

PUBLIC SPACES FOR COMMUNITY CAMPUSES AND UNIVERSITIES

Edited by
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Progetto grafico
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Prodotto da
INU Edizioni Srl
Via Castro Dei Volsci 14
00179 Roma
Tel. 06 68134341 / 335-5487645
inued@inuedizioni.it
www.inuedizioni.com
Iscrizione CCIAA 81 4890/95
Iscrizione al Tribunale di Roma 3563/95

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Finito di stampare
Luglio 2025
Officine Grafiche Francesco Giannini & Figli SpA

In copertina
Copenhagen: detail of the Søndre Campus (photo by Marichela Sepe)

ISBN: 978-88-7603-269-1 (e-Book) €. 0,00
Open access <http://www.inuedizioni.com>

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Forewords

Marichela Sepe

This volume stems from a deep interest in a topic that, in recent years, has gained increasing importance in urban and architectural design: the role of open public spaces within university campuses¹. These places are not merely accessory settings for academic functions but are vital elements contributing to the quality of life for the entire community that studies, works, or simply passes through these areas. The open spaces of campuses thus become arenas for relationships, informal learning, and physical and mental well-being, acting as true extensions of the city itself.

My personal interest in this subject developed during periods of study, visits, and research across numerous university campuses, in Europe, the

¹ This volume was realized within the framework of the research projects “*LOVE Sapienza: Livable, Enjoyable, and Attractive Spaces for the Community*” (under the author’s responsibility) and “*University and Urban Regeneration: Redesigning Neglected Spaces and Routes with Sapienza as a Driver, NARRATES*” (under the author’s responsibility for the Architecture and Urban Regeneration research line), both funded by Sapienza University of Rome. The contributions contained in the volume relate to the conference I organized as part of the *LOVE Sapienza* research, which was held at DICEA-Sapienza University of Rome, on July 3, 2025, in partnership with the GUDesign Network (www.gudesign.org), founded by Heleni Porfyriou and coordinated by me since 2022.

United States, and Asia. On these occasions, I observed how the quality of open spaces directly affects the experience of those who frequent the university: students, faculty, researchers, workers, and visitors. These are not merely green areas or transit zones, but welcoming environments, carefully designed to encourage pause, outdoor study, and spontaneous socialization. In particular, it became clear how the presence of spacious, well-equipped areas with a thoughtful focus on environmental and architectural quality significantly enhances the overall livability of campuses.

At the same time, another compelling aspect is the connection between the campus and the surrounding urban fabric. In the best examples I visited, permeability and accessibility were ensured by a range of sustainable mobility options: bike paths, efficient public transportation, and safe, pleasant pedestrian routes. This network of connections not only facilitates daily movement but also fosters deeper social and cultural integration between the city and the university, overcoming the traditional physical and symbolic separation between the two worlds.

In recent times, attention to urban resilience has further expanded the scope of the discussion, making it essential to consider public spaces through a climate-oriented lens. Campuses, as genuine urban microcosms, must face challenges linked to extreme weather events—heatwaves, heavy rainfall, flooding—by designing open spaces capable of absorbing, withstanding, and adapting. Soil permeability, the presence of appropriate vegetation, and stormwater management have become fundamental design criteria, steering choices toward greater environmental and social sustainability.

The goal of this research is therefore to understand which factors make university spaces healthy, liveable, and resiliently future-oriented, as well as to identify effective design strategies to translate these factors into concrete practices.

The volume collects and analyses a series of international best practices, offering a useful tool for students, researchers, academics, designers, administrators, and all those involved or interested in the design of cities and campuses.

The structure of the book is organized into three main parts, following the cultural framework provided by Eric P. Mumford, Vassiliki Petridou, and David Grahame Shane. Each part addresses a different aspect of the relationship between public space and university campuses, yet all are closely interconnected and offer further insights for discussion. These

three parts regard: Campus and Public Spaces, which explores the issue of liveability and health in campus public spaces, examining how the design and organization of open areas can promote users' physical and psychological well-being; Campus and University Communities, which focuses on the various communities that inhabit campuses and their emerging needs; Campus and the City, which delves into the topic of connecting infrastructures and the relationships between campuses and their surrounding cities.

The ultimate goal is to propose a vision of the campus as an integral part of the contemporary city. Open public spaces can be a driving force in this transformation, creating environments that improve users' quality of life and contribute to the development of more resilient, healthy, and inclusive cities. In my introductory contribution, I therefore propose a set of guiding principles to support the design of liveable and inclusive campuses.

PART 2

CAMPUS AND UNIVERSITY COMMUNITIES: TYPOLOGIES AND EMERGING NEEDS

From Artificial Dependence Towards White Islands: Rethinking University Spaces for Digital Detox

*Giovanna Badaloni**

AD 2025: Artificial Dependence

"I imagine one could say: 'Why don't you leave me alone?! I want no part of your Internet, of your technological civilization, of your network society! I just want to live my life!'. Well, if this is your position, I have bad news for you. If you do not care about the networks, the networks will care about you, anyway. For as long as you want to live in society, at this time and in this place, you will have to deal with the network society. Because we live in the Internet Galaxy".

Manuel Castells (2001, p. 282)

The Spanish sociologist and urban planner had already predicted the rise of the 'Network Society', a paradigm of the social structure of our time (Castells, 1996; 2001). Today, we are all immersed in a hyperconnected world from which it is impossible to escape. Even on Mount Everest, high-speed WiFi is available (Meikle, 2010). However, the most widespread fear among people is not about finding a space immune to notifications from digital devices but instead being without a smartphone and thus offline.

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To indicate this psychological state of discomfort and fear, the term “Nomophobia” (from “NO MOBILE PHOne phoBIA”) was coined in 2008, introduced in the study commissioned by the UK Post Office to YouGov, which investigated the link between anxiety disorders and mobile phone use among 2163 participants. It concluded that ‘the fear of being out of mobile phone contact’ affected 53% of British users, 13 mn people (MailOnline, 2008; Bhattacharya et al., 2019). In 2011, the acronym FoMO (from “Fear of Missing Out”) was also introduced. Conceived in 2004 by a Harvard student, it describes the anxiety of missing something important and being socially excluded (McGinnis, 2023; Vaughn & Mack, 2012). In 2012, the Macquarie Dictionary designed the word “Phubbing” (PHU), a fusion of “phone” and “snubbing”, for the widespread behaviour of ignoring one’s interlocutors due to the (ab)use of mobile devices, resulting in damage to interpersonal relationships (Dibajnia et al., 2025).

Network Society or Hyperconnected Society?

According to the *Digital 2024: Global Overview Report*, unique mobile users rose to 5.61 bn at the beginning of 2024 (+2.5% compared to 2023); active social media profiles increased to 5.04 bn, 62% of the world population. The daily time spent online is also impressive, estimated by GWI at 6 hours and 40 minutes per average user, increased by 4 minutes per day (+1%), of which 2 hours and 23 minutes are spent on social media (We Are Social & Meltwater, 2024). In Italy, 75% of children aged 6 to 9 and 96% of adolescents aged 10 to 13 use smartphones; in the 14-75 age group, two out of five Italians (38%) have nomophobia (SWG, 2023).

The situation among students is worrying. In the “Smartphone addiction: vissuto dei giovani e strumenti di contrasto” project, conducted by EURES, the Lazio Region, and the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies, 1800 students were interviewed. They use it mainly out of boredom (46.9%) and a need for belonging (22.5%), on average 6 hours a day; one in four, over 8 hours (25.4%). Smartphone addiction affects 82% of them: 60% are at medium risk, while 22% are in the critical ‘alert addiction’ range (EURES, 2021).

The scientific literature refers to this condition as a ‘new addiction’ and a ‘substance-free addiction’ relating to dysfunctional behaviours such as pathological gambling, compulsive shopping, and addictions to work, exercise, sex, and relationships (Colantuono & Cocciolletti, 2020; Griffiths, 2005; Caretti & La Barbera, 2009). The original expression “artificial dependence”, which gives this study its title, offers a current definition of the phenomenon, which – more or less directly – now involves everyone, add-

ing a reference to AI, which could strengthen young people's addiction, being used by 80% of students aged 16 to 18 (Ronchetti, 2024) and 86% of university students (Digital Education Council, 2024). It is artificial because, in seeking its object, it is a "data addiction"; moreover, it is induced, so it is not possible to choose or escape it. While it is possible to decide to avoid certain behaviours or things, such as starting to gamble or drinking alcohol, so as not to become their slaves, this does not apply to digital devices, whose use has become a mandatory choice for many. Otherwise, without the possibility of connection, they would not have had the attractiveness and functionality they have, which increase their impact in shaping individual behaviours, so the problem would not have arisen.

2025 is set to be the most technological year ever, with an estimated over 23 bn connected objects – an average of three per person – and an Internet of Things (IoT) business worth 1.05 tn dollars (Mele, 2024). The idea of studying, working, or living without the Internet is unrealistic: it would mean complicating life to an unimaginable extent, indeed, *not existing*. In many contexts, including universities, its use is the norm. For some professional roles, such as top executives, the mere continuous (even obsessive) checking of emails is the daily essence. Without the Internet, the planet would be paralysed today. Digital addiction seems to have become inevitable, a corollary of contemporary socio-economic circumstances beyond individual control. Over time, it has become a global concern, particularly among young people, the most vulnerable to excessive technology use. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the phenomenon, with a sharp increase in digital device use and repercussions on individual well-being.

In Italy, the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) has identified the "Missione Salute" ("Health Mission") among the areas of intervention, with investments of 15.63 bn euros (8.16% of the total) to be realised by 2026 (Ministero della Salute, 2024a). The Ministry of Health's *Performance Plan 2022-2024* (2022) outlined specific objectives to improve the efficiency and accessibility of the health system, also focusing on the mental health of the population. The "Psychologist Bonus" was introduced in 2022, and confirmed until 2025, to respond to the growing psychological distress exacerbated by the pandemic, offering financial support for psychotherapy courses, including treatments for social and digital addictions (Ministero della Salute, 2024b). The latest ministerial guideline promotes the psycho-physical well-being of adolescents (Ministero della Salute, 2025). However, it does not explicitly refer to digital addiction, although it is becoming an increasingly relevant health issue, as numerous scientific studies confirm.

From Digital Addiction to Digital Detox

A recent analysis examined the connections between social media use and the mental health of university students during the pandemic, revealing a significant correlation between excessive use of digital platforms and symptoms of stress, depression, anxiety, and loneliness (Ghanayem et al., 2024). Similar conclusions were reached by research on smartphone addiction among adolescents, demonstrating that it is closely linked to depression, distress, and sleep deprivation, requiring preventive actions to mitigate its adverse effects (Kabadayi, 2024). An investigation into significant interventions against digital addiction in children and adolescents highlighted the effectiveness of cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) and the importance of early and multidisciplinary intervention (Ding & Li, 2023). A study on the links between digital literacy, Internet use and addiction among Chinese university students revealed that higher digital competence is associated with a lower risk. Targeted educational programs can be an effective strategy for reducing it (Jiang et al., 2023).

Extensive research confirms that excessive Internet use, mainly social media, can generate anxiety and depression, a sense of isolation, and even “social media loneliness”. To regain control of one’s life, a “digital detox” – the choice to reduce or eliminate the use of digital devices for a certain period – can be helpful.

A team from the University of Pennsylvania conducted an experiment on 143 students divided into two groups: the first one limited the use of Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat to ten minutes per day per platform, and the other had no restrictions. After three weeks, the experimental group showed a significant reduction in loneliness and depression compared to the control group. The analysis suggested that limiting social media use to about 30 minutes a day can significantly improve well-being (Hunt et al., 2018). A study by the University of Wuppertal evaluated the impact of digital detox in promoting well-being, social relationships, self-control, and performance. From the review of 21 studies (3625 participants), inconsistent results emerged: some observed positive consequences from the interventions; others did not find any or identified adverse effects on well-being. Digital detox appeared promising in reducing smartphone use and symptoms of depression, but further research is needed to better clarify the variables influencing its effectiveness (Radtke et al., 2021).

Finally, the new research by Dibajnia et al. (2025), involving a sample of 320 university students, has identified a significant correlation also be-

tween phubbing behaviour and symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress. Furthermore, phubbing negatively impacts concentration and academic performance, interfering with students' personal development. These findings highlight the pressing need for educational interventions and support strategies aimed at fostering a more mindful and balanced use of technology.

Beating Technology with Creativity

Digital addiction is a complex problem that requires a multidisciplinary approach to address it. Key factors in developing effective prevention and intervention strategies include targeted measures, promoting mindful use of devices, and enhancing digital literacy among young people. In this context, architecture can play a crucial role by proposing solutions to foster digital detox. Innovative interventions can transform public and learning spaces into engaging environments that fully support student well-being. The project will need to counter boredom and the fear of social exclusion, which drive young people to live online. Here, human creativity could be the winning card. A natural quality that artificial intelligence can only simulate.

Designing Well-being for University Spaces in the Digital Age

Today, architecture plays a crucial role in educational contexts to promote well-being. Design and renovation of university campuses have become a primary focus to create environments that meet academic needs while improving community quality of life. Various research has explored these dimensions, providing guidelines and insights for creating innovative, sustainable, and healthy spaces for both body and mind.

Solutions

A recent study on university campus design strategies emphasises the importance of integrating open areas, buildings, circulation, and utilities to create a stimulating and welcoming environment. Additionally, the construction and upgrading of campuses should aim to create an integrated system between schools and cities, exploring new models for their joint growth. This approach seeks to enhance the sustainability and inclusivity of spaces, addressing the modern needs of students and staff (Dong et al., 2023).

Green spaces can also significantly improve students' physical and mental well-being, emphasising the importance of including them in campus design (Si et al., 2024). The positive effect of natural environments on students' mental health and well-being has been confirmed by Ribeiro et al. (2024), who found that their presence on university campuses can reduce stress and anxiety levels. Furthermore, the variety of on-campus landscapes can positively influence mental health, offering opportunities for recovery and regeneration (Nie et al., 2024). A study on the impact of green spaces in schools on academic performance showed a beneficial correlation, considering indicators such as tree canopy cover, views of vegetation from windows, college prep exam scores, and semester grades (Browning & Rigolon, 2019).

The design of university buildings is crucial in jointly promoting students' well-being, accessibility, and inclusion by creating more welcoming and functional spaces where everyone can feel comfortable and supported. The use of landmarks and clear, visual, and relevant signage helps reduce daily frustrations for neurodiverse students. Recognising the need for a diverse range of environments to study, work, socialise, and retreat allows students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) to find spaces of refuge and tranquillity. Incorporating natural environments helps alleviate stress and anxiety, develop social skills, and motivate learning, particularly for students with special educational needs. Well-being can thus be fostered by also working on inclusivity, which should be considered from the early stages of design to ensure environments that genuinely promote social interaction and engagement for all (Roylance, 2023). Flexible learning spaces in secondary schools have been shown to facilitate student interaction, cooperation, and behavioural engagement compared to traditional settings, confirming the importance of innovative design solutions that stimulate socialisation and active participation among young people (Kariippanon et al., 2019).

Challenges

The design of university campuses is evolving towards more sustainable, inclusive, and well-being-oriented models. The strategies proposed by recent literature offer an integrated and multidisciplinary vision that considers not only architectural aspects but also environmental and psychological ones. This transformation, which sees the growing importance of health among the factors to be considered in the project, is essential for creating environments suitable to support students' personal and profes-

sional growth. However, specific attention to digital detox is still lacking in the design strategies of campuses and university spaces. Due to the absence of implemented projects and thus significant case studies, architectural literature does not explicitly address this aspect. This gap could be partially filled by addressing it from a theoretical perspective, given the substantial body of studies in the humanities, which could stimulate discussion and new ideas and potentially lead to practical solutions, starting with reflection on such a current and relevant theme.

Designing and integrating spaces that promote disconnection from digital devices represents a new challenge to enhance the well-being of students and the university community further. First and foremost, it reveals an urgent necessity given the exponential growth of a phenomenon that now seems out of control and risks nullifying all the progress made over time, leaving a trail of unresolved questions and contradictions.

After all, in this performance-driven society, what use are innovative and performance-enhancing learning environments if all students are distracted by the first available device capable of connecting to the Internet? What good is discussing environment, sustainability, and health in architecture if concerns about electromagnetic pollution and radiofrequency electromagnetic fields have been put on stand-by? What is the point of an inclusive and avant-garde campus if those who should benefit from it primarily live in the virtual world, ending up isolated and thus self-excluding?

In response to such questions, even a notification sound would be comforting. However, among architects, there is still too much silence.

AD 2025: Architectural Disconnection

The latest *Digital Wellbeing* report has confirmed that hyperconnectivity can have adverse effects on mental, physical, and emotional health. Drafted by All Digital, a European network of stakeholders in the development of digital skills, along with three member entities from different countries, this paper highlighted various initiatives to encourage healthy technology use (Arroyo Moliner et al., 2023). Universities worldwide are increasingly recognising the importance of digital well-being, moving in the right direction to address the issue in an interdisciplinary manner, mainly by proposing informative programmes, workshops, and awareness-raising activities, sometimes even specific tech-free lessons. However, there have been no known cases of spaces specifically designed for digital detox, as they overlook the potential contributions of architecture.

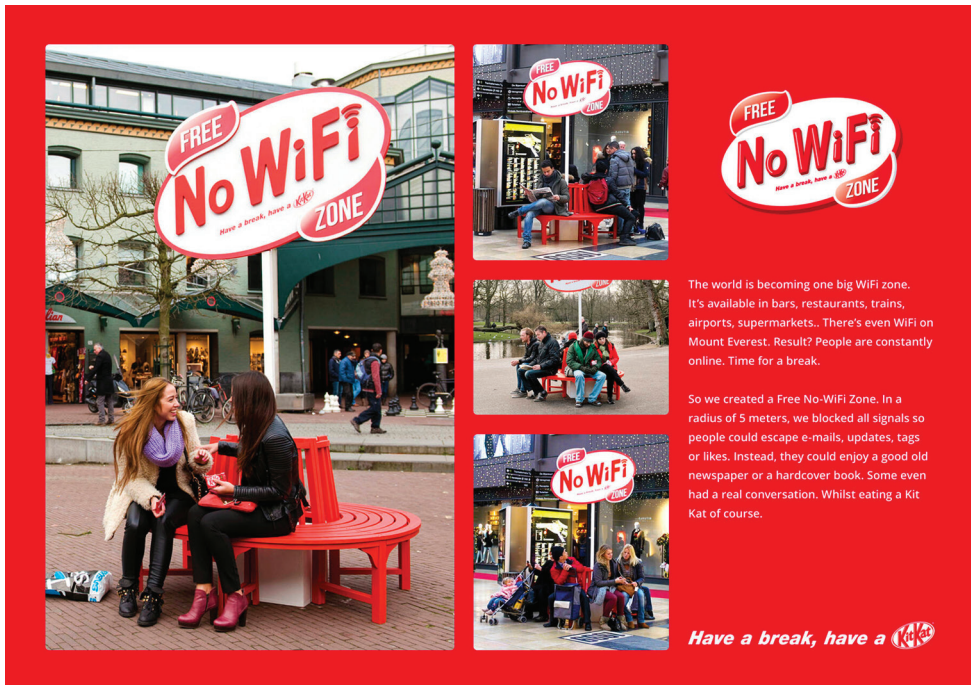
Towards Implementing University Spaces for Digital Detox

Internationally, the USA stands out, ranking 18th globally for smartphone addiction according to a McGill University study, preceded by Italy (11th), with China, Saudi Arabia, and Malaysia leading the chart (Olson et al., 2022). For example, the University of Arizona has created an excellent informational page on combating digital addiction, almost a site within a site dedicated to digital detox, but it has not yet established permanent structures for this purpose (The Arizona Board of Regents, 2025). The same applies to Stanford University, which has been promoting digital wellness initiatives for years. Among the most recent, in September 2024, the “Youth Safety and Digital Wellbeing” workshop investigated approaches to protect young users from the risks of social media (Stanford Center for Digital Health, 2025; mediaX at Stanford University, n.d.).

The Massachusetts Institute of Technology further distinguishes itself through the design of its spaces, which encourage casual encounters and cooperation among students and researchers. Buildings such as the Stata Center, Sloan, and Media Lab offer spacious atriums, flexible laboratories, and common spaces to enhance collaboration. Additionally, internal passages like the 251-meter-long “Infinite Corridor” and sky bridges between research buildings on campus help mix thousands of people daily, fostering face-to-face social interactions without the need to connect online (Dizikes, 2022).

In Canada, the University of British Columbia has done much to promote community health, creating UBC Wellbeing, a collaborative initiative with its own Strategic Framework and guided by the Okanagan Charter, a call to action shared among various partners to transform campuses into health-promoting institutions (UBC Wellbeing, n.d.). Green areas and relaxation spaces have also been created, though not explicitly focused on digital detox, but helpful in promoting broader well-being. An internal study did not find a direct correlation between time spent in outdoor green spaces and reduced student stress, but students were more inclined to visit these areas if better informed about their location and availability (Pham et al., 2022).

In Europe, universities attentive to digital well-being are on the rise, but none seem to go beyond specific programmes and activities, not even the renowned University of Oxford (2023). Among the most noteworthy initiatives is the EUniWell – European University for Well-Being, an alliance established in 2020 with the support of the European Com-



mission, bringing together over 60 partners and 11 universities, with the University of Florence being the only Italian. Its mission is to understand, improve, measure, and balance multi-level well-being (individual, community, and social) by addressing various fronts, such as health, equality, environmental change, culture, and education (EUniWell, n.d.). The largest European one, Sapienza University of Rome, is fully committed to health, yet there are no facilities designed for digital detox. Furthermore, its rich website still lacks a dedicated page for digital well-being. This is a noticeable gap, given the comprehensive section on well-being and inclusion. It is an unequal battle, as the “Sapienza Wireless” boasts an exhaustive page where even the *enemy* sign, “WiFi Zone”, has earned its own document. Digital & free-to-download. In the perfect spirit of the times (Sapienza University of Rome, a; b).

Less Wireless is More

Meanwhile, outside the academic world, some projects have successfully implemented digital detox solutions, which could be helpful in rethinking university spaces. A business? A trend? This study does not delve into potential economic or cultural issues, but it mentions them only because

Figure 1 -
Kit Kat “Free
No-WiFiZone”
campaign,
2012 (JLWT
Amsterdam,
2012, courtesy
of VML)



Figure 2 -
*Technology-free zone at
Paypal offices
in Milan (Photo
© Davide Galli,
courtesy of
Tétris Design x
Build)*

they can offer valuable insights into tackling a problem that can no longer be ignored. It demonstrates that architecture, especially in places deeply experienced by young people (such as schools and universities) – those most at risk – must catch up.

As early as 2012, the Kit Kat brand of the multinational company Nestlé sought to bring people back to reality with the ingenious ambient marketing campaign “Free No-WiFi Zone”, inviting them to “have a break” from digital devices, playing with its famous slogan (Fig. 1). To do this, it provided unique benches with signage in some central areas of Amsterdam, making the connection unavailable within a 5-meter radius. In these areas, simply sitting down allowed people to escape smartphone stress, enjoying a normal conversation or reading the books and newspapers provided. This idea could be easily adapted to university campuses by creating small WiFi-free islands, for example, in study rooms and libraries, to limit student distractions.

In the digital age, cutting-edge cafes and restaurants have already introduced No-WiFi zones, certainly to stand out, but mainly to encourage customer conversation, reducing the use of mobile devices during meals, given that phubbing is now on the menu everywhere. This ap-

proach aims to create a more social and humanly interactive atmosphere. On campuses, shared meeting spaces, both indoors and outdoors, could be redesigned with creative solutions to transform them into tech-free areas that foster dialogue and relaxation.

In recent years, digital detox has become one of the flagship offerings in the hospitality and tourism sector. More and more hotels and resorts, in Italy and around the world, offer themed packages that include rooms without WiFi (in some cases, even without TV, air conditioning, or any type of technological device) to meet the growing demand from customers who want to unplug and are willing to pay more, and have less, to free themselves from the Internet. These “Less Wireless is More” solutions, with the endorsement of Mies 5.0, are appreciated because they aid in relaxation and mental well-being. In dormitories, some rooms could be redesigned to exclude connection and, consequently, electromagnetic waves, improving the quality of sleep.

Even in offices, companies far from being analogue have started to introduce areas to reduce distractions and create a calmer environment that allows employees to achieve full mental recovery during breaks, thereby enhancing their concentration and productivity at work. In Milan, Tétris Design x Build (2021) has revamped the corporate image and equipped the PayPal headquarters with a tech-free zone. Workers now have a modern, bright, and serene workspace that also allows for digital disconnection (Fig. 2). Universities could draw inspiration to renew a multitude of environments, such as study areas, libraries, and common spaces. Here, the students would concentrate more, improving productivity, academic performance, and well-being.

Take the Train!

At this point, the more astute architects might argue that digital detox does not deserve so much attention, since the challenge could be won immediately and without cost simply by disconnecting all devices. It is worth remembering that there is a widespread issue, often an addiction, which will become global if the numbers continue to grow at this rate. Instead of missing this train, they could board the “Frecciarossa” by Trenitalia. Its Business Class carriage, and since late 2019 also the standard carriage on two hundred trains a day, provide the “Area Silenzio” (“Silence Area”) where the use of smartphones, the activation of ringtones, listening to music through speakers, and loud conversations are prohibited. They would find a quiet space to reconsider, taking advantage of the fact

that even the transport sector has also adapted with spaces for digital detox.

Now, only they are missing. And the university campuses, of course.

Results

Extensive research has consistently shown that hyperconnectivity is driving increases in stress, anxiety, and digital addiction among young people and university students. Recent data confirm their growing use of the Internet, especially social media platforms, and Artificial Intelligence in study and research activities. However, the issue has a global reach, involving a vast population of users of different age groups, increasingly affected by anxiety and social exclusion, linked to phenomena such as Nomophobia, FoMO, and Phubbing.

Digital detox emerges as one of the most promising solutions, fostering well-being and concentration, with a positive impact on the quality of life and academic performance. Targeted design solutions, such as the integration of natural elements in campuses (starting with the enhancement of green spaces and landscapes), the provision of welcoming and flexible spaces, and the creation of an integrated system between educational institutions and cities, also prove helpful.

Universities react to digital addiction primarily by encouraging awareness activities, but they do not yet offer spaces specifically designed to promote technological disconnection. In general, in the vast architectural domain, the problem is addressed in a limited and partial manner. That is both a cause and reflection of the scientific literature in the field. To date, it has not adequately shed light on the issue, the prospects, and the potential contribution of architecture, thus failing to utilise resources fully and significantly enrich the international debate, which can instead rely on a substantial body of humanities studies, mainly from fields such as psychology, sociology, and tourism economics.

Successful experiences in non-academic contexts offer valuable insights for rethinking university spaces. To combat the exponentially growing Internet addiction, immediate action on multiple fronts is required, involving interdisciplinary cooperation and the identification of creative and sustainable architectural solutions capable of redefining the university experience and fully promoting student well-being in the digital age.

Conclusions

Architecture, with the help of technology itself, particularly AI, boasts enormous potential to transform university campuses into healthier and more sustainable places, into cultural and creative oases for digital detox, where well-being and learning are closely connected.

White Islands for Mindful Disconnection

This transformation could begin by designing and integrating, both indoors and outdoors, zones without technology, relaxation areas, and other spaces to encourage exchange and face-to-face interactions. In any case, these spaces should be specifically created to incentivise *mindful disconnection*, regardless of the presence or absence of WiFi signals. This does not mean declaring war on the Internet and, with it, all the possibilities it offers students for entertainment, study, and discovery, but rather, it seeks to make it superfluous: less interesting and attractive compared to what the new spaces would genuinely offer them, without mediation.

In this regard, the examples presented in the study, although still in their embryonic stages, prove to be more than mere suggestive ideas, as they could be easily adapted to the specific needs and contexts of different campuses. All this is not anachronistic: it does not mean turning to the past or renouncing the enormous efforts and investments made to connect the planet. The proposed vision is not to forgo the Internet starting with universities, to bring them closer to the so-called “White Areas”, still devoid of broadband network coverage because no operator is interested in investing there, nor to the “White Zones” forgotten by urban planning.

Instead, the architectural frontier of campuses could be the “White Islands”, which have nothing to do with the former. They are specific and circumscribed spaces, with particular attention to environmental and naturalistic aspects – hence “islands” – and are specifically designed for a purpose towards which there is a clear interest: promoting digital well-being more than general well-being.

These islands, combining creativity, sustainability, and attention to health, can become a distinctive feature of future campuses and offer shelter from the technological overload of contemporary times. For universities, the challenge is to restart by embracing the underlying pioneering vision that encourages a balance between body, mind, nature, and the external world, favouring healthy effects over special effects.

Moreover, what colour, better than white, expresses ideas of harmony, mental peace, simplicity, freedom, and a new beginning?

No Signal?

This scenario demands a joint call to action.

Architects, technicians, students, university staff and administrations, and other key stakeholders, such as health professionals, policymakers, local communities, and non-profit organisations, have the challenge to cooperate towards a common goal: to create engaging and inclusive spaces for the digital detox of the entire community. These should allow individuals to recharge between classes or during work breaks or to engage in something more interesting and constructive than compulsively scrolling through screens and incessant notifications from digital munitions. They should make one forget even having them.

Artificial Intelligence has the task of offering help in an unusual way: by facilitating the design of spaces, deep down, dedicated to freeing us even from it.

Researchers have the responsibility to contribute in an innovative way, starting by exploring others' research. The real others: those from other fields. If disciplines still exist, they are all interconnected today, just like us.

Each university has the choice to self-deceive into thinking it is distinguishing itself from others and promoting multilayered culture and well-being by providing Internet access everywhere while simultaneously launching awareness initiatives on digital addiction. Alternatively, they can join forces and gather ideas and courage to take a concrete step forward, one that opens a new path rather than just an informative web page.

Time is running out, but in the Internet Galaxy, it is easier to offer the WiFi signal than a signal of change. It is such an old story that the Castells' Networks would not care about it, and social media would even reject it.

Acknowledgements

The study is being developed as part of the author's doctoral research.

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This volume explores the growing significance of open public spaces within university campuses—spaces that go far beyond their functional role to become essential arenas for social interaction, informal learning, well-being, and urban integration. Rooted in the research projects LOVE Sapienza and NARRATES both founded by Sapienza Università di Roma, and enriched by contributions from a 2025 international conference at DICEA-Sapienza University of Rome, this book provides guiding principles for designing open spaces that promote inclusion, health, and sustainability—on campus and beyond. Far from being passive backdrops, these environments shape the daily experiences of students, researchers, faculty, and visitors, offering settings that foster connection, creativity, and community. The book presents a critical reflection on how well-designed open spaces contribute to the quality of campus life and their evolving role as urban microcosms. It also examines how campuses can serve as active agents in urban regeneration and resilience, addressing environmental challenges through sustainable and adaptive design solutions. Structured around three interconnected themes—Campus and Public Spaces, Campus and University Communities, and Campus and the City—the volume gathers international best practices, offering an insightful tool for students, academics, designers, administrators, and urban thinkers.

Marichela Sepe is an Associate Professor of Urban Planning at DICEA, Sapienza University of Rome, and a member of the Academic Board of the PhD Program in Architecture and Urban Engineering. She also joined ISMed-CNR and DiARC-University Federico II. Sepe has been a Visiting Professor: in 2013 at Peking University, and in 2024 at the Faculty of Architecture of Gdańsk University of Technology. Her research interests include sustainable urban design, place identity, healthy cities, livable public spaces, creative urban regeneration, post-earthquake reconstruction and multi-adaptation, and cultural heritage enhancement. On these topics, she has published numerous articles in national and international journals, conference proceedings, books, and book chapters, and coordinated and served as the scientific director of national and international research projects. Since 2022 she is the Coordinator of the GUDesign network. Sepe serves as the Vice President of the Campania section of the INU (National Institute of Urban Planning) and is a member of the National Board of Directors of INU, the Board of Directors of EURA (European Urban Research Association), and the Urban Design Group. From 2014 to 2023, she has won several awards, including the Ardito-Desio Prize for papers presented at the Ipsapa conferences in 2014, 2016, and 2018; the Urban Planning Literature Award of the National Institute of Urban Planning (INU) in 2014, 2015, and 2017; and the Horizon Europe Award in 2023. She has also participated in various architecture and urban design competitions, achieving two first places and one selection.

in copertina

Copenhagen: detail of the Søndre Campus (photo by Marichela Sepe)

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ISBN: 978-88-7603-269-1 (e-Book) € 0,00

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