placemaking • Italia

Words that map *Places*

by Valeria Lorenzelli

A guide to language for describing neighbourhoods and communities: moving beyond stereotypes and prejudice.

#1 Post•t III 2025

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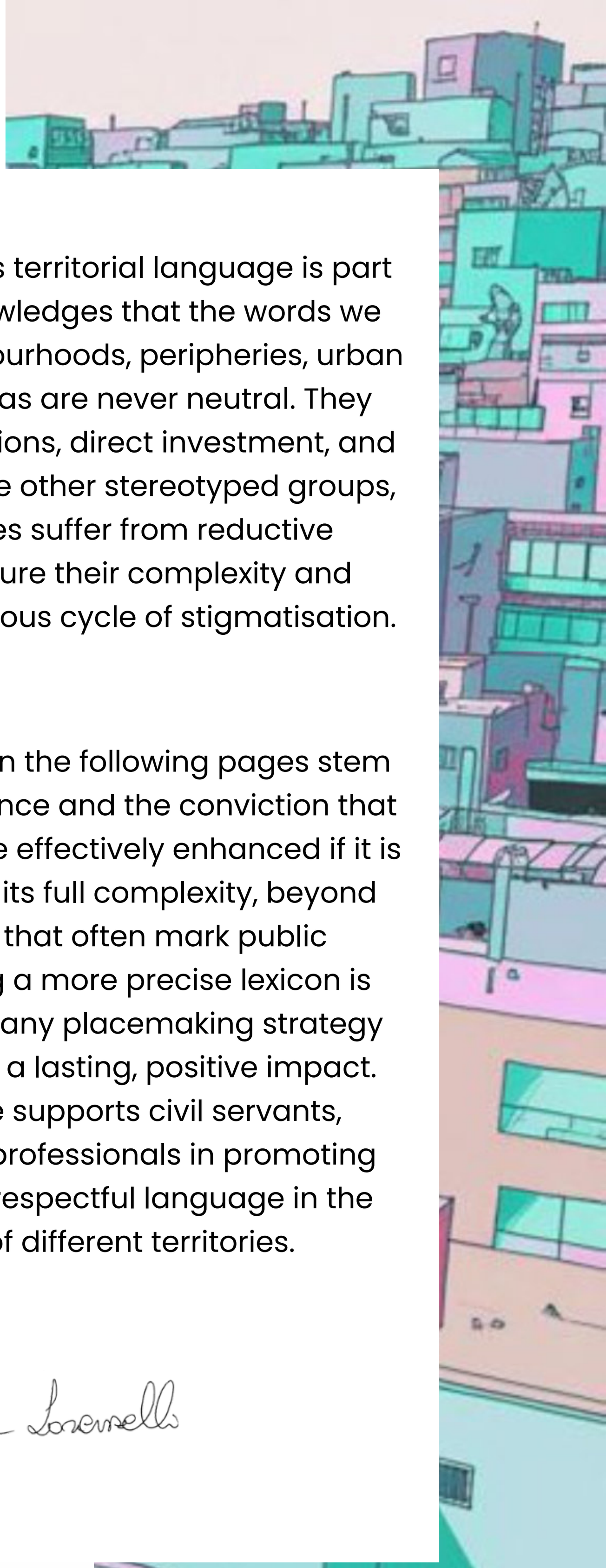
This document stems from a deep reflection on the transformative power of words in shaping the identity of places. As highlighted in my book on placemaking, every area is also a collective story, woven from the narratives of those who live there, govern it, and communicate about it.

The placemaking framework I have developed for our country puts people at the heart of any planning project. It recognises that the success of any revitalisation effort depends on its ability to resonate with local communities. In this context, communication is not an optional extra; it is a fundamental pillar for successfully unlocking a place's potential.

In recent years, we have seen a growing awareness of language's power to perpetuate or challenge stereotypes. This focus has appeared in many fields: from how we speak of road traffic victims, avoiding terms that absolve drivers of responsibility, to the language used to describe cyclists, who are often stigmatised, and the need for inclusive, non-sexist language when speaking of women. It is crucial to extend this same sensitivity to how we describe our communities, particularly those on the margins.



This guide to conscious territorial language is part of that vision. It acknowledges that the words we use to describe neighbourhoods, peripheries, urban centres, and rural areas are never neutral. They actively shape perceptions, direct investment, and define public policy. Like other stereotyped groups, marginalised places suffer from reductive narratives that obscure their complexity and potential, feeding a vicious cycle of stigmatisation.

The insights and tools in the following pages stem from hands-on experience and the conviction that a community cannot be effectively enhanced if it is not first recognised in its full complexity, beyond the simplifications that often mark public discourse. Developing a more precise lexicon is therefore essential for any placemaking strategy that aims to generate a lasting, positive impact. This guide therefore supports civil servants, communicators and professionals in promoting more conscious and respectful language in the representation of different territories.

Valeria Lorenelli

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The power of *Words* in *Placemaking*

The words we use to describe places are a choice, and for that reason, they are never neutral. Language does not just describe reality; it actively helps to construct it, shaping public policy, directing investment, and influencing the collective perception of places and their inhabitants.

When we describe neighbourhoods and districts with terms like "run-down," "deprived," or "problematic," we are not describing an objective reality. We are actively contributing to a narrative that influences policy, investment flows, and the sense of belonging for those who live there.

This creates three key problems:

1 It Flattens Complexity

Many common terms carry prejudices that erase the complexity of inherently diverse communities.

2 It Crystallises Stigma

Imprecise language perpetuates discrimination and stigmatises entire neighbourhoods.

3 It Obscures Assets

Negative labels hide the existing resources, potential, and social capital within these communities.

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The shifting *Meaning* of territorial *Terms*

"Borgata" (Hamlet)

Originally, it referred to a small autonomous village with a distinct cultural identity.In post-war Italy, it became synonymous with unplanned settlements, taking on a social stigma that overshadowed the complex dynamicsof the community.

1

2

Dormitory Suburb

Coined in the 1960s and 1970s to describe objectively new residential neighbourhoods with poor services, it has become a reductive term that erases the social practices and solidarity networks developed in these contexts.

Hinterland

A term of German origin meaning "behind the land", today it is often loaded with connotations of cultural subordination, as if geographical distance necessarily implied a distance in values.

3

4

Periphery

Originating from the Greek for "circumference," it was a neutral geographic term. In the post-war era, it acquired negative connotations linked to social marginality and exclusion.

This semantic shift both reflects and actively reinforces territorial disparities and value hierarchies. The risult is a form of linguistic colonisation of these areas

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Deconstructing the word "*Periphery*"

The term "periphery" transcends its geographic function to become a powerful symbolic tool. Even when used with "positive" intentions, it reproduces a relationship of subservience. Its very structure presupposes the existence of a dominant "centre," against which everything else is defined by what it lacks. It turns physical distance into social distance.

Symbolic function

It naturalises socially constructed divisions

Connotative shift

Phisical distance becomes social distance

Costructions of oppositions

It generates dichotomies such as quality vs. deficit

Etymological dimension

It establishes a hierarchical relationship with a dominant centre

The concept of spatial *justice*

The power to name, describe, and classify places is not distributed equally in society. Public institutions, the media, and privileged groups hold a disproportionate linguistic authority over the inhabitants of the places being classified, creating a form of "linguistic colonialism"

Theoretical Roots

The concept is rooted in the work of Henri Lefebvre, particularly his 'Right to the City' (1968). It was later developed by the geografo Edward Soja, who defined it as "the equitable spatial distribution of socially valued resources".

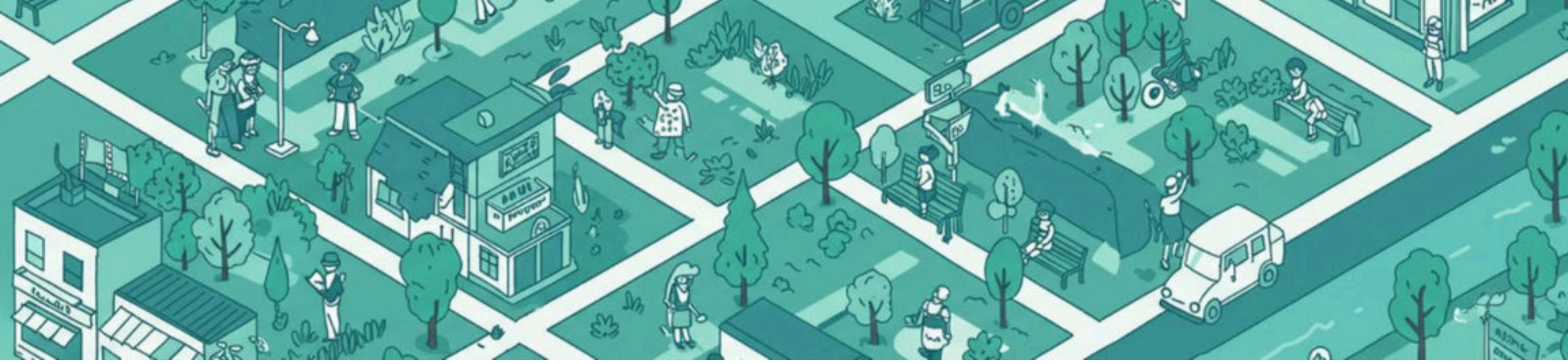
Core Principles

Urban space is not a neutral container; it is a social product that reflects power relations.

The way territory is organised influences access to both tangible and intangible resources.

Language and Injustice

Language pins problems onto the territories themselves, rather than attributing them to structural failures. It naturalises inequalities and draws a false equivalence between geographical and social marginality.



Power asymmetries in *revitalisation* efforts

It is particularly significant to grasp how even seemingly benevolent discourse about peripheral areas can reproduce power imbalances.

- A paternalistic attitude towards these areas is founded on a systemic presumption that local communities are incapable of self-determination, thereby legitimising external intervention.
- The occasional celebration of "peripheral vitality" functions as the exception that proves the rule—reinforcing the presumed norm of deficit or lack.

⚠ Institutional Narratives

Even programmes that aim to "revitalise" peripheral areas tend to define them by what they lack in comparison to a dominant centre, thus perpetuating asymmetrical relationships and a lack of autonomy.

⚠ Media Narratives

Cultural events and local potential within peripheral contexts are often presented as "unexpected" or "exceptional". The result is an implicit confirmation of the rule that such achievements are presumed to be impossible.

⚠ Territorial Policies

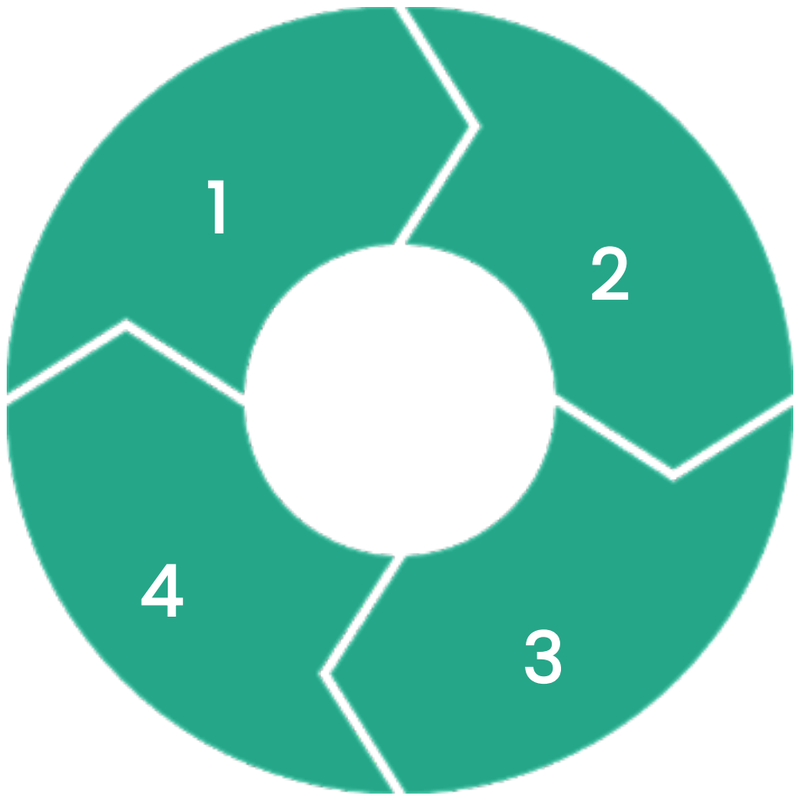
Public interventions often reproduce mechanisms of dependency, through projects conceived without the active involvement of residents and which apply "normalising" approaches.

Towards a critical *awareness* of *territorial language*

Recognising how language helps construct territorial hierarchies is fundamental to developing conscious communication practices. The issue extends beyond mere formality; it concerns the power of words to either legitimise or challenge specific power relations within urban space.

Recognise
Identify stereotypes and prejudices in the language we use

Include
Actively give voice to the communities who inhabit these places



Contextualise
Understand and explain the structural causes of the phenomena described

Value
Highlight the existing assets, resources, and potential within the communities

Developing a more precise and respectful vocabulary requires a critical reflection on the very categories we use to interpret these territories. This is essential to recognise their full complexity and multiple identities, without resorting to reductive frameworks that fuel symbolic marginalisation.

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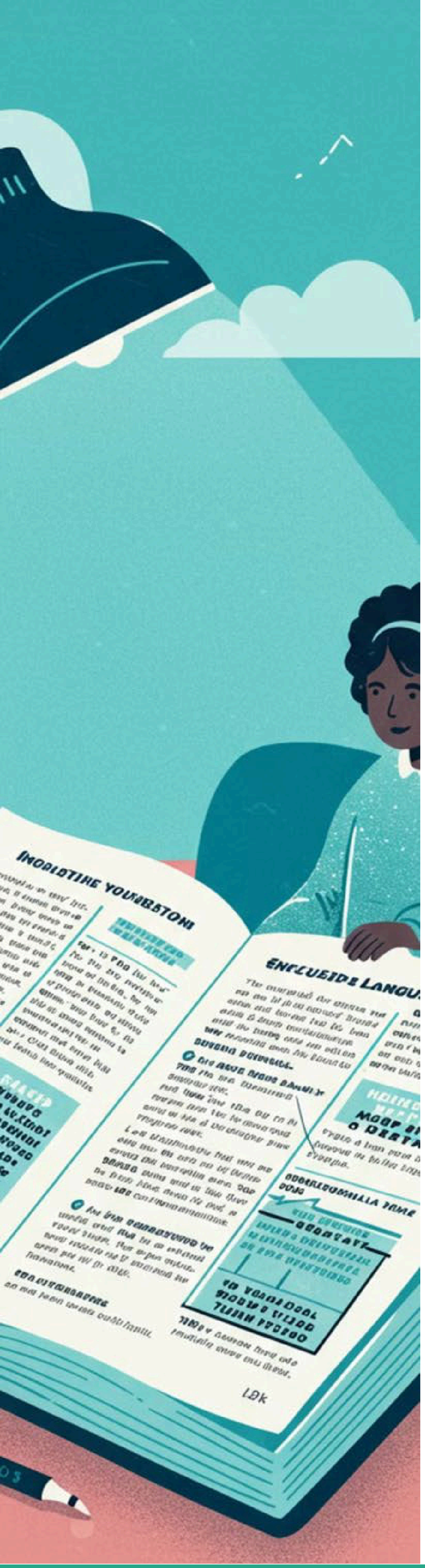

Negative glossary: problematic terms and alternatives

Problematic term	Why it's limiting	Proposed alternative(s)
Dormitory suburb	Reduces a community to a single residential function	Residential neighbourhood, Local community
Run-down periphery	Generalises and stigmatises, ignoring internal diversity	Area with specific needs, Neighbourhood facing structural challenges
'At-risk' zone	Criminalises an entire area and its residents	An area facing specific challenges, (or) an area undergoing transformation
Ghetto	Implies segregation and irredeemable marginality	Neighbourhood, urban area
Blight / Decay	A generic term tha confuses cause and effect	Lack of manitenance, Insufficient public services

This glossary is not intended to impose 'politically correct' language. Rather, it aims to stimulate reflection on how the words we choose can influence perceptions, and ultimately shape concrete policies and interventions in these communities.

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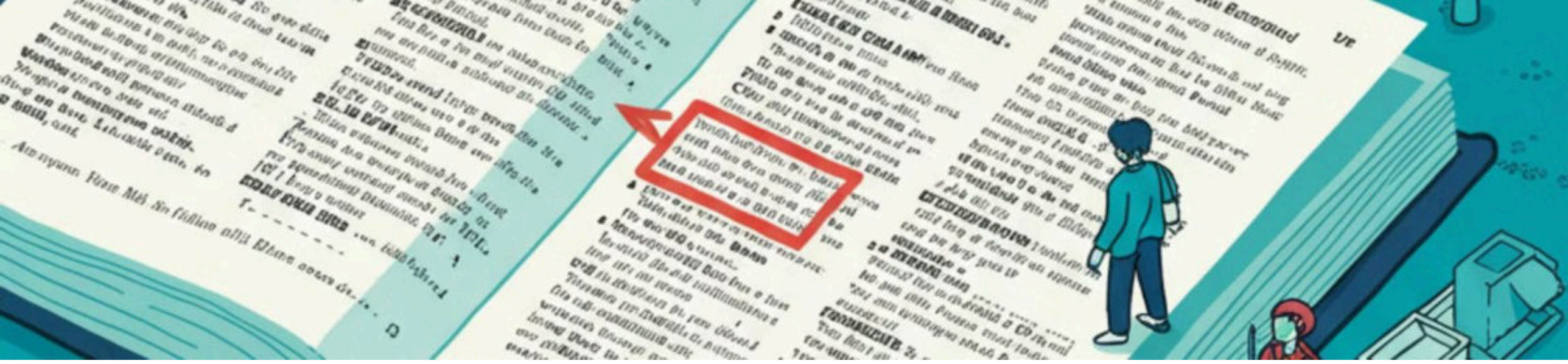

Positive Glossary: a new lexicon for our communities

This glossary is not about finding euphemisms, but offering tools to see and narrate contemporary urban complexity.

Using these words can help us transform not only how we talk about territories, but also how we perceive and experience them.

Descriptive Terms

- **Neighbourhoods**: Urban units with a recognisable identity
- **Urban Poles**: Areas with specific functions that draw people in
- **Urban Fabric**: The physical and social weave of the city
- **Diffused centralities**: 'central' functions distributed throughout the city

Valuing Terms

- **Territorial Diversity**: The specific, unique qualities of each area
- **Community Assets**: The material and immaterial resources of a place
- **Community Resilience**: The collective capacity to adapt
- **Plural Identity**: The composite, multi-layered character of a place

Innovative Concepts

- **Polycentrism**: A city understood as a system of multiple centres
- **Proximity**: The accessibility of essential services
- **Space of Possibility**: Places that are open to change and self-determination
- **Self-Organisation**: Autonomous community-led strategies

A communications review *Checklist*

1

Name
Did you use the actual name of the neighbourhood rather than generic labels such as 'suburb'?

2

Specificity
Have you described the precise location of a phenomenon instead of generalising it to the entire area?

3

Context
Have you included historical and social context to help understand the structural causes of an issue?

4

Plurality of Voices
Have you included the perspectives and testimonies of the people who live and work there?

5

Balance
Have you given space to both the challenges *and* the assets, resources, and potential of the community?

This checklist is an invitation to reflect.

Use it as a tool for more conscious, respectful communication that reflects the complexity of places and the communities that inhabit them.

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Placemaking·Italia is a hub for connection and sharing, founded on the belief that the story of placemaking in Italy is still being written.

Placemaking is the process of creating high-quality places where people want to live, work, visit, shop, play, and learn.

I'm Valeria Lorenzelli, author of the book 'Placemaking. Creare luoghi vivi, amati e attraenti' (Creating vibrant, loved, and attractive places), which won the Il Sole 24 Ore Prize for Economic and Social Non-Fiction in 2024. The book stems from years of hands-on experience in the field of urban regeneration and placemaking.

In Italy, mayors, councillors, public officials, parish priests, businesses, and over 330,000 associations are already active on the ground. To make their work more effective, they need a common platform that acknowledges and champions their efforts and resources.

Post·t was created to share and connect stories of public space transformation from across the country. It's the newsletter for the Placemaking·Italia channel, a space where I share monthly reflections, design best practices, national and international case studies, urban regeneration projects, and opportunities for collaboration.

This channel is dedicated to active citizens, associations, local authorities, community foundations, and professionals who want to collaborate for the good of their cities.

I invite you to join the movement. If you have projects, ideas, or stories to share, or simply want to contribute to the community, please get in touch. Placemaking is a collaborative process.

You can contact me via email at *info@placemakingitalia.it* or find me on LinkedIn as *@Valeria Lorenzelli*.

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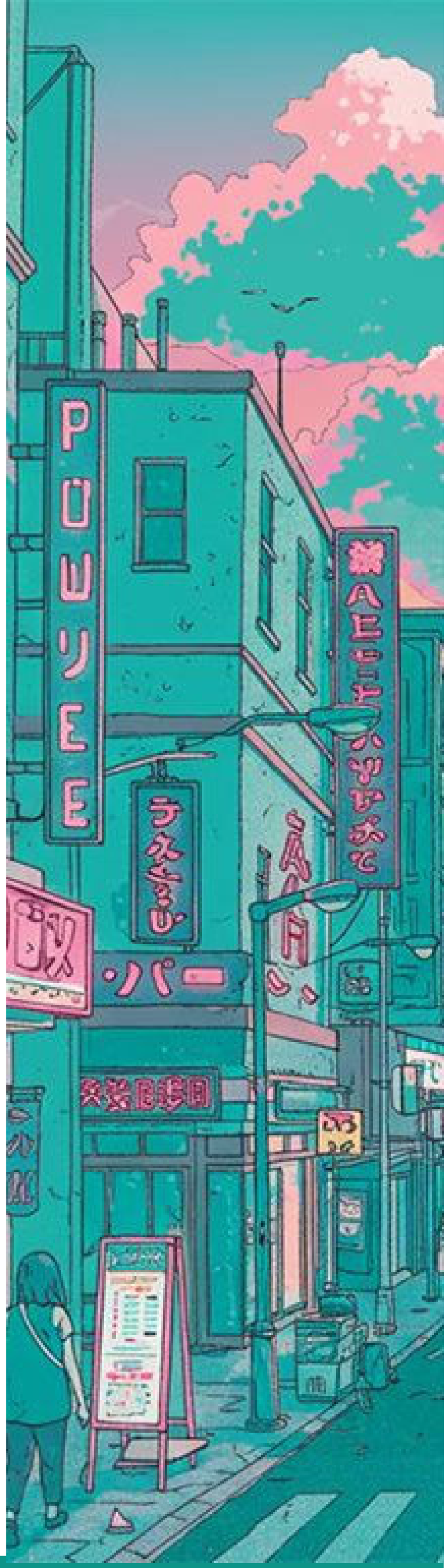

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