

BiG City Life: Ethical Sieving and Professional City-Making in Milan's Conditional Housing

Giuseppe Servino

Abstract

This article analyses everyday professional mediation in Milanese social housing as a city-making practice. At the Borgo Intergenerazionale Greco (BiG), a restored farmstead organised around a collective courtyard, residents under thirty-five access below-market apartments contingent upon performing ten monthly hours of civic volunteering. Through twelve months of ethnography, the article proposes the concept of ethical sieving to describe the continuous discretionary process through which two professional figures assess and recalibrate residents' adherence to a model of moral citizenship whose criteria remain deliberately unarticulated. Unlike punctual gatekeeping or initial sorting, ethical sieving operates ceaselessly across the housing trajectory. The central finding – zero contract non-renewals for non-compliance – reveals governance operating through the ambient possibility of exclusion, sustained by unceasing professional repair work.

Questo articolo analizza il lavoro quotidiano di mediazione professionale nell'housing sociale milanese come pratica di fare-città. Nel Borgo Intergenerazionale Greco (BiG), una cascina restaurata organizzata intorno a un cortile collettivo, i residenti sotto i trentacinque anni accedono ad alloggi a canone calmierato a condizione di svolgere dieci ore mensili di volontariato civico. Attraverso dodici mesi di etnografia, l'articolo propone il concetto di *ethical sieving* – setaccio etico – per descrivere il processo discrezionale continuo attraverso cui due figure professionali valutano e ricalibrano l'aderenza dei residenti a un modello di cittadinanza morale i cui criteri restano deliberatamente inarticolati. Il dato centrale – nessun contratto non rinnovato per inadempienza – rivela una governance che opera attraverso la possibilità ambientale dell'esclusione, sostenuta dal lavoro incessante di riparazione professionale.

Keywords: city-making; ethical sieving; social housing.

Parole Chiave: fare-città; setaccio etico; housing sociale.

Introduction

«BiG is its people. People make BiG».

Laura, the social facilitator at the centre of this article, offered this formulation during one of our conversations in the farmstead's small library of the Borgo Intergenerazionale Greco (BiG) – a municipally-owned social housing project in Milan's Greco neighbourhood managed by a social cooperative under a twenty-year convention. In its apparent simplicity, her sentence condenses the analytical problem this article develops. If BiG is its people, and if people make BiG, then the question becomes: who selects which people, through what criteria, and who sustains the conditions under which these people produce the project that produces them? Laura's phrase is not a celebratory slogan. It is, I will argue, the reflexive articulation of a professional who knows that the project she manages depends entirely on the relational labour through which she and her colleagues fabricate daily its operative conditions and who knows, simultaneously, that this labour operates within contradictions it can manage but never resolve. This article examines that labour. Through intense ethnographic fieldwork at BiG, I addressed two professional figures whose daily discretionary work transforms a contractual clause – ten hours of monthly civic volunteering as a condition of housing access for residents under thirty-five – into inhabitable arrangements.

Laura exercises discretionary authority over resident selection, volunteering monitoring, and contract renewals. Marco, the territorial coordinator, cultivates the neighbourhood partnerships creating the infrastructure within which volunteering activities become concretely possible. Their work constitutes a form of city-making in Michel Agier's sense: not just the production of the city as planned object, but the doing of urban life through situated practices that, in their accumulation, generate the conditions of coexistence (Agier, 2015). The professionals I describe inhabit this process in a specific way, as their work is not marginal to the institutional narrative of Milan's social innovation but is simultaneously its product and its operative condition. BiG exists because Milan's governance has delegated housing provision to foundation-funded, third sector-managed arrangements; these arrangements exist,

in turn, only because professionals like Laura and Marco fabricate the conditions that allow institutional narratives of intergenerational solidarity, active citizenship and community empowerment to be sustained. Their labour does not appear in policy evaluations, remains largely invisible to funders, yet without it the housing device they manage, and the institutional story it serves, would collapse within weeks. The article proposes a concept to name what this work involves: ethical sieving. I develop this notion, rooted in my doctoral fieldwork at BiG, to describe the continuous discretionary process through which housing professionals assess, filter and recalibrate residents' adherence to a model of moral citizenship whose criteria remain deliberately unarticulated. Unlike the punctual gatekeeping documented in British housing governance (Flint, 2004; Koch, 2019), the initial sorting mechanisms identified in Milanese conditional housing (Costarelli, Kleinhans and Mugnano, 2020; Costarelli, 2025), or the mediated deservingness through which street-level actors determine migrants' housing access in Athens and Berlin (Glyniadaki, 2024), ethical sieving is not a mere threshold operation. It operates ceaselessly: at selection, during monitoring, at renewal and, most revealingly, in the informal courtyard conversations where Laura gauges whether residents are «taking up the project's cause». The sieve has no fixed mesh, its grain shifts with circumstances, professional intuition, funding pressures and residents' evolving trajectories. The empirical puzzle is that across BiG's entire operational history from 2021 through 2025, no residents have been denied contract renewal for non-compliance, yet the sieving never stops. The device functions through what can be termed the ambient possibility of exclusion: a disciplinary pressure generated not by sanction but by uncertainty about the sieve's grain at any given moment.

The article proceeds as follows. The first section situates BiG within Milan's housing crisis and the specific spatial form of its restored farmstead. The second develops the theoretical framework, constructing a genealogy from Muehlebach's moral neoliberalism through housing conditionality scholarship to the concept of ethical sieving as city-making practice. The third describes the ethnographic approach. The fourth presents the contractualised volunteering device as formalised in governing

documents. The fifth, which constitutes the analytical core of the article, documents the two professionals' work, showing how resident heterogeneity constitutes the terrain their labour must navigate. The concluding section positions ethical sieving comparatively and asks what professional mediation in conditional housing reveals about the contemporary urban.

A farmstead in Milan's housing question

Understanding BiG requires situating it within a specific urban scenario and a specific built form, first and foremost linked to Milan's housing landscape undergoing radical transformations since Expo 2015; the city's residual public housing stock, already among the lowest in Western Europe has been progressively eroded, while private rental markets have become structurally inaccessible. Single rooms regularly cost between six and eight hundred euros monthly, while this question has not been met with structural public responses. Instead, Milan has become the Italian laboratory for a distinctive governance arrangement: small-scale housing alternatives operating through service contracts rather than tenancy rights. These projects, termed *housing sociale*, occupy an intermediate position: governed by cooperatives and financed primarily through banking foundations – above all Fondazione Cariplo – they represent a patchwork of interventions that, however innovative, cannot substitute for the structural provision they implicitly replace (Bricocoli and Cucca, 2016; Poggio and Boreiko, 2017; Belotti and Arbaci, 2021; Peverini and Wolfgring, 2024). BiG sits squarely within this landscape, though its material origins reveal how residual such projects remain within the broader economy of urban development. The Borgo Intergenerazionale Greco opened its doors to the first tenants in late 2020 within the restored Cascina Conti, a historic Lombard farmstead under monumental protection in the Greco neighbourhood, Municipality 2. The project emerged from a protracted intervention of urban regeneration referred to as Programma Intervento Integrato (PII) Greco-Conti, whose expression of interest dates to 2006. The PII spans approximately 48,000 square metres across two territorial areas separated by a railway embankment, comprising private residential development, a public sports facility and infrastructure works including the rehabilitation of the Cascina

itself¹. BiG occupies a fraction of this larger intervention, a small pocket of social housing embedded within a predominantly private development whose new residential buildings surround the restored farmstead. The original plan underwent significant reorganisation, and the renewed farmstead took fifteen years from the initial expression of interest to yield its first residents. ABCittà Società Cooperativa Sociale operates BiG as managing entity². The farmstead's spatial configuration is analytically consequential. Cascina Conti is a set of low, two-storey buildings organised around an extensive internal courtyard – a *piazza* that constitutes a shared space in its own right, used not only by BiG's residents but by the inhabitants of the surrounding buildings and the neighbourhood more broadly.

This creates a spatial configuration in which the courtyard functions as semi-public infrastructure: BiG's residents cross it daily to reach their apartments, encounters are structurally facilitated by horizontal distribution and the building's domestic spaces open onto this central void while shared facilities, such as a small library, storage rooms, common areas, are distributed within the farmstead's body. Visibility is high, withdrawal complex. The *cascina* form produces a specific regime of proximity that both enables the intergenerational sociality the project valorises and spatialises the ethical sieving this article documents: in the courtyard, differential participation is visible to all who use it, and it is there – in informal exchanges legible to both residents and professionals – that Laura's continuous

1 The PII Greco-Conti (convention signed 27/05/2011, integrative act 24/10/2018) encompasses private residential construction, the restoration of the monumentally protected Cascina Conti, a public sports centre, and infrastructure works including railway underpass rehabilitation and green areas along the Naviglio Martesana. BiG's social housing component occupies a small portion of the overall intervention, which is predominantly private residential development. Unlike most Milanese housing sociale relying on the Integrated Funds System, BiG secures direct grants from the Municipality of Milan, Fondazione Cariplo, Fondazione Peppino Vismara, and Fondazione di Comunità Milano – a funding arrangement that underscores how peripheral intergenerational social housing remains within the broader architecture of Milanese urban regeneration.

2 BiG forms part of Fondazione Cariplo's Milano 2035 network of 22 intergenerational housing projects.

assessment operates most effectively. The project houses three categories of residents across twenty-five apartments strategically scattered in the farmstead. Fourteen accommodate young workers and students (twenty to thirty-five), who sign renewable service contracts of maximum two years, paying between €350 and €610 monthly. Six house autonomous elderly residents and five accommodate single parents with dependent children managed primarily by the Municipality. Only the young residents face both fixed-term contracts and the volunteering requirement – the most contractually precarious category bearing the heaviest conditional burden.

Ethical sieving as city-making: a theoretical genealogy

The concept of ethical sieving emerges from the intersection of three bodies of scholarship, each of which illuminates a dimension of the phenomenon while leaving a gap the ethnography fills. Muehlebach's *The Moral Neoliberal* (2012) provides the foundational account of how Italian welfare reform in Lombardy mobilised voluntary labour and moral sentiment to compensate for state retrenchment. Her concept of ethical citizenship describes a post-welfarist form of belonging where duties replace rights and unpaid care work is reframed as civic virtue. The framework illuminates BiG's fundamental logic: young residents access housing by performing solidarity, presented not as institutional requirement but as opportunity for self-realisation. Yet Muehlebach's analysis operates primarily at the level of institutional design and ideological formation, documenting how the state and its moral allies produce ethical subjects through pedagogy and affective mobilisation. What the framework leaves undertheorised is how this logic operates – or fails to operate as designed – when translated into specific housing arrangements by specific professionals managing residents whose heterogeneous circumstances resist any uniform moral interpellation (Barberis and Boccagni, 2014; Giudici, 2019). The gap between the macro-institutional production of ethical citizenship and its micro-operational management in daily practice is the exact terrain this article occupies.

A second body of scholarship addresses how housing providers use conditionality to sort tenants and produce normative citizenship.

Costarelli, Kleinhans and Mugnano (2020) documented how housing initiatives in Milan and Utrecht link access to below-market housing with requirements for community participation, constructing *active, young, and resourceful* individuals as ideal residents through multidimensional screening. Costarelli (2025) has deepened this analysis for Milan specifically, showing how collaborative housing projects for young people construct the figure of the *resourceful tenant* through selection processes where professional discretion proves central: abstract criteria like *suitability for communal living* must be operationalised through subjective judgments about dispositions and affects. This scholarship reveals the mechanisms through which conditional housing sorts populations at the point of entry. What it documents less fully is what happens after entry, how conditionality is sustained, renegotiated and adapted over time through ongoing professional labour. The concept of *citizenship agendas* (de Koning, Jaffe and Koster, 2015) provides the institutional framework connecting these two levels. Their identification of *regulated outsourcing* – configurations where non-state actors implement citizenship norms on behalf of state-enabled governance – describes precisely how ABCittà, a private cooperative, enacts a citizenship agenda defined by foundation funding conditions. The street-level bureaucracy tradition (Lipsky, 1980; Dubois, 2010; Brodtkin, 2011) specifies how such enactment operates through discretion; Glyniadaki (2024) has shown how this produces *mediated deservingness* in housing contexts across Athens and Berlin, where individual assessments based on perceived vulnerability determine access through informal practices.

Ethical sieving builds on and extends this genealogy. The concept names a process that is not punctual but continuous, a discretionary filtration that does not end at the gate but operates throughout the housing trajectory, from selection through monitoring to renewal and beyond. Its distinctiveness lies in three features. First, the sieve has no fixed mesh: criteria are deliberately inarticulated, allowing professional judgment to adapt to circumstances. Second, the sieving is reflexively aware: the professionals who operate it know they are operating within a veneer sustained for funders, and they name this knowledge without it interrupting their practice.

Third, the sieving is productive rather than exclusionary: during BiG's entire operational history, no one has been sieved out. The sieve functions through the ambient possibility of exclusion rather than through actual exclusion, generating compliance through uncertainty about the sieve's grain at any given moment. Clarification is necessary regarding the relationship between sieving and the other form of professional labour this article documents. Ethical sieving names the continuous discretionary assessment through which Laura evaluates residents' moral fitness; but the sieve cannot operate in a vacuum, as it requires prior labour of stitching: the territorial brokerage through which Marco assembles partnerships, formalises agreements, and maintains the neighbourhood infrastructure that gives volunteering activities their concrete, performable form. Stitching is not a second concept of equivalent analytical status, instead it is the operative complement without which sieving would have no material through which to filter. Laura can assess whether a resident is «taking up the project's cause» only because Marco has constructed a field of activities – the communal garden, the food distribution network, the associational partnerships – within which civic disposition becomes observable. The two labours are structurally interdependent yet analytically distinct: one produces the terrain of moral observability, the other operates the filtration within it. Not everything these professionals do is sieving. When Laura and BiG's residents collectively search for alternative terminology, they are not sieving but engaging in discursive maintenance: the ongoing work of finding language that renders the device's constitutive contradiction inhabitable. When Marco negotiates with a partner association whose volunteers are frustrated by insufficient youth participation, he repairs the stitching, maintaining infrastructure against the entropy of institutional fatigue. The analytical value of ethical sieving depends on this specificity. Reading both processes as city-making, in Agier's (2015) sense, means recognising that Laura and Marco's daily sieving and stitching constitutes the doing of urban life in this specific neighbourhood. They do not implement a housing policy; they fabricate, day by day, the conditions under which a particular form of urban coexistence becomes possible.

Ethnographic approach to volunteering as housing condition

This article draws from twelve months of uninterrupted ethnographic fieldwork at BiG (October 2024-October 2025), combining documentary analysis (the *Carta dei Servizi*, funding reports, social media communications), semi-structured interviews with young residents across entry cohorts, participant observation during volunteering activities – particularly food package assembly and delivery – and extended conversations with the two ABCittà professionals. I attended specifically to moments where the sieving became visible: ambiguities in monitoring, residents' tactical manoeuvres, professionals' reflexive commentary. Residents' accounts and professionals' perspectives were analysed relationally, examining how discretion shaped residents' experiences and how residents' responses influenced professional practices. Fieldwork access was explicitly acknowledged by Marco, whose recurring phrase «our anthropologist has arrived» marked recognition as legitimate interlocutor within the project's unfolding tensions, a form of ethnographic hospitality structuring knowledge production's conditions (Fava, 2017: 175-180). In this specific elaboration, all names are pseudonyms; this choice reflects considerations of participant protection in a small, identifiable project context³. The analysis documents, among other things, the professionals' reflexive awareness of operating within what they themselves term a structure oriented toward funders. This dimension forms part of the ethnographic findings rather than a disclosure extraneous to the research relationship; the professionals' critical consciousness about their own contradictory position constitutes analytically noteworthy evidence about how conditional housing governance operates and is treated as such throughout the article. BiG's *Carta dei Servizi* presents itself as a *pact* concerning «reciprocal responsibilities, rights, and possibilities» (ABCittà, 2024: 4). For young residents, it stipulates «a personalised and group accompaniment [...] the activity plan is individual and agreed upon at the beginning of the path between the tutor and the young person, based on individual inclinations and availability, and requires a minimum of ten hours per month» (ABCittà, 2024: 4).

3 All interviews were conducted in Milan between October 2024 and September 2025.

Institutional language inscribes a constitutive tension, framing the volunteering requirement simultaneously as emerging from individual inclinations and as contractually mandated subject to continuous monitoring. Access depends on demonstrating «proximity and sharing of the project's objectives» during pre-entry meetings. According to the Carta, what is contractually obligatory must appear voluntary and what is monitored must seem spontaneous. Activities include assembling food packages for neighbourhood distribution, maintaining the courtyard and common spaces, participating in intergenerational programming and collaborating with local associations, each depending on a network of partnerships and prior coordination labour that precedes any individual act. Understanding how the tension between voluntary rhetoric and contractual obligation is managed and sustained, rather than resolved, requires turning to the professional figures who hold the sieve.

Fabricating cohabitation

Marco, an architect specialized in participatory and engagement methods, one of ABCittà's long-standing professionals, cultivates partnerships and negotiates agreements transforming the abstract clause into performable activities. Laura describes him as BiG's father, a familial metaphor capturing how his role exceeds formal coordination to encompass territorial parenthood within Greco's neighbourhood ecology. The community garden adjacent to BiG exemplifies this stitching. On Via Rho beside the Naviglio Martesana, the garden occupies formerly abandoned space transformed through mobilising diverse actors: an environmental association, ABCittà themselves, a social street network, and the Greco residents' association. While official narratives emphasize spontaneous collaboration, ethnographic evidence reveals a deliberate cultivation of relationships, formalization of informal solidarities into signed agreements and continuous maintenance. What Marco accomplished is an actual institutional translation which transforms dispersed, personalised neighbourhood relationships into recognised partnerships generating predictable schedules, material infrastructure and legible activities within which BiG residents' hours of volunteering become countable. Through fieldwork, Marco's presence at territorial events proved remarkably

consistent and visibly exhausting: garden workdays, foundation presentations, municipal consultations, partner events. This produces structural vulnerability: the infrastructure enabling residents to perform contractual obligations mostly depends on one person's relational capital and physical endurance. It is relationships that give agreements their operative meaning, not agreements that create relationships. Were Marco to leave, partnerships would not sustain themselves through institutional memory. The infrastructure he fostered in the neighbourhood is constitutively personal based. Marco's stitching, however, does not merely construct an internal infrastructure for residents' volunteering, it produces effects on the neighbourhood scale as well. The food packages that BiG's young cohort delivers are assembled from donations secured through solidarity networks, the recipients are also elderly residents of Greco who have no connection to BiG and delivery routes trace paths through the neighbourhood's streets, rendering BiG's young residents visible as civic actors beyond the farmstead's walls. The garden on via Rho, while functioning as a site in which volunteering anchors territorially, is simultaneously a public space whose maintenance depends on BiG's institutional presence. The partnerships Marco cultivates with a plethora of actors, the social street network, and Municipality 2 consultative bodies insert BiG into Greco's associational ecology as a node that did not previously exist: a provider of young labour for neighbourhood initiatives, a venue for intergenerational programming, a recognisable institutional interlocutor in a peripheral area historically characterised by fragmented civic infrastructure. What Laura and Marco fabricate is not merely the internal conditions of cohabitation within a restored farmstead: it is a specific form of urban sociality extending beyond BiG's courtyard – the delivery routes, the garden shifts, the associational meetings, the street-level encounters between young residents and elderly recipients who would otherwise have no occasion to meet. The city being made through this professional labour is not Milan in the abstract but Greco as a specific kind of neighbourhood: one in which a foundation-funded intergenerational project, sustained by two exhausted professionals, generates relational circuits that would not otherwise exist. That these circuits are precarious – dependent on Marco's endurance, on funding cycles, on the

willingness of partner associations to continue collaborating – reveals the fragility of the urban fabric that professional city-making produces in the absence of structural public provision. Notably, Marco delegates monitoring almost entirely to Laura, maintaining strategic distance from enforcement. His labour constructs the field of possible activities; it does not police participation within it. He stitches, Laura sieves.

Laura operates in a different register, the intimate domain of discretionary judgment. Her work is where the concept of ethical sieving becomes ethnographically visible. Selection operates through what Laura describes as *chiacchierate*, informal chats, rather than structured interviews⁴. Candidates recall questions about prior communal experiences and expectations. These function less as screening than as extended interactions through which Laura assesses dispositions and alignment. When pressed on criteria, her response revealed the sieve's deliberately inarticulate grain: «Over time you better understand who you have before your eyes, and how willing they are to adhere to the pact». This is mediated deservingness in Glyniadaki's (2024) sense but with a crucial specificity. Laura is not evaluating vulnerability, she is evaluating *civic disposition*, the perceived capacity and willingness to inhabit the moral obligations the project prescribes. And she does so still, even when aware that the precise contours of adequate disposition remain impossible to codify. She spoke at length, on multiple occasions, about her ability to identify what she called the *perfect match*, the resident whose inclinations align with BiG's needs at a given moment⁵. This phrase reveals the sieve's temporal calibration, as the grain shifts not only with individual candidates but with the project's evolving composition. A cohort heavy on students may need a young worker; a period of tension may require a conciliatory temperament. The sieve is reactive, adaptive, sensitive to the composition of the courtyard from the very moment of selection itself; it is a process whose effects extend beyond filtration: as Adrian's trajectory will show, the sieve does not merely select, it produces subjects who internalise its moral logic. This evolution is most visible during the monitoring phase, where a veneer of administrative oversight masks a widening rift between formal

4 Laura, multiple conversations, October 2024-June 2025.

5 Laura, conversation, March 2025.

policy and daily practice. Although the Carta dei Servizi explicitly mandates supervision, any tracking that occurs is performative rather than coercive. Monitoring is treated as a *pro-forma* requirement for securing funds rather than a tool for tenant accountability. This functional drift is the structural byproduct of Laura's fragmented role: as ABCittà's selector, as a practicing architect and as territorial facilitator, she inhabits a professional kaleidoscope that leaves her, by her own admission, quite perplexed regarding her professional identity. Yet, to interpret this loose monitoring as mere permissiveness would be to miss the sieve's ongoing operation. In late 2025, Laura articulated an emerging shift, condensing the moral logic of ethical sieving. Citing residents who rarely completed their hours, she noted: «The next round of volunteering, which maybe we won't even call that way, needs slightly more monitoring. Why should they do it while you exert yourself? You go against your own neighbours.» In this framework, non-compliance is reframed: it is no longer a contractual violation against the institution, but a betrayal of compliant neighbours. The sieve displaces enforcement from vertical authority to horizontal moral pressure. This is a displacement form that the courtyard, where differential participation is visible to all, architecturally enables. What distinguishes both professionals' practice is a clear reflexive awareness about their roles. When confronted with the volunteering requirement's contradictions, a theme which residents had already surfaced repeatedly in their own interviews, both professionals responded with striking unanimity: «It's non-negotiable, we absolutely cannot remove it, they'd cut funding, and we already must be careful to stay afloat». The requirement exists primarily as a funding condition – and both know this. Laura's reflexivity extends to language. Toward the end of fieldwork, she reported that residents had collectively sought alternatives to *civic volunteering* as a label: «community activities», «service», «active commitment», «making oneself available» were the alternatives, yet none resolves the fundamental contradiction: how to name something that must appear voluntary while remaining contractually mandatory. The search for names is an act of discursive maintenance – finding words that render the device's constitutive tension inhabitable without resolving it.

What the sieve produces: resident trajectories as evidence

Residents' varied responses to the volunteering requirement are not the central analytical object of this article, yet they are evidence through which the sieve's operation becomes visible. Their heterogeneity, structured by temporal position within BiG's evolving enforcement, material precarity and activity visibility constitutes the terrain that Laura and Marco's professional labour must navigate. Adrian, working in urban planning, entered during BiG's first cohort in 2021⁶. He arrived amid the pandemic economic crisis, having lost the capacity to pay rent and moved between friends' apartments for months. The prospect of a studio flat for six hundred euros seemed, in his words, «a strange, incredibly good offer» in a city where single rooms cost way more. He was among the first residents to move in, the farmstead was «practically empty, they were opening it up person by person in those days». The pandemic constrained the intergenerational sociality BiG promised «we had elderly neighbours, so all those ideas of socialising were very difficult to apply» but among the young residents, strong bonds formed through the courtyard's spontaneous rhythms: «when you felt you weren't doing alright, we'd go out at night for a cigarette in the courtyard, that was a way to get up from the computer and get out». Yet the volunteering requirement weighed differently on him than on students with family support. When enforcement was «rather mandatory», Adrian found himself «trying to do things that I didn't really enjoy», unable to contribute while navigating work overload and what he retrospectively identified as a form of burnout or work depression. His structural analysis was lucid: «it seemed like there were too many demands and fewer benefits for my group compared to the others», noting that «only young workers and students were required to do volunteering, not the elderly or mothers» – the most precarious category bearing the heaviest conditional burden while other categories faced none. What makes Adrian's trajectory analytically consequential is the gap between this structural awareness and his self-attribution of failure. Despite identifying the asymmetry in obligation distribution, despite recognising the inadequacy of support, despite understanding that «the project's usefulness for people like me is a matter of expiration

⁶ Adrian, phone interview, 25/05/2025.

like aid for a limited period» while for the elderly it is permanent, he ultimately framed his August 2023 departure as individual inadequacy: «maybe I wasn't the ideal figure for the project, I couldn't contribute anymore, but on the other hand I felt that my social needs perhaps weren't being heard». The sieve produced a subject who, unable to pass through its moral grain, accepted displacement as legitimate consequence rather than structural injustice. Adrian was not sieved out by formal sanction, rather he sieved himself out at the contract expiry date, internalising the device's moral logic – a process rendered all the more powerful by the fact that it operated on someone whose professional training in urban planning gave him the analytical tools to see precisely what was happening.

Other residents' trajectories reveal the range of positions the sieve accommodates without disrupting its operation. Nadia, sharing Adrian's temporalities and entrance cohort, articulated the contradiction directly to Laura: «volunteering means that I choose how and when to spend my time» while simultaneously identifying institutional function; ABCittà needs a *façade* for funders, «facilities exist more for declaration than sustained use»⁷. Her critical compliance sustained the device precisely because critique remained individual rather than collective: the sieve absorbs dissent that does not organise. Later cohorts developed tactical relationships within monitoring gaps. Leila's volunteering followed improvised rhythms «I never do ten hours per month, I do it when the mothers need it» – intensive engagement in crises followed by months of absence, generating enough relational credit that the sieve's grain never caught⁸. Michele pursued the opposite tactic: high-visibility food distribution leaving extensive traces yet expressed frustration that «there are many activities that we don't know exist» – the sieve's opaque grain disciplining through indeterminacy⁹. Among those entering after 2023, when enforcement had relaxed, the sieve became nearly imperceptible: Chiara reports «no one has ever asked me if I actually did my ten hours», her spontaneous sociality – facilitated by the courtyard's enforced

7 Nadia, interview, 04/02/2025.

8 Leila, interview, 16/05/2025.

9 Michele, interview, 16/07/2025.

proximity – already producing what the contract demands¹⁰. The paradox is structural, where those most aligned with BiG's objectives experience least sieving, while those struggling face the grain's tightest mesh. Heterogeneity is not a problem to be resolved; it is the condition that professional mediation transforms into operative governance. A significant absence structures this analysis and warrants acknowledgment. BiG's stated *raison d'être* is intergenerational cohabitation, yet this article has attended almost exclusively to young residents and the professionals managing their conditional access. The elderly residents and single parents – the populations for whom the volunteering is nominally performed – appear only as silent recipients: the woman who opens her door guardedly to Nadia's delivery, the single mother whose child Leila babysits in improvised rhythms. Their perspectives on the obligation structuring their cohabitation remain unexamined. This is partly a consequence of methodological focus, mainly because the article was designed to investigate contractualised volunteering and its professional management. But the absence is also analytically revealing. The ethical sieve operates on the young filtering civic dispositions, yet the moral standard against which these dispositions are measured is constituted by the needs of populations whose own experience of being *objects* of prescribed care remains unvoiced. Subtle pushbacks from elderly recipients, expressing a desire for autonomy over their schedules, reveal a relational landscape far more complex than the project's rhetoric suggests. This friction indicates that being the designated object of another's contractual obligation carries its own distinct discomfort. While the sieve filters for a specific civic disposition in the tenant, the very standard of what constitutes an adequate disposition is defined against a vulnerable population whose own perspective on this governed intimacy remains undocumented.

Conclusions: The Urban Through the Sieve

During twelve months of fieldwork encompassing BiG's operational history from 2021 through 2025, the figure zero carries the most analytical weight. Not one resident was denied renewal for non-compliance. The ethical sieve functions through

¹⁰ Chiara, interview, 09/03/2025.

the permanent possibility of exclusion that never materialises – governance through ambient possibility, sustained by the courtyard’s spatial regime where participation is architecturally visible and by the professionals’ continuous, reflexively aware, discretionary labour. «BiG is its people. People make BiG». Laura’s formulation, read through ethnography, is not a platitude. It is the most precise description of a governance mode in which the device has no existence independent of the relational labour that daily fabricates it. The project does not precede its inhabitants; it is produced through the encounter between professional sieving and resident navigation, within a built form that spatialises both. This is city-making in Agier’s (2015) sense, not planned urbanism but the continuous doing of urban coexistence through situated practices. The concept of ethical sieving contributes to existing scholarship by identifying a process that falls between the cracks of current analytical categories. It is not *gatekeeping* (Flint, 2004), which is punctual. It is not *sorting* (Costarelli, Kleinhans and Mugnano, 2020; Costarelli, 2025), which operates primarily at the point of entry. It is not *mediated deservingness* (Glyniadaki, 2024), which evaluates vulnerability. Ethical sieving is continuous, evaluates civic disposition rather than need and operates through a deliberately inarticulate grain that adapts to circumstances. The comparative positioning is instructive: Costarelli’s documentation of how Milanese projects construct the *resourceful tenant* through multidimensional screening captures the sieve’s initial operation; the ethnography of BiG reveals that this construction does not end at selection but requires ongoing professional maintenance. The question this opens – whether continuous ethical sieving is specific to BiG’s *cascina*-cooperative-foundation configuration or structural to conditional housing for young people more broadly – invites comparative ethnographic work across different spatial typologies, institutional arrangements, and European contexts where analogous mechanisms have been documented. More broadly, BiG reveals that housing access in contemporary cities depends increasingly on navigating moral infrastructures whose operative conditions are fabricated by professional intermediaries. The moral neoliberal, observed from the level of Laura and Marco’s daily practice, does not produce ethical citizens through institutional design (Muehlebach, 2012); it

generates contradictions that require continuous professional repair work to sustain. What distinguishes the ethical sieve from the macro-level production of ethical citizenship is precisely its personal, relational, exhaustible character. Laura's admission «we already must be careful to stay afloat» and her perplexity about her own professional identity signal the structural vulnerability at the heart of this governance mode. Whether foundation-funded, third sector-managed conditional housing represents a sustainable urban future, or a symptomatic interregnum remains open. What this ethnography demonstrates is that it operates, for now, only because specific professionals daily sieve and stitch, fabricating the conditions of cohabitation that neither policy design nor market mechanisms nor bureaucratic entitlement can produce or sustain alone. This study's limits extend beyond the absent populations discussed above. BiG constitutes a single, architecturally distinctive case, and findings cannot be generalised without comparative work across different scales and institutional arrangements. Future research might productively examine the upstream dimension – how foundation programme officers understand the relationship between conditionality and urban governance, and whether the productive ambiguity documented here is an unintended consequence or a tacitly recognised feature of the governance model itself.

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Giuseppe Servino is a PhD candidate in Cultural and Social Anthropology (Cycle XXXIX) at the University of Milano-Bicocca, conducting ethnographic research in Milan's Greco neighbourhood on intergenerational social housing and urban regeneration. He held a visiting position at IGOP-UAB Barcelona, working on housing policies and urban governance from a comparative European perspective.
g.servino1@campus.unimib.it