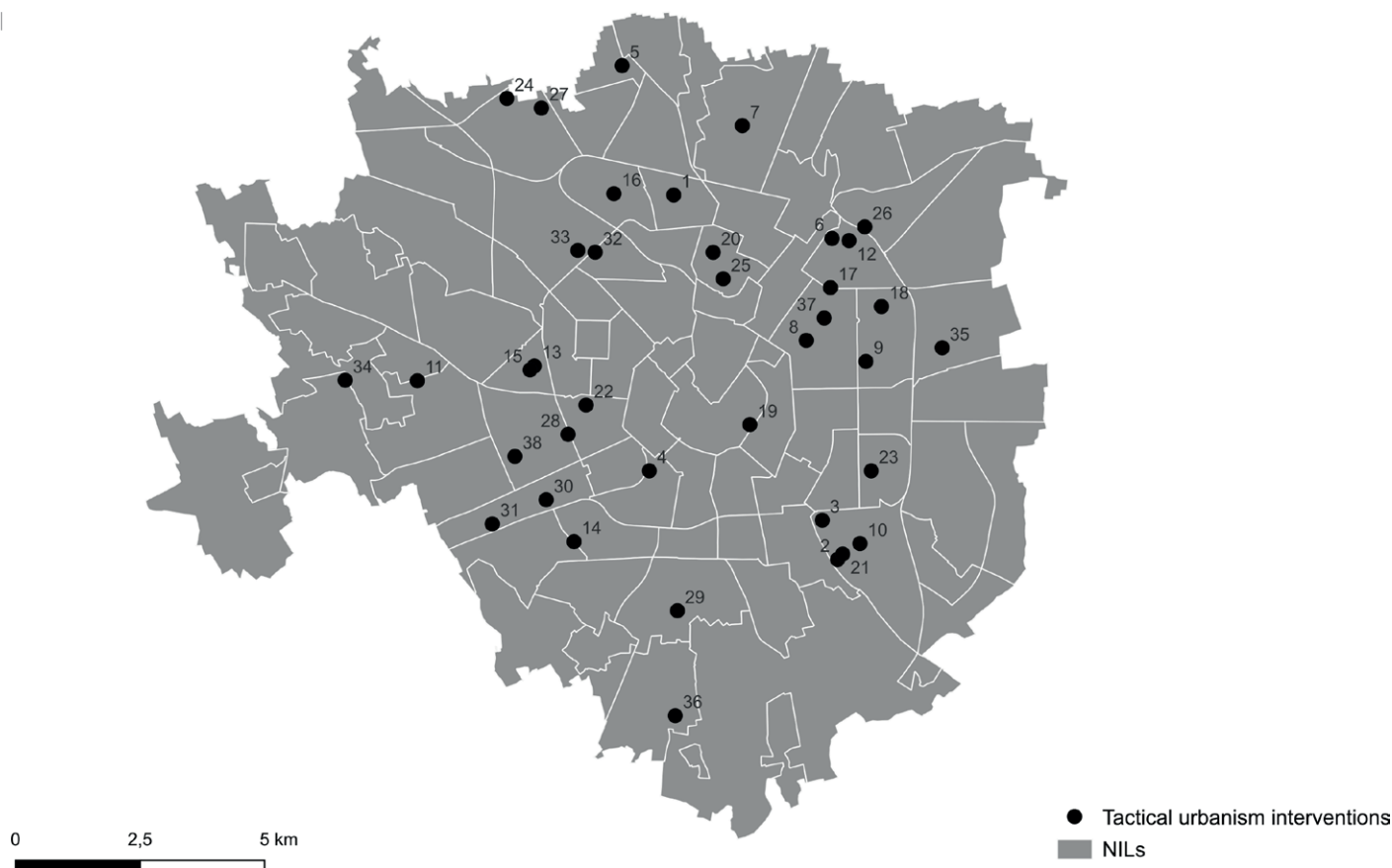
Investigating the economic impacts of the “Piazze Aperte” Programme: a local economy growth perspective

A local economy growth perspective requires identifying a proxy to express local economy growth dynamics at a sub-municipal level. International literature provides different metrics for this purpose, namely employment growth, gross domestic product (GDP), and local business¹ and entrepreneurial vitality (Garcia-Lopez and Muniz, 2013; Volintiru *et al.*, 2018; Huang



and Xu, 2021). Among them, the research theme’s specificities lead to identifying local business and entrepreneurial vitality as the most appropriate. More in detail, such a metric can be expressed as the variation of the number of local businesses¹ since it represents the type of entrepreneurial activity best suiting the neighbourhood scale. The performed analysis is extended to the 38 tactical urbanism interventions from the “Piazze Aperte” programme completed between 2018 and 2021 (Fig. 3). The remaining 14 most recent interventions are excluded from this analysis due to the insufficient timing for evaluating, even partially, their effects. The analysis, which requires preliminary identification and spatialisation in a GIS environment of tactical urbanism interventions and commercial activities with an information layer concerning their opening date, is structured in two phases:

1. A former phase, at the neighbourhood level, that, according to the Milan municipality plan, is identified by the “Nucleus of Local Identity” (NIL). It compares the percentage variation of local businesses for each NIL hosting a tactical urbanism initiative between January 2021 and June 2024 with the average variation at the municipal level, and with the same variation in NILs not affected by tactical urbanism experiences.
2. A latter phase, based on defining an influence area with a radius of 500 metres for each tactical urbanism intervention. The percentage variation in the number of local businesses in these influence areas between 2021 and 2024 is compared



to the average variation at the NIL level, thus attempting to capture tactical urbanism’s specific contribution to economic growth in the reference neighbourhood.

The reference data are retrieved from Lombardy Region’s “Neighbourhood Business Registry” (Regione Lombardia, 2024), while data about tactical urbanism interventions are retrieved from Milan municipality’s website (Comune di Milano, 2024). Regarding the choice of January 2021 as the temporal reference for the analysis variation, it rests on the assumption that, given the COVID-19 pandemic, all the new business openings, even where interventions were carried out previously, have been recorded after this date.

Results

The two phase analysis of the relationship between tactical urbanism experiences and the increase in local businesses between 2021 and 2024, based on elaborating and processing the input data through the software “QGIS”, returns several insights to discuss these temporary interventions’ possible economic impacts. Starting the analysis at the NIL scale does not return

to a strong correlation between the variation in local businesses and the implementation of tactical urbanism interventions (Tab. 1). Only in 6 out of 26 NILs hosting at least one intervention, the variation in the number of local businesses between 2021 and 2024 is higher than the corresponding value for the whole municipality (16.3%). However, the spatial display of this relationship provides a more valuable reading of the phenomenon. Indeed, semi-peripheral and peripheral NILs interested in tactical urbanism seem to show better economic growth dynamics than the other NILs (Fig. 4).

Narrowing the analysis to the NILs affected by the interventions, and comparing the variation of local businesses in the tactical urbanism experiences’ influence areas against the average value for the NILs provides more interesting results. Indeed, in 45% (17 out of 38) of the cases, the interventions’ influence areas are affected by more robust growth in local businesses, thus hinting at their positive contribution to the economic vitality of the region (Fig. 5). Furthermore, the detailed reading of the results reveals that these “positive” results mainly occur about interventions shaping a public space with a pivotal position in

COD_NIL	DEN_NIL	Local businesses 2021	Local businesses 2024	Var % Local businesses (2021-2024)	No of tactical urbanism Interventions
1	Duomo	2.515	2.990	18,9%*	1
2	Brera	1.199	1.405	17,2%	0
3	Giardini Porta Venezia	3	4	33,3%	0
4	Guastalla	613	722	17,8%	0
5	Vigentina	262	318	21,4%	0
6	Ticinese	757	896	18,4%	0
7	Magenta – San Vittore	471	532	13,0%	0
8	Parco Sempione	2	2	0,0%	0
9	Garibaldi Repubblica	287	348	21,3%	0
10	Centrale	587	690	17,5%	0
11	Isola	583	675	15,8%	2
12	Maciachini – Maggiolina	265	305	15,1%	0
13	Greco	143	161	12,6%	0
14	Niguarda – Ca' Granda	293	332	13,3%	1
15	Bicocca	110	133	20,9%	0
16	Viale Monza	280	309	10,4%	0
17	Adriano	86	101	17,4%	0
18	Parco Lambro – Cimiano	173	196	13,3%	0
19	Padova	524	602	14,9%	1
20	Loreto	827	959	16,0%	3
21	Buenos Aires – Venezia	1.904	2.246	18,0%*	2
22	Città Studi	625	707	13,1%	2
23	Lambrate	140	153	9,3%	1
24	Parco Forlanini – Ortica	24	25	4,2%	0
25	Corsica	321	375	16,8%	0
26	XXII Marzo	786	890	13,2%	0
27	Porta Romana	488	555	13,7%	0
28	Umbria – Molise	274	332	21,2%	0
29	Ortomercato	88	95	8,0%	1
30	Mecenate	180	191	6,1%	0
31	Parco Monluè – Ponte Lambro	33	39	18,2%	0
32	Triulzo Superiore	15	18	20,0%	0
33	Rogoredo	56	66	17,9%	0
34	Chiaravalle	0	0	0,0%	0
35	Lodi – Corvetto	487	548	12,5%	4
36	Scalo Romana	133	155	16,5%	0
37	Ex OM – Morivione	76	85	11,8%	0
38	Ripamonti	138	157	13,8%	0
39	Quintosole	11	13	18,2%	0
40	Ronchetto delle Rane	0	0	0,0%	0
41	Gratosoglio – Ticinello	105	119	13,3%	1
42	Stadera	292	317	8,6%	1
43	Tibaldi	145	158	9,0%	0
44	Navigli	493	570	15,6%	1
45	San Cristoforo	193	227	17,6%*	1
46	Barona	57	61	7,0%	0
47	Cantalupa	14	14	0,0%	0
48	Ronchetto sul Naviglio	101	115	13,9%	0
49	Giambellino	437	504	15,3%	2
50	Tortona	357	404	13,2%	0
51	Washington	453	523	15,5%	1
52	Bande Nere	516	577	11,8%	2
53	Lorenteggio	102	112	9,8%	0
54	Muggiano	8	9	12,5%	0
55	Baggio	232	260	12,1%	1
56	Forze Armate	144	156	8,3%	1
57	Selinunte	355	403	13,5%	2
58	De Angeli – Monte Rosa	398	455	14,3%	0

| Tab. 01

COD_NIL	DEN_NIL	Local businesses 2021	Local businesses 2024	Var % Local businesses (2021-2024)	No of tactical urbanism Interventions
59	Tre Torri	55	62	12,7%	0
60	San Siro	69	79	14,5%	0
61	Quarto Cagnino	70	77	10,0%	0
62	Quinto Romano	40	42	5,0%	0
63	Figino	10	13	30,0%	0
64	Trenno	23	26	13,0%	0
65	Gallaratese	126	145	15,1%	0
66	QT 8	18	21	16,7%	0
67	Portello	123	140	13,8%	0
68	Pagano	358	403	12,6%	0
69	Sarpi	967	1.191	23,2%	0
70	Ghisolfa	252	296	17,5%*	1
71	Villapizzone	608	686	12,8%	1
72	Maggiore – Musocco	126	276	119,0%	0
73	Cascina Triulza – Expo	1	1	0,0%	0
74	Sacco	7	7	0,0%	0
75	Stephenson	8	11	37,5%	0
76	Quarto Oggiaro	186	204	9,7%	2
77	Bovisa	236	281	19,1%*	1
78	Farini	51	62	21,6%	0
79	Dergano	278	319	14,7%	1
80	Affori	237	269	13,5%	0
81	Bovisasca	35	38	8,6%	0
82	Comasina	45	55	22,2%*	1
83	Bruzzano	67	81	20,9%	0
84	Parco Nord	7	7	0,0%	0
85	Parco delle Abbazie	10	10	0,0%	0
86	Parco dei Navigli	2	2	0,0%	0
87	Parco Agricolo Sud	3	3	0,0%	0
88	Parco Bosco in Città	9	13	44,4%	0
-	MILAN MUNICIPALITY	24.188	28.134	16,3%	38

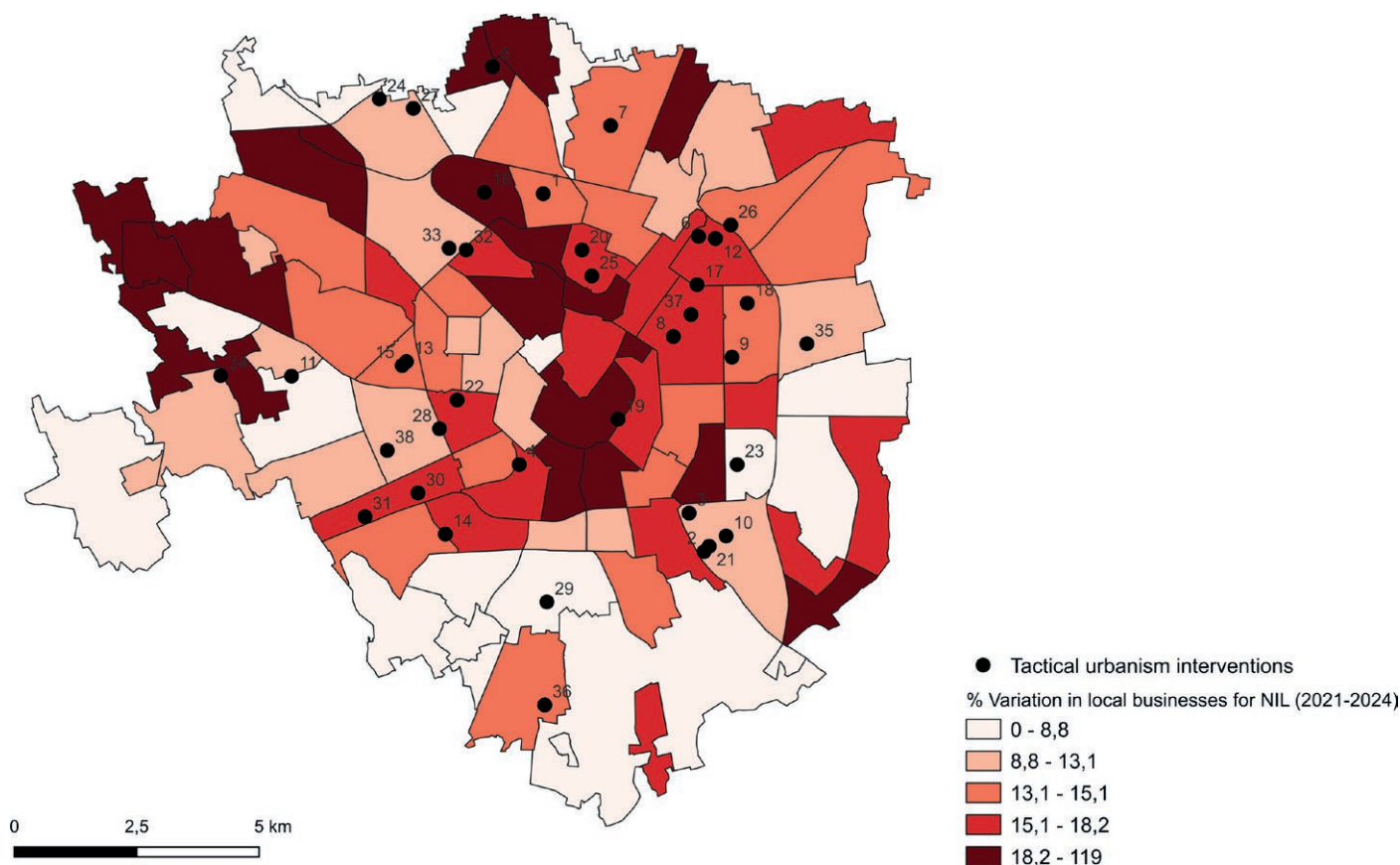
the mobility system, thus hinting at an urban morphological interpretation of these interventions' impact. Finally, it is interesting to notice that “not positive” results from the comparison are mainly related to the most recent tactical urbanism initiatives (dating 2020 and 2021). This result needs to be deepened and monitored to understand if the emergence of the impact of experiences on local business dynamics requires a specific period for maturation.

Discussion and conclusions

In recent decades, new social, economic, and environmental challenges have led urban planning to dramatically innovate its objectives and approaches by conceiving transformative interventions from a perspective of adaptation and rapid response. In this context, tactical and temporary urbanism interventions have found significant application in urban regeneration processes, and have gained increasing attention from the scholarly debate. The minimum intervention and community-oriented perspective behind this intervention has led the scientific discussion to explore the social and environmental benefits of these interventions, while understanding their economic impact is still an open challenge. From this perspective, the research addresses this challenge

by reading tactical and temporary urbanism experiences' economic impacts from an economic growth perspective. The focus on Milan municipality, based on exploring the relationship between tactical urbanism initiatives and the variation in local businesses in their influence area, hints at their positive effects in triggering growth dynamics at the neighbourhood scale. Coherently with the existing literature on the impacts of urban regeneration initiatives, these results cannot be generalised to the entire urban environment but seem to be affected by context-based factors and by the morphological nature of the intervention.

Hence, the paper's findings must be interpreted as preliminary insight into the theme of tactical urbanism's economic impacts, which needs further exploration and questioning. Indeed, the analysis is currently limited to quantitative data about entrepreneurial activities and their variation over time, which cannot fully explain the complexity of the investigated phenomenon. From this perspective, future research endeavours will be oriented to integrate the provided information layer about the supply of local businesses with an analysis of the demand for these activities and its relationship with the tactical urbanism interventions. Furthermore, approaching the “demand” side will allow to better investigate the relationship between social



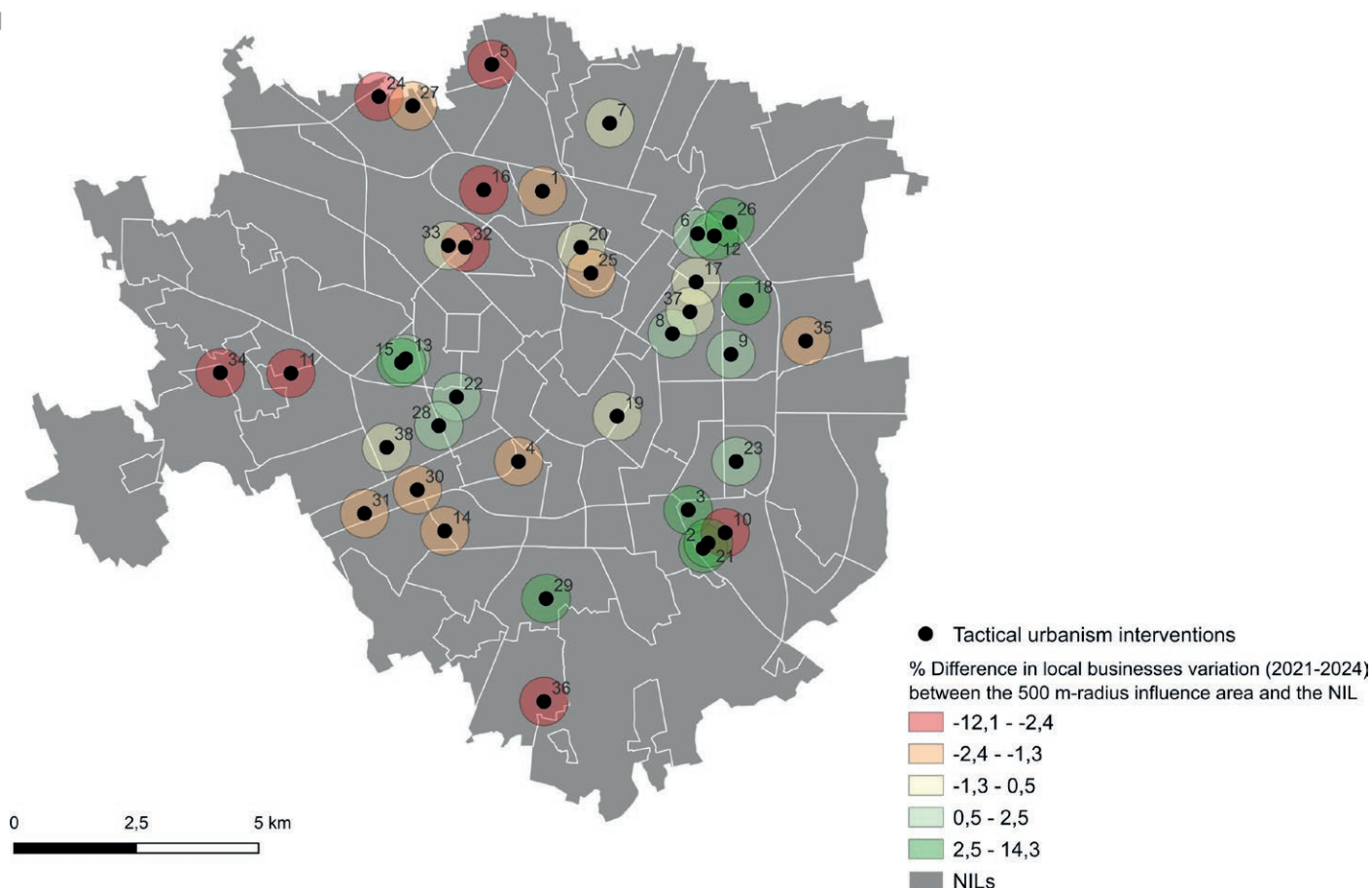
impacts and the emerging economic growth dynamics, thus critically questioning these small-scale interventions' role in triggering socially responsible urban development rather than, as observed for bigger-scale regeneration initiatives, contributing to gentrification processes and exacerbating social inequalities (Levine *et al.*, 2022). To this end, the implementation of the proposed analysis in other urban contexts, characterised by less vibrancy in terms of urban regeneration initiatives compared to Milan, can allow for a deeper understanding of the interrelations between economic growth and the social impact of tactical urbanism interventions.

NOTES

¹ According to Legislative Decree of 31 March 1998, no. 114, the local business refers to a retail activity with a sales area not exceeding 150 sqm in municipalities with a population lower than 10,000 residents, and not exceeding 250 sqm in municipalities with a population higher than 10,000 residents.

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