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Staging Corvetto, the pre mega-event neighborhood: ethnography of urban beautification in the age of aesthetic capitalism

Doctoral dissertation by

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Antonia Pozzi

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Pesano fra noi due
troppe parole non dette
e la fame non appagata,
gli urli dei bimbi non placati,
il petto delle mamme tisiche
e l'odore –
odor di cenci, d'escrementi, di morti –
serpeggiante per tetri corridoi
sono una siepe che geme nel vento
fra me e te.
Ma fuori,
due grandi lumi fermi sotto stelle
nebbiose
dicono larghi sbocchi
ed acqua
che va alla campagna;
e ogni lama di luce, ogni chiesa
nera sul cielo, ogni passo
di povere scarpe sfasciate
porta per strade d'aria
religiosamente
me a te.

Da *Il Fasciocomunista. Vita scriteriata di Accio Benassi,* Antonio Pennacchi

Lo strano però è che al momento del ritorno on mi pigliasse mai la malinconia. [...]Ma al momento di partire e tornare indietro - appena il tram aveva smesso di sferragliare lungo corso Lodi ed era arrivato a piazzale Corvetto - la tristezza se ne andava. Era la ripresa del viaggio, e al Corvetto mi riavvolgeva l'aura magica. Bastava scendere dal tram, mettersi all'angolo di via Marocchetti e subito si sentivano squillare - "Alleluja!" - le trombe degli angeli e arcangeli dell'Autosole.

Adesso lì c'è il cavalcavia mostruoso, ma allora la strada era in piano e il Corvetto era un piazzale come tutti gli altri. All'angolo dell'autostop c'era una siepe alta con le foglie fitte e grasse. [...] Le finestre delle case - soprattutto quelle delle cucine - poggiavano quasi su quella siepe. Tu facevi l'autostop e vedevi le luci accese, le madri che cucinavano e la gente che mangiava. Io sognavo di vivere lì, di essere uno di loro, ed ero innamorato da morire di quella siepe. Mi pareva che come quella non ce ne fossero da noi e ne mangiucchiavo qualche foglia mentre - seduto sul muretto - aspettavo che qualche macchina s'affacciasse dall'altro lato di piazzale Corvetto. Quando sono passato lì l'ultima volta - qualche decennio fa - ho provato a vedere se ci fosse ancora, la siepe. Ma il taxi andava troppo veloce su quel cavalcavia.

A me mi sa che tutto questo avanti e indietro per Milano non fosse esattamente dovuto a Francesca. Più che di lei, forse, ero innamorato di Milano. Oltre che dell'avanti e indrè.

One evening I sat Beauty on my knees - and I found her bitter -
and I reviled her.

A Season in Hell, Arthur Rimbaud

in The Abuse of Beauty, Arthur Danto

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INTRODUCTION
Will beauty save the world, or the ugly neighborhood to be saved

Between the late 19th and early 20th centuries, in the United States, the City Beautiful Movement emerged. It was a nationwide trend in urban planning, combined philosophy and architecture into a powerful planning ideology in reaction to the physical decay and demoralization of citizens that burdened America's industrial centers. In fact, the City Beautiful movement had spread to as Chicago, Denver, Philadelphia o Detroit, where crowding in tenement districts was the results to high birth rates, increased immigration, and internal migration of rural populations into cities. Modeled on large boulevard and monuments that characterize many European cities, the movement emphasize on aesthetics promoting beautification and monumental grandeur in urban design, and it sought to inspire civic pride and moral virtue through the creation of orderly, aesthetically pleasing public spaces. Proponents believed that beautified cities would not only uplift the human spirit but also encourage harmonious social order. In their view, order, harmony and structure were ideals to be pursued through Neoclassical and Beaux-Arts architecture, geometric urban layouts, and open public spaces such as large parks[1]. But why should improving the aesthetic of cities contribute to the moral and civic progress of their inhabitants?

In the colonial context, urban modernization was often employed as both an ideological and material instrument of power. Colonial powers, particularly European ones, viewed their colonies as spaces to be transformed and modernized according to their own aesthetic, social, and cultural standards. Urban beautification projects were a key component of this transformation. Numerous studies have long examined how beautification was used as a tool of civilization, exclusion, and domination (Herzfeld, 2006, 2017, 2021; Ghertner, 2010, 2011; Spire and Choplin, 2017; Giuliani, 2022). Especially in colonial cities - but not exclusively - these projects often involved highly invasive interventions, such as the demolition of neighborhoods deemed unhealthy or dilapidated, such as slums or bidonvilles. In their place, tree-lined boulevards, parks, squares, and monuments were constructed, along with exclusive residential areas for European colonists. These settlers disproportionately benefited from the new modern amenities, such as sewage systems and public lighting, often resulting in the segregation of local populations. Postcolonial cities still bear the deep imprint of colonial urban planning: spatial inequalities, social exclusion, and urban decorum rhetoric - often directed against

[1] For more informations: What Is the City Beautiful Movement?, Planetizen.com (last accesed 6 giugno 2025) https://www.planetizen.com/definition/city-beautiful

the poorest residents - are embedded in their architectural forms and spatial arrangements. In Algiers, for instance, the Casbah was gradually marginalized in relation to the development of the European colonial city, which was reconstructed following the metropolitan French model of cities like Lyon or Paris. New infrastructures were designed primarily for the settler population, while Algerians were relegated to peripheral or neglected areas. Similarly, the geographer Asher Ghertner describes how, in the process of transforming Delhi into a world-class city, beautification projects led to the displacement of hundreds of thousands of slum-dwellers (Ghertner, 2011, 2010). He demonstrates how, in such policy decisions, aesthetics became a central criterion for distinguishing between what was legal or illegal, modern or backward, deserving or undeserving (Ghertner, 2011, 2010)**.** Ghertner shows how local institutions and authorities reinterpreted the presence of slums as a public *nuisance* to middle-class neighborhoods, linking dirt and visual disorder to the presence of lower-class populations (Ghertner, 2011, p. 280). In these cities, beautification projects, originally conceived as instruments to legitimize colonial rule, contributed to the erasure of local memories, spaces, and practices. This justificatory regime led to the demolition and removal of settlements that were not only informal but even regular, though deemed visually unappealing, and to the forced displacement of residents to peripheral areas. In continuity with these visions, in the 2014 United Nations Human Rights report on Forced Eviction phenomena, prepared by the Habitat for a Better Urban Future commission[2], the City Beautification appears high on the list of situations that can lead to evictions and expulsions. If beauty has always been a convenient myth for the maintenance of specific power hierarchies, and the city is a significant 'locus of forces' (Shaw, 2018, p. 10), I will discuss the codes of beauty and monstrosity in the context of the neoliberal city, reading decay as something dangerous that scares, and as a dispositive to govern the unruly bodies and spaces.

In this work, I examine the aesthetic mechanisms that shape the contemporary "beautiful city," focusing in particular on the moment when processes of urban beautification - that is, a complex and heterogeneous set of practices aimed at aestheticizing and enhancing urban space - become tools of social control. These processes are used to reorganize urban space and to discipline bodies and behaviors according to what is deemed acceptable or unacceptable within prevailing aesthetic codes of beauty and ugliness. Furthermore, my research also traces the trajectories of those people and things that are not only unwanted to be seen, but also to be heard, smelled, or touched in today's city. This thesis offers an ethnography of urban beautification processes in Milan, the city of aestheticized images, Milan of the "staging of everything" (Böhme 2017), this city is often named as Italy's "showcase city". In fact, it is often said that much of what happens in this city is done to be displayed, to be put on show.

[2] Cfr. https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/FS25.Rev.1.pdf [last accessed on June 2025]

The ethnography, however, focuses on one neighborhood in particular: Corvetto, a historically stigmatized peripheral area, long considered the "ugly" or unwanted part of Milan, which is now undergoing rapid transformation. As the title of this work suggests, the ethnography focuses on the process of 'staging' Corvetto, the neighborhood of the pre-mega event. Corvetto lies at the heart of a territorial diagonal connecting the two largest construction projects currently underway for the upcoming Milan-Cortina 2026 Winter Olympics: the Olympic Village at Scalo di Porta Romana and the new Palaitalia in Rogoredo. This dissertation presents data collected during fieldwork conducted between autumn 2022 and early 2024 in the southeast quadrant of Milan - a part of the city today caught between advanced gentrification processes and areas still heavily criminalized and stigmatized in public opinion. This neighborhood, at the center of which still stands one of the city's largest public housing estates, is continuously portrayed both as a dangerous area to be avoided and, simultaneously, as Milan's new frontier of change, or the 'neighborhood of the future', an image vividly embodied by the skyline of cranes and scaffolding surrounding it. However, beneath all these narratives, Corvetto's present seems to *disturb*. The research investigates how urban beauty is produced, managed, and contested, highlighting the tensions between visibility and invisibility, attraction and expulsion, decorum and conflict.

What, then, does it mean to live in the neighborhood of the pre-mega event? Many scholars have examined the role of mega-events in the massive transformation on the urban fabric, activating often very fast and violent mechanisms of urban change (Gaffney 2010; Watt 2018; Guala 2015). As previous examples of Athens 2004, Beijing 2008, London 2012, Rio de Janeiro 2016 or Paris 2024 - to mention only the recent ones - have already shown, the sudden arrival of large capital and mediatic attention for the construction of mega-event flagship project and infrastructures has often acted on the low-income neighborhoods, which are often 'cleared' in order to renew and pacify the space hosting the event and all its implications (Gaffney 2010; Watt 2018). Even in the Lodi-Corvetto area, large urban regeneration projects in addition to the constructions of new buildings and facilities related to the event have called top-down beautification operations, hiding frequent processes eviction and expulsions subsuming the space reordering, mitigate, or sometimes completely mask the symbolic and the structural violence embedded in aestheticization operations (Herzfeld 2017). Here, these processes reflect the policies and decisions of administrations that can choose what - and who - should be visible and what should not (Zukin 1995: 7). This dissertation weaves together aesthetics, urban anthropology, critical urban studies, and visual sociology, with a particular focus on the concept of urban camouflage (Böhme, 2010, 2017)**:** an aesthetic and political device that selectively determines what is to be displayed and what must be removed from the showcase city. This mechanism operates on multiple levels, material, sensory, and narrative, and directly impacts the

possibility of inhabiting and belonging to a place. In this work, I aim to unpack the language that shapes and facilitates recurring dynamics of housing and spatial inequality. Through ethnographic vignettes and the reflections they inspire, I will narrate the increasingly troubled everyday life of Milan's new southern frontier.

One of the central axes running through this research concerns the tension between what is meant to be seen and what is preferred to remain unseen within processes of urban transformation. In particular, the ethnographic work reveals how beautification operates not only on a material level but also on a symbolic one, producing new geographies of visibility and invisibility. This process helps to highlight how aesthetics and politics are intertwined and connected dimensions in urban transformation, often masking the underlying mechanisms of social exclusion and urban change. In this work, I aim to demonstrate how analyzing this process is crucial in contemporary urban dynamics, functioning through both symbolic and material *additions* and *removals*. It is essential to consider the role of aesthetic professionals today: how they decide what is beautiful and where to place it, and conversely, how they determine what is ugly and must be removed. Seemingly innocuous interventions explicitly aimed at improving public space - such as colorful benches, graffiti removal to make way for street art, cultural events, urban gardens, and flower beds - are part of a broader project of redefining the urban landscape, in which what is displayed reflects ideals of order, decorum, and desire. However, the question that must always be asked in these processes is: desires, ideals, and projects of whom and for whom? Indeed, there is a hidden side to beautification that concerns everything that contradicts this vision, informal practices, presences deemed deviant, conflicts, and marginality, which tends to be concealed, displaced, or stigmatized. Beautification can thus become an operation that helps legitimize social control. Beauty - and arguably ugliness as well - is used to justify practices of surveillance and discipline, such as demands for installing cameras or the removal of political graffiti. Identifying who holds the power to decide what is displayed and what is erased therefore becomes crucial to understanding the new forms of aesthetic and political governance in contemporary cities.

In his text *Breve manuale per una gentrificazione carina (Semi, 2023),* Giovanni Semi offers a sharp reflection through sarcastic parody, mimicking the often grotesque language of regeneration projects scattered throughout transforming neighborhoods. The text addresses the main themes of the gentrification process, linking it to the almost obsessive need to make neighborhoods "cuter" - another way of describing urban beautification. Increasingly, the author argues, stating the intention to make a neighborhood more beautiful serves as a rhetorical tool that helps neutralize the possibility of criticism and silence dissent, while simultaneously making the area more attractive to investors and new residents with greater economic means (Semi, 2023). In this view, beautification becomes the

gentler face of gentrification, a powerful ideological device capable of aestheticizing even brutal, displacement-driven practices (Semi, 2023).

Throughout this ethnography, readers will sometimes find the logics and processes, languages and narratives, and even the temporalities of beautification and gentrification overlapping. As seen in Corvetto, there is a close correlation between the two concepts, with one accelerating the onset of the other, though not necessarily in a straightforward chronological order. However, it is important not to confuse the two concepts. While gentrification in a neighborhood activates a transformation of the cultural fabric - bringing new lifestyles, habits, and activities that simultaneously demand an aesthetic change in its atmosphere - the reverse is not necessarily true. An aesthetic transformation in a neighborhood does not automatically lead to gentrification. For example, in many peripheral neighborhoods known for high levels of inequality, over the years cultural regeneration projects, such as street art initiatives or public space redesigns, have taken place without necessarily triggering gentrification (Raccanelli, 2022; Iandolo and Raccanelli, 2024). This point is important to emphasize that aesthetic interventions alone do not have the power to transform model of living or to reduce inequalities, nor should they be entirely rejected. This demonstrates that the fundamental difference lies in political will, if not precisely in the type of policies, rather than in the model of practices themselves.

Like a kind of rhetorical battleground, the Corvetto neighborhood is caught between narratives full of hope, expectations, and prospects on one side, and criminalizing discourses that continue to reinforce its stigma on the other. In this suspended atmosphere, Corvetto remains in a liminal space, grasped between a neighborhood already undergoing transformation but not yet fully renewed, where its change is justified through the rhetoric of the 'neighborhood to be saved'. For several years now, and especially since the construction of the Olympic Village began, Corvetto has been everyday *staged*. In perfect continuity with broader city branding and city image strategies, new symbols of an 'authentic but beautiful' Corvetto have been identified - and sometimes even created. We will see how certain places and specific people have been entrusted with the responsibility of representing the neighborhood's renewed face of regeneration. We will revisit the creation of new murals, various public space restyling projects, exploratory walks, artistic strolls, itinerant theater performances that engage the neighborhood's streets, as well as independent films portraying parts of the area, decorative replanting of public flower beds, and much more, all contributing to beautifying images of the community through its aesthetic transformation. We will follow the tension between these creative projects and locals and how this highlights fracture and tension between memory and renewal. In Corvetto, the regenerated and beautified spaces have become a battleground for competing visions of Milan's future. In this sense, beautification is embedded within the tension

between universalism and neoliberalism, it both produces and is produced by expectations and desires about what one wants (or wants to see) from urban space. Following the perspectives of those who have investigated «the ugly price of beautification»[3], «the blight of beautification» (Herzfield 2017) or «beauty as control» (Harms 2012), studying the diverse forms of re-significations of city walls allows us to dwell on the processes of visibility and invisibility inherent in the relationship between aesthetics, city and citizenship.

Between aesthetic and anesthetic beautification

The aim of this dissertation is precisely to follow and try to understand how the category of beauty influences and acts upon contemporary urban aesthetic mechanisms, and how it is irreversibly connected to and at the same time characterizes the cultural, social, political, and economic processes of the contemporary era.

The thesis is structured into several chapters. The first part outlines the theoretical framework, examining the concept of beautification in light of its aesthetic, political, and economic implications, and situating it within the broader context of 'aesthetic capitalism' (Boltanski and Chiappello, 2014; Böhme, 2017; Lipovetsky and Serroy, 2017). A critical reinterpretation of the category of beauty is proposed, framing it as a social construct that is historically and culturally situated, and which contributes to the production of symbolic hierarchies, desires, and exclusions (Brand, 2000; Bourdieu, 2007; Figueroa, 2013; Giuliani *et al.*, 2018; U Eco, 2018; Carnevali, 2020; Démuth, 2023). This chapter weaves together aesthetic philosophy, sociology, urban anthropology, and critical urban studies to analyze urban beautification as a tool through which contemporary cities become attractive, governable, and consumable, often at the expense of subjectivities and practices that exceed dominant norms of beauty or decorum (Herzfeld, 2006, 2017; Ghertner, 2010, 2011; Spire and Choplin, 2017).

The second chapter, which continues the theoretical framework, delves into the opposing process, namely monstrification (Doyle, 2019; Giuliani, 2021, 2022). It offers a reflection on the affective and symbolic dimensions of urban decay, using the figures of the *ghost* and the *monster* as analytical devices to interpret the aesthetic and political transformations of urban spaces (Vanolo, 2018; Brighenti, 2021; Grossi, 2021; Pavoni and Vanolo, 2022; Poier, 2022). Drawing on the concept of the uncanny (Vidler, 2006; Huskinson, 2016) and critical literature on postmodern urbanization

[3] The phrase is taken from the title of the 2014 report on transformations in the city of Columbus by the Center for Policy Alternatives: https://s3.amazonaws.com/f.cl.ly/items/3T1o3B3v263n3Z3r2u24/Colombo%20Evictions%20Report%20-%20April%202014.pdf (June 2021)

(Vidler, 2006; Shaw, 2018), the chapter analyzes how, in contemporary cities, entire territories and subjectivities are simultaneously rendered invisible and hyper-visible (Brighenti, 2008, 2017). Ghosts represent denied yet persistent presences, memories, traumas, and contradictions that resurface in urban margins and challenge the dominant narrative of the orderly, functional city. Monsters, on the other hand, embody what is actively excluded, stigmatized, and pathologized: the urban Other, often represented through racist, sexist, or classist lenses. The concept of 'atmospheres of decay' is employed to illustrate how peripheral areas are narrated and portrayed as spaces of degradation, insecurity, and fear, shaped by discursive practices embedded in public policy, media, cultural production, and even the researcher's own gaze. The chapter concludes by revisiting the concept of 'territorial stigmatization' (Wacquant, 2007, 2010; Wacquant, Slater and Pereira, 2014) to understand the symbolic and material mechanisms that 'taint' entire neighborhoods, shaping the lives of dwellers.
The third chapter reconstructs the recent urban history of Milan, showing how the city has shed its former reputation as an unattractive, 'ugly' city to reinvent itself as a creative and competitive metropolis. Starting from an analysis of the historical narratives that portrayed Milan as a grey, cold, and industrial city, the chapter explores how this image was progressively reworked through urban rebranding efforts, culminating in the big-event Expo 2015 (Foot, 2003; Maggioni and Off Topic, 2013; Bracco, 2023; Tozzi, 2023; Bricocoli, Peverini and Caresana, 2025). Through the paradigmatic cases of Isola, Chinatown, and finally Corvetto, the chapter analyzes how urban space has become a site of contention between global capital, aesthetics of decorum, and local forms of resistance. At the heart of the chapter is a reconstruction of Corvetto's urban history up to the present day, with particular attention to the trajectory that led to the current intensity of its transformation processes, its strategic positioning among Milan's new urban centralities, and the tensions between stigma and rebirth, marginality and creativity, conflict and co-optation. Corvetto thus becomes a paradigmatic site for understanding the contradictions of contemporary Milan. The chapter lays the groundwork for an ethnographic analysis of the aesthetic devices at work in urban peripheries, where the production of beauty intertwines with processes of selection, erasure, and resistance.
The fourth chapter presents the methodological framework of the research, which is based on a situated and sensory ethnographic approach. It adopts a perspective inspired by Gernot Böhme's aesthetic ecology (Böhme, 2010, 2017), drawing on an approach that invites consideration not only of what is seen but also of what is heard, smelled, touched, and felt in urban space; the research combines participant observation, sensory walks, analysis of visual materials, and interviews with residents, activists, and urban regeneration actors. The chapter includes a reflection on the researcher's positionality, integrating an autoethnographic perspective. It also addresses the structural and systemic conditions of conducting research in an urban space marked by narratives of insecurity

and marginality, highlighting how gender, class, embodiment, and temporality are crucial factors to consider throughout the ethnographic experience.

Concluded the more theoretical section, from the fifth chapter onward the thesis delves into the ethnography. The chapter is divided into two parts, corresponding to two major dynamics followed during the research: *what we want to see* and *what we do not* in the Corvetto neighborhood. Throughout the ethnography, a series of actions aimed at shaping the neighborhood's image or creating a new one will be followed. Through the account of significant events, from evictions and demolitions of so-called 'eco-monsters' to attempts to represent Corvetto as a 'new creative district,' the chapter reveals how redevelopment practices intertwine with processes of exclusion and stigmatization. The neighborhood thus emerges as the stage for a politics of the sensible, where an aesthetic battle is fought over graffiti, waste, benches, occupations, and marginalized presences.

The sixth chapter continues the reflections of the previous section through five ethnographic vignettes. It portrays the neighborhood from the perspective of new residents, exploring language and expectations, the *artification* and political use of street art, securitarian narratives, evictions, and the struggle for housing rights, while examining the relationship between aesthetics and displacement. This chapter indeed addresses gentrification, the connection between art and the city, urban transformation, repressive policies in response to notions of decay and order, and housing expulsions in Corvetto.

The seventh chapter, which concludes the ethnography, offers a sensory analysis of Corvetto's public space, aiming to decentralize the primacy of sight in anthropological reflections on aesthetic dynamics. Through a series of ethnographic case studies centered on vision, hearing, smell, touch, and taste, the chapter explores how the transformation of urban space occurs not only through architectural or political interventions but also through the sensory perception of places. The senses thus become instruments of selection, exclusion, and symbolic reconfiguration. Sight is the first of the senses to be examined: in Corvetto, the production of images of urban greenery often conceals processes of removal and control, as exemplified by the case of Porto di Mare Park. Here, the aestheticization of the landscape through events, cultural activities, and discourses about a 'return to nature' intertwines with processes of green gentrification, which increase the symbolic and economic value of the area - often at the expense of local communities. Hearing then becomes a battleground between differing habits: construction noises, nighttime disturbances, music, or religious sermons generate tensions between longtime and new residents. The case of the artist F., who was forced to leave the neighborhood due to the impossibility of working in peace - or perhaps more accurately, as a result of rising living costs - highlights how the soundscape serves as a litmus test for ongoing social transformations. Even the sense of smell reveals ambivalent dynamics. Where once unpleasant odors

were central to environmental struggles for public health, today they are often interpreted through the lens of decorum. Some social projects explicitly focus on managing urban smells and scents as tools of urban regeneration, but these initiatives can also become sites of conflict - balancing genuine participation with aestheticizing narratives. Touch is explored through the work of the *Custodi del Bello* (Guardians of Beauty), figures tasked with physically cleaning urban spaces of what is considered degrading: broken glass, waste, and remnants of "undesired" life. Their actions reveal how managing proximity and contact with 'urban dirt' is central to the mechanisms producing decorum and control. Finally, taste, as explored through the case of the Corvetto Municipal Market, is presented as a deeply cultural and political sensibility. The project of transforming the market from a popular place into a potentially gourmet space reflects what is referred to in the literature as *foodification* (Perrucca and Tex, 2022; Semi, 2023), making the selection of tastes a device of social distinction and an indirect tool of displacement.

The thesis closes with an open reflection on the before, during, and after of urban processes, with a look towards the future of Corvetto in the context of pre-Olympic Milan 2026. What emerges is a city that is divided, layered, selective, but also deeply contested. In this scenario, ethnography becomes not only an analytical tool but also a political gesture: a way to listen to, give voice to, and recognize the bodies and desires at risk of being erased in the city that wants to be beautiful. The premises are thus concluded, we can now delve into the research.

CHAPTER I
Beautification in urban studies

1.1 Aesthetics and politics: beauty in the era of aesthetic capitalism



Figure 1 - Ourq Canal evicted during 2024 Olimpic Games - Paris - 27/6/2024 - Photo by the author

Field notes - Paris

July 30, 2024

In Paris, it's 35 degrees Celsius. The city has been caught off guard by the heatwave during the first week of the Paris Olympic Games. Despite being the city of the grand event, the late afternoon atmosphere is slow and drowsy. In the 19th arrondissement, everyone is seeking a bit of relief along the banks of the Ourcq Canal. Not a breeze stirs, and there's no hope of respite.

As usual, I walk north along the canal toward Parc de la Villette, which these days is temporarily renamed *Parc des Nations*. The name reflects the park's exceptional transformation into an exhibition space to host the countries participating in the Olympic Games. A Taj Mahal design printed on canvas marks the perimeter of *India House*; admission costs 5 euros, and inside, visitors can sample traditional Indian dishes and join yoga sessions. At the heart of the park, a giant screen has been set up by *Club de France*, the central meeting point to follow the achievements of French athletes and celebrate their victories together.

I turn the corner and walk toward the small pedestrian bridge that crosses the canal and leads into the center of the park. There, on the iron steps, a soldier scrolls through his phone, a firearm tucked under his arm, wearing a bulletproof vest. For several months now, permanent patrols and police presence around Place Stalingrad - a few kilometers further south, where the Ourcq Canal ends and the better-known Saint Martin Canal begins, an area also notorious for being one of Paris's crack hotspots - have partly pushed drug dealing and use further north, to the side of that pedestrian bridge, in a slightly more hidden spot between the canal and Parc de la Villette. This is what in France is referred to as *nettoyage social*, a form of social cleansing - often carried out through police operations and repression - meant to "clean up" public space by removing undesirable presences: unhoused people, racialized individuals, sex workers, or activists. Here, between Stalingrad and the newly branded *Parc des Nations*, this cleanup had been carried out to prepare and offer the area, neat and orderly, to the new crowd attending the cultural events of the Paris 2024 Olympic Games.

The soldier, I realize after passing him, is stationed there to monitor the flow of people around the bridge. Where just a few days ago groups of people and a few tents occupied the low walls and benches lining the canal, I now find a military van and three French police cars. Around ten officers stand guard over a space that has been entirely emptied. Behind me, two Parisians appear, laughing. They climb the steps and, taking in the view, one of them exclaims: *"Ah, regarde, c'est beau comme ça!"* - "Isn't it beautiful like this! The canal is really beautiful now, finally, look at that!"

Beautiful. How can an emptied and militarized space be beautiful? What seems beautiful to those two Parisians is certainly not beautiful for everyone - not for those who have been pushed out. And to me, it feels paralyzing, leaving me momentarily stunned in disbelief.

In what has been called an increasingly ocularcentric society (Mirzoeff 2021), that is, a society where much of its social action is based on the visual realm, particularly on the sight, dominated by a visualization that is as pervasive as it is paralyzing (Grossi 2021: 15),), a crucial role is played by what has been called visual culture (Brighenti, 2007; 2008; 2017; Mirzoeff, 2020; 2021).

I open my thesis with this field note, written during a thoughtful afternoon walk along the Ourcq Canal in the 19th arrondissement of Paris, as it helps introduce the complexity of the argument. The neighborhood, in parts still quite working-class, in those days was significantly overwhelmed since the start of the Olympic Games. This snapshot helps me to raise the philosophical and political sociology issues that underpin the discussion around the definitions, conditions, and use of the category of beauty today. Far from being a neutral aesthetic category, as well as it is not for the visible characteristics that define it and the gaze that perceives it, beauty must first be positioned within a philosophical debate that explores the relationship between aesthetics and politics.

Although aesthetics as an autonomous philosophical discipline emerged only in the 18th century, reflections on the ultimate meaning of beauty have shaped Western philosophical debate since its inception. From Plato to Kant, Hegel, and Adorno, some of the most significant thinkers in the history of art and philosophy have addressed the definition of this concept, particularly those who have tackled the question of aesthetic experience.

Throughout the centuries, artists and philosophers have attempted to provide their own definitions of beauty. There is a widely held notion in the history of thought that beauty is defined precisely by its indefinability (Davis, 1995, p. 3). Echoing Fyodor Dostoevsky, it is because beauty is indefinable that it is both terrible and frightening: "Beauty is the battlefield on which God and Satan contest for the heart of man," as the author had Dmitry say in *The Brothers Karamazov*.

The notion of beauty as something we can't define but we can recognize has very ancient roots. In classical Greece, the terms *kalós* - beautiful - and *agathós* - good - were perfectly interchangeable, affirming the connection between harmony of forms, beauty, and moral perfection. For Plato, to judge what surrounds us, humans had to draw the idea of beauty upon the *hyperuranion* pure concept. According to the philosopher, something was considered more beautiful the closer it was to this hyperuranic idea of beauty. However, it was not until 1750 that Alexander G. Baumgarten, the recognized founder of this discipline, famously defined aesthetics as the 'science of sensory knowledge'. With this definition, Baumgarten identified the purpose of the new aesthetic discipline as reflecting on beauty as the perfection of sensory knowledge, thus definitively separating this concept from the realms of ethics or metaphysics that had previously accompanied its definition.

The conviction of a radical epistemic impossibility regarding the idea of beauty persists into the contemporary era. However, there emerges a tendency to consider the relationship between beauty and reality, beauty and truth, not as an intrinsic characteristic of the being and the object, but as an internal representation within the subject (Esposito, 2023).

It is precisely in Kant's *Critique of Judgment* that the principle of the subjective experience of beauty, which from this moment onward will become the 'taste' for beauty, will determine the canon of all

subsequent aesthetics. For Kant, aesthetic judgment is a ‘reflective judgment’, which to comprehend beauty and the sublime must be disinterested, contemplative, and purposeless, universal without concept, not tied to real objects or empirical subjects we deem beautiful, each of which would otherwise lead to its own definition of beauty. Therefore, it involves a feeling of pleasure that is produced *a priori* by the ‘necessary judgment of reason’ - this is why in Kant, we always speak of pleasure rather than beauty. (U Eco, 2018, p. 294; Esposito, 2023, p. 506). From this moment onward, beauty would start to be seen not so much as a reflection of objective perfection but as a subjective experience that varies with individual perceptions and interpretations. This perspective emphasizes the role of the perceiver, asserting that aesthetic judgment is heavily influenced by cultural, historical, and personal factors.

The main debate around the role of aesthetics in the changes of contemporary society was formulated by the German thinkers of the Frankfurt School between the 1930s and the 1950s (Adorno et al. 2020). Their ideas influenced critical theory, Marxist aesthetics, and political philosophy of the 20th century, fueling the debate on the intersections between aesthetics and politics, which from that moment began to consolidate and gain increasing autonomy. Frankfurt School scholars have also emphasized that the aesthetic domain is never neutral but always intertwined with dynamics of power and ideology, starting with Walter Benjamin, particularly in his famous essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (Benjamin, 2020), where he highlights the connections between the democratization of new techniques for reproducing images - primarily through cinema - and their emancipatory potential, and extending to Theodor W. Adorno, whose aesthetic theory focuses on the dialectic between art, society, and mass culture, critiquing its standardization and commodification. The critical theory of these thinkers has provided tools to understand how aesthetic changes reflect transformations in social reality (Adorno *et al.*, 2020), decisively moving away from the universality and disinterest that defined and produced Kant's reflective judgment of beauty.

The commodification and consumption of the aesthetic domain are therefore key themes in the subsequent discussion, particularly concerning reflections on the ascend of the so-called post-war spectacle and images society. The emergence of new social classes linked to the 50s economic boom was indeed generating new needs and reflecting the rise of new aesthetic desires, associated with new lifestyles and modes of consumption.

In 1979, one of the most significant contributions to the debate on aesthetics and politics emerged: Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. In this seminal work, Bourdieu explores how aesthetic tastes are deeply influenced by individuals' social positions, highlighting that cultural and artistic preferences are not mere expressions of individual choices but reflect broader social structures, hierarchies, and power relations (Bourdieu, 2007). Through the

introduction of concepts such as *cultural capital* and *habitus*, Bourdieu delves into the influences and dispositions that shape individuals' behavior, perceptions, and tastes. Cultural capital is primarily acquired through education and family background and plays a significant role in shaping aesthetic preferences. Similarly, the habitus, a system of ingrained structures, is molded by the social and historical conditions in which a person grows up and lives. Cultural preferences are rooted in daily habits and practices that reflect one's social position.

One of Bourdieu's central points is that aesthetic tastes function as tools for social distinction. Dominant classes use their tastes to set themselves apart from subordinate classes, thereby legitimizing and reinforcing their social status (Bourdieu, 2007). The sociologist argues that aesthetic tastes serve a symbolic function, as they express and reinforce social differences. Taste is not merely a matter of personal preference but is deeply connected to class structure. Aesthetic preferences and differences in taste are thus a means of signaling one's affiliation with a particular social class and maintaining distance from other classes (Debord, 1997; Bourdieu, 2007; Adorno *et al.*, 2020). These classificatory dispositive thus become a domain in which inequalities are reflected and established (Bourdieu, 2007). Bourdieu also critiques the notion of a pure and universal aesthetics, which views art as an autonomous entity independent of social influences. He argues that this conception is a construct of the dominant classes to legitimize their taste and maintain their power. For Bourdieu, art is always socially situated, and its evaluations result from historical and social processes. (Bourdieu, 2007).

Among the most well-known names in the debate on the dialectic between aesthetics and politics, it seems useful to refer Jacques Rancière's political definition of aesthetics (2022). According to the philosopher, the term aesthetics does not refer to a theory of art related to its relationship with the sensible, but rather to a specific regime of identification that redefines the articulation between ways of doing, their forms of visibility, and the corresponding modes of thinking, which he calls the "distribution of the sensible" (Rancière, 2022). It is organized by a political system that determines what can be legitimately seen, heard, perceived, and considered relevant, and what should be relegated to the background. The distribution of the sensible thus implies an implicit hierarchy of perceptions and sensations that reflects existing power inequalities in society and, in doing so, reproduces them. This distribution of the sensible therefore establishes both a shared common ground and exclusive parts. It is based on a division of spaces, times, and forms of activity that determines the very manner of participating in the common. Yet, another form of distribution precedes this participation: the one that defines who will be allowed to take part (Rancière, 2022, p. 16).

The concept of the distribution of the sensible makes visible who can take part in the common in relation to what they do, the time, and the space of their activities. This activity defines competencies

and non-competencies concerning the common (language, tools, etc.), thus also determining whether one is visible or invisible within a shared space The philosopher argues that “at the core of politics, there is thus an aesthetics” (Rancière, 2022, p. 16). The partitioning thus pre-defines what is perceivable by dividing time and space, the visible and the invisible, the words and mere noise, defining the place and the interests of politics as a form of experience. This is what Rancière refers to as the “politics of the sensible”: it allocates the relationship between the sayable and the visible across different platforms (Rancière, 2022, p. 17).

1.1.2 Aesthetic capitalism and the industrialization of seduction

As we have seen, the determination of aesthetics merely as a theory of beauty or as a philosophy of art now seems outdated. To describe the specific, and perhaps the most "epochal" (Carnevali 2020 p. 247), characteristics of the contemporary world, terms like the aestheticization of politics, the society of images and appearances, and the spectacularization of existence have emerged. If we revisit the Greek term *aisthesis*, it now suggests a theory of perceptions, sensations, and a history of sensibility. This implies that we should consider not only art and literature but also the sensitive aspects and values of things, encompassing the domain of emotions, desires, and pleasures.

Therefore, while the history of studies has managed to separate the idea of aesthetics from the domain of art, throughout the 20th century, and more intensely since the post-second war period, critiques of the new consumer society have observed a tendency towards the commodification of aesthetics in industrial capitalist culture (Michelsen, 2014: 64). This has laid the groundwork for refining the analysis of the relationship between modern capitalist dynamics and aesthetics, a concept that scholars have termed *aesthetic capitalism*. This notion highlights how, in contemporary society, aesthetics become a central element in the market value of products or services. The literature emphasizes that not only are products and services, but also experiences, brands, and identities, designed and marketed with particular attention to visual appeal and aesthetic perception.

Aesthetic capitalism is thus not only the attention on interaction in history of capitalism and history of art, but something more broadly linked to aesthetic premises and relationship in transformation of perceptions and desires, following the changing in the dynamics of late modern capitalism.

Indeed, on one hand, there has been a growing awareness that the realm of aesthetics - encompassing visual appeal and the pursuit of attractiveness, from art, fashion, and design to the burgeoning market for experiences - has become increasingly intensified and commodified. It has become overwhelmingly pervasive, taking on the dimensions of a ‘cultural industry’. This concept aligns with

Horkheimer's and Adorno's critique, and has evolved into what are now debated as the 'creative industries' (Pratt, 2004; Michelsen, 2014; D'Ovidio, 2016; Böhme, 2017; Adorno et al., 2020). On the other hand, building on Marxian thought regarding the superstructure of material production, another line of inquiry focuses on the critique of commodity aesthetics. This perspective delves into the analysis of representation and imagination, evolving from György Lukács' discussion on alienation in the aesthetics of reification, to Guy Debord's critique of the "society of the spectacle", and to Jean Baudrillard's concepts of simulacra and hyperreality. These approaches are crucial for understanding how aesthetic capitalism creates and manipulates images and signs in contemporary culture (Michelsen, 2014, p. 63).

Crucial to this analysis, in his essay *Critique of Aesthetic Capitalism*, philosopher Gernot Böhme (2017) focuses on defining this complex concept. Explicitly referencing the works of Karl Marx and Thomas Piketty, particularly their studies on *Capital*, Böhme observes a new dynamic in the current phase of advanced capitalism, which for the author is indeed the phase in which life is completely permeated by capital. For instance, this would be when all the family sphere which serves at reproduction activity had already been turned into economic activities, transforming them into entertaining industry, fast food, tourism, professional childcare etc. The economic saturation of private sphere led to a situation in which further economic growth is possible only through what he calls 'the enhancement of life', which consist in equipping and staging it, "in seeing and being seen, hearing and being heard" (Böhme, 2017, p. 14). Following the philosopher, advanced capitalism has enhanced the creation of a new value he called 'staging value' or 'show value'. Drawing from Marx's dichotomy of use value and exchange value, Böhme introduces this third value category, that increases exchange value through attractiveness, appeal, and atmospheres. The author provides a nuanced explanation of this new dynamic, where the focus shifts from merely producing material commodities to creating aesthetic experiences that profoundly influence people's behavior and emotions. In other words, through the 'staging of self and reality', new means on objects and spaces would be produced (Böhme, 2017, pp. 20-21). Accordingly, the pervasive phenomenon of the aestheticization of reality takes seriously that aesthetics is a significant factor in advanced capitalism, in which the philosopher recognizes the importance of what is termed the 'aesthetic economy'.

A decisive characteristic that distinguishes the contemporary aesthetic economy within advanced capitalism is that a significant portion of the economic sector is dedicated to the production of 'show value'. This involves creating commodities that need to be showcased and spectacularized, playing a major role in the new phase of capitalist development (Böhme, 2017 p.20). In this transformation, central is what he refers to as 'aesthetic labor,' which is dedicated to giving things and people, but also cities, landscapes, and environments, a particular appearance and look, producing an attractive,

glowing, and radiant atmosphere (Böhme, 2017, p. 20). Presentation, therefore, becomes more important than ever, imbuing commodities with market attractiveness and pursuing an obsessive contemporary search for 'something more' that transcends mere utility and physical presence. This 'something more' is indeed the 'staging value', which "contributes to the staging, the dressing up, and the enhancement of life" (Böhme, p. 20). In the aesthetic economy, the aesthetic properties of commodities thus become an essential and independent value, playing a crucial role for both the buyer and the exchange context.

Bhöme indeed notes, in regard to production, a "change in the character of commodity and, with regard to the consumer, the corrisponding change in the structure of needs" (Böhme, 2017, p. 11). In fact, according to Böhme, another crucial characteristic of aesthetic capitalism, given the stage of development where every need can be satisfied, is its ability to transform desires into necessities. Unlike basic needs such as hunger or sleep, which disappear once fulfilled, desires persist and evolve: those with power will seek even more power, and those who are fortunate will desire even greater fortune. Desires, therefore, create their own boundless economy, unlike natural resources, and demand a staging-setting that enhances life (Bhöme, 2017 p.21). In fact, desire can only temporarily be appeased, but not permanently satisfied and surplus consumption disconnect it from sphere of necessity. By evolving desire, the capitalist economic system could be fulfilled by producing new desires.

As we have seen, previous theories on the relationship between aesthetics and economics have reflected societal transformations over time. From Veblen to Sombart, and through Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, Benjamin, and Baudrillard, scholars have long critiqued the aestheticization of the commodified world and the repressive nature of the aesthetic economy, analyzing the phenomenon of what has been called the 'spectacularization of society'. A different version of this concept is recently proposed by sociologist and philosopher Gilles Lipovetsky, who points out that contemporary hypermodernity has today produced what is called the 'seductive society'. In his works, such as *L'Empire de l'éphémère* (Lipovetsky, 1989), *Plaire e Toucher. Essai sur la société de séduction* (Lipovetsky, 2019), and *L'esthétisation du monde*, co-authored with Jean Serroy (Lipovetsky and Serroy, 2017), the author argues that aesthetics permeate contemporary capitalism and modern life. This injunction operates everywhere: in the economy, advertising, and politics. Lipovetsky asserts that consumerist capitalism is marked by temptation through a range of more or less market-oriented techniques that stimulate desires for purchases and experiences, a phenomenon he refers to as the 'industrialization of seduction' (Lipovetsky and Serroy, 2017). He argues that it would be catastrophic to return to the oppressive models of the past, while also emphasizing the

pitfalls of this hedonistic and often vacuous playground in which we live, and outlines ways to ennoble it without sacrificing it.

Lipovetsky speaks of a genuine 'hyper-seduction', referring to the escalating intensification of rules governing seduction and the pursuit of beauty, which collectively outline what he describes as the "aesthetization of the world" (Lipovetsky & Serroy, 2017). In this context, the guiding principle has shifted from coercion or the more well-known 'surveillance and punishment', to 'pleasure and impact' (Lipovetsky, 2019).

In conclusion, as we've seen, aesthetic forms hold an inherent normative power, always intertwined with relations of power, desires and emotions. Therefore, we can consider the domain of aesthetics and the perception of beauty or ugliness as something far distant from being an inherent characteristic of objects or people. Instead, it is the product of a long historical and cultural process of canonization and standardization of aesthetic codes of taste and beauty, which shape expectations, habits, and models. In the next section, we will explore the critique of the concept of beauty through critical beauty studies, which underline its relation to the processes of canonization of normative and dominant aesthetic ideals.

1.2 Critical beauty studies and the new regime of visibility: images, imageries, and desire

It was February 4th, 2020, the first evening of the Sanremo Festival was live on Rai Uno, the main Italian public television channel. A voice from the back of the audience called out to the co-host of that night, Diletta Leotta, shouting, "You're beautiful!". She smiled, seemingly improvising, and addressed the audience in the theater and those watching from home, taking center stage for a monologue:

> Yes, I'm beautiful... but you know what? *Beauty just happens*; it's not an achievement. Of course, when beauty happens, it can be an advantage - otherwise, I wouldn't be here, right? I'm a sports presenter, a well-known presenter, but I'd be lying if I said that my appearance doesn't matter. Beauty is a burden that can trip you up over time if you don't know how to carry it[4] (*personal translation*).

[4] Sì, sono bellissima...ma sapete una cosa: la bellezza capita, non è un merito. Certo quando la bellezza capita può essere un vantaggio, altrimenti col cavolo che sarei qui, starete pensando. Sono una conduttrice sportiva, una conduttrice

Following these words, she continued with about ten more minutes of speech. Behind her, a graphic effect displayed a simulated image of her face as it would appear in 2076. Leotta reflected on her definition of beauty, drawing from her grandmother's teachings, and reassured the audience not to fear losing the advantages her radiant youth had provided so far. Although criticized in the days that followed for the paternalistic tone of her speech, with her couture gown, perfectly styled hair, and sophisticated, undoubtedly expensive makeup, one thing was clear in the presenter's words: beauty is something tangible and identifiable, accidental and assigned at birth, and like an expensive dress gifted to you - something you can't choose or weave - you must learn to wear it with skill and responsibility. In Diletta Leotta's words, probably unintentionally, on the one hand, there seems to be an idea of authentic, simple, and natural beauty that people who "have it" must learn to carry. On the other hand, Leotta appears to be very aware of the economy behind the different meanings of beauty and the aesthetic logic of prestige and power in the contemporary world. It is a complex system of symbols and meanings that has made this concept one of the most debated in the history of Western thought.

As shown in the first paragraph, we can therefore consider the domain of aesthetics and the perception of beauty or ugliness today as something far removed from being an innate characteristic, linked to objects or people at birth, and thus a matter of chance and fortune, as Leotta suggested in her monologue. On the contrary, beauty is the product of a long historical and cultural process, strongly related to power relations.

A vast literature from both femminist studies and critical race studies, as well as in historical and postcolonial studies, has examined the concept of *beauty* concerning the imposition of standards, codes, and practices that culturally determine its canons. According to these scholars, it is useful to consider beauty, as well as race and gender, as a dynamic category socially constructed (also) on the visual. In agreement with beauty studies scholars, analyzing the historical and social production of aesthetic ideals of beauty requires reflecting on their construction through an intersectional perspective. As Monica G. Moreno Figueroa writes:

> [...] feminist claims have urged us to explore beauty as an empirical and pragmatic question. 'The question [of beauty] for feminist politics', wrote Claire Colebrook in her 2006 introduction to a special issue of Feminist Theory on beauty, 'is not so much moral

conosciuta, ma sarei ipocrita se dicessi che il mio aspetto sia qualcosa di secondario. La bellezza è un peso che col tempo può farti inciampare se non la sai portare.

> – is beauty good or bad [...]? – but pragmatic: how is beauty defined, deployed, defended, subordinated, marketed or manipulated, and how do these tactics intersect with gender and value?' (Moreno Figueroa, 2013, pp. 137–138)

Beauty ideals are to be conceived as normative devices, capable of influencing the forms of regulation of life and perception of both the self and the community (Giuliani *et al.*, 2018, p. 432); they have to do with everyday myths and abstractions and are subject to continuous ritualization through social practices that inscribe themselves and produce specific imaginaries (Giuliani *et al.*, 2018). These are structured within canonization and naturalization processes capable of constructing standardized dominant patterns, usually taking the form of commodities, cultural products, symbols and desires whose circulation passes over different scales, imposing their imaginaries from the more local to the national and global ones (Giuliani *et al*., 2018*,* p. 433).

For instance, the association between canonical beauty with purity, cleanness and whiteness has long been eradicated in Western history. Nicholas Mirzoeff reflects on the different meanings of the white colour, tracing it back to classical European art and ellenic sculpture (Mirzoeff, 2011). Although it is known that the ancient Greeks used to colour their statues with pigments, by the nineteenth century, the beauty of these statues was associated with proprer candid marble. Throughout art history, representations highlight how whiteness had come to represent the ideal type of race and thus the hegemonic canon of physical beauty *per se* (Mirzoeff, 2011). As it was stated:

> Reflecting on race and beauty [...] means [...] coming to terms with the lines of color that have been scuttled in the past and that characterize Italian society in the present and, particularly, with the *visual construction of its imagined community*. A critical approach to beauty matters: a critical analysis of beauty may help us understand how *aesthetic codes participate in the articulation of everyday racism* in both the public and private spheres of the Italian imagined community (Giuliani et al., 2018: 433, *personal translation*, italics added).

Beauty, as well as gender and race, are thus to be considered as discursive constructions (Hall, 2013). What is important to grasp in its processual aspect is their being functional for the reproduction of specific power relations or, at the same time, defining spaces of self-determination, and resistance, opening "spaces of agency and subjectification" (Giuliani *et al.,* 2018, p. 433).

As Moreno Figueoa (2013) stated, the rational around issues of beauty is either theorical, than empirical and pragmatical, challenging common moral imperative: beauty is *bad*, superficial, frivolous, something that should be ascetically rejected, and it is also *good*, a pursuit of harmony and perfection, and a path to normality (Moreno Figueroa, 2013, p. 138). The author main aim was to

understand what the beauty does, rather than what it is. This perspective helps her to grasp its role in the exercise of power and the work of the concept of beauty the subjectivisation processes, especially in supervising and maintaining the canon by marginalizing those who deviate from that of the "unmarked woman, with no racialized identity, no class base, implicitly heterosexual, young, and situated in industrialized societies" (Moreno Figueroa, 2013, p. 138). This vision on the imposition of codes by an external hegemonic subject, usually identified with the broader general male gaze, certainly does not forget the existence of female agency, but focuses on the influence of the desire to feel normal, even attractive, and to act upon the perception of identities. This is what is discussed in research on plastic surgery (Davis, 1995), facial beauty (Kišoňová, 2023), body work, or more generally, on practices of beautification.

An example of how somaesthetic is regulated by cultural, economic, and symbolic codes that highlight the connection between body image and identity can be found in the North American obsession with dental care and the perfection of the smile. Now a symbol of well-being and prestige, following a model propagated over the years by Hollywood and advertising, the procedures and treatments for achieving immaculate and perfect teeth have reached exorbitant costs. The whiteness or lack thereof in one's smile has thus become a measure of class inequalities and social status, visually representing the differences between wealth and poverty, urban centers and peripheries, cities and rural areas.

Kathy Davis, in her work *Reshaping the Female Body: The Dilemma of Cosmetic Surgery*, highlights how feminists have long criticized the way in which women, in particular, have been conditioned to see themselves as always too fat, too thin, too old, too ethnic, too sensual, too disorderly (Davis, 1995, p. 3). As these examples illustrate, cosmetic interventions aimed at altering the body primarily function to bring it more closely in line with the average or the norm, shaping individuals who have been taught by beauty standards to view themselves as unacceptable[5].

The reflection on cosmetic surgery and aesthetic body work demonstrates how desire plays a crucial role in aesthetic judgments of beauty. Many philosophers and sociologists have underscored capitalism's pervasive ability to colonize desires. In the previous paragraph, we discussed how, according to Gernot Böhme's thinking, aesthetic capitalism relies on the ability to manipulate consumers' perceptions and emotions, a process he refers to as the work of aesthetic professionals

[5] The author view is aligned with contemporary feminist views that consider the beauty system as an oppressive mechanism for disciplining or normalizing women through their bodies. However, in her brilliant book, she recognizes that the reality of cosmetic surgery proved to be more complex than she had initially thought. She also recognizes a feminist desire to regard at women as active agents on the decision above their bodies in the structural contraints of gendered social order (Davis, 1995, pp. 4–5).

((Böhme, 2010). Aesthetic techniques are employed to continuously generate new desires, which are rarely fully satisfied, a phenomenon Böhme describes as the 'discontent of prosperity'.(Böhme, 2017, p. 17). Taken from Foucault's concept of 'economy of need,' Böhme analyzes the structure of needs and the management of satisfaction. For instance, today's pervasive desire to be seen drives and produces the now dominant so-called image industry, one of the leading sectors of the economy. Desire thus carries the ideals, codes, and imaginaries that shape aesthetic expectations, predominantly western, white, and middled class. The fully developed capitalist economic system can only thrive if the system of need continues to create and intensify new desires. Ultimately, even when desires are fulfilled, they are also amplified (Böhme, 2017, p. 14).

1.2.1 Visuality and the social aesthetics

The dissemination of aesthetic ideas, as well as the meanings and definitions of beauty, has not been the exclusive domain of philosophers, historians, artists, sociologists, or anthropologists. In tracing the history of beauty standards, we must consider not only the works of art and poetic or literary expressions - often intended merely for contemplation or ritual celebration - but also the more ordinary documents and objects. These include forms of entertainment, commercial promotions, or expressions of erotic desires, whether or not they have artistic intent, such as images from cinema, television, and advertising (U Eco, 2018). The two domains - the traditionally separated realms of high culture and mass culture - are undeniably of equal importance in understanding the production of beauty ideals and canons today. Moreover, they significantly influence contemporary political processes and policies, both in urban contexts and beyond.

Sociologist Andrea Mubi Brighenti has long engaged in a theoretical reflection on the concepts of visibility and visuality, distinguishing them as "fully entitled sociological cathegor[ies]" (2007 p. 324) and recongising their importance as a research field (Brighenti, 2007; 2008; 2017). The author especially elaborates on the "more complex phenomenon of visibility" (Brighenti, 2007 p. 324), which is not only relevant to the visual dimension *per se* but is to be understood as a category constituted at the intersection of two main domains: aesthetics, that is, relations of perception, and politics, that is relations of power (*Ibidem*). Visibility, thus, not only produces and influences our everyday existence but has now become a primary means of knowledge (Mirzoeff, 2021). Nowadays, the visual realm has assumed a pivotal role since through the multiplication of screens and other image infrastructures we build our visual experience, which is now an integral part of our social experience. Understanding the cultural, social and political meanings of the norms shaping the

dominant aesthetic codes and ideals implies questioning this new regime of visibility that has such a high impact on our society.

Images now play a predominant function in our political life, they have a powerful influence on conceptions, desires and imaginaries (Giuliani et al., 2018 p. 233) almost assuming a 'religious sense', adopting the postulate of one of the best-known writings of the 20th century, Walter Benjamin's *Capitalism as Religion* (1921). As Bhöme stated, the reality of images is almost a reason of life (2017 p.21). This intersection and overlapping between reality and images blurs the lines between being and seeming, reality and appearance, often making it unnecessary to distinguish between them. In a scenario radically changed by the new technologies that have made the action of images and imaginaries even more pervasive, we can witness sacred attention to the aesthetic sphere and a contemporary obsession with the seeking for beauty.

Philosopher Barbara Carnevali would argue that appearance is an inherent part of social life and cannot be eliminated. Her theory of appearances explores how people use external appearances, such as clothing, behavior, and other visible signs, to convey information about themselves and gain social recognition. In her book *Social appearances: a philosophy of display and prestige*, Carnevali argues that none of us can present ourselves directly to others without some form of sensible mediation, emphasizing the importance and the pervasive influence of what she calls 'social aesthetic'. It is useful to focus on the author's definition of this concept to highlight the role of everyday aesthetic in social life, regardless of its local variations or specific historical contexts: "we will call social aesthetics a theory of social immaterialism, or, paraphrasing Hegel's definition of beauty, the appearance of society in a sensible form" (Carnevali, 2020, p. 244, personal translation). For the author, everything social appears sensibly, and therefore aesthetically. Carnevali highlight how sociological concepts can appear, or could also appear, in the vocabulary of aesthetics: lifestyle, distinction, representation, ritual, ceremony, civilization, manners, prestige, luxury. Social aesthetics is thus the philosophical analysis of the ordinary aesthetic dynamics inherent in taste, understood as a judgment that is both active and productive, as well as receptive, which generates aesthetic rules and evaluations, driven by the necessity of a daily performance of the self and reality (Böhme, 2017; Carnevali, 2020).

Since appearances are something we reproduce based on expectations, cultural influences, and norms, Carnevali rejects the dualism between surface and deep authentic beauties, advocating for an understanding of interactions in terms of aesthetic mediation, thus criticizing the traditional notion of authenticity. According to Carnevali, appearances are not merely superficial or insignificant; rather, they play a crucial role in projecting a desired self-image and navigating complex social relationships. The author here stresses also on the concept of prestige and on the related desire of recognizing. Understanding and analyzing appearances, as Carnevali suggests, can reveal much about the

dynamics of power and social structures that govern our lives. Carnevali delves into the etymology of the word *prestige*, derived from the Latin *prestigium*, which originally meant "artifice", "illusion", or "enchantment", showing how the word, which over time has lost its magical-metaphysical connotations to denote a more socio-anthropological aspect of power, still retains something enchanted: "the authority of a leader, the allure of a celebrity, or even the simple charm exerted by beautiful women or soldiers in uniform. [...] The analysis of the term 'prestige' and its derivatives serves as an indicator to recognize phenomena belonging to this family of 'everyday spells' " (Carnevali, 2020, p. 214, personal translation), Appearances can be powerful artifices of influence and control, what Bourdieu would call symbolic power: social prestige is thus precisely for those who possess and are able to exercise "suggestion, seduction, influence, magnetism" (*Ibid*.). Carnevali agrees with Bourdieu's interpretation that this capacity to impress can be seen as a form of violence. According to the author, "power also operates aesthetically" (Carnevali, 2020, p. 219) through a seductive influence. To understand the contemporary relationship with the effectiveness of images, the symbolic power of prestige might be defined as aesthetic power.

Indeed, "[v]isibility is a metaphor of knowledge, but it is not simply an image: it is a real social process in itself" (Brighenti, 2007, p. 325), Brighenti argues. As a social process, the relation of visibility, encompassing what is seen and what is not seen, is often asymmetrical, structured by - and structuring – specific hierarchies. In this sense, processes of visibilization, invisibilization or hypervisibilization act on particular bodies, spaces, and subjectivities (Giuliani et al., 2018). Assuming a Goffmanian posture, Brighenti describes how normalized behaviour in the public space can be invisibilized. In fact:

> [they] are always subject to, and conducted through, practices for the reciprocal management of visibility among social actors. [...] The 'normal appearance' (Goffman, 1971) of a setting is its invisibility. In the absence of alarm signals, the setting is 'transparent' to the observer. In other words, the normal is neither noticed nor thematized owing to its invisibility. Conversely, it is the anomalous which is marked and transposed to a different register of visibility (Brighenti, 2008, p. 3).

But the opposite is also true: the codes of beauty produce bodies, practices and spaces that are desirable or deplorable, legitimate or illegitimate. Their hypervisibilization and *monstrification* (cfr. Chapter II) are often accompanied by processes of invisibilization of non-normative and/or eccentric practices, involving the exclusion from the visual frame of what disturbs it. Thus, hypervisibilization and invisibilization are processes that overlap, alternate, and often affect the same deviant body and practice at the same moment and in the same (public) space.

1.3 The attractiveness blackmail of neoliberal city: seductive cities and creative economy

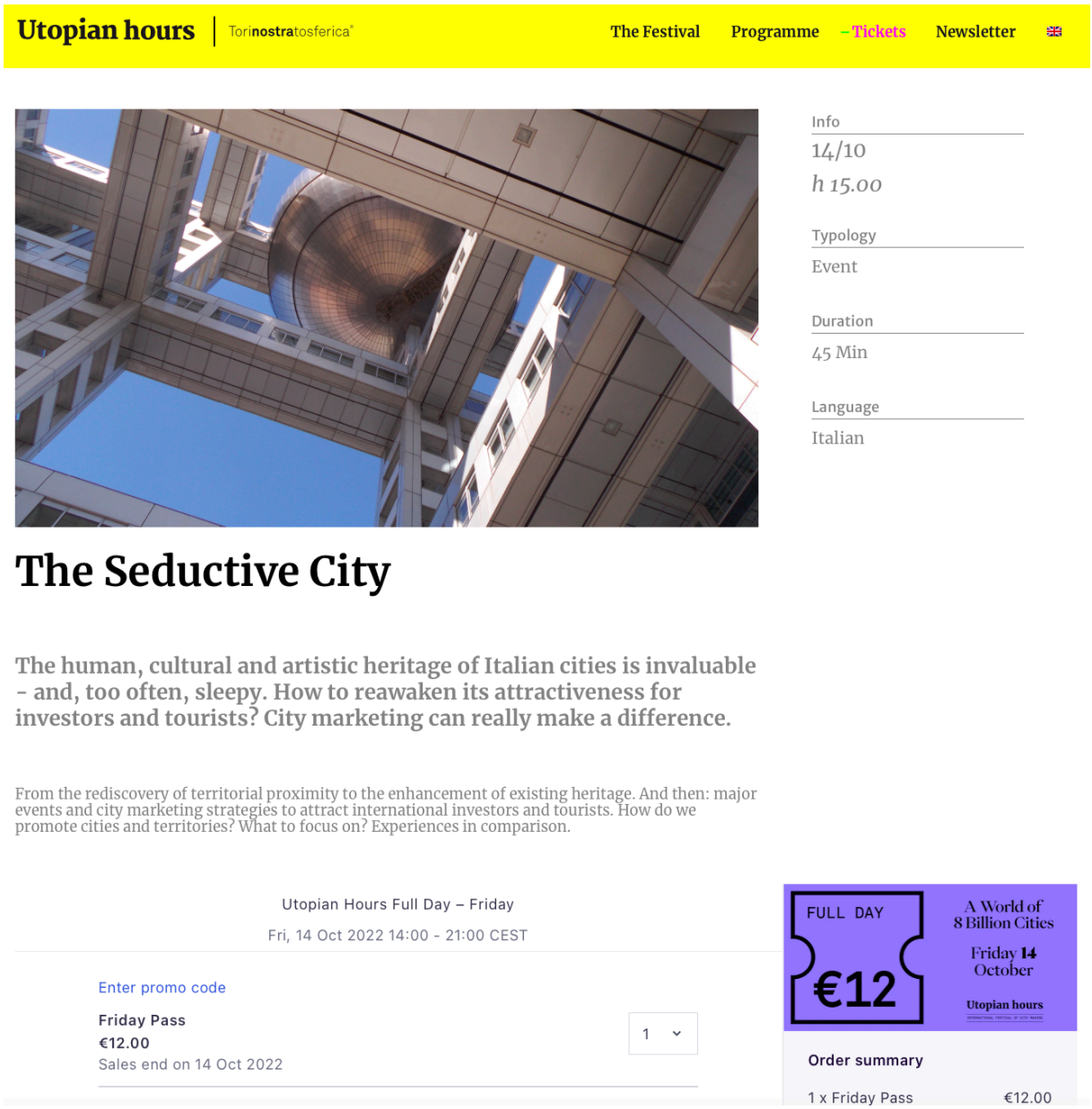


Figure 2 - The first panel of the Festival of city Making - Turin, October 14th 2022

On October 14, 2022, the annual edition of Utopian Hours, the city-making festival, began in Turin. That year's edition was titled "A World of 8 Billion Cities" and focused on the future of cities. The festival has been held for several years at the Nuvola Lavazza, one of the symbolic locations of the post-industrial urban regeneration in Turin. According to the website, it offers a moment where "professionals, city makers, and theoreticians meet industry players"[6].

[6] Utopianhours.it

Over the years, the festival's stage has hosted acclaimed monologues from some of the most well-known figures in urban culture, ranging from prominent voices in progressive thought to notable proponents of neoliberal and even conservative perspectives. The previously mentioned Richard Florida was presented as the star of the 2020 edition, followed by the well-known Republican theorist Edward Glaeser alongside the equally famous Amanda Burden, who led the urban planning department during New York's most "prolific" transformation period - reading here the gold year of New York gentrification - under Mayor Michael Bloomberg**.**

During those three days, I wandered, at times astonished, from talk to talk, between a panel on the feminist city to one on the officeless city, and even a workshop on how to make your citizens "smarter". The main theme of that year was precisely the reflection on the seductive power of places. The event kicked off with a roundtable dedicated to *The Seductive City (Figure 1)***,** where policy makers or consultants from major attractive cities - and read here as tourist destinations lik**e** Venice**,** Rome**,** or Matera, which had concluded its tenure as the European Capital of Culture two years prior - were seated. For the modest price of 12 euros, the audience would have seen the participants show their opinions on how to make their city less *sleepy*, explaining their formulas for refining "the art of city promotion", an art that, as the presenters remarked, "Italians should do better". Bombarded by a direction of scenic lights and a succession of images showcasing a selection of projects deemed interesting for discussing strategies to make cities more attractive, I listened to the speeches of tourism, culture, urban planning, and decentralization councilors, even the CEO of Edison, who urged the audience to "rethink energy as a seductive asset". "Attract what? Human capital, businesses? Attractive to whom?" they rightly asked. Then they answered: for those who come to the city but especially for residents, "if I feel good at home, the house isn't dirty", and the city thus remains clean and welcoming. "Using tools of culture-based urban regeneration" to "restore the seductiveness of cities through territorial marketing," where the "cultural and creative industry" plays a primary role, but the decisive factor is naturally the "public-private partnership". "Convincing Italians that Italy is beautiful, restoring positive immigration, making cities seductive again that do not attract either tourists or citizens"[7].

Their ideas were presented, more or less explicitly, on where to invest, on whom and what to attract to make their city beautiful.

Even though the 21st century has often been referred to as the 'century without beauty'[8], as we saw in the previous paragraph this concept continues to play a significant role in our daily experience,

[7] The quotes come from notes, transcriptions, and field notes taken during the days of the festival

[8] The 20th century has been described as the century of contradictions, a period of great scientific and technological progress but also of unprecedented tragedies and conflicts. Some intellectuals spoke of the 'century without beauty' to refer to the loss of values in the face of events such as the world wars, the Shoah, and the atomic bomb.

leading to ongoing efforts in academic studies to continuously define and/or reframe the idea of beauty (Démuth, 2023). The last decades have witnessed a growing interest in beauty, as in the area of the 'aesthetics of everyday life' studies (Saito, 2007), or in the more specialistic focus on environmental aesthetics, somaesthetics or empirical aesthetics (Démuth, 2023, p. 6). The concept of urban beautification has primarily been associated with other specific urban processes, such as gentrification and artistification (Pattaroni, 2020; Semi, 2023; Andron, 2024), urban cleaning and evictions (Ghertner, 2010, 2011; Harms, 2012; Herzfeld, 2017; Spire and Choplin, 2017), definitions and dynamics that are often overlapping, with the risk of confusing one with another. The primary aim of this thesis is to recognize its complete theoretical and systematic autonomy based on my ethnography, emphasize its sociological value, exploring its empirical utility and applications. By positioning it within the interconnection between critical beauty studies and urban studies, the concept of urban beautification assumes a role in identifying and understanding the aesthetic mechanisms of urban beauty production.

Cities have deployed various strategies to invest in the creation of aesthetically attractive spaces, producing, imposing, and globally selling their dominant, homogeneous and standardized images, with the aim to fascinate primarily potential new inhabitants, investor and tourist. Starting with the passage to the post-Fordist city in its neo-liberal turn, new models of urban economic development have emerged. Particularly interesting for this thesis is the cultural transformation one.

Indeed, addressing the aesthetic urban transformation from an economic angle is inevitable today, and particularly useful has been the reading of neo-Marxist approaches as a key to interpretation, not necessarily in their focus on political economy, but more generally in the study of the productive organization of the city.

In these studies, a moment of transition is identified in what is called the 'crisis of Fordism', which is followed by the post-Fordist restructuring phase: a series of political-economic disruptions, mostly related to the oil and fiscal crises and the great waves of deindustrialization, from the 1970s onward, shaped a political climate of recession and restriction (Rossi and Vanolo, 2010; Semi, 2015, p. 48). It is thus the crisis of the city as a place of great industries, mass production and economic growth.

The imagery of the city as a place of crisis, unemployment, and urban voids still remains in some cult movies of the 1980s such as the political films of Ken Loach or the Italians Dino Risi and Ettore Scola, or the dystopian Blade Runner, where the city eventually becomes the place of the end of civilization (D'Ovidio, 2016, p. 7). From that time, and particularly in the following two decades, Western economies in transition from pre- to post-Fordism transform the economies of the city by assigning it a new role in the global and social scenario upheaval, where their centrality had already been made known by students and workers movements that found theater in the cities. Out of the

urban voids left by the relocation processes of industries that were increasingly leaving urban milieus in search of regions with greater productive convenience in the exploitation of labor and resources, cities experienced what David Harvey in a famous 1989 article effectively described as the transition from managerial to entrepreneurial cities (Harvey, 1989). Following the author, the neoliberal turn to which all Western economies were exposed had focused on the enhancement of the city in a capitalist sense, eliciting what has been called the *growth machine*[9]. This would have involved the city itself as the terrain of macro-economic investments, increasing new dynamics of intra-urban competitiveness (Harvey, 1989). In governing urban areas in crisis, the post-industrial city was itself discovered to be a new space of capital accumulation. In those years, moreover, the two best-known faces of early Western neoliberalism, Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, were embarking on their political careers, the consequences of which are now unfortunately notorious. The positions promoted and sustained from their respective mandates, insisting on growth and competitiveness, produced the spread of an attitude of progressive disinvestment and withdrawal of the state, based on the idea that the city should not depend on public expense. Cities were thus reborn as entrepreneurs, where interdependence and competition shifted in scale: urban centers began to attract international business and investment, especially in the service sector, sparking mechanisms of competition among so-called global cities, as Saskia Sassen well described in her celebrated text *Cities in the Global Economy* (Sassen, 2021). The new urban entrepreneurship, becoming part of the global arena, had therefore start to design global strategies for rethinking and promoting the cities in crisis, mostly aiming at attract tourist gaze and to create new centers of consumption, in the frame of the urban symbolic economy (Zukin, 2002), the beginning of the so-called processes of spectacularization of the city.

As part of an all-urban stage, in just a few decades the primary urban production circuit, that of the production of consumer goods, had shifted to the secondary one, that of real estate, to the gradual tertiarization of productive activities. Following the increasingly neoliberal logics of the new urban governance, the gradual spread of privatization, redevelopment and gentrification phenomena of entire portions continued to influence a constant rise in real estate prices of both medium and large cities that still does not seem to want to stop.

[9] I refer here to the theory of the growth machine by Harvet Molotch and John Logan discussed in the volume published in 1987, Urban Fortunes. The political economy of place, Berkeley, University of California Press. The two authors argue that it is necessary to analyze the city from the perspective of a true political economy of place. To understand the dynamics of urban power, it is essential to identify the sociological processes through which political actors, citizens and capital movements co-participate in the attribution of value to the territory by influencing the production of urban space and the composition of the administrative class that will rule over city decisions (Rossi, Vanolo 2010; Semi 2015).

Between the late 1980s and the late 1990s, people began to talk about a new urban renaissance: the previous identity crisis in the role of cities urged to reinvent them as differentiated places for different specialized economies, such as those of knowledge, finance, and precisely culture and creativity. At that moment, an explicit convergence of culture, economy, and city redefined a new economic sector, that of creative cultural industries, founding the so-called 'culture economy' (Pratt, 2004, 2008; D'Ovidio, 2016). Having to globally compete, cities have to creatively reinvent themselves from the declining past, each reality seems to need to label itself, and different brands began to emerge: from smart city, green city, to creative, tech, digital city.

Unlike in the past, not only the private but also the public sector today allocates significant resources not only for services but also for policies related to the so-called *place making*. This is at the core of one of the best-known and most criticized theories on urban development: Richard Florida's "creative cities" model (2002). The author's idea is to theorize a urban policy-making meant to attract in the city what he calls the "new class of creative workers". According to Florida, urban governments should address the explicit demand for a precise aesthetic that could be capable of attracting this new productive class to their territory. His suggestion involves building a new interesting and vibrant urban atmosphere through both productive and symbolic processes to transform the *look* and thus influence the *feel* of the city (Zukin, 1995: 7). Although with a dissemination content purpose, this is one of the best-selling urban policy books of the past three decades precisely because it offers a very quick and easy recipe for the city by giving the arts and culture sectors a key role in urban growth and development, which are responsible for making urban space more beautiful and increasing amenites offerings. Culture and creativity, innovation, art, museums and festivals have now become mainstream cultural consumption patterns, serving as recurrent strategic policies for producing local development.

The '*attractiveness blackmail*' of the modern city is well explained either in Böhme's perspective of «aesthetic capitalism» (2017), then in the significant analysis of the mechanism of *enrichment* proposed by Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre (2018). The two authors show how the logic of capitalist accumulation has over time readjusted the way in which wealth is generated, and how particularly in the last quarter of the twentieth century, in a West marked by heavy deindustrialization and fierce exploitation of resources, new forms of commodity diversification have been able to be created (Boltanski and Esquerre, 2018, p. 6). The "enrichment economy" is the formula the two authors preferred to the Pierre Bourdieu's "symbolic economy", since their concept is able to evoke how this new economy seeks to "enrich things that are already there" (Boltanski and Esquerre, 2018, p. 6, *personal translation*) instead of producing new ones. The authors show how the economic practice of enrichment is based primarily on narrative presentation, storytelling, which is capable of

assigning new value to objects and places that already exists. This is made possible through actual "techniques" of value production: one of these is the tendency to assign value out of a basic resource, the past, through invoking specific commodities qualities such as memory, indefinite durability and non-weariness (Boltanski and Esquerre, 2018).

In both Böme and Boltanski and Esquerre's contributions, it is stressed how the logic of capitalist accumulation has over time redefined the way wealth is generated nowadays, moving towards an aestheticization of the economy or an aesthetic economy. This plays a central role in the dynamics of aesthetic capitalism in his urban configuration. Through the Böhme's views of the 'staging of everything' (Böhme, 2010, 2017), which is manifested in the continuous effort to spectacularize the urbanity, we could see how beautification affects both the use and the exchange value of *beautiful* space as an object of consumption. It is what sociologists Scott Lash and Jhon Urry have called *Economies of Signs and Space*, examining how contemporary capitalism deals increasingly with the production of signs, symbols and images rather than material production, introducing the idea of a cultural and symbolic economy.

Sharon Zukin's resume the notion of 'symbolic economy' (1995) to explains how some cities specialize in the production of pictures, languages, and artistic and entertainment forms. These cities' model, becoming more hegemonic in the interrelation of image and product, aim to sell images of urbanity on both national and global scales, working on a globalized and cosmopolitan sense of urban identity and belonging to attract new populations (Zukin, 2002, p. 7). Aesthetics could also work as justification, increasing the real estate stock values with a series of beautification strategies, most of which rely on discourse based on the notion of authenticity: museification of history, patrimonialization of the landscape, storytelling about the glorious past (cfr. Herzfeld 2017; Semi 2018) are just some striking examples of rebranding strategies of symbolic, cultural or creative economies, based the mechanism of *enrichment* (Boltanski and Esquerre, 2018).

Within these premises, one can deepen understand how the normativity of beautification work in his connection within urban studies, which means also examining what discourses and practices it involves and produces in the spatialization of those processes. Indeed, the policies on the creative city, through a focus on talent, promote the consumption and production of culture that falls pressingly on the individual or urban realities. *The creative cities does not exist*, as wrote sociologist Marianna d'Ovidio (2016):

> Indeed, the creative city is a theoretical model, or an ideal type: a way to analyse the contemporary city, focusing on the immaterial component of its economy. Moreover, the creative city is a model of development for post-industrial cities, which need to revamp their economy and to keep growing. Finally, the creative city is also a brand used to sell the city (or, better, some portions of

> it), to tourists, foreign companies, investors and whoever wants to buy it in the international arena (D'Ovidio, 2016, p. 7)

In fact, critics position toward Florida's creative city theory (Peck 2005) highlights the risk of establishing hierarchies among attractive and less attractive cities and categorising people as more or less creative, creating divisions based on those who "just don't get it" (Peck 2005 in Semi 2015 p. 94).

1.2.2 Atmospheres and the 'staging of everything' in the showcase city

The notion that a city must be beautiful and attractive has thus become imperative. Especially in the world's major urban centers, the prevailing standard of the "showcase city", an urban stage designed to attract significant investments. Urban planners, city makers, and developers have laid out their own recipes. Nevertheless, this is often achieved by the fast influx of big capital, for instance throughout big-events or large-scale real estate developments, often designed by renowned architects, and the subsequent arrival of businesses, tourists, and ultimately new residents. However, it's essential to ask two fundamental questions: for whom is this seductive city model designed? And how is it being realized?

To fully address the first question, we will need to wait until the second chapter. However, to begin answering the second, we can turn to the concept of atmospheres (Böhme, 2010; Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, 2015; Sumartojo and Pink, 2020).

From a philosophical and aesthetic perspective, the concept of atmosphere - not in their meteorological sense - is relatively recent, even though it is something extremely familiar. An entire pop vocabulary could be drawn upon to express the experience of atmospheres using terms like melancholic, cheerful, threatening, and so forth. One of the most well-known concepts in Walter Benjamin's thought is the notion of *aura*, from the Greek word for breath, breeze, or waft (Pinotti, 2018, p. 11). It is perhaps the concept that most closely resembles that of atmosphere, referring to the aura or character that a situation, person, or object radiates independently of itself.

The philosopher Gernot Böhme (2010), in his theory of perception, has extensively explored the concept of atmospheres in relation to the perceiving subject, space, and the perceived object. First and foremost, Böhme distinguishes between *atmosphere* and *atmospheric*: these are two distinct perceptual phenomena, with *atmospheric* referring to something clearly separate from the self, something that falls within the realm of semi-things. For example, summer, night, and lighting possess

this nature (Böhme, 2010, p. 82). In contrast, *atmosphere* is something from which we cannot distance ourselves; we feel atmospheres when we are affectively immersed in them. Atmospheres have a subjective component, but they are co-determined by semi-objective conditions.

Böhme describes two fundamental experiences that define atmosphere: *ingression* (Böhme, 2010, p. 83) and *discrepancy* (Böhme, 2010, p. 84). In fact, it is only by entering - immersing yourself - that it becomes possible to discern the emotional character of a space. Elisabeth Ströker had already discussed 'emotionally toned spaces' (1965, in Böhme 2010: 83). According to the philosopher, atmospheres are therefore spaces in which the emotional texture can be experienced with a certain degree of objectivity. These atmospheres are discovered through the experience of ingress or through their discrepancy; that is, the impression a space suggests or the urge to adopt a different state of mind than the one you are in - for example, a serene spring day during a period of mourning (Böhme, 2010, p. 84).

The concept of atmospheres is particularly interesting for urban studies in its entanglements between the experiencing of the space and the materiality of the perception (Degen and Rose, 2022). Interest in urban scholars toward the aesthetic and sensory experiencing of the everyday life had made the interest on the concept of atmosphers grows. In a recent paper, Sumartojo and Pink, have adressed the term as a "specific configurations of sensation, temporality, movement, memory, our material and immaterial surroundings and other people . . . how places and events feel and what they mean to the people who participate in them" (2019: 6).

Following Böhme, since emotional tone can be transferred from one object to another, it follows that atmospheres can be conceived as quasi-objects. This is crucial for understanding the conditions that produce atmospheres and their character - what fundamentally distinguishes one atmosphere from another. "Character is the specific way in which something affects us emotionally" (Böhme, 2010, p. 89), and thus, it falls within the realm of aesthetics, specifically within the theory of perception. As Böhme demonstrates, being something quasi-objective, character can be shaped by what he calls the aesthetic professions - fields where aesthetic knowledge has become professionalized, such as scenography, design, architecture, and cosmetics. The author defines aesthetic work as the activity that shapes things, spaces, and compositions with consideration for the emotional engagement that an observer, recipient, or consumer must experience through them (Böhme, 2010, p. 91),which he refers to as the work of 'staging'. It is not merely about beautifying, shaping, or crafting a particular style. To work on appearances in an atmospheric sense and stage it, it is necessary to add a climatic element that places us in a different condition than the initial one. Background music or the modulation of light are good examples of this work in any space, from the theater to the shopping mall or bar.

As thoroughly discussed by Degen and Rose in *The New Urban Aesthetic* ((2022), when applied to public spaces, urban atmospheres are indeed organized through the combined actions of bodies, the environment, and technologies:

> Street lighting, for example, allows the city to be visible at night, shifting the times that spaces can be occupied, and the different materialities of light - candles, gaslight, arc lights, LED - give different qualities to what is seen (Ebbensgaard, 2015, 2020; Otter, 2008). Different systems for managing sewage produce different olfactory experiences. A modern shopping center built with glass window walls and marble floors has a different tactility than a high street with a hotchpotch of buildings in brick, concrete, plaster, and wood (Degen and Rose, 2012). And now, as we have emphasized, digital technologies are mediating urban sensoria. Such an approach "render[s] the street as a fluid and fluctuating space" (Hubbard and Lyon, 2018: 939) that is constantly transformed through shifting relations between bodies, technologies, and urban materialities (Degen and Rose, 2022, p. 6)

Bhöme also focuses on how rhetoric, or what we would today call storytelling, is part of these atmospheric experiences conveyed through aesthetic work. This is because it is the narrator's task to arrange words in a way that engages the recipient with what they hear or read (Böhme, 2010, p. 91). Narration and storytelling play a crucial role also within the Boltanski and Esquerre's main thesis on the enrichment economy (Boltanski and Esquerre, 2018). With their focus on the contemporary capitalist forms of value and valuation, they contribute to highlight the role of discourses in the aestethic mechanism. In a world that has been fully aestheticized (Lipovetsky and Serroy, 2017), governed by the rules of hyper-seduction (Lipovetsky, 2019), and intertwined with the competitive dynamics of global cities increasingly tied to the circulation of images, the operation of the 'industrialization of seduction' (Lipovetsky and Serroy, 2017) is clearly visible in the transformative logics of the city. Here, it seems mandatory to enhance every urban area.
D. Asher Ghertner, in his ethnography of two different slum of New Dheli under redevelopment, hypnotizes the existence of a world-class aesthetic which can rule and factual remake the city:

> how a world-class aesthetic – a distinct observational grid used for making normative assessments of urban space – has been codified through law […], making aesthetic judgments […] increasingly central to the delineation of state policy and practice (Ghertner, 2011, p. 281).

Starting from the vast urban voids left in post-industrial crisis cities, from the early 2000s Western urban governments preferred to replace the model of demolition - like the Barcelona Olympics in the early 1990s - with a less violent and more progressive approach devoted to urban regeneration, invoking the revitalization and reuse of industrial relics. In line with Boltanski and Esquerre (2018),

one can observe a variety of techniques for re-narrating urban spaces, whose main lines often focus on enhancing the already existing urban heritage. Viewed this way, urban regeneration could be defined as a form of enrichment for the city's less evaluated districts. The neoliberal approach to urban revitalization has gradually translated into a rather homogeneous urban model that focuses on existing neighborhoods, particularly those with strong economic extractive potential. This means selectively enhancing working-class areas because they represent fertile ground for urban investment. Coherently with aesthetic capitalism logic, urban regeneration in the low-income neighborhoods could nevertheless often be reduced to aesthetic transformations, to make the neighborhood cooler instead of investing in strengthening social welfare[10].

Related to the proliferation of neoliberal urban redivelopment in its transnational synchronization, the concept of 'planetary gentrification' has been discussed in the literature (Lindner *et al.*, 2021, p. 14), which made Lindner and Sandoval speak of a global *aesthetic of gentrification (*Lindner *et al.*, 2021). These aesthetic transformations, embedded within the global urban competition, are increasingly homogenized and homogenizing across diverse urban contexts, so much so that studies refer to it as *disneyfication* (Semi, 2015) denoting the reassuring feeling of recognizing the same urban experience in every neighborhood around the globe, as if we are always in an urban parks, focused solely on spectacle, entertainment, and consumption.

> We argue that aesthetics are integral to the global story of gentrification, particularly in the way aesthetics are increasingly being used - via neoliberal consumerism (Castro 2015) - to produce the seductive conditions and instil the desires needed for creating exclusionary urban transformations predicated on displacing and disempowering vulnerable populations (Lindner *et al.*, 2021, p. 14).

In fact, frequently these projects reflect the policies and decisions of administrations that can choose what - and who - should be visible and what should not (Zukin 1995: 7). I refer to these actions as covering and masking operations, involving cleaning, camouflage, and maquillage of the space that one prefers not to see, which forms a core part of my thesis on understanding urban beautification.

1.3 Camouflage. Varnishing facade, erasing memory

[10] The link between visibility and quality of life will be discussed in the second chapter.

To explore one of the many mechanisms at work in the process of urban beautification, I draw on the concept of *camouflage*. Following Böhme, who has extensively reflected on the concept in relation to aesthetic economy, camouflaging the space is work on its architectural design, looking at the "concealment and deceptive appearance in contrast to its internal structure and functions" (Böhme, 2017). *Camouflage* - disguising, trick, masking, or makeup - is a term borrowed from military or animal lexicons. It refers to a set of techniques used to deceive and conceal, altering appearances to hide the presence of an object or body that wishes to remain unseen. In relation to beautification, I use the term camouflage to describe a technique for concealing imperfections through the act of adding, removing, or preserving a specific urban image (Raccanelli, 2023b). Bhöme discusses operations aimed at altering the skenographia of a space to achieve a "new, dazzling appearance incapable of aging", characterized by the beauty of shining, immaculate newness (Böhme, 2017, p. 91). Examples of such operations include plaster renewal, storefront resurfacing, re-gardening, and landscape decoration. These practices represent a form of maquillage, or cosmetic enhancement performed by aesthetic professionals, which, in its spatial dimension, primarily focuses on facades.

Scholars have long reflected on the face as a crucial site for mediating and facilitating social interactions (Goffman, 1997; Carnevali, 2020; Simmel, 2020). As the most exposed and vulnerable part of the body, the face is inherently difficult to downplay without masking it. It is the central point for sensory input and communication, from which words and emotions are both conveyed and perceived. Among these reflections, Erving Goffman's seminal work on the mask highlighted how various techniques exist for socially masking the person. As "an inseparable business card" (Carnevali, 2020, p. 15, *personal translation*), a crucial element in her theory of appearances, Barbara Carnevali demonstrates how much of the aesthetic work concentrates on the face: it transmits expressions and impressions, and images and sounds are emitted and received, all of which are socially controlled and produced through techniques such as acting skills, plastic surgery, makeup, and increasingly, technology (Carnevali, 2020, p. 75).

If the mask serves as a screen that shapes our social interactions, mediating our appearance, aura, or the representation we wish to project in the social theater (Goffman, 1997; Carnevali, 2020), urban camouflage similarly mediates and adjusts the idea or atmosphere that a city aims to project within the metropolitan and global urban system. The switch from designing spaces to designing facade reflected the passage from being to be seeming (Böhme, 2017).

Stavros Stavrides, in his *Common Space* (2016), speaks of the opposite practices of '*defacement'* (Stavrides, 2016, p. 286) to indicate actions aimed at destroying the *face*, distorting and partially hiding its features:

> Space [...] is predominantly perceived in the form of stereotyped images which circulate through the dominant culture-shaping media and become actualized through in situ experiences. [...] These images identify space. Defacing the appearance of public space would thus mean targeting the perceivable characteristics of such space that create its identifiable image. Defacing acts create memory shocks because spaces familiar or recognizable through established images are suddenly rendered strange (Stavrides, 2016 p. 289-290).

Restoring the facades with brand-new street art murals and other similar interventions in the public space sphere are perfect examples of what Stavrides means with *defacement.* Almost every neighborhood now has its own murals, and every suburb has its street art revitalization project (Raccanelli, 2022, 2023a; Raposo, 2023). Stavrides reflects on how the gesture of 'defacement', in its similarity to *camouflage*, could be quite a violent act as it "ruptures in urban memory, since memory is essentially connected with the socially crafted images of public space" (2016 p. 190). The aesthetic transformation of neighbourhoods could involve actions *above* the history and memory of places. Two brief examples can participate to clarify these processes.

In his comparative study of two districts in Paris and Milan – *La Défense* and *Milano 2* – sociologist Bruno Cousin defines the so-called 'refunded neighbourhood' as "the result of large-scale real estate operations - of leveling, rebuild, and repopulate by the upper classes - totally erasing the working class and industrial memory of the previous places" (2016 p. 91 - personal translation). These are two formerly working-class suburban areas whose typical periurban character has been radically replaced by a landscapes of shimmering skyscrapers, financial offices, and shopping malls (La Défense), and a gated community of luxury apartments with gates and tennis courts (Milano 2). In both areas, luxury buildings were built, replacing factories, agricultural land, farms and barracks, as well as previous dwellers have been replaced by more affluent citizens who have managed to adapt on new neighbourhood's expectations and its current luxury functions.

Its opposite in terms of urban planning action (but not for its social consequences) is the process of museification of the neighbourhood history, well explained by what the anthropologist Michael Herzfeld has called "the neoliberal hijacking of history" (2010). The London Docklands serves as one prominent examples of the districts where the history stealing through its aestheticisation is best experienced. The Docks were formerly part of the Port of London, with all their industrial infrastructures and appearances. They have now been redeveloped while maintaining their dockland look, becoming one of the coolest areas of the cities, a cluster of offices, luxury residential buildings, shops and small business headquarters. During the 1980s, image promotion was very intense,

focusing explicitly on aesthetic and landscape values: emphasis was placed on the attractiveness of waterfronts and residences facing the vast waterways of the old docks. Within this framework, explicitly aimed at social substitution, real estate acquisitions for young families of skilled workers, professionals, managers were encouraged.

On the one hand, attempts at beautification are frequently addressed to cover and erase the 'un-saleable' appearances of poverty and classes (Bukowski, 2019). Simultaneously, we have also seen how operations of aestheticization and commodification of history are meant to produce and sell experiences of urban authenticity (Zukin, 1995; Herzfeld, 2010).

Other ways to enhance the "face" of a neighborhood to present a more attractive appearance include city branding policies, so-called artistification processes, and urban clean-ups. However, these concepts should not be confused with each other[11]. All of them involve in different way the aesthetic economy, where the staging value is predominant than use and utilty so that the commodity aesthetic can be forced to govern design: the surface aesthetic of the building become the marketing area that puts on show the image of the neighborhood, setting its tone and producing the scenery and lifestyle of which they are apart (Böhme, 2017, p. 95). This is a result of standard neoliberal policies in urban governance, often subject to the demands of public-private partnerships. The complexities of these processes reflect the interplay of various interests, including those of urban planners, artists, and citizens, which can conflict and converge in diverse local ways. Sometimes, these operations intersect, as seen in the growing trend of integrating the arts into city branding and place-making strategies to produce a "cultural atmosphere" (Zukin, 2002; Böhme, 2010).

Devra Waldman (2021), in her study of a golf-focused gated community in India, underlines how aesthetics serves as a vehicle to produce a specific imagination and desire for a specific urban experience and living. She examines the politics of designing the 'sense of place' as a marketing strategy, reflecting on how these projects in postcolonial India carry colonial legacies within their willingness to build green, purified gated environments and atmospheres. The manipulation of symbolic assets of the urban space is now a well-known and appreciated tool for city administrations, leading to the emergence of a trend toward an aestheticization of the policies. Creating and designing attractive places means also producing symbolic competitions over old and new identities of neighbourhoods. It is crucial to understand the correlation between aesthetics and semiotics of spaces in its strong influence on the symbolic reorganization of spaces. Sociologist Andrea Mubi Brighenti also addresses the relevance of the symbols in this relation:

[11] An explanation of these three concepts will be provided in Chapter Two.

> What we are specifically interested in is not the visual dimension *per se*, but the more complex phenomenon of the field of visibility. [...] It makes sense to say that the medium between the two domains of aesthetics and politics is the *symbolic*. A symbol is aesthetically impressive and semiotically relevant in social relations. Just think of the powerful and ambivalent position of the *light* in western culture, its indelibly metaphysical *residuum*: light is the obsession of physics as well as of religion, it marks the field of the sacred and that of the secular. It is not simply visible. It constitutes a form of visibility (2007: 324).

Beautification thus involves actions such as camouflage, staging, and cosmetic enhancement, which contribute to the processes of defacement, erasure, or covering of undesirable aesthetics and their associated memories. Sometimes this manifests in actual demolitions, such as those seen in La Défense or Milan 2, or in contemporary examples like the clearance of favelas or slums (Davis, 2006; Ghertner, 2010) or the demolition of popular social housing projects, such as the notorious *Vele di Scampia*, which added aesthetic justifications to their architectural decay and 'social degradation'. Other times, even if these processes are less overtly violent, involving initiatives like street art projects or the replanting of decorative flowerbeds, this often end with some kind of 'social cleaning', in the form of more or less cohercitive espulsions, as Herzfeld underlines that "all conservation involves some degree of selection and often also of actual physical modification" (2010 p. 259). By asking "who defines what matter in residents' life" (*Ibidem*), he highlights the ambiguity of top-down actions of patrimonialisation and how the rhetoric of heritage frequently raises conflicts towards the collective representations of identity from below. In the words of Sharon Zukin:

> There are many different "cultural" strategies of economic development. Some focus on museums and other large cultural institutions [...]. Others call attention to the work of artists, actors, dancers, and even chefs who give credence to the claim that an area is a center of cultural production. Some strategies emphasize the aesthetic or historical value of imprints on a landscape, pointing to old battlegrounds, natural wonders, and collective representation of social groups, including houses of worship, workplaces of archaic technology, and even tenements and plantation housing. [...] The common element in all these strategies is that they reduce the multiple dimensions and conflicts of culture to a coherent visual representation (1995 p. 271).

As an article in The Guardian titled on October 26, 2017: *Everithing is gentrification now but Richard Florida isn't sorry*[12]. Therefore, looking at these transformations from a process perspective, we have seen the transition through which cities previously in crisis, discover that they are players in the global economy, invest in creativity to make themselves attractive, and culturally-based urban regeneration policies become a standardized model of governance. In *Aesthetics of Gentrification*, the authors discuss:

> […] well established pattern of postindustrial revitalization supported by transnational global realestate investments. The result is a neighbourhood ironically lacking in identity and originality – a site marked by flashy architecture, an abundance of pseudopublic space, predictable public art, corporate shopping and dining chains, superficial greenwashing, restricted mobility, and a general aura of affluence and placelessness (Lindner *et al.*, 2021, p. 11).

The effects of creative city policies on society are certainly many. However, it is worth noting that through these policies some of the main consequences that have been repeatedly observed in the so-called most creative cities is the irrepressible gentrification or hyper gentrification, neighborhood after neighborhood, in a trend toward homogenization of the cultural scene.
However, the conflictual dimension has been felt in the creative city: activist groups oppose the logic of the dominant creative economy. For example, in the early 2000s the blog "The creative class struggle" denounced the various difficulties of this class within the creative economy. Among the various mobilizations it reported, the one in Hamburg and Berlin between 2009 and 2010 seemed to be the most resonant. With a resounding manifesto titled Not in our name, artist collectives in the two cities refused to take part in initiatives to make a more artistic and cooler city's atmosphere, denouncing the exploitation of invisible and precarious service sector labor that holds up the creative city and the effects on rising real estate values, the dangers of expulsion and housing segregation

These chapter underscores the importance of elucidating the relationship between aesthetics and politics. In light of the previous discussion, the atmosphere in public space, being both personal and mediated by collective aesthetic experience, possesses an internal normative force. It is always connected to power relations, aesthetic judgments, and affective dynamics. If camouflage also acts toward erasing the memory of the neighbourhood, it can be argued that the specific imagination, through which the aesthetics of the new urban spaces are being produced, acts through a series of symbolic violent processes to adapt to the only normative urban appearances that today seems

[12] https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2017/oct/26/gentrification-richard-florida-interview-creative-class-new-urban-crisis, last consultation in August 2024

possible. Observing the processes of symbolic production of the beautiful city can de-invisibilize the power relations that constitute dominant visibility and marginal visibility.

How beautification manifests in various forms - ranging from interventions on appearance (artistification) to rewriting narratives (city branding), and even to outright reordering of public spaces and the inhabitants (social cleaning) - underscores the need to reassess how aesthetics governs and rules, and how it interacts with political processes and functions of aesthetics. As Lindner and Sandoval have observed: «[…] aesthetics increasingly function as a battleground where these urban spatial power struggles are played out through displacement, exclusion, and division» (2021: 9).

CHAPTER II
Monsters, Ghosts, and the Urban Uncanny

2.1. Urban fears in the posturbanist city. Some aesthetic premises in the politics of unwanted space

In the fantasy novel by British writer China Miéville, two separate cities coexist within the same territory in an undefined part of Eastern Europe, overlapping in certain places. There, their streets, buildings, citizens, and collective memories inhabit the same spaces. Yet, in both cities, the most dangerous crime is to see the other world - an offense met with severe and unwavering punishment. So accustomed to *unseeing*, the daily lives of the inhabitants continue in a state of blind routine, each side expertly avoiding the other - two worlds so close, yet trained to remain invisible.

As we explored in the previous chapter, the interplay between visibility and invisibility is a central theme in contemporary urban aesthetics. As David Sibley argues, beneath the Western impulse to establish and reinforce borders lies a desire to purify space from traces of the "abject," both metaphorically and materially associated with pollution and filth (Sibley, 2007). Techniques of avoidance and removal of elements that disrupt the visual order are frequently employed in urban spaces. Public spaces are increasingly governed by restrictions and rules, designed to maintain the "right" appearances while pushing aside those that do not fit. Yet, traces and memories of their presence always linger.

The relationship between what is meant to be seen and what is meant to remain unseen in urban spaces - between the *seeable* and the *unseeable* - is the central focus of this chapter, encapsulated in the metaphorical and analytical figures of the monster and the ghost.

Continuing the reflection on the categories of beauty and ugliness in art history, *On Ugliness* (Umberto Eco, 2018), Umberto Eco explores this concept, rehabilitating it not as a mere absence or negation of beauty, nor simply as its opposite, but rather as a distinct aesthetic category and experience. Since antiquity, from ancient rituals to contemporary practices, demons, madmen, grotesque enemies, and unsettling presences - representations of the disharmonious, unpleasant, repellent, terrifying, and even the sublime - have often mirrored societal fears and anxieties.

Its central role becomes especially evident in reflections on tragedy as a literary form, which generates a paradoxical pleasure through the depiction of terrible and painful events, allowing audiences to

experience violence and suffering. However, it is in comedy, where the ridiculous, the ugly, and the deformed take center stage and gain autonomy, that ugliness is most clearly recognized in its positive function (Russo, 2010, p. 35).

Today, many female authors have begun to speak of the *re-enchantment* of the world, in relation to Weber's famous formulation that scientific and technological rationality - set in motion by the Industrial Revolution - has progressively led to the abandonment of magical means of making sense of the world, resulting in a gradual "exhaustion of the realm of the invisible" (Gauchet, 1992). If the progressive *disenchantment* of the world seemed to characterize Western capitalist modernity in the twentieth century (and beyond), today, an opposite trend appears to be emerging - one that various scholars refer to as *de-secularization*, while others call it the *re-enchantment* of the world: a process of rediscovery and reconciliation between wonder and knowledge. In the following pages, I will attempt to *re-enchant* the study of urban transformations, particularly those related to aesthetic processes, in order to rearticulate and understand the relationships between visibility and invisibility, fear and wonder, past and present in neighborhoods undergoing transformation. These are places often inhabited by ghosts - a term I use both as a synonym for the monstrous, the *unwanted*, the frightening, but also as a metaphor for something that lingers at the margins of the visible order, resurfacing from the past, haunting the present until it is finally laid to rest.

As early as 1854, in *Hard Times*, Charles Dickens described the industrial city as a realm of sadness, uniformity, dreariness, and, indeed, ugliness (Umberto Eco, 2018, p. 329). At the time, the city was identified as the source of modern anxiety, the stage for revolutions and epidemics, the ultimate site of twentieth-century alienation - a space where the most unsettling aspects of life were heightened: darkness, the demonic, the horrific, disease, transgression, death.

The intense urbanization and its radical acceleration in the 21st century have led to a growing global population living in cities and the sharpening of a range of anxieties, anger, fears, loneliness - *feelings that are often linked to the urban experience itself*.

Anthony Vidler spoke of *posturbanism* (Vidler, 2006, p. 177) referring to the loss of the recognizable coordinates of the modern city, replaced by an urban landscape that dislocates its own memory. According to Vidler, this shift is due to the collapse of the ordered paradigm that once framed the city as a body - an organic fabric that was recognizable and memorable. This process began with the modernist visions of modular neighborhoods and satellite cities and continued with the rise of the aesthetic model of global cities, symbolically encapsulated in the gleaming skyscrapers of financial districts.

In Debra Benita Shaw's reconceptualization, proposed in *Posthuman Urbanism* (2018), the posturban city is a vast space where media representations play a primary role in guiding and promoting the *city-*

as-theme park to attract tourism and investment (Shaw, 2018, p. 183). In arguing for the structural connection between the spectacularization of cities, the commodification of their image, and the era of posturbanism (see §1.2.2), Shaw refers to concepts such as *Zone Urbanism*and the *Fantasy City*[13] - "a themed and branded space which never sleeps" (Shaw, 2018, p. 13). This is an urban space without history, where neighborhoods are reshaped into enclaves or *modules*, protected zones designed to maintain the illusion of a city where homelessness and poverty do not exist. obviously emplying surveillance architectures and exclusions. To maintain consistency in the mythologization of such a city, she argues that visible traces of difference - such as poverty or deviance - must be erased and concealed in order to shape the urban space into a playground for capital. Cities like New York, Paris, Milan, or Dubai function as interchangeable global zones or enclaves, perfectly configured in their respective downtowns, dominated by towering symbols of luxury and finance. Such a posturban reality, then, resembles an immense extraterrestrial space - an outcome of the interplay between technology, mythology, and new global, homogenized infrastructures, where every urban device is designed for spectacle and staging.

Ghosts (and monsters) are therefore the *hypervisible* and *fantasy* elements of the posturban city, but also, more specifically, manifestations of what does not belong to the rational sphere of this new aesthetic - and thus, what should not be seen (Vanolo, 2018).

In this sense, the presence of monsters and ghosts in the urban space is deeply tied to the act of looking. As explored in the previous chapter and further examined later, looking is never a neutral action; it is always a vehicle of intention. The gaze, as a social practice capable of acting upon the objects it perceives, has been widely studied - feminist and postcolonial theories, for example, have long highlighted the violence of the objectifying, machista, or racist gaze.

Federico Campagna, in his book *Magia e Tecnica*, speaks of the *value of anonymit.* In a world hyper-organized under the rule of technique, magic, he suggests, can serve as a means of becoming unrecognizable - escaping a gaze whose sole purpose is to classify and categorize us. (Campagna, 2021).

Investigating urban space through its ghosts means engaging in a discourse about the past and future of the neighborhood, observing in the present what people do not want to see, hear, smell, feel, or perceive in the new city. Disturbing noises, stench, garbage, wilderness, and similar elements become the objects and traces for ethnographies of urban phantasmagorias (Pavoni and Vanolo, 2023).

If beauty has always been a convenient myth for maintaining specific power hierarchies, and the city is a significant *locus of forces* (Shaw, 2018, p. 10), it is essential to discuss the codes of beauty and

[13] The concept of the *Fantasy City* is taken from John Hannigan's book *Fantasy City: Pleasure & Profit in the Postmodern Metropolis*, published in 1998 by Routledge

monstrosity within the context of the neoliberal city - focusing on how and why frightening urban images are constructed. I intend to observe this phenomenon from the perspective of the city's *unwanted*: the peripheries. More specifically, in the following pages I will interpret urban decay both as a source of fear - something perceived as dangerous - and as a mechanism for governing unruly bodies and spaces.

2.1.1 Ghosts:

With the term *hauntology*, a long-standing sociological and philosophical tradition has analyzed the spectral presence of a past that haunts the present. Originally proposed by Jacques Derrida in the 1990s, this neologism combines the terms *haunt* and *ontology* to refer to a specific analytical and methodological approach for observing and understanding the present's unique temporal, historical, and ontological disjunction. This disjunction challenges the ability to think about the future, what Mark Fisher described as the "nostalgia for lost futures" (Fisher, 2014).

The ghost is a liminal figure, a presence suspended between a before and an after, symbolizing traumas, memories, fears, and recollections - all elements that deeply characterize every urban system. The cultural shocks of the last century, such as deindustrialization, globalization, and the acceleration of planetary urbanization, have brought forward specters and ghosts of all kinds that increasingly articulate these transformative forces, making cities their primary habitats. Here, urban ghosts mark the fragmentation created by turbulent 'multiple spatialities and temporalities' (Pavoni and Vanolo, 2022, p. 6).

In the context of this thesis, the figure of urban ghosts is called upon primarily to decode a certain "politics of the visible," aiming to reveal an intermediary relationship between visibility and invisibility, absence and presence. This involves searching for the traces and memory of territorial trauma and cultural anxieties(Vanolo, 2018; Pavoni and Vanolo, 2022, 2023; Poier, 2022).

The geographer Alberto Vanolo wrote that thinking in terms of ghosts and spectral presences allows for observing and analyzing space through "specific geographical sensitivities" (Vanolo, 2018, p. 2, *my translation*):

> Il fantasma può essere immaginato, a questo proposito, come un elemento semitrasparente che turba e destabilizza la partizione del sensibile. Nel caso di uno spazio geografico, il fantasma può

essere, per esempio, quel campo che smuove e corrode la narrativa egemonica di un luogo [14](Vanolo, 2018, p. 8).

The author reconstructs the debate around the theme of specters and ghosts in the social sciences, demonstrating that, although a substantial body of foundational literature exists, it remains nearly impossible to start from a shared definition of what a ghost is. It is a cultural object that allows for multiple interpretive approaches and activates a wide range of emotional fields, spanning from terror to compassion and spectacle. Among the first to use the ghost allegorically and speculatively to examine the city, Walter Benjamin worked extensively on the concept of *phantasmagoria* (Benjamin, 2010; Pinotti, 2018, p. 55).

The term originated in France at the end of the 18th century and referred to a popular spectacle of optical illusion created by manipulations of light, Chinese shadows, and magic lanterns, through which images of fantastical creatures or famous deceased figures were projected. Benjamin specifically used the concept of phantasmagoria to refer to the enchantment of the commodity spectacle that the *flâneur* experiences within the capitalist urban life of the late 19th century (Pinotti, 2018, p. 55; Vanolo, 2018, p. 3). Following the philosopher's reflections, the concept of phantasmagoria thus addressed the spectacularized and spectacularizing aspect of the city in the era of commodity dominance. By emphasizing this, Benjamin underscored its aesthetic character - a dimension that had remained secondary within Marxist theory on commodity fetishism (Pinotti, 2018).

More specifically, urban studies have recently drawn upon the figure of ghosts with varied intentions. Some works have taken a literal approach, focusing on the legends, tales, and myths of ghosts still circulating in cities, touching on phenomena like paranormal tourism or the housing dynamics of "haunted landscapes." Other scholars have employed the metaphor of the ghost as a tool to decode the role of urban absences or erasures, such as industrial ruins, urban voids, or abandoned factories (Edensor, 2005; Vidler, 2006; Tonnelat, 2008; Strangleman, 2013). Through the concept of the ghost town (Vidler, 2006; Gandy, 2022; Pavoni and Vanolo, 2022; Poier, 2022), these vacant spaces highlight the dynamics of invisibility within the city's political space[15].

The urban ghost signifies the presence of something that physically exists but remains unseen, poised to appear; or, to borrow Freud's terms, it is a repressed element that resurfaces (Vidler, 2006, p. 62). From an ethnographic perspective, as the forthcoming chapters will show, it is this state of "in-

[14] 'The ghost, in this sense, can be imagined as a semi-transparent element that disturbs and destabilizes the partition of the sensible. In the context of a geographic space, the ghost can be, for example, that force which unsettles and corrodes the hegemonic narrative of a place'.

[15] For a comprehensive review of the foundational literature on what has been called the *spectral turn* in the social sciences, see Alberto Vanolo's essay *Fantasmi*. (2018, pp. 3–4).

betweenness" that makes the ghost a fascinating object in urban space, particularly in rapidly transforming neighborhoods like Corvetto, in the midst of the process of change. Here, ghosts vary depending on perspective: for some, they are vestiges of the past, lodged in the interstices of the old neighborhood - what people might wish not to see anymore but which lingers or sporadically re-emerges. For others, the ghosts represent the present and the future, embodying the era of projects and time for desires and the aesthetic aspirations that don't yet seem to fit.

As Vanolo wrote, the concept of the ghost helps 'to problematize, rethink, and reposition the discontinuities of time and space, as well as numerous dichotomies that tend to oversimplify geographical perspectives, such as those between visible and invisible, real and unreal, life and death, presence and absence (Vanolo, 2018, p. 4, my translation). In *I fantasmi di Pittsburgh*, Salvatore Poier argues that not all ghosts bring to light social traumas or structural issues like the systemic violence of neoliberalism, inequality, or racism. Instead, they represent presences that highlight "irregularities in the supposedly smooth surface of everyday life" (Poier, 2022, p. 14, my translation) capable of descover the process under which the spectacle of the contemporary city is realized. These spectral figures reveal underlying tensions and contradictions, subtly disrupting the polished narrative of urban spaces and exposing the concealed dynamics under which the spectacle of the contemporary city is realized. As we saw in previews chapter (*cfr. Chapter I*), dispositives such as aesthetics norms and codes positions bodies according to race, gender, sexuality and physical ability but also produces the way this body should be understood. The collision between urban forms and right and wrong bodies, wanted and unwated presence shows the power relations under which the bodily distribution in the urban space is produced (Shaw, 2018, p. 10).

Objects and people both produce ghosts and are themselves ghostly presences. A ghost is thus something intrinsically tied to memory - something that exists without fully being there, something that once was but has physically disappeared, yet lingers on. These ghosts include traces of former residents who have been relocated or displaced from the neighborhood, as well as less tangible memories, like the echoes of suffering experienced by workers in the city's production spaces.

2.1.2 Monsters

Looking in the opposite direction of beautification, I draw on a particular body of literature that has focused on the process of *monstrification*. Framed within last century's critical thought and revisited today by feminist and queer studies, postcolonial and migration studies, these perspectives analyze

the symbolic representations and collective perceptions associated with monsters (Doyle, 2019; Giuliani, 2022).

Monsters as cultural constructions have been the subject of a long tradition of study, which, since the last century, has examined the production of the abnormal within the interstices of what Michel Foucault described as the regime of normality, from which monstrosity emerges as transgression or deviance. Processes of monsterization are often introduced in contexts where attempts are made to stigmatize and demonize the presence of the Other.

As Gaia Giuliani stated:

> The association between horror and moral panic has a much longer history connecting the deformed, animalized monstrosity, and cannibalism to the transgressors of the 'order of discourse', such as criminals, infidels, and heretics in both the Holy Land and the domestic space of the witch. Nevertheless, it has generally been a mark of cosmogonies connecting the lower classes of living things (that is, animals, perceived as farthest from the light and beauty of God) to cannibalism, ugliness, and monstrosity (Giuliani, 2022, p. 416).

At the same time, some works have focused more on the urban dimension, tracing legends and stories of uncanny creatures that populate cities and offering an overview of the myths and beliefs that have emerged around these phenomena (Vidler, 2006; Lyons, 2018; Pavoni and Vanolo, 2022; Poier, 2022). Observing the *monstrification* of a specific urban space allows us to understand its unique codifications - its mythology and symbolic connotations - and, more specifically, its role in constructing the *Other* of the city as a threat.

After all, by definition, a monster evokes fear, anger, and disgust. According to feminist literary critic Jude Ellison Sady Doyle, author of *Dead Blondes and Bad Mothers: Monstrosity, Patriarchy, and the Fear of Female Power* (Doyle, 2019), since humanity has historically been defined by male norms, women - who are not men - are therefore not considered fully human. Sirens, Medusas, avenging angels: monstrous representations of the female body have populated mythologies, legends, and folk tales since the earliest written records. For Doyle, historicizing *monstrification* helps us grasp a fundamental sociological reality: beneath the disdain and condemnation that men have directed at women for centuries lies a deep-seated fear of otherness. Practices of controlling *unruly* female bodies - from the Inquisition to domestic "taming" - reveal a recognition of their inherent power (Doyle, 2019, p. 14).

In the connection between fear and power, the deep-seated anxiety about the 'other' and those who deviate from societal norms is particularly stressed. Indeed, it is noteworthy that the prevailing political approach today, especially in the Western world, is one rooted in anxiety, fear, and performance, what has been called the phobocracy. The term phobocracy refers to a certain type of power that relies on the control of fear and widespread hatred among the population, which is capable of driving real political agendas. This has been discussed in relation to the political management of the COVID-19 emergency or, as many analyses have pointed out, in connection with the rise of far-right governments in the contemporary world. It is no coincidence, indeed, that monstrous figures - long present in popular, literary, and cinematic imaginaries - have proliferated in cultural production, especially in recent decades, precisely when a series of crises, such as the climate crisis, the so-called migration crisis, or the recent and ongoing multiplication of wars, have forcefully entered the public debate, spreading moral panic (Giuliani, 2021, 2022) and a general 'uncanny sense of fragility' (Pavoni and Nirta, 2021, p. xv). In this fracture, processes of monstrification run parallel to, and mutually reinforce, processes of othering, as part of the attempt to control practices, spaces, and unruly or unwanted people.

As well as the figure of the urban ghosts, monster have been stressed also in their liminal quality: they stand between repulsion e attraction, hyper visible and unreality, norms and its transgression (Pavoni and Nirta, 2021, p. xv). In this duality, recent critical literature, in addition to analyzing processes of monstrification, has begun to reclaim the figure of the monster to reappropriate it and assert both its existence and its fundamental role in highlighting contemporary dynamics of exclusion, discrimination, and marginalization. While there is a significant emphasis on fear and control, this perspective also underscores the importance of reclaiming minority voices. Returning to the idea of the posturban proposed by Anthony Vidler:

> Ma bisogna quanto meno riconoscere che a fronte delle esclusioni rigorose operate dall'urbanesimo nella sua fase più idealistica, e dei sostegni economici da esso richiesti in quella più realistica, un mondo post-urbanistico sarebbe in grado di offrire almeno una maggiore inclusività e non solo speranze meno grandiose. Il nostro caffè post-urbano potrà forse offrire riparo a molti soggetti a lungo considerati indesiderabili dall'urbanesimo - indesiderabili a causa di genere, razza o classe (Vidler, 2006, p. 207)[16].

[16] But we must at least recognize that, in contrast to the strict exclusions imposed by urbanism in its most idealistic phase, and the economic support it required in its more realistic phase, a post-urban world would be able to offer at least greater inclusivity, and not just less grandiose hopes. Our post-urban café may perhaps provide shelter to many subjects long considered undesirable by urbanism - undesirable due to gender, race, or class.

Monsters, far from being mere aberrations, play a vital role in ethical considerations and philosophical thought processes, as seen in Deleuze's conceptualization of monstrosity (Brighenti, 2021). This view advocates for a commitment to examining the monstrous as a means of enriching philosophical inquiry, through an emphasis on encounters with monsters, which can lead to transformative experiences. Individuals are urged to reconsider and challenge their assumptions about norms (Brighenti, 2021).

'In our current post-millennial age, monstrosity, as an inherent traversing condition, has thus become a battleground for intersection, representation, scapegoating, redemption, and de-essentialisation' (Pavoni and Nirta, 2021, p. xvii).

As we have seen, both the figures of the *ghost* and the *monster* raise aesthetic issues that intersect with the relationship between the visible and the invisible, what can be seen and what must not be sidelined. Referring back to Jacques Rancière's definition of the "partition of the sensible," it refers to the set of sensory manifestations that make the existence of a common element perceptible, while simultaneously establishing divisions that assign specific roles and spaces within this common. In other words, a partition of the sensible simultaneously determines a shared common and the excluded parts. This partition is based on a division of spaces, times, and forms of activity, configuring the way in which each person can participate in the common. However, there exists a more fundamental form of partition: that which establishes who can actually access and have the right to participate. 'Politics, therefore, concerns what can be seen and what can be said, who has the competence to see and the right to speak' (Rancière, 2022, p. 17, *my translation)*. The *politics of the sensible* operates by distributing the relationship between the sayable and the visible across different platforms.

The regime of normality, in which monstrosity is seen as transgression or deviance, raises the question: what is considered 'normal' in the city?

2.2. The monsters lie in the peripheries: between territorial stigmatization and the spectacularization of uncunny urban space

In Franz Kafka's story *The Worries of a Family Father*, the presence of a mysterious and unsettling entity, described in vague and surreal terms, the Odradek, both disturbs and fascinates the protagonist. Odradek is described as an animate being that dwell in the family home, something one has become

accustomed to seeing but remains unexplained. The Odradek disrupts and destabilizes the norm, embodying in literature the sense of strangeness and unease, the frightening familiar that forms the basis of Freud's concept of the *uncanny*. As Freud stated in his 1919 essay on the uncanny, the terrible is terrible in as much as it is secretly far too familiar; that is why it is rejected (Vidler, 2006).

Transposed to the urban realm, the discourse on the uncanny becomes intriguing because it identifies the urban repressions, the unwanted spaces of the city, which almost always coincide with the peripheries. I propose to read the periphery as the space of the urban uncanny: today, peripheral neighborhoods, publicly recognized and narrated as no-go areas, are present in many urban agglomerations. Such spaces are recognized as places of blight, spirals of social disintegration, and desolation. Similar to the Odradek, suburbs are often considered as 'familiar strangers', stirring both fear and fascination. The entanglement of these contradictory feelings characterizes the Freudian concept and, at the same time, captures the suburb as the 'unhomely' space par excellence.

The state of the art on the suburbs today is mostly populated by essays portraying it in the terms of an 'urban exotic' (Fava, 2008, p. 41), texts resembling 'travel chronicles' (ibid.: 36) or field diaries of 'an urban spelunker' (Strangleman, 2013) who 'discovers' with surprise the territories on the edge of the city. In particular, the way the theme of the periphery has been framed in the Italian public debate shows how it is a concept that exists to the extent that it is narrated, around which a struggle for the right to speak, to tell, and to counter-narrate takes place. The peripheries and suburbs are in fact often more literary and journalistic product: they are often described as the dark, the obscure, the urban ghosts, spaces of terror, frightening, the unknown of the city. This very powerful narratives and discourses play an important role in displaying effect on the reality of this urban spaces. Thus, a macro imaginary is super-imposed on the multiplicity of peripherical spaces, certainly highly differentiated from one another but homogenized by an Orientalist gaze that depicts it as a scarry and spectral element that came from elsewhere, in some way it is the return of the repressed.

This happens especially because it is impossible to define the periphery without including its opposite: the center. "In short, we can say that from the mid-1970s onwards [...] the concept of periphery has lost any progressive connotation and has remained only the spatial indicator of a discomfort made of distance from the center, lack of services and infrastructure, delay in integration, social tension, and a sense of marginalization," continues Ciorra in his analysis (Ciorra, 2010). The binary system as a key for investigating and interpreting reality is not new to philosophical, sociological, and anthropological studies. As we will see, not only in the Western world, we are used to interpreting and orienting our lives through a system of ontological oppositions filled with cultural meanings and significance: woman is defined in opposition to man, human to animal, the animal world to the plant world, and so on. Opposing particular macro-concepts that operate in the structuring

of the real, as feminist or anti-racist struggles teach us, reveals the disparities and imbalances of power between the two poles. Rethinking the unequal relationship between center and periphery will therefore be useful as a key to understanding the historical mechanisms of spatial segregation and the set of oppressive forces that structure one at the expense of the other (Vicari Haddock, 2013). For example, some studies, focusing on the various forms of displacement generated by gentrification, agree in interpreting this process as a machine for producing peripheries (Petrillo, 2018; Portelli, 2017) - an economic engine typical of the contemporary era that concentrates resources in central areas while gradually generating disinterest in the margins. This dynamic intersects, particularly in the Italian context, with the promotion of heritage practices in historic city centers, aimed at the preservation and restoration of architectural and landscape assets for tourism purposes, and consequently, with the concentration of leisure and entertainment venues. Over time, this has led to the valorization of only a few, specific areas, mostly not far from central zones. The relationship between center and periphery is therefore often ambiguous and generates confusion. A peripheral area may in fact not be that far from the center - as we will see in the case of Corvetto - particularly when the urban infrastructure system integrates it closely with the central area, for instance, by making it easily accessible via public transport. Some peripheral neighborhoods may even become new peripheral centers, in line with policies often referred to as those of the ‘polycentric city’ (Vicari Haddock, 2013). Indeed, the conceptual dualism continues to structure the unequal relationship between center and periphery, dividing the spaces of the "good city" from those of the "bad city." Following Freud, the uncanny, or *unheimlich*, is rooted, etymologically and in usage, in the domestic sphere (*heimlich*). The center is what appears comfortable and domestic (*homely*), while the periphery is what feels disorienting and inhospitable (*unhomely*). The uncanny is the dominant element of modern nostalgia, whose spatial dimensions touch every aspect of social life. ‘In this sense, we could characterize the uncanny as the quintessence of bourgeois fear’ (Vidler, 2006, p. 26, *my translation*).

With the crisis of the 19th- and 20th-century urban model, alarmist discourses have proliferated regarding the fate of working-class neighborhoods on the outskirts of cities, resembling an eschatology of peripheral worlds, even going as far as proclaiming the ‘end of the peripheries’ (Ciorra, 2010), the formation of a ‘new periphery’ (Petrillo, 2018), or the denunciation of a ‘periphery everywhere’ (Petrillo, 2013). This data reflects the uncertain condition of these urban spaces but reveals a semantic distortion more tied to a condition than to a topographical position. As Agostino Petrillo argues in his theoretical survey of the concept's status, what the author calls a 'philosophy of the peripheries' (Petrillo 2013), behind the problem of definition lies a generalized uncertainty about what the city is today, a chronic inability to arrive at conceptual syntheses that go beyond mere description.

As we will see in Corvetto, in the entwined action of stigmatizing and exoticizing imaginaries, the peripheral spaces thus produced remain suspended between attempts to alternatively either remove, or domesticate, the disturbing aesthetics of 'urban otherness.' However, in this perspective, one must not forget the existence of coping strategies - strategies employed by residents to face stigma, exclusion, the uncanny, and their experiences of living in the spaces of the *unhomely*.

Thus, while the margins were, for the symbolists or early modernists, a place of possibility and liberation, a space to form a new urban society on the nostalgic ruins of the city of the past (Vidler, 2006, p. 205), today, the peripheries often represent the space of inequality, the unknown, and fear. Such dominant feeling of decay is often counterbalanced by attempts to romanticize and aestheticize the urban occult. In their dialectic, both attitudes take an active role in widening the gap between the periphery and what is often considered, by contrast, "the good city".

If we consider the urban uncanny as an aesthetic problem, there are several *out of* strategies aimed at controlling it, seeking its visual domestication. Some of these practices operate by implementing an aesthetic domination, which can be understood as part of the broader processes of *beautification*. These processes tend to transform marginal or unsettling spaces into more acceptable environments, conforming to prevailing aesthetic ideals, by hiding or neutralizing the disturbing features that make those places "unfamiliar" and uncanny. In this way, the uncanny is reduced to an acceptable surface, often through gentrification, urban revitalization, or standardization, which remove elements of inequality and social distress, but often also erase some of the identities of the places and their inhabitants. The codes of beauty constructed in this way thus produce bodies and spaces that are desirable or depracble, legitimate or illegitimate: the hypervisualisation of both the former, commodified, and, by contrast, the latter, monstrous is often accompanied by processes of invisibilisation of non-regulatory and/or eccentric practices, i.e. the expulsion of what disturbs the visual frame.

2.2.1 Territorial stigmatization:

Uncanny and frightening are feelings that act on the perceptions and atmospheres of the peripheries, thus embedding themselves in the processes of production of certain urban spaces, particularly in the nexus between symbolic space, social space, and physical space. Regarding the importance of the socio-spatial aspect in the study of dynamics and experiences of territories, it is useful to refer to the concept of "territorial stigmatization" elaborated by French sociologist Loïc Wacquant in his *Urban Outcast* (Wacquant, 2010*)*. In this text, Wacquant takes us into the Black ghetto of Chicago and the

deindustrialized suburbs of Paris, illustrating how urban marginality is not the same everywhere. The author identifies recurring characteristics of what he calls 'advanced marginality,' a new and distinct regime of poverty observed in a city polarized and fragmented by the dismantling of the welfare state. As we saw in the previous chapter, similarly, during the years of post-Fordism, all Western world metropolises have witnessed the worsening of a series of conditions with exclusionary effects for a more vulnerable portion of the population. The sociologist identifies six features that distinguish this new regime of marginality: instability and insecurity of wage labor, functional disconnection from macroeconomic trends, spatial alienation and dissolution of place, loss of a background and collective support, extreme fragmentation and precarization of lives, and, indeed, territorial fixation and stigmatization (Wacquant, 2010, p. 259).

To complement and clarify the functioning of this concept, Wacquant discusses the idea of "spatial taint," a spatial stain. In a more in-depth study carried out alongside British geographer Tom Slater and Portuguese sociologist Virgílio Borges Pereira (Wacquant, Slater and Pereira, 2014), the space of marginality is identified as a place where social discredit can take root (Wacquant, Slater and Pereira, 2014, p. 1272), transforming into a stigma that can be transferred from the place of residence to the bodies of those born and living there, effectively "staining" and determining their existences, identities, and judgments. The effects of this powerful stigma are easily detectable in every space of territorial stigma: the inhabitants of these neighborhoods are often subject to certain expectations regarding behavioral or character models associated solely with their residence, a discriminatory attitude that influences their access to various types of goods, services, and opportunities. In the United States, a classic example of these territorial penalization mechanisms is what is referred to in journalistic jargon as "boundary hopping" or "district hopping," the tendency to falsify one's address to enroll children in schools in more prestigious neighborhoods. A few years ago, the case of Kelley Williams-Bolar became widely known. She was a single African American mother living in a public housing neighborhood in Akron, Ohio, who was arrested in 2009 and later prosecuted for enrolling her two daughters in the school of a nearby wealthier residential neighborhood by falsifying her address, using her father's address located there.

Wacquant suggests that in every national context, there exists a specific topographical lexicon for referring to stigmatized neighborhoods, a generic label applied to territories seen as rifts or threats in the nation's production: *banlieu-ghetto* in France, *quartieri degradati* in Italy, *Problemquartier* in Germany, "*sink estate*" in Great Britain, *Krottenwijk* in the Netherlands, and so on' (Wacquant et al., 2014, p. 1273). Each term is commonly associated with peripheral neighborhoods in large cities that have become famous symbols of territorial denigration, synonymous with delinquency, insecurity, and incivility. The international spread of emblematic toponyms used to indicate urban perdition has

passed through the pervasive influence of music videos, the film industry, and literature (Wacquant, Slater and Pereira, 2014, p. 1274), as seen with the Bronx or what has been happening in recent years with Scampia, after the success of the series *Gomorra* (as we will explore further in the next paragraph).

The notion of territorial stigmatization requires the inclusion and incorporation of two other fundamental concepts into the theoretical framework: the concept of "symbolic power" from a Bourdieusian perspective and the models of representation and staging of the so-called "fictitious identity" proposed by Goffman. The research group focused on this phenomenon (Wacquant et al, 2014), with the help of these two frameworks, was able to identify the various ways in which the "spatial stain" affects not only the residents of defamed areas but also the inhabitants and shopkeepers of surrounding areas, public policies, cultural production specialists - journalists, academics, politicians - and, not least, state officials and policies (Wacquant, Slater and Pereira, 2014, p. 1270). These and other actors are central to studying the outcomes, but also to understanding the performative and reproductive effects of denigratory discourses, whether they are produced from below, in daily life interactions, or from above, in the realm of sensationalism driven by journalistic or television images, bureaucracy or politics, and even scientific inquiry:

> A *blemish of place* is thus super-imposed on the already existing stigmata traditionally associated with poverty and ethnic origin or postcolonial immigrant status, to which it is closely linked but not reducible (Wacquant, 2007, p. 67).

Building on Goffman's *Stigma* (1963), an essential reference for any research on the subject, it is possible to interpret territorial stigma as a new attribute, a more or less visible characteristic capable of "de-qualifying" the individual who bears it. It creates a "discredited difference" (Wacquant et al. 2014, p. 1272) in the mutual gazes and face-to-face interactions. According to Goffman's classic work, stigma is constructed around three main axes: bodily deformities, character or behavioral anomalies, and tribal stigma, linked to identity lines transmitted by lineage. In this context, Wacquant adds a fourth "disability," one related to the place of residence, a mark less perceptible than the three aforementioned classes, but, like them, capable of "depriving individuals of full acceptance by others" (Wacquant 2007, p. 67). Territorial stigma, like tribal stigma, for the author, can also be transmitted through generations, equally contaminating the attitudes and actions of all family members (Wacquant, 2007). The picture outlined here is further complicated by adding what Pierre Bourdieu called the capacity for "performative nomination," that is, the symbolic power inherent in an authority, such as the state, the scientific world, the church, the law, or journalism. All these fields often produce representations with self-fulfilling and material effects (Wacquant et al 2014, p. 1272),

which can reverberate through the land and its inhabitants, becoming places of public discredit and real barriers, for example, in finding work or new housing.

> To Bourdieu's founding proposition that symbolic power contributes to "making and unmaking groups" by cutting up social space in ways that (de)mobilize putative members, Wacquant (2014a) adds the crucial mediation of place as material container, social crossroads, and mental imagery carrying deep emotional valences, in and through which collectives will emerge (or not) through struggles to establish claim over the built environment (Wacquant et al 2014, p. 1272).

Thus, the "harmful representations of territories" are produced and disseminated within the domains of power and in daily life and practices, with modes and outcomes that alter "social identities, strategies, and structures" (Wacquant et al 2014, p. 1273), becoming entrenched - and laden with new meanings tied to the aesthetics of order and decorum - on the spatial dimension and the characteristics of urban advanced marginality.

Pereira, Slater, and Wacquant also argue that the neighborhood taint is a "new and distinctive phenomenon" (Wacquant, Slater and Pereira, 2014): 'the sense of social humiliation' (Wacquant, 2010, p. 265) that afflicts these neighborhoods differs from that of previous eras for five main reasons (Wacquant et al., 2014, p. 1273). First, territorial stigma, traditionally associated with poverty, the ethnic origin of subordinate immigrants, degraded housing, or unpunished immorality and street crime, has today partially become autonomous, taking on a specific and territorialized dimension linked to the reputation of the area. Secondly, this process has gradually become nationalized and democratized: a common point for nearly every global metropolis is the identification and public recognition of zones in the city described as no-go areas, impassable neighborhoods seen as "urban hells where violence, vice, and abandonment are part of the norm" (Wacquant 2010, p. 264). This sense of decay is widespread, not only by the social and cultural elites of contemporary cities but also by the entire citizenry, including the residents themselves, who have become active participants in their own fragmentation and removal from the rest of the "decent" city. In fact, the authors continue, the consequence of this widespread attitude is to portray these neighborhoods as places of perdition, spirals of social disintegration and debauchery. They become products of a hierarchical order, the result of a symbolic violence that separates them from the opposite pole of the norm, a sort of counter-world socially constructed in opposition to a caricatured narrative that pits "ghettos and slums" against "organized and orderly spaces" (Wacquant et al., 2014, p. 1274). This labeling brings us to the fourth dimension of the new spatial taint, what the authors call 'racialization through selective accentuation or selective prejudice' (Wacquant et al., 2014, p. 1274). As we will see more clearly throughout this chapter, a certain literature and a specific approach to scientific research, as well as

journalistic investigation, tend to exaggerate the more exotic and voyeuristic characteristics, intensifying tones and emphasizing the cultural nuances of differences. Thus, as we will see repeatedly staged in Vallette, 'episodes of deviance and violence within and around these areas are regularly sensationalized and attributed to alleged intrinsic sociocultural traits of the residents, who are thus labeled as outcasts' (Wacquant et al., 2014, p. 1274). The fifth and final characteristic of neighborhood stigma is linked to the reactions it provokes, often raising negative feelings about places of exclusion and punitive disciplinary attitudes driven by fear and moral condemnation. This way of approaching the neighborhood from the outside leads to demands for corrective interventions, calling for the resolution of the problem through the penal system and security responses to criminalize poverty. Wacquant, Slater, and Pereira (2014) propose recording and systematizing the different social and symbolic strategies provoked by reactions to territorial stigma. These vary from submissive attitudes to outright resistance in the form of challenges to denigration. The tendency to adopt one or the other strategy, as we will see in the course of our ethnography, depends on the trajectory along the social production path of individuals and the position they occupy in the physical and social space (Wacquant et al., 2014, p. 1275-1276).

However, contrary to what the authors claim, we are increasingly witnessing a new attitude related to an ambivalent fascination with the lower depths of the post-industrial city, particularly by a specific intellectual class. This is what Tim Strangleman (2013) referred to as "ruin porn," or the eroticization of rubble and decay. The new economic machinery of urban spectacularization and the aestheticization of decay is closely tied to the tourism industry that seeks a particular side of urban life. Indeed, more and more often, organized tours are held in notorious neighborhoods or dangerous favelas, or investigative journalistic documentaries are produced on YouTube featuring footage from slums in the third world, which have temporarily become mysterious places for a certain social voyeurism, discovering immorality, transgression, disinhibition, spaces of artistic inspiration, or venues for studying and analyzing the effects of deprivation. This brings us to how the spectacle of poverty is produced.

2.2.3 Cinema, photography, and suburbs

If we try to think, perhaps distractedly, about the prominent images that currently represent the periphery, we cannot ignore a newly rediscovered interest from parts of the cinema and publishing industries, which in recent years seem to have understood the aesthetic and commercial potential of the "other," the exotic, and the distant. Films, TV series, books, and even academic essays are

increasingly focused on narrating life in the contemporary periphery. Just in recent years, and only looking at Italian distribution, we've seen a succession of films such as *La paranza dei bambini* by Claudio Giovannesi and *Selfie* by Antonino Ferrente, which focus on the urban situation in Naples, and *La terra dell'abbastanza* and *Favolacce* by the D'Innocenzo brothers, which address the Roman context. Moreover, in the established tradition of French cinema focusing on peripheral areas, particularly those of Paris (it's impossible not to mention *La Haine* by Mathieu Kassovitz), there's been much talk about *Les Misérables* by Ladj Ly, *Gagarin* by Fanny Liatard and Jérémy Trouilh, and *Athena* by Romain Gavras, all of which are undoubtedly films of considerable directorial quality, but they share the same tendency to spectacularize urban life, particularly its margins. Since the beginning of the new millennium, audiovisual productions focusing on the periphery have intensified, prompting critics - particularly French critics - to speak of a new cinematic genre, and, if produced by authors or directors originating from peripheral contexts, of a new movement (Lago and Toni, 2024, p. 52).

The relationship between cinema and suburbs in Italy is nevertheless multifaceted, reflecting both the socio-cultural dynamics and the aesthetic representations of suburban life, reveals complex narratives of identity, marginalization, and socio-political dynamics. The historical cinematic representations of contested spaces such as Italian suburban complexity portrayed the duality of suburban life, often oscillating between idealized pastoral images and social realism. Popular films of second 20th century, as for exemple Pasolinis's Accattone or Luchino Visconti's Rocco e suoi Fratelli, have often been documented the socio-historical development of suburbs while also constructing and theorizing the stigmatized concept of *suburbia* (Huq, 2013). In fact, recent years have seen a growing branch of Italian cinemas playing a significant role in shaping and reflecting the perception of peripheires, often portraying them as spaces of violence, poverty, and contradiction. In fact, the international spread of emblematic toponyms used to indicate urban perdition has mainly passed through a pervasive action of music videos, the film industry, and literature. This was the case for the Bronx and, more recently, for Scampia, after the success of the *Gomorra* series. In this work, the portrayal of an archetype of the Scampia resident, linked to the stereotype of the camorrista (mobster)-outlaw-uncivilized person, immediately triggered protests from the residents of this neighborhood and, more generally, from Neapolitan citizens, who felt internationally labeled by such a one-dimensional overrepresentation. The proliferation of all these cultural products helps create a specific imagery of the periphery, which too often risks adhering to a singular semantic sphere. For the needs of spectacle, it is mostly reduced to stereotypical traits, almost always connected to derogatory concepts such as decay, criminality, abandonment, insecurity, delinquency, and incivility.

In *Spazi contesi. Cinema e Banlieu*, authors Paolo Lago and Gioacchino Toni (2024) discuss the *mise en scène* of the peripheries. In their book, they identify recurring characteristics that cinema, particularly in its portrayal of the *banlieue*, has heavily caricatured: the architectural clusters of public housing, a 'multicultural' population, and a *cité* depicted as a ghetto - a closed, cemented space. Alongside these, secondary elements are highlighted, such as street lifestyles involving drug trafficking, hip-hop culture, trap music, athletic clothing from certain brands - tracksuits, hoodies, sneakers - slang or *argot*, and clashes with the police (Lago and Toni, 2024, p. 53). The repetition of such stereotypical images has, on one hand, contributed to forming a repertoire that has solidified a new cinematic genre, but on the other hand, it has reinforced a media representation that criminalizes the inhabitants. These inhabitants are typically depicted as male, young, and deviant, while female characters are often relegated to the roles of mothers, guardians of compromised family units, or secondary figures, both in film plots and in the public sphere (Lago and Toni, 2024, p. 54).

As Walter Benjamin aptly pointed out in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, innovations in cinema and, especially, photography, unlike other art forms traditionally considered elitist and defined for centuries by the uniqueness of the work, are characterized by their innate reproducibility. In her brilliant essay *On Photography*, Susan Sontag (2004) argues that one of the reasons we are driven to capture images of reality is photography's ability to transform what is familiar into the unknown, while simultaneously making the unknown familiar and understandable. Sontag states that the difference between cinema and photography lies in the fact that, while in the flow of a film the images 'illuminate the walls, flicker, and disappear' (Sontag, 2004, p. 5, *my translation)*, photographs are the product of a subjective, light, and inexpensive act, aimed at accumulating and preserving the resulting images. Despite the abundance of images, we encounter daily, which may desensitize us, the author contends that photographs have shaped a new visual code, one that can influence our beliefs about what is worth looking at and what we have the right to observe (Sontag, 2004, p. 5, *my translation)*.

Even before cinema, photography served as a powerful medium for representing urban peripheries. Urban reportage from famous peripheral neighborhoods of the twentieth century can be found in the works of photographers like Helen Levitt, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Italian photographers Letizia Battaglia and Gabriele Basilico, or even in the broader concept of the periphery photographed by Steve McCurry. In talking about ghosts also the photographic work *I Travestiti. Fotografie a colore* by Lisetta Carmi, (1972 Essedi Editrice - Rome) is relevant to be mentioned. The protagonists of the portraits are transgender women, subjects of history never portrayed in photography, and at that time relegated to the margins of society, led a hidden life, invisible, also historically linked to the concept of decay and decorum. As is well-known, in reference to the emblematic verb used to define the act

of photographing, *to shoot*, Sontag argues that the camera is essentially a weapon used for acquisitive awareness. To photograph, in essence, means to appropriate the thing being photographed, establishing a relationship of knowledge and, therefore, of power with it (Sontag, 2004, p. 13). The snapshot is a passive and elusive act, and it is precisely the ubiquity of the photographic document that makes the photographic medium aggressive. In fact, even though, in a sense, the camera does actually capture reality and does not merely interpret it, photographs are an interpretation of the world just as much as paintings and drawings, and when it comes to the representation of peripheries, they are narrative tools that are not exempt from the dynamics described above.

Some authors have discussed a specific attitude towards the periphery that seems to prioritize sensationalism over understanding the underlying social phenomenon. This attitude has been described as *urban spelunking* (Strangleman, 2013), or, in our case, *suburban spelunking*, referring to journalists, photographers, and researchers: a particular category of "seekers" who delve into the most hidden parts of the city to find and report the juiciest scandals. These "spelunkers" (urban spelunkers) tend to focus on the more degrading and dramatic aspects of urban life, rediscovering and amplifying the darkness and misery of the peripheries, often without delving into the real social dynamics or living conditions of the people who inhabit them. In this way, their narrative often emphasizes exotica, transgression, and deviance, rather than exploring the structural causes behind these issues.

> There is something unseemingly or objectionable in middle-class urban explorers gaining pleasure from sites of working-class loss. Spelunking can be read as akin to dancing on a grave, an unthinking act of what can be seen as deeply meaningful, almost sacred place. [...] The class insensitivity [is] twice meted out by middle- and upper-class people on the working class - first in the process of closure, and second as post-industrial necrology. In both cases there is a violence being done, one class on another. (Strangleman, 2013, p. 29)

In this dangerous voyeuristic vice, these "archaeologists" often risk confusing the traces of misunderstandings created by their respective geographical and social distances with relics of a past working-class culture. They present these as the last remnants of urban misery and poverty, to be cataloged and documented in a naturalistic way. In a similar manner, the classic ethnographies in the history of anthropology described the peoples they encountered, crystallizing and simplifying cultural traits through the use of a historical present, without considering the positionality of both the researcher and the subject being studied: the Nuer do, the Nuer think, and so on. This approach often decontextualizes and reduces the complexity of the lives of the people being studied, presenting them as static and unchanging, disconnected from the dynamic, lived realities that shape them.

As we have seen, even the suburbs are portrayed and/or represented as urban otherness in dominant depictions, and in this way, they are trapped in the lower part of a hierarchical system of places that de-qualifies these neighborhoods, which are mostly described as spaces where "the urban pariahs of the late century" reside, where the "outcasts of the city" are relegated (Wacquant 2008: 29). In the history of anthropology, the attraction and production of the 'other' - distant, exotic - through the words of the researcher has been a delicate and much-discussed topic, not only in the past of our discipline. A foundational and revolutionary text regarding this type of academic-scientific attitude was *Orientalism*, the famous essay by Edward Said published in 1978, which aimed to change the ethical-methodological assumptions of ethnographic research, opening the way to a new field of study, the so-called cultural studies. This field focused on reconstructing critical knowledge about how power relations and hegemonic forms of knowledge produce and transmit forms of thought and cultural mechanisms profoundly shaped by them. Building on and reworking the ideas of Antonio Gramsci and Michel Foucault, Said's dense text demonstrates how the East is not the name of a geographic or cultural entity distinguishable by its characteristics, colors, smells, traditions, etc., but the product of a precise history - namely, the European intellectual history - that has shaped the description of others - the Orientals - through its own determinations and ideologies, reinforcing a complex system of stereotypical representations and romanticized images of smells, flavors, traditions, and colors. "'East' and 'West' are the product of human material and intellectual energies. Therefore, just like the West, the East is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, images, and language that have given it reality and presence for the West" (Said, 2013, p. 8, my translation) .The distinction between East and West is therefore interpreted as a tool of domination, an attempt by the West to control colonized territories through the symbolic domestication of their representation. However, Said continues:

> la struttura dell'orientalismo non è affatto una mera struttura di miti e bugie, che si dissolverebbe come nebbia spazzata dal vento appena la verità le venisse contrapposta. Personalmente, ritengo che l'orientalismo sia più veritiero in quanto espressione del dominio euroamericano che come discorso obiettivo sull'Oriente (come vorrebbe l'orientalismo accademico o comunque erudito) (Said, 2013, p. 9).

In a similar way, if thought of as a tool for intellectual colonization and a moment of domesticating the unknown aspects of the city, one can sometimes observe a knowledge of the suburbs produced by the same mechanisms born from unequal power relations, with similar mystifying, romanticizing, and at the same time dehumanizing characteristics. The expression 'invention of the underclass' refers to a line of thought connected to the so-called 'culture of poverty' theories (Mingione, 1996; Paone and Petrillo, 2016), which have crystallized stereotypes when observing social phenomena in marginal

spaces and subjects. As highlighted by various studies in opposition to the "miserabilist" views of these territories (Bourgois, 2005; Wacquant, 2010; Paone and Petrillo, 2016), the concept of underclass, far from being neutral, becomes a "linguistic construct," a container of judgments formulated by others, synonymous with "groups to be criminalized and stigmatized" (Paone, Petrillo 2016, p. 16). It can be summarized in a paternalistic-punitive tendency that, more evidently in the United States of the 1990s and 2000s, in relation to the reduction of social intervention and the unprecedented growth of the prison response inspired by neoliberal doctrines, has fueled "a political attitude of stigmatizing social marginality revolving around the distinction between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor"(De Giorgi, 2005, p. 6). Of the same nature have been the perspectives of the sociologists of the culture of poverty, a school of thought founded in the mid-20th century by the studies of Oscar Lewis (1966), particularly in *La Vida*, the famous ethnography of an extended Puerto Rican family. This group of researchers, mostly white intellectuals from middle-class backgrounds, have over the years produced an other-constructed and distorted view of poverty, shaped by a perceptible cultural distance. They theorized it as a set of attitudes, values, and practices of a subculture, the result of languages, ways of thinking, and behaviors typical of the subordinate classes passed down from generation to generation, but without the ability to question them. According to this school of thought, long criticized despite its long history of popularity and occasionally making a comeback in certain circles, there is ‘a defect of socialization among the poor that prevents them from sharing the dominant values’ (Bourgois 1989 in De Giorgi 2005, p. 10). Indeed, as Philippe Bourgois (2005) highlights in his famous ethnography of the 1990s New York City inner city of East Harlem, a classic example of a segregated urban space meant to contain the poor and dangerous minorities of the American metropolis, the culture of poverty is constructed primarily through a moralistic comparison with the hegemonic model of the so-called American way of life, which revolves around the values of individualism, self-assertion, and social mobility through work. In contrast, there is a subculture of the slums based on passivity, dependence on welfare, and resignation, in which the lives of the poor would serve as damning evidence of the link between deprivation and depravity (De Giorgi 2005, p. 8-9). In investigating the connection between structural, political, and symbolic violence against the inhabitants of East Harlem, Bourgois shows the violence exerted by "respectable" North America against the poor, distant and relegated to the districts of misery, through a systemic stigmatization of the ways and behaviors of street culture, considered inadequate in regulated environments, producing denigrating and racializing discourses and representations of urban poor people, opinions that the media constantly convey, influencing public opinion (De Giorgi 2005). As highlighted elsewhere (Morlicchio, 2012), the most discussed aspect of the culture of poverty concerns the supposed autonomy of this "syndrome" from the social context that allows its

generational transmission through the family (Morlicchio, 2012, p. 9, my translation). On this topic, Chiara Saraceno effectively points out that this line of thought is responsible for having produced "a theorization of the lifestyle of the poor as a culture and not as a specific reaction to an objective situation [...], an implicit moral and psychological denigration of the behavior of the poor" (Saraceno 1976 in Morlicchio 2012, p. 9, my translation).

How one looks at and speaks about the periphery is therefore not separate from the effect it has on the space under scrutiny. There exists both a literature and a visual production that reiterate the exoticizing, stigmatizing, and racializing rhetoric of the media and journalistic discourse.

The forms of power deployed in the scientific world, particularly symbolic power as formulated by Gramsci, relate to the ways in which domination and exclusion are produced. In the complex intertwining of processes of misrecognition, symbolic domination, and mystification typical of the scientific field, the task of criticism must be to produce knowledge capable of being a tool for the "unveiling" (Paolucci, 2002, p. 151) of the mechanisms that seek to reproduce forms of power:

> Il «misconoscimento» [...] per Bourdieu è il fatto di accettare quell'insieme di presupposti fondamentali, «pre-riflessivi», che gli agenti sociali fanno entrare in gioco quando si ritrovano a «prendere il mondo come ovvio» (Bourdieu, Wacquant, 1992: 169), e che porta a riprodurre le forme diffuse di «dominazione simbolica» e, insieme, le forme di legittimazione che possono giungere a quello che Spinoza indica come servitù volontaria[17] (Paolucci, 2002, p. 154).

It is precisely this particular mechanism of misrecognition that interests us when examining the group of researchers mentioned above, a concept capable of revealing, as we have seen, a specific form of symbolic violence that traces the division between the dominant and the dominated. Within this, the former produce forms of mystification and describe the "world as obvious," while the latter reiterate forms of legitimization of domination. The flaw of this literature is, in fact, that it takes for granted the common condition of every periphery, an abandoned world naturally afflicted by delinquency, insecurity, and decay. The habitus of the researchers and their positions, as Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 2003) would say, are then subjected and universalized, laying the foundation for the systematization of prejudice[18]. The result is a writing tainted by preconceived notions that, when put into self-

[17] The "misrecognition" [...] for Bourdieu is the act of accepting that set of fundamental, "pre-reflexive" assumptions that social agents bring into play when they find themselves "taking the world as obvious" (Bourdieu, Wacquant, 1992: 169), which leads to the reproduction of widespread forms of "symbolic domination" and, at the same time, the forms of legitimation that can lead to what Spinoza refers to as voluntary servitude

[18] For Bourdieu, the sociologist should be able to control the conditions that produce their knowledge, but also the predispositions that condition it, reducing themselves to the level of "an object of reflexivity through the objectification of oneself as an objectifying subject." In doing so, Bourdieu promotes a "sociology of sociological knowledge" as a way to construct an epistemological critique of one's own discipline. "The sociologist, then, as an 'agent' endowed with habitus and social capital, who has managed to enter the field, who 'engages' and acts by generating 'practices,' must

legitimating discourses and thus self-verifying, are justified, making their hypotheses match reality. Wacquant also records the tendency to favor certain registers when speaking about the periphery today, a language in which the writer paints the research field as a battlefield where "the martial rhetoric of war is intertwined with the racial vocabulary of postcolonialism" (Wacquant et al. 2014:, p. 1274). In fact, the author continues:

> Cultural differences are exaggerated to the point of turning into divergences, if not outright hostilities, with religion often serving as a "surreptitious agent of sedition," while the vulnerability of the positions of the classes is often ignored or underestimated (Wacquant, Slater and Pereira, 2014, p. 1274)

Along with us, Agostino Petrillo (2018) also suggests the importance of analyzing the words of the periphery, and specifically those discursive horizons distorted by value judgments that impact spaces and their uses. This is exactly what Pierre Bourdieu referred to as “effects of place” in *La misère du monde (Bourdieu, 1998)*, meaning the conversion of conceptual frames into cognitive parameters, which are easily visible where discourse, in this case, degrading discourse about the peripheries, has performative effects on places and the actors operating within them (Petrillo 2018). Indeed, as Petrillo continues, if we seek help from sociolinguistics, the periphery is produced by certain external discursive orders but also generates its own language, which, incorporated and normalized, becomes part of a strongly identity-forming lexicon that ties the community thus created to the territory of institutional abandonment and street life. Today, the definition of *banlieue* is based on historical connotations that have produced a singular image, that associated with poverty and social destruction, constructing and directing improper discourses from both a theoretical and empirical perspective. As Wacquant emphasizes, the thesis of the emergence of ghettos in the peripheries of European cities is based on a complete sociological contradiction:

> [Esso è] prodotto e perpetuato dall’ignoranza della realtà storica della città americana (il cui studio empirico è vantaggiosamente rimpiazzato dalla infinita ripetizione di clichés, che, condivisi come sono da giornalismo sensazionalista, pregiudizi dei politici, settori più mondani della ricerca, alla lunga finiscono per parere fondati su fatti) e da una tenace confusione tra ghettizzazione e differenziazione spaziale, segregazione residenziale, pauperizzazione economica, concentrazione degli stranieri e dei migranti, creazione di

question how much these are conditioned by their position in the field and the perception that arises from this very 'position,' occupied precisely because their habitus has predisposed them to act within a horizon of probable social positions" (Giannini 2013: 9).

> enclaves fisiche, degrado del costruito, violenza criminale (presi in seriatim o a grappolo)[19] (Wacquant 2010, p. 33-34).

Wacquant denounces the lack of a collective language specific to the periphery, which, not recognizing itself as an autonomous subject of speech, almost never speaks of itself with a common jargon (Wacquant 2010, p.: 35).

Thus, Cinema and photography have played a crucial role in shaping and reinforcing these representations, often oscillating between two extremes: romanticized aesthetics of decay or hyper-realistic portrayals of violence and social dysfunction. Films and photographic projects have sometimes contributed to the reproduction of an exoticized and alienating image of the periphery, emphasizing its "otherness" rather than exploring the lived experiences and cultural complexities of its inhabitants. However, in recent years, a growing body of independent and documentary cinema, as well as grassroots photographic initiatives, has sought to challenge these one-dimensional portrayals by offering counter-narratives that emerge from within the periphery itself. These works not only provide a more nuanced depiction of urban marginality but also serve as acts of resistance against hegemonic visual discourses.

This critical perspective challenges dominant narratives that perpetuate exclusion and misrepresentation, advocating instead for an analytical approach that acknowledges the agency of peripheral communities. By exposing the mechanisms of symbolic violence and the performative power of discourse, these studies call for a redefinition of the periphery - not as a passive, stigmatized space, but as a dynamic social and political entity capable of producing its own narratives. By reclaiming the right to representation, communities can challenge the symbolic domination imposed upon them and assert their presence as active subjects in the social and cultural landscape.

2.3 Atmosphere of 'degrado': from urban ghosts to phobocracy

As we have seen, narratives of territorial stigmatization, abandonment, and desolation evoke a set of perceptions, images, and stereotypical representations tied to urban spaces marked by poverty and social marginality. This is not merely a material condition - visible through decaying buildings,

[19] '[It is] produced and perpetuated by ignorance of the historical reality of the American city (whose empirical study is conveniently replaced by the endless repetition of clichés, which, being shared by sensationalist journalism, political prejudices, and more worldly sectors of research, eventually come to appear as if they were based on facts) and by a persistent confusion between ghettoization and spatial differentiation, residential segregation, economic pauperization, concentration of foreigners and migrants, creation of physical enclaves, decay of the built environment, and criminal violence (taken separately or in clusters)'

desolate streets, or crumbling infrastructure - but a cultural and symbolic construct, shaped both by what we have termed the politics of the unwanted and by dominant discourses that define these spaces.

This phenomenon is often amplified by the media and the aestheticization of misery in photography and cinema, generating a visual language of the periphery that oscillates between the picturesque and the menacing. Ruin porn, for instance, is a form of visual representation that turns urban decay into an object of aesthetic fascination, severing it from its social and political implications. At the same time, in certain cinematic and literary narratives, urban decline is transformed into a stage for violence - a dark, predetermined landscape that reinforces stereotypes of crime and deviance.

Such discourses often question a broader discussion on the relationship between aesthetics, public space, and politics.

This perspective aligns with the broader production of urban storytelling that employs a rhetoric of perceived order and aesthetic control of neighborhoods, linking these elements to discourses on livability and security. The origins of this way of thinking - and the subsequent model of urban intervention it inspired - can be traced back to the now-famous *"broken windows theory."*

Formulated in 1982 in a seminal essay by American political scientists J. Wilson and G. Kelling, this theory connected the visibility of disorder to the perception of insecurity. The authors drew upon a 1969 experiment conducted by social psychologist Philip Zimbardo. His research team abandoned two identical cars in different neighborhoods: one in an exclusive, affluent district of Palo Alto, California, and the other in the infamous Bronx, New York. According to the study, the car in the Bronx was quickly vandalized - within hours, its wheels were stolen, valuable parts stripped, and the vehicle further damaged. The car in Palo Alto, by contrast, remained untouched for days. However, when Zimbardo and his team decided to break one of its windows - hence the name of the theory - to test whether it would trigger vandalism, the car was soon damaged, even in this affluent neighborhood.

Within the field of critical urban studies, the *broken windows theory* has long been examined for its most problematic implications. To this day, it continues to shape public discourse in a deeply insidious way, largely because it is built on an appealingly simple premise: the myth that *"disorder begets disorder."* Wilson and Kelling believed that tackling the aesthetic and superficial aspects of urban decay would be enough to restore order and security to neighborhoods.

This theory took a decisive turn toward practical application in the 1990s under New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, who used it to justify punitive, criminalizing, and repressive interventions as part of the *Zero Tolerance* policy (Bukowski, 2019). In the years that followed, several studies publicly challenged and ultimately debunked the claims made by Wilson and Kelling. Yet, the theory remains

widely invoked as a justification for increased policing, particularly in so-called "degraded neighborhoods," where the belief persists that urban beautification - renovating abandoned buildings, decorating public flower beds, cleaning graffiti off walls, or removing trash from sidewalks - has a greater impact on quality of life than deeper structural interventions, such as improvements to public services, transportation, or maintenance, which are often severely lacking in these areas.

Even today, discussions around the use and reuse of public spaces frequently emphasize the need to create visually appealing, highly attractive environments. In the broader debate on the evolving practices and morphologies of contemporary public space - where usage seems increasingly transient and geared toward consumption - there is growing focus on the demand for spaces that are not only aesthetically pleasing but also tightly controlled, both socially and visually (Bianchetti, 2011; Raccanelli, 2022).

The association between the idea of dirt and the concept of disorder was extensively analyzed in the renowned 1966 text *Purity and Danger* by British anthropologist Mary Douglas (Douglas, 2011). In her study of purification rituals and symbolic systems, Douglas observed that what was deemed dirty was categorized as *out of place*. Any action taken toward it was therefore aimed at culturally restoring order. This suggests that the notion of *degrado*[20] is not merely a material or sensory issue but is deeply intertwined with cultural concepts of order and disorder.

Douglas explains that societies categorize the world through symbolic frameworks of purity and impurity, and these frameworks shape perceptions of what is acceptable or unacceptable within different social, cultural, and religious contexts. Indeed, the symbolic representation of what is associated with dirt, disorder, and decay often links these to broader ideas of inferiority, irresponsibility, and delinquency.

Following Tamar Pitch's (2013) historical analysis of the pairs *degrado-decoro* (degrado/decay-decorum/decency) in Italian public discourse, it becomes clear how this deeply moralistic prejudice against certain spaces and individuals has been produced and reinforced based on appearances. Pitch traces the origins of this rhetoric to the conservative and securitarian political positions of *berlusconismo* in the late 1990s, a period when these two terms gained widespread traction, particularly in reference to public behavior. In this context, individuals were classified as more or less *decorous*, effectively distinguishing between the '*per bene'* (*respectable)* and the 'per male' (*disreputable)* ways of inhabiting urban space (Pitch, 2013).

[20] Although the English translation of this term can be found in concepts such as *decay*, *degradation*, or *blight*, in agreement with other authors, I will use the Italian term throughout this thesis to emphasize the impossibility of disconnecting it from the Italian socio-political context. See, for example: (Pitch, 2013; Bukowski, 2019; Pavoni Andrea and D'Alba, 2024)

The aesthetic forms of order and disorder resonate with this kind of language, often evoking common perceptions that, within aesthetic studies, have been explained through the concept of *atmosphere*. The philosopher Gernot Böhme (2010) devoted much of his work to the study of atmospheres precisely because they offer a way to describe, with a certain degree of objectivity, the emotional perception of spaces.

Throughout the twentieth century, various attempts were made to define the affective dimension of spatiality - from Walter Benjamin's *aura* to the debated notions of *genius loci*, the *numinous*, or *Stimmung* (Napoleone, 2016). For Böhme, atmosphere is […] a space with *its own emotional tonality*, meaning that what we experience as an impression is, in reality, the *arrival* of a certain disposition of mind rather than merely our own internal state (Böhme, 2010, p. 84, *my translation, original emphasis*).

His work *Atmospheres, Ecstasies, Staging*, originally conceived as a collection of lectures titled *Aesthetics as a General Theory of Perception*, aimed at bringing about an epistemological shift beyond the Kantian tradition of aesthetic theory. Böhme sought to move past an *aesthetics of judgment*, which had long been confined to the domain of art criticism and reception, and instead redirect attention to the aesthetics of everyday life. For Böhme, aesthetics derives from the Greek *aisthesis*, meaning perception as a form of sensory knowledge - an understanding that passes through the senses. Atmosphere, then, is something that exists between an autonomous *I*(subject) and the surrounding space (object). It is a mode of perception that occurs in a *pre-dualistic* moment, before the perceiving subject and the perceived object become entirely distinct.

Atmosphere, therefore, neither belongs to nor solely concerns spaces and objects. To clarify this point, Böhme introduces the idea of a *quasi-objective* component that enables us to experience specific sensations, encountered as something external to ourselves through what he calls *ingression experiences* and *discrepancy experiences*. In the first case, atmosphere is something we immerse ourselves in: we enter a room and immediately feel its tense, welcoming, or somber ambiance. The experience of *discrepancy*, on the other hand, is even more striking - it occurs when atmospheric perception clashes with our internal state of mind.

It is essential to move beyond the dichotomy that suggests atmospheres are either imposed from above or spontaneously deduced. As anthropologist Lucilla Barchetta points out, 'atmospheres are fields of force in which different social bodies interact mutually, actively contributing to the orchestration of particular feelings' (Barchetta, 2021: 112).. They can be, at the same time, both subjective and personal while also mediated through collective experience (Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, 2015).

In the context of this thesis, which focuses on observing the aesthetic mechanism that drives the urban transformation of "unwanted" neighborhoods, the concept of atmosphere is not only intriguing in

itself, but also in its more productive dimension. As the title of the text suggests, Böhme does not solely concentrate on the theoretical-philosophical analysis of the concept but also examines its staging (Böhme, 2010). The author delves into what he calls the 'professionals of aesthetic labor,' such as designers, artists, architects, urban planners, and communicators. This refers to the sector of the aesthetic economy that produces the value of staging, connected to the creation of appearances and even the management of atmospheres.

According to this reading, it is possible to consider *degrado* as a container, a repository of sensations and impulses that tends to homogenize the experiences and impressions that certain categories of people capture while traversing spaces and places within the city (Brighenti and Pavoni, 2019; Barchetta, 2021). In particular, the atmospheres linked to degrado today play a key role in shaping and normalizing the political and affective rules of the so-called "phobocracy," the political management of fear. Degrado is thus seen as an omnipresent danger and threat, which transforms into a demand for security and control to regulate any deviant or disturbing behavior that threatens the aesthetic balance of public space. As anthropologist Lucilla Barchetta (2021) argues, the atmospheric rhetoric of degrado produces a depoliticizing and anesthetizing effect precisely because it pushes us to treat the abandoned or garbage-filled space as a place separate from the larger context. This prevents us from fully revealing the historical processes behind the logics of degrado and their connection to the destructive and repressive realities of extractive capitalism (Barchetta, 2021).

In their Urban Violence, geographers Andrea Pavoni e Simone Tulumello introduces the notion of atmospheric violence (Pavoni and Tulumello, 2023). Expanding the analysis of violence beyond traditional notions, the concept it is particularly relevant in urban settings, and underlines how urban environments can be manipulated to control populations through the management of atmospheres, rather than just through physical force. The control of atmospheres - through pollution, surveillance, and policing - reflects deeper societal issues and power dynamics (Pavoni and Tulumello, 2023).

Atmospheres indeed have an internal normative force; they are always connected to relations of power, aesthetics, and affect. In this sense, it is also important to focus on the dimension of their control - a series of practices and projects on urban spaces aimed at influencing, modifying, or taming atmospheres. These actions are primarily carried out by those we have defined above as 'professionals of aesthetic work'. . According to the Italian urbanist Cristina Bianchetti (2011), one of the main features of contemporary public space is its entire devotion to consumption and entertainment. In this sense, public space requires new attributes capable of building highly attractive and visually comfortable public spaces, designed to respond to a desire for security rather than a desire for interaction (Mitchell, 2003 in Semi, 2020 p. 219). In trying to mitigate the conflictual aspect implied in the twentieth-century idea of publicness, public space must be both socially and aesthetically

controlled (Bianchetti, 2011). Often these measures reflect policies and decisions of administrations that can choose what and who should be visible and not (Zukin, 1995: 7). This is also related to a typical attitude of the neo-liberal and securitarian city to assume that there is a correlation between increasing the creative population (Florida 2002) and producing a more *livable* city. How the neoliberal city reacts to and absorbs these demands is the subject of the next paragraph.

2.3.1 From Broken Windows to Painted Glass. How to Kill the Monsters: Urban Regeneration in the Neoliberal City

If in the past the aesthetic consumption of places was almost exclusively relegated to the central and productive areas of the city, over the last decade there has been a growing trend in promoting new regeneration projects devoted to the peripheries. In stigmatized areas of the city, such as peripheries, the idea of educating, domesticating, and civilizing plain areas is prominent in this transformation; artistic practices are presented as catalysts for the economic, social, and cultural development of the neighbourhood, promoting a greener, more sustainable and healthier environment. Thus, the aesthetic mechanism involved contributes to the social construction of beautiful and ugly, good and bad urban spaces, with the corresponding right and wrong citizens.
Niel Smith's seminal work on gentrification (1996) equated gentrification processes with a form of urban colonization, in which gentrifiers acquire the characteristics of good, civil middle classes who comply with social norms, conquer spaces of decay, and improve uncivilized, deviant, and poor neighbourhoods.

> As new frontier, the gentrifying city since the 1980s has been oozing with optimism. Hostile landscapes are regenerated, cleansed, reinfused with middle-class sensibility; real estate values soar; yuppies consume; elite gentility is democratized in mass-produced styles of distinction. So what's not to like? The contradictions of the actual frontier are not entirely eradicated in this imagery but they are smoothed into an acceptable groove (Smith, 1996 12).

Therefore, certain beautification operations can be interpreted as forms of aesthetic neocolonialism, wherein images of an urbanity that are usually intended to be reproduced reflect the expectations of a seductive imaginary of a productive, successful and, particularly in Italy, white middle class, often representing the main (sometimes the only) target audience of these projects.

Today's urban governance prefers to replace the demolition model, seen in examples like Barcelona's Olympics in the early 1990s, with a more progressive attitude devoted to urban regeneration, often

reduced to aesthetic transformations. In fact, an amount of very common and recurring urban renewal practice have been planned to ensue in stigmatized public urban spaces, playing a central role in *beautification*.
In his paper Emanuele Guano observe the intersection between neoliberal aesthetics, redevelopment project and community activism. In the discussion, the author critiques the broader context of neoliberal urbanism, which often prioritizes economic growth and aesthetic consumption over community needs, suggesting that while the aestheticization of urban spaces can be co-opted by developers, it can also serve as a tool for grassroots movements to assert their rights and influence the future of their neighborhoods.

In fact, in the context of the neoliberal city, urban regeneration operates mostly focusing on the shift from the theory of "broken windows" to newer methods of visual intervention. The process of urban renewal is often framed not just as a physical transformation, but as a strategic aesthetic project, deeply embedded in neoliberal values of control, security, and profit generation. The neoliberal city, as it seeks to manage disorder, precariousness, and visible signs of decay, deploys a variety of tools, both symbolic and material, to reconfigure spaces and subjectivities. This reorganization of space, through policies like “zero tolerance” in the past and gentrification in the present, works to reshape marginalized neighborhoods not merely by addressing the structural causes of poverty or inequality, but by altering perceptions through aesthetic interventions.

Just to give an example of neoliberal aesthetic attitudes, one could be found in street art project as urban renewal model. Traditionally viewed as a deviant artistic form, subject to ongoing lively controversies, conflicts and oppositions (Dal Lago and Giordano, 2016), the institutionalization and re-functionalization of urban art in the framework of an aesthetic economy and its connection with urban redevelopment interventions in stigmatized neighbourhoods. Street art today has entered into a productive machine of symbols and space, spreading a specific urban aesthetic and atmosphere, found from New York to Cape Town to Naples, yet potentially reflecting certain class expectations. Murals, covering entire facades of public housing, are linked to the evidence and erasure ghosts and monsters, and in particular the recognizability of social classes, or, as Wolf Bukowski said, the “visibility of poverty” (Bukowski, 2019 p. 15). But why should a street art mural improve the space and life of the residents? Isn’t it primarily a very simplistic way to create new economic value also from the popular areas of the city? Top-down street art interventions in urban peripheries, distanced from the urban subculture from which they were born (Dal Lago, Giordano, 2016), may contribute to the objectification and commodification of the associated urban space (Boltanski, Esquerre, 2019). In this context, street art becomes an instrument of governance and a tool for urban transformation

easily manipulated by urban planners: through interventions on surfaces and on external appearances of structures, quicker and less expensive than other deeper structural operations, the city can attract tourists and new inhabitants in brand new beautified redeveloped neighbourhoods. Such artworks may be enjoyed by adventurers who consume the associated public space. Consequently, the push for beautification techniques of public space becomes a new field of reproduction of inequalities, "placing individuals, territories and objects before the imperative of aesthetic performance as a guarantee of potential enrichment" (Semi, 2018, p. 90, personal translation). Through this new wave of regeneration, what is often masked is the underlying economic and social disenfranchisement. Urban spaces are cleaned and repackaged to cater to new markets, typically leaving those who have inhabited these spaces for generations either displaced or marginalized. The function of such interventions is not only to beautify or revitalize but to create a palatable image for external investors and new residents, while subtly controlling the marginalized communities that remain. It becomes a practice of maintaining the status quo under the guise of progress, where the visual transformation of space becomes an effective tool for social and political control.

Indeed, as already emphasized in the first chapter, this is a cosmetic vision that operates on certain practices by making them invisible, and on others by hyper-visibility. In this way, the implicit construction, by contrast, of the space to be cleaned, beautified, and saved, as what is considered a dangerous space, has justified and legitimized other types of practices: images of orderly and clean spaces often obscure the violent and repressive interventions of the police, once again shifting the focus onto the plane of aesthetic control.

Following Jacques Rancière's partition of the sensible (2022), is organized by a political system that determines what can legitimately be seen, heard, perceived, and considered relevant, and what must instead be sidelined, this implies an implicit hierarchy of perceptions and sensations that reflects existing power inequalities in society and, in doing so, reproduces them. However, Rancière calls for a further step in the critical reflection on aesthetic and cultural practices, suggesting that forms of expression considered marginal, or inferior can challenge and destabilize the dominant power hierarchies, opening spaces for new forms of politics and emancipation.

Indeed, while the aesthetics of *degrado* often provoke essentialization and paralysis, this should not be interpreted as a completely passive attitude: the landscape of decay can be negotiated in radically different ways by heterogeneous subjects.

In the following ethnographic chapters, I will employ the figure of urban ghosts and monsters and its related ghostbusters for analyze the materiality and immateriality of the wanted and unwanted in Milan, and in particularly in Corvetto neighborhood, often involving emotions of fear and scare that

makes some places collectively recognized as spectral. Within this metaphor, I will reflect on how the process of ‘camouflaging the unwanted’ is often founded on what must be removed. Stressing the relevance on the theme of the fragment and waste, I will look at the relationship between memory and history (Benjamin 2007), focusing on how frequently the aesthetic valorization of urban space act by selecting some memories and erasing others.

CHAPTER III
Milan is ugly

3.1 Rebranding Milan: death and rebirth of a city through its narratives



Figura 1 -The Duomo of Milan shrouded in fog

Source: https://tresequenze.com/2022/03/20/milano-e-la-sua-nebbia/

Milan has often been portrayed and perceived as an unappealing, introverted city, frequently at odds with the more romantic image the world tends to associate with Italy, derived from other, more renowned tourist destinations. From the immediate post-war period through the years of the economic

boom, the twentieth-century national imagination came to depict Milan as a cold, grey, post-industrial city, particularly so in its peripheral neighborhoods, perpetually enveloped in fog.

The cliché of the late-century metropolis painted Milan as a city of office skyscrapers cloaked in factory smoke, inhabited by blue-collar workers in overalls and stiff clerks who, come six o'clock, would cross paths on trams, cracking open the local paper *La Notte del Corriere* to its crime section. In winter, thick banks of fog compounded the city's already somber atmosphere, mingling with the smoke from factories and coal-fired boilers that blackened the façades of buildings.

Iconic films that would later be recognized as pillars of neorealism, *Rocco e i suoi fratelli* by Luchino Visconti, *Miracolo a Milano* by Vittorio De Sica, and *Milano Nera*, based on Pasolini's screenplay *La Nebbiosa*, portrayed a city full of contradictions: a place marked by migration, new forms of wealth and exclusion, crime, and rapid industrialization. The same anguished yet alluring Milan appeared in Bianciardi's *La Vita Agra*, in the crime novels set in Giorgio Scerbanenco's Milan, and in the stories collected in Carlo Emilio Gadda's *L'Adalgisa. Disegni Milanesi*. On stage, it was brought to life in the colossal and still resonant *El Nost Milan*, where desperate and humiliated souls wandered through foggy fairgrounds, dismal soup kitchens, and rundown dormitories, echoing the pale, desperate outskirts brought to life in the invented language of Giovanni Testori's *L'Arialda*.

In *Milano dopo il miracolo. Biografia di una città,* British historian John Foot (2003) wrote that 'Milan is universally considered an ugly city: its beauty is hidden, private, to be found behind closed doors, inner courts, the few humble squares' (Foot, 2003: 14, *my tranlsation*). The book traces some of the key developments that turned Milan into a central actor in Italy's postwar social, political, and economic transformation. Foot observes: 'It would be interesting to explore more deeply the psyche of a city whose identity seems to be defined, both physically and meteorologically, by its inability to be seen' (Foot, 2003: 14, *my tranlsation*).

In the metropolis of the economic boom, the tense atmosphere of the so-called 'years of lead'[21] and the memory of deserted streets at dinnertime were quickly overshadowed by the glossy, image-driven *Milano da Bere* - the city of *aperitif* and ostentatious nightlife, shaped by the rise of the fashion and marketing industries (Foot, 2003). Even as Milan began to embody what would later become the full expression of the Italian neoliberal city - with the launch of major urban redevelopment projects in former industrial zones, such as the Bicocca district in the early 1990s - the city continued to be narrated primarily as a place for work or consumption. This framing saw little variation until the early 2000s, by which time the post-industrial imaginary no longer aligned with Milan's urban reality, much as the older narratives had failed to account for the everyday life of more alternative urban environments, such as those shaped by artistic and political movements since 1968.

[21] A period of political violence and social upheaval in Italy, from the late 1960s until the late 1980s.

Between an urban economy increasingly driven by real estate speculation and the intensification of privatization processes - with growing neglect of public city spaces in favor of attracting major corporations and international capital - Milan progressively took on the contours of a financial metropolis.

In *L'ultima Milano*, authors Jacopo Lareno and Alice Ranzini (Lareno Faccini and Ranzini, 2021) reconstruct the city's urban history over the past three decades. They describe Milan in the 1990s as a city in crisis: although it had emerged relatively successfully from its industrial phase and was transitioning toward a tertiary economy in which it was beginning to assert itself as a driving force, it still struggled to gain recognition as a major metropolitan center within the European context. This was due in part to the fact that the city's deindustrialization process had been largely delegated to private actors, implemented through a set of political tools referred to in urban planning as "negotiated" instruments - mechanisms by which public and private actors engage in negotiation, and which initiated the transformation of large urban surfaces (Lareno Faccini and Ranzini, 2021).

This transformation particularly affected peripheral areas, where vast former industrial sites became the focus of large-scale development operations. But similar processes also occurred on a smaller scale, within more central parts of the city (Mazzette, 2009). In this way, fragments of the city were produced where the public sector, while promoting urban transformation, effectively withdrew from its role in governing these spaces, ceding the coordinating role it should have held to local private actors - who thus came to play a central role in Milan's urban governance during that period.

From the early 1990s through the 2000s, this development model - focused primarily on private residential construction and the expansion of large retail surfaces (mainly supermarkets) - was shaped by a narrow vision of what urban life could entail. It drove the growth of the real estate market, which at the time was led by local real estate firms, unlike today. These were the years of Salvatore Ligresti, a well-known figure in Milan's urban affairs, particularly for the real estate empire he had built (Lareno Faccini and Ranzini, 2021).

At the same time, the successive right-wing administrations had heavily emphasized issues of urban decorum and security. The city was progressively replacing open green public spaces with fenced areas and investing in surveillance systems, at a time when various cultural and countercultural movements were being actively repressed (Lareno Faccini and Ranzini, 2021). These dynamics delivered, on the threshold of the new millennium, a city that had become increasingly inward-looking - struggling to keep pace with its European metropolitan counterparts and continuing to lose residents. By the early 2000s, Milan had reached its lowest population point, with just 1.2 million inhabitants.

The city was particularly losing young people and couples, who were moving beyond municipal boundaries in search of more affordable housing - already unaffordable for many within the city itself. This trend ignited broader debates around youth autonomy and the so-called *youth issue*, which would later be further intensified by the fallout from the 2008 economic crisis.

In this somewhat disheartened climate - and partly in an effort to distance itself from the persistent, heavy image of Milan as a harsh, grey city - the municipal government began, in the early 2000s, to promote a major rebranding campaign. This initiative focused on crafting and disseminating a new image of Milan as a welcoming and vibrant metropolis (Tozzi, 2023). It was a city preparing for the landmark event of Expo 2015, a moment often referred to as the "Renaissance of Milan." Indeed, the launch of the machinery behind the major event marked a significant acceleration in the broader process of urban transformation - one that is still ongoing today (Maggioni and Off Topic, 2013; Tozzi, 2023). From that moment on, efforts in Milan focused on creating and revitalizing a range of cultural institutions with the aim of promoting placemaking policies, particularly in the cultural sphere, to attract creative economies and professions, as well as tourists and entertainment industries - especially those linked to event production.

The investment in Milan's new creative economy has led to the dominant presence of large private cultural institutions, which have become key partners in the city's economic and tourism development. In this dynamic, the public sector has largely played a secondary role (D'Ovidio, 2016; D'Ovidio and Cossu, 2017). While the narrative of Milan as an ugly and unattractive city has not entirely disappeared[22], a significant symbolic effort in rebranding and urban marketing has sought to project a new image: that of a creative, increasingly vibrant, smart, and green city. These two narratives - only seemingly contradictory - still coexist today and reflect, in part, the local workings of the aesthetic mechanism that contributes to constructing the image of an attractive global metropolis (Raccanelli, 2023a).

The Milan we know today - the city of themed "weeks" and major events, with a skyline that stretches from the *Bosco Verticale*, past the sharp-edged skyscraper of Piazza Gae Aulenti, and from the golden nape of the Madonnina to the "*Tre Torri*" associated with popular influencers such as Fedez and Chiara Ferragni (designed by architects Arata Isozaki, Daniel Libeskind, and Zaha Hadid) - is also the product of a massive communication strategy. In her essay *L'invenzione di Milano*, Lucia Tozzi argues, as the title suggests, that this image is the result of a powerful marketing operation, constructed through the strategic deployment of new narratives and visual representations. Tozzi focuses particularly on the entanglement of art, market forces, and marketing in a city that adopted

[22] For example, in this article from June 2021: Antonio Chimenti, *Milano è brutta*, Milano città stato, 27 giugno 2021 https://www.milanocittastato.it/opinioni/milano-e-brutta/

"*Milano non si ferma"* ("Milan doesn't stop") as its unofficial motto, where the imperative of change has long guided economic logics. Her book shows how cities use vibrant symbols and catchy slogans to reshape their identities and attract tourists and new residents - often in ways that obscure the more mundane, less spectacular everyday experiences of long-term inhabitants.

By examining the impact of neoliberal policies on urban space, Tozzi questions the optimism and widespread consensus - at least from the top down - that accompanied the set of policies and practices commonly referred to as the so-called Milan Model. To explain the scarcity or marginalization of dissenting voices, she traces the history of processes that have progressively neutralized critical perspectives, from the depoliticization of the third sector to the complicity of Milan's cultural production - ranging from theater to contemporary art and media (Tozzi, 2023).

To convey Milan's new cultural identity, specific marketing strategies were planned to drive city branding operations - that is, the set of activities aimed at transforming a city from a *place* into a *destination*, creating a true brand that can be extended and commodified across various urban opportunities and services. Starting in the years just before Expo, Milan intensified the organization and promotion of specific urban initiatives - such as bike lanes and coworking spaces - contributing to the rhetoric of the smart city. At the same time, the city's cultural landscape was shaped by a proliferation of events and festivals across multiple sectors of the creative economy: from longstanding industries like fashion and design to more recent fields such as contemporary art and literature.

These initiatives have often been criticized for targeting tourists and visitors more than residents - a dynamic commonly referred to as *eventification* or the *festivalization* of urban life. Furthermore - and this will prove significant in relation to the processes and interests currently shaping Corvetto - as highlighted in the recent research report *Milano ReMapped*[23], which focuses on the independent art scene, Milan has also invested in the development of various so-called *creative districts*. These are largely private initiatives supported by political strategies aimed at concentrating within the same area a mix of cultural infrastructures - such as galleries, museums, artist studios - and artistic events, including urban performances, public art projects, and festivals.

[23] "Milano Re-Mapped: Culture, Territory, and Citizenship" is a project I took part in as a member of the research group between 2022 and 2024. It was carried out by the Department of Sociology and Social Research at the University of Milano-Bicocca under the guidance of Professor Marianna D'Ovidio, in collaboration with Pirelli HangarBicocca and supported by Fondazione Cariplo. The project aimed to foster critical reflection and dialogue between the city's diverse independent actors and its cultural institutions.
To explore the project (accessed on 22/03/2025):
https://bicoccaresearch.unimib.it/impatto-locale/milano-re-mapped-cultura-territorio-cittadinanza/

As we have seen, the last two decades of political decision-making in Milan have been marked by a fairly consistent effort to continue the city's process of spectacularization - what some have called *Disneyfication* (Semi, 2015). This trajectory is closely linked to the onset and increasingly widespread diffusion of gentrification processes, beginning in the Isola district and gradually extending to areas such as Chinatown, the newly branded *North of Loreto* (including Via Padova), and now progressively reaching the city's outer peripheries.

At the same time, sociologists Veronica Conte and Guido Anselmi, drawing on the literature on *growth machines* and *urban regimes*, have observed Milan's transformation into an increasingly global city - though not yet on par with London or Paris - and the growing financialization of its urban governance, shaped by power relations (Conte and Anselmi, 2022). The authors analyze Milan's financial regime, within which public authorities delegate control over parts of the city to private actors, thereby legitimizing growth machines driven by large-scale capital investment. Their study focuses on two flagship projects emblematic of this new phase: Porta Nuova and CityLife (Conte and Anselmi, 2022). To these, we might now add the large-scale real estate developments currently underway at the Porta Romana rail yard and in Rogoredo, which will be examined more closely in the following section (see 3.2).

In her essay, Lucia Tozzi examines the impacts of these large-scale investments on Milan's image and identity, such as the privatization of public spaces, the expulsive nature of urban transformation, and the ever-increasing unsustainability of living costs. She primarily urges policymakers and urban planners to consider the underlying social issues, including growing inequalities and the precariousness of urban life (Semi, 2015; Manzo, 2023; Tozzi, 2023).

After thirty years of demographic decline, starting with Expo 2015, Milan experienced a demographic upswing, surpassing the threshold of 1.3 million inhabitants, with the 2021 census recording an 8.7% increase. Some scholars, however, have noted not only a growth in population but also a change in its composition: approximately 300,000 residents over fifty have left the city, while around 400,000 under forty have moved in, particularly students. This is a significant finding that reveals much about a city gaining a largely transient population, while losing those in working and retirement age groups - likely the segment of residents no longer able to afford Milan's rising living costs.

Over the past three years, the debate around housing issues and the housing crisis in Milan has exploded within the city's public discourse. Much has been said about the so-called "Milan Model," and the forced optimism that once surrounded the concept has begun to crack. Today, the idea that this model is the only viable alternative to the failing governments of other major Italian cities has started to unravel, shifting attention toward the negative consequences and impact on the right to the city (Tozzi, 2023).

A particularly significant moment occurred during what became known as the "tent protest," which drew national attention to Milan. On May 3rd, 2023, a student pitched a tent outside the Politecnico of Milan to protest rising rents and a cost of living far higher than the average in other large Italian cities. Of course, Milan is not the only city experiencing the fallout of the housing crisis - anyone who has tried to find a room in a major urban center has likely faced unreasonably inflated listings or offers that border on unacceptable.

This situation arises when a significant portion of the housing stock is taken off the rental market due to a large number of vacant or unassigned properties, both private and public - Milan currently has over sixteen thousand public housing units left unassigned[24] - combined with the rise of short-term rentals catering to the tourism industry and the increasing student population occupying much of the remaining available rental units.

Data from the Affordable Housing Observatory shows that from 2015 to 2022, over 10,000 families were evicted in Milan, a city that offers no alternatives for those unable to afford private rental housing. The availability of public housing is far too limited compared to demand: in 2022, nearly 37,000 families applied for assistance, while only 1,523 units were put up for offer and 1,297 assigned (Bricocoli, Peverini and Caresana, 2025)**.** The consequences fall primarily on single-income families, students, and precarious young people, who increasingly share experiences of widespread housing instability.

3.1.1 Isola and Chinatown: Two Precedents in Milan

The spectacle of the new Milan can be summed up through the stories of two historic neighborhoods: Isola first, and then Chinatown - among the earliest cases of gentrification in Milan and Italy. These neighborhoods anticipate and, in some ways, reveal the dynamics of power and interest that hint at what Corvetto's future might hold.

The transformation of the Isola district has a long history, dating back to the 1960s when considering the adjacent areas of Brera and Garibaldi. Isola is just one of several Milanese neighborhoods that have been progressively reshaped to cater to increasingly affluent residents, culminating in its current identity closely tied to the city's luxury segment.

Those who still remember Isola before the 2000s tend to associate the neighborhood with a working-class and artisan past, characterized by the typical "ringhiera" houses and popular housing blocks that helped reinforce the myth of Isola as a neighborhood with a strong sense of belonging for those born

[24]Case popolari vuote, a Milano sono oltre 16mila: 50mila in tutta la Lombardia, 20 luglio 2024 (last accessed on 21/3/2025) https://www.immobiliare.it/news/vivere-a/milano/case-popolari-vuote-a-milano-sono-oltre-16mila-50mila-in-tutta-la-lombardia-221005/

and raised there, who also lived through the years of Milan's criminal underworld (Caselli and Ferreri, 2013; Semi, 2015, p. 156).

A key turning point in the transformation of Isola was the demolition of the *Stecca degli Artigiani* in 2007, a former industrial building occupied by a group of artisans who, in the 1980s, had opposed the demolition plan mandated by the 1972 Master Plan. This event marked the end of a period of political activism and opened the way to negotiations between the parties, leading to the abandonment of resistance against real estate speculation (Caselli and Ferreri, 2013).

The second turning point was undoubtedly the arrival of the 'Porta Nuova' project, a masterplan covering an area of over 290,000 square meters, led by about twenty international architecture firms, designed by world-famous star architects, and, as one of the first examples of this type of real estate development in the city, financed by multinational investment funds. It was ultimately acquired in 2015 by the Qatar Investment Authority fund of Emir Al-Thani (Semi, 2015, p. 162). According to what is called in the literature *new-build gentrification*, the gradual rise of the Porta Nuova towers accelerated the simultaneous erosion of the residents' rights in Isola to produce and appropriate lived-in spaces, which came into conflict with the spaces imagined for the tastes and aspirations of an increasingly affluent social class shaping and homogenizing the demands to which the new neighborhood had to conform (Caselli and Ferreri, 2013, p. 361).

Even within the heart of the Chinatown neighborhood, on Via Paolo Sarpi, episodes of conflict and resistance against advanced gentrification have occurred, similar to those in Isola. In her ethnographic research in this area, sociologist Lidia Katia C. Manzo focused on the relationship between migratory flows and urban transformations, seeking to understand the ways and outcomes of the territorialization of difference, particularly emphasizing processes of valorization built on the consumption and aestheticization of diversity - a key concept in her work. (Manzo, 2016, 2023).

By attempting to understand the roles played by various stakeholders in the gentrification process - local government, residents, entrepreneurs, and other key actors - the research examined the economic interests and market forces shaping the urban landscape, particularly that of Via Paolo Sarpi. The case of its pedestrianization is significant in this regard.

Known as *El bôrgh di scigôlatt*, the gardeners' borough, it was a working-class area dense with small shops, where living costs were low, and since the early 20th century it had been hosting an increasing number of internal migrants (Manzo, 2016, p. 33). Although the first presence of the Chinese migrant community dates back to the 1920s, it was only in the 1990s that the gradual replacement of small neighborhood shops with Chinese retail and wholesale businesses began.

This is a neighborhood where tensions have often concentrated and erupted, especially after years of fear-mongering rhetoric and not-so-subtly discriminatory policies carried out by right-wing

administrations, mostly targeting multicultural neighborhoods. Starting from 2010, although the change of administration seemed to open a new political phase, it does not appear to have succeeded in its goals of social cohesion (Manzo, 2016, p. 36). Political interests in this neighborhood, which is fairly close to the city center and had gained considerable value, were becoming aware of its attractive potential in terms of local and tourist consumption. Thus, under the motto "*Via Sarpi becomes beautiful",* the pedestrian restyling project of the street was completed in 2011.
With data in hand, the opening of the pedestrian street has multiplied retail and restaurant businesses run by Chinese entrepreneurs, accompanied by a connected increase in cultural initiatives and events, such as the Chinese New Year celebration or projects like "*Arte in Sarpi*" and "*Jazz in Sarpi*," while the presence of wholesale activities has drastically declined (Manzo, 2016, p. 40). Manzo writes:

> The old post-war productive/manufacturing vocation is now being replaced by a new type of production, that of the "cultural" kind. Through a constant process of "aestheticization," the Canonica-Sarpi neighborhood is becoming an increasingly attractive place for the creative and entertainment industries. The pedestrianization seems to have metaphorically changed the "skin and soul" of Sarpi (Manzo, 2016, p. 40, my translation).

3.2 Corvetto, South Milan. A Brief History of the Neighborhood

Once an agricultural landscape up until the early twentieth century, Corvetto is one of those peripheral districts that emerged as part of Milan's early urban expansion, shaped by a strong public and working-class character. Its development was closely tied to the forces of industrialization and the mass urbanization they triggered. Today, Corvetto encompasses what the City of Milan defines as the *Nucleo di Identità Locale* (NIL) Lodi-Corvetto, which corresponds to the outer south-western section of Milan's Municipality 4. The area now covers approximately 3.64 square kilometers, stretching southward from Piazzale Lodi. It borders Porta Romana to the north, Calvairate to the east, runs along Via Ripamonti to the west, and opens out into the countryside to the south. This is precisely one of the features that makes Corvetto so appealing, despite its continued marginality. Just a few kilometers from Milan's city center, and only five metro stops from the Duomo - as residents, local associations, and real estate developers are all keen to point out - Corvetto also marks, in a very real sense, the edge of the city. The urban planning restriction introduced in the 1990s, which preserved vast agricultural fields in southern Milan, today formalized as the *Parco Agricolo Sud*, has helped

maintain the green belt stretching beyond the neighborhood toward Chiaravalle[25]. As will be discussed in the ethnographic chapters, this includes areas such as the *Parco di Porto di Mare* and *Parco della Vettabbia*.

Today, the neighborhood is home to approximately 37,184 residents, around 10,000 of whom are foreign nationals, a number that has steadily increased over the years[26]. As is often the case with peripheral neighborhoods, Corvetto's relative isolation has been shaped by both its agricultural border to the south and a set of infrastructural barriers. To the north, the Porta Romana train station once marked the transition to the more affluent parts of the city, while to the south and east, the *Autostrada del Sole* and the railway tracks leading to Rogoredo station still delineate the beginning of the countryside and the Milanese hinterland.

To take a step forward in the urban history of this neighbourhood and arrive fully equipped with the necessary context to understand contemporary Corvetto, it is first essential to take a step back.

Like every major industrial city of the last century, Milan expanded continuously, its physical form growing alongside its inhabitants. The first significant urban aggregation of the territories that now make up the city took place in 1853, in what Milanese historians refer to as the integration of the *Corpi Santi*. These were so named because, following the prohibition of burying the dead within the city walls, they were designated areas for cemeteries - the *campi santi*, or “holy grounds” (Bracco, 2023). In reality, these were already urbanised areas that had grown since the 17th century around the medieval walls, a boundary now visible only in the remnants of the ancient city gates, or *Porte*. Some of these gates still lend their names to entire neighbourhoods, such as Porta Venezia, Porta Genova, or Porta Romana (Bracco, 2023)

The portion of urban territory that today includes Corvetto was incorporated into the city of Milan only a century ago, during what is remembered as the second major annexation, in 1923. This was when eleven additional municipalities were absorbed, municipalities that today constitute many of the outermost neighbourhoods of Milan, such as Affori, Crescenzago, Lambrate, Chiaravalle, and Baggio. Unlike the *Corpi Santi*, which were mainly agricultural fields and farmsteads relative to the walled city, these were actual towns, often densely populated, with their own sometimes centuries-old histories and well-established political structures (Bracco, 2023).

[25] Chiaravalle, also known as 'Chiaravalle Milanese', is a neighborhood located on the southern outskirts of Milan. Although it belongs to a different Municipality than Corvetto, the two neighborhoods are closely connected due to their proximity. In fact, Chiaravalle lies just beyond the Parco della Vettabbia, and the closest access point to the city of Milan is precisely through the Corvetto district

[26] Data from 12/31/2024 (SISI Comune di Milano)

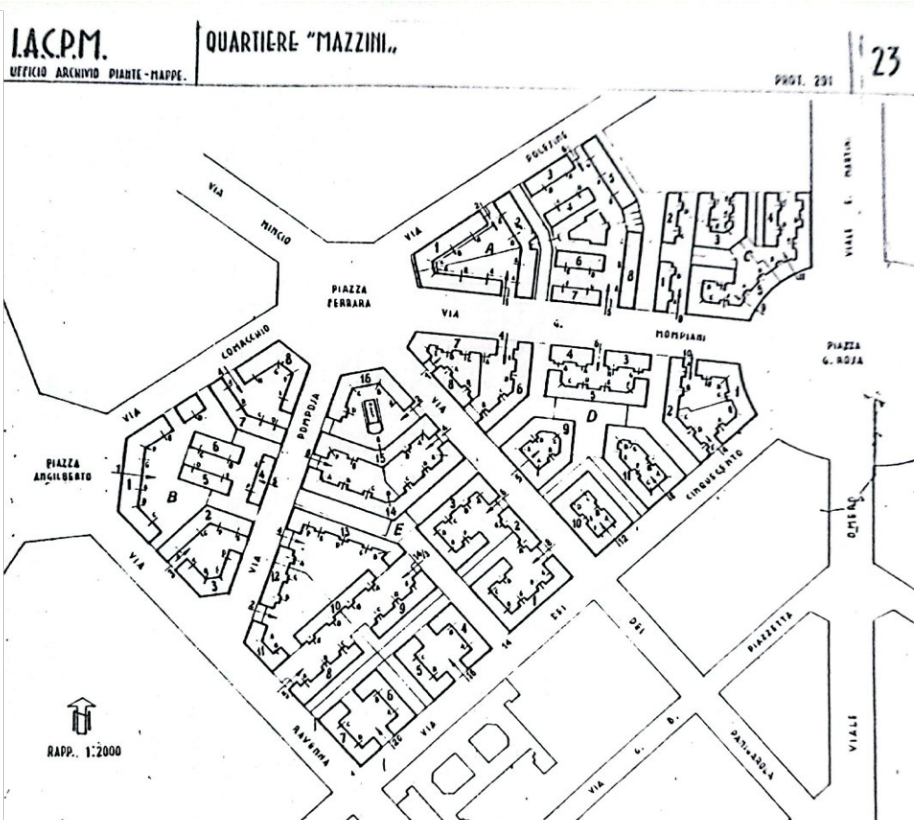


Figura 2 - Quartiere Mazzini plan - Source: Iosa, 1986

This, however, was not the case for Corvetto. In 1923, the area was still in the process of completing the newly built neighborhood of the *Istituto Autonomo delle Case Popolari*, known as the Quartiere Regina Elena (today called Quartiere Mazzini). It was one of the first examples of public housing (*Edilizia Residenziale Pubblica*) of its kind in Italy, and the largest in the country during the interwar period, with a total of 2,784 housing units at the time of its inauguration. The development was built on a vast, still-unurbanized agricultural area (Iosa, 1986, p. 192). Following the incorporation of the surrounding municipalities, Milan began to face a growing housing crisis, driven by an expanding industrial sector and a rapidly increasing suburban, mostly working-class population. Moreover, the Universal Exposition held in Milan in 1906, much like the later Expo nearly a century later, had accelerated the city's urbanization and transformation. In those years of the *Greater Milan*, Mussolini saw the city as the embodiment of modern Fascism: international, efficient, enterprising, innovative in its urban planning, and at the forefront of geographical expansion (Bracco, 2023, p. 28). And so, even in its outskirts, construction began on what was intended to be a new neighborhood designed to house “the poor and the very poor” (Iosa, 1986). Organized into four large trapezoidal blocks that open southward from Piazzale Ferrara, the Mazzini housing district still displays today its solid façades, adorned along the cornices with early-20th-century decorative motifs typical of popular architecture of the time.

> Corvetto looks all the same, but it's not entirely uniform. When they built the Mazzini neighborhood, someone who knows more than me explained that during the Fascist era and the monarchy, public housing wasn't assigned in a single, uniform way. There were houses for teachers, houses for the working poor, houses for state employees [...] so these homes reflect the class differences and the intended occupants of that time. Some were even structurally poorly built, with very small spaces, and those have since undergone full renovations.
>
> [Interview with Z., 17/9/2024, my translation]

Some farmsteads from the area's agricultural past still survive today, including *Cascina Casottello* on Via Fabio Massimo, which recently became the new home of the International Neighborhood Center; *Cascina San Bernardo* and *Cascina Nosedo*, both located within the Vettabbia Park, the latter now serving as an off-campus site for the Politecnico di Milano. On the other hand, *Cascina Gamboloita*, which originally gave the area its name until around 1900, no longer exists. The new Piazzale was then named after Count Luigi Corvetto, and from that moment on, the neighborhood took on the name Corvetto. According to one of the many popular myths about the origin of its oldest name, it's interesting to note that this area was already identified as a dangerous place prone to attacks, especially during long winter nights. Historical studies suggest that *Gamboloita* may derive from the vulgar phrase 'Gamba-la-vita'. According to a local tale, the area was frequented by shady characters, and couriers leaving Milan for Lodi would gather at Porta Romana and exchange the password '*Uei, fieu, in gamba la vita'*, meaning 'Watch out for brigands' (Iosa, 1986, p. 171). As is often the case with oral history, it is difficult to determine which of these popular accounts came first or were shaped later over time, their origins are lost in the blurred timelines of collective memory.

In this part of Milan, some buildings were originally constructed to serve water-based freight transport, taking advantage of the area's abundance of canals. Later, they became linked to road and rail networks, and were interspersed with more residential areas that developed primarily to house a growing working-class population, drawn by the many factories established in the district. What makes the area particularly distinctive is the wide range of building present: early 20th-century *case di ringhiera* (corridor-style tenement houses), modernist residential towers from the 1980s, *case minime* (minimalist housing units), public housing blocks from the 1920s and 1950s, and private villas. The internal diversification of the area, in terms of both housing typologies and social groups, as well as the variety of its industrial histories, has resulted in a spatial fabric that remains highly fragmented and layered, a condition the neighborhood continues to grapple with today (Citroni, 2020). I leave it to the words of O., born in 1937 and a lifelong resident of Corvetto, to paint a picture of the neighborhood as it was in those days:

> There were people living in Corvetto and working at Falk - it was fair to say it was a working-class neighborhood. [...] Oh yes, absolutely! Starting from Rogoredo, there was Redaelli. [...] It was a huge company. Then on Via Sile there were the Trafilerie, which eventually moved out of Milan. There were Geloso, Falk, and Vanzetti; there was Balilla on Via Antonelli, and Motomeccanica... [...]
>
> Then, heading down to Piazzale Lodi, there was Tecno Masio Italiano, TIBB. Boeri was on Viale Umbria. Lago Marsino was between Via Tertulliano and Tito Livio, there were hundreds and hundreds of workers inside. It was all factories...
>
> And well, now there's not a single one left. Every single one shut down.
>
> [...]
>
> Trains used to come in from Rogoredo - it would've been great to have a photo of Via Marochetti when the line 32 passed through, the bus that went from Corvetto to the station. We used to call it the *Gibuti* because the trams had those old open carriages. They'd arrive at Corvetto all packed together under the trolley wires, and then everyone would head off to the different factories around here, off to work.
>
> There was also the train coming in from the Lodi area - people would come to work from as far as Piacenza. It arrived at Porta Romana station. And when the train came in from Melegnano or Lodi, people called it '*il fogna'*, *the sewer*. You had all sorts on board. Packed full. It was something to see, watching them all arrive. Floods of people. All of them coming to work.
>
> [Interview with O., 20/11/2024, my translation]

In those years, there were more than a hundred factories in and around Corvetto. From the perspective of social struggle, the neighborhood has long been considered a vanguard in the history of the Milanese workers' movement, due to the presence of a highly active urban proletariat rooted in democratic and anti-fascist traditions. This legacy is still traceable today in the various commemorative plaques scattered throughout the streets of Corvetto, honoring those who fought in the Resistance (Iosa, 1986). In the postwar period, to address the housing emergency caused by the recently ended conflict and the new waves of migration from southern Italy, as well as to meet the growing demand for workers' housing in the area, new residential districts continued to be developed in Corvetto, both privately and, above all, publicly funded. After completing the Mazzini district, in 1948 the IACP (Autonomous Institute for Public Housing) built the Gamboloita complex, consisting of six residential buildings on Via Barabino. Small houses for displaced families and shelters for war veterans and refugees were also constructed on Via dei Cinquecento and Via Ortles (1948–1956), near the building that still today functions as a municipal shelter. Designed by prominent Milanese architects of the time, such as Arrigo Arrighetti, construction began on several INA-Casa residential complexes, part of the Fanfani Plan aimed at addressing housing shortages and strengthening the

social welfare system. These included the Gabrio Rosa district (built between 1948 and 1952), the developments along Via Montemartini, and the Omero district, completed in 1955. The latter stands as one of the most substantial public housing projects of the postwar period and was based on a standardized typology: six five-story buildings, all connected to a central heating plant that served the entire complex (Iosa, 1986, p. 195). The "minimum houses" on Via Barzoni date back to 1952. This project, initiated by the City of Milan in the immediate postwar period, alongside similar developments in Crescenzago and Lorenteggio, was intended to house families displaced by wartime bombings. The complex consists of 60 two-story terraced single-family units, each with its own private courtyard. Commonly remembered as the "little villas" of Corvetto, they are still managed today by MM (Metropolitana Milanese). As we will explore in the ethnographic chapter, the minimum houses of Via Barzoni are currently at risk of being demolished to make way for the construction of three new residential towers that would increase the housing stock, offering a mix of public and market-rate units. The story of these houses and their residents offers a powerful lens through which to understand the transformation of Corvetto.

The housing developments of the following decades, beginning in the 1970s and 1980s, reflected a broader city-wide trend increasingly oriented toward private initiatives, with a focus on high-rise buildings and infrastructural connectivity. The Pismonte district, built in 1978 as a public initiative between Piazza Angilberto and the Vettabbia area, consists of three 16-story tower blocks. Later, in the 1980s and 1990s, the San Dionigi district was developed along the street of the same name: six similar high-rise buildings offered as simple rental units, also commonly referred to as the 'policemen's houses' (See Fegure 3). In 1964, the overpass of the *Autostrada del Sole* was constructed, which still frames the urban landscape at the entrance to Piazzale Corvetto. In 1991, the opening of the Line 3 metro station finally connected the neighborhood directly to the city center.



Figura 3 - Via San Dionigi from Parco della Vettabbia - author's photo

Much of the public housing stock built in Corvetto during the postwar period has since been bought out or sold off. With the exception of the Mazzini district - which remains entirely under public management - the number of housing units still administered by the City or by Aler has significantly decreased. Corvetto is a neighborhood with a layered housing history, emblematic of the 20th century, and from its origins has been, and still is, recognized as one of the most emblematic spaces for the right to housing in Milan. Now that the industrial and working-class peripheries are no longer what they once were, the question arises: what has taken their place?

While acknowledging the complexity of a neighborhood with such a rich historical legacy, it is fair to say that, from a socio-economic perspective, the area has experienced increasing polarization, meaning a growing disparity in both living conditions and life opportunities among its residents (Citroni, 2020, p. 18). This is the result of factors operating at multiple scales. Locally, historical processes - most notably the deindustrialization of the area - have played a central role. But broader dynamics have also contributed, such as the arrival of the metro line, the redevelopment of the former TIBB industrial site, the project in the Porto di Mare area, and the opening of the housing market through rent control policies, which coincided with the first significant waves of international migration (Citroni, 2020, p. 19). According to data from the Municipality of Milan, in 2002 the Mazzini housing block had around 4,800 residents, nearly 800 of whom were foreign nationals (15% of the total). These figures have continued to rise over the years (Merlo, 2009) and today residents without Italian citizenship account for approximately 25% of the neighborhood's total population.

Also in light of more recent events that have brought Corvetto into the national spotlight, as we will return to later (see Chapter 5), the stigmatizing narrative that has accompanied this neighborhood for over thirty years has shaped a widespread perception across the city: Corvetto is seen as an unsafe, dangerous place to be avoided. Discourses of decay are frequently interwoven with those of crime, drug dealing, youth delinquency, and so on. This narrative intensified especially during the 1990s and early 2000s, when the area was marked by what the literature refers to as an 'open drug scene' (Bergamo, 2023), and continues today through the events surrounding the infamous *boschetto della droga* ('drug forest') in the Porto di Mare area, an area that came to be identified as one of the major heroin dealing and consumption sites in northern Italy (see par. 7.1). This representation of Corvetto is constantly reinforced by local news media, municipal policy, and even by some residents themselves. Today, it often seems as though Corvetto is forced to choose between two extremes: the persistence of urban blight or the promise of urban regeneration, as if no other alternatives were possible.

3.3 Between Stigma and Regeneration: From Gangsta Corvetto to the New SouPra, South of Prada



Figura 4 - Screenshot from the Corvetto episode of the popular video-reporting series "Quartieri Criminali," created by YouTuber Simone Cicalone

In December 2024, the popular online platform *Milano Città Stato* - known for its polemical and often conservative tone - published an article ranking the most disliked neighborhoods among Milanese residents. Unsurprisingly, topping the list was Corvetto, labeled by the author as a "dangerous and ugly" neighborhood[27].

As mentioned earlier, this view - or variations of it - has unfortunately been widespread and widely accepted across the city for several decades. Within the neighborhood itself, opinions are not radically different. The research reveals a prevailing sense, particularly among long-term residents, that the area has significantly deteriorated. In Corvetto too, I encountered the nostalgic narratives of the 'neighborhood as it once was', stories that are common in similar urban peripheries, where people once knew each other and, within a context of shared and horizontal poverty, could rely on mutual support and solidarity. While many residents who have lived in Corvetto for more than twenty years agree that they have witnessed the neighborhood's decline since the early 2000s, we are left with a key question: when and why did the narrative of Corvetto as a degraded neighborhood begin?

In F.'s words:

> It used to be beautiful. [...] Cleaner..spotless, to be honest. Back in '88, when I moved back here to Viale Omero, I was working as a doorkeeper. [...] But after '95, things started to go downhill. [...] I remember when Italy won the last World Cup, we celebrated with the neighbors in the square right out front [Piazza Gabrio Rosa, ed.], it was so peaceful. Now you can't even walk through there without someone following you, asking if you want to buy weed. Before, it was spotless, quiet, people walked around at night... [...] Now, this is the worst it's ever been, the worst.
>
> [Interview with F., 25/1/2024, my translation]

The myth of a conflict-free past - or of the future as a form of liberation - exists only within narratives. Already in the 1980s, for instance, public debates were taking place around emerging issues in the neighborhood, particularly concerning the long-neglected extraordinary maintenance of the Mazzini district. There was growing concern about a process of ghettoization, marked by the increasing presence of drug use and a rise in petty urban crime - phenomena that were linked to the concentration of both "old poverty and new forms of marginalization." (Iosa, 1986, p. 230).

How does a city like Milan govern - or perhaps it would be more accurate to say fail to govern - an urban space of this kind today? It almost seems as though this narrative serves a purpose, helping to activate certain dynamics that have become typical of neighborhoods like this one.

[27] *Le 7 zone di Milano che stanno più «antipatiche» ai milanesi*, Milano Città Stato, december 25th 2024 (last accessed on march 20th 2025) https://www.milanocittastato.it/curiosita/le-7-zone-di-milano-che-stanno-piu-antipatiche-ai-milanesi/

In connection with the arguments presented in Chapter One, the coercive logic of urban attractiveness in contemporary cities can be better understood through the lens of the "aestheticization of the economy," or via the critique of the aesthetic economy developed by Gernot Böhme (Böhme, 2010, 2017; Boltanski and Esquerre, 2018). As these authors argue, economic growth today increasingly relies on the production of new aesthetic value, achieved through the spectacularization of the existing - what they describe as the staging of both the self and of reality (Böhme, 2017). They demonstrate how these processes inherently require the 'reinvention' of what already exists and, especially following the introduction of new narratives (Boltanski and Esquerre, 2018), operate on a powerful symbolic asset capable of generating new urban imaginaries. In Milan, the city known as the 'stage for everything,' this is clearly reflected in the aim of the new Milan 2030 Territorial Governance Plan, which focuses primarily on the redevelopment of the suburbs.

Indeed, the Corvetto neighborhood is one of Milan's best-known suburbs, still discussed publicly with the ambivalent tones of stigmatizing narratives, increasingly interspersed with those portraying it as an area undergoing rapid transformation. Recently, the neighborhood has received particular attention: numerous regeneration initiatives and projects have either been completed or are still ongoing, driven by a growing number of both new and established associations, institutions, cultural organizations, and universities that operate within the area, alongside those initiated by the Municipality of Milan and District. However, perhaps the most significant impact is already becoming visible with the upcoming 2026 Milan-Cortina Winter Olympics, which will largely focus their major urban activities in the city's southeast quadrant.

Imagining a line following Corso Lodi, it connects the two main territorial hubs currently hosting construction sites related to the major event: the Scalo di Porta Romana and the Rogoredo station (Figure 3), two of the largest projects currently underway in terms of both square meters and investment, as well as the narratives surrounding them.

The first one, in the north part of Corvetto-Lodi area, includes the nearly completed works for the Olympic Village at the Scalo di Porta Romana. This vast empty space was part of one of the seven railway yards owned by FS, thus public property, which was transferred through a program agreement in 2022 to a consortium of private developers. It is the largest of the seven yards, covering about 200,000 square meters, where after the Games, alongside the Olympic Village buildings to be converted into student housing, new constructions, mostly luxury residential buildings and offices, will rise in what until recently was one of the few green spaces in this predominantly industrial area, albeit spontaneous and fenced off.

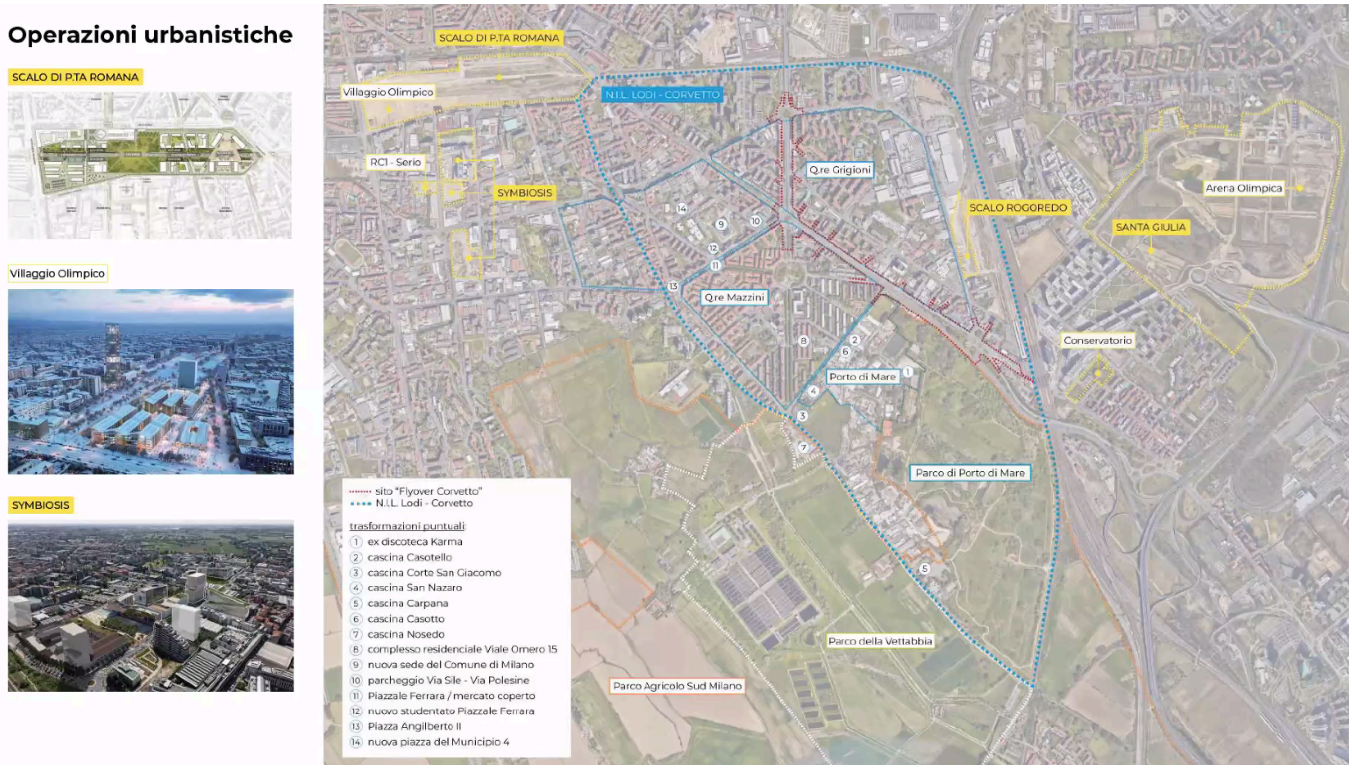


Figura 5 - Screenshot of the project presentations during a C40 meeting of Municipality 4 - Source: https://www.c40.org

The Scalo is located just a short walk from where, in 2015, the new headquarters of the Fondazione Prada was inaugurated - a complex of contemporary art buildings designed by star architect Rem Koolhaas, who renovated the early 20th-century distillery complex. Today, the Fondazione's immaculate white tower overlooks the construction sites below. It is no coincidence that Prada Group's holding company is one of the three key players that won the development bid for the Scalo di Porta Romana area, alongside two other prominent real estate investment firms: Coima, led by Manfredi Catella and known for major Milanese projects like Porta Nuova in Isola, and Covivio, a French real estate investment company formed through a merger with Luxottica. Covivio not only oversees the development of the Scalo but also currently leads the Symbiosis project - over 130,000 square meters of land under construction just south of the Scalo. Presented as regeneration, in this neighborhood with an industrial and working-class past, the offices of major international fashion giants such as Louis Vuitton and Moncler will soon open within just a few blocks. Alongside them will be some Mars Group companies, the German pharmaceutical firm Boehringer, and the new headquarters of Snam - new buildings currently under construction that will stand alongside the existing offices of Fastweb and the ICS International School.

In early 2024, construction began on the new Santa Giulia Olympic Arena in Rogoredo, out of the south part of Corvetto-Lodi district, designed by David Chipperfield. It was chosen an open

wilderness area right next to two sites historically tied to major urban green space scandals in Milan: the '*boschetto della droga'* - a notorious drug den in a wooded area - (see par 7.1) and the so-called 'city of poisons', the investigation into contaminated land and fraudulent remediation efforts in Santa Giulia, which led to seizures and arrests of executives from Risanamento, the real estate company that owns the Santa Giulia district and the land where the PalaItalia will be built. The development project for the area - which, in addition to the arena, will include a fully equipped park of around 350,000 square meters, a mix of social and market-rate housing, the new headquarters of the Conservatory within the so-called "Bosco della Musica," and commercial spaces developed by Esselunga - was recently transferred to Lendlease, the SGR Investment Management firm previously involved in the 2012 London Olympics and in the development of the milanese MIND district, the science and innovation hub built on the former Expo 2015 site. Construction of the arena is currently significantly behind schedule, and to ensure it is completed in time for the Olympic Games, work is now proceeding around the clock in three continuous shifts.

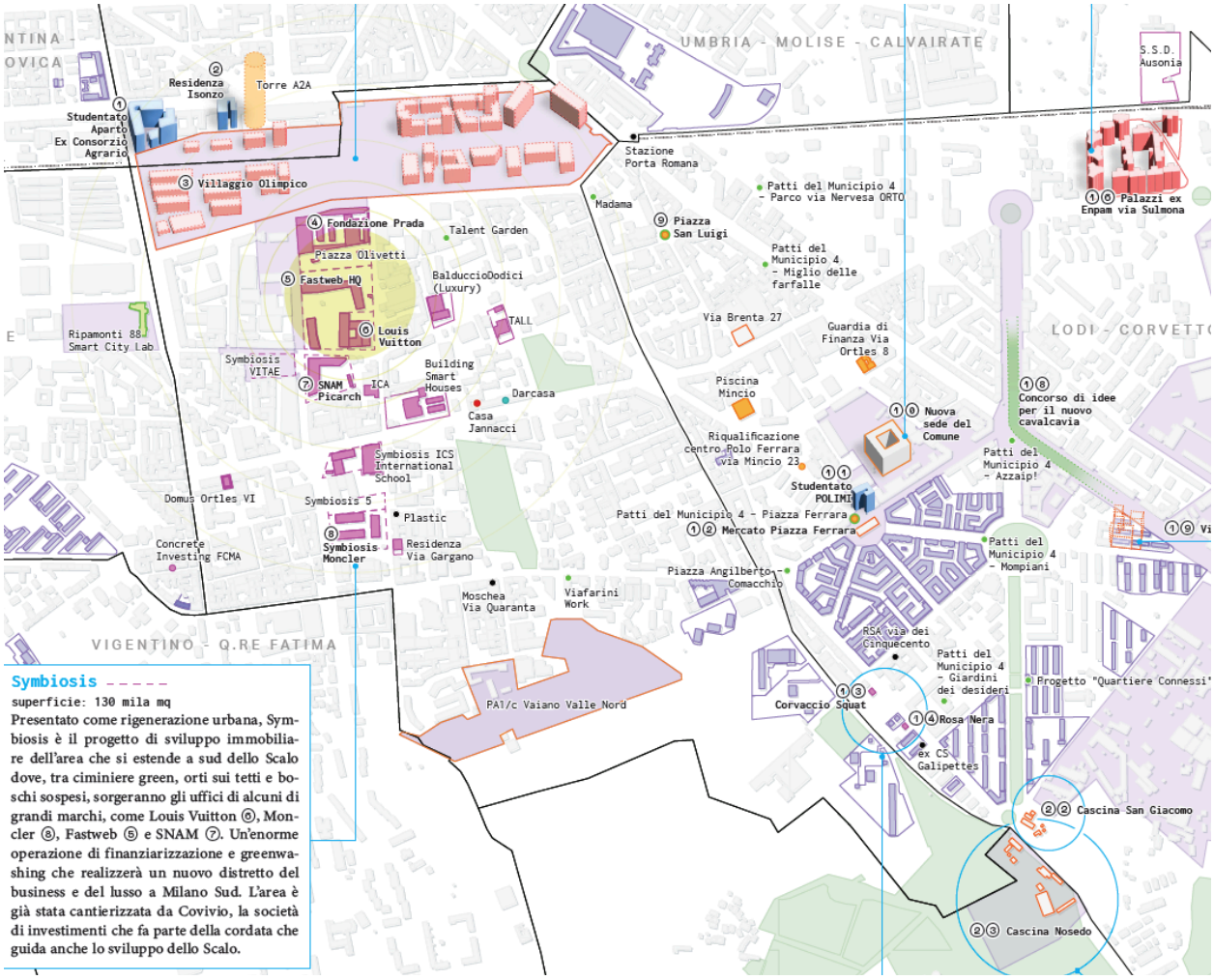


Figura 6 - Section of the brochure illustrating the area's transformations, the result of the collective mapping carried out between 2023 and 2024 by the Off Topic lab. Source: Off Topic concession

Exactly in the middle - at the heart of this line - the area that stands to gain unexpected value is indeed Corvetto. It is in fact one of the city's working-class neighborhoods but today it sits right at the center of what has been dubbed the 'golden triangle of regeneration'[28]. Corvetto is already feeling the pressure of the upcoming mega-event, now just around the corner, and it comes as no surprise that the cost of living here is rising faster than in any other part of the city. Since the start of construction, the price per square meter has risen from 3,700 euros to over 4,500 - a growth of around 30%, nearly double the citywide average[29]. In *a Corriere della Sera* article published on October 9, 2024, with the telling title "Rents up 22 percent in the last five years. Record increases in Barona and Corvetto. Low supply and rising values push residents out" [30] , it was reported that in 2024, the average rent requested in Milan for a 70-square-meter apartment reached an all-time high of 1,625 euros per month, marking a 22% increase over five years. This is a trend explained by Neil Smith's rent-gap theory (Smith, 2005; Semi, 2015), which posits that gentrification occurs in areas where there is a gap between the current rental income of properties and the potential income that could be generated from them.

[28] The expression was used during the presentation of *Hyper Corvetto*, an open planning process proposed by Tempo Riuso and Zero. For further details, see: Lucia Tozzi, Il Fatto Quotidiano, *Il brand Milano spinge ancora sull'acceleratore: il caso Hyper Corvetto e la finta coprogettazione, 7 dicembre 2023 (last accesed on March 24th 2025).* https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2023/12/07/il-brand-milano-spinge-ancora-sullacceleratore-il-caso-hyper-corvetto-e-la-finta-coprogettazione/7375669/

[29] Flavio Bini, *Prezzi delle case a Milano, il vero affare lo ha fatto chi ha comprato in periferia: in testa viale Certosa e Corvetto,* La Repubblica, 25 maggio 2023 https://milano.repubblica.it/cronaca/2023/05/26/news/casa_prezzi_periferia_viale_certosa_corvetto-401783305/

[30] Gino Pagliuca, Il correrie, *Canoni su del 22 per cento negli ultimi cinque anni. Record a Barona e a Corvetto. Poca offerta e aumento dei valori espellono i residenti*. 9/10/2024, https://milano.corriere.it/notizie/cronaca/24_ottobre_09/affitti-a-milano-canoni-su-del-22-per-cento-negli-ultimi-cinque-anni-e-record-nei-quartieri-barona-e-corvetto-54b2a505-6389-4953-9684-c98e6008cxlk.shtml#



Dimmi in che quartiere di *Milano* vivi e ti dirò quanto spendi di *affitto*

QUARTIERE	COSTO AFFITTO 40MQ	VAR % RISPETTO AL 2019
Centro storico	1.270€	+32,3%
Garibaldi, Moscova	1.236€	+22,6%
Solari, Washington	984€	+33,7%
Centrale, Repubblica	980€	+28,9%
Navigli	956€	+17,7%
Sempione, City Life	952€	+34,5%
Porta Romana	952€	+24,0%
Pasteur, Rovereto	888€	+36,2%
Corvetto, Rogoredo	844€	+47,6%
Città Studi	840€	+29,6%

Fonte: Elaborazione su dati Immobiliare

Figura 7 - A graphic published in September 2024 by Will Italia highlights that rental prices in the Corvetto neighborhood have increased more sharply than in any other area. Source: [1] Casa, amara casa. (last accessed on 21/3/2025) https://willmedia.it/loop/casa-amara-casa/

It is not only the Olympic construction sites that are accelerating the rise in real estate prices and the rapid transformation of this area. Just as the Via Padova area saw the emergence of the acronym NOLO (North of Loreto), the new territorial branding SouPra (South of Prada) is now taking shape. As the name suggests, this process is closely linked to the presence of Fondazione Prada, which since its opening has influenced the area's transformation by attracting a demand for a specific kind of cultural consumption, very different from the neighborhood's industrial past. In the same year - on a date that is no coincidence, the year of Expo 2015 - the Madama Hostel also opened nearby. Almost ironically, in the historic building of the '*madama'* station, police in Milanese dialect, at Via Benaco 1, right next to the Scalo di Porta Romana, there are now wooden tables and counters along with chairs occupying much of the sidewalk - often accompanied in the evenings by karaoke tunes or DJ sets coming from the minimalist ground-floor rooms, furnished with reclaimed materials, a typical aesthetic of this type of venue.

In the literature, this is referred to as *zoning* - a set of policies that encourage the concentration of activities related to a specific economic sector within the same urban area. Alongside the future

business district depicted in the renderings of the Symbiosis project lies the SouPra neighborhood, described in a well-known Milanese online cultural magazine as 'the new realm of art, fashion, culture, and nightlife in constant transformation' [31] . The range of activities sparked by the presence of Fondazione Prada, including the opening of various galleries, artist studios, design, and architecture firms throughout the area south of the Scalo, melds with broader city placemaking policies aimed at positioning Corvetto as the "*new creative district*" of southern Milan. Suspended between two opposing narratives, the public debate surrounding the Corvetto neighborhood is thus highly charged and contentious. As is often the case in other well-known suburbs, the prevailing narrative tends to focus almost exclusively on the discrepancies between expectations for the neighborhood's future and the persistent realities of decline and neglect (Raccanelli, 2023b).

Indeed, with the arrival of new residents in this area, there are also those who are forced to leave. As often happens, eviction statistics reflect the increase in property values, although the numbers are somewhat more complex to track since many leases began before the pandemic and, fortunately or not, follow different timelines and procedures than the faster-moving market. Rental prices are also tied to sale prices, and given the significant reduction in available rental housing, this paints a picture of a neighborhood where the right to housing has been severely undermined.

While part of the neighborhood is already undergoing resident displacement, another significant area of Corvetto - the working-class Mazzini district - appears, due to its public housing nature, to still fulfill its role in protecting residents from the risk of eviction. In Merlo's ananlysis (2019), the neighborhood was described as an urban space characterized by aging, with a predominant elderly population and a decline in younger residents. Over the fifteen years separating that study from today's Corvetto, however, the percentage of young people - also linked to the growing presence of second- and third-generation residents - has increased substantially.

[31] *Benvenuti a Soupra*. La redazione, Zero Milano, 20 luglio 2020 https://zero.eu/it/news/benvenuti-a-soupra/ (last accessed on 21/3/2025)

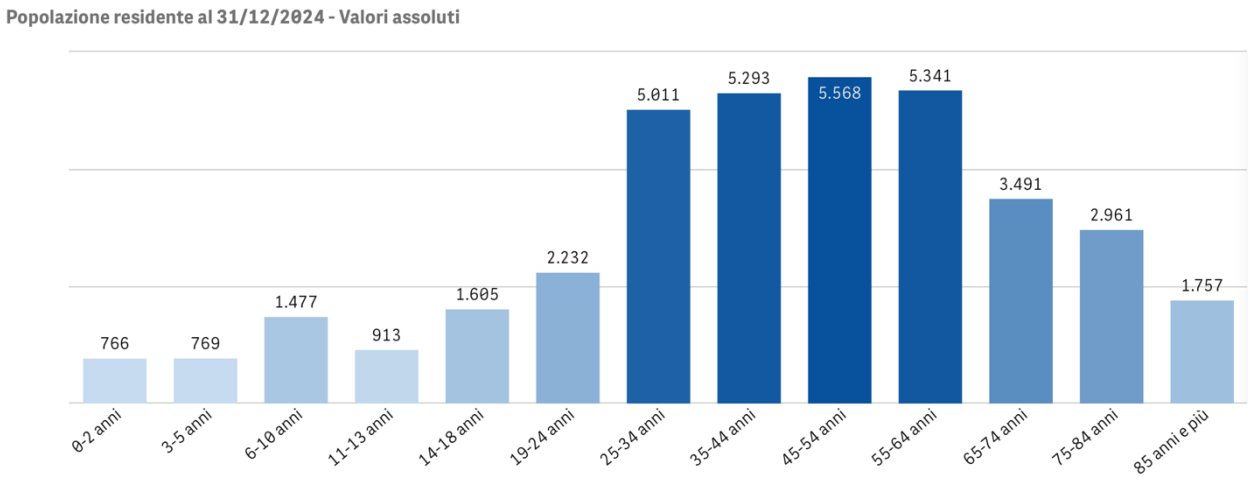


Figura 8 - Statistical data of aging the municipality of Milan residents as of 31/12/2024 - Source: SISI Comune di Milano: https://www.comune.milano.it/aree-tematiche/dati-statistici/dati-statistici-sisi-sistema-statistico-integrato

This demographic scenario reflects a neighborhood where youth issues are particularly significant[32], as evidenced by the strong focus on school dropout rates, which are seen as a critical concern in Corvetto. This underscores the important role played by public institutions - such as schools and libraries - and social spaces, which remain relatively scarce in this neighborhood. In Corvetto, educational facilities are becoming fewer and increasingly underfunded. The continuous and steady decline in student enrollment is putting some of these vital institutions at risk of closure. A notable example is the Fabio Filzi elementary school, built on Via Ravenna in 1932 to accommodate up to 1,000 students. The school experienced a significant demographic decline, partly due to progressive segregation, leading to it being labeled a "ghetto school." In 2023, the Milan Municipal Education Office approved a downsizing plan that halted all ongoing projects at the school, some of which had received city-wide recognition. On August 31, 2024, the Fabio Filzi Institute officially closed, and all educational activities at the Via Ravenna site were transferred to the Candia Institute, also located on Via Ravenna.

As is widely known, concerns about youth issues in Corvetto reignited in November 2024, when a protest, taking the form of urban guerrilla warfare, broke out the evening following the death of Ramy Elgaml, a nineteen-year-old Corvetto resident killed by a police car during a chase. We will examine in detail what the events of those days and the following months brought to the neighborhood. What is important to note, however, is that the media coverage, instead of focusing on the structural

[32] This article from October 20, 2017, cites data from the Observatory on School Dropout and Integration, part of the Milan School Registry: *Fino all'ultimo banco. Dispersione scolastica a Corvetto: una sfida che «si combatte in strada»* (last accessed on 21/3/2025) https://medium.com/@wtobagi/fino-allultimo-banco-f7c5d67cd1e2

dynamics of inequality and institutional racism underlying such events, framed the protest of Ramy's young friends and Corvetto residents primarily as a public order issue. The usual narratives treated what was described as the threat of the "*banlieue effect*" with rhetoric centered on crime and insecurity. These perspectives inevitably reinforce and revive the stigma, prompting repressive responses, increased police interventions, and new investments and efforts aimed at "repairing" the image tarnished by these incidents.

3.3.1 Beautification, New-Build Gentrification, and Planned Gentrification: Capital, Aesthetics, and Inequality



Figura 9 - Snapshot of Zero Magazine article, A well-known Milanese publication primarily focused on news and events in the urban arts and cultural scene -Source: https://zero.eu/it/news/benvenuti-a-soupra/

Gentrification is a complex urban process that defies simple definitions and involves a multitude of actors and their interconnected motivations. It is generally recognized when reinvestment dynamics in a neighborhood bring new images and capital, triggering a process that replaces the original residents - typically from lower social classes - with new inhabitants of higher socioeconomic status (Semi, 2015, p. 7). As Caselli and Ferreri (2013) aptly describe, there are three clearly identifiable elements also present in what is happening in Corvetto, which together shape outcomes of this kind: an injection of capital into a specific area; the portrayal of the neighborhood as attractive and

emerging; and finally, the direct and indirect displacement of previous residents, along with the exclusion of those who might have been able to live there (Caselli and Ferreri, 2013, p. 341).

This phenomenon does not happen suddenly but unfolds in distinct phases, often triggered by what is known as the rent gap: the difference between the current rental value of a property and its potential rental value, meaning how much the house, building, or land could be worth if fully exploited to its maximum potential. Classic example used to explain the rent gap is an empty manufacturing complex in the city center, which, once renovated, acquires an incomparably higher rental value. It is precisely this gap that attracts the so-called gentrification producers, ranging from small property owners to major real estate market players, motivating them to reinvest in areas previously considered unproductive or uninteresting.

In the gentrification literature, the initial phase is often described as marked by the arrival of so-called "pioneers": young families, artists, students, usually searching for affordable spaces to live and work. In an urban area typically segregated, with a high concentration of poorer populations and inequality, new faces begin to arrive, and the combined actions of small property owners or small businesses provide the initial momentum for change.

Next, projects and new plans land in the neighborhood, aiming to impose a new public image, one that moves away from the stigmatized past, usually through branding initiatives: the area is given a new name, much like what happened with SoHo in New York or NoLo in Milan. The atmosphere shifts through aesthetic, architectural, and urban interventions, and the neighborhood fills with new commercial activities. Art often plays a central role in this transformation, making the change visible and attracting further investment. Trying to harness the symbolic momentum generated by the renewal around the rail yard, the neighborhood - which aspires to be known by the acronym SouPra but has yet to gain full recognition - also bases its new image on the presence of art spaces and cultural institutions (see Figure 9).



Figura 10 - T-shirt from the 'Quartieri' series by a Milanese streetwear brand. For Corvetto, the chosen design features the Christ from Via San Dionigi. Source: https://www.meneghinostore.com/products/t-shirt-unisex-maglietta-corvetto-zona-4-nerazzurra

Although the presence of cultural venues such as galleries, museums, and artist studios is undoubtedly increasing, a closer look reveals that the urban fabric and cultural dynamics of the Corvetto neighborhood have yet to host a sufficient number of artistic initiatives and events to be truly defined as an urban art cluster. It is interesting, however, to observe how and where this narrative is trying to establish itself: for example, the Wikipedia page dedicated to the neighborhood describes Corvetto, right at the end of the first paragraph, as '*Milan's Contemporary Art District*.' And it continues: "The Corvetto neighborhood has undergone a profound revitalization with the creation of the new Milan Municipality headquarters on Via Sile, becoming a gathering place for artists - both Italian and international - from contemporary avant-garde circles. This has led to the emergence of numerous art galleries and events, establishing it as Milan's contemporary art district of international interest"[33].

The new identity of the Corvetto neighborhood also draws on local symbols, such as the *Cristo Redentore,* a plaster statue that has always been present, at least in everyone's memories, on the terrace of a private home near Piazza Angilberto, also known as "*El Signoron*" or "*El Criston*." Today, the statue has become part of the symbolic and iconographic fabric of the new Corvetto, to the extent that it has become the image representing the neighborhood on a series of printed t-shirts dedicated to Milan and its districts (Figure 10).

In 2020, several scholars, including expert on gentrification in Southern European cities and activists Sandra Annunziata and Loretta Lees, published an anti-gentrification handbook aimed at illustrating how to resist such transformations both from within and outside the neighborhood (Annunziata and

[33] https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Corvetto_(Milano) (last accessed on 22/3/2025)

Lees, 2020). The text first proposes analyzing the typical forms gentrification takes in urban areas, highlighting three key identifiable elements.

Foremost, it emphasizes that gentrification is always driven by the reinvestment of capital, often substantial financial capital. This includes both multi-year regeneration projects - public and private - that have taken place in Corvetto over the years, as well as large-scale real estate developments like Symbiosis and the works related to the Milano-Cortina 2026 Olympics. These latter projects, managed by actors who move investments on a much larger scale, participate in what is called the financialization of urban space, transforming every square meter of Milan into a financial asset. The manual notes that although the capital invested is generally private, public policies remain crucial - especially when they have the power to favor certain developments or display excessive weakness in protecting the public interest (Annunziata and Lees, 2020).

The authors then emphasize that gentrification is not just a real estate issue but must be closely connected to social classes and their ways of representing and inhabiting the city (Annunziata and Lees, 2020). The new residents bring with them specific lifestyles, preferences, tastes, and needs that impact the commercial offerings and the use of urban spaces. Alongside aesthetic and cultural changes, new demands related to livability begin to emerge - such as those voiced by various groups in the Corvetto neighborhood - which we will explore in more detail in the ethnographic chapter: bike lanes, clean sidewalks, and a more general call for, or recognition of, beauty. However, these desires can sometimes mask more exclusive demands that imply the removal of elements considered "degrading," such as informal markets or scooters parked on sidewalks. In the literature, this process is often described as *genuine gentrification* or, more critically, as forms of *urban neocolonialism* (Smith, 2005; Semi, 2015, 2023), since the new residents bring specific desires that impose themselves on the pre-existing social fabric and have the power to trigger profound changes .



Figura 11 - Snapshot of an apartment listing from a rental website - January 2023. Source: https://www.idealista.it

Gentrification, the authors emphasize, invariably involves various forms of displacement: direct, indirect, symbolic, and exclusionary (Annunziata and Lees, 2020). Numerous factors contribute to this displacement, whether through rising housing costs, the transformation of the neighborhood that no longer reflects the habits of its long-term residents, or the imposition of new aesthetic and cultural codes that exclude those who do not share them. Ultimately, the rising cost of living makes the neighborhood inaccessible to its most vulnerable populations. But one might ask: at what stage of the gentrification process is Corvetto today? Which of the dynamics described have already taken place, and what can we expect in the times ahead?

Considering the various facets of the process, Corvetto can certainly be described as experiencing *new build gentrification*, especially following the introduction of the masterplans for the Winter Olympic Games. It is also undergoing *planned gentrification*, given the number of regeneration initiatives and the actors involved who are working on the symbolic apparatus to reshape the neighborhood's representation. As the authors of the article titled *Gentrification as a governmental strategy* argue (Uitermark, Duyvendak and Kleinhans, 2007), In the peripheral neighborhoods of the Netherlands where they conducted research, gentrification has established itself as an urban strategy - not so much driven by the local administrations' and real estate market's need to make a profit, nor by the demand for housing for a new middle class. Rather, the authors interpret promoted gentrification as a tool through which a coalition of public and private actors seeks to restore social order in the most disadvantaged neighborhoods, often supported by the residents themselves, which increases conflicts between new and old inhabitants (Uitermark, Duyvendak and Kleinhans, 2007).

In light of this research, for various reasons that we will explore in the following chapters, the neighborhood seems to be in a transitional phase, a limbo between the period following the arrival of its pioneers and, as we have seen, a radical increase in real estate values that has significantly reduced the so-called rent gap, yet is still not clearly defined enough to speak definitively of gentrification. This intermediate phase, not entirely controllable by the actors and producers of gentrification, may explain the growing demand for security that has affected the neighborhood and the increasingly constant police presence over the past three years, in an attempt to manage and contain the disorder with which urban transformation is acting in Corvetto.

CHAPTER IV
Doing ethnography of wanted and unwanted

4.1. Rational, questions and methodological notes

This research seeks to discuss the necessity of observing the processes of symbolic production of the beautiful city. The term *urban beautification* generally refers to a set of practices, policies, and urban interventions aimed at enhancing the aesthetic quality of public or private spaces within the urban environment. Despite being a widespread practice, the concept of urban beautification has not been coherently systematized in the existing literature, it can often be overlapped with other sociological concepts such as those of gentrification or artistification. A specific part intended to explain the continuities and differences between the three concepts has been reserved (see par. 3.3.1 and par. 6.2). One of the first main goals of the research project has been to emphasize the sociological value of observing *beautification* processes, looking for its empirical utility and applications. I argue that analysis of this processes can de-invisibilize the power relations that constitute dominant visibility and marginal visibility (Brighenti, 2007, 2008, 2017).

Some principal research questions were meant to lead the fieldwork:

- How do the beautiful neighborhood is produced?
- How the correlation between attractiveness and profit is realized in the contemporary city?
- How does beautification become a model of governance in neighborhoods of territorial stigmatization, and what consequences does it have on residents?
- What and who do not fit into the logic of aesthetic capitalism, that is, what and who do not participate in the extraction of economic value from the aesthetic domain?

Specifically:

- I examined how the city of Milan is configured concerning beautification practices and processes.
- I focused on the beautification in Corvetto, ‘unwanted’ neighborhood of Milan, finding the objects of aestheticization practices, those enhanced or to be enhanced and the ones discarded.
- I looked at the clash of aesthetics from above and counter aesthetics from below
- I questioned the theme of the ideal city and the production of urban desire and imagination

The objective of mapping the processes to identify and recognize the spaces and actors involved in the beautification of Corvetto has raised other important methodological questions:

- What kind of interests lie behind these processes?
- To what extent can associations and institutions genuinely represent the voice of the local population?
- What do the residents actually think? How informed are the neighborhood's citizens about these aesthetic processes, and how can their voices be given greater prominence? What possible forms of resistance or mobilization have they engaged in?

As outlined in Chapter III, my approach was to analyze the aesthetic mechanisms within what I have termed *the neighborhood of the pre-mega event*: the southeastern area of Milan, which extends longitudinally along the infrastructural axis of Corso Lodi, linking the North Brenta zone to the Santa Giulia district. This trajectory intersects various forms of territorial fractures and social polarizations. At the heart of the two poles of major investment and transformation associated with the 2026 Winter Olympics lies Corvetto, a highly stigmatized neighborhood, often regarded as one of Milan's "ugly" districts. Beginning here, I argue that it is possible to trace the full trajectory of the aestheticization process. Through ethnographic research, I examined the everyday urban life shaped by the aesthetic mechanisms of urban change, considering multiple scales and the diverse variables embedded in aestheticization practices.

In the research, I accepted Gernot Böhme's (2010; 2017) proposal to analyze urban space through a new 'ecological aesthetics' (2010) to understand and examine the *staging* feature of the city and of our society. Conducting neighborhood ethnography through an aesthetic ecology approach entails engaging the entire sensory apparatus - not only the visual dimension but also the auditory, olfactory, and tactile ones. Some scholars have proposed a multisensory methodology for urban research, emphasizing the need to *feel* the city in its everyday life and urban transformations, moving beyond mere visual observation to capture social practices through all senses (Degen, 2014; Low, 2015; Schwanhäusser, 2016). Indeed, ethnography plays a central role: the researcher is physically immersed in the field, walking, smelling, listening, experiencing discomfort or pleasure. Their body thus becomes a reflexive and relational tool of knowledge, producing data alongside the bodies of other participants. The sensory method in urban ethnography underscores the significance of the body and the senses in comprehending urban experiences, a particularly relevant approach when investigating aesthetic dynamics.

I also propose an integrated research methodology, which would alternate participant observation in its classical sense with visual methods (Harper 2012; Frisina 2013), as the visibility is a founding

dimension of the aesthetic order, starting from the recognition and examination of the production of the imaginary of the ideal city and its territorialization; furthermore, it is considered important to focus on the discursive production around the connection between stigmatization and beautification on mass media, web, social media and other specific archives.

Looking at today's Milan can also serve to refine some useful keys to study the mechanisms of globalisation, embedding, disembedding, all very ephemeral processes that are difficult to perceive through ethnography. Today city branding, in fact, can be studied on both the local and global scales, thus looking at the financialization of aesthetics in the production and in the selling of images of urbanity. An interesting track of the analysis might be to see how the production of the new image of the Olympic city is also produced virtually: how the ideal city, that is the city that does not produce waste by definition, is imagined and created therefore, which has nothing to do with the unwanted.

I agree with Michael Herzfeld when he stated that «the way in which the dominant aesthetic encodes aspects of radically and increasingly unequal social relations requires critical analysis» (2017: 296).

How then is the beautiful and saleable city produced and what are the process at work are the main questions of my project. I answered at this question starting from observing what we want and do not want to see in the beautiful city. In the ethnography, I focused on a key mechanism: the actions of addition and removal. I looked at the lives of added, enhanced objects and those removed, rejected. On one hand I examined role of professional of the aesthetic workers, observing the ways in which these actors produce the aesthetic atmosphere. On the other hand, I observed the politics of the unwanted.

4.2 The fieldwork:

In this thesis, I have sought to analyze urban transformations through an ethnographic lens. What follows is an attempt to recount what I observed between September 2022 and February 2024 in Milan, starting from the ethnographic study of Corvetto, a neighborhood historically considered “ugly,” a working-class district in the southern periphery of the city. My approach traces the example of foundational works in urban anthropology and studies on peripheries, such as those of Philippe Bourgois, Alice Goffman, and Loïc Wacquant. My fieldwork in Corvetto lasted approximately 18 months, during which I lived in the neighborhood for 11 months. In fact, in April 2023, I rented a room in Piazza Gabrio Rosa - one of the most publicly scrutinized spaces, often subjected to alarmist and criminalizing rhetoric. Moving to Corvetto profoundly shaped my perspective: conducting research, having breakfast, and shopping in the same place allowed me to directly experience the spaces and everyday rhythms of this peripheral neighborhood.

Ethnography is indeed a qualitative research method that requires the researcher to remain in the field for a significant period, striving to be as immersed as possible in the everyday life of the context. In anthropology, this methodology is understood through two distinct definitions. The first, a *wide definition*, conceptualizes research as an extended and immersive process, an *ethnographic experience*, a practice of *living with* and *taking part with*. This phase directly engages the researcher's body in the field, invoking a broad sensory dimension that extends beyond mere observation to encompass the emotional contours of fieldwork. Research unfolds through moments of excitement and discovery - the thrill of data collection, the opening of new investigative pathways, and the deepening of contextual understanding. Yet, it is also shaped by more challenging phases, where fatigue, stress, fears, frustrations, and failures become fundamental elements of the process. The final stage of this process is, inevitably, its narrative form: writing. *What does the ethnographer do? They write!*, as Clifford Geertz famously asserted, an idea that finds resonance in the very etymology of the term itself, derived from the Greek *ethnos* (society) and *graphos* (writing). Alongside this first definition, however, stands a second, *narrower* one: ethnography as the culmination of research, not the immersive experience itself but rather the textual outcome, the written account. While it is true that the act of writing carries decisive weight in shaping the ethnographic process, the eighteen months I spent in the field in Corvetto were rich, dynamic, and deeply intense.

Data collection relied on traditional ethnographic methods, foremost among them *participant observation*, the fundamental tool of the discipline. I began by observing neighborhood life and taking part in initiatives and events organized by the heterogeneous landscape of institutional, associative, and informal actors operating in Corvetto, at times even witnessing the early phases of planning. I attended public debates and more internal neighborhood discussions, the inauguration and conclusion of local projects, as well as walks organized by various associations. I also participated in anti-eviction pickets, neighborhood assemblies, and demonstrations in front of the City Hall.

Tracking these moments, hard to quantify and even harder to summarize in a single paragraph, required another essential ethnographic instrument: *field notes*. This tool is crucial in preserving the memory of events while capturing the ephemeral and fragile details that might otherwise slip away: casual conversations, accidental occurrences, fleeting emotions or thoughts, and minute aspects that may seem insignificant at first but later prove essential. Though seemingly invisible and deeply personal, field notes are often regarded as the most subjective of data. In the dialogue between these notes and the written account, they allow personal experience to take on a crucial role in shaping ethnographic research.

During my fieldwork, I conducted and analyzed 20 unstructured interviews with key informants, including long-time residents and newcomers, project leaders in urban regeneration, engaged citizens, and activists from housing rights movements.

Alongside participant observation, I conducted an analysis and reconstruction of urban regeneration projects and ongoing real estate developments that were actively reshaping the area. At the time of my fieldwork, more than 20 redevelopment initiatives were underway in Corvetto, ranging from small, self-managed projects like the *Patti di Collaborazione (see par. 7.3)* to large-scale interventions such as *La Città Intorno (see par. 7.5)*, a three-year urban regeneration program funded by Fondazione Cariplo with a total investment of 10 million euros. This initiative had spanned multiple neighborhoods across Milan's periphery.

I then broadened my focus to include an examination of projects transforming vast areas in Brenta/Scalo di Porta Romana and Santa Giulia. My research traced the visual renderings, slogans, and language used to frame these developments, mapping their construction timelines and tracking the evolution of each project.

As mentioned, a turning point in the ethnographic process was moving into the neighborhood of Corvetto. *Living in* and developing an extended familiarity with the territory proved to be the most effective method of *être affecté*, as anthropologist Favret-Saada would say, that is, to grasp the urban experience from the margins of the city, within a neighborhood in transition.

From that moment on, my research intensified considerably. With the arrival of warmer weather, I became even more engaged in the initiatives promoted by the regeneration projects. I actively participated in presentation days and open workshops, as well as various exploratory and artistic walks, theater performances, co-design workshops, and public initiatives focused on cleaning and collective repainting.

I also incorporated techniques from sensory methodologies (Degen, 2014; Low, 2015). These approaches vary, including *smellscape walkabouts* and *soundwalks*, ethnographic walks with participants aimed at exploring and discussing perceived scents and sounds, or the *go-along* method, in which informants accompany the researcher, narrating their sensory experience of place, thereby enabling a form of sensory participant observation (Low, 2015) . In my research, I alternated between sensory walks throughout the neighborhood and an analysis of discourse on sensory perception, which I encouraged during interviews and informal conversations. I supplemented these insights with textual data, including newspaper articles, social media comments, and public opinions that engaged with discussions of sensory experience. Seeking to move beyond the predominance of visual perception to embrace the full range of senses, I structured the seventh chapter into five sections corresponding to sight, hearing, smell, touch, and taste. The senses become both interpretive and

methodological tools for reading the city as a lived space - one that is felt and navigated emotionally, culturally, and politically. These sensory methodologies, in practice, allowed me to analyze and identify specific power relations embedded in aesthetic transformations.

I also worked on photographic - and at times video - documentation of all phases of my fieldwork. In parallel, I compiled a small physical and digital archive of various materials: flyers, newspaper articles, and an analysis of YouTube videos and television programs. Among these, I examined the episode dedicated to Corvetto from the well-known format *Quartieri Criminali* by YouTuber Simone Cicalone, as well as a segment from the reality show *Case a Prima Vista*, which offered a brief portrayal of Corvetto's real estate market.

As mentioned, ethnography unfolds in two distinct phases. The first is the data collection stage, during which qualitative research tools are employed to gather opinions, ideas, expressions, and viewpoints, all the elements that must later be translated into an interpretative framework. This is followed by a more analytical phase, where the data is transformed and reconfigured into a narrative form. In ethnographic methodology, creating a buffer period between fieldwork and writing is crucial. Since field research deeply engages the researcher's body in the space, this temporal distance helps establish a necessary detachment from the field and from field notes before embarking on the writing process. In March 2024, I left my room in Corvetto district and traveled to Paris for a visiting period at the *Centre d'Études Européennes* at Sciences Po, where I stayed for the next seven months. This separation finally marked the beginning of the *writing moment*.

Thus, as I will further explore in the next section, there exists a *before* and *after* in fieldwork. However, the translation of data remains an ongoing task for the ethnographer in the production of the text: recordings must be transcribed, images interpreted, life stories given meaning beyond the individual level, and verbal and, more importantly, non-verbal messages organized within the material. Conversations, postures, expressions, gestures, as well as folklore, myths, and the stories we have encountered must all be reexamined in relation to the research question.

Ethnography is, therefore, a long and intricate process of cultural understanding - one that challenges the researcher's body and experiences in their entirety and often remains open-ended. As anthropologist Marilyn Strathern famously noted, *ethnography is the study of relations with relations* (Corsín Jiménez, 2019). This underscores the importance of considering the emotional dimension of research - particularly for those, like my research, who engage in *domestic ethnography*, where the emotional distance between the researcher and the field is significantly reduced.

Fieldwork thus brings an acute awareness that research is always a matter of interpretation, negotiation, and dialectical, rhetorical, and often conflictual relationships, and dynamics that must be explicitly acknowledged. Through this methodology, the certainties with which one enters the field

are continuously challenged; they often collapse, are reformulated, become lost along the way, and are rediscovered only when the researcher relinquishes the privileged position of the detached observer and fully recognizes their participation in the research process.
Before delving into the ethnography of beautification processes in the Corvetto neighborhood, one final methodological reflection is necessary - to articulate my positioning in this district before, during, and after the 18 months of research.

4.3 Autoethnography of inbetweenness

Feminist and postcolonial critiques have long questioned positivist conceptions of objectivity and neutrality in academic research. These critical perspectives advocate for beginning with one's own personal experience as a methodological approach - one that helps uncover the power dynamics embedded within the relational systems we create and navigate throughout fieldwork. The premise of these studies is thus to dedicate a space for reflecting on one's positionality and privileges. For instance, our affiliation with a powerful institution such as academia inevitably shapes and influences our fieldwork. Recognizing the non-neutrality of our presence in the research setting, each of us carrying our own autobiographical weight, is fundamental to overcoming what Donna Haraway termed the *god trick*: the illusion of being able to describe reality as though we had no body.
On the contrary, our subjectivity is always present in our research, influencing the way we interact. Fieldwork is not only structured observations but also moments of frustration, bad days, illness, the private dimensions that run parallel to the research process yet inevitably shape our engagement in the field. Positioning oneself within the research setting simultaneously serves as a critique of the notion of research as a progressive process of discovery. It requires acknowledging the ways in which other actors contribute to the co-production of knowledge and influence the evolving trajectory of the study.
As feminist research suggests, before embarking on ethnographic work, one must first articulate who they are, where they come from, and the perspective from which they speak. It is essential to clarify how the research was conducted, not seeking an absolute truth, but as a deeply personal inquiry. Positioning myself within the context and among the people I encountered throughout my months in the field meant finding my place within structures of power, inequality, and privilege, striving to avoid being shaped or perpetuating them.
This process also requires an awareness of the limits and constraints of the research, what could not be included, what had to be left out. What follows, then, is an attempt at *autoethnography* on the page, placing myself on the same critical plane as the subject of the research.

4.3.1 Before and After: A Field in Waiting

Corvetto today is a neighborhood in waiting, suspended in the limbo between *before* and *after* redevelopment. Conducting ethnographic research on urban transformations in a context of massive investments and rapid change raises crucial questions about identity and identification.

What is the role of the researcher working in the *in-betweenness* of a transforming neighborhood, when the politics and policies of urban renewal are still being negotiated and shaped? What was my role, both as a researcher and as a new resident, in implicitly reproducing the very urban desire in Corvetto that I was observing? And to what extent could my presence influence, if not the *before*, then at least the *after* of these processes?

Before and *after* emerged as two fundamental dimensions in my research - both from a theoretical-imaginative perspective, in relation to the idea of the neighborhood as it once was versus the neighborhood of the future, and from a practical standpoint, tied to the lived experience of precarity in a district undergoing transformation.

In ethnographic research, another fundamental *before* and *after* is marked by the beginning and end of fieldwork. By the summer of 2023 - midway through my ethnography - I had participated in a methodological workshop held as part of the *Etnografia e Ricerca Qualitativa* conference. During the morning discussion, we were asked to reflect on several questions, one of which opened up critical considerations: *When did fieldwork truly begin?* This question encoureged deeper reflections on the challenges of *domestic ethnography*. If I could pinpoint two specific dates marking the official start and end of my fieldwork, then at some point, I would need to acknowledge all the prior experiences that had, over the preceding months, contributed to my pre-existing understanding of Corvetto, a urban space I already inhabited and observed through the multiple lenses shaped by my biographical trajectories. In other words, it reinforced the importance of positioning oneself within the research field: *Who am I? Where do I come from? From what standpoint do I speak? Why conduct research in Milan, and why specifically in a peripheral neighborhood like Corvetto?*

I moved in Milan to begin my doctoral studies, and for about a year, I observed Milan both as a resident and as a phd student in urban studies. I lived in the residential district of Porta Romana, obliged to reside in such a well-regarded area, yet never truly feeling a sense of belonging there. Before Milan, I had lived in Bologna, Athens, and Turin, cities where my interest in peripheral neighborhoods was first sparked and where I began my research. Even earlier, I had grown up in a small town in the province of Modena. I suppose that having personally experienced life on the

margins shaped my initial questions about territorial inequalities, the processes of exclusion and inclusion, and the dynamics of visibility and invisibility that define these spaces.

In Milan, I navigated the city with these insights and awareness, realizing that I was encountering a completely different urban landscape from the ones I had previously studied. Milan was difficult to grasp due to the complexity of the scales that shaped its system - political, financial, geographical, and beyond. At that point, my knowledge of Corvetto was still limited. During that first winter, I began attending the meetings of *Off Topic*, a political laboratory dedicated to debate, observation, and investigation into the transformations of the Milanese metropolis.[34]. Off Topic was founded over fifteen years ago, emerging from the intense debates that shaped pre-Expo 2015 city. Since then, the laboratory has developed grassroots research methods and alternative analytical perspectives to defend the right to the city, bringing forth a different vision of Milan. Through their lens, I began reconstructing the social and political history of the city, understanding its most violent and underreported processes, learning the names of key figures in urban transformation, and distinguishing between spaces of power and spaces of exclusion. Given the collective's long-standing attention to the impacts of big-events on the city, having already witnessed the effects of Expo 2015, they were quick to scrutinize Milan's bid to host the 2026 Winter Olympics. It was also thanks to Off Topic that I began to understand Corvetto and its growing centrality within the political and economic dynamics of the city. In January 2022, the collective launched an open, grassroots mapping workshop centered around a fundamental question: *What remains of the public city in Milan?* And in connection with this: *Who are the actors and what are the spaces of privatization in this city?* After extensive discussions, the workshop decided to focus on two areas of Milan: San Siro and, of course, Corvetto. Over the course of two years, the laboratory held regular monthly meetings, and the mapping process became a crucial moment for studying and understanding the ongoing urban transformations in this part of the city.

In the ethnography of Corvetto, I had to navigate the dual *before* and *after* - not only in relation to the neighborhood's transformation but also in terms of my own role as an internal, non-neutral subject within the field. This encompassed additional intra-research dimensions: the *before* and *after* of my move into the neighborhood, as well as the *before* and *after* of research time and lived experience.

Living and conducting research in the same place inevitably forces one to reconcile the differing temporalities of personal life and fieldwork. It requires a careful balance - knowing how to take care and not neglect either aspect. This challenge underscores the need to establish clear boundaries between *before* and *after* research, though such distinctions are not always easy to define.

[34] For more informations see: https://www.offtopiclab.org

Finally, as reflected in the title of this thesis, the dimension of *before* and *after* was fundamental to my research on Corvetto - particularly in relation to its position as a pre-mega-event neighborhood ahead of the *Milan-Cortina 2026 Winter Olympics*. In cases of major urban transformations produced by the sudden influx of capital, it is crucial to analyze the impacts *before* they unfold, observe their effects *during* the process, but it is essential to remember that the consequences persist *long after* the event has passed, as post-Expo Milan has clearly demonstrated. In March 2024, I traveled to Paris for a visiting period, just as the city was preparing for its own Olympic event that same summer. There, I was able to observe the *before*, *during*, and *after* of the Games within a much tighter timeframe than the arc that applied to Corvetto. Although I was not in Paris explicitly for research, it was deeply insightful to engage with urban observers monitoring these transformations, collectives developing counter-narratives, and to witness firsthand what was often referred to in Paris as the social, democratic, economic, and ecological *predatory* of the event. This impact was particularly visible in the northern *banlieues*, in three of France's poorest departments: *Saint-Denis, Saint-Ouen, and Aubervilliers* - areas that, in some respects, bore similarities to Corvetto.

The ethnographic gaze must learn to navigate both the slow rhythms of fieldwork and the sudden jolts of history. If this section has focused on the *before*, the next will examine the *during*. Yet, at times, events disclose *after* fieldwork has officially concluded. On the night of November 23–24, 2024, Corvetto experienced an event that sent shockwaves through the neighborhood, the city, and all of Italy. The death of Ramy, a 19-year-old raised in Corvetto, struck by a police vehicle after a prolonged chase through Milan's streets, unleashed an outpouring of grief and anger from his friends and family. Their mourning spilled into the streets, transforming private sorrow into a political reckoning. The episode also generated disproportionate media attention and ignited an intensely polarized debate. Although it occurred long after fieldwork had officially ended, it would have been impossible for me not to include it in the thesis. *Section 4.3* will therefore attempt to examine some of its causes, effects, and consequences.

4.3.2 Inside and Outside: Three Homes

In April 2023, I rented a room in Corvetto. Before that, I had been living in Porta Romana, just a 15-minute bike or metro ride from Corvetto but worlds apart in terms of housing composition. Since the start of my fieldwork in late September 2022, I had spent months trying to engage with Corvetto as much as possible, taking advantage of every available opportunity: public initiatives related to regeneration projects, debates, presentations, and neighborhood walks organized by local associations. Whenever I could spare a morning or afternoon, I would lose myself in long walks

through the district, often leading to spontaneous conversations with residents, workers, and regular visitors. Yet, despite this immersion, in this first months my time in Corvetto remained episodic. Once the events ended, I would leave Corvetto behind and return to my home in Porta Romana.

Despite my expectations, finding a room in Corvetto was not easy - the rental market had already proven to be dynamic and increasingly expensive. After a long search, I finally moved into the neighborhood in the spring. The first apartment I lived in was just steps from *Piazza Gabrio Rosa* and the *Quartiere Popolare Mazzini*, located on the fourth floor of a former *Ina Casa* complex - the public housing initiative that operated between the 1950s and 1960s. Over the years, all the buildings from that project had been fully privatized, and even this apartment had recently been renovated by its new owner. Its proprietor was *E.*, a middle-aged journalist who, after separating from his partner, had decided to buy a home in Corvetto.

Like many other new homeowners had told me, E. was drawn to Corvetto both by the attractive price per square meter and the proximity to the vast *Parco di Porto di Mare*, where he could take Lila - his aging dog - for walks. He occasionally rented out one of the two spare rooms belonging to his eldest son, and he was pleased to learn about my research, offering me the room at a reasonable price for a few months. When I visited the apartment, I was struck by the contrast between the minimalist architecture typical of public housing on the exterior - a long rectangular building connecting four floors of apartments via four separate stairwells - and the carefully curated interior. The space featured large wooden bookshelves overflowing with books and vinyl records, armchairs with handcrafted covers, parquet flooring, and decorative plants, creating an atmosphere quite different from its austere facade.

Later on, I would find myself experiencing this same feeling more and more frequently - this apartment embodied the prevailing concept of *living* among many of Corvetto's new residents. It reflected a common trend: those who had taken advantage of the neighborhood's relatively low real estate prices to completely renovate their interiors - often opting for a more modern, and undoubtedly more luxurious, aesthetic than what had previously defined the space.

Living with a representative of Corvetto's new residents turned out to be a interesting experience. Over informal mealtime conversations as well as more structured discussions related to my research, I gained access to his personal map of the spaces he frequented and appreciated - especially in relation to new consumption habits - as well as those he avoided or disregarded. Among the first group were several neighborhood cafés, such as *Pasticceria Gobbato*, a popular spot among both longtime and newer residents. It was also favored by police officers and *carabinieri*, who often stopped there during their patrol breaks. Another significant place was the *CIQ – Centro Internazionale di Quartiere*, a vibrant cultural hub in Corvetto that hosted an extraordinary array of activities daily, ranging from

concerts, workshops, and theater performances to film screenings, book presentations, thematic dinners, and more. Naturally, the already-mentioned *Parco di Porto di Mare* and the *Vettabbia green area* held special significance for E., frequented by runners, cyclists, and casual walkers - especially on weekends.

However, for E., there was also a part of Corvetto that remained unfamiliar, a space he deliberately avoided or passed through reluctantly. These areas included certain streets in *Quartiere Mazzini*, particularly *Via dei Cinquecento*, as well as a few bars with a more dubious reputation and the nearby *Piazza Gabrio Rosa*.

Three months later, in early July, I moved into my second home in Corvetto - just a few buildings away from the previous one. This time, my windows overlooked the infamous *Piazza Gabrio Rosa*. The apartment was in a residential building, positioned opposite the twin blocks of *Quartiere Popolare Mazzini*, home to a mix of longtime middle-class Corvetto residents, alongside an increasing number of students and newcomers.

Sharing the apartment with me was *A.*, a fellow doctoral student in comparative literature, who had arrived in Corvetto about a year earlier. During the months of our cohabitation, we frequently exchanged reflections on the dynamics and transformations unfolding in the neighborhood - observations shaped not only by our academic perspectives but also by the everyday experiences we lived together. More than anything, we found ourselves grappling with similar questions, ones we directed first and foremost toward ourselves, as *new residents* of Corvetto.

My move - from outside to inside Corvetto - meant crossing a housing boundary tied to class, but also recognizing a second, more internal boundary related to the distinction between *popular* and *non-popular* ways of living. *Inside* and *outside* were also linked to questions of belonging: I observed the group of new residents from an external standpoint while simultaneously being one of them. I observed the popular neighborhood from within but was never truly part of it.

Conducting research 'at home' required vigilance in avoiding the risk of creating what can be called the *exotic domestic* - a particularly delicate issue when studying peripheral neighborhoods, already weighed down by countless urban mythologies. Furthermore, these questions intersect with the *mirroring effect* in ethnography - that moment when researcher and researched reflect one another. Indeed, the primary group of actors I engaged with during fieldwork was a broad middle class of new residents in Corvetto - a community within which, as a young, white, highly educated researcher, I was warmly received. At the same time, I was acutely aware that those who belonged to the side of Corvetto that certain newcomers preferred *not* to see - if not absolute avoid - might identify me as part of that first group. Alternatively, they could perceive my research as extractive, and as a result, might have little interest in engaging with it or collaborating. Sitting with these contradictions often

led to discomfort, and that discomfort, in turn, forced me into a continuous process of reflection - constantly renegotiating my place *inside* or *outside* these groups, questioning my role in the transformation of the neighborhood, and interrogating the very function of my research.
Each answer demanded choices.
Despite my efforts to include voices, perspectives, and experiences that could reflect Corvetto in its entirety, research always comes with limitations - frequently tied to what cannot be incorporated and what must inevitably be left out.
To address the research question in this thesis, I chose to focus primarily on the practices and demands shaping urban space - particularly those put forth by actors with the most power and influence over beautification processes. Without a doubt, the new residents are the main protagonists of this transformation today. However, the participation of residents from *Quartiere Popolare Mazzini* remains less visible, despite its undeniable significance within Corvetto. The access would have required modifying the research question or methodology in response to reciprocal needs. Perhaps, with a more solidified knowledge of the neighborhood and the time for a new study, even the remaining distances will be bridged.
The *inside-outside* dynamic also manifested in the groups I engaged with and their activities. During those months, I became a regular participant in the monthly meetings of the *Rete delle Associazioni di Corvetto* - a space that accompanied me throughout my field research, essential for gathering insights and understanding the many initiatives and events that shaped the neighborhood each month. Through these meetings, I became familiar with the various associations active in Corvetto, gradually recognizing key figures and more frequently visiting their spaces. My involvement was especially focused on initiatives aimed at *beautifying* the neighborhood - events driven by a mix of longtime residents as well as newcomers from far beyond Corvetto.
In parallel to observing the construction of a new image for Corvetto, I also turned my attention to the mobilization of its residents. During the summer of 2023, amid the media upheaval sparked by the *tende in piazza* movement and the wider debate on housing in Milan, I participated - both as a researcher and as a resident - in the founding of the *Rete per il diritto all'abitare della Zona 4*. This initiative emerged from a coalition of housing activists, representatives from tenant unions (*Sicet, Asia, Unione Inquilini*), and members of the *Rifondazione Comunista* branch in Municipality 4. Their aim was to highlight growing concerns over the worsening housing situation in the area, where, as Olympic construction projects advanced, evictions were becoming more frequent.
Once again, the *inside-outside* dynamic shaped my experience within this group - especially during more politically charged actions like anti-eviction pickets. I constantly negotiated my position, both internally with myself and externally with the group, moving between roles as researcher, resident,

and activist. Publicly positioning myself as a researcher also meant offering my research and reflections as resources, reinforcing the public and applied responsibility of my discipline - to extend beyond the university and engage with the realities outside its walls.

As mentioned, ethnographic fieldwork is a long process of understanding that often feels never-ending. The ideas we begin to construct evolve over time, and the ethnographic experience never truly leaves us.

In February 2025, nearly a year after leaving Corvetto, I returned to live in the neighborhood. My third home overlooks, on one side, the public housing of *Quartiere Mazzini* and, on the other, the newly built municipal building on *Via Sile*. A single corridor is all it takes to cross from the 1920s into the 2020s - spanning a century of urban transformation.

Even though fieldwork has ended and the thesis is nearing completion, finding myself in between these two Corvettos continues to remind me that the question of *inside* and *outside* in a neighborhood like this is never fully resolved.

4.3.3 Day and Night: The Spaces of Prohibition

On the night between July 14 and 15, 2023, I was walking toward Piazzale Corvetto with two friends. It was very late, unbearably hot, the streets were completely empty, and the neighborhood was wrapped in a kind of silence I had never experienced before. Suddenly, a young guy appeared from around the corner. He looked very young and was slightly staggering. He glanced at us and then began to change direction, heading straight toward us. In a split second, before I could even realize what was happening, his hands were on my necklace—he yanked it, breaking it, and ran off toward Piazza Gabrio Rosa.

The anthropologist Philippe Bourgois, whose ethnographies were among the first to inspire my work, has long reflected on the contradictions inherent in representations of urban marginality:

> Any detailed analysis of social marginality is bound to confront serious problems related to the politics of representation [...]. For this reason, I am concerned that the life stories and circumstances narrated in this book might be misunderstood as stereotypical representations [...] or as negative portrayals of the poor." (Bourgois, 2005, p. 40, my translation).

As often happened while reading his work, Bourgois' words helped me clarify some of the methodological and theoretical dilemmas that conducting research in peripheral neighborhoods had

forced me to confront. The author had in fact grappled with these concerns for years—on the one hand, agreeing with social scientists who had critically examined the risk of reproducing inferiorizing narratives that have historically dominated the discipline, especially in relation to the study of poverty. On the other hand, Bourgois firmly opposed the erasure of suffering and destruction that run through the streets of the North American inner city—an erasure often reinforced in academic research by a middle-class aversion to poverty and a discomfort with violence.

In this section, then, I aim to reflect the full range of emotions I experienced and witnessed in the field, including those linked to discomfort, fear, and fatigue in the face of the less pleasant aspects of living in a fragmented space—one marked by the polarization of inequality and poverty, and still riddled with contradictions. As Bourgois suggests, I strive not to 'ignore or minimize the social misery I have witnessed, because in doing so I would become complicit in oppression.' (Bourgois, 2005, p.40, my translation)

Indeed, there is an aspect of ethnographic research that is not often addressed: few works have reflected on gender differences in fieldwork, particularly in urban research. This concerns the varying experiences of public space based on the researcher's gender and the differing conditions for moving through certain areas of the neighborhood, particularly at specific times of day. According to the authors of *Milan Gender Atlas. Milano Atlante di genere* (Andreola and Muzzonigro, 2022), perceptions of urban safety differ significantly depending on gender. The authors highlight that women experience spatial inequality and insecurity more frequently than men - not only due to objective threats like harassment or assault but also because of the constant need to plan their movements according to perceived risk. Andreola and Muzzonigro (2022) describe this as *incorporated discipline*: women internalize self-protection strategies such as avoiding certain places, limiting outings to specific hours, or adjusting their clothing - practices that ultimately restrict their access to the city and their freedom of movement (p. 167). *Milan Gender Atlas* thus highlights that the city is not neutral but shaped by gendered codes that differently influence access, presence, and the perception of public spaces. As the authors demonstrate, being a woman in urban spaces often involves navigating both the gaze of others and pervasive narratives of fear - whether one's body is actually seen or directly threatened or not (Andreola and Muzzonigro, 2022, p. 166). Perceptions of insecurity and fear, therefore, should not necessarily be understood as direct responses to experienced violence but rather as manifestations of gender-based oppression and control - mechanisms that reproduce traditional divisions and roles within the public sphere (Andreola and Muzzonigro, 2022, p. 166).

Ethnographic research, as a spatial experience, is profoundly shaped by the body, gender, and the personal encounters with the city that I, as a researcher, had lived and continued to live. As explored

in the previous chapter (see *Chapter III*), narratives rooted in discourses of insecurity, fear, and crime have long defined the urban atmosphere of Corvetto. Unlike other peripheral neighborhoods I had visited, where local residents actively sought to delegitimize their stigma through counter-narratives, in Corvetto this discourse had become so normalized and internalized that many residents themselves perpetuated it, despite the low incidence of recorded crimes and minor offenses, as they often reassured me. For me, both as a researcher and as a new resident, there existed a rigid *geography of prohibitions*, defined by the detours, compromises, and adjustments I had to make to avoid potential dangers. In fact, from the first day to the last day of fieldwork, even in casual conversations unrelated to research, my interlocutors constantly offered advice, warnings, and sometimes even prescriptions about which areas of Corvetto to avoid. Often unsolicited, these recommendations dictated which streets to take and which to avoid, the places not to linger, and the hours when I 'h*ad to learn to watch my back'* or when it was best to return home.

As I listened and mentally mapped out this landscape of restrictions imposed on me, I was entirely certain that such a map would not have applied in the same way to a male researcher.

Restrictions did not apply only to specific locations - they also contributed to a sharp divide between the experience of *day* and *night* in Corvetto. Studies on nighttime urban dynamics have long examined common perceptions of insecurity, which are shaped by the interplay between light and darkness. Nighttime is often framed as more dangerous because of its association with anxiety and vulnerability, largely due to diminished control, leading to a set of expectations about night itself and, conversely, about daytime (La Bruna and Brazioli, 2024, p. 126). Urban ethnography inscribes our bodies within external temporalities and rhythms that we must first adapt to. Whether I chose to conform to these restrictions or continuously questioned them, these elements inevitably influenced my research - both practically and emotionally. My interaction with spaces and individuals was constantly shaped by *co-constructed expectations* surrounding my behavior, as well as the broader categories of *day* and *night* and *fear* and *safety* - forces that actively defined the rhythms and intensity of fieldwork.

Although the contrast between expectations and reality almost always leads to disappointment, it is nonetheless crucial to acknowledge the role of *day-night variations* and *geographies of restriction* in limiting freedom of movement during fieldwork.

This aspect profoundly shapes the research experience, which is inherently subjective and, as we will see, deeply intertwined with sensory, emotional, material, and affective dimensions - each stemming from the relationship between the researcher and the field itself.



Figure 3 -"Safe streets are made by the women who walk them"

Corvetto, October, 10th 2023 - Photo by author

CHAPTER V
In the Field. Ethnography of camouflaging Corvetto

> I moved here around July 2022. I was living nearby at first to get a better sense of the area - I was renting - and then I came across a place that was for sale, so I bought it. […] The price per square meter was insane! We're talking around 3,700 euros. But keep in mind, it's brand new. Do you know the building? It's all been redone. It used to be a historic building from the 1920s, and they rebuilt it from scratch. All the masonry, everything, it's really beautiful, and the interior is stunning. Completely renovated!
>
> **L:** Are they all for sale?
>
> Oh gosh, if there's still anything left... I think they've sold everything. There's still a sign up for the attic apartment, though, so I guess they haven't been able to sell that one. And I have this feeling they're struggling with it because I saw three episodes of that show - what's it called? *Casa a prima vista*... Someone told me: "Hey, your building was on TV!" And sure enough, it really was.
> So yeah, I think they've had trouble selling the attic. I don't think they ever will... […] Well, because it costs 450,000 euros for an attic they advertise as being 100 square meters, which would make the price make sense, but in reality, it's only 50 square meters.
>
> [Interview with M. – 24/2/2024, my translation]

Since 2024, an Italian television channel has aired a daily reality-format program called *Casa a prima vista* ("Love it at First Sight"). In each episode, three real estate agents based in Milan compete to meet the demands of clients searching for a home in the city. Their goal is to convince the buyers to make a purchase "at first sight," based on the properties the agents have managed to find within Milan's notoriously difficult housing market. In one of the episodes, a couple is looking to buy an apartment in the city, with one specific request: a beautiful view. Ideally, they hope for a view of greenery or historic buildings. The first property they are shown is located in Corvetto. As soon as they arrive in the neighborhood, one of the three agents comments, "*Well, she really messed up with the area right away*," immediately followed by another agent who responds, "*I don't feel like criticizing the neighborhood.*" The client, however, doesn't seem fazed and replies that she actually owns another apartment just around the corner. The agent, clearly pleased, adds, "*So you know very well that this is a neighborhood undergoing major redevelopment.*" "*Corvetto is a rough diamond, you just have to believe in it*," the buyer concludes.

As described in the previous chapter, an extraordinary number of urban regeneration projects, events, and both public and private initiatives have taken place over time. Alongside the arrival of various galleries and studios, ranging from art to architecture and design, these contribute to the production of a new image of the neighborhood. In addition to its emerging artistic identity - which, for now, still appears less vibrant than one might hope - another dimension is particularly valued for its symbolic renewal: Corvetto borders the vast green expanse of the nearby *Parco Agricolo Sud*. Between *Parco della Vettabbia* and *Parco di Porto Mare*, around 65 hectares of public land open up onto the neighborhood, offering a resource that is unmatched compared to more central areas of the city. As the excerpt from the television program illustrates, this has also been recognized by other actors, such as real estate agencies and property development companies, who capitalize on the presence of parks and the imagery of urban nature, turning them into real estate assets. This strategy has played a significant role in driving up property values in the area.

What, then, is being made visible, and what, or who, is being hidden in this neighborhood? We now turn to the heart of the ethnographic inquiry: the processes of beautification and the politics of the unwanted in Corvetto. Starting from this, in the ethnography I decided to following two main category of practices that could be subdivide in related two movements: *what we want to see* and *what we do not want to see* in the neighborhood in transformation. It is important to stress that this is not a generic we, but the precise ones of the drivers of change – we will see the variety, from new dwellers to municipality to associations - those who have the power to act and decide what is legitimate and what is not in Corvetto. The first group includes a wide range of actions associated with regeneration projects, those related to art, the creation of new images, and future-oriented narratives, which are closely tied to attempts at beautification. The second group comprises the activities of what could be called, following the suggestions of second chapter, ‘urban ghostbusters’: efforts aimed at removing, cleaning up, and erasing the traces and presence of the unwanted in Corvetto. Both movements originate from initiatives that come from above - from institutions or actors with a social and/or economic interest in the area - and from below, led by residents or active citizens who, for various reasons, devote part of their daily lives to activities carried out for the neighborhood.

In the article *What We See (and What We Don’t): Resignifying Urban Traces of Colonialism* by urban sociologists Annalisa Frisina and Giovanni Semi (Frisina and Semi, 2023), the relationship between seeing and not seeing, and between looking and being looked at, is explored in relation to the concept of regimes of visibility (see Chapter I). These regimes have evolved and transformed alongside the political and economic changes in cities. The authors focus specifically on urban space as a site where the relationship between the visible and the invisible is regulated by dominant powers and cultural codes, which determine what can be seen and how, and what must remain hidden or aesthetically

disguised (Frisina and Semi, 2023). In short, seeing and not seeing are, for Frisina and Semi, deeply political and contentious actions, tied to dynamics of power, memory, and belonging. Looking and being looked at thus become asymmetric practices that need to be questioned, deconstructed, and transformed through participatory visual practices. This is also what the notion of camouflage (Böhme 2017, p. 91) encourages us to understand when analyzing the mechanisms behind beautifying spaces commonly regarded as ugly. Urban camouflage could be understood as the technique of hiding imperfections, the act of adding, removing and/or preserving a certain urban image: plaster renewal, storefront resurfacing, re-gardening and landscape decoration and so on. In stigmatized areas of the city, such as in the peripheries, the idea of educating, domesticating, and civilizing plain areas is prominent in this transformation; these practices are presented to promote the economic, social, and cultural development of the neighborhood and a greener, more sustainable and healthier environment. This perspective helps to grasp regimes of visibilization on one hand, regims of invisibilization in the other, and to understand how they take different forms in public spaces.

5.1 What we do not want to see:

While observing the actions aimed at highlighting the sides and faces of Corvetto that people wanted to see, I noticed that a series of initiatives operated in the opposite, yet complementary, direction, attempting to cover up what was not wanted to be seen. These are several practices that fall under what we have called the politics of the unwanted (see Chapter II), those that actively hunt what is considered the "monster" of Corvetto. What disrupts the visual order is often regulated by rules or prohibitions and subjected to techniques of avoidance and removal. However, traces and memories of these presences continue to persist in the places themselves. Within this interplay of concealment, revelation, and displacement, it becomes possible to better understand the relationship between invisibilization - everything that is attempted to be hidden - and hypervisibility - objects and bodies on which intervention becomes excessively crucial. In the fieldwork, the focus on the monstrification of certain urban space allow me to understand its specific codifications, that is its mythology and symbolic connotation, and in particular its role in constructing the 'Other' of the city as a threat. More precisely I read the *degrado* as something dangerous. Starting from the data I collected, here I focus on a particular sentimental dimension of decay, that is, as something that scares.

However, this of course arise a question: fear for whom and, most of all, from whom? It is important to stress the positionality of the hegemonic gaze the looks at decay and identifies it with the monstrosity. The position from which this gaze is produced is not static, it is constantly rearticulated by several agencies and institutions - local newspaper article or television shows, as well as traditional

media and social media. It is worth mentioning the case of a social media profile, later transformed into a blog, whose very title could summarize the theme of this thesis: *Milano Bella da Dio* ("Milan Beauty as God"). This channel was launched in 2019 by Milanese Giovanni Santarelli to showcase "the beauty and the ugliness of Milan," as he writes in the profile bio. It was inspired by its famous counterpart, *Welcome to Favelas*, which today counts over one million followers. The founder of the project, who lived in Calvairate, another working-class area of the city, explains that his goal is to provide a space for collecting video and photo testimonies of Milan's decay. He often posts content related to the suburbs, focusing on waste, graffiti, fights, and drug dealing, framing their presence as a social problem connected to security issues. Today, his page counts over 400,000 followers (Figure 10).

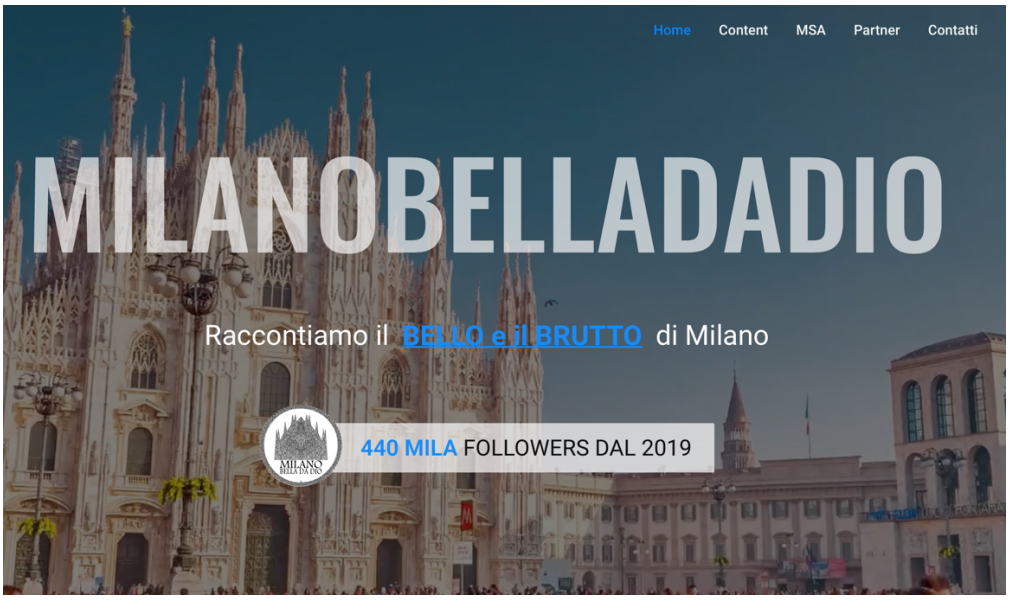


Figura 12 - Screenshot from the Milano Bella da Dio website - Source: https://milanobelladadio.it (June 2023).

Corvetto naturally appears frequently in profiles of this kind, as well as in similar media outlets. In January 2022, the website *Milano Città Stato* published one of its usual rankings, this time listing "the 7 areas [of Milan] where we feel most unsafe." Unsurprisingly, Corvetto ranked second, described as the neighborhood of "public housing and frequent fights."[35].

Henceforth, what and who are the monster of Corvetto individuated by the hegemonic discourses? What people don't want to see in the neighborhood is more easily identified and reported in local social media groups than in interviews - through photos of overflowing trash bins and litter on the ground, videos recorded from above, from apartment windows, capturing behavior that calls for

[35] Le 7 zone di Milano dove i milanesi si sentono più in pericolo, Milano Città Stato, 7/01/2025 (last accesed on 9/4/2025) https://www.milanocittastato.it/esperienze/le-7-zone-di-milano-dove-ci-sentiamo-piu-in-pericolo/

sanction. For example, complaints arise about the loud music near the sandwich kiosk that stays open late into the night in Piazzale Corvetto, or about illegal street markets selling food, goods, and second-hand clothes on the sidewalks of one of the main streets. Regular tirades are also directed at empty or occupied buildings. Finally, many of the complaints target certain categories of people: 'The lost souls of Corvetto'[36] (Figura 11), what is traditionally considered deviant, poor, as for exemples homeless, bums, drug dealers, even anarchists entered in this cathegory.

> I'd say the scariest area for me is definitely inside the public housing complex in the Mazzini neighborhood. It's like an imaginary neighborhood, really. In reality, it's just one or two intersections that are truly rough. Even there, I repeat, we're not talking about... Dangerous things happen maybe in New York. But there, the atmosphere is totally different. And even though I'm aware there are small problems, there's a really bad feeling, like sometimes you get in Piazzale Corvetto and the two large squares [Piazza Gabrio Rosa and Piazza Angilberto].
>
> [Interview with C., 2/6/2024, my translation]

According to the vast majority of interviewees, the main places in Corvetto associated most strongly with fear are its three squares: Piazza Gabriele Rosa, commonly known simply as Gabrio Rosa, Piazzale Ferrara, and Piazza Angilberto.

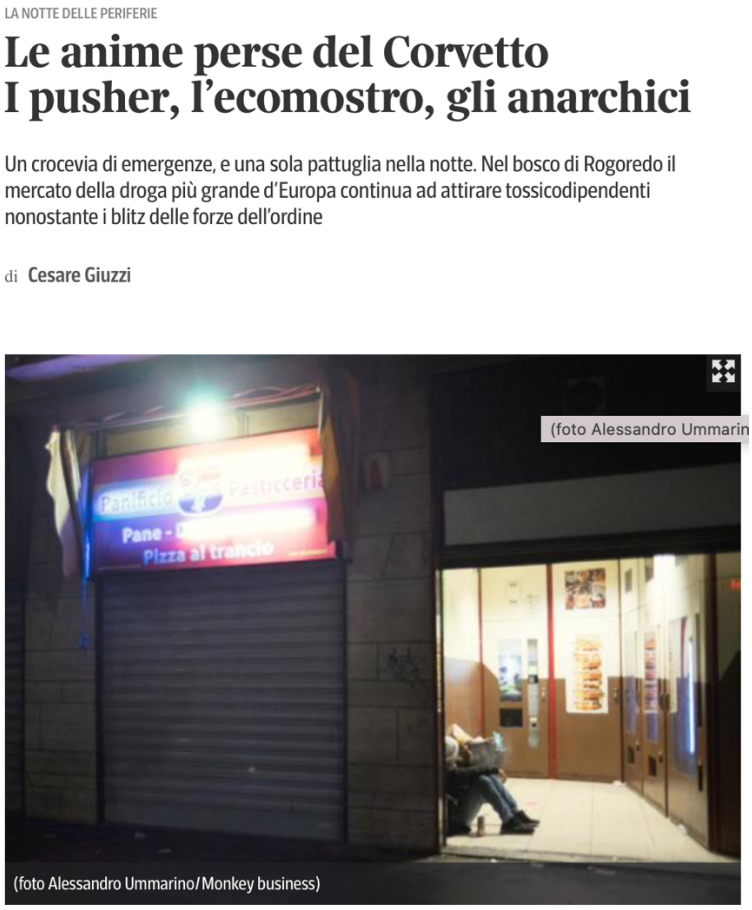
> I remember the square here in front [...] it was really peaceful, [...] people used to walk around at night. [...]
> Now you can't take a step without someone following you to offer you some weed, and you also find a lot of broken glass everywhere. Yeah, then around seven or seven-thirty the sanitation workers come to clean everything up, but after half an hour it's all back to the same.
>
> [Interview with F., 1/25/2024, my translation]

Hyper associated with drug dealing, the perfect exemples of a 'no goes area' where many inhabitants suggests not to go there, Piazza Gabrio Rosa has always been the vibrant heart of the neighborhood since its inception, precisely because it is the place where the streets of the working-class district converge. In residents' memories, it remains a landmark both for the presence of the Church of San Michele and Santa Rita, and for the shops - such as the pharmacy still in operation, the ice cream parlor, the butcher's shop, and the Trattoria del Cesareo, which no longer exist (Iosa, p. 213).

[36] Le anime perse del Corvetto. I pusher, l'ecomostro, gli anarchici, Cesare Giuzzi, 22 novembre 2016 (last accessed 10/04/2025) https://milano.corriere.it/notizie/cronaca/16_novembre_22/anime-perse-corvetto-pusher-ecomostro-anarchici-bosco-droga-rogoredo-e82e7d26-b07a-11e6-b55d-c69c2623ee72.shtml

The second most frequently criticized space is Piazzale Ferrara, which marks the northern boundary where the other streets of the working-class block meet. It is also the square that for years hosted at its center the now-closed building of the Municipal Covered Market (this story will be recounted in the chapter VII), and several of the businesses that once faced the square have progressively closed down. Today, only a minimarket, a bar, and a pharmacy remain.

The third square in the neighborhood is Piazzale Angilberto, which marks the western boundary of Corvetto before Via Marco d'Agrate leads far away toward the other neighborhoods of southwest Milan. Here still stands the oldest part of a cluster of "ringhiera" buildings typical of the Vaiano Valle area (Iosa, 2015, p. 201). As in Piazzale Ferrara, where a series of murals on the pavement and market walls once brightened the space for a time, the square has been the subject of a redevelopment project that radically transformed its design. We will discuss this further in the next chapter.



LA NOTTE DELLE PERIFERIE

Le anime perse del Corvetto
I pusher, l'ecomostro, gli anarchici

Un crocevia di emergenze, e una sola pattuglia nella notte. Nel bosco di Rogoredo il mercato della droga più grande d'Europa continua ad attirare tossicodipendenti nonostante i blitz delle forze dell'ordine

di **Cesare Giuzzi**

(foto Alessandro Ummarin

(foto Alessandro Ummarino/Monkey business)

Figura 13 - Screenshot of the article title from Il Corriere online - Source: https://milano.corriere.it/notizie/cronaca/16_novembre_22/anime-perse-corvetto-pusher-ecomostro-anarchici-bosco-droga-rogoredo-e82e7d26-b07a-11e6-b55d-c69c2623ee72.shtml

The narratives surrounding these three spaces in Corvetto have, over the years, influenced and intensified the stigma: for example, in September 2021, Piazzale Ferrara ranked third in a so-called

"Nightmare Tour," described as a "scene of fights and stabbings."[37] Piazzale Gabrio Rosa was labeled a "drug dealing hub," where an "alliance between pushers and anarchists"[38] was claimed to exist, immersed in a "perpetual filth."[39]

These are indeed the places where most of the initiatives I observed, connected to what is unwanted or hidden in Corvetto, take place. I divided this category of practices into two main actions: hiding or erasing, and removing.

5.1.1 Hiding - erasing

[37] Nightmare tour, I 7 luoghi di Milano dove non girare di notte, Milano città statao, 31 ottobre 2024 (last accessed on 10 april 2025) https://www.milanocittastato.it/esperienze/nightmare-tour-7-luoghi-di-milano-dove-non-girare-di-notte/

[38] Milano, piazzale Rosa centrale di spaccio. E l'alleanza tra pusher e anarchici, Nicola Palma e Marianna Vezzana, Il Giorno, 28 maggio 2022 (last accesed on 10 april 2025)
https://www.ilgiorno.it/milano/cronaca/piazzale-rosa-droga-anarchici-e79129f0

[39] Rubrica segnalazioni su Milano Today, 5 agosto 2014, (last accessed on 10 april 2025) https://www.milanotoday.it/social/segnalazioni/degrado-urbano-rifiuti-gabriele-rosa.html



Figura 14 - Social housing cleaning day – 13rd May 2023



Figura 15 - Social housing cleaning day – 13rd May 2023. The works concentrated on covering the political writings claims on the walls of Corvetto

Field Notes – May 13, 2023

Via Mompiani, 9 a.m.

A table is set up with white coveralls, latex gloves, and shoe covers waiting for the day's volunteers. I am greeted by a smiling lady wearing leather heels stained with paint and a bright red vest that reads "D., Citizen Volunteer." She is the one managing the cleaning day today, organizing it, signing off, and taking legal responsibility for the event, as she repeats throughout the day. I'm told she is very wealthy and has been organizing many other wall-cleaning days in different parts of the city for a long time. Often, she even buys the paint herself. She points to the coveralls and gloves and asks me to choose a brush ("people usually like to pick their own; they're all different," she says).

A few young people arrive and start putting on the coveralls and gloves. They are members of the Rotaract, the youth branch of the Rotary Club of Piazza Castello: young members of one of the city's most exclusive and elite clubs who are spending their morning in Corvetto covering graffiti on the walls. At one side of the table, some residents of the public housing buildings begin to arrive, including members of the Aler Tenants' Committee. Two councilors from Municipality 4 of the Lega party also show up, along with a representative from Aler who helped organize the day and selected the buildings (D. proudly tells us: "Imagine, Corvetto was chosen instead of Via Marcona").

As we paint, passersby repeatedly comment with the same phrases: "Well done! This was really needed!" or "It'll be back to the way it was by tomorrow anyway."

Having moved to Corvetto about a month earlier, my ethnographic work had undoubtedly intensified. Living in the neighborhood - commuting in and out by public transport each day, doing my grocery shopping, and no longer only visiting occasionally for events - allowed me to access and interpret the area in a very different way. I could now attend initiatives not only as a researcher, but also as a resident. This dual position placed me on a different footing of trust with my interlocutors, opening conversations and side chats that took unexpected and revealing turns.

In early May, while walking down Via Mompiani, I noticed a flyer inviting residents to take part in the first "Cleaning Day" of the Mazzini neighborhood, organized by the Aler Public Housing Tenants' Committee, a group I had never heard of until then. Curious to learn more about the Committee, I decided to attend and see how the initiative would unfold. Judging by the title, I assumed I was in for a morning of sidewalk cleaning - sweeping up leaves, picking up trash, or at most, clearing away dog waste - similar to the kind of initiatives I will describe later on (see section 5.2.1). What I encountered that morning left me completely unprepared, both for the purpose of the event - the cleaning wasn't aimed at the streets, but rather at political graffiti and tags on the walls - and for the diverse backgrounds and motivations of the participants. The group consisted largely of well-to-do young

people from central Milan, who, gloves in hand, were fulfilling their association's requirement to complete volunteer hours in social initiatives across the city. Alongside them was a small number of public housing residents, who mostly stood back, watching and commenting as the young volunteers painted over the wall. Unable to either refuse the offered paintbrush or fully take part in the activity, I spent much of the morning chatting with the latter group, trying to waste as much time as possible. The goal of the initiative was to cover one side of the street in the public housing neighborhood, erasing what were labeled as "vandalistic writings" - a mix of graffiti and political messages, which are, in fact, the majority of wall markings in Corvetto. This initiative can be seen, within the framework of this thesis, as a clear example of a beautification practice aimed at reshaping the appearance of the neighborhood, something I preferred to observe rather than take part in.

In fact, the attempt of act of beautification is frequently to erase the "un-saleable" appearances of poverty and classes (Bukowski 2019). Stavros Stavrides reflects on what he called the gesture of *defacement* (2022) and how it can be quite violent: following the architect, it «fractures urban memory as it is connected to the dominant images of public space» (2022, p. 163). Indeed, the aesthetic transformation of neighborhoods implies an action on the history and memory of places as well.



Figure 14 - Political writing in Corvetto - Author's photo

Walking through the streets of Corvetto, one notices various forms of wall expression, many of which are tied to political claims against speculative dynamics in the neighborhood, evictions, or urban regeneration projects. Observing these surfaces reveals multiple layers, the result of repeated erasures and overpainting. In Corvetto, there is an ongoing struggle - both material and symbolic - to erase what is not meant to be seen, what does not align with the emerging narrative of the area. One of the clearest sites where this battle plays out is precisely on the walls, where the eye is drawn to '*a*

palimpsest of voices, overlapping and attempting to overpower one another'[40] .

A few weeks later, I meet D., the organizer of the cleaning day, in a café in her own neighborhood - decidedly more central than Corvetto. I ask her to tell me about the wall-cleaning initiatives she coordinates, and how and why she decided to start them:

> Well, I started by founding the Neighborhood Committee. We fought a battle to have a traffic divider wall removed - eventually they tore it down because we insisted so much. When we saw it, we said: what is this thing? It was completely covered in graffiti, so we thought: why don't we start cleaning it? From there, I began to think: why not develop a project to clean all the so-called 'vandalism' graffiti across the entire neighborhood? It was actually the first national project I took on, and I even received a civic merit award: I was honored by the City of Milan for having launched this initiative back in 2009. I'm a researcher by training, so I'm used to approaching problems through data collection and the analytical and technical development of solutions. I was able to show how certain sociological theories - like the one about how a degraded environment leads to further degradation - were indeed applicable. And this was a project that could be implemented directly by the citizens.
>
> [...] Nowadays there's much more participation, but back then neighborhood committees would often emerge as single-issue protests. That is, the Committee would protest against the construction site under their windows or because, say, they wanted to cut down a tree. [...] In fact, it's often said that they arise precisely where there's a critical issue.
>
> [...] At a certain point, I joined the National Anti-Graffiti Association. I continued to pursue my own battles - against drug dealing, prostitution - and with them, the fight for urban decorum and against urban decay. Then, in the meantime, the Anti-Graffiti Association became Retake. I stayed networked with them for a year and then left, moving on to the Coordination of Milanese Committees, which still today brings together 151 local committees from across different areas of the city. This was because... As I said earlier, Retake carries out a very beautiful campaign - very beautiful - but also very single-issue, more focused on decorum, meaning on bringing beauty to neighborhoods that aren't exactly beautiful.
>
> [Interview with D., 31/05/2023, my translation]

As stated on their website, Retake is a "spontaneous movement of citizens born to fight against the degradation of public spaces," primarily known for its initiatives to repaint walls. Founded in Rome in 2009 under the motto *Wake up, speak up, clean up!*, the movement today counts numerous active

[40] The quotation is taken from a recent article published in the journal *Gli Asini*, which constitutes one of the first contributions to the debate on the transformation of the Corvetto neighborhood: Davide Caselli, Lucia Tozzi, Una passeggiata rigeneratrice intorno a Corvetto, 14 july 2023 https://gliasinirivista.org/una-passeggiata-rigeneratrice-intorno-a-corvetto-2/

local chapters across many Italian cities[41].

Graffiti writing is a practice of street art that originated from the eponymous movement born in the ghettos of New York in the 1960s. It was a youth subcultural phenomenon linked to hip-hop, which at the time expressed urban antagonisms and marginalization (Dal Lago and Giordano, 2016). In the 1980s, graffiti spread across the United States and Europe as a means for young generations in urban outskirts to give expressive form to their social and material experiences, to claim a tangible presence in the streets, and to assert their identity by marking the territory and the urban environment (Ascari, 2022; Dal Lago e Giordano, 2016). However, this spread was accompanied by strong criminalization of writers through police repression, in a context that quickly took the form of urban conflict and guerrilla warfare between youth and police (Dal Lago and Giordano, 2016). It was precisely during those years that the strict enforcement of 'zero tolerance' policies by New York mayor Giuliani harshly punished even minor offenses such as graffiti and urban vandalism.

As she says in the interview, D. does not want to engage in a single-issue battle focused solely on preserving urban decorum, but rather to address what she identifies as the broader underlying problems related to security. From her words, it often emerges that the aesthetic cleaning interventions she organizes alternate with actual actions by law enforcement, which most of the time are requested by her or by the Committee itself.

Indeed, during the morning of the 'cleaning day', while I was participating in a conversation between some residents belonging to the Aler Tenants Committee and the League party councilors, it didn't take long before the discussion about graffiti and tags in Corvetto also became an opportunity to talk about perceived security and to request increased surveillance:

> **Field Notes – May 13, 2023**
>
> On the opposite side of the street, on the twin façades of the public housing buildings, the strips where political graffiti and tags were removed by city workers are still visible: since they only cover them with the paint they have on hand, the result is a series of rectangular patches of color that make the wall look covered with uneven stripes, like very visible patches. I'm told that the paints purchased by the Rotary were carefully chosen to reproduce the original tones of the wall, and here the difference is only slightly noticeable.
>
> "When will the opposite wall be done?" everyone asks. "In October," they say, leaving a certain sense of discouragement among the residents.
>
> One of them told me that not long ago cameras had been installed in the courtyards, but they were quickly covered up. "They're useless," she said. Another woman chimed in, saying she's even afraid to go down the stairs and told me about occupied buildings and illicit activities happening

[41] Cfr: https://www.retake.org/chi-siamo/ (My translation, last accessed on 12/4/2025)

at night - issues for which the committee mainly blames the foreign residents. Then the woman added: “Between trash, cans, cigarette butts, and dog poop, it’s unbearable!”

Starting from 2020, a tax incentive, also known as the Superbonus 110%, allowed property owners to deduct expenses incurred for the renovation or energy efficiency improvements of buildings. Within a few years, cities were almost entirely repainted. In Corvetto as well, this bonus had whitened and varnished many façades in the neighborhood, creating a widespread icy, uniform effect throughout the area. The act of erasure is thus also an act involving memory: according to anthropologist Anna Tsing, it is crucial to emphasize the political importance of the ‘aesthetic practice of remembering’; without it, there would be no past and no future (Tsing 2015, p. 79). According to the broken windows theory, graffiti, considered a problem of aesthetic order as much as garbage and filth, are still today identified as a crime against private property and public order, within a complex legal and ideological struggle (Andron, 2018).

Following Jacques Rancière, artistic practices, or the forms of visibility of artistic practices, should be understood in relation to the space they occupy and what they do within it (Rancière, 2022). The wall thus becomes the site of “a display of ghosts” (Rancière, 2022, p. 17) because it both distributes and simultaneously confuses the expressions of the neighborhood’s identities and activities. However, the ‘politics of the sensible’ maneuvered through initiatives such as the cleaning day unilaterally dictates the relationship between what can be said and what can be seen. The whitening - carried out through erasures and coverings - now prevents us from thinking of the wall as an archive, as a repository of the neighborhood’s layered past and memories, especially the conflictual ones.

Field Notes – May 13, 2023

At the end of the morning, they take a group photo and gradually head back to their homes in the city center.

It’s just me and D. left, who is finishing putting away buckets, brushes, and shoe covers. She closes the trunk and is about to leave, but just before getting into the car, her expression freezes: at a corner of the wall, at the end of the street, someone forgot to cover a writing. It’s a black stencil that reads: *“Molesting male, if you touch me, I’ll beat you up.”* D. is shocked; you simply cannot leave that stencil on a freshly repainted wall. With a quick movement, she reopens the trunk, grabs a brush and a bucket with the remaining paint, returns to the wall, and covers the last, unacceptable trace on the surface.

“Now it’s all in order,” she says, satisfied.

5.1.2 Remove



Figura 16 - February 15, 2023 – Parco della Vettabbia – Vaiano Valle - Author's photos

Field Notes - 15 febbraio 2023

We walk under the bright gray concrete towers, and cross a park that stands in the middle, hardly to be seen in the shadow of the high-rise buildings. we exit on the mirrored side and we are already in the open countryside, the Parco Agricolo Sud opens up and stretches into the background. we follow a traced-looking path for about ten minutes, when we begin to see silhouettes of burned waste more and more evident. We cross a small metal bridge, a daunting panorama opens in front of us: an overgrown expanse of debris, a flattened square with still evident traces of bulldozers' wheels, on the horizon the skeletons of two former farmhouses with decaying walls opening to interior rooms. The demolition, we quickly realize, must have been recent. This was where a Roma camp had been located for more than a decade, so D. [a resident] told me in a previous chat. It had been evicted at the end of last August (2022).

The second action I propose to analyze is perhaps the most intuitive, and at the same time, the one that seems to have the most brutally direct consequences. While the excerpt from the field notes speaks of outright forced removals, carried out through the presence of law enforcement and other removal apparatuses deployed during evictions and clearances - ranging from evacuations by the fire

brigade to actual demolitions - there are, however, other less direct methods that contribute to displacing what people do not want to see.

As we have seen, public space is increasingly regulated by prohibitions and rules, shaped according to criteria of decorum that effectively exclude and push away what is considered out of place. The traces of what remains - what we called "ghosts" in the second chapter - are therefore linked to memory, something that exists without really being there, something that once was physically present but has now disappeared, yet still lingers: the marks left by former residents who have moved away or been expelled from the neighborhood, but also less tangible memories, such as the recollections of the hardships faced by the working-class district. As Matthew Gandy writes, 'urban wastelands are by-products of history but hold an ambiguous relation to discourses of historical preservation or existing modes of cultural valorisation' (Gandy, 2022, p. 1123). In Corvetto, indeed, in the voids left by old industries or demolitions, new buildings have been constructed that are hard to miss, and somehow retain a spectral aura both because of what they have erased and because of their visible strangeness.

When I began the ethnography in September 2022, two skeletal structures of empty buildings still stood at the two ends of Piazzale Ferrara. These were the remnants of construction sites started in previous years but then abandoned. The larger of the two buildings, at the corner of Via Polesine and Via Mincio, was the reinforced concrete skeleton of a huge horseshoe-shaped residential complex, of which only the five floors and the supporting walls had been built. At that time, the building was still owned by Aler, the regional agency managing public residential properties, and had been abandoned since 2012 due to the bankruptcy of the companies responsible for the construction work. Over those ten years, the building - mostly known as Corvetto's "eco-monster" - had been the subject of heated complaints and debate within the neighborhood, both because of the architectural anomaly caused by its unfinished appearance and because of the informal uses that took place in its gaps and crevices. Since it was partly covered and protected by its walls - open but solid - for many years it was used as a living space by homeless people or people in transit. A shopkeeper from Piazzale Ferrara recalls the situation of the building with these words:

> That structure originally cost 13 million euros. To build that thing. Then the Municipality passed the responsibility to the Region, and over the years the Region passed it to Aler, who took charge of that building, and it remained abandoned for twelve years. Yes, maybe even more, even longer. Many years abandoned... it became a refuge for all kinds of people. Because the skeleton was there, so underneath people had taken shelter... There was everything and more, very dangerous! And so there were public order problems because down there it was really dangerous. Then we went to the Municipality [...] and spoke with Rozza, who was the security assessor at the time,

> during Sala's first administration, and they did a bit... they put up street lamps. They evacuated the place with a lot of police because there were more than 150 people down there.
>
> [Interview with G. and F., 21/2/2024]

In 2021, through an agreement between the Region, Aler, and the Municipality, scaffolding reappeared and construction work resumed. The building was entrusted to a project proposed by the Politecnico di Milano, which would have a thirty-year concession on the property and would turn it into student housing with 213 beds.

Perfectly in line with this operation, not far away, the new Municipal Building on Via Sile was inaugurated in that same year. In this case as well, the first plans dated back to 2007, and the unfinished structure had remained abandoned since 2011, becoming yet another eyesore in the neighborhood. In search of a location to consolidate several municipal departments previously housed in rented spaces in central and semi-central areas, the city purchased the Via Sile complex, and in 2021 the "ecomonster" was transformed into a gleaming stronghold, illuminated day and night by a play of lights created by the internal and external reflections of the sparkling glass panels that now entirely cover its façades. It is a piece of contemporary architecture designed by the FZ studio, now inhabited daily by hundreds of officials, council members, and citizens.

Both the new student residence, officially opened in 2023, and the municipal building on Via Sile were widely announced by the City and the press as milestone projects in the redevelopment of Corvetto. This was because, at the very moment construction resumed, these interventions both helped to halt and remove the informal uses that had come to characterize those urban voids and, at the same time, the two new openings promised the arrival of a significant number of new young residents and workers, bringing with them a high level of cultural capital, guaranteed by their respective social and professional statuses, to live in and circulate daily through the neighborhood. Both buildings now stand as alien presences, as they have little or nothing to do with the architectural style of the surrounding residential fabric or with the housing history of the neighborhood, thus representing a rupture within it.

To use the term proposed by Matthew Gandy (2022), the two buildings have transformed from *eco-monsters* into "architectural monstrosities" - a concept the author employs to refer to the presence of newly constructed buildings, often designed in a hyper-contemporary style by well-known architecture firms, that are inserted into low-income neighborhoods, contributing to forms of social and ecological displacement.

> Clearly, my notion of an architectural monstrosity, encompassing both aesthetic as well as structural dimensions, does not elide with the 'promises of monsters' thesis in relation to forms of cultural and technological hybridity. The emancipatory monster of the posthuman imaginary is

> an ‘unstable assemblage of categories that were never intended to be fused’ (Hellstrand et al., 2018, p. 153), whereas in this case we must contend with a deliberately crafted form of eco-capitalist hybridity that represents a simultaneous form of aesthetic and political monstrosity. (Gandy, 2022, p. 1132)

In the summer of 2023, to everyone's surprise, scaffolding appeared on the second ghost building in Piazzale Ferrara. For several years, the renovation work at number four Via Comacchio - a public housing building owned by Aler and dating back to the early 20th century - had been at a standstill, or rather, only halfway completed: the lower part, repainted in a cream yellow color, had its openings sealed with light gray bricks to prevent entry, while the upper floors remained exposed, with open windows revealing the interior spaces, which had withstood years of harsh winters and hot summers. Despite the new scaffolding, even the shopkeepers in the square had little information about the building’s future. Only Bruno Cattoli, the union representative of the Corvetto branch of the Tenants' Union (*Unione Inquilini*), whose office is located nearby, was able to explain its history to me in more detail.

> “Neighbourhood Contracts” were the old urban renewal scheme for public housing neighbourhoods. [...] These were complex redevelopment interventions that were supposed to include both an urban planning and architectural component, which meant the adaptation of roads, and among the complementary works they even included the student housing. Then, for certain buildings that were structurally in the worst condition [...] they carried out full renovations. In Corvetto, for instance, they renovated Polesine 2 and Polesine 6, then turning into Via Mompiani there were numbers 3 and 5, and finally the one at Via Comacchio 4. Separately, they worked on building number 2 in Via Panigarola, which is right across from here. In this case, they basically kept the external walls and completely renovated the interior - they redid all the internal volumes, the elevators; only the external façades remained. Theoretically, this whole process was still framed within the period when people talked about participatory planning, so there was the Neighbourhood Lab which was supposed to manage relations with the tenants [...] and then, once the works began, the houses were emptied; those with legal tenancy were relocated, and the squatters relied on the well-known Article 34, paragraph 8 - I don’t know if you’re familiar with it, it’s quite famous - because it allowed for relocation to other neighbourhoods, but only through regularisation, and in fact, nearly all the squatters were regularised. [...] That article no longer exists, but there's now a regulation that has taken its place, which allows squatters to be assigned SATs (Temporary Housing Services) as an exception to the requirement of not being squatters. It’s basically the purgatory of unlawful occupation - they are moved into SATs with contracts of

> up to five years, so that they can later become eligible for public housing.[42] [...]. Anyway, it's complicated even like this because for every apartment that needs to be vacated, they have to find another renovated one, and that becomes a real mess.
>
> One of the problems with the neighborhood renovation contract in Corvetto is that it was done a bit... Because it's true that some buildings were in really bad shape - even the one on Comacchio was kind of all piecemeal, without a clear boundary... without real neighborhood participation. There was neither participatory planning nor anything like that, so while it certainly solved some structural issues in the area, it didn't have any real impact on the social aspect or the overall livability of the neighborhood.
>
> [Interview with Bruno Cattoli, 20/6/2024, my translation]

On the morning of August 19, 2015, to allow the start of renovation works at number 4 Via Comacchio, police, *Carabinieri*, firefighters, the financial police, emergency medical services, social workers, and Aler inspectors entered the building in what is remembered as one of the largest eviction operations in Corvetto[43]. The building, in fact, was entirely occupied in its more than fifty apartments. After that day, construction work began but was almost immediately halted due to the bankruptcy of the company handling the renovation. Work resumed eight years later. Today, the renovations have been completed, and the seventy restored public housing units remain vacant, awaiting assignment. In September 2024, the Region - governed by the right-wing Lega administration led by President Fontana - announced that these apartments would be reserved for members of the police and fire brigade, according to a resolution proposed by Regional Housing Councillor Paolo Franco, in collaboration with Security Councillor Romano La Russa. This is part of a partnership between Aler and the Milan prefecture, aiming to increase security in the neighborhood. 'It's a turning point', declared Franco, 'a tangible example of how the Lombardy Region is working toward the regeneration and redevelopment of Aler buildings'[44]. Meanwhile, the housing emergency in Milan is becoming increasingly urgent: fewer and fewer public housing units are being assigned, while the

[42] Among the requirements to apply for public housing is also the obligation of not having been evicted or removed from other public housing units in the past five years.

[43] Gianni Santucci, Maxi sgombero in via Comacchio. Svuotato il palazzo degli abusivi, 19 agust 2015 (last accessed on 13/4/2025) https://milano.corriere.it/notizie/cronaca/15_agosto_19/maxi-sgombero-via-comacchio-svuotato-palazzo-abusivi-case-popolari-aler-7324bb2e-4638-11e5-979c-557f4d93ec30.shtml

[44] Le case Aler per poliziotti, carabinieri e pompieri: "Così aumenta la sicurezza", Redazione Milano Today, 16 september 2024 (ultima consultazione 13/4/2025) https://www.milanotoday.it/attualita/case-popolari-poliziotti-carabinieri-2024.html

number of requests continues to rise. According to data collected by the Affordable Housing Observatory, in 2022 there were 36,946 applications submitted for public housing, compared to just 1,523 units made available and 1,297 actually assigned (Bricocoli et al, 2025).



Figura 17 - The City Hall building on Via Sile transformed into a venue for the Hyperlocal festival – September 24, 2023 – photo by the author

Meanwhile, that same September, just a few steps from Via Comacchio, the newly inaugurated Municipal Building on Via Sile hosted the third edition of the *Hyperlocal Festival*, a two-day event organized by the Milan-based magazine *Zero*, dedicated to showcasing various Milanese neighborhoods and promoting urban subcultures and local communities. Performers, musicians, DJ sets, and talks took turns in the outdoor courtyard, the inner court, and on the rooftop terraces of the eighth floor, alongside food trucks and vintage markets. Images of the venue packed with crowds

circulated widely in the days that followed. That was just the first of the editions that have since been held every late September in the Municipal Hall of Via Sile.

The 2023 edition was entirely dedicated to telling the story of the Corvetto neighborhood: in the days leading up to the event, a series of posters appeared on nearby streets featuring the faces and words of those selected by the editorial team to represent Corvetto - almost always the same people as in many previous occasions (see section 5.2.2). The event was such a success that by 9:30 p.m. on Saturday night, entry had to be stopped, as the venue had reached its maximum capacity earlier than expected.



Figura 18 - Queue at the entrance to the event – September 23, 2023 – Photo by the author.

In all these events, there is always something new that arrives and displaces what was there before, albeit in different ways, with varying intensity and force. This dynamic is deeply tied to visibility and desire: the implicit logic behind operations like those described above is to attract new, temporary populations that are better suited to consumption. At the same time, it works to remove undesirable presences, typically those who or that hinder related investments.

In Corvetto, the consequence of these sudden injections of new populations has been the rapid acceleration of the transformation of connected spaces. However, this is a change that is not easy to fully control and is, in fact, still ongoing. This is still a neighborhood that, at times, resists complete domestication - and doing so sometimes requires (or rather, leads to the demand for) more direct measures.

On March 1st, 2024, a resident posted the following message in a neighborhood social media group:

> **MORE CHECKS AND SEARCHES BY THE STATE POLICE (THANKFULLY)**
> Things are still far from being resolved - in fact, the drug dealing and the arrogance of the young guys involved are still very much present and can, unfortunately, be felt in the air of our neighborhood. However, the pockets of resistance (such as the ever-growing group of citizens who meet at the now-famous Giacomo's Kiosk in Piazzale Corvetto, an authentic stronghold against illegality and a territorial outpost against both petty and organized crime) are becoming increasingly stronger.
> The strength of this resistance, however, must come from the institutions, and it must be said that recently the Police Headquarters has been much more active.
> The image you see here was taken today at exactly 2:30 p.m. in Piazzale Gabrio Rosa: as often happens, checks and searches were being carried out, even under pouring and unpleasant rain. Let's hope that with law enforcement constantly breathing down their necks, these healthy young men might finally decide to get a real and honest job, instead of continuing to push weed and coke along the sidewalks [...] *(my translation)*

Discourse on the perceived dangerousness of new urban 'Calibans' and 'witches' very often leads to the peripheries while, at the same time, it reproduces privilege by regulating and ordering spaces and bodies, assigns differing degrees of morality and immorality. The implicit construction 'by contrast' of the cleaning, greening and beautifying space in what is understood as a *neighbhorhood to be safe* absolves and justifies other kinds of practicess: the images of the ordered and cleaned space in fact sometimes obscure the repressive violent interventions of the police, but also less violent but still repressive requests, such as the asking for cameras and patrols.
Everything that acts to encircle what one does not want to see in Corvetto establishes a precise hierarchy of contempt: the monstrification acts on the subjects until they are confused with the object, creating a dangerous blurring - both in terms of life trajectories and biographies - between ourselves and the other.
Images of order imposed by individuals but also through police interventions, the before-and-after pictures described as victories, help us understand the role of Corvetto's 'monsters' in the aesthetics

and politics of urban space in this neighborhood, and allow us to address some key questions: how does degrado become degradao? What is the process that leads to transform spaces and residents to monsters?

In this paragraph, we observed how decay can be transformed into a dispositif to demonize the unruly and unsettling (Giuliani, 2021). Indeed, the request of beauty is tied to the supposed need of a part of the residents to be saved by the dangerous "degrado". After all, Smith's seminal work (Smith, 2005) already refers to the process of gentrification to a form of urban colonization, in which gentrifiers acquire the characteristics of good, civil, savior, which obey to accepted a middle classed social norm, conquering and improving spaces of decay, uncivilized, deviant and poor neighbourhoods. Let us now turn to the second group of practices more closely connected to this category of residents.



Figura 19 - Anti-Eviction morning with the activists of the Rete per il diritto all'abitare zona 4 – Via Polesine, 18th September 2023 - Author's photo

5.2 What we want to see

Starting precisely from the representation of the 'criminal Corvetto,' there is an ongoing effort in this neighborhood to propose a new idea of the area - today increasingly linked to the Olympic Games machinery - as an explicit strategy of de-stigmatization, aiming to present Corvetto as a 'new creative neighborhood.' This process of rewriting meanings involves a symbolic apparatus that certainly

operates on the level of urban narratives but is grounded in specific local activities. During the ethnography, it happened to observe and participate in a very heterogeneous specific group of actions aimed at acting on the image of the neighborhood and/or reproducing a new one, which I assumed could be divided into two macro actions: ordering/cleaning and rinarrate.

It is mainly the new, white, middle-class residents that is involved the most in taking an active role on the redeveloping and improving of the neighbourhood. Discourses on the need and relevance for their effort have often emerged and acting towards a material, symbolic and cultural transformation of the area. Examples of activities could be recorded both in informal actions such as collective street cleaning or re-gardening (planting flowers, fixing flowerbeds), but also more institutionalized social and cultural associations, many of which are supported by, or framed within, public or private projects of urban regeneration.

One of the central places for this first category of practices is undoubtedly the *Rete Corvetto*, an informal network that brings together the ever-changing constellation of associations working in the neighborhood to share initiatives, news, opportunities, and exchanges. The *Rete Corvetto* meets once a month at the *Laboratorio di Quartiere*, a municipal service of the City of Milan aimed at supporting the urban regeneration process of the Mazzini neighborhood, where residents, operators, and other local entities gather monthly. Today, *Rete Corvetto* counts more than 50 associations, a Google group of 220 people, and monthly meetings held at the *Laboratorio*, attended by 30 to 40 people including active citizens and association representatives[45].

5.2.1 Ordering-cleaning

In the Corvetto neighborhood, complaints about abandoned trash in the streets and dirt left in the squares are numerous and daily - heard in condominium chats, street conversations, but especially on the channels that most of all host these kinds of grievances: neighborhood groups on social networks.

[45] For a deeper understanding: 'Nadia Zoller. Capire come abitare assieme: la Rete delle Associazioni di quartiere', Redazione quartieri di Zero, 2 september 2023, (last accessed 27/3/2025)
: https://zero.eu/it/persone/nadia-zoller-laboratorio-di-quartiere-corvetto/



Figura 208 - Post from January 25, 2025 - Source: Facebook group "Corvetto, Viale Lucania, Piazza Bologna"

Michael Herzfeld, in his article titled *Spatial Cleansing: Monumental Vacuity and the Idea of the West* (Herzfeld, 2006), emphasizes the symbolic importance of clean, open, and closed spaces. With this concept, the anthropologist involves both the physical and conceptual redefinition of spaces, often leading to the exclusion of certain groups of practices or presences. Spatial cleansing refers to the clarification of boundaries within a space, which often results in labeling former something, being an object or a person, as intruders. This process can involve derogatory language to describe these individuals, emphasizing their perceived illegitimacy in the area (Figure 18). In the photo, which shows a post published by a resident of the condominium complaining about the garbage left on a neighborhood sidewalk, some neighbors are accused using ironic nicknames. This serves to highlight the division between two different types of behavior, which are also linked to the aesthetic forms that order takes in public space. To manage this aspect, for several years now, regular collective clean-up days have been organized in Corvetto to clean the streets and parks. These events are proposed both by active players within the Corvetto network of associations and by external organizations, such as charitable or volunteer groups, as well as by individual residents or those united in condominium or street committees.



Figura 19 - Neighborhood cleanup initiative organized by Laboratorio Mazzini – May 30, 2024

Figures 19 and 20 are just some examples of these initiatives, gathered under slogans like *PuliAmo il quartiere* (Let's Clean the Neighborhood), implying a symbolic connection between the act of cleaning and love and care for Corvetto. However, this seemingly harmless and obvious association conceals a cultural vision that risks slipping into normative attitudes. As we saw (see Chapter II), in the classic *Purity and Danger*, anthropologist Mary Douglas (2011) seeks to understand the act of cleaning as a social phenomenon. In the text, she explores the connections between contamination (pollution) and taboo. 'Love of cleanliness and respect for conventions are two elements that make up our idea of dirt', the author asserts in the opening of her work (Douglas, 2011, p. 39, my translation). Building on the division between the sacred and the profane, Douglas observes how dirt is linked to the profane realm of contamination and how this is experienced at the community level

as a threat. The act of cleaning serves to reposition the boundaries between the sacred and the profane, emphasizing the limits between what is restored to order and what remains dangerous.

Just as street-cleaning initiatives are proposed - mainly focused on collecting litter, bottles, and trash from the streets, which, in light of the previous passage, take on a somewhat threatening aura - every month in Corvetto, a network of active citizens organizes a day dedicated to tidying up some flowerbeds. These are mainly small patches of public green spaces in the neighborhood, managed through collaboration agreements, such as the Miglio delle Farfalle, or projects like the Giardino dei Desideri and the Sentiero della Biodiversità. The Patto di Collaborazione (Collaboration Pact) is a project promoted by the Municipality of Milan that allows some autonomous citizens to take charge of managing common areas. In this case, the collaboration focuses on the flowerbeds lining the bike path along Corso Lodi, including those in Piazzale Corvetto, covering about a mile of land where various shrubs have been planted (see also par. 7.3). These were specifically chosen for their decorative qualities - such as flowering plants or low evergreen shrubs with broad, covering leaves, selected to harmonize with each other in terms of colors, shapes, and scents. Since May 2021, the year the Pact was first signed, a determined group of active citizens has been carrying out monthly actions of cleaning and tidying the area, often focused on removing waste and weeds, but also organizing seasonal reseeding events, carefully selecting the color and form variations of the new plants. What is interesting is the discourse behind this commitment, which emphasizes the need to (re)bring beauty to the neighborhood and the belief in the power of aesthetic action itself to contribute to the regeneration of the entire district.

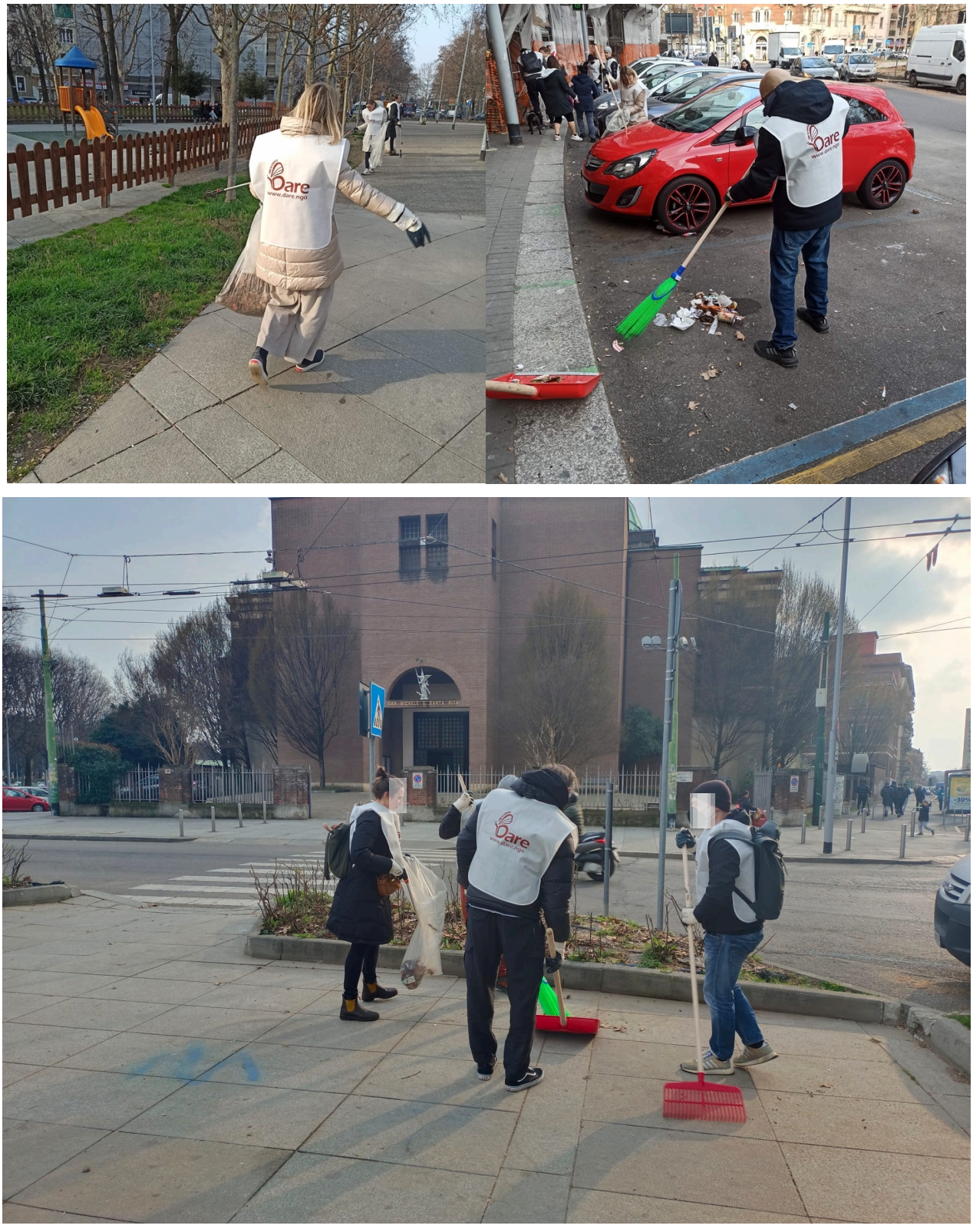


Figura 20 - Cleaning day in Gabrio Rosa Square - January 2023 - Source: Quartiere Mazzini' Facebook Group



Figura 21 - Periodic cleaning of the flowerbeds of the Miglio delle Farfalle project – February 24, 2024 – Photo by the author



Figura 22 - Regardening – March/April 2023 – Photo from the Miglio delle Farfalle project Facebook group

As can be seen in the images, however, these collective actions are often organized and almost exclusively overseen by white residents with a relatively high average age, usually composed of active citizens and, in particular, new residents who have recently arrived in Corvetto and express a desire to take on an active role in the neighborhood's regeneration. The reasons behind their

participation in neighborhood life are varied, but they often refer to a desire to improve the appearance of the area - both to enhance the neighborhood's overall atmosphere and, sometimes explicitly and other times implicitly, to protect the value of their real estate investment, fearing that deterioration could lead to its loss.

Collective cleaning and tidying actions, however, do not enjoy uniform widespread support throughout the neighborhood and sometimes even spark conflicts. In June 2023, I attended a discussion at the monthly meeting of the Rete Corvetto. A representative of the "*pattisti*" - as the active citizens managing the Collaboration Pacts in Corvetto call themselves - reported on the results of recent cleaning activities in some flowerbeds carried out in collaboration with other longstanding associations in Corvetto.

> **Field notes, June 28, 2023**
>
> Rete Corvetto Meeting
>
> R. expresses satisfaction with the excellent work done on the flowerbeds. However, she also reports rising tensions along Corso Lodi due to the disrespect of the area near the benches; despite the daily efforts of associations and Amsa, the amount of trash is overwhelming. She is concerned that some people are exploiting the issue by proposing petitions to remove the benches - a proposal she finds unacceptable, especially since many elderly residents and families enjoy that space. She argues that it is the responsibility of the Municipality to raise awareness seriously and concretely among the shops open late (as well as the 24-hour supermarket) that sell food and drinks, as they would be responsible for the beer bottles abandoned on sidewalks and in the squares.

The long-standing issue of the benches along Corso Lodi, as well as those in Piazza Gabrio Rosa and Piazza Angilberto, sparks lengthy debates - both in Rete Corvetto meetings and in the Council meetings of Municipio 4, but especially on social networks. The discussion focuses on the disorder allegedly caused by the glass bottles accumulated and left on the ground, often found in the mornings. These bottles are taken as evidence that the benches are being used by people deemed inappropriate, who contribute to making these spaces feel unsafe. As can be seen from the words reported in the field notes, the proposals of the new residents of Corvetto boil down to two main approaches: one, to take preemptive action by requesting the removal of the benches; the other, opposing this, advocates increasing cleaning efforts and enforcing order in public spaces, supported by ordinances that limit the hours during which glass containers can be sold. These are two seemingly opposing attitudes, with one clearly more reactionary than the other. However, in both cases the underlying idea is to delegate the management of public space to rules and practices that, although different in methods

and targets, result in criminalizing certain urban habits - treating them as deviant behaviors - such as the use of public space as a place for socializing.

Much has been said, including in previous chapters, about the association between disorder and the perception of insecurity, and consequently about the connection between social control and the demand for order (Pitch, 2013; Bukowski, 2019; Pavoni Andrea and D'Alba, 2024). As D'Alba and Pavoni argue:

> The centrality of order in political science (Hobbes), Enlightenment philosophy (Kant), and in classical sociological thought (Durkheim, Parsons) does not need to be highlighted here. What we could stress, however, is the extent to which order itself has offered a way for criminology to translate into the urban space – rather than abandon – the moral and normative bases and biases it had been accumulating for over a century. In this way, problematic questions concerning the discriminating effects of security policies in terms of race, gender, class and so on have been diluted into the seemingly uncontroversial aesthetic consensus concerning the common sense of order (Ascari, 2019, p. 23; Wall, 2021). We can refer to such a common sense as the intangible infrastructure of shared norms and expectations that holds the social together (Goffman, 1971). While it tends to disappear into the background, the sense of order is far from being innocent, rather it depends on historical, power-structured relations and expectations (Pavoni Andrea and D'Alba, 2024, p. 27).

The authors observe that the word *decorum* evokes the realm of *orderliness* and *appropriateness*, and although it may seem like an empty concept, it is actually connected to a system of values (Pavoni Andrea and D'Alba, 2024, p. 29). Acting on the level of order and cleanliness involves actions that try to conform to a norm, to control what slips away, based on the implicit belief that there exists a shared idea of order and that caring for a public space can communicate a common expectation about that space to others. However, the realm of aesthetic surveillance of public space rests on a contradiction - that of a certain moralism which links the need to maintain the appearance of order with the successful prevention of crime (Andrea Pavoni and Roberto D'Alba, 2024).



Figura 23 - Facebook neighborhood group post gathering before-and-after photos of the cleaning interventions in Piazza Gabrio Rosa



Figura 24 - Post of November, 10th 2021. 'Since some time, a fixed garrison of the local police has been preventing the creation on Via Martini, next to the schools, of the illegal market' (my translation).

The practice of cleaning and tidying always represents an attempt to draw a boundary - both aesthetic and temporal - establishing what counts as decay and what counts as decorum. As can be seen in Figure 7, the idea of before and after is very recurrent. Often, the appearance of the public space after

cleaning, linked to an idea of decorum, takes the form of large empty spaces. Michael Herzfeld, in his article on Spatial Cleansing, refers to this as the concept of vacuity. The author further illustrates where the removal of existing communities to make way for new architectural orders create a material and cultural void. This process can exacerbate feelings of emptiness as the historical and social fabric of the area is disrupted (Herzfeld, 2006).

5.2.2 Ri-narrate

Today, telling the stories of cities and narrating neighborhoods seems indispensable. Why this contemporary obsession on narratives about urban space? What are they meant to tell us, and who are they supposed to speak to? The seminal work *The New Spirit of Capitalism* by Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2014) is the first major exploration of the transformations that have affected the West in the last quarter-century, particularly since the cultural revolutions of 1968. The authors, over the course of more than six hundred densely packed pages, analyze how the managerial spirit of contemporary capitalism increasingly takes on narrative forms. The text highlights the central role and importance of narratives today, precisely because this appears to be the way the market has found to be more effective and competitive in a context of growing territorial complexity. Boltanski clearly explains this mechanism in a later work co-written with Arnaud Esquerre, *Enrichment: A Critique of Commodification* (Boltanski and Esquerre, 2018). The two authors show how the logic of capitalist accumulation has gradually readapted the ways in which wealth is generated, and how, particularly in the last quarter of the twentieth century - in a West marked by intense deindustrialization and fierce resource exploitation - new forms of commodity diversification have been created. The economic practice of enrichment, the authors tell us, is based on narrative presentation - storytelling - that is capable of attributing new value to something already existing. In line with Boltanski and Esquerre, one can observe in this sense a variety of techniques of re-narrating urban spaces, whose main strategies often focus precisely on the enhancement of already existing heritage, for example starting from a fundamental resource, the past, through the appeal to specific values such as memory or remembrance.



Figura 25 - The new mural of the main public regeneration project inaugurated in early 2022. Author's photo

Narratives about cities indeed help shape the collective imagination and the identity of an urban space. They are, in fact, one of the main aspects of placemaking policies and constitute a key element in the process of rebranding.

In 2022, during my first months of fieldwork, I took part in a series of guided tours of Corvetto organized by some local associations. The walks led us to the 'discovery' of what the guide called the 'Sistine Chapels of Corvetto.' The visit was designed not so much to explore the neighborhood as a whole, but to focus on places linked to urban regeneration. After a brief historical introduction, the first thing the guide showed us at the start was the large colorful writing that stands out on the gray overpass - a piece of street art marking the entrance to the neighborhood (Figure 8). The mural was created in 2021 as part of the project "A Name for Every Neighborhood," promoted by the Municipality and the Cariplo Community Foundation. The aim, according to the project's promoters, was to guide both tourists and residents toward rediscovering the sense of place and community ties. For this reason, the huge and colorful murals often reference the history of the area or convey educational messages about social inclusion. It is worth pausing to consider the symbols that embellish the lettering, as they more than any other element reveal where and how to focus our attention in tracing the neighborhood's transformation. On one hand, certain drawings evoke Corvetto's past: the Proust armchair - an iconic object of Milanese postmodern design, conceived by

Alessandro Mendini- calls to mind the famed studio that still stands just a few steps from the square. Meanwhile, trees encircled by flocks of birds illustrate the predominant presence of greenery within the district, reflected in its parks. Then, there are the symbols of the present: butterflies narrate the story of the *Patto del Miglio delle Farfalle*, one of the ongoing regeneration projects in the neighborhood. "*The Miglio also works toward the revitalization of the road axis connecting the aristocratic district with the outskirts*," the guide adds (*my translation*). Unmissable, of course, is the *Signurun de Milan*, the now-famous white plaster statue of Christ with open arms, which has become one of Corvetto's defining symbols. Yet no one seems to remark on a banner hanging from the same overpass, just above the mural, bearing the words: *"Stop gentrification."*

Sabina Andron (Andron, 2018) has examined the role of what she calls *the street art tour industry* in shaping the geographic, economic, and symbolic value of the spaces the group traverses. Drawing on Bourdieu's theories of language and power, Andron argues that tour guides operate from a position of authority: through their narratives and the routes they curate, they wield the ability to highlight certain aspects while obscuring others.

> They [the guides] also play a substantial role in drawing the boundaries of the street art world, by naming and validating its artworks, and enabling the formation of its audiences. Show it on the tour, and it is art; don't show it, then it is probably not (Andron, 2018, p. 5).

In doing so, tour guides not only describe, define, and stage street art, but also shape the space itself - constructing its meanings as much as its visual identity.

> **Field Notes, 27/9/2022**
>
> **Corvetto Tour**
>
> We trace the borders of the Mazzini Quarter, though we do not enter it, and pass by the Covered Market, home to the office of *La città intorno* - an urban regeneration project funded by *Fondazione Cariplo*, which has been active in Corvetto for nearly three years. It stands as one of the earliest and most substantial interventions in the area, both in terms of resources and activities.
>
> We pause in Piazza Angilberto, admiring the square's transformed appearance following an initiative in tactical urbanism. This intervention falls under *Piazze Aperte*, a project spearheaded by the City of Milan, which has involved a number of squares, applying low-cost strategies to reimagine public space.
>
> The journey through the new Corvetto continues with an essential stop beneath the *Cristo* di Corvetto, as our guide had promised at the outset. We proceed along Viale Omero, passing Piazza Gabrio Rosa, while the guide recounts the names of those who envisioned and built the neighborhood - figures remembered by the guide as the "*architects of the poor."*

She then speaks of the vital presence of *Rete Corvetto*, along with other social initiatives, such as the neighborhood concierge and the rehabilitation of architectural heritage, which, she notes, had been subject to unlawful occupation.

As we walk, the guide pauses to highlight the official murals - funded by the municipality and prominent cultural institutions - which serve as key attractions and a means of narrating Corvetto's evolving identity. In peripheral neighborhoods, street art interventions can be understood as a distinct form among various techniques for constructing urban narratives, for several reasons. Foremost, street art itself originates as an artistic act whose very purpose is to generate discourse through imagery. On the other hand - and this is crucial to the economy of enrichment - street art functions as a powerful agent of valorization, insofar as it engages the economy of the symbolic. In its institutional and recognized form, as an intervention primarily (if not exclusively) tied to the *beautification* of the neighborhood, its exchange value lies precisely in the aesthetic transformation of a district's appearance.



Figura 26 - Poetic perfromartive walk for the conclusion of a project aimed at connecting urbanistic and storytelling - 14 July 2023

As Francesco Careri argues in *Walkscapes: Walking as an Aesthetic Practice* (Careri, 2006), walking serves as a fundamental tool for rewriting the meanings embedded in a territory. For the author, the act of walking - although it does not constitute a material construction of a space - implies a transformation of a place and its meanings. Crossing it, already constitute forms of aesthetic and cultural action on the landscape that modify the meaning of space and therefor the space itself.
During my field research, I took part in various types of walks - ranging from more educational or touristic formats to those that were distinctly performative and artistic. The exhibitions of the new Corvetto, organized by several local association, involved a variable number of visitors, mostly

Italian, middle-class, white tourists and local (new) residents curious to discover the neighbourhood and its social and cultural life.

At the end of May 2023, I took part in a performative walk alongside a group of children from the elementary school on Via Polesine and their parents. Setting off from Corvetto, we crossed the agricultural fields of Vettabbia - a journey that unfolded beneath a radiant sky, on one of the first mornings of that year to carry the unmistakable warmth of summer. The artistic guides had explained that before reaching the field where we would take part in a surprise performance, we would pass through a delicate place, filled with memories - some difficult, some painful - that deserved respect. This was the land where, only a few months earlier, a Roma encampment had been cleared out.

Though it had been, in every sense, a hidden space, difficult to access amid the fields of Vettabbia and far enough from the inhabited part of Corvetto to evade the spotlight of public attention, walking through garbage, mountains of waste, and ruins was an unsettling experience (Figure 27). It was as if, through that passage, attractions and symbols of authenticity - so central to the walk - had come to include the heaps of rubble, the scorch marks of a fire, and the memories of those who had been evicted - elements that, in turn, would find their way into the selective storytelling of the walking tour.





Figure 27 - Artistic walks in Corvetto and Vettabbia Park – 27th May 2023. We walked through garbage, mountain of waste and ruins. Author's photos

In mid-July 2023, a cultural association specializing in video storytelling organized a poetic walk, bringing together poets, writers, and authors, not only from Milan but beyond. The walk marked the conclusion of a project that wove together tactical urbanism, storytelling, and territorial animation (Figure 26).

As part of the initiative, the association installed concrete cubes in various locations throughout the neighborhood - at intersections, in squares, and even within inner courtyards - structures that remain in place to this day.

> **Field Notes – July 14, 2023**
>
> Corvetto Poetry Corner walking tour
>
> I witness the installation of talking cubes in four squares across the neighborhood. By scanning a QR code, passersby can listen to (and watch) the video testimonies of selected residents and workers, chosen to represent the voices of the new Corvetto.
>
> The cubes are part of a broader project, as the website explains: *"Neighborhood stories - narratives and experiences from those who inhabit it," (my translation"* told through participatory storytelling.
>
> [...] T. shares with me a growing fatigue toward projects that feel endlessly repetitive - the constant demand to narrate urban spaces, especially working-class neighborhoods. The storytelling follows

> a monolithic script, tightly controlled: always the same faces, always those who best embody the most polished and palatable image of Corvetto.

During the walk, the performative act of poetry reading was interwoven with excerpts from the recorded testimonies. These stories - whether autobiographical accounts or narratives of entrepreneurial journeys deemed exemplary - belonged to individuals who, throughout my field research, I had often seen called upon to speak about and for the neighborhood. Some recounted a past that no longer exists - the era of the working-class district, where solidarity and closeness bound residents together. Others spoke about their work - often artisanal and preserved in its traditional form - and the reasons they had chosen Corvetto as their home. Some, particularly newer residents, were keen to emphasize that, despite its poor reputation, the neighborhood was, after all, a good place to live. Yet the prevailing impression was that these narratives were crafted to reshape the perception of Corvetto - to tame its image as an unruly space. Much like the waste and sorrow-laden memories encountered on the first walk, the storytelling about the periphery had been rendered safe, pleasant, and consumable a specific kind of commodity that allow an immersion in vicarious places and a means for social distinction. In her doctoral research, sociologist Sara Iandolo focused on the commodification of stigma as a touristic product in peripheral areas - particularly in Scampia, Naples (Iandolo, 2025). She highlights how local actors such as third sector associations of the neighborhood, in that context of economic scarcity and austerity, were brought to use the bad reputation as a means to attract investment and special funds (Iandolo, 2025, p. 50). Corvetto, more a space of design than one of pure habitation, has increasingly come to function as a brand - a label that effectively attracts both public and private funding, while simultaneously contributing to its own commodification.

At the time of my arrival in the field, over twenty urban regeneration projects were underway in the neighborhood, managed and organized by a significantly larger number of associations and foundations. The steady influx of new initiatives pouring into the district each year shows no sign of slowing down. The way third-sector organizations continue to arrive in Corvetto with their own project proposals - often without prior knowledge of the neighborhood - mirrors the emergence of new associations founded specifically on the idea of working within Corvetto. Similarly, artistic and cultural collectives come together to design projects tailored to the area.

This dynamic reveals how Corvetto, as a periphery suspended between stigma and renewal, has now become a recognized entity, one that functions effectively for those adepts at leveraging its rebranded image.

As I observed time and again afterward, only a limited number of stories, voices, and images were included. These voices were deliberately selected to narrate a specific face of Corvetto - one that

framed the neighborhood's past as museified, its renewal as regeneration, or its evolution as transformation. This was the Corvetto meant to be seen.

Throughout the walks, the speakers were invariably the guides, the organizers, or the artists, interspersed with new residents workers or entrepreneurs, brilliant students, while all the others actors remained hidden and often unspoken. Such narratives and performances implicitly stress a further division: 'good' residents, willing and productive, and 'bad' one, undeserving, inactive, and profiteering (Pitch, 2013).

In the process of re-narrating the neighborhood, carefully chosen elements from its past and present are assembled into a selective narrative - one that not only describes the area but also suggests and advocates specific paths of transformation.

The murals, depicting both the history and contemporary reality of Corvetto, along with the curated storytelling of the walking tours, have, in a way, invented both past and present - crafting a narrative that brands the neighborhood by linking its current characteristics to its working-class heritage and its troubled present. Through this process, an idealized image emerges - one of a historically welcoming and diverse community.

CHAPTER VI
I see / I don't see
Five frames

6.1 'We live by beauty.' C., the new resident

C. arrived in Corvetto not long ago, but he already feels deeply involved in the life of the neighborhood. He speaks with the enthusiasm of someone who has chosen this place - not by chance but following a project. "*We live by beauty*," he tells me during one of our talks. For him, beauty is not ornamental, but vital: it's in the way people enjoy the new cultural spaces of Corvetto, in the cracks of the sidewalk where flowers grow back, in the morning light that cuts through the buildings, coming from the Parco della Vettabbia.

In this paragraph, I tell the story of C., a new resident who is particularly active in Corvetto. Indeed, the fieldwork allowed me to encounter several recently arrived white residents who identified the chance to live in such environment as a lifestyle choice. Many of them have come to the district for its diverse and authentic atmospheres, but they combine such fascination with the chance of exploiting the area low real estate prices. His words allow me to perfectly summarize the tensions between what people want to see and what they prefer to ignore in this neighborhood.

C. works in the cultural sector. He used to live in a central district of another major metropolitan city in central Italy. One day, tired of "living in such a poorly governed city," as he tells me, he decided to change his life and move to Milan, choosing it precisely because of its reputation as a more dynamic and promising city. He began following the Milanese real estate market, bought a home in Corvetto in 2019, and moved there permanently in 2020:

> At one point, I told myself that maybe I could try to buy something in Milan, in an affordable area. [...] I was looking a bit around the Gallaratese neighborhood and Corvetto; back then, those areas were within that price range. [...] But in the end, as I kept coming to see houses here [in Corvetto], I thought, damn, this is cool! I liked it. [...]
>
> I bought this house for less than 2,000 euros per square meter. Today, its value has doubled. It's a beautiful condominium now, but it wasn't like that before. Meanwhile, everything has been renovated. The buildings across the street have all been restored, and in four years the whole street

has completely changed. The little streets were full of gray, beige, mouse-colored apartment blocks... they've all been renovated, even the ones across the street that were in even worse condition. They used to be public housing.

I fell in love with this apartment: on the eighth floor, from the balcony you can see the Alps, the entire Apennine range - from Trentino-Alto Adige to Valle d'Aosta and all the way to France. When the real estate agent showed me the place, I stepped inside and from the west side you could see the whole city skyline - the Duomo, the Madonnina - and on the other side, when I looked out, I saw Chiaravalle. I thought, no, stop everything. This is the one.

[Interview with C., 02/06/2024, my translation]

C. tells me about his house-hunting process in Milan and, while doing so, focuses on the main reasons why he chose Corvetto:

The real reason, if you want to know - beyond the subway, which is fine and all - I only realized later just how incredibly convenient this place is. But at first, the main motivation was this idea of the countryside. [...] Being able to step outside and take a break from work, to go for a walk among horses and sheep... You see, today I was working, right? And around 4:30 pm, I heard a rooster crowing! There are two illegal farmhouses right in the middle, full of roosters and chicken coops. That fascinated me a lot...

And then there's an impressive bloom of cultural spaces - and more will be opening soon... When I arrived, I used to mark restaurants with *stars* on Google Maps and cultural spaces with *hearts* - I had my own personal system of signs. At first, it seemed like a neglected area, but to tell you what's happened, now there's an archipelago of cultural spots: from *Via Farini Work* to *Terzo Paesaggio*, and of course there's the ICA Foundation. Nearby, another art gallery is about to open, and another one will open close by as well.

So, alongside the countryside, another reason I chose this area was these *hearts* on the maps - there weren't many back then, maybe two or three, but they were already there, like *Galleria Zero* here on Via Boncompagni, for example. Recently, these hearts made me realize the neighborhood will change quickly... It doesn't take a genius to see that. This is a very important part.

[Interview with C., 02/06/2024, my translation]

C. clearly understands how cultural spaces and actors, as symbols of the creative economy and the repertoire of urban cultural industries, have material consequences on neighborhoods. As urban culture studies have well demonstrated, the opening of an art gallery in a neighborhood previously

overlooked by the city's art scene - while not problematic in itself - undoubtedly signals that something is changing (Zukin, 2002; Semi, 2015). As Giovanni Semi argues, 'looking at the cultural frontiers between groups and social classes allows us to consider how new forms of inequality are increasingly based on consumption, tastes, and symbolic repertoires' (Semi, 2015, p. 101, my translation).

C. embodies the urban habitus of the new middle class, drawn to a selective authenticity - the access to green spaces, the chicken coops, the sheep, the emerging cultural venues. For him, the neighborhood is not just a place to live but also a symbolic consumption object valued for its authenticity, diversity, and popular charm. Yet, this desire for authenticity coexists with a speculative logic. C. clearly recognizes the potential for both aesthetic and, above all, real estate-driven gentrification of the neighborhood - a point he emphasizes repeatedly in his narrative. As he himself stresses, at the time of purchase he was fully aware of the rent gap mechanism. The low prices undoubtedly represent a prime investment opportunity, and in his words, the neighborhood's identity is both valued and capitalized upon. Choosing Corvetto as a lifestyle choice is therefore closely linked to the economic necessity of making his various investments profitable.

> There was a constant turnover on my landing. Both neighboring apartments emptied out within a few months; now, there's me and next door there's another young family with small children, and everything is changing in this way...
>
> I spent a long time trying to buy another house in Corvetto. I missed out on a couple, including one in your building - which is a beautiful building! [...] Well, then I did other things, I bought a little shop... [...] Of course, prices now are almost double what they were back then. [...] Nothing comes up for me anymore. I had alerts or whatever they're called - like on the real estate listings website, right? [In the search engine] I filtered for all houses over 70 square meters and under 3,000 euros per square meter. Nothing for months. Before, listings kept coming in constantly. I kept going to see houses, trying to grab another little place here - well, aware of what would happen… of the price growth. And then nothing popped up anymore. The last ones were about a year ago... I convinced a friend to buy here at Piazza Angilberto. Of course, I pushed her because she was hesitating a bit. I told her: this is the last house in Milan, the last house in Milan!
>
> [Interview with C., 02/06/2024, my translation]

Since arriving in Corvetto, C. has launched a popular and active blog, which we will call *Corvetto è bella*. The blog gathers complaints, discussions, and general opinions about the neighborhood's

management. It's a public site, but C. has chosen to exercise a form of editorial control, selectively moderating posts and topics he considers most suitable for productive debate:

> [The blog was born from] observing the main Corvetto group, where, in my opinion, it was impossible to develop a meaningful conversation because it was always dominated by the usual people on social networks. [...] There is a big anomaly in groups of people - everyone participates in public discussion. It wasn't like this before; back then, social media happened at the bar, at the barber's... [...] I decided to try creating a different project with a group where practically only the topics I choose get shared.
>
> [Interview with C., 02/06/2024, my translation]

C., after all, is a writer; this is not the first time he has actively worked to shape and influence the public voice and discourse about the city. As he explains to me, his civic engagement in managing the blog stems both from a desire to offer his professional skills and from an intention to present his own narrative of the neighborhood where he bought a home and now lives:

> Well, no, this [the blog] is because I live here. I did the same thing many years ago in the neighborhood where I lived before. I have a particular attention, sensitivity, preparation, or clarity on certain issues related to city management. So I see them and I get pissed off. It's a way for me to vent and write about it. And then I have a strong feeling it can be useful [...] to identify problems and look at them from a different perspective. It's not the usual complaining: 'They removed parking spots, we want dog areas, they're building a new building and it's all real estate speculation...' [...] But if they build a new building, is it really speculation? Why should people who don't know anything believe it? They call it a "concrete slab" and that's it - we dismiss it like that. But maybe behind it there's a certain kind of project that brings resources to part of the city, or replaces a run-down building, or could attract new residents who help improve local activity and commerce. That's the reason [I started the blog].
>
> [Interview with C., 02/06/2024, my translation]

If Corvetto is a neighborhood still waiting the transformation, suspended between the spectacuralisations and the still very thick stigmasitazion, the debate managed and guided by C. on his blog highlights above all certain positive aspects of the neighborhood, which for C. demonstrate how Corvetto is a strategic choice for both living and working:

> It seems to me that the main positive point concerns transportation. It's an exceptionally well-connected area - much more than people who consider it well served usually realize. Because it's not just about the metro and being 14 minutes from the Duomo; it's much more complex than

> that. There's a cycling infrastructure that's anything but trivial. For example, I use my bike a lot, and it allows me to reach Centrale station in 18 minutes. Then there's the proximity to a high-speed train station, which for people like me who travel frequently and need quick access to cities like Rome, Bologna, Florence, and so on, is incredible. Rogoredo station is an astonishing asset for me and my lifestyle. Plus, I don't have a car, but when I do rent one, I take the A1 highway without hitting a single traffic light.
>
> [Interview with C., 02/06/2024, my translation]

At the same time, he repeatedly emphasizes other negative aspects of the neighborhood that, in his view, need to be addressed - often focusing on decay and the perception of insecurity. He concentrates on the presence of waste, the specific spots where it accumulates, which in turn become the very cause of more waste piling up. This concern extends even further to the people who use these spaces, who are portrayed as the final link in this chain of blame.

> The negative side is something you're familiar with too. The first issue is this widespread feeling of insecurity caused by the actual presence of certain… well, if you think about it [...] looking at the crime report data, what happens here can't really be called an unsafe neighborhood. But in people's perception, having figures who speak a completely incomprehensible language and clearly seem to be controlling the territory... [...] Then there are the illegal street markets, with all their goods dumped on the ground selling trinkets stolen from homes... And in summer, along Corso Lodi, on the benches. At night it turns into a kind of r*ambla* for idle drunks who not only drink but also litter... [...] Why should we tolerate those who don't respect the city? Around the benches there's a kind of gathering spot, and so there's a constant demand to remove the benches from those who see this as a simple solution to complex problems.
>
> [Interview with C., 02/06/2024, my translation]

The words C. uses echo the typical rhetoric based on politics of fear. For him, the main problem seems to be the people on electric scooters, the benches, and the illegal street markets - all contributing to the atmosphere of insecurity. C. even refers to the Mazzini block as an imaginary neighborhood where the atmosphere feels completely different. On his blog, he often lays out clear and concrete political proposals:

> I'm referring to what I know about the Broken Windows theory and related ideas. In the end, many of my thoughts lead me there, to that kind of research - even if it's been disproven in many ways, fine - but still, it's fairly convincing to me that disorder breeds more disorder, and above all, disorder encourages bad behavior, aggressive behavior. Like today - I was riding through the

> square on my bike to come here, and someone stops me to offer weed, four idiots sitting on the bench. Why? Because in that context, that kind of aesthetic, in my opinion, legitimizes that kind of thing. Piazza Gabrio Rosa - with a certain kind of greenery, a café run by a certain kind of organization, with tables outside, the little string lights like at a town fair, and a few families finally bringing their kids there... that setup, in my opinion, prevents those people from hanging around. It's not about calling in the police. It's about laying out the city in a certain way.
>
> [Interview with C., 02/06/2024, my translation]

Naturally, a discourse of this kind, reiterated on his blog, has not gone without criticism. At times, during public discussions, some participants have pointed out how his proposed solutions - deeply rooted in specific lifestyles and cultural expectations - are typical of a class-based public discourse. The main consequence of this, they argue, is the exclusion of all those practices that still represent diverse ways of inhabiting Corvetto. In doing so, he contributes to rendering these practices illegitimate. C. has a clear understanding of who the key actors are - those operating in ways that align with his expectations and demands - and of the processes they are implementing. He often takes the time to delve into specific updates about new restaurant openings or cultural venues, recounts the history of certain local initiatives already active in the area, promotes the ongoing regeneration projects, and explains what will emerge from the construction sites and the current real estate investments happening in the neighborhood.

> Even the Prada Foundation, of course, has reshuffled the cards a bit. I believe the transformation began not with Expo in 2015, but with the opening of the Prada Foundation. Then, the day the Olympic Village project was confirmed, everything accelerated. And now we can see the same dynamic with the Olympic arena. That is to say, it has set things in motion - like placing a sort of mortgage on the area - meaning that you are practically obliged to fix things up when such major public attention magnets, these kinds of anchor institutions, are established. And then, there have been many smaller initiatives that have strongly reinforced this process - particularly the associative fabric, which is incredible. I don't participate much myself, but there's this kind of broad infrastructure that supports and enables the birth of ambitious new projects, like the *Miglio delle farfalle* and other emerging initiatives. Of course, it's still a struggle. We would need a hundred times more resources and things should be moving faster than they are. There are already some new examples, and maybe, finally, *Viale Omero* will become an extension of this [*Miglio delle Farfalle*] initiative. So, looking at the medium-term perspective, there are quite a few promising developments… even in the rural areas, there are interesting projects. The idea is to create a large *Cascina Rinascita*. […] If in two or three years there really is a cascina like that - with a restaurant, sports facilities, support services for women… it actually starts becoming a

> destination in itself. And then this area stops being such a *cul de sac*. […] There are three large real estate projects, and now the regeneration of *Chiaravalle* is beginning - it's becoming a little hamlet with more residents and people passing through, maybe cycling back and forth to Chiaravalle.
>
> [Interview with C., 02/06/2024, my translation]

As Giovanni Semi writes: "A neighborhood is 'trendy' if its transformation is visible, if it is home to young residents, and if it is celebrated by local, national, and sometimes international media as a place to spend a pleasant weekend" (Semi, 2015, p. 103, my translation). C. has clearly understood this. In fact, he repeatedly emphasizes how the presence and growing attention surrounding the Olympic Village marks a turning point and compels public institutions to 'tidy things up'. The question, however, remains the same: tidy things up for whom? The new consumer spaces and the cultural offerings in Corvetto are directly tied to processes of gentrification, because the very actors involved - this flow of new people C. refers to, who he *hopefully* imagines as the next ones to buy renovated apartments - are the same ones producing the collective representation of the neighborhood's new urban style (Semi, 2015). As Semi continues to argue, the main issue with this kind of transformation is that, while it aspires to be cosmopolitan, accessible to all, and universal, by definition it cannot include every city resident (Semi, 2015).. This becomes evident from the outset through the different languages introduced by the new cultural offerings - languages that one must recognize and understand. These include the discourse around sustainable mobility or zero-kilometre food shopping, to mention two themes that emerge directly from C.'s words. Such practices require a form of socialization into specific urban habits and values that are certainly not accessible to everyone and, crucially, are far from universal. Studying C.'s language means studying the language of gentrification itself, understanding how words create maps of power and inequality where certain populations can end up marginalized (Semi, 2015).

6.2 Artification, or attempts at street-artification, in Corvetto[46]

[46] This paragraph revisits and adapts part of the chapter written by me and Sara Iandolo: Iandolo, S., Raccanelli, L., 2024, Sopra i Muri di Periferia. Rigenerazione Artistica e Turismo della *Street Art* a Ponticelli (Napoli) e Corvetto (Milano), in Cocco, E., Montanari, F., (a cura di), *Immagini di città,* Il Sileno edizioni, Lago, pp.247-274

When C. talked about the increase of "hearts," the flag marking cultural spaces in his personal map of the neighborhood's change, he was referring to a specific process: the artification of Corvetto. For a definition of the concept of artification, I will use the one proposed by Adam Andrzejewski (2017):

> […] [T]he phenomenon of artification is the process of modifying non-art objects by art (i.e. specific works of art or practices linked to art). The modification process itself takes place on many levels, for instance, physical, discursive, contextual or perceptive, while its outcome is the creation of artified objects, i.e. art-like objects (Andrzejewski, 2017, p. 27).

The sudden arrival of galleries, hybrid cultural spaces, festivals, or art-related events within the same neighborhood changes its social status, and art becomes a driver of urban change. This mechanism is now well known to urban administrations and has become a widely adopted political strategy almost everywhere. While in Corvetto the presence of cultural spaces is growing but not yet significant enough to speak of a true artistic district, today there is a more immediate and recognized way to use art for urban transformation: through street art works.

The generic label of street art includes various genres and traditions linked to so-called urban art: graffiti, murals, and tags, which are painted, created with stencils, or affixed with stickers on urban surfaces (Rivasi, 2022). The term street art thus encompasses multiple meanings that oscillate between illegality and legality, art and non-art, and its diverse uses - both from below as a form of expression and/or protest, and from above in its more institutional applications. This is why this form of urban artistic expression has always been associated with peripheral neighborhoods, both for its connotation as a more underground art form and for its current use within regeneration processes, having now understood and accepted its function as a device for the aestheticization of urban space. In relation to this latter aspect, another more recent movement has emerged over the past few decades: *the new muralism*. Appearing in the early 2000s, it consists of often monumental and aesthetically reassuring mural painting, usually commissioned by private actors, institutions, and city administrations, generally within the framework of urban regeneration art projects (Rivasi, 2022).

To better understand the relationship between street art and urban transformation, it is useful to return to the concept of 'aesthetic capitalism' (Böhme 2017), precisely because street art represents a perfect tool for attributing new meaning to spaces and objects through their 'aesthetic value' or 'spectacle value.' In the words of sociologist Andrea Mubi Brighenti:

> Under the hegemony of the creative city narrative, street art has been wielded into an urban development tool, targeting specific neighbourhoods and areas… In the public discourse, street art has thus provided something like a mirror into which the contemporary city could mirror itself, finding beauty for once – after decades of ugliness! (Brighenti, 2016: 123).

Many stigmatized suburbs have indeed seen one street art project after another, and some of these neighborhoods have even been renamed as 'street art districts.' Based on the narratives often created in these urban spaces, street art contributes to fostering a more 'cool and creative' atmosphere, integrating into the growth strategies of post-industrial cities. Projects involving street art create aesthetically appealing spaces designed to welcome the creative class and are increasingly mobilized as place-making tools to support public space branding initiatives.

However, this new form of contemporary street art is no longer found only in the suburbs. Architectural historian Sabine Andron (2018) emphasizes that the new large murals emerging in public spaces are not only tolerated by public administrations, but these administrations have also fully understood their economic potential. At number 81 Corso Garibaldi, right in the center of Milan, since 2020 the blank wall of a private building has been used as an advertising panel through the technique known as '*mural advertising* '[47]. Milan was indeed one of the first Italian cities to make commercial use of street art. Over the years, more than twenty large murals have been commissioned from street artists by some of the most famous international brands such as Gucci, Chanel, Lancôme, Valentino, Moncler, and Samsung[48]. Mural advertising has become an increasingly widespread practice due to the pervasive impact of the artwork in its advertising function, both in terms of size and its highly appealing, Instagrammable aesthetic. These major brands often promote such initiatives as urban regeneration projects aimed at "gifting artistic works to the city of Milan" (*my translation*) [49,] while in reality masking a process of privatizing public space for commercial purposes.

The new muralism is the result of a process of institutionalization and top-down repurposing of street art, which nonetheless reveals a paradox: while some works have been legalized, less recognized artistic forms are increasingly criminalized today. Indeed, the institutions that commission the artworks have the authority to authorize murals and to define and limit the spaces within which artists can express themselves. Moreover, the wall-cleaning practices discussed above (see section 5.1.1) reinforce the hegemonic division between 'bad street art' and 'good street art'. The latter is well represented by the new muralism precisely because its function of beautifying public space is widely

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[47] "Mural advertising" refers to any type of hand-painted advertisement that appears on walls in the form of a mural. For further details, see: Moran, C., (2013), *The Business of Mural Advertising,* Routledge, London

[48] *Clear Channel Italia, La comunicazione dei brand passa per la street art,* 22 marzo 2023: https://artemagazine.it/2023/03/22/clear-channel-italia-la-comunicazione-dei-brand-passa-per-la-street-art/

[49] An example of the contradictions of mural advertising can be read in this article: Federica Venni, La Repubblica, 12 september 2021, *Milano, murales troppo belli e i cittadini chiedono di lasciarli* (last accessed on June 2025) https://milano.repubblica.it/cronaca/2021/09/12/news/milano_murales_pubblicita_-317417090/

recognized, especially where murals are placed in urban areas considered ‘ugly’ or degraded. Within more institutional projects, local involvement and participation in the decision-making process regarding the subject to be depicted - and more rarely in the actual creation of the murals - is promoted. However, the prevailing impression of these projects is that their main goal is to influence the value-creation process sparked by the combination of street art and urban space. Several studies demonstrate a link between street art interventions and increases in property values (Seresinhe, Preis, and Moat, 2016). As clearly shown by Fabiana Forte and Pierfrancesco De Paola:

> An emblematic example of this phenomenon occurs in Chelsea, where a building which exhibits two murals of Brazilian artist Eduardo Kobra painted in 2012, recorded an increase in market value of $880,000 to $2,075,000. Media reports indicate that in New York City neighborhoods enhanced by ‘street writers’ the property prices increased by 10 to 15%, depending on the reputation of the artist involved (2019, p. 3-4).

Not all neighborhoods experience an increase in property values, particularly those with a predominance of public housing. In such areas, artistic regeneration projects often activate a different form of valorization - namely, tourism. According to Erika Polson’s 2024 study on the RiNo Art District in Denver, USA, it was primarily the sharing of photos of mural artworks on social media that made this once-marginalized neighborhood extremely popular. Thus, street art is promoted as a symbol of authenticity and urban grit, becoming a tourist attraction even in neighborhoods that are ‘off the beaten path’. As previously noted, organized tours aimed at ‘discovering’ the new Corvetto begin precisely at the large mural inscription ‘Corvetto’ on the overpass at the neighborhood’s entrance. This striking mural, surrounded by symbols of both the past and the (regenerated) present, welcomes visitors as they exit the metro station. A little further on, on the blind façade of an old traditional Milanese tenement overlooking Piazza Angilberto, stands a massive mural created in 2019. More abstract than the first, it was painted by Dutch street artist Zedz. The artwork was funded by the Mudec - Museum of Cultures - as part of urban renewal efforts that revitalized the public space of the square.

> **Field Notes, 27/09/2022**
>
> Corvetto Tour - Piazza Angilberto
>
> The guide stops right beneath Zedz's mural in Piazza Angilberto to admire the new appearance the square has taken on after the tactical urbanism intervention. This is part of the *Piazze Aperte* project, promoted by the Municipality of Milan, which has involved several squares through low-cost initiatives aimed at redesigning public spaces. In Corvetto, the square’s restyling includes new paving, replanting of flowerbeds, new benches, and ping-pong tables. The guide emphasizes that such interventions do not entirely solve the structural challenges of a neighborhood like

> Corvetto but acknowledges that they represent an initial step in its revitalization - one that builds on a sense of order and aesthetic appeal.

Some scholars highlight that these projects are sometimes presented as a panacea for a wide range of issues (Richards & Marques, 2012). At the same time, public policies increasingly seem to relinquish their role in planning and maintaining the public city, resorting instead to outright *art washing* operations (Young, 2016). In such cases, the outcomes are reduced almost entirely to beautification processes rather than genuine urban regeneration. Street art has become a convenient camouflage, masking deeper issues of urban marginalization[50] (Raccanelli, 2022; 2023). Otávio Ribeiro Raposo, in his ethnography of the working-class neighborhood of Quinta do Mocho, located north of the Greater Lisbon metropolitan area, refers to *"(an)aesthetic management of social inequalities"* (2022, p. 186). He uses this term to describe the role that new muralism interventions have played in anesthetizing political struggle, implicitly contributing to the reproduction of inequalities. According to the author, the street art on public housing buildings has helped reshape the neighborhood's previously negative public image and attract tourists. However, following a top-down approach, the *street-artification* of Quinta do Mocho has functioned as a mechanism of subjugation and the preservation of subalternity, aesthetically masking exclusionary processes (Raposo, 2022).

[50] For another case study in the outskirts of Turin, see the article: Sara Iandolo, Laura Raccanelli, *La retorica dell'abbellimento. Il quartiere Vallette di Torino tra stigma e propaganda politica*, Monitor, 26 gennaio 2021 https://napolimonitor.it/il-quartiere-vallette-di-torino-tra-stigma-e-propaganda/



Figura 21 - The inscription in Piazza Angilberto, "We want flowers, but also houses," - *Source: Sophia Grew's photos*[51]

As we have seen above, several initiatives have been promoted in Corvetto with the aim of masking public spaces that do not conform to new aesthetic standards. As part of the projects developed through the *Patti di Collaborazione* - agreements between the municipality and active citizens of Corvetto - several collective murals have been created. These include artworks on the walls of the *Mercato Comunale* building, on the pavement of *Piazzale Ferrara*, and a mural painted together with the children of *Fabio Filzi* School in the adjacent public park. No longer visible today, the mural was once painted on the wooden panels covering the former social center *Corvaccio* - a small, single-story building that now stands empty and dilapidated, awaiting its transformation into the *"neoliving paradise corner"*[52], as described in the real estate company's project plans. Across the neighborhood, a constellation of political inscriptions - protesting speculative urban dynamics, evictions, and regeneration projects - can be found, sometimes placed right alongside official mural projects. Yet, these statements remain entirely erased from guided tours and regeneration maps, rendering them invisible in the curated narratives of the neighborhood's transformation.

Whether or not property values and living costs in the neighborhood rise, numerous studies have

[51] Sophia Grew, *Corvetto vuole i fiori. Ma soprattutto le case,* Irpi Media, 3/3/2025 https://irpimedia.irpi.eu/citiesforrent-piazza-angilberto-milano-beautification-urbanistica-tattica/

[52] Lucia Tozzi, *Contro la gentrificazione di Milano non basta l'indignazione social*, Lucy, 14/4/2025 (last accessed on 17/04/2025) https://lucysullacultura.com/contro-la-gentrificazione-di-milano-non-basta-lindignazione-social/

identified a strong correlation between *artification* and *gentrification*, along with the resulting displacement of lower-income residents. This process contributes to increasing socio-spatial segregation and urban inequality (Zukin, 2002; Young, 2016; Andron, 2018; Polson, 2024). For this reason, while some residents adopt a more collaborative stance with institutions, a growing number of citizens, activists, and artists actively resist the instrumentalization of street art, fighting against the mechanisms of gentrification.

The walls of the city bear witness to the encounters and clashes of various conflicting practices tied to cultural memory, public memory, and official memory, creating fractures between what is deemed legitimate and what becomes illegitimate. This is also true for the contested public space of Corvetto, where graffiti writing and certain forms of street art - closer to the aesthetics of new muralism - serve as artistic practices of urban reappropriation. These forms of expression become a means of self-narration for local residents, who use the walls to voice protest and dissent as well as to inscribe shared symbols of identity and belonging.



Figura 22 - The inscription on the wall of the Municipal Market of Corvetto, "Lower the rent, and I'll stop dealing - May 2025 - Author's photo

6.3 The Night of the Fires: On Politics of Complaint and Security in the Periphery

On the agenda of the extraordinary session of *Municipio 4* held on February 19, 2025, the following item was listed: *"Hearing with Deputy Mayor Anna Scavuzzo and Assessors Bertolè (Welfare and Health) and Granelli (Security) regarding the 'situation' in the Corvetto neighborhood and proposed*

interventions." In the municipal council chamber, the new security protocol was presented - a proposal developed by the Municipality of Milan in collaboration with the Education Office, the Prefecture, the Municipality, the Region, and Aler. The initiative aimed to *"naturally contribute to the construction of that tranquility, social cohesion, and security that we all need in every neighborhood,"* as Deputy Mayor Scavuzzo stated in her opening remarks. The extraordinary commission session had been scheduled to request and debate a political response to the events that, over the past few months, had drawn national attention to Corvetto - so much so that the neighborhood was increasingly being referred to as a true *banlieue*.

The events under discussion revolved around three nights in late autumn 2024, with one in particular standing out: on Monday, November 25, around 10 pm, a protest erupted in the streets of the Mazzini neighborhood, escalating into an urban riot that lasted for several hours. Some residents of Corvetto, particularly young people from the neighborhood, took to the streets, expressing their grief and anger following the death of Ramy, a young man born and raised in Corvetto. Ramy Elgaml was 19 years old. On the night between November 23 and 24, the scooter he was riding as a passenger was struck by a car belonging to the *Carabinieri*, near the Mazzini neighborhood where he lived, following a high-speed chase of over eight kilometers through the streets of Milan. His friend Fares, also a Corvetto resident, was driving and was left severely injured. The next afternoon, Ramy's friends and relatives immediately gathered at the intersection where the accident had occurred. They demanded truth about the events of the previous night and justice for Ramy - words that remain emblazoned on banners still hanging across the neighborhood streets as this is being written. On that first evening, an initial attempt at protest was swiftly suppressed by police intervention. The following afternoon, three riot police vans appeared in *Piazza Gabrio Rosa*, bus routes were diverted, and as night fell, the neighborhood lit up with fireworks and burning dumpsters. The sounds of clashes - marking the first direct confrontations with the police - echoed through the streets until nearly midnight. Violent charges, barricades, and tear gas filled the air, culminating in the arrest of a 20-year-old man.

In the days that followed, the protests had subsided, but tension in Corvetto remained high. The neighborhood space was heavily monitored - not only by a disproportionate number of surveillance cameras of all kinds, as the events were reported by national and even European media - but also by a reinforced police presence. Riot police vans maintained a constant watch, while several plainclothes *Digos* officers patrolled every corner of the square.

As is often the case in these situations, it will take several more months to fully reconstruct the events. In early January, a video - difficult to watch and, above all, to listen to - captured by a camera on a *Carabinieri* vehicle showed, in near unequivocal detail, the sequence of events, from the chase to the

moment of impact between the patrol car and the scooter. Investigations and legal proceedings are still ongoing, but the first forensic report, completed last March, acquitted the *Carabinieri*.

An incident of this nature - complex and difficult to condense - nonetheless prompts critical reflections. On one hand, it must be acknowledged that the protests erupted in response to an act of police violence that, unfortunately, was far from exceptional - neither in Corvetto nor in other working-class neighborhoods. This is evidenced by the deaths of Ugo Russo (15) and Davide Bifulco (16) in Naples, as well as that of Nahel Merzouk (17) in Nanterre, in the Paris *banlieue* during the summer of 2023 - just to mention some of the more recent cases. On the other hand, it may not be entirely coincidental that this happened in Milan - specifically in Corvetto, one of the key sites for the upcoming *Milan-Cortina 2026* Winter Olympics. Today, Corvetto remains home to one of the city's largest public housing estates, increasingly besieged by intense speculative pressures and the uncontrolled rise in property prices and living costs, which inevitably impact the lives of its residents, both directly and indirectly. Almost exactly ten years earlier, in November 2014, during Milan's pre-*Expo 2015* period, similar episodes had already taken place in Corvetto. These events followed the eviction of the occupied space *Corvaccio*, marking the beginning of a wave of housing evictions in preparation for the major international event.

This system of encroachment does not progress solely on an economic or aesthetic-symbolic level - it operates through deeper mechanisms of spatial control and transformation.

As the Olympics approach, the neighborhood has witnessed a steady increase in police presence, particularly in the squares and around *Quartiere Mazzini*. The militarization of the area - already underway even before the protests - has tightened control over the spaces that previously remained outside official oversight.

Residents have widely noted the intensification of surveillance:

> "Right now, it's the worst time, the worst. Before, not even a single police car would pass through. Now, sometimes in the afternoon, there are five or six extra patrols - sometimes even the Carabinieri, police, and all the others. During the day, they bring dogs everywhere to carry out checks..."
>
> [Interview with F. - 25/01/2024]

The protests following Ramy's death were, first and foremost, an expression of grief and anger over a private loss. Yet, the moment this grief spilled into the streets, it became public - deeply political. However, in the intense public debate that erupted in the aftermath, the personal dimension of this tragedy was almost entirely overlooked. In the newspaper headlines in the days that followed, rather than amplifying the residents' clear and legitimate demand for truth and justice for the two young men involved, the focus shifted. Coverage predominantly framed Corvetto as a neglected periphery,

emphasizing uncontrollable social distress, drug dealing, and illegal occupations as the neighborhood's core issues. These narratives reinforced the usual calls for increased security measures, tapping into discourses of fear and perceptions of danger rather than addressing the deeper structural concerns raised by local residents.

Those days and the weeks that followed were undoubtedly a difficult and delicate period for everyone. As both a researcher and a resident of Corvetto, the events tested my position in relation to the unfolding situation. I felt close to and in solidarity with those protesting, yet at the same time, as a new white resident of the neighborhood, I was acutely aware of the distance between my own biography and the lived experiences of those taking to the streets. In any case, those voices unequivocally conveyed the ways in which inequality in neighborhoods like this becomes tangible, manifesting as constant and often violent discrimination experienced daily by residents. But not only them - also those deemed undesirable, those who bear the weight of precarity within the exclusionary logic of neoliberal cities.

The protests revealed how systemic racism, institutional and structural violence, inequality, discrimination, impoverishment - alongside privatization, gentrification, and financialization - are deeply interconnected, shaping the urban landscape in ways that reinforce exclusion and dispossession.

> **Field Notes, 9/2/2024**
>
> **6 pm – Giacomo's Kiosk. It's raining.**
>
> A customer arrives - a middle-aged man. Giacomo tells me he is a *special* resident of Corvetto. *"I've lived here for over sixty years,"* he says. I ask him if it's true that Corvetto used to be cleaner and more beautiful, as everyone tells me. *"You can bet on it, a perfect neighborhood - not like now."*
>
> This becomes the cue to start discussing the police presence. He recounts that yesterday a police van passed by with dogs, and M., another resident of Corvetto, described the dealers fleeing. *"You should've seen how they ran,"* he says, laughing heartily.

Protest movements like those following Ramy's death are often leveraged to accelerate repressive responses. In Corvetto, this took the form of strong demands for increased police presence and expanded surveillance measures framed as solutions to the unrest. Indeed, the extraordinary commission session on February 19 was convened precisely to present these planned interventions. The neighborhood was described as a *"paradigmatic district,"* inhabited by *"many frightened, angry, and worried people."* The new security protocol had been designed as a collaborative effort between the Municipality, District Councils, the Prefecture, and the Police Headquarters. However, during the

meeting, the discussion did not focus on presenting the protocol itself, nor did it engage in a political analysis of what had transpired in the neighborhood the previous November. Instead, the contributions from citizens during the commission centered on familiar and frequently repeated concerns: abandoned waste, drug dealing, general uncleanliness, and beer bottles left in the streets near *Minimarkets*, which were blamed for these issues simply because they remained open late into the evening. The protest continued with opposition from a group of residents of *Via Barabino* against the planned opening of a shelter for unhoused individuals in their street. Their objections were accompanied by calls for increased surveillance and stricter control over *"presences we do not wish to have,"* referring to those who *"loiter, cause damage, and sell stolen goods."* There was also criticism directed at those profiting from short-term rental speculation, described as *"people who surely do not live in the neighborhood."* Finally, a speech expressing skepticism about the allocation of a new headquarters for *Leoncavallo* - one of Milan's most well-known occupied social centers - right in Corvetto was met with extended applause.

Aside from a few rare critical interventions, for over an hour, residents and representatives of neighborhood committees presented their concerns, often addressing Councillor Granelli directly to demand that the promise of increased police presence be upheld. In practice, the commission was fully legitimizing what could be described as 'politics of complaint.' As a Lega councilor argued:

> In my current political position, it would be easy for me to engage in a series of complaints and present the neighborhood's concerns. I try to avoid that and instead emphasize the importance of debate and dialogue. However, we must also make an effort to find common ground. [Recording of the Extraordinary Commission, Municipality 4 – 19/02/2025, my translation]

It was not the first time that special measures had been introduced in Corvetto to "improve the security of the area through increased controls." As early as 2023, the provisions of the high-impact operation *Stazioni Sicure* had been used to authorize large-scale interventions in certain urban spaces. This was an extraordinary measure by the Ministry of the Interior aimed at increasing the daily presence of law enforcement at railway hubs and their surrounding areas in major urban centers. Since Rogoredo Station was nearby, Corvetto fell within the areas monitored by the operation. During the months of field research, on certain evenings, the neighborhood was swept by large police patrols, with police vans stationed throughout the night and raids that, for a few hours, completely emptied the streets and squares.



Figura 23 - Police presence in Piazza Gabrio Rosa – photo by the author

A month after the protests for Ramy in Milan, national measures were introduced to identify so-called *Red Zones*. Through a directive from the Ministry of the Interior, these provisions designated urban areas where the presence of individuals deemed dangerous or with criminal records could be restricted, allowing authorities to enforce their removal accordingly. The *Red Zones* revived the tool of *daspo urbano*, a previous measure introduced in 2017 by the Minniti decree and later expanded by the Salvini decree in 2018. This regulation allowed authorities to fine or remove individuals from certain areas of the city if deemed 'indecorous'.

> Good evening, my name is A.V. and I live in Gabrio Rosa. I would like to take this opportunity, with Councillor Granelli, who is responsible for security in Milan, to make a few observations. I have been attending this Council for almost three years now. I don't come every time because I also have my own health issues, but I am here tonight because you keep saying, "We have done a lot, we have done this, we have done that," yet the situation in Gabrio Rosa and Viale Martini has worsened rather than improved. If I remember correctly, you declared Corvetto a red zone, is that right? Regardless of the designation, the drug dealers we have there are taken away by the police, yet by the next morning, they are back. The minimarkets in the area [...] sell alcohol past midnight, violating the regulations for neighborhood shops - Article 34 of Law 96/2010. They provide drinks to the usual unruly individuals, leading to brawls, broken glass, shouting, and litter. Then, as you well know, I also report the massive presence of food and beverage trucks that occupy and block the bike lane, parking for hours - far beyond the permitted two-hour limit - until late at night. Often, they are clustered together, violating the regulations on itinerant sales.

> Occasionally, authorities confiscate them, yet after two weeks, they return. And again, there are drunk individuals, fights, shattered glass. You can take it from here. [...] That's all. Good evening.
>
> [Recording of the Extraordinary Commission, Municipality 4 – 19/02/2025, my translation]

Indeed, Corvetto was designated as a *Red Zone* by the city of Milan. The measures had been implemented on December 30, 2024, and were originally set to expire on March 31, 2025. However, less than a week before their expiration, the Provincial Committee for Public Order and Security announced its decision to extend them for another six months. The establishment of *Red Zones* in Corvetto further reinforced the already constant police presence in the neighborhood, where - especially following the events of November - nightly inspections and seizures had become routine. In 2024, due to the discriminatory methods employed by law enforcement in their racial profiling of marginalized communities, Italy received a formal reprimand from ECRI, the Council of Europe's agency against racism and discrimination.One of the final statements in the Extraordinary Commission meeting raised a concern: 'with all these decrees and emergency measures, is there an attempt to turn the neighborhood into a police state?' [Recording of the Extraordinary Commission, Municipality 4 – 19/02/2025, my translation]

In the spring of 2024, I was in Paris. It had been a tense and hurried few months in this already restless city, which was preparing to host the Olympic Games that summer. Among the various conflicting plans regarding the impact of major events on urban spaces, one of the least discussed aspects was the securitarian and repressive framework of public order and control - the most dangerous of which is preventive policing. In Paris, a specific anticipatory security arrangement was planned to address both terrorism and potential protests. A force of 45,000 police officers was deployed across the city to patrol during the Olympic Games. These officers were given the authority to assess who could partake in the more celebratory aspects of the event. Moreover, in the previous year, a specific security law had been approved, allowing the use of body scanners and AI-powered cameras to track any movement deemed irregular, enabling rapid intervention by armed forces. It is, therefore, easy to imagine that Corvetto's extraordinary measures will continue to be extended until the opening of the 2026 Winter Olympics - now less than a year away as this is being written.

The night of the fires for Ramy and Fares prompted both the city of Milan and the country as a whole to turn their collective gaze toward Corvetto, reflecting on the different layers of urban inequality experienced in certain spaces. While the deafening and chaotic noise fueled the repetition of xenophobic and securitarian rhetoric, one could say that - for once, at least on the night of November

25, 2024 - the silence of those who rarely enter the public and political discourse was momentarily broken.

6.4 Evictions

> One morning, the police arrived without warning. We were all terrified, thinking they were looking for someone. The show of force outside was unlike anything I had ever seen on this street - three armored Carabinieri vehicles, two police vans, plainclothes officers, all armed and in riot gear.
> None of us imagined they had come to our building - for us. Then, they started breaking down doors. I was still in my pajamas when I rushed downstairs and asked, *What is happening?*
> "The residents must leave," one of them told me.
> The first eviction was in Unit Six. M. was asleep - he works as a night guard. Then they knocked on F.'s door and said, *"You're on the list too. Get out."*
> They contacted Bruno [the tenants' union representative who was following the case], and he was given a month. But in the end, they threw him out just the same.
> Then there was a family from another building. The wife was home alone - her husband at work, her children at school. Can you imagine the police showing up one day with a moving company truck, packing up your belongings in boxes? Throwing everything out just like that?
> [...] At another address, the young man wasn't home. They broke down his door and started packing up his belongings themselves. You know how they do it? They take a cabinet, dismantle it, throw everything inside, wrap it in tape, and carry it downstairs.
> They don't carefully pack up the house. When it comes to eviction removals, they just grab everything, pile it up haphazardly, and dump it in the courtyard.
>
> [Interview with A. – 14/07/2023, my translation]

I meet A. in her apartment, located on the upper floors of an old *ballatoio* building owned by ASL - now ATS, the Health Protection Agency of Milan. It is one of those stifling midsummer mornings in Milan, where not a single breeze stirs the air. The kitchen windows overlook the street, at the far end of which, behind iron fences, the towering cranes of the Olympic Village construction site at the Scalo di Porta Romana stand clearly visible. A. offers me a glass of ice-cold water and begins to tell her story. Nearly fifteen years have passed since it all started, she says. It was 2009 when, through a resolution, the tenants discovered - almost by chance - that ASL had approved the sale of the entire building. At that time, just under seventy families lived there - *"not wealthy people,"* A. tells me -

who had always relied on the subsidized rent provided by the public entity that owned the property. *"And so the story begins, the story begins."* Indeed, A., along with other residents, began to gather information, reached out to local tenants' unions, and formed a committee to try to halt the sale and negotiate their right to remain in the homes they had lived in for years.

> We carried on with a series of mobilizations - flash mobs, demonstrations in front of the Regional Council. We did everything we could. And at a certain point, we managed to halt the sales.
> But all of this took years. You'd request a meeting, plan it two months in advance, and then, the day before, they'd call and say, *"We're unavailable today, let's reschedule for next month."* Months passed, years passed, and in the meantime, we kept receiving rent bills - payment slips marked *"unauthorized occupant"* because, one by one, they let our rental contracts expire.
>
> [Interview with A. – 14/07/2023, my translation]

With negotiations led by the Tenants' Union, the Committee managed to reach an agreement, and for a time, expired rental contracts were renewed, allowing families in the building to regain a sense of stability. While certain regulations still protect tenants today, there are more subtle mechanisms that erode housing rights. The building itself, constructed in the early 1900s, had suffered from years of neglected maintenance.

> So, one excuse after another - sometimes a lack of funds, sometimes sheer neglect - the state of these homes truly deteriorated, as no maintenance work was ever carried out. The *ballatoi* began to collapse [...]
> In my first apartment, in the other section of the building, the entire kitchen ceiling caved in. Then, the floor sagged by ten centimeters, forcing them to relocate me to another unit. [...] The sale of public property has always happened. They told us they didn't have the money to renovate it, but I think they were letting it fall apart on purpose to sell it. They would have sold it to a real estate company that would have profited from it - demolishing everything and rebuilding from scratch.
>
> [Interview with A. – 14/07/2023, my translation]

Between apartments rendered uninhabitable and rental contracts left to expire, the building kept losing residents - shrinking from the original 67 households to just 34, half as many. It is february 2023, three years after the pandemic, eviction proceedings had almost fully resumed. So, under the pretext of *resolving* irregular housing situations, a wave of eviction operations began that year:

> They carried out the evictions on a strict weekly schedule - every Thursday morning. I was awake by six, watching from the window. They arrived at eight. Always on time. First, we'd spot the riot police van. Then came the regular police and the Carabinieri. The moment we saw them, we'd

start calling: *"They're coming, they're coming. We're ready. Another eviction is about to happen."* And so it went, one after another. Of course, in that moment, we were powerless. There was no way to stop them.

One morning, at the apartment next door, M. was at work when they broke down the door. I rushed over - there was a cat inside. *"Wait, there's a cat! Let me go in!"* I told them. Somehow, I managed to get in and rescue her - she was terrified.

[Interview with A. – 14/07/2023, my translation]

The building still bears the visible marks of that wave of evictions. As you descend the stairs, more than half of the apartment doors are either sealed with heavy iron padlocks or walled off entirely. Though the fate of the building remains uncertain, the last remaining tenants await the end of their contracts - concerned, yet resolute. They know they have fought to the very last moment with every tool at their disposal. At the far end of their street, the future Olympic Village rises, floor by floor - soon ready to welcome over 1,400 athletes for the upcoming Winter Games.



Figura 24 - Padlock on an apartment after an eviction - Photo by the author

In Paris, I had followed counter-information initiatives regarding the Olympic Games and their real impact on the city. Over the previous year, several critical observatories emerged, working to monitor the urban consequences that this model was imposing on various neighborhoods - particularly in the inner suburban areas. Many spoke of an ongoing *netoyage social*, a term used to denounce a set of

policies and practices designed to *"clean up"* Paris[53]. In the years leading up to the Games, the construction of new infrastructure - such as Olympic villages, stadiums, and sports facilities - served not only to showcase the host country but also as a means to *"pacify"* certain neighborhoods in the Parisian *banlieue*. This led to urban *clean-up* practices, particularly in Saint-Denis, the working-class district in the northern outskirts of Paris - one of the poorest areas in all of France. In this district, a massive redevelopment project was underway to build the athletes' village - more than 2,000 new housing units spanning three *cités*: St-Denis, Île-St-Denis, and St-Ouen.

The village was presented as a future *mixed* eco-neighborhood, though in reality, it was clearly geared toward middle- and upper-class residents. This large-scale construction accelerated the transformation of these once working-class areas. Since Paris was named as the Olympic host city, property values in this district have risen by 22.3%[54] In a report published in July 2024 by the activist and research collective *Le Revers de la Médaille*[55], it was estimated that between spring 2023 and the end of the Games in October 2024, more than 20,000 people in Paris were affected by expulsions - an increase of 33% compared to the 2021-2022 period. In the Île-de-France region alone, the collective observed the eviction of 260 informal housing spaces - including squats and makeshift encampments. Among them: 64 evictions of *bidonvilles* (shantytowns), 34 evictions of tent settlements (only in Paris and the Aubervilliers district*),* 33 evictions of squats, 7 evictions of Roma camps. The government had explicitly aimed to clear Paris of homeless individuals, many of whom were migrants, relocating those evicted to temporary reception centers (*SAS*) set up outside the city, across about ten regions of France. In March of that same year, a brochure was published by transgender street workers and a collective of lawyers, denouncing the increasing repressive and transphobic policies targeting sex workers in the lead-up to the Games.

The big-event not only managed but also accelerated displacement and gentrification in several working-class areas of Paris. We see this clearly in Corvetto, where the rise in expulsions is increasingly tied to the construction of new infrastructure designed for the middle class.

Just a few steps from Piazzale Corvetto, there is an entire block that until recently belonged to Enpam, the former pension fund for medical personnel. The complex was built between the 1960s and 1970s to house around 550 families**.**

[53] Of course, the same operations had been observed in Marseille and other areas impacted by the large-scale event.

[54] Data collected by the Saccage 2024 collective. For more information: https://saccage2024.noblogs.org/ (last accessed on 11/6/2025

[55] Il report can be downloaded on the web page of Les revers de la Medaille Collective: https://lereversdelamedaille.fr (last accessed may 2025)

> I'll keep it simple: In 2022, the property - formerly publicly owned - was sold off at a bargain price. I say "sold off" and not just "sold" because, in my opinion, it was practically a giveaway. These homes had been neglected for years, and maintenance had been minimal. Eventually, this became an excuse to sell them last year to the American investment fund Apollo Global Management. Then, just like that, the new owners told us: *Either buy at market prices or leave.* We fought, of course - through our Tenants' Committee and alongside unions - especially because many residents were elderly and struggled to find new housing. Socially, the impact was devastating. And this sale wasn't just about Sulmona…
>
> [Interview with B. - 11/7/2023, my translation]

Indeed, beyond the Sulmona complex, Apollo's real estate fund had acquired four more residential sites formerly owned by Enpam, along with several commercial spaces - altogether affecting around 1,500 families**.** The buyer then appointed *Investire SGR*, an Italian asset management company, to handle negotiations with the tenants. Since blocking the sale was no longer an option, the tenants' committee and unions, after a tough negotiation involving various stakeholders and the Municipality of Milan, managed to secure contract renewals for about a hundred families. They specifically fought to protect those with disabilities, elderly residents over 70, and low-income tenants, who were granted temporary rental agreements for up to five years. For everyone else, the choice came down to either purchasing their apartments at renegotiated prices or relocating elsewhere. The agreement was publicly signed in March 2023 during the first *Housing Forum* and was hailed by the then housing councilor Maran, as a successful mediation between the public and private sectors. However, the *Sulmona Tenants' Committee* viewed the negotiation conditions as deeply troubling, reacting with a sense of dismay.

> Let's just say that these buildings were originally designed with a clear purpose. Over the years, they served as a *buffer*, especially in recent times, since most of the residents in these housing sites - though there weren't many - had incomes that were neither high nor low. They belonged to that middle ground: unable to access public housing yet struggling to afford a home of their own. You can imagine the consequences if these housing options disappear - Milan's situation could quickly spiral. Socially, it would be a ticking time bomb. Just think about it: 1,500 families suddenly without a home.
>
> [Interview with B. - 11/7/2023, my translation]



Figura 25 - A corner of the Via Sulmona complex – photo by the author.

The transfer of this residential complex to the American multinational is undeniably a major loss of public housing assets in Milan, especially in a neighborhood deeply tied to social housing.
In Corvetto, with the sudden rise in real estate values, vacant homes, and increasing evictions, access to housing is becoming increasingly difficult. Until recently, in the Mazzini district - as well as in other areas managed by Aler - a well-established practice was often followed: after an eviction, remaining fixtures and utilities were deliberately damaged to prevent reoccupation. As a result, out of a total stock of around 70,000 public housing units in Milan, more and more apartments have remained unoccupied for years. In the words of a resident from the Mazzini district:

> I think it's basically standard practice to seal them off now. In my building, I'd say around 20% of the apartments have iron sheets covering the doors - and the number keeps growing. When I first moved in, more of them were occupied, but over time, more and more units have been walled up. On my own landing, for example, there are two: one sealed off and the other left empty. There used to be an elderly man living in the vacant apartment, but he passed away. I don't think they've reassigned it. Maybe he had no children, no relatives - no one to claim the unit. So now, it just sits there, filled with belongings that need to be cleared out, renovated. And that costs money. I think the apartment has remained exactly as it was. I haven't seen anyone there since.
>
> [Interview with I. - 1/3/2024, my translation]

I meet Bruno Cattoli at the headquarters of *Unione Inquilini* on Via Panigarola, in the heart of the working-class *Mazzini* neighborhood in *Corvetto*. Bruno is the Milanese secretary of the historic tenants' union for housing rights and has been active in the neighborhood for a long time. His relentless advocacy for tenants and the homeless has made a significant impact in this part of Milan over the years. He is well known not only in Corvetto but throughout Zone 4 and across the city. He is the one called upon for negotiations in eviction cases and, when possible, for squatter removals. Having followed almost all the expulsion-related incidents in the district, Bruno knows the stories and the people affected firsthand. I ask him to tell me about the current housing situation in Corvetto:

> Evictions due to rent arrears in public housing have largely been put on hold for now, thanks to an agreement between the Municipality and Aler that suspended all evictions for four months.
> Even as evictions start to pick up again, there are still a range of protective measures put in place during COVID that have helped keep the situation somewhat under control.
> As for forced removals, they haven't skyrocketed - but they are still happening. The biggest issue is that once people are evicted, they have virtually no alternatives. They are sent to *Casa Jannacci*[56] for ten days, and then they're left to fend for themselves - including families with young children, who suddenly find every possible door closed to them. [...] Regarding private evictions, the latest city-wide trend - though quite predictable given market dynamics - is the rise in *end-of-lease* eviction proceedings.
> While evictions due to rent arrears had exceeded 90% in recent years, now about 25% of new eviction confirmations are due to lease expirations. It's clear that this shift is closely tied to the urban transformations in Corvetto, where rising real estate values are drastically reshaping prices. After a renovation, renting out a property can be worth *twice* its previous price.
> [...] Real estate agencies are buying up entire buildings here. For example, there's a property with two buildings that has always rented to middle- and lower-income families at reasonable prices. Now, it only accepts lease terminations without renewal - essentially clearing out the building to repurpose it. This trend is also evident among private landlords.
>
> [Interview with Bruno Cattoli - 17/9/2024, my translation]

Bruno explains that current legislation allows for various mechanisms to transfer public residential assets - such as outright sales or less direct strategies that, in practice, contribute to the withdrawal and reduction of public housing in the city.

> One of the key issues is the accessibility of the concept of *social residential housing (ERS)*, which includes *public housing (ERP)* but must be distinguished from it. Currently, ERS means it is managed by a private operator, offering rents lower than market rates. But what does *lower than*

[56] It is a temporary shelter for adults in severe need, located not far from Corvetto.

market rate actually mean? What defines *market rent*? The regional law on *social housing*, which dates back to when the center-left was still in power, established an undifferentiated definition of social housing. This lack of distinction naturally allows private interests to dominate.

There was plenty of talk about *urban renewal* and *mixité*, but then they realized that public housing residents could no longer afford ERS rents. So, if you want to increase returns on a block of buildings, what do you do? You start by taking a portion and shifting it to a different rental model with new types of tenants - that's the idea. Another strategy, for example, has been through projects like *'housing for workers*[57]*'*, which essentially means carving out sections of ERP and handing them over to companies that then sublet them to their employees. In *Corvetto*, some reductions in public housing stock had already occurred through neighborhood contracts, where attics were renovated and then rented out at controlled rates.

Now, however, the approach is shifting more toward direct removal, including through redevelopment projects. These expansions increase building volumes - sometimes adding twenty new apartments, of which only two are designated for public housing. The rest are rented at moderated rates, managed by the private entities that carried out the renovations.

[Interview with Bruno Cattoli - 17/9/2024, my translation]

This is essentially what has been happening to another section of Corvetto's public housing stock. On December 20, 2023, all residents of the *Case Minime* complex on Via Barzoni (see chapter III) received a phone call informing them about a new project that would affect the 60 cottages. Without consulting the residents, the Municipality decided to demolish the *Case Minime* and replace them with new residential blocks, awarding a contract to a private developer who would construct taller buildings. Of these new buildings, while part of the project would remain public housing (ERP), one entire building was planned for *Social Housing (ERS)*. Meanwhile, about a third of the newly developed units would be rented at higher rates or put up for sale. The project has yet to begin, but at least 15 million euros have been allocated for its completion - half of which comes directly from the city budget. At the time of the presentation, tenants were given a choice: either relocate temporarily and return to *Via Barzoni* once the project was completed, or opt for a permanent move elsewhere. In these cases, the level of vulnerability remains high - largely due to a significant number of elderly residents and a smaller group of unauthorized occupants:

Field Notes – January 30, 2024

Meeting of the *Zone 4 Housing Rights Network*

[57] It was a project proposed in 2023 by Housing Councilor Maran, which aimed to entrust the renovation of vacant ERP housing units to certain companies. These companies would then offer the apartments to their employees at reduced rent rates.

Discussion begins with the situation on *Via del Turchino*, where tenants have been without heating for two weeks - *in the middle of January, with temperatures barely above freezing.*
Then T. speaks about *Via Barzoni*, explaining its current state. Built in the 1950s by architect Arrigo Arrighetti to house those displaced by wartime bombings, the history of the *Case Minime di Corvetto* - along with the stories of its residents - illustrates the profound changes taking place in the neighborhood.
The *Case Minime* are set to be demolished to make way for taller buildings, officially justified by claims of *"decay and neglect"*. In reality, the project is framed as a benefit for residents rather than what it also is - a real estate operation. A decade ago, the same *Via Barzoni Tenants' Committee* successfully blocked an identical plan. This time, the battle is more complicated: the committee has shifted politically, and those willing to leave have been promised stunning new homes.
According to T., demolition is scheduled for December, which means all tenants must vacate by August.

The original plan, which called for demolishing the cottages, relocating tenants, and constructing three new buildings, was met with opposition. With the support of Bruno Cattoli, the Tenants' Committee secured several modifications, including the option for *internal relocation*. Under this revised approach, the first section of the new buildings would be completed first, providing housing for tenants who chose to stay in Corvetto. Only afterward would the demolition proceed.

Despite the hard-fought battles to preserve what remains of the right to housing in this neighborhood, the sale and transfer of public assets to large international corporations illustrate more than anything how the area is transforming - and how the displacement of longtime residents is already underway.

Field Notes – January 30, 2024

Meeting of the *Zone 4 Housing Rights Network*

[...] The redevelopment of properties has become one of the leading causes of eviction by *Aler* and *MM*, as demonstrated by the case of *Villaggio dei Fiori* in *Giambellino*. T. pulls out a *Corriere* article from that day. A letter from the municipal employees' union has been published - urban planning department staff are refusing to sign off on certain projects due to an ongoing prosecutor's investigation into municipal procedures. The term *regeneration* has been used to justify some demolitions, yet T. points out: *Regeneration means renovation, not demolition.*

> She picks up a flyer from the *anti-Olympic protest march* and holds it up: *Regeneration means making the area wealthier.*

The accounts of these three collective evictions mark a shift in *Corvetto's transformation* - both in the number of affected residents and in the scale and financial nature of the operations. *Regeneration projects* and major events like the *Olympics* are often promoted as *"zero-cost, zero-impact"* initiatives. However, the social costs, now far from negligible, will likely fall on those who don't fit into Milan's urban spectacle. The *neoliberal city* today demands precise aesthetics - green, smart, and elegant. *Corvetto*, as it stands, doesn't align with this vision, except through waves of redevelopment, privatization, concrete expansion, and displacement.

6.5 Forms of Resistance

I was attending yet another art walk in Corvetto. Despite the sweltering summer heat and the relentless mosquitoes already launching their assault, a considerable number of people had gathered at the meeting point. The organizers had just finished presenting the urban regeneration project that had given rise to the initiative. Before setting off, however, they handed over the microphone for one final speech:

> I live here, just nearby. I'm not sure how to put it briefly, but perhaps the most important thing is to make an appeal. It's mainly addressed to those who work in the cultural sector, in community-based initiatives. What I want to say is this: in recent years, there have been a number of projects - by the City Council, by Fondazione Cariplo - that have mostly amounted to communication operations. And these kinds of communication efforts, when carried out in working-class neighborhoods, tend to do very little - except, perhaps, to prepare the ground for redevelopment and rising housing prices. That's already happening. Rents are already going up. We already have parts of public housing that have been abandoned, and no one knows what they will become. We are the poor neighbors of the Porta Romana rail yard, where one of the largest real estate developments in the city is about to take shape. We need you - and we need ourselves - to find a way to ensure that your work, and initiatives like this one, don't end up feeding the great machine of surface-level neighborhood beautification. From my point of view, everything you know how to do - technically speaking - better than the average resident of Corvetto needs to be put at the service not just of some generic narrative [...] not the kind of gentrification story that tries to soften the blow, that says: "it's not so bad here after all." [...] This is my appeal: let's plan the next walk with this issue at the center - what is actually happening. But not in general terms, not just to tell nice stories. What is happening in light of the intense real estate pressures? What is

> happening considering that culture and initiatives like this one are always at risk - knowingly or not - of being co-opted by that very project?
>
> [Art Walk in Corvetto – July 14, 2023, my translation]

As we have seen, the effects of beautification - which in Corvetto are closely tied to gentrification - are not merely abstract. They are tangible phenomena that become evident in things like "for sale" signs on once working-class apartment buildings, the arrival of foreign investors, the sharp rise in rental prices, and a widespread sense that a major shift is underway. During my fieldwork, I witnessed a steady growth in awareness and a mounting concern about the neighborhood's transformation - reflected not only in newspaper and magazine articles but, more significantly, in the voices and everyday conversations of local residents.

In that same summer of 2023, just a few weeks before that walk, I had received an invitation to take part in an initial moment of collective reflection and organization, convened by a number of political groups active in the area:

> Our local district - Municipio 4 (which includes Corvetto, Calvairate, Romana, Forlanini, Ponte Lambro, Rogoredo, and Santa Giulia) - is experiencing these dynamics of displacement with particular intensity and urgency. These processes are being accelerated by real estate developments like the Scalo Romana project, the arrival of new logistics hubs, the impact of major infrastructures such as the Paullese highway and the new M4 metro line, the divestment of housing stock by institutions like Enpam and ATS, and the preparations for the 2026 Winter Olympics. All of these forces converge toward one outcome: the rising cost of housing - both in terms of market prices and rental rates.
>
> Faced with all this, what is to be done?

The appeal came from a number of representatives of the main trade unions and housing rights activists from Municipality 4 (with a few participants from other parts of Milan as well). It proposed a meeting at the local headquarters of Rifondazione Comunista on Via Vallarsa, just a short distance from the construction sites at Porta Romana's former rail yard. A few months earlier, the tent protests had erupted in Milan's main squares, bringing the issue of the housing emergency into sharp focus and onto the national stage. Acknowledging the growing pressure bearing down on the city's southeast quadrant, the meeting aimed to bring together interested parties to propose the formation of a network dedicated to monitoring and raising a collective public voice around the housing issue in this area. The trade unions present at the meeting denounced a deeply troubling approach to evictions - marked by levels of brutality previously unseen in Milan. Families, including those with children,

ill individuals, or people with disabilities, were being evicted in most cases without any viable alternative housing options. Response times from institutions were slow, and the available social resources were insufficient, unstable, and inadequate. It was from this meeting - and through subsequent gatherings - that the *Rete per il Diritto all'Abitare del Municipio 4* (Municipality 4 Network for the Right to Housing) was formed. To raise awareness of the situation, the Network first focused on producing a flyer to introduce itself and circulate a collective call to action:

> We are a group of trade union and political activists, social workers, researchers, and residents of these neighborhoods who have chosen not to remain passive in the face of the crisis of evictions and forced removals - and more broadly, in the face of a worsening housing emergency that is pushing more and more people out of their homes due to the rising cost of living and soaring rents, combined with the absence of meaningful public housing policies.
> Too many people in Milan today - despite working or studying in the city - are forced to live in overcrowded and absurd shared housing arrangements, or have lost their legal residence status altogether because they are unable to secure a stable address.
> Over the past few weeks, we have come together to halt several evictions in District 4 and to begin organizing a collective effort that places the right to housing - both public and private - at its core. We invite everyone who feels the urgent need for radical change to join us today to stop evictions, and tomorrow to advocate for a new vision of housing as a common good and a public, social service.
>
> Who is involved in our call to action?
>
> First and foremost, those who are victims of these processes of speculation - tenants, homeless people, evictees - and secondly, anyone who wants a city truly designed for the people who live and work here, not just a showcase for tourism and large-scale events.
>
> Join the Network for the Right to Housing in District 4!

The Network aimed to build a strong political response to the housing crisis in District 4, acknowledging the particular vulnerability of the area surrounding Corvetto, as well as the construction sites linked to the Olympics and new real estate development projects. The most immediate and effective proposal that emerged during the meetings was to strengthen the presence of activists and residents at the eviction solidarity pickets. This is a collective action carried out to support families or individuals who, having received an eviction notice, have not yet been able to find alternative housing solutions. On the day the eviction officer is scheduled to arrive - usually early in the morning - a picket is organized in front of the building. The goal is to gather as many people as possible at the doorstep to prevent the eviction from taking place through physical resistance and

passive witnessing of the event. The Network therefore aimed to collect information about the dates and times of such actions and to disseminate announcements regarding picket locations or protests. It also organized several public assemblies to bring the housing issue in Corvetto into the public debate, as well as other demonstrations in front of the City Council's housing department offices. The meetings of the District 4 Network for the Right to Housing were also an important space for discussion and updates on ongoing housing emergencies in the area - an essential forum that allowed for the construction of a grassroots counter-narrative about the real state of affairs in the neighborhood, as exemplified by collective evictions in Sulmona Street and Via Barzoni.

It was during the first of these meetings that I met Stefano and Massimo, two activists from the Municipality 4 branch of the Communist Refoundation Party. They are key figures in the local struggle for housing rights in this part of Milan and, together, also residents of the area:

> We have long been trying to promote these kinds of initiatives. Here in the area, the Network for the Right to Housing in this district was born back in September, almost two years ago now. The push came from the three trade unions with whom we had already worked intermittently in the past [...] Following their prompt, we held some preparatory meetings and formed this network around eviction struggles. The call was for participation, but we understood that it wasn't always easy. Now, with the sanctions against anti-eviction pickets introduced by the new security decree, things have only gotten worse.
>
> However, the aim was to bring together neighborhood residents - often critically engaged residents, that is, people who, beyond simply living here (especially in Corvetto), also had their own education, knowledge, and analytical skills. And hopefully, some connections were also made among the tenants facing eviction.
>
> [Interview with S. and M. – 11/13/2024, my translation]

Stefano and Massimo were fundamental presences throughout the subsequent months of fieldwork, both for their deep knowledge of the transformation dynamics in the district and for their important political commitment within the neighborhood. Over the time we spent together - during more formal political actions as well as in informal moments of conviviality, which I remember fondly - we shared and discussed many of the reflections that have shaped this thesis. The headquarters on Via Vallarsa was indeed one of the main sites for critical debate on the dynamics affecting the neighborhood, as well as a welcoming space that hosted - and continues to host - the meetings of the Network for the Right to Housing, along with a variety of events ranging from book presentations on the

transformation of Milan, to discussions with experts on gentrification, to debates critiquing the model of large-scale events.

One afternoon, I asked them to tell me more about their political work and their perspective on the neighborhood:

> M.: Stefano and I have, let's say, embarked on this new venture - the right to housing struggle - for some time now, because honestly, there was very little discussion about housing in Milan. [...] Especially here, attacks on entire apartment blocks - not just individual units due to unpaid rent or lease expiration, which, of course, are also increasing - are multiplying, and it's no coincidence...
>
> S.: We, who are doing this small work of raising awareness and mobilizing here in the neighborhood, have seen it firsthand. Until now, awareness of what's happening was mostly based on hearsay - "did you see that shop closed down?" or "my neighbor has to move out." That awareness is only now starting to spread.
>
> [...] Returning to the question of grassroots reaction - how it is perceived, felt, and sometimes even resisted - we need to distinguish between two circles of responses. One is the more widespread reaction rooted in common sense, popular perception, but not only that; the other concerns what people actually try to do in terms of active opposition to this situation.
>
> I won't hide that it is very difficult to give voice to those who are victims or who still feel, for a short time, somewhat exempt from this slaughter. It's difficult because resignation, illusion, and sometimes even individual coping strategies tend to prevail. But above all, there is abandonment in every sense, along with self-exclusion and a kind of closing off from any possibility of mobilization - if not even an awareness of not being able to make it, leading to giving up and withdrawing.
>
> [Interview with S. and M. – 11/13/2024, my translation]

According to Stefano and Massimo, the most common response to the processes of displacement over the years has often been an individual one, marked by exhaustion and mistrust. Yet, where real estate pressures become more intense - such as in the case of attacks on entire apartment blocks - collective dynamics also emerge:

> S.: For those occasions, we formed a sort of resistance and mobilization committee, for example regarding the case on Via Sulmona, but also in other cases - there are at least two or three others in our area.

M.: From there, we started to tell the story of what was happening throughout the area, which is heavily battered by this so-called gentrification. That was just one of many examples, and from that point, we began this work, trying in every way to highlight the housing issue. With all these foreign investors, the rise in price per square meter, and the increase in rents - which, as is well known, have gone up by 40% - it's madness. This area is particularly affected by this situation. What happens is that many people have found themselves in what can only be described as a dramatic housing situation.

S.: There is a collective response to all this, but it is very difficult. We keep telling ourselves how important intervention in this area is, and, in this effort to come together, at the very least to network or communicate between very different groups. One example is this leaflet mapping the transformation processes in the area, produced together with the Off Topic lab, to which, besides us and our Right to Housing network, the Sicet union also contributed. I believe the territory needs to be marked much more with widely spread counter-information initiatives.

[Interview with S. and M. – 11/13/2024, my translation]

The difficulties are indeed numerous: internal relations between organizations are not always easy, and the involvement of institutions and the third sector - often externally directed by public commissioners - risks operating within a mechanism that serves pacification rather than radical transformation.

S: Often, the third sector becomes - not to say a perpetrator - but a willing agent of gentrification itself, despite its own self-declared commitments, which are sometimes very noble. But this also needs to be acknowledged, especially since our area has many such associations, largely because the municipality commissions a lot of work from them. [...] However, there is an interesting point: some of them are beginning to question what kind of role they play within gentrification processes.

[Interview with S. and M. – 11/13/2024, my translation]

The need to respond to these processes has thus spread and begun to unite multiple groups in proposing different forms of opposition. Furthermore, as highlighted at the end of this excerpt, the level of reflection on these dynamics no longer remains confined solely to political or activist circles but was starting to spread into other spheres as well:

Field Notes

Corvetto Network Meeting – 10/25/2023

> I enter an already ongoing discussion. [...] While R. describes the success of the initiative, N. recalls something: they mention that there was a plan to organize a public debate on the topic of gentrification at the CIQ. The event, they say, is connected to the publication of an article on Corvetto on the website of the magazine *Gli Asini*[58], which analyzes some of their projects. Starting from this proposal, a lengthy debate ignites in the room about the article, the regeneration of Corvetto, and its relationship with the gentrification process. Someone says, "To me, the whole discourse on gentrification is complete nonsense." Others, however, raise with concern the need to acknowledge their own role, as active actors and workers in Corvetto, within these processes. The discussion dominates the meeting and continues for about an hour until it's time to wrap up. Many, however, express interest in continuing the debate. They agree to set a date for an initial meeting focused on deepening the discussion around the topic.

The article that sparked the discussion reflects on the ambiguities and contradictions of urban regeneration policies in Corvetto. These projects, often presented as participatory and grassroots, are in reality driven by a network of universities, consultants, and third-sector organizations working in synergy with institutions and banking foundations. The article highlights how these practices, despite employing inclusive and collaborative language, risk fueling processes of gentrification, territorial marketing, and rising property values. The third sector therefore felt implicated in these dynamics, and following that meeting, a small motivated group effectively formed with the intention to organize a public debate and informational event on all the processes mentioned - gentrification, but also urban regeneration, speculation, co-optation - topics that still seemed surrounded by considerable confusion. The organizing group included representatives from various active local organizations in Corvetto, among them the *Rete Corvetto* itself, a contemporary art gallery, *Off Campus* - the recently inaugurated Politecnico campus in the neighborhood - *Casa Pace*, some new residents, and the Corvetto Library, which would later host the event. I also took part as a researcher, both because I found the process and the questions it raised extremely interesting, and because I felt a certain responsibility to contribute my research on the neighborhood - at least the insights that seemed useful to the discussion at the time.

[58] Cfr.: https://gliasinirivista.org/una-passeggiata-rigeneratrice-intorno-a-corvetto/?fbclid=IwZXh0bgNhZW0CMTEAAR3Le9iCxN5E99jgIGu6f-bXKxUegWLfl4Xp5N88rzATczKE7KKmuatgNqQ_aem_yufcq1JFUFA1_ic3RXuCAg



Figura 26 Meeting Are We Gentrifiers? – Oglio Library – 02/24/2024 – photo by the author

The process that began in December 2023 culminated in a well-attended and quite complex event at the end of February 2024, structured in multiple parts and titled (after lengthy negotiations): *Are We Gentrifiers? Corvetto, Local Actors, and Urban Regeneration* (my translation). The afternoon opened with a roundtable discussion featuring three experts - urban sociologists Marianna d'Ovidio and Davide Caselli, and urban planner Alice Ranzini - who focused on the phenomenon of gentrification, explaining its causes and effects, and exploring how these dynamics relate to the Corvetto neighborhood. This first part was designed to collectively highlight some of the main risks that gentrification brings to neighborhoods, such as processes of displacement and segregation, as well as the danger of aesthetic homogenization and the standardization of consumption options and services. It also aimed to foster a discussion about possible opportunities - provided they addressed the question, "For whom? For all residents or only for some?" Building on this reflection, the second part saw participants split into thematic tables based on a set of guiding questions. Participation was open to anyone interested, though operators from associations within the Corvetto network were especially encouraged to attend.



Figura 27 - Flyer of the meeting

The feedback from the second part brought to light some interesting points, revealing a widespread feeling of having sometimes been unwitting accomplices to these processes - for example, through manipulated social intervention tools, which were sometimes underutilized and only used for superficial actions, or through the typical real estate dynamics created by new residents who had purchased homes at affordable prices. Participants also highlighted the problem of difficult communication and alliances between associations, whose proposals, often overlapping within an event and project calendar considered overcrowded, tended to follow funding calls rather than the actual needs of the neighborhood. There was also a clear desire to work in and with the neighborhood, trying to understand how to measure the social impact of the various activities, and, as social actors,

to regain the ability to demand public policies or require guarantees that urban transformation does not trigger displacement processes.

As expected, it had not been easy to find a common ground that could satisfy not only the extremely diverse audience who participated that day but also the organizing group itself, within which various tensions had emerged over time. In the delicate balance between criticizing and contesting a negative process like gentrification, it was sometimes quite challenging to find a shared way to act from within that process and to agree on what to do - especially since, in this group, there was no intention to be a political actor, but rather representatives of a network of individuals and organizations living or working in the neighborhood, with very different roles and interests. The group agreed that gentrification was looming over Corvetto and that no practice or action could be proposed without critically addressing it. To this end, the group committed to continuing the path they had begun, with the plan to form a small informal Observatory in the following months, driven by the shared need to start again from a precise analysis of the processes in order to take a clearer position within them. Meanwhile, at the Corvetto Library, preparations were underway to set up a themed bookshelf dedicated to the topic of urban transformations. The bookshelf, titled “Corvetto Gentrification Observatory,” was inaugurated on May 7th 2025 and collects many key texts for understanding the neighborhood’s transformation.

The group had slightly expanded, also including some people interested in continuing the reflection process on the transformations of Corvetto, among them other residents and operators of local associations. Several online meetings had been organized with the new participants. However, during some of these meetings, part of the group began to ask the Observatory to become more active and concrete in order to start taking a stance on the proposals affecting the neighborhood. For example, it had been proposed to try to identify the types of projects, conferences, festivals, performances, walks, or calls for proposals taking place in Corvetto, and to distinguish the kind of influence each of these events had on the trends toward gentrification. The aim was to understand if there were initiatives to support - perhaps by including a more critical perspective either from external or internal voices, for example by allowing space for awareness-raising or informational interventions at the beginning or end of the event - or, conversely, initiatives to boycott that were considered more ambiguous or directly connected to the transformation. This spirit had effectively contributed to an internal split of thoughts and intentions within the group, which had become fragmented between a more moderate approach and a faction that increasingly felt a series of needs were left unexpressed - needs related to a clearer and more shared positioning that did not seem to be represented by the heterogeneous composition of the Observatory.

At the end of November 2024, shortly after the weeks surrounding the events involving Fares and Ramy - which undoubtedly accelerated the sense of urgency in the collective reflection on what was happening in Corvetto and how it was being discussed - together with some people living in Corvetto, I took part in a first meeting aimed at reflecting on the thoughts we had shared somewhat disorderly during those days. There were just under a dozen of us, still quite shaken by those events. The meeting had been intense, profound, and focused; we confronted the main questions that had brought us together that evening, discussing possible ways to live in the neighborhood without fueling expulsive dynamics, and the possibility of building an alternative meaning to the security-focused approach that was spreading in Corvetto. The group then continued to meet regularly, beginning to discuss the common reasons and themes that could shape the path forward. It was decided to start by organizing open self-education meetings on the topics of gentrification in Corvetto and, above all, on possible resistance strategies to propose. This was useful for building a shared perspective and an informed counter-narrative about the dynamics of which we were - and still are - active participants. The importance of forming networks, collectives, and resistance movements against gentrification has also been demonstrated in other Italian and international cities, where such experiences have supported the fundamental struggle for housing rights, against real estate speculation and processes of urban exclusion. They seek to propose practices of resistance from within transforming neighborhoods similar to Corvetto. Therefore, even as the changes in Corvetto continue and accelerate, this process is by no means uncontested. While the group's meetings go on, the neighborhood's proposals become increasingly solid and well-structured.

The participants of the artistic walk listen in silence to the words of the resident, a climate of bitter realism spreads among the organizers, who demonstrate acquiescence with what is pointed out. Before leaving the microphone at the beginning of the walk, he closes his speech with these words:

> [...] But here even people who look like you start to fall through the cracks - those who work in the creative industry and can no longer afford to pay 600 or 700 euros for a studio apartment. At the end of that street, there's a renovated building selling at 5,500 euros per square meter, and behind it, the same. [...] The point is: we have to use the forces that exist, of those who live here [...] building a common image, a shared project that says that in this neighborhood, first and foremost, the people who live here now must be able to continue living here. We don't need to prove we are "nice enough" or "educated enough" to attract others: above all, the neighborhood has to become more livable for the people who already live here, particularly for the most vulnerable segment of the population who live in the most run-down rentals, in public housing, and who traditionally are the first to be pushed out when these processes happen.
>
> [Artistic Walk in Corvetto – 07/14/2023, my translation]

CHAPTER VII
Everyday Aesthetics in Corvetto

In chapter five it was outlined that often decay, in the words of the interviews, is scary and upset them a lot. Fear and awful feelings connected to decay in fact involve all the sensorial apparatus: not only a visual dimension but also an audible, olfactory, gustatory, and tangible one. As Mary Douglas stated in his Purity and Danger (Douglas, 2011), danger is tied to the fear of contamination and is, therefore, a matter of the senses, insofar as the dynamics of proximity and distance are central. The tension between the hunt for decay and the pursuit of decorum - or between monstrification and beautification - produces a play of invisibilization and visibilization, cleansing and removal, erasure and re-narration, as discussed in the previous chapters.

In his article *The Sensuous City: Sensory Methodologies in Urban Ethnographic Research*, anthropologist Kelvin E.Y. Low proposes a sensory ethnography of the city as a way to reformulate how urban experience is known and represented (Low, 2015). In this final ethnographic chapter, I will focus on the last key aspect of the ethnography of beautification processes in the Corvetto neighborhood, illustrating how the research captured aesthetic demands that were not limited to the visual dimension of the area, but instead engaged perceptual aspects involving the full range of the sensory apparatus. In fact, for more than two millennial sight has commonly stood at the apex of a hierarchy that poses it above all the other sense, 'the noblest and the most powerful' (Schmidt, 2016, p. 54), which, alongside hearing, is regarded as a channel through which knowledge can be acquired. According to long philosophical tradition, the bodily senses of smell, taste, and touch are not suited to deliver aesthetic experiences and perception. 'Marx has also ranked the senses in a manner which departs from Durkheim's. Smell, taste, and touch are assigned lower statuses given the link to animality, while hearing and sight are accorded higher positions in the hierarchy as a result of the connection to civility' (Low, 2015, p. 297). The roles of smell, touch, and taste in the sensory experience of the world have thus long been overlooked. As Leigh Eric Schmidt notes:

> That ocularcentrism is peculiarly modern may seem at first glance surprising, especially given the deep-rootedness of such visuality in classical orderings of the senses. For both knowledge and delight, the sense of sight was, according to Aristotle, 'above all others'; it was the most developed sense, the clearest and most discerning, the one most able to bring 'to light many differences between things'. Hearing was a close second, superior for its conduciveness to learning. Taste and touch, associated with animality, had the 'least honour'. Smell fell as a mediator in the middle. Despite Christian reservations about the dangers of the eye and its seductions, this hierarchic view

> of the senses was widely replicated in theological terms from Augustine onward, including Aquinas's repetition of sight's crowning perfection in the Summa Theologica (followed still by hearing and smell, then by taste and touch). In commentary on the senses, this has been one of most deep-seated philosophical formulas to follow the ancients in establishing a hierarchy of perception, a system of nobility (Schmidt, 2016, p. 54).

Apart from contextualizing the senses and sensuousness as both socially and historically contingent, the sensory method challenges the oculocentric system and the excessive reliance on vision as the central mode of ethnographic inquiry, instead promoting multisensoriality as a pathway to a deeper understanding of urban experience. Low draws on the notion of *emplacement* developed by anthropologist Sarah Pink and on Henri Lefebvre's concept of *rhythmanalysis*: the senses are always situated within a physical and social context, and urban experience is inherently rhythmic and embodied Low, 2015, p. 298). The city must therefore be 'listened to,' 'smelled,' and 'walked through' (Low, 2015, p. 299). In line with Low, this chapter will consider the senses not only as modes of perception but also as ways of knowing, allowing access to the embodied meanings embedded in the everyday life of the Corvetto neighborhood-meanings that often elude purely visual or verbal analysis.

"In the following paragraphs, we will explore how the senses operate either in opposition to or in support of beautification. The list of everyday sensory experiences in a neighborhood like Corvetto includes the sounds of renovation work but also of bottles shattering during street fights; new pedestrian paving in the squares, but also shoving or pickpocketing; the smell of locally sourced bread, but also the scent of hashish drifting through the streets; views of newly built modern-style buildings, but also of outstretched hands asking for spare change. In the first paragraph, dedicated to the sense of sight, we will focus on how the widespread presence of large green spaces contributes to shaping a new, greener image of the neighborhood. This process of 'greenification' is accompanied by dynamics of green gentrification: urban nature is aesthetically valorized and turned into real estate capital, often at the expense of local communities. The emblematic case of Parco Porto di Mar illustrates how green space is used to justify interventions of social cleansing, increased control, and real estate investment, while masking inequalities and displacing issues of urban decay elsewhere.
Sound and smell in Corvetto have long been at the center of urban conflict: nighttime noise, music, and shouting often become sources of complaint, particularly among middle-class residents, while unpleasant or unhealthy odors-once a focus of environmental protest-are now increasingly framed in terms of decorum and aesthetic regeneration. Piazza Angilberto and the Porta Romana rail yard emerge as contested spaces, where noise reflects social tensions and urban transformations. We will

recount the story of F., a retired artist, and how construction noise and rising prices are pushing him to leave the neighborhood.

We will then examine how certain urban regeneration projects have focused on the rehabilitation of neglected flowerbeds, using fragrant plants and symbols of beauty to contribute to the aesthetic improvement of the neighborhood. In this context, noise and smell are not merely disturbances - they are material signs of urban transformation. Finally, touch and taste, the senses of proximity and traditionally the least explored, are central to understanding the dynamics of contamination, removal, and urban regeneration.

In the paragraph on touch, we will follow the work of those tasked with removing objects that symbolize decay in Corvetto. Broken glass and waste in public spaces are collected daily by the Custodians of Beauty, cleaning crews composed of people in vulnerable situations. The project, created to combine social inclusion with the care of public space, also reveals the close relationship between touch, decorum, and social control. Since taste and disgust are social constructions that reflect class affiliations and distinctions, while simultaneously marking exclusions and fears of the Other, the final paragraph will follow the story of the Corvetto Municipal Market. Once a popular gathering place, the market was gradually allowed to empty over the years in anticipation of a revitalization strategy focused on foodification: transforming the market into an aestheticized space for ‘experiential’ consumption.

With the understanding that, far from existing in a hierarchical relationship, each sense is closely connected to the others, with sensory perceptions mutually influencing and shaping one another, we will explore how the senses convey memories and emotions tied to places, create boundaries between self and others, and help unravel power relations-allowing us to perceive urban inequalities from a different perspective.

7.1 Sight: Green Corvetto and the Ghosts of Parco Porto di Mare



Figura 28 - Rendering of the redevelopment project of the overpass in Piazzale Corvetto - Source: MilanoToday, Il cavalcavia Corvetto potrebbe diventare la "green line" milanese [59]

In a recent article, sociologists Annalisa Frisina and Giovanni Semi explored the relationship between seeing and not seeing, between looking and being looked at (Frisina and Semi, 2023). Their analysis focuses on the city as a space where visibility is regulated by powers that decide what must be seen and how, and what instead should remain invisible, hidden, or aesthetically neutralized. In this sense, seeing is never a neutral act but the result of cultural and political selection: some urban elements are made visible, while others are systematically obscured or ignored.

During the first months of fieldwork, my main exploratory activities in the neighborhood consisted of walking, pausing, and observing. I would stroll, visit the market, look into the courtyards of public housing, and try to map the places my interactions led me to. Indeed, for a long time I often found myself getting lost in the vast green area overlooking Corvetto - between *Parco della Vettabbia* and *Parco Porto di Mare* - an extensive portion of the *Parco Agricolo Sud* that connects this neighborhood to Rogoredo and Borgo Chiaravalle. I became increasingly aware of the importance of this space, both for the residents of Corvetto and for the various actors who have operated - and continue to operate - within the neighborhood. A series of regeneration projects - cultural, artistic, and social agriculture initiatives, as well as different collaboration agreements - promoted activities such as exploratory and/or artistic walks, waste clean-ups, theatrical performances, and workshop days. Most

[59] *Il cavalcavia Corvetto potrebbe diventare la "green line" milanese*, Massimiliano Massey, 10 agosto 2023 (last accessed on 10/5/2025) - https://www.milanotoday.it/attualita/cavalcavia-corvetto-passerella-verde.html

of these initiatives aimed, more or less explicitly, to rewrite and re-signify the image of Corvetto as a 'green' neighborhood.

This large movement around the expansive peri-urban space of open wilderness highlights the ambivalent intertwining between the possibility of accessing green spaces as a resource and their symbolic and economic valorization for the neighborhood. One of the most well-known online platforms for house hunting in Italy offers further confirmation of this dynamic. The site features dedicated sections analyzing the residential market's trends and provides interpretations and descriptions of the neighborhoods where property listings are located. Corvetto is certainly not absent from this, being one of the Milanese areas currently attracting significant attention from real estate agencies. On the website, the neighborhood is described as a place where recent efforts have been made to overcome 'stereotypes and problems through urban and social regeneration projects.'[60]. Among the advantages of choosing to live in Corvetto are the (no longer very) low property prices, the proximity to the city center, and, notably, 'urban redevelopment with [...] the creation of new green spaces.' This innovative drive, we are told, 'could further increase the value of homes and make properties more attractive to investors.'[61].

In her work *How Green Became Good*, sociologist Hillary Angelo (2021) analyzes the twentieth-century cultural shift in how nature is perceived within cities. The author traces the historical, political, and social processes that have led to the conception of green spaces as 'good,' moving through the rise and consolidation of increased environmental awareness. Starting in the 1980s, this awareness spurred Italy's early major political victories for environmental movements, helping to promote the idea of green as synonymous with progress and the widespread adoption of sustainable lifestyles. However, Angelo demonstrates how political elites have progressively adopted the urban nature imaginary, redefining it based on shifting economic, social, and political objectives. She observes how green spaces have been commodified and transformed into a desirable and fashionable product. Moreover, access to public green areas - or even just the view of them - is now used as a genuine real estate asset, as evident in property listings that heavily exploit this imagery, which today serves as a significant economic valorization factor for homes and residential areas. Every new skyscraper has its own park carved out of parking lots or even rooftops, and every new residential project includes a communal garden (Tozzi, 2022). Renderings inevitably feature doses of greenwashing - the now-ubiquitous marketing strategy that, supported by the idea that any large-

[60] *Quartiere Corvetto di Milano: dove si trova, cosa vedere e quanto costa viverci*, Immobiliare.it, 17 february 2024 https://www.immobiliare.it/news/quartiere-corvetto-di-milano-dove-si-trova-cosa-vedere-e-quanto-costa-viverci-188241/ (my translation)

[61] Ibidem

scale real estate development is acceptable as long as it is green, sustainable, and smart, emphasizes the ecological aspect of the project, at least visually. Today, green spaces have revealed their ambivalence within contemporary neoliberal dynamics, showing on one hand that urban nature still certainly holds a political role in cities, but on the other hand, how discourse surrounding it has become increasingly useful and necessary for shaping their reputation (Angelo, 2021). This, in fact, influences how they are perceived globally, so that the ecological issue is almost entirely replaced by an aesthetic one: urban nature is mobilized to support the image of a green, sustainable, and livable city. To demonstrate this, a simple search combining the keywords 'Milan' and 'Green' on any search engine yields an unsurprising - though perhaps not so surprising - result: in Milan, the iconic symbol of the reclaiming and domestication of the urban nature imaginary is represented by the well-known Bosco Verticale skyscrapers designed by internationally renowned architect Stefano Boeri. This is the famous 'urban forestation' project, achieved through the vertical densification of more than two thousand plants, including shrubs and trees. The canopies overlook Milan from small terraces running along the exterior façades of the skyscraper up to the twenty-sixth floor, serving primarily as decoration and likely far less for the touted environmental and climatic benefits, as stated by the design firm. This illustrates how the idea of wild nature - wilderness - has been incorporated into real estate development projects and the broader processes of financialization of the city that depend on it.

This does not always happen everywhere. There was a time when spontaneous green areas, especially peri-urban ones, far from being exploited for the public image of these neighborhoods, were left uncultivated and unused, or turned into urban dumps. This was often the result of prolonged neglect or nearly absent management, to the extent that numerous cases of so-called 'toxic lands' have been reported in various Italian urban outskirts. These are spaces subjected to a long history of abandonment and territorial stigmatization (Wacquant, 2007; Wacquant, Slater, and Pereira, 2014), little known and little explored, mostly thought of as places scattered with weeds, waste, and post-industrial ruins, emptied of both human and non-human practices. Often, this leads us to treat abandonment as a space separate from the broader context: the trope of 'wild nature' as dangerous - precisely because it is considered uninhabited and full of hazards - still characterizes the language of urban policies today (Barchetta, 2021). The case of the birth, decline, and revitalization of Porto di Mare Park encapsulates all of this, helping to clarify the more or less visible stories of those who have crossed and continue to cross this open green space on the southern outskirts of Milan.

Porto di Mare is a vast peri-urban area of approximately 65 hectares of wild green space on the border of Corvetto. As its name suggests - unusual given the city's geographic location - the park was originally conceived in 1917 as part of a project to build a commercial waterway port connecting

Milan to the Po River, thus enabling the transport of commodities to the Adriatic Sea. Work began, but just a few years later, in 1922, the excavations filled with water and the project was halted. The park then started to be used as a quarry for materials needed to build the Milan ring roads and the nearby new working-class neighborhood of Corvetto. For many years, as remembered by residents of the surrounding buildings, the park remained in a state of limbo without any planning, caught between marshy areas, construction excavations, and patches of wild greenery. Starting in the 1970s, the meadow area began to be used as a public landfill for the city's waste. In the 1980s, with the first attempts at environmental policies aimed at regulating landfills, the waste was covered over, and a park rehabilitation project began. As A. from the Urban Forestation Center of Italia Nostra, which currently manages the park, explained to me:

> It was an area heavily damaged from an environmental standpoint. Porto di Mare was then covered and filled in; and usually, when you do these kinds of fillings, a few messes happen. At some point, the green area ended up isolated, enclosed by the artisanal-industrial zone to the north, the small ring road to the northwest, and the railway to the south. Nobody ventured inside because it was somewhat impenetrable due to its very layout.
>
> [Interview with S. – 05/13/2023, my translation]

Here, the same controversial atmospheres of toxic contaminated soil and the insecurity associated with urban decay - discussed earlier (see Chapter II) - come to the fore. On one hand, this contributed to the area's complete managerial abandonment; on the other, its isolation fostered remarkable natural richness, with the proliferation of dense low arboreal vegetation and serving as a refuge for certain wildlife species typical of the plain. Isolated yet simultaneously well connected thanks to the nearby Rogoredo Station, the area had not actually been entirely abandoned. Porto di Mare Park is highly illustrative for tracing and understanding the formation of multiple narratives around urban wilderness. There is indeed an assumed proper and improper use of these spaces: 'from illegal encampments, to waste dumping, to copper recycling, to the most notorious part - which caused the most uproar - namely the so-called *Drug Forest*, where drugs were sold, a zone of dealing and consumption'[62]. Starting from mid-2014, Porto di Mare became the focus of intense media attention, with the issue of the 'Drug Forest' entering the daily discourse. It was described as one of the largest drug dealing hubs in northern Italy, with an estimated flow of around six hundred people passing through each day (Bergamo, 2023).

[62] From the documentary by Luca Errera e Daniela Trastulli "*Porto di Mare - Un parco per Milano*": https://youtu.be/t_qi2hPDDgQ?si=34oY7rJIxUSOxvtX (my translation)

Following extraordinary media emphasis on the Drug Forest, which had severe stigmatizing effects on the space and the people involved in this 'contemporary open Milanese drug scene' (Bergamo, 2023), around 2017 a massive operation of militarization and criminalization began, featuring daily incursions by the army, military helicopters, and riot police units. At the same time, the Municipality proposed a major redevelopment project that combined law enforcement actions with health and social initiatives related to harm reduction, alongside broader urban regeneration efforts. These latter initiatives were almost entirely entrusted by the municipal administration to the association *Italia Nostra*, which, based on its previous experience managing *Parco delle Cave* - another stigmatized green area in western Milan - took over the management of the entire park. Alongside daily police patrols, volunteer teams began organizing clean-up rounds to remove waste from the park, aiming to control the movement of drug dealing by creating clean green spaces.

> The problem was that the area, from a naturalistic perspective, was not really accessible or was kept under control by a certain situation, and on one hand, this was unacceptable. So, they started all this work of cleaning and fixing the trails and paths, opening up access points, organizing activities, volunteer Sundays, guided tours, wildlife censuses with naturalists, events like Piano City and the Green Week - basically a series of actions aimed at encouraging people to discover these places. But these weren't the places people had in mind, shaped by the external communication they had received from television and newspapers.
>
> [Interview with S. – 05/13/2023, my translation]

According to Frisina and Semi, seeing and not seeing are deeply political acts, tied to dynamics of power, memory, and belonging. These actions, aimed at pushing away unwanted presences, thus become asymmetrical practices that need to be critically examined.

Many newspaper articles, for example, emphasized how the redevelopment of *Porto di Mare* was working to 'return the park to the citizens,' portraying how in the former "Drug Forest" people could now go jogging, mountain biking, or organize concerts[63]. As sociologist Sonia Bergamo notes in her ethnography of consumption spaces in Rogoredo:

> During the research, this was evident in the narratives of key informants and residents, for whom the desired purification of the space was expected to occur through processes of gentrification, privatization, militarization, commercialization, and social cleansing. In other words, it was hoped

[63] Elisabetta Andreis, *Bosco di Rogoredo, nell'ex regno della droga ora si fa footing, si va in mountain bike e si organizzano concerti*, 6 luglio 2022
https://milano.corriere.it/notizie/cronaca/22_luglio_06/bosco-rogoredo-nell-ex-regno-droga-ora-si-fa-footing-si-va-mountain-bike-si-organizzano-concerti-823d2a84-fcf1-11ec-9409-69d0fa31673b.shtml?refresh_ce

> that urban social and physical relations would be redesigned through strategies of promotion and reclaiming of the space (Bergamo, 2023: 474, my translation).

The use of the language of reclaiming and reconquering the *Parco di Porto di Mare* carries a problematic aspect, namely a clear separation between practices deemed illegitimate - linked to the park's wild past - and those considered legitimate, thereby connected to a process of both symbolic and material domestication. At the end of this very long process, in late November 2022, the regeneration project came to an end: the park had been successfully 'returned to the citizens,' effectively taking it away from those who, in this way, were no longer considered as part of citizenship. This disqualification, however, does not happen only to the *Parco di Porto di Mare*. Barbecues, parties, gatherings, tent camps and encampments, alcohol and fires: around the use of public green spaces, it is common to hear discussions demanding the enforcement of civic rules. Typically, Italian citizens - preferably from the middle class - are considered more respectful of public green spaces compared to other users, thereby contributing to measuring and legitimizing more or less appropriate uses of these spaces based on class and ethnic criteria (Barchetta, 2021: 115). At *Parco di Porto di Mare*, as in other similar areas, the tendency is often to reduce abandoned places to spaces in waiting: waiting for redevelopment and domestication toward a future where those who 'reclaim' and pass through these spaces are already predetermined.

> **Field notes, 18/11/2023**
>
> **Cascina Carpana, 1 PM**
>
> Along San Dionigi street, which marks the boundary between *Parco di Porto di Mare* on the left and Parco della Vettabbia on the right, there is already a long line of cars. Inside the park, the performance *Bucolica* by Marta Cuscunà, an artist associated with the Piccolo Teatro di Milano, is about to begin. The director wanted to lead the audience through the southern Milan suburbs, staging seven whistle players from the Canary Islands alongside a flock of Giganti Bergamasche sheep and the last family of transhumant shepherds from the Po Valley, who twice a year bring their flock to graze right in Parco di Porto di Mare. However, that morning, both children and adults in the audience were disappointed: due to the heavy rains in the preceding days, the sheep had not yet arrived at Porto di Mare, and the promised show took place only partially.

The regular passage of shepherd Giuseppe and his flock of sheep through the meadows of *Porto di Mare* has become an annual event eagerly awaited by the residents of Corvetto. Their presence in these peri-urban areas dates back to June 2018, when *Italia Nostra* granted the shepherd and his grazing flock temporary hospitality as an experimental method for maintaining the park's grounds. Gradually, their visits - usually in November and May - became increasingly well-known, soon

transforming into a symbol not only of the park's regeneration project but also of the broader revitalization of the Corvetto neighborhood. Research on the presence and emergence of certain animal species in cities often highlights the ambivalent responses they provoke, ranging from disgust and rejection to romanticization (Barchetta, 2021: 112). This has also happened with the presence of urban grazing and transhumance practices at Porto di Mare, alongside other similar projects such as agroforestry and the urban chicken coop. These initiatives seem to be contributing to the new branding of Corvetto as a vibrant, green, cool neighborhood "connected to the land." Although appreciated by some residents - especially newcomers - this imagery is increasingly exploited to boost the area's appeal for new real estate investments, in a neighborhood where housing prices and the cost of living are becoming unsustainable for many of the people who currently live there. This phenomenon is what literature has termed green gentrification (Anguelovski et al., 2022), referring to the increasingly systematic focus on the concept of the "green city" and its construction - interventions that are certainly beneficial for urban spaces but that sometimes accelerate and exacerbate the gentrification process in neighborhoods. Critical studies observing this process highlight the potential for increased social exclusion and inequality, both in terms of some communities having limited or no access to green areas and their benefits, and in the tendency to transform these spaces into new sites of consumption and leisure for incoming middle-class residents (Anguelovski *et al.*, 2022). 'Despite the potential to generate enormous social and health benefits for 'long-standing' residents, some of these new green projects have become tools to accelerate luxury real estate investments, which has raised concerns and criticism from community leaders', explains scholar Isabelle Anguelovski in a recent article [64].

Research also highlights how attention to urban green spaces is often superficial and driven by purely commercial logics, with policies and projects primarily aiming to improve the city's image rather than addressing real environmental and social challenges. This is clearly visible in the transition from the 'Drug Forest' to the 'Music Forest,' a new redevelopment project near the Porto di Mare Park that employs the rhetoric of nature but with very different intentions. The project involves the construction of the new campus of the Giuseppe Verdi Conservatory on an abandoned green area owned by the municipality, effectively continuing the city's tendency to consume public green spaces while making it more acceptable through doses of greenwashing. Not only does the *Music Forest* exemplify how the stereotyped imagery of nature has been perfectly integrated into urban financialization logics, but this is also clearly visible in the renderings and language promoting the brand-new large-scale urban transformation projects affecting the entire area around *Porto di Mare* and the *Parco Agricolo Sud*,

[64] Ilaria Sesana, *La moda della "natura in città" e l'ombra di nuove diseguaglianze*, Altraeconomia, 1 Novembre 2022, https://altreconomia.it/la-moda-della-natura-in-citta-e-lombra-di-nuove-diseguaglianze/ (my translation)

particularly those connected to the Milan-Cortina 2026 Winter Olympics. They are, in fact, being promoted as the most sustainable and zero-impact Games ever, in a context where construction sites are already underway, concreting about 200,000 square meters in the former Porta Romana rail yard, where until recently spontaneous shrubs were still growing, and the development of over 1 million square meters in Santa Giulia, handed over to Lendlease - a company already known for similar Olympic projects in London 2012 and in the post-Expo districts of Milan. Here will rise the new Olympic arena within the future "largest park in Milan," a place so far mostly known for a famous scandal involving contaminated land and false remediation efforts. From Expo 2015 to the upcoming Olympics, it is now widely recognized - not only in Milan - that major events act as allies and drivers of large urban transformations, as well as the social cleansing and displacement often accompanying such events.

All around Porto di Mare, it is possible to observe who is shaping the images of the city today, what they represent, and what their effects are. Moreover, in this still somewhat spontaneous green space - caught between toxic environments and green gentrification - it is possible to see how nature and the city can sometimes be antagonistic entities and at other times integrated within contemporary urban dynamics. The images of a green Corvetto have thus been consolidated around a specific cosmetic vision that acts by rendering some practices invisible while hyper-visibility is granted to others. In this way, the implicit construction - by contrast - of the space to be cleaned, beautified, and saved as a dangerous area has served to absolve and justify other types of practices: the images of an orderly and clean space sometimes obscure the violent and repressive actions of the police, shifting the problem once again onto the plane of aesthetic control. The massive presence of law enforcement has effectively only displaced illegal behaviors, pushing the open scene of drug use that was once centered in Corvetto and Porto di Mare just a little further out - into another area of wilderness that is now less visible than the new Park for Milan.

7.2 Hearing: F., the Artist on the Run

> I'm S. from Piazza Angilberto, and a few years ago they created this beautiful tactical urban plaza. At first, it was quite nice because we residents used to come down and sit on the benches. Gradually, though, the square got occupied - with two ping-pong tables, benches, lots of benches - and nowadays, almost every evening, people gather there and it turns into a sort of hangout. The ping-pong tables end up being used as places to put pizzas and beers, kids play on the tables, and often I myself have to go and get them down from there. Mostly because we're afraid. I'm

> afraid the kids will hurt themselves and fall while their parents are there drinking all night, every night, not watching them... Anyway, regardless, we were told... now I don't know when the ping-pong tables and most of the benches will be removed, but so far we haven't seen anything... Anyway, you all already know about this square, and with summer coming there will be more people drinking, shouting, and we, the residents, can't sleep. We want an answer from you. When will these ping-pong tables be taken away? When will these benches be removed so it's no longer a hangout place for those of us who live here and want to sleep?
>
> [Recording from the Extraordinary Commission, Municipio 4 – 2/19/2025, my translation]

Modern cities have frequently been sites for auditory contestation, where noise and loud disturbances are often the main source of conflict between neighborhood groups. There are many cases of residents coming together to report and request specific interventions concerning episodes of disturbance caused by music and street crowds, such as the anti-movida committees. In his text on the phenomenon of gentrification, Giovanni Semi (2015) focuses on the transformation of the Brooklyn neighborhood in New York, as depicted in the cinematic and literary works of Spike Lee. The director has often recounted how his father, a musician, participated in creating musical languages that became integrated into the African American neighborhood between the 1960s and 1990s. Semi shows how, one generation later - the generation observed by the director in his films - that 'jazz on the stoop,' which represented the local cultural expression produced by the previous generation, was no longer seen by the new residents as an appreciated form of everyday local culture, but rather complained about as a form of 'domestic noise.' (Semi, 2015, p. 101, my translation). If the tension between old and new urban habitus in a gentrified Brooklyn could turn even a globally recognized and appreciated musical genre like post-war urban jazz into a source of annoyance, it takes little imagination to understand how the issue of noise is a major cause of conflict and tension in a neighborhood still undergoing significant transformation, such as Corvetto.

Studies have highlighted the material nature of sound and its capacity to generate concrete effects on reality (Bull and Back, 2016; Schwanhäusser, 2016). While the importance of sound is linked to its role in verbal communication, it also resonates in higher perceptual spheres not solely related to rational interaction - for example, in the realms of emotion, memory, and even in the capacity to shift or modify bodies and spaces. Sound indeed has a physical presence, compelling both the space and the individuals within it to engage in an immersive listening experience. While sound produces many effects across various spheres of everyday life, there are also more violent manifestations that can be manipulated to sow fear and terror, in the form of dangerous sounds. For example, "acoustic bombs"

or “sonic weapons” are devices developed through defense and warfare technologies that emit targeted high-intensity sound waves. They are often used during protests to disperse crowds, sometimes causing serious physical harm such as ear pain, nausea, disorientation, and even hearing loss.

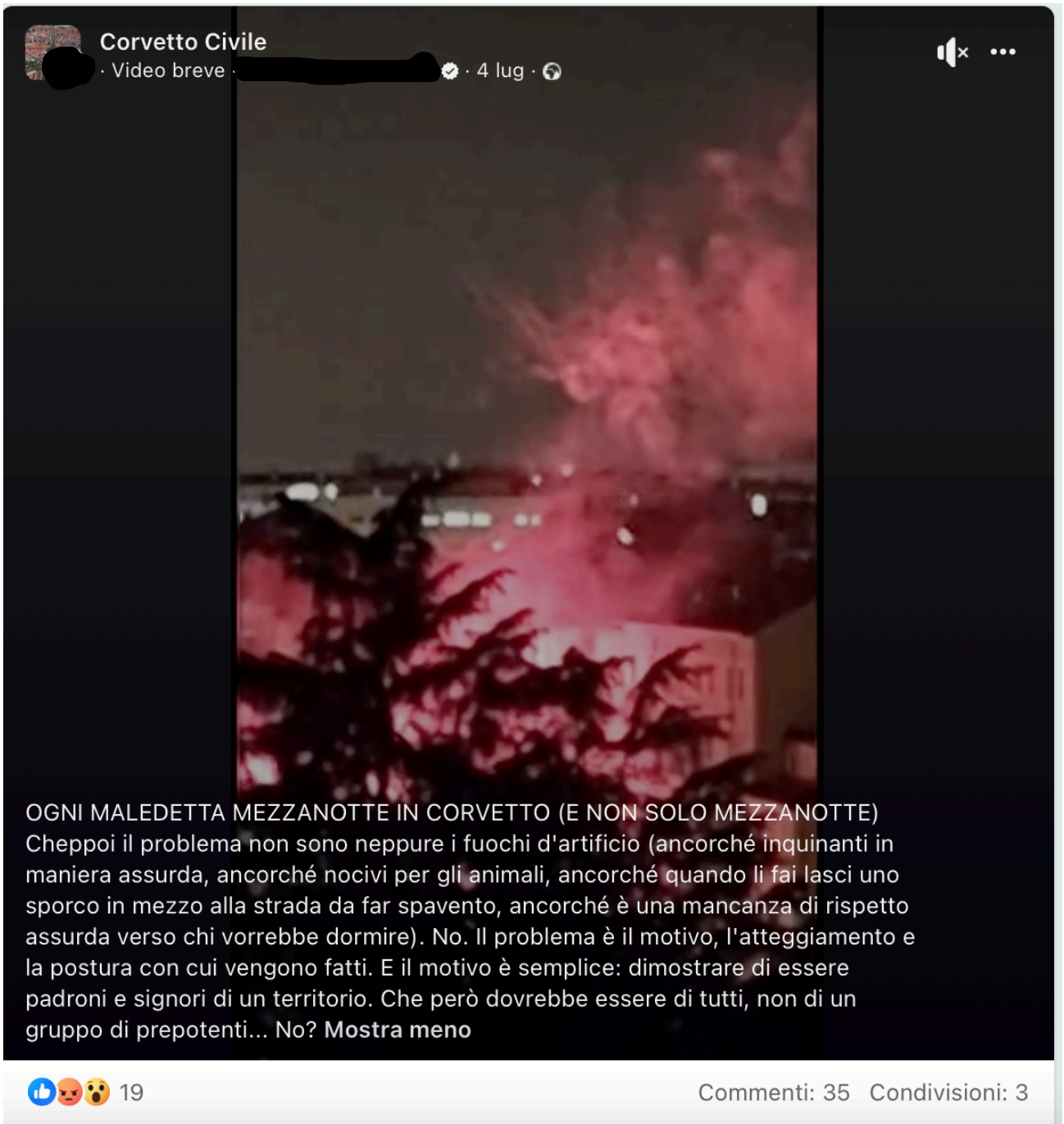


Figura 29 - Facebook group post from Corvetto Civile complaining about the noise from fireworks - May 4, 2024

Noise complaints in Corvetto take many forms - loud music, shouting and celebrations, firecrackers in the streets, and the hum of air conditioners in summer. These complaints usually relate to temporary noises occurring during hours traditionally reserved for rest and quiet, but they can also include grievances about constant sources of noise pollution like traffic, industrial activity, or construction sites. As the excerpt at the beginning of the paragraph shows, these are often "noisy places where the middle and upper classes complain about other people's noises" (Bull and Back, 2016, p. 48). In neighborhood social groups, there are numerous posts documenting noisy situations, often captured from above, especially from people's windows. Piazza Angilberto and Piazzale Corvetto are the main hotspots mentioned; in the first case, the primary issue is the presence of ping-pong tables and benches that enable nighttime gatherings, while in the second it is mostly a sandwich kiosk that stays open late with loud music. A very long saga of complaints on social media periodically captured a group of evangelical church preachers who gathered every Sunday morning in Piazzale Corvetto to "shout," as people described on social media.

I meet F. at the bar of the hostel next to the Scalo di Porta Romana. He's already at the counter, ordering his usual breakfast and chatting with the staff as if he knows them well - he's a regular. On the counter, there are wholegrain and vegan cakes and pastries, Polaroid photos stuck to the walls, and English words painted on the walls. Some young customers are already working at the tables with their Macs. It is the typical place with a vintage aesthetic that anticipates and follows gentrification. The bartender asks him if he has found a new studio. He replies that he's looking in Dergano or along Viale Padova, but no, he hasn't found anything yet. He's even thinking about moving to Turin - a friend recently called him and told him he rented a large studio downtown for half of what they're asking in Milan. He doesn't know why he's still here.
F. is an artist, a former painting professor now retired. About ten years ago, he moved into an apartment on the fifth floor of an old *casa di ringhiera* building, not far from the hostel. From his windows, he can take in the full stretch of the vast open space of Scalo di Porta Romana: just a few meters ahead, the white tower of Fondazione Prada rises against the skyline, while each day the construction sites for the future Olympic village push forward. Yet, when F. first rented this apartment, neither the foundation nor its tower existed - let alone the building sites. From his vantage point, he has witnessed every stage of the Scalo's transformation, from pruning to evictions, a process that began eight years ago:

> I had understood that there was a plan for the park. They began removing the trees, clearing everything away… In a way, that was a good thing, because the area had been quite dirty. The Scalo was frequented by many - people would enter by climbing over the barriers, often those

> who had nowhere else to sleep. At the beginning, there was a building nearby that was frequently used by the homeless… So at first, I saw the cleanup as something positive. But then I quickly realized what they were planning: alongside the park, they would build the Olympic Village, followed by a student residence. And I understood that this place was about to change - that it would soon become what it was always meant to be. Yes, because this place here [*Scalo of Porta Romana*] has a peculiar history. They started dismantling everything at night, doing it quickly, only to leave the site as it was - so the brambles and weeds grew back. Then they cleaned it up again, two or three times, but each time, it returned to the way it had been before.
>
> [Interview with F. - 21/2/2024, my translation]

F. opens the door to his apartment, carefully ensuring the cat doesn't slip out. He removes his overcoat and walks down a corridor crowded with books, stacked both on shelves and the floor. One of the rooms in the apartment he rented has become his studio: he has arranged it with large canvases stacked against one another and a worktable overflowing with brushes of various sizes, colors, palette knives, and mixing boards - set right beside the large panoramic window that now overlooks cranes and scaffolding. He tells me he chose this particular home, on the fifth floor, because he loved painting in the morning light, which indeed floods the room in its full brilliance. But now, F. says, working in peace has become impossible - background noise from the construction sites merges with the relentless renovations of neighboring apartments:

> So, with half my time swallowed by the relentless construction noise right below, I told myself it was time to find another studio. […] There's no longer a space for me in this neighborhood - how could there be, when basement storage rooms are offered at 500 or 600 euros, and warehouses go for 1,200? Just to give you an idea: they were showing me basements - you know the kind. Sometimes they're not even proper cellars, just spaces wedged next to garbage barriers. And yet they were presented as small studios, as storage units, all at absurd prices. Not just here, but everywhere. […] Now, you need 5,000 euros a month to rent a workshop.
>
> [Interview with F. - 21/2/2024, my translation]

Indeed, F. had witnessed the entire transformation of the area surrounding the Scalo, a process that had accelerated following the inauguration of Fondazione Prada. Like many other artists - often referred to in the literature as the pioneers of gentrification (Zukin, 2002; Smith, 2005; Semi, 2015; Manzo, 2023) - they are among the first to activate such processes, yet also among the first to be displaced by them. F. had begun to experience these effects firsthand:

> At first, […] in reality, with Prada just over there, I realized that, all things considered, the redevelopment had done my street well. The Tower is a striking skyscraper, with each floor housing significant works of art. There was a critic - Celant, who has since passed away - who curated some excellent exhibitions. So initially, I was pleased; I thought I had made the right investment because, from this vantage point, I could take in so much, culturally speaking. But then, I saw the waves of tourists arriving in droves. [...] There used to be a trattoria here called T. It was a historic, well-loved spot, frequented by the elderly residents of the neighborhood. Every now and then, I'd stop by, grab a bite to eat - it gave me a certain comfort. Then a young man took over, bringing a managerial, business-oriented approach, and I suppose it has now become a proper restaurant, a real trattoria where the food is good. So I'm not criticizing it, mind you. But of course, the prices have gone up. He still gives me a fair price, but for this - well, you have to run. You have to get out.
>
> [Interview with F. - 21/2/2024, my translation]

I ask F. to take a walk toward Fondazione Prada, and to our right, we pass the construction sites of the Olympic Village. He tells me how, years before moving here, he used to come to this very street with his wife for the Saturday morning flea markets - now long gone, just like the presence of sex workers at night. He remembers with nostalgia the once lively, working-class neighborhood, now replaced by a circuit entirely monopolized by luxury consumption. In truth, more than the noise of the construction sites, his words suggest that it is the relentless rise in rent prices and the cost of living that is driving him away - along with those, like him, who no longer fit the demands of this new transformation:

> No, this area is bound to become a luxury district. Between the Foundation and the new student residence they plan to build in place of the Olympic Village, it's turning into a highly coveted location. I can already see it happening. These used to be working-class homes, built under the old system - *case di ringhiera*, workers' housing - and now they're all being renovated. People are leaving. I've realized it because the real estate agents constantly pass through here, looking for elderly residents who have passed away. They always go to the same places. They even ring my doorbell. Just yesterday, they even left me a note: "We couldn't reach you, could you call us?" There are still a few elderly residents holding out. Well, with the kind of money they're offering, people take it and move somewhere bigger. It's clear that it's tempting.
>
> I, too, am thinking about leaving Milan - what am I still doing here? Let's leave the luxury to the wealthy bourgeois and the trendsetters. I'm off to Turin.
>
> [Interview with F. - 21/2/2024, my translation]

A common misconception among those who criticize gentrification is the idea of defending a status quo - a former balance disrupted by the arrival of a major real estate project, perceived as an alien intrusion, with the belief that an alternative form of development could exist. In doing so, there is a risk of missing the real target of critique, overlooking the actors and places from which these processes originate. Indeed, it is difficult to envision a different form of development for Scalo di Porta Romana - whether more democratic, equitable, or environmentally sustainable - that would not also carry the expected consequences, if not on the same scale.

We walk to the newly redesigned Piazza Olivetti, renovated just a few years ago, unfolding behind the buildings of the Foundation. F. gazes at the glass façade of Fastweb's new headquarters and the play of reflections in the artificial pond - where, amid a small forest of bamboo and ducks, the stark white silhouette of the Prada Tower stands clearly in view. Behind him, at the center of the square, a monumental silver inscription declares: **YOU ARE FUTURE.**

7.3 Smell. Stinks of shit in the flower beds, or searching for butterflies in Corvetto

Until a few decades ago, the role of the sense of smell was not widely considered in studies on sensory experiences (Lindquist, 2023; Diaconu, 2024). In recent years, *smell studies* and *olfactory aesthetics* have rehabilitated the role of scent in social life, recognizing how it can evoke emotions, memories, and nostalgia. Scents may also be linked to rituals and traditions, shaping how individuals experience and interpret them. Pleasant scents can enhance social gatherings, making people feel more comfortable and connected. Conversely, unpleasant odors can create discomfort and social distancing, impacting relationships and group cohesion (Diaconu, 2024). As Pavoni and Tulumello explain, just as with dangerous sounds, new technologies have been developed that use scent or sound to create non-lethal weapons, such as Skunk, which illustrates a new form of violence that affects and injuries individuals through senses that do not require physical contact. The authors show how this type of violence is often marketed as less harmful, yet it has profound psychological and social impacts on those subjected to it (Pavoni and Tulumello, 2023).

In Corvetto, longstanding protests emerged around unpleasant odors as early as the 1980s. Residents of the Mazzini neighborhood had rallied against the pervasive stench that engulfed the working-class district, emanating from a company that cleaned tankers arriving from across Europe (Iosa, 1986, p. 242). The smell of solvents seeped through the drains of household sinks, even on rainy days. Residents' protests eventually forced sewage workers to uncover the manholes in an attempt to dispel the nauseating stench of trichloroethylene rising from the pipes (Iosa, 1986). During those same years, residents fought against the fumes from the public landfill in Porto di Mare, against illegal dumping

sites, and against the stench rising from the *rogge*, the open-air canals that once ran through the area. Some of these battles led to the covering and remediation of certain lagoon sections (Iosa, 1986).
If the ecological problem in Corvetto, as in other suburbs, has always had a certain relevance, the fight against unpleasant odors is no longer, or not only, so closely linked to public health. Today the problem of unpleasant smells and fumes often concerns the logic of decorum. In some streets of In Corvetto, at certain corners, one can spot a series of flower beds noticeably different from the surrounding ones. Rather than appearing barren or sparsely covered with patches of wild grass, these areas burst with lush, flourishing foliage - especially from spring through autumn - almost always enclosed by a protective fence (Figure 3). These flower beds are managed as part of the *Patti di Collaborazione* in Corvetto - a framework through which municipalities can, via an agreement, entrust the direct stewardship of certain public spaces to one or more engaged citizens involved in initiatives for the care and regeneration of *common goods* in the city.

I., a coordinator from an association that had overseen some of these projects, tells me that one of them emerged in response to a specific request:

> When it comes to the issue of odors, Via Panigarola immediately comes to mind. This particular flower bed was part of the second phase of the project, following the one on Via Mompiani. […] It was a highly significant *Patto di Collaborazione* because some of the residents who decided to participate were completely unlike the usual figures involved in neighborhood initiatives or present at the *Laboratorio di Quartiere*. Quite the opposite! These were people who didn't fit the typical profile of an engaged citizen - think tattoos reading "ACAB" on their necks. And yet… their desire to establish the *Patto* stemmed from a pressing need, one as strong as the unpleasant stench that wafted into their homes whenever they opened the windows on the first floor of Via Panigarola.
>
> [Interview with I. - 19/02/2024, my translation]

In Corvetto, most *Patti di Collaborazione* focused on neglected public flower beds or barren roadside areas that some citizens volunteered to tend and replant. I. tells me that the first flower bed to be included in a *Patto* was proposed by a small group of residents from Via Mompiani, a street in the working-class Mazzini neighborhood. Their goal was to transform the spaces around the trees to prevent waste from accumulating or being abandoned along the road. The residents of Via Mompiani purchased soil hummus, flower seeds, decorative plants, and gardening tools - spades, hoes, and watering cans - and began tending to the flower bed.



Figura 30 - ***Flower bed from the*** **Patto di Collaborazione** ***on Via Mompiani – photo by the author***

However, the residents' proposal to tend the second flower bed - on Via Panigarola - was in response to a much more specific issue.

> The stench was primarily from dog poop. Understandably, with an open window looking down onto an empty clearing - the flower bed with its plants - it easily became both a dumping ground and an informal dog run. So, the driving reason behind the *Patto* was, quite literally, the smell. While the issue hasn't been entirely solved, the street has undoubtedly become more pleasant to walk through, visually as well.
>
> [Interview with I. - 19/02/2024, my translation]

Thus, flower bed by flower bed, the *Patti di Collaborazione* gradually incorporated even larger green spaces - including the long strip of land, approximately a mile in length, running along the sides of the bike path on Corso Lodi, known as the *Miglio delle Farfalle*.

> Well, the other *Patto*, which played heavily on aesthetics, was the *Miglio delle Farfalle*. There, we worked hard to engage other active citizens in a message of beauty - one that was somewhat implicit in the name and in those who originally proposed it. […] It started with 25 signatories,

> then grew to 40, and kept expanding. But in the end, the core group of caretakers has remained more or less the same - about seven or eight people, maybe ten. The flower beds involved in the *Patto* have also increased. […] It began with three or four small green oases, then expanded as new sections were added along Corso Lodi. The project grew, eventually involving an entire apartment building near Brenta. At one point, even the municipality stepped in, contributing water access points - fundamental for long-term sustainability. There's still much to do, of course, but the scale of the project was ambitious from the start, spanning a full kilometer of roadway.
>
> [Interview with I. - 19/02/2024, my translation]

It's interesting to note how the response to an unpleasant odor was an aesthetic solution - one that linked the fragrance of flowers and aromatic plants with beauty. In fact, the project's intent was precisely to plant specific flowering species that would provide nectar and pollen, attracting butterflies to Corvetto.

> The original idea for the butterflies came from R.P., [the owner of a historic shop in the neighborhood, ed.]. He reached out to us after seeing similar urban butterfly oases elsewhere and asked, "Could we do this on Corso Lodi?" […] He made himself available, engaging others in the process. His role was to convey this vision, harnessing the powerful symbolism of butterflies. And it truly worked. […] We were still in the depths of the pandemic, unable even to go outside. So, we launched a social media campaign, inviting people to send us a photo from Corso Lodi - perhaps a small act of care for the street or something connected to butterflies. We were absolutely flooded with images. It showed just how deeply people longed for something else… I'm not sure if this is the right way to say it, but - perhaps - a different kind of aesthetic.
>
> [Interview with I. - 19/02/2024, my translation]

The active citizens involved in this *Patto* gather monthly on Corso Lodi for the regular upkeep of the flower beds. In spring and autumn, they also meet to plant new seeds or maintain the evergreen plants. These cleanup days are public and open to the entire community, with new participants often joining in. One Saturday morning, I met up with the group of *pattisti*, who - armed with spades, trowels, and, most importantly, litter-picking tongs and garbage bags - were working their way up Corso Lodi, tidying the flower beds. Speaking with them, they often expressed frustration over the indifference of some residents toward the project, as well as occasional acts of vandalism against the flower beds - or even outright opposition, which they had witnessed from time to time.

Since the *Patti* were launched, especially in some of the flower beds on Via Mompiani, incidents have regularly occurred: fences being damaged or torn down, and household waste dumped into the

carefully maintained green spaces. The attempt to replace litter and dog waste with butterflies, it seems, has not been welcomed by everyone.

One morning, as a *pattista* tells me:

> Most people tell us “well done,” though there are always a few who don’t quite understand - asking if the municipality sent us or if we’re getting paid. At one point, someone even put up signs in that flower bed. Wait, what did they say again? “You’re just privileged retirees with too much time to waste.” Honestly, in this area, anything that adds beauty should be appreciated even more than elsewhere, given how challenging things can be…
>
> [Interview with M. – 24/2/2024, my translation]

What might appear to be mere vandalism - constantly reported by engaged citizens and local associations - can also be interpreted as an act of protest against the way regeneration projects arrive in Corvetto: often imposed without negotiation and stripped of meaningful, shared objectives with residents. The *Miglio delle Farfalle* is certainly a *Patto* that has succeeded, as I. affirms, along with all those involved in the initiative, who frequently express satisfaction with the project. Efforts like these have a clear focus on aesthetics - driven by a beautification mindset - where olfactory perception plays a key role in enhancing the decorative aspect and improving public spaces. These projects fall under the broad and diverse category of *cultural regeneration*. I ask I. what relationship exists between this and the *Patti di Collaborazione*:

> So, I'll respond broadly to the question of cultural planning: the *Patti di Collaborazione* should be seen as a tool - something to be used - rather than a magic wand. And, most importantly, not just a story to tell. This is particularly crucial in urban regeneration processes, where there is always the risk that they remain just a compelling narrative. The *Patti* represent a significant innovation precisely because they envision a deep cultural shift within public administrations. However, this cultural change should be rooted in a broader transformation: communities must be genuinely involved in these processes while ensuring that a strong public framework guides them. Above all, within a systemic vision, it is essential to develop higher-level policies and reinforce the grassroots demand for participation.
>
> [Interview with I. - 19/02/2024, my translation]

This label encompasses all specific actions that use cultural tools as a means of urban regeneration. However, it raises an important question: How do these planning efforts, which focus on the aesthetic dimension of a neighborhood, truly impact the social and urban fabric of Corvetto - and of other peripheral districts - as they claim to on paper?

As Marianna d'Ovidio writes:

> Culture alone isn't enough to transform a peripheral district into a high-quality, vibrant, and attractive neighborhood. It can - and must - be part of a regeneration process, but this must take place within a broader transformation framework, driven by carefully constructed social policies, sufficient resources, and the political will to bring real change. Culture is wonderful and indispensable, just as housing, employment, healthcare, safety, and education are (D'Ovidio, 2024, p. 41, my translation)

6.4 Touch. The 'Guardians of beauty'

The physical contact ordered by touch reduces or eliminates the distance that is traditionally required for an 'aesthetic experience'. Among other disqualifying features, especially in the case of touch, which requires physical contact to operate, the needed distance that permits the appropriate kind of aesthetic perception and pleasure is absent. Presenting the sensory experience of the body in its entirety, this is why - alongside taste - it is also considered the most compromising sense, precisely because it is vulnerable to contagion and injury.
Given the proximity-based nature of this sense - and thus its application in ethnographic research on urban space - my fieldwork has explored the dimension of touch in relation to the *bad objects* of Corvetto that we are afraid to incorporate:

> Good evening, everyone [...]. First and foremost, I want to sincerely thank the deputy mayor and the councilors for security and welfare for being here tonight. We are truly grateful for your presence, and we would like to take this opportunity to make a few specific requests. [...] The problems here remain the same: broken glass, vandalized cars, fireworks going off at all hours of the day and night, ethnic shops. We've tried submitting documents to request enforcement of operating hours for ethnic shops, limiting alcohol sales to specific hours, and banning glass bottles - but nothing has changed. [...] At the same time, however, one thing must be acknowledged: your interventions, though sporadic and never entirely conclusive, have had positive, tangible impacts - noticed by everyone. This should be the core point of our appeal: implementing targeted measures, issuing ad hoc ordinances, and addressing the regulatory gaps that still exist in Corvetto.
>
> [Recording of the Extraordinary Security Commission – 19/02/2025, my translation]

We had already examined public space cleaning and reorganization efforts in Chapter Five (see sec. 5.2.1), along with the various practices of restriction, regulation, and control - such as requests for the removal of benches or trash bins from public streets - all the way to the militarization of public space. What is interesting to note in this passage is the material dimension that the *unwanted* in Corvetto takes on - in the form of beer bottles, broken glass, and overflowing dumpsters that must be removed. According to Mary Douglas in *Purity and Dange* (Douglas, 2011), touch is a culturally sensitive sense, especially when linked to the realm of impurity and filth, making it closely associated with the idea of contamination. Moreover, as the sense that most directly implies proximity, it often serves as the channel through which the violation of symbolic boundaries between purity and danger is perceived. Touching dirt means not only coming into contact with something subjected to prohibitions but also breaking a cultural norm. It involves, first and foremost, one's own body, entering the territory of taboo, disorder, and impurity. In cases of direct contact with this realm, it is often tied to rituals of purification or practices of exclusion and stigmatization. Indeed, there is a broad range of urban *bad objects* that must disappear - but whose removal is entrusted to specific entities responsible for their management.



Figure 5 - ***Office of the*** **Custodi del Bello** ***project – photo by the author***

One Saturday morning, I was sitting at a table in the outdoor seating area of a bar in Corvetto, finishing my coffee, when a fluorescent yellow vest caught my eye. It was worn by a sanitation worker, and on the back, bold lettering read: *Custode del Bello - Guardian of Beauty*. He walked with

a broom and dustpan in hand, carefully gathering cigarette butts and stray scraps of paper from the sidewalk. The contrast between his task and the grand title on his back was striking. I thought: could the central theme of my research really be captured so effectively in just a few words? That title, in fact, evoked the *aspects of embodiment* tied to the role of its bearer - called upon to "protect" and safeguard the beauty of the neighborhood by physically removing, one by one, the objects that Corvetto did not want to see.

One February morning, in their office on Via Barabino, I meet the Custodi del Bello team of Corvetto along with the project coordinator. It has been raining relentlessly for several days, and on mornings like this, the team doesn't go out for their usual collection rounds. We dry off from the rain, find seats for everyone, and they begin to share their stories with me:

> A – The project began in 2017. Back then, it was called 'Bella Milano' and it emerged from a civil society initiative - specifically, from a group of people involved in a committee called ExtraPulita. Their idea was to take care of the city by reintegrating people who had been excluded from the labor market or who were experiencing particular vulnerability. The proposal was presented to the City of Milan in 2017, at a time when Councillor Majorino had moved his office right here to Corvetto. The City appreciated the idea. The Councillor adopted it as his own, and in 2017 we launched the project experimentally with two teams.
>
> What is the Custodi del Bello team? Here's a brief example: it's a team made up of a team leader - he, in this case, is regularly employed by a Type B social cooperative. There are trainees who stay on for six months. There are also volunteers who take part in our activities three days a week. The team, using this office as a base, is assigned a set of streets, parks, and gardens within a designated area, and they are responsible for keeping it clean.
>
> [Interview with C.d.B. – 26/02/2024, my translation]

The project initially launched with two pilot teams in Milan, and today, teams operate in around twenty areas across the city. These zones were identified through collaboration between the municipal administration and AMSA, the Milan-based company responsible for waste collection and disposal. The Custodi del Bello are especially active in peripheral neighborhoods, which are the areas where their presence is most visible. Corvetto was the very first neighborhood selected in Milan:

> A– Corvetto is the oldest of the funded teams. It's a very straightforward activity [...] which consists of walking around the streets we've identified. [...] Let's say the selection of these areas is based on the visible signs of decay, or because there's a particular social fabric - such as in extremely peripheral zones - or the presence of services that have a significant impact on the area.

> [...] It's real work - in this area, on average, they collect around thirty bags of waste a day, sometimes even more. If you do the math, and each bag weighs between eight to ten kilos, you get a sense of the volume of waste they manage to gather and deliver to the environmental services every single working day. [...] The team also pays attention to requests from local residents - like when a mother stops one of them and says: 'That playground over there has been completely trashed.' So the team goes and takes care of cleaning it up.
>
> [Interview with C.d.B. – 26/02/2024, my translation]

The project was originally conceived by a national association called *Extrapulita*, which aimed to combine public space cleaning efforts with the involvement of socially vulnerable individuals. The teams are made up of participants from a range of different programs: there were recipients of the *Reddito di Cittadinanza* (Universal Income) - until the measure was discontinued[65] - who were required by law to complete a number of hours of community service in order to maintain the subsidy. There were also people with Work Grants for Socially Useful Jobs, as well as volunteers from migrant reception centers. Some are employed by the cooperative and are tasked with coordinating the teams, while others participate through internships or voluntary service.

> A – Therefore, beyond being a project aimed at the work reintegration of people facing vulnerabilities, "Custodire il bello" has also become one of the tools through which labor policies supporting income can be implemented. For example, through PUCs (Collective Utility Projects), which are funded by municipal administrations that are required to activate them following the distribution of the Reddito di Cittadinanza, as a way for recipients to give back to the community. And for people who have long been excluded from the workforce, it represents a moment of reactivation after extended periods of inactivity: the idea of having to respect a schedule and being accountable to someone for their time, physical condition, and health is something that gradually reconnects them to the basic minimum conditions needed to face a possible work hour, or even simply a job interview
>
> [Interview with C.d.B. – 26/02/2024, my translation]

In Corvetto, the team consists of five people: one coordinator and four others who are either on work grants, internships, or volunteering. Less than a month earlier, on January 31, 2024, when the Reddito di Cittadinanza was suspended by the Meloni government, the Custodi del Bello in Corvetto were

[65] The Reddito di Cittadinanza was a welfare subsidy in place from January 2019 until January 2024. One of the first decisions made by the newly elected Meloni government was to suspend the measure, replacing it with more targeted forms of support, such as the Inclusion Allowance (*Assegno di Inclusione*) and the Support for Training and Employment (*Supporto per la Formazione e il Lavoro*).

able to work continuously. Now, however, their shifts in this neighborhood are only every other day. The team explains in more detail the work they do in the Corvetto district:

> A – We're here in the areas where there's dirt. In fact, when the team of Reddito di Cittadinanza recipients was still active, we were present in Corvetto every day except Saturdays. Now that we're only here three days a week, you can definitely see the difference...[...] When we were present every day, we had decided to cover the Mazzini neighborhood. We never officially included it in our zones, but since the recipients' team was there too, it was pointless to clean certain streets every day that didn't really need it. Sometimes we focused on Corso Lodi, which from Brenta to Corvetto is a real mess - and we still do - or on Via Mompiani, when there's no market, which is a disaster. It's true, having more teams allows us to always intervene in crucial areas, and since we've also slightly expanded the coverage area, many times people ask us to stop by. I tell them, "Ma'am, I'll come by tomorrow.
>
> C – I've been here in Corvetto for about a year now, and as a job… well, at the beginning, you know, it's mostly cleaning up, but in the end, it also makes sense because it becomes more of a relationship with people. Especially since we're very present in Corvetto, many people know us - from shopkeepers offering us coffee, giving us fruit, focaccia, or water in the summer.
>
> B – Every time people see us, they ask if we want a coffee or an aperitif, and we say, "No, thanks, that's already the fifth one," but then you end up drinking it anyway because otherwise, they'd get offended. By the evening, you're almost… The other day, I went to buy a bottle of water: the shopkeeper wouldn't take the money and even gave me four bananas.
>
> C – There was a neighborhood committee that took photos of us here in Corvetto every day; they said they were doing a review, but I don't know if they ever did it.
>
> A – Yes, you ended up in a Municipal 4 newsletter.
>
> [Interview with C.d.B. – 26/02/2024, my translation]

In fact, with their fluorescent vests and that distinctive writing, it's hard not to notice them passing through Corvetto. Their relationship with the neighborhood seems very good, and this is confirmed by their stories:

> C – There's this nice relationship with the older ladies; by now, they know us well. We've been coming here for a year, everyone knows us - both at the bar and around the neighborhood. We've almost become like guardians...

A – These might seem like trivial things, but for this reason Corvetto has become the most representative neighborhood. I'm telling you, the presence of people like this is very discreet because they don't do much, but for example: their nighttime patrols, when school isn't in session, drive away drug dealing. The dealers move away only to come back once the team has passed. But you know, when you see these people all in their colorful vests, it becomes an official, formal presence - call it whatever you want, that is, codified.

C – People greet you, they thank you for all these things. Then you might also find some people who avoid you, not to say they're a nuisance… that hasn't happened, but you do get a few sideways glances now and then…

B – Let me tell you this: there's a playground for kids right in front of the school on Via Ravenna, just next door, and in the mornings when I came to work - I'm someone who always arrived an hour early - the first thing I did was go check how the playground was, what condition it was in, because the moms would come early and send their kids to play. So I used to get there before them; I kept doing this for a while, and they understood I was coming to see how the playground was holding up. If there was a bottle, I'd take it away right away, if it was dirty. The first thing I did every day was stop by there. And the moms noticed what I was doing, and that gave me satisfaction because they'd say things like: "Good job!" Those little things matter to you. It's like getting a tip. Exactly the same.

[Interview with C.d.B. – 26/02/2024, my translation]

While their presence in the Corvetto neighborhood was genuinely appreciated, there was one aspect of the project that made me uncomfortable. In the book *Disciplining the Poor* (Soss, Fording, and Schram, 2022), the authors address the governance of poverty in the United States and the shift toward an increasingly neoliberal and paternalistic welfare system. They analyze forty years of public policies aimed at managing and socially controlling the poor - such as social assistance services and poverty benefits - and demonstrate how today the State and institutions distinguish, through specific regulations, between the "deserving" and "undeserving" poor when it comes to aid. The authors draw on the ideas of Michel Foucault, who spoke of a shift from a punitive society to a disciplinary society: poverty was no longer just an economic problem, but also a moral and social one, and for this reason, it needed to be corrected. From this perspective, welfare programs have been reformulated by imposing rules on beneficiaries related to behavioral expectations, monitored through incentives or sanctions in cases of non-compliance. Various types of welfare benefits, such as food aid or housing assistance, have thus been made conditional on good behavior. The text reviews some of the ways the State currently controls the behavior of the poor, for example through mandatory work, strict schedules, and moral rules. According to the authors, some of these measures aim to change habits

deemed deviant and make the poor ‘useful’ to society, often forcing them into programs where they must ‘give back’ what they receive through assistance. While listening to the words of those working on the Custodi del Bello project, such rigidity is not explicitly evident, yet some forms of discipline remain implicit in certain intentions:

> A -This activity is very simple because it involves eight hours a week, so basically one day of work, or in some cases, participants can choose to do two half-days. This is to accommodate people’s needs or to avoid overburdening those involved physically [...] I want to add a personal note: the project has been very effective in uncovering cases where the Reddito di Cittadinanza was received irregularly, because we would get reports from social workers; then I would call and say, ‘Hello, you have been selected to participate in the PUC program.’ And their response was: ‘No, I can’t, I’m not able to.’ At the first refusal, the Reddito di Cittadinanza was suspended for one month; at the second refusal, the suspension lasted three months; the third refusal meant the complete termination of income benefits. So, it was already a form of control. And it worked because many of the people who chose not to participate were those who perhaps had undeclared jobs or other commitments and definitely did not rely solely on the Reddito di Cittadinanza.
>
> [Interview with C.d.B. – 26/02/2024, my translation]

The debate in the sociology of inequalities and the governance of poverty argues that these actions often do not truly combat poverty. Instead of addressing the structural causes, they tend to blame the poor and, rather than promoting emancipation, they reinforce social control and the infantilization of those receiving assistance. Through the daily act of removing, collecting, and cleaning, the worker’s body takes on a dual role: on one hand, reintegrating into the social fabric; on the other, internalizing a logic of repayment and merit, which ultimately overlays the regeneration of space with the moral regeneration of the individual.

> C – Feeling useful, feeling part of society, and as mentioned, also the pride of earning the Reddito di Cittadinanza - even if it’s a small amount. Before, I stayed at home and didn’t have much money; now I receive the money because I’m part of a project, and however little, I earn it... Because many times we were labeled as freeloaders, money-eaters living off others. The system doesn’t really know what’s truly going on.
>
> [Interview with C.d.B. – 26/02/2024, my translation]

Nevertheless, it’s important to highlight how projects like the Custodi del Bello often represent not only work opportunities but also essential spaces for building relationships. In fact, C. shared his story with me:

> C- My name is C., and I used to work as a gardener and florist. I had a home with my sick mother, who later passed away, and everything else. When the pandemic started, they gave me public housing in Buccinasco, outside Milan, and the boss where I worked downtown as a florist closed down. I spent quite a long time at home, in the public housing in Buccinasco, and I'll tell you something… I really hit rock bottom. There was no friendship there; everyone just minded their own business, and I was used to things being different. Luckily, one day the social worker from INPS called me and put me in touch with the social worker from the cooperative. I went to talk with them, we introduced ourselves, got to know each other. And they suggested I do some volunteer work. I said yes. I was paid through the Reddito di Cittadinanza. The satisfaction… Apart from finding a family - I was reborn with my colleagues and with them, who still support and help me today. The real satisfaction was that people on the street would stop you and compliment you. Really. There was an elderly lady who had a bar behind via 500. If you passed by and didn't come in for a coffee, she would get upset. I was reborn - truly reborn.
>
> [Interview with C.d.B. – 26/02/2024, my translation]

On one hand, projects like Custodi del Bello generate meaningful relationships and opportunities for personal reactivation; on the other hand, they reveal how the management of ugliness and poverty tend to be associated, even if only symbolically. Bad objects and bad subjects are thus controlled through norms, rules, and prohibitions aimed at improvement.

The social function of the project has definitely been recognized and appreciated, as evidenced by the resonance Custodi del Bello has gained both within the city and nationally. However, its aesthetic dimension has not been overlooked either. In fact, for a few years now, the project is no longer under public sponsorship, and new funding actors with very different interests have become involved.

> A - Since 2022, the Municipality has stopped funding the project, but it has been carried forward and expanded through private sponsors. Currently, there are seven teams operating in the city. Since 2021, Redo SGR, a real estate company that has developed several projects in this neighborhood, has funded two teams for two years; now their sponsorship is ending. If not them specifically, there is also BPM (Banca Popolare di Milano). Additionally, other real estate companies like Dils and Real Step sponsor the teams, and there are others who have recently shown interest.
>
> [Interview with C.d.B. – 26/02/2024, my translation]

For these new sponsors, 'Custodire il Bello' in Corvetto seems to carry meanings beyond just labor reintegration - it also serves to ensure the maintenance of the neighborhood's aesthetic value.

6.5 Taste: Ingredients for an Indirect Displacement: The Case of the Municipal Market

Pierre Bourdieu, in his seminal work *Distinction* (Bourdieu, 2007), explored the role of social conditions in shaping and distinguishing tastes. According to the sociologist, food, aesthetic, and cultural preferences are not simply individual or biological matters but social products tied to class, gender, age, ethnicity, culture, and historical context. By "taste," Bourdieu did not mean only the sense related to food and palate, but rather the broader range of aesthetic choices based on socially conditioned judgments about what is beautiful or ugly, refined or vulgar, interesting or banal. The sociology of taste has therefore investigated how, for example, certain styles linked to fashion can reflect a visible form of cultural capital, or how a preference for contemporary or classical art represents social distinctions, or how specific music genres are associated with particular social groups. Its opposite, disgust, also plays an important role in the complex relationship between bodies and objects. Starting from the etymology of the term “bad taste,” the objects that the body perceives and/or judges as disgusting are those “bad” objects we fear incorporating due to the risk of contamination (cf. supra). The sociology of taste has therefore investigated how, for example, certain styles linked to fashion can reflect a visible form of cultural capital, or how a preference for contemporary or classical art represents social distinctions, or how specific music genres are associated with particular social groups. Its opposite, disgust, also plays an important role in the complex relationship between bodies and objects. Starting from the etymology of the term “bad taste,” the objects that the body perceives and/or judges as disgusting are those “bad” objects we fear incorporating due to the risk of contamination (cf. supra): ‘it will be apparent that disgust is deeply ambivalent, involving desire for, or an attraction towards, the very objects that are felt to be repellent’ (Ahmed, 2014, p. 84). Studying taste and disgust therefore means understanding dynamics of power, exclusion, and belonging.

Expressions like “savoring a city,” spending a “quick weekend getaway,” or having “a taste of a neighborhood” are now common and mostly linked to tourism. Can an urban space have a taste? What are the processes through which a neighborhood comes to distinguish its own identity? And finally, what role do taste and its opposite, disgust, play in Corvetto?



Figura 31 - Shutters down at the Corvetto Municipal Market – 2/21/2024 – photo by the author.

Since the 1930s, Corvetto has had a Municipal Market. Built as a service alongside the popular Mazzini district, it is one of the places most historically connected to food in the neighborhood. At the moment I write this, however, it is closed. The market is a low structure, similar to other covered municipal markets in Milan, occupying the center of Piazzale Ferrara. Its walls have recently been repainted with an artistic project, featuring colorful rainbows and various illustrations of fruit. Yet, alongside these images are graffiti such as: "*If you want to valorize the neighborhood, you have to kick out many poor people*," "*Redevelopment = war on the poor*," and "*Stop evictions*" (my translation). At the back, the large sign from the 1930s has long been missing an 'M'; now it reads simply: "ercato comunale," which seems to aptly summarize the fate of this place:

> **Field notes –**
>
> **Monday, February 13, 2024**
>
> It's a mild sunny day. I decide to walk through the neighborhood streets looking for a bench with a good view in one of the three squares of the district. My plan is to observe the interactions of an ordinary afternoon. I start from Piazza Ferrara, where I thought the Municipal Market would be open and the offices of the regeneration project Made in Corvetto active: the door is closed, the shutters tell me the building won't open anytime soon. I do a quick online search: the project ended last December 22nd and the help desk inside the market has been closed. Everything else seems to be gradually shutting down. I wonder what will happen to this empty building in such a central location, with such high investment potential.

One late afternoon in February, I decide to go inside and ask for information. The interior looks desolate: the long cross-shaped corridor is empty, and only two stalls in the entire market appear to be open. These are the last two merchants remaining after the gradual closure of all the other shops. The first is a butcher's stall that opened in the 2000s, while the second is a historic rotisserie and bakery that has been part of the Municipal Market since the 1970s. I approach their counters and ask them to tell me the history of the market and why it is in this condition.

> G - Look, it all started a long time ago, back in 2007, when we asked the Municipality to update this building to more modern standards - it was quite old, so things like air conditioning and so on. The Municipality said no because they had plans to create a new building, the one you see right across the street [the Polytechnic student residence]. Initially, it was only supposed to be a ground floor. The new municipal market was meant to be in that open space right now. [...] However, to support all the extra floors they added, they had to put columns everywhere. This made it impossible for us to move there because stalls like this one would have ended up in front of a column, maybe right in front of the counter - which was totally unworkable. So, it just wasn't feasible for us.
>
> [Interview with G. and F. – February 21, 2024, my translation]

With or without the columns, G. continues, in the meantime, the construction site had stopped, and then the Municipality signed an agreement with the Politecnico, which restarted work with its student housing project. At that point, the Municipality purchased the land on Via Sile to build the new building. The Municipality then made an agreement with the buyer to reduce the urban development fees on the condition that part of the economic benefit would be reinvested in the Corvetto neighborhood.

> G - The renovation of this building was part of a deal the Municipality made with the sellers of the new property on Via Sile, where they relocated. According to the law governing urban development fees related to the sale of that land, a portion of the money must be reinvested in the neighborhood. They included the renovation of this small market in that agreement, but in the end, the funds simply weren't there. And that was the end for us because then they told us they were closing. So those who were left - in the end, there were about ten of us - just left because there wasn't much left to do. They gave us an ultimatum in 2021, if I remember correctly, saying they would close in 2022. In the end, it was just the three of us left: me, her, and the fishmonger.
>
> [Interview with G. and F. – February 21, 2024, my translation]

Thus, between the wait for the redevelopment works and the announcement of the closure, fifteen years of promises and delays had passed. Starting from 2021, the municipality finally stopped

renewing licenses, and one by one the merchants awaited their deadlines to move elsewhere, leaving those who remained to shoulder the ever-increasing costs of an increasingly empty market.

> G - We stayed, but we've been waiting to be evicted for two years now. Everyone else left all at once. Practically all of them changed their businesses within six months. Because businesses like ours are local and based on proximity, opening somewhere else right now is problematic. The issue with these kinds of facilities is that they are very expensive, plus you have high rent costs - and rents in Milan are incredibly high.
>
> [...] So, look - the last call for bids was in 2019. We left it hanging on the wall as a reminder to show you the kind of mindset the Municipality has. Just look at the free stalls: in 2019 there were only five left, and there were still 17 of us inside. That call went unanswered because I'm asking you to pay this amount annually, which is low, but only for one year. Would you invest that amount for just one year? For a business? Would you ever do that?
>
> [...] For two and a half years, they've been renewing our licenses every three months. Behind these situations are our families, and at my age, retirement isn't really an option. We have no alternatives here. Moving outside of Milan is tough, and honestly, I just don't feel like it anymore... so we'll see, something will happen, though.
>
> [Interview with G. and F. – February 21, 2024, my translation]

I ask G. and F. if, since the student dormitory opened the previous September, they have noticed any changes:

> F - So, some people do come, I have to be honest, but they're all young kids who live at the Politecnico in Bovisa; basically, they only come here to sleep. The ones who come do buy things like a chicken breast slice or some ham. But they haven't really brought in much. Even when the Municipality arrived, they didn't really do anything, also because most of these students work remotely, so they don't bring much of anything. We're lucky to still have our regular customers - people who, over the years, she's known for twenty years, I've known for a lifetime - they grew up here, they're like family. They call me by name, call me on my cell phone, and I bring their orders to their homes.
>
> [Interview with G. and F. – February 21, 2024, my translation]

On February 14, 2020, the project *Made in Corvetto* opened inside the premises of the Municipal Market. It was the first of the Community Points of LaCittàintorno, a major urban regeneration program funded with over 10 million euros by Fondazione Cariplo, aimed at the suburbs and neighborhoods "around the city." According to the project, the Community Points were meant to be

gathering places offering social and cultural initiatives and activities for local residents, while also revitalizing the spaces that housed them. Inside the Corvetto Market, a Kitchen Space and a Community Bike Workshop were opened. However, as we know, just two weeks later, Made in Corvetto's activities, like those across much of Italy, were forced to halt due to restrictions following the spread of the Covid-19 epidemic. The Community Point gradually resumed its initiatives as the national health emergency receded, until it finally ceased all activities in December 2022.

> Made in Corvetto didn't work for many reasons. You could say they were unlucky because right after they opened, Covid broke out. They mainly focused on a community kitchen - they opened around mid-February and by the 28th, everything was already shut down. They stayed here for two or three years because they had funding from Fondazione Cariplo, but after that, nothing more happened. It was nice to have them here because they organized quite a few activities, or at least we helped each other out by sharing expenses. But even so, this area is tough - you just can't make it work, you know? The idea was to create a popular kitchen for the neighborhood, but in the end, they never really managed to make it happen.
>
> [Interview with G. and F. – February 21, 2024, my translation]

It is now December 2022, three years since the announcement that Milan-Cortina would host the 2026 Winter Olympics, and just a few months before the construction of the Olympic village at the Scalo di Porta Romana begins. In the Corvetto neighborhood, the urban regeneration program funded by Fondazione Cariplo, which lasted over three years, has just concluded. Although the project progressed unevenly over the years, adapting as best it could to lockdowns and reopenings, it brought funding, attention, and temporary interest to Corvetto. New projects had just arrived or were about to start, and the neighborhood's valorization was increasing, even as the Municipal Market continued to empty out.

In urban studies, the term "foodification" typically refers to the growing centrality of food in urban transformation. In their book *Foodification: Come il cibo si è mangiato le città*, authors Perrucca and Tex (2022) explore what happens when a street, a square, or a neighborhood fills up with bistros but loses its residents, and what occurs when a city's economy focuses primarily on the gastronomic sector. Foodification is often part of gentrification and touristification processes, as the symbolic and economic value of food is leveraged to attract new consumers and investors. This process has a strong aesthetic component: on one hand, through the revitalization of markets or squares and the opening of new venues, it participates in a restyling of the neighborhood, often very homogenized in line with other gentrified districts. On the other hand, food - photographed and shared on social networks - helps to build and spread the new image of the neighborhood (Perrucca and Tex, 2022).

G - Nothing is known about the project. At least, they don't tell us anything. Their idea is to turn it into something like what they have at the central station. Basically, we're already excluded, so here it becomes a supermarket, like... there's a chef there, then there's Bastianich from MasterChef, that guy who opened his hamburger place. But there, it's food service with ready-made meals, not retail sales of products anymore. It's not bad, but it has nothing to do with the neighborhood's needs. You don't go to that market to do your groceries because you get ripped off... Maybe if you want to put it further along, near Prada, which has become a wealthy area, maybe... but here, with these public housing blocks, I just don't see it working.

[Interview with G. and F. – February 21, 2024, my translation]

Starting from some older and well-known examples, such as the Boqueria market in Barcelona, which later became a model to replicate, covered markets have in fact become the places most affected by foodification. Traditionally popular trading squares and sites of everyday social interaction, through redevelopment and renovation interventions, they are transformed into spaces for the consumption of refined food aimed at a wealthier clientele, replacing food stalls and retail sales with restaurants, bistros, and street food, thus changing the identity and social function of these places. As G. points out in the interview, just as it had already happened at the Isola and Darsena Covered Markets, the project in Corvetto is also aimed at shifting from everyday-use gastronomy to experiential gastronomy, with markets transformed into gourmet food courts.

G - We asked to move into some shops in the area; we requested the shops right here in front, but they are all closed. These belong to Aler, the Milan Municipality's housing agency [...]. There's no way to get even one because they're all marked as assigned [...]. Those have been abandoned, I think for about ten years. This one has been like this for five or six years. That's it. Unfortunately, this is our sad story.

[...] We've tried everything, because this has been a battle started back in 2007 - it's not something new. Now it's just the end of something that has lasted a very long time. Over these 17 years, so many journalists and TV crews have come through here. Even the head of the Politecnico came by, went inside, and asked, 'What happened here?' And we explained, just like I'm telling you now.

F - After Wagner Market, Corvetto's market was one of the busiest in Milan. This place, unlucky as it is! There were so many of us, all these stalls open. And there were lines - yes, there were - and people worked a lot because, I repeat, there were many people and the culture of shopping close to home. On Saturdays, at least throughout the 1980s continuously, and even much of the mid-1990s, you couldn't get past the line from that shop to mine; there were so many people in front, you just couldn't get through. Now, what do people see when they come in? Something that

> really makes your heart sad. She and I have to hear it fifty times a day, and we live in this reality. Imagine how hard it is to work like this. First, because I can't do anything - I can't invest if I don't know whether we'll still be here tomorrow. Then maybe, you know, they'll do what they say, and in two or three years, it might be a wonderful place.
>
> [Interview with G. and F. – February 21, 2024, my translation]

While G. and F. talk to me in the fading light of late afternoon, I try to imagine that space - now half-empty - with the promised new look. I picture the square set up with minimalist wooden tables and chalkboards displaying the daily menu, shaded by the new student residence behind it and, a little further on, by the new regional government building, likely catering more to this kind of consumption than to the previous one. I imagine C., the new resident journalist, writing an enthusiastic review of the natural wines offered by the new wine shop, and perhaps some association organizing artistic performances in the internal corridors of the building. Now, the reasons behind the whole story start to become clearer to me.

On February 18, 2025, the Municipality of Milan signed an agreement with Sogemi Spa, the company that manages the General Markets, for the transfer of 15 of its 21 covered markets, totaling 18,000 square meters and a property value of 20 million euros, with the goal of redeveloping them. Today, the Covered Market of Corvetto has permanently closed, and future projects for this structure have not yet been announced.

CONCLUSION
Between monstrification and beautification

The Neighborhood of the Future



Figura 32 - Construction sites, Olympic Village - April 12, 2023 - author's photo

We have now reached the final part of this ethnographic journey. Throughout this work, we have examined the current process of the 'staging of Corvetto', focusing in particular on the dynamics of beautification in the so-called unwanted neighborhood. As we stated, Corvetto is still narrated as a 'no goes area' even though the neighborhood has changed significantlyin the last 5-6 years, moving faster starting from the beginning of the Olympic building work area. Indeed, this is connected to the production of a specific urban *desire* and its related future imaginary, both inscribed in the dynamic of what is called 'aesthetic capitalism'. In this context, the tension between beautification and monstrosity is particularly palpable, just as the contrast between visible and invisible, past and present remains ever present. As the ethnographic chapters have attempted to suggest, while the past still holds ghosts or monsters that must be reckoned with, the official narrative of Corvetto speaks almost exclusively of the future, a discourse vividly embodied by the landscape of cranes surrounding this entire urban area (see Figures 1 - 2 - 3).

The temporal relationship between the visible and the invisible, the wanted and the unwanted in Corvetto raises some question: how is the future invented, planned, renounced and researched? What

does it mean to talk about governance of the future in cities today? How is the future a condition of the present?

Future studies have long suggested the cultural implication of this concept (Jameson, 2005; Fisher, 2014; Bryant and Knight, 2019; Chakkalakal and Ren, 2022). Future is usually conceptualized through a variety of temporal and spatial logics, shaping different perspectives on what lies ahead. The future is constantly in a process of being made, relational to other temporal concepts, performative, material, and spatial, emphasizing that future thinking is a product of social situations and cultural contexts (Chakkalakal and Ren, 2022). As Silvy Chakkalakal and Julie Ren argue, tangible practices of the future can be identified that could shed light on how the notion of futurity functions as a relational category, intertwining imagination, speculation, anticipation, and various temporal dynamics to create future perspectives (Chakkalakal and Ren, 2022, p. 846). This is more evident in urban planning literature, where we can observe a big effort of urban planners and developers to manage future or take technological solution in planning it. They designed different scenarios for possible urban futures, each representing unique temporalities and possibilities, illustrating the multiplicity of potential futures that can be imagined (Chakkalakal and Ren, 2022, p. 846). Different positionalities within the future reflect the varied social positions, perspectives, and power dynamics that individuals or groups occupy in relation to envisioning and navigating the future.



Figura 33 - Construction sites, Olympic Village - 27 july 2023 - author's photo



Figura 34 - Construction sites of the Symbiosis project - 12 april 2023 - author's photo

Urban planners and designers - along with both large and small-scale developers - have clearly understood their power to shape a series of imagined futures for urban spaces. This becomes evident in the slogans lining the promotional and informational materials produced by developers around the Porta Romana rail yard and within the Symbiosis project area. (See Figure 2 and 3).

These actors construct visions of the future primarily through specific tools, namely, renderings. These are powerful instruments precisely because they shape the imaginaries and narratives of the city; they both reflect and are shaped by the desires that fuel a specific idea of urban life. In her article *Rendering Aurora: Analisi di un processo di rigenerazione urbana a Torino tra il reale e il virtuale* (Voglino, 2022), Michela Voglino identifies Computer Generated Images (CGI) as the key digital and photorealistic tools used to communicate architectural projects. These images are not mere technical visualizations, they are carefully crafted, idealized portrayals of reality: curated social worlds and virtual spaces, populated by young, happy people, natural elements, and sleek design objects. Together, they build an appealing and desirable narrative of the urban future (Voglino, 2022). Renderings use visual and atmospheric effects to convey a sense of realism, often incorporating elements from real photographic databases, like street furniture or people, to enhance their plausibility. Yet, they do not necessarily reflect what the space will become; rather, they imagine and idealize it according to market-driven logics. As Voglino argues, these virtual images are far from neutral: they actively shape urban imaginaries and help legitimize exclusionary urban policies. In her analysis, renderings are closely tied to gentrification and broader processes of urban transformation.

They serve to transform the perception of the neighborhood by presenting an exclusive, orderly, and "desirable" future. Acting as real estate marketing tools, renderings make the neighborhood marketable, attracting wealthy investors and prospective buyers (Voglino, 2022).



Figura 35 - Rendering of the Masterplan for the Olympic Village - source: https://scaloportaromana.com

As can be seen from the renderings of the new large-scale real estate developments in the Corvetto-Lodi districts - for example, in the visuals of the new Olympic Village (see Figure 4 and 5) - they depict an image of the neighborhood and its inhabitants that contrasts starkly with reality. In Corvetto's digitized future, there are no longer elderly residents or people of migrant backgrounds, no ethnic shops or food trucks, but rather young families or stylish youths enjoying their leisure time: walking dogs in newly landscaped parks, sipping drinks, or working on their laptops at outdoor tables belonging to the new cultural-consumption venues. These hegemonic imaginaries seem to follow the design of a "sense of place" based on green, purified, and gated environments. Far from being diverse, their vision relies instead on a singular and essentialized notion of the future.

Indeed, as images that precede and actively shape reality, they promote a form of urban manipulation rooted more in aesthetics and appearance than in addressing existing social issues. They serve as both visual and political justifications for redevelopment projects.



Figura 36 - Rendering of the Masterplan for the Scalo di Porta Romana project - source: https://scaloportaromana.com

There are thus forms and practices of imagining, planning, and producing exclusionary future scenarios - ways of shaping the future that become embedded in everyday life (Chakkalakal and Ren, 2022, p. 847).

Not everyone, however, has the means to imagine and desire the same things. In *The Future as a Cultural Fact*, American anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (2014) observed that the capacity to aspire - the ability to envision oneself in the future - is not equally distributed, but rather concentrated among the more affluent (Appadurai, 2014). This results in varied logics and narratives of future-making that

create distinct social positionalities, shaping how different actors engage with and influence the future.

Aspiration, intention, and desire are recurring dimensions in the design of urban regeneration, particularly in large-scale projects led by public-private partnerships, such as the redevelopment of the Scalo di Porta Romana or the upcoming transformation of Piazzale Loreto. Yet, one should not look at the changing city solely through the lens of imaginaries. All those who live in the transforming neighborhood experience these changes in concrete and everyday ways, and they each hold their own perspectives.

Often, however, residents are unaware of the projects underway. Urban planning remains a field dominated by specialists, and information is not always accessible or comprehensible enough to allow people to fully understand or distinguish the processes their neighborhood and housing model will undergo. If those who live in the areas targeted by transformation do not know what is being planned, then who are these regeneration projects truly for - and who are they envisioned *by*?

> And so, this awareness about what is changing - about the fact that something is happening here, right here - is noticeable. I've observed that there is both a growing awareness and a desire to understand, which is tied to a sense of concern.
>
> [Interview with S. and M. – 11/13/2025]

There are therefore two temporalities: the first one of urban planning, which conveys a singular and essentialised notion of future, and the other of the neighbourhood's current inhabitants, who nevertheless experience the present and the future as extremely precarious in the same moment they witness the transformation, the complete aesthetic change of Corvetto and the associated price increase already underway.

> There hasn't been any real political project or investment in public housing or affordable housing - it's been years without any plan, nothing at all. [...] And that, in fact, is the core problem: today there's a hunger for social housing, because let's not forget what's happening in Milan. Not everyone here is a manager or, excuse me, without offense, a university professor. In Milan, there are people working in logistics, there are waiters…
>
> [...] Because, I repeat, if you have a mortgage and end up paying 5,000 euros a year in housing costs, you understand how that becomes a problem. Especially since wages aren't really increasing. [...] Anyway, people do ask themselves some questions [...], there's concern, especially about the future, because the future isn't so bright - especially for families.
>
> [Interview with S. and M. – 11/13/2025]

Uncertainty, risk and vulnerability act politicizing calculations, probability and speculation, understanding a future field itself is crossed by inequalities and imbalances (Chakkalakal and Ren, 2022). Thus, the biographies and personal trajectories of those suddenly confronted with an uncertain future operate on the most intimate level of fear - like someone peering over the edge of a ridge but still unable to tell whether beyond the summit lies a valley or a sheer drop. Nevertheless, it is very clear that for many of the inhabitants of the old, unwanted Corvetto the beautification will mean - and still it is - their more or less forced eviction. Many of Corvetto's residents, both long-time and newcomers alike, have repeatedly expressed the feeling of witnessing the end of the neighborhood as it once was. And this is something that ethnography could capture well, in the direction closest to what Anna Tsing, who asks in her beautiful ethnography: how do we live in uncertainty?



Figura 37 - Barriers at the construction sites of the Scalo di Porta Romana project - 27 july 2023 -author's picture

Strategies for coping with precarity and this rhythm of transformation today seems to face the proposal of a single, hegemonic future based on a dominant urban imaginary, that is the one we found in the rendering of the new neighborhood. It can be said that this specific imagination acts as an action of futuricide, or rather a slow erasure all the other possible futures (Fisher 2014) than the greener, soustanible, smart, beautiful one showed in the rendering, that allows no alternatives.

Urban Apocalypses: the end of a neighborhood

> I've been living here for a year, and everyone feels like they're on the edge of a wave - so what are we in this whirlpool? Right now, it feels like being in this neighborhood requires a kind of ascetic endurance.
>
> [Feedback from Corvetto Observatory Meeting – 05/21/2024]

Ernesto De Martino, a well-known Italian anthropologist, in *La fine del mondo* (De Martino, 2019) employed the concept of 'cultural apocalypse' to refer to a profound crisis or collapse of cultural values and structures within a society. This crisis can manifest itself in various ways, and it describes a deep and radical crisis that threatens the very integrity of a community, that experience a sense of loss. According to the author, the crisis of symbolic structures occurs when the system of meanings that provides people with a sense of identity and belonging breaks down - this system helps orient individuals in the world and gives meaning to everyday experiences. Such a breakdown can lead to a loss of meaning that spreads profound disorientation and alienation, amplifying feelings of vulnerability and uncertainty. During the end of a cultural world - an apocalypse, so to speak - individuals and communities may feel powerless and unable to influence their own fate. De Martino viewed cultural apocalypse as a potentially universal phenomenon that can occur in any culture at any historical moment.

> G - Listen, there's concrete everywhere here. Where that building now stands, there used to be a green area. Was that really necessary? [...] There was an abandoned villa and the rest was parkland, right? And now there's another building. Over the years, Milan has changed, Milan… well, Milan is no longer… And it's getting hard right now, because it's no longer for ordinary people. Even Corvetto is becoming too expensive, the costs have become outrageous.
>
> [Interview with G. and F. – 21/02/2024]

*

> S - I'll tell you more - as we get closer to the Olympics, paradoxically, this area, this is just my personal opinion, will become increasingly isolated. Because this part will become the dump, you know, for everything that has to stay here - meaning it shouldn't cause problems.
>
> [...] They're now building where there used to be old farmhouses. When we were kids, they'd take us to see the cows, show us how milking was done. Just imagine how much has changed over the years... now they'll build housing here, including social housing, but it's that usual trick of so-called social housing where, in reality, all the apartments will be luxury units. [...] That's the picture, it's pretty grim, but unfortunately, it's the reality. And it will end dramatically.
>
> [Interview with S. and M. – 13/11/2025]

The demolitions and new constructions - often entire blocks covered by new buildings - along with evictions and forced removals that are disrupting the social fabric of this stigmatized neighborhood, have not gone unnoticed. As shown in the ethnography, while these changes are viewed, despite everything, somewhat positively by those who anticipate benefiting from the investments - whether small-scale, as in the case of some new residents, or large-scale, such as multiproperty owners or real estate investors - there is, on the other hand, a growing concern, if not an outright 'urban malaise,' among a significant portion of the community.

Urban anthropologist Stefano Portelli explored this concept in his article *The Social Impact of Urban Renewal* (Portelli, 2014), analyzing the sense of unease felt by residents in the peripheral Bon Pastor neighborhood of Barcelona, where a regeneration project had advanced demolition of the old housing, creating a state of permanent emergency among locals. Drawing on the work of colleague Marc Dalmau, Portelli refers to the 'síndrome de afectación' to describe the alienation and psychological breakdown experienced by many residents on the verge of relocating to the new buildings (Portelli, 2014, p. 212). Appealing to the concept of a syndrome can help capture the radical nature of a malaise connected to the feeling of loss or the awareness of witnessing the end of a world whose 'familiarity'. deeply meaningful and symbolic for its inhabitants, is disrupted by the impact of transformation. As in Corvetto, the author notes that interviews revealed a sense of a "world's end," a cultural apocalypse:

> They often used the image of death to refer to the transformation of their neighborhood, for example playing with the Spanish expression *ir al otro barrio* - literally "to go to the other neighborhood," meaning to go to the cemetery - or contrasting the life *a ras de suelo* (at ground level) in the houses with the future life *entre las nubes* (among the clouds), from the heights of the new buildings (Portelli, 2014, p. 220 my translation).

'I remember a sunset, driving along some lonely Calabrian road', recounts De Martino in *La fine del mondo* (2019, p. 479, my translation). Fearing they had lost their way, the anthropologist and his team encounter an old shepherd and ask him to get into the car to help guide them for a while along the correct route. Initially distrustful, the shepherd gradually transforms his unease into genuine anguish during the journey: 'from the window he kept watching, he lost sight of the bell tower of Marcellinara, the landmark of his extremely limited domestic space' (2019 p. 481, my translation). Indeed, the shepherd had intertwined his identity with a world ordered by familiar symbols - or, to use De Martino's terminology, the historically and locally constructed bond between 'cultural homelands' and 'presence'. Alongside the concept of cultural apocalypse, De Martino also addressed disorientation and territorial anguish, a state of alienation or, more broadly, a disturbing sense, that

today can affect those who experience, for example, the unstable nature of home or broader living conditions.

As had already happened in Isola, the process of constructing a new identity for the Corvetto neighborhood operates within an atmosphere of uncertainty, which in turn amplifies the very "sense of loss of identity" that these projects were meant to mitigate (Caselli and Ferreri, 2013, p. 355). The unease felt by residents of these neighborhoods - who remain in a state of waiting for an impending catastrophe - can sometimes lead to chronic anxiety or crisis, fueled by the perception that this process is seemingly unstoppable. However, as will be explored in greater detail in the next paragraph, practices, proposals, and solutions aimed at curbing the most negative outcomes of the urban transformation analyzed in this ethnography have been imagined and suggested both by the most active residents and by critical scholarly literature (Caselli and Ferreri, 2013; Semi, 2015, 2023; Annunziata and Lees, 2020; Manzo, 2023).

The identity of the Corvetto neighborhood is therefore caught in the midst of a profound process of symbolic manipulation and rewriting, and its current state of transition and precariousness is clearly reflected in the events that have unfolded over the years in the neighborhood and in the stories I have attempted to recount. A concrete foretaste of this can already be seen in the large-scale privatization operations involving the former Enpam buildings on Via Sulmona, as well as in the announcement of the forthcoming 'redevelopment' of the minimal housing on Via Barzoni, both of which have already involved or threaten collective evictions. We could say, then, that there exists a kind of necropolitics, to use the term coined by philosopher Achille Mbembe, produced by urban transformation and tied to the management of the old neighborhood's end in anticipation of the new neighborhood of the future. This is a political form that legitimizes the power to decide who can stay and who must leave the neighborhood. Rowland Atkinson (2020) described with the term *necrotecture* the desertificazione delle città, the "dead residential space produced by the invisible hand of the market" (2020: 97). Indeed, Milano, the Italian "città vetrina", or the city of 'the staging of everything' (Böhme 2017) has been particularly interesting in observing the aesthetic mechanism toward which urban dominant imaginaries are shaped, built by renderings and a broader symbolic asset related to regeneration. The scholar Lauren Berlant spoke of "cruel optimism" to refer to the relation which exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing (Berlant, 2011). Despite the growing evidence that liberal-capitalist societies can no longer offer genuine opportunities to build meaningful life paths, many people continue to hold on to its ideals. These aspirations persist even in the face of the progressive dismantling of the material and symbolic conditions that once made them plausible. In fact, starting from this thesis, I argue that the ways in which the neoliberal invests in the creation of seductive and attractive spaces (Lindner, Sandoval 2021) could be read as acts of

futuricides, or urbanicides**,** that cut off any idea of an alternative urban future that does not fit into that dominant, hegemonic and standardized image to be financialized.

In *The Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin extensively explores the concept of *remembrance* (Pinotti, 2018, p. 111). Starting from the neologism *immemorare*, Benjamin gives this concept a strategic role in shaping a new understanding of history (Pinotti, 2018, p. 111). According to the philosopher, it is an involuntary act concerning the re-emergence of something from a prior state of oblivion. In this sense, it involves memory capturing that element of the future which has been secretly repressed because it cannot be realized in the present:

> What Benjamin calls the "Copernican and dialectical turn of remembrance" (*The Arcades Project*, Paris; OC IX, 432) consists in overturning the historicist view that the past is a fixed point (ibid.) toward which the present should move closer. On the contrary, the past is seen as something to be mobilized in relation to the present, becoming "the sudden eruption of awakened consciousness (Pinotti, 2018, p. 112, my translation).

Indeed, ghost of the past are still hunting the present and future of Corvetto, and, as we have seen throughout this thesis, the traces of these past presences thus remain *immemorated* in the public space of this neighborhood. One could argue that beautification acts as a symbolic gesture aimed at *leaving behind* the memory of a past that is no longer wanted. Often, this same memory, but connected to a future that one wishes to see, is used as a tool to *educate* the old residents. Increasingly, this future is not confined solely to the symbolic or visual dimension of images. In fact, it is also possible to *feel* the future with the body. The bodily sensations experienced and discursively constructed around the political phenomena occurring in Corvetto were investigated in the concluding chapter of this ethnography.

The rhetoric of the "revitalized neighborhood" goes hand in hand with processes of displacement and the reconfiguration of urban identity, fueling both visible and invisible conflicts. Yet, it is precisely within these spaces of tension that ethnographic inquiry can uncover the multiple possibilities embedded in the nuances of everyday life - through the bonds, survival strategies, reinterpretations, and acts of resistance enacted by those who live in the neighborhood. The closeness of ethnography thus becomes an essential tool for understanding not only how urban transformations are experienced and internalized, but also how they are debated, contested, and negotiated.

If the past and the present *disturbs*, the act of camouflages acts toward erasing the disturbing aesthetics - or memories - of the old neighborhood. This is well reflected in the shift from the feeling of "the end of a neighborhood," to the rhetoric of "the neighborhood to be saved," and finally to that of "the neighborhood reborn." Corvetto, far from being an isolated case, stands as a paradigmatic

laboratory of the new forms of aesthetic and social governance of contemporary urban peripheries. It is a place where aspirations for redemption intertwine with logics of expulsion, where walls speak yet are often silenced, and where ethnography's work can become a tool to give voice back to what is being erased.

An impossible conclusion

Milan's urban transformations - and particularly those unfolding in the Corvetto neighborhood - tell the complex and layered story of a city that has chosen to engage in the global competition through strategies of attractiveness and aesthetic regeneration. This thesis has highlighted, first and foremost, the evident geographical shift in the Municipality of Milan's interests: with the transformation of the northern area now largely complete, recent initiatives have focused on the southeastern quadrant. This area presented a significant number of large, publicly owned urban voids, such as the Porta Romana and Rogoredo rail yards (owned by *Ferrovie dello Stato*), as well as the uncultivated lands behind Santa Giulia - spaces which, in terms of urban rent, have offered substantial potential for profit.

The governance of transformation has also changed considerably. The city's early master plans, the 1953 and 1972 PGRs, which guided the first major reorganizations of post-industrial Milan, relied on territorial concessions that operated through processes of conversion and demolition. By contrast, in the current *Milano 2030* Territorial Government Plan (PGT), urban regeneration has become the principal framework for intervention at the neighborhood level.

In this context, the urban peripheries have become both laboratories of experimentation and spaces of friction, where old and new inequalities intersect with practices of resistance and adaptation, stigmatizing narratives clash with grassroots counter-narratives, and the everyday life of the city continues to be contested and redefined.

One of the main conclusions of this thesis is the recognition that Milan's urban politics appears to rely increasingly on a form of governance that Asher Ghertner has described as a 'rule by aesthetics' (Ghertner, 2011). Political decisions are no longer primarily grounded in urban planning rationality, socio-demographic analysis, or spatial mapping, but are instead increasingly driven by imaginaries, shaped by aesthetic codes of order and appearance (Ghertner, 2011). This is a politics rooted in a vision of how the city *should* look. In this light, not only Corvetto, but Milan's urban governance more broadly, seems oriented ever more toward an imagined future, while leaving unresolved many of the pressing issues of the present, which are consequently displaced even further toward the urban periphery.

The case of Corvetto clearly illustrates how beautification, closely tied in this neighborhood to processes of gentrification and the financialization of the city, functions not only as an anticipation of these dynamics, but also as their direction and outcome. Far from being a neutral or merely economic process, beautification operates on multiple levels: symbolic, residential, social, and cultural.

Conversely, the focus on the opposite process of monstrification allows me to understand its specific codifications, that are the mythology and symbolic connotation, and in particular the role in constructing the 'Other' of the city as a threat. Fear and discourse on dangerousness around decay can be read as a dispositives to demonize the unruly and unsettling. In my central concern on understanding the role of beauty and monster in urban transformation, discourse on monstrosity and the perceived dangerousness in Corvetto reproduces privilege by regulating and ordering spaces and bodies, assigns differing degrees of morality and immorality (Giuliani, 2022). A close observation of the practices of aestheticization and erasure unfolding in Corvetto reveals how they often require a constant balancing act between visibility and invisibility, between symbolic valorization and material removal. The concept of camouflage has proven useful in understanding how the transformation of space occurs not only through architectural interventions, but also through symbolic and affective dispositifs that mask, neutralize, or displace what is perceived as a threat.

The practices analyzed, from the tidying of flowerbeds to the removal of graffiti, from evictions to neighborhood storytelling in tours, reveal an operation of aesthetic and moral selection of urban space. This process constructs new orders and hierarchies, legitimizing certain presences while excluding others. Aesthetic norms, in fact, generate hierarchies not only of appreciation and valorization but also of disdain and disqualification. In the United States, the term 'blockbusting' refers to the practice of selective residential degradation, widespread after World War II, which involved pioneering racial minorities into middle-class areas to lower property values, depress the neighborhood, and subsequently rebuild it to capture the rent gap (Semi, 2015, p. 159). In its Italian version, this practice takes the form of a selective policy of under-regulation combined with the concentrated placement of so-called 'problematic' populations. Drug dealers and open drug-use scenes were at times deliberately allowed to operate in certain urban areas, including Corvetto, in order to justify both the arrival of regeneration and privatization projects by real estate investors, which encouraged and accelerated the transformation, and more repressive interventions aimed at the militarization of public space.

Within this dialectic lie the tensions between old and new residents, between practices of care and strategies of control, between the desire for beauty and the production of stigma. This ethnography has sought to analyze the extent to which decision-making power is distributed when it comes to the aesthetic apparatus: what kind of agency does a new tenant have in these processes, compared to a

homeowner, or a resident of public housing in Corvetto? How much influence is held by third-sector associations, and how is power divided between public and private actors? These questions raise broader concerns about the role of politics, and whether political institutions are truly taking responsibility for managing these regulatory mechanisms. In light of this research, we might ask whether studying beautification processes can reveal how such efforts conceal the failure of urban policies. In the city's southeastern quadrant, the absence of clear regulatory frameworks around what is considered 'ugly' or 'beautiful' has effectively delegated decision-making power to the new dominant players in real estate development.

The relationship between today's Corvetto and the city of Milan unfolds through deep contradictions: on one side, the selective enthusiasm of new residents who view the neighborhood as an aesthetic, cultural, and real estate investment; on the other, the daily expulsion of subjectivities and practices that do not fit within the desired framework of the showcase city. Episodes of artistic regeneration, securitarian control measures, evictions, and infrastructural transformations in preparation for the 2026 Winter Olympics reveal a neighborhood on the edge, a space where a crucial political struggle is unfolding over the very meaning of urban citizenship. The ethnographic chapters have shown how the strategic use of street art, dominant narratives about safety, the rhetoric of decorum, and speculative dynamics around housing assets all contribute to a symbolic reconfiguration of the neighborhood that has little to do with inclusion, and much to do with selection, normalization, and exclusion. Symbolic production and public discourse, as evidenced by the voices of new residents or what I have referred to as the 'politics of complaint' - often institutionalized within municipal spaces - function as powerful tools in legitimizing inequality. At the same time, however, the voices that rise in opposition, from self-managed murals to the protests for Ramy, from housing rights movements to counter-narratives rooted in lived experience, remind us that urban space remains a contested and open terrain, where conflicting visions of the city, of justice, and of the future continue to confront one another.

If gentrification is looming over the neighborhood, it is first and foremost necessary to critically address this process. This requires a broader and deeper understanding of what is happening in Corvetto, perhaps the primary objective I hope this ethnography has achieved, while also offering a political proposal. The voices of those resisting or opposing these processes in Corvetto (see section 6.5) are very clear on this point: public investments are needed for the maintenance and revitalization of public housing; social services and infrastructure such as schools and public spaces must be improved; mechanisms to control and limit the power of the financialized real estate market are essential; the excessive promotion of beautification initiatives, often publicly funded, that inadvertently fuel harmful attention and speculative interest in the neighborhood should be avoided;

and above all, the right of existing residents to remain in the neighborhood must be protected, along with the diverse sensitivities that make up urban space.

The aesthetic mechanism, therefore, reveals much about how the city is produced and the processes at play. Observing its functioning, in light of this thesis, offers a way to understand and discuss the city itself.

Traversing the urban landscape of Corvetto with all our senses alert has revealed how the everyday aesthetics of this neighborhood are perceived, utilized, rejected, and manipulated. We followed the voices, contradictions, and devices engaging sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch to offer a more layered picture of the processes of beautification and regeneration, one that goes beyond the merely visual dimension. The neighborhood thus emerges as a tense sensory field, where a battle is fought not only through perceptions but where the urban landscape becomes the product of a struggle that is political, symbolic, and deeply embodied. Shifting our gaze in all directions engaged by the various senses involved in the ethnography proves effective in capturing the pervasive materiality of the transformation processes and the aesthetic devices that accompany them. Disturbing sounds, unpleasant odors, out-of-place tastes, objects of decay and objects of décor, these are sensitive elements manipulated through aesthetic and governance practices, with the aim of producing a selective perception of urban space that both results from and generates the division between what is desired and what is rejected in this neighborhood, between the “good” and the “bad” citizens (Pitch, 2013; Bukowski, 2019). At the same time, however, the senses also carry memories, emotions, affective connections, and micro-resistances: the voices of the inhabitants, the smells of the streets, the bodies that inhabit and touch the space, all tell a city that exceeds its official narrative. Conducting sensory ethnography in this context means not only listening, smelling, or touching, but adopting a critical stance capable of questioning what is made visible and what is actively obscured - and ultimately, who is allowed to legitimately inhabit the changing city.

Another key conclusion that can be drawn from this ethnography, perhaps one of the most significant, is the recognition of the essential role and responsibility of the public city in its function as a safeguard and defender of the right to housing. In Corvetto, the dynamics of privatization, the rapid increase in real estate values, and the processes of displacement, gentrification, or class replacement, at least for the time being, do not seem to affect the Mazzini area, the portion of public housing that has persisted since the late 1920s. While the rest of the neighborhood and the city transform, the presence of the Mazzini block, right in the heart of Corvetto, still ensures that an entire segment of the population can remain. The processes of erosion affecting public housing in Milan, as in most Western cities, must therefore be viewed from this perspective, rather than, as has often been argued in this city, as

the only solution for managing an otherwise vacant property stock. In the strategic vision of a more inclusive city, priority should be given to policies that support and expand the public city.

Yet in Corvetto, the main symbols of transformation today seem to be bulldozers and cranes, emblematic signs of a particular way of producing urban space. These are closely linked to the vision of the city as a 'growth machine'. This theory was developed by Harvey Molotch and John Logan in their influential book *Urban Fortunes: The Political Economy of Place* (Logan and Molotch, 2007). According to the authors, to understand the dynamics of urban power formation, it is necessary to identify the processes through which political actors, citizens, and capital movements jointly contribute to assigning value to the territory, triggering new dynamics of intra-urban competition based precisely on the extraction of value from urban territory itself. The contemporary cosmetic approach reserved for urban space is thus embedded in this economic dynamic: the city must first and foremost be beautiful in order to generate profit.

This thesis has therefore sought to provide a critical genealogy of the category of beautification, breaking it down into its multiple semantic layers and the power devices that traverse it. Far from being a mere embellishment of urban space, beautification emerges as a true instrument of governance, acting upon the visible and the invisible, the desirable and the repressed, actively participating in the production of atmospheres, imaginaries, and normative aesthetic regimes. It has been shown how the concept of beauty cannot be understood outside the power relations that produce and regulate it. Beautification is thus rooted within the contemporary aesthetic economy, where appearing, displaying, and seducing become central both in real estate valorization and in public urban regeneration policies. In this context, spectacular urbanism, city branding, the concealment of social contradictions, as well as the industry of seduction and pervasive aesthetic labor, are all expressions of an aesthetic capitalism that transforms cities into stages to be sold, visited, and consumed. Beautification, understood as the aestheticization of public space, does not only concern the appearance or the practices of beautifying the city; it must also be seen as a social and political device, a critical lens to question who can be seen, what can be shown, and at what cost. Within this logic, what is 'unwanted', such as poverty, spaces inhabited by marginalized bodies, signs of social conflict, and non-normative forms of dwelling, is physically eliminated through forms of control and regulation of bodies and spaces, or through actual evictions and removals; alternatively, it is symbolically domesticated through selective narratives and representational devices that impose a new image on the neighborhood. Conversely, what is 'wanted to be seen' is what reassures and aligns with the acceptable aesthetics of institutional street art, clean public spaces, well-kept flowerbeds, and Instagrammable cultural venues.

In conclusion, as Lindner and Sandoval have observed, we can talk about a normative aesthetic of the urban beauty, where "[…] aesthetics increasingly function as a battleground where these urban spatial power struggles are played out through displacement, exclusion, and division" (2021 p. 9). All this process of ordering and regulating bodies and spaces by beautification would lead to an overview of some principal functions of aesthetics: as we saw in the first chapter, it could be understood as an instrument for real estate economic value production; nevertheless, we would see how aesthetics can also protect - delimits and traces the inside and the outside of a community - discipline - mitigate and domesticate what exceeds the norm - and govern - decides who can or cannot cross the city (Waldman 2021; Herzfeld 2017; Ghertner 2010).

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Milan, June 11, 2025

Urban Regeneration. Corvetto: Redevelopment Works Begin on Streets, Squares, and the Piazzale Ferrara Market

The first works to begin, in the coming days, will be on Via Sile. These will soon be followed by interventions on the perpendicular Via Gamboloita and on the area at the intersection with Via Polesine, specifically the surface level above the underground parking lot. Later on, the redevelopment efforts will extend to Via Oglio, Via Mincio, and the small square within the block, accessible from Via Mincio. In the meantime, the market in Piazzale Ferrara will also undergo renovation and renewal.

[…] A large-scale regeneration project that will transform the face of several areas in the neighborhood - currently dominated by vehicular traffic, paved over, and lacking shaded spaces - into more comfortable and livable environments.

[...] The regeneration of Corvetto is now underway - a transformation that promises to enhance the livability of the neighborhood by improving its public spaces with more greenery, better connectivity, and expanded areas for resting, walking, and playing. These interventions in the public realm have been designed by the architecture firm Studio FZ Ferrari Milano and are being carried out as part of the planning obligations associated with the redevelopment of Via Sile 8. Since 2021, this site has housed municipal offices for five different departments (Urban Regeneration, Mobility, Public Works, Welfare and Health, Environment and Green [66]Spaces). The total value of the public works amounts to €4.753 million.

[66] From the Municipality 4 web site: https://www.comune.milano.it/-/rigenerazione-urbana.-corvetto-via-ai-lavori-di-riqualificazione-per-strade-piazze-e-il-mercato-di-piazzale-ferrara?redirect=%2Fufficio-stampa%2Fnews%2Fdettaglio-

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By the time I reach the end of this thesis, it already feels like it should be rewritten. In a neighborhood so deeply entangled with visions of the future, a definitive conclusion seems almost impossible. It falls, instead, to the present to observe, to interpret, and to make sense of what is unfolding.

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