Chronicles from a Walled-Up Ward: The Black Hole of Public Housing Policies and Its Consequences in a Medium-Sized Italian City

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Abstract: The research aims to shed light on the case of a medium-sized town in the northeast part of Italy, where a semi-central neighbourhood, encompassing a triangle of streets and hundreds of apartments, has recently acquired the reputation of being an 'urban social problem', and is described by the local media as a 'drug-dealing suburb'. Specifically, since 2021, most of the state- and company-owned buildings have been completely bricked up, families evicted, and apartments and gardens left in a state of complete abandonment, without giving residents any explanation, and without a plan for the future, except demolition. Using ethnographic and qualitative methodologies, this study seeks to investigate the reasons why such negative narratives have quickly become established in common discourse and are then immediately amplified by the media until they remain the only description of the neighbourhood, and to examine how residents have strived and worked to restore the centrality of their 'sense of place'. In the conclusions, an attempt will be made to sketch out an answer to the classic question of whether a turnaround can be more easily brought about by large urban renewal plans, or whether community involvement in a network of 'small plans' might be more effective.

Keywords: neighbourhood unit; public policies; public social housing; participation.

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Analysing the urban scene from a grassroots perspective

The case study analysed in these pages shows how important it is to apply a 'microphysical' perspective in the policy-making process (Bimbi et al. 1997), that is, see the space of the city in which action is taken as divided into individual neighbourhoods and each neighbourhood into subsets that we can call wards (Perry 1929). Evidence also suggests that, in some cases, it is necessary to go into even greater detail, as Carlo Cellamare (2019) proposes. Analysing a series of neighbourhoods in Rome, Cellamare stresses the significance of giving agency to practices that are activated even on a 'street by street' basis (p.76), between houses and courtyards, behind the scenes, on the margins, and in the spaces 'that we always see and never look at' (Ballo, Charmet 1996: 5). It is here, in these 'do-it-yourself places', that people somehow manage to find alternatives, temporary and bricolage solutions (Beauregard 1994), and answers that can only be found completely outside the standards of official policies but that enable people to build a bridge between one phase of their lives and another (Verloo 2023). In this perspective, the research conducted in Padua, a medium-sized city (207,000 inhabitants in 2024) in the northeast of Italy, focuses on a relatively small triangle of streets known as Rione Palestro (Palestro ward), which counts about 5,000 inhabitants and is located just outside the 16th-Century walls of the historical centre of the town, in an area that could hardly be called a 'periphery' (Ilardi and Lanzetta 2022) but is identified as such in common discourse, a perception strongly supported by the local media (Bortolami 2023). So, when in 2021 Palestro made national headlines, it was because of a very specific and striking fact, which at first glance only reconfirmed the place's reputation: the Regional Agency in charge of social housing management (ATER), took the very hasty decision to respond to recent protests – which had been prompted both by a delay in housing allocation, which had ended in the occupation of some housing units, and by several reports of drug dealing in the courtyards and public spaces between buildings (Boscaro 2021) – by abruptly selling more than 200 apartments and then evicting tenants from and 'walling off' another 60 flats (Boscaro 2023), located around the main street of the ward (Palestro St.).

This institutional action was described as brutal and violent by many residents (Malfitano 2023). It suddenly produced an 'urban void', a 'hole', right in the centre of the ward, with no attempt made at dialogue or mediation. This action was taken, moreover, at a time when the housing issue in town was emerging as one of the biggest problems (Savino 2023; Malfitano 2023), resulting from the effects of the multiple international economic crises of the last decade (Fregolent and Savino 2014), worsened by the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, one of which was the increasing number of students enrolling at the local university and seeking accommodation in the city centre -close to the university main buildings (Savino 2024). The situation was further aggravated by the fact that Padua recently joined the list of UNESCO protected sites (Bonel and Andrian 2022) and is now part of the map of places (like Venice, only 20 miles from Padua) affected by "overtourism" (Gainsforth 2020, 2022; Salerno 2020). Why then, at a time of extreme need, did it reach such a crisis point that the evictions and the "walling up", with a strong and violent gesture, of the apartments in Via Palestro were carried out? What went wrong in the dialogue between the institutions and this community? As many residents pointed out (Bortolami 2023), it is certainly not just the result of urban decay and reports of drug dealing involving young migrants (Boscaro 2021). There must be much more.

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Many reasons for the 'void': defining a methodology

In this research work, great effort has been made to collect not only bibliographic sources in order to frame the history of the Palestro ward, but also oral testimonies from the inhabitants (14 in-depth interviews¹) of various genders and generations have been collected, in order to fully understand how it came to the gesture-very strong and symbolic-of walling up the entrances to the buildings (Bortolami and Perini 2022; Manni 2022). Information was gathered, not just through formal interviews, but through numerous "neighbourhood walks", conducted using the technique of psychogeography (Perini, Bissan-Nabulsi et al. 2020), to which were added moments of participatory observation at various public events organised by the municipality, where there was a chance not only to get involved in interesting conversations, but also to access videos and photographic material belonging to the personal archives of the inhabitants of the ward. This was extremely valuable documentation, capturing important moments of their personal stories and collective daily life over the course of the urban transformations that the place has undergone over the past fifty years.²

During these meetings/walks, an initial reconstruction of the events of 2021 (protests, barricades against the evictions); then the displacement of the inhabitants and the walling off of the apartment buildings immediately revealed a narrative and an explanation quite different from the one depicted by the local media, which had all been focused on the unsafety of the place, insisting that if the buildings had been bricked up there must be a reason, and erroneously claiming that the high concentration of social housing in the district, associated with various types of poverty, is capable – in itself – of causing decline and social conflict (Scigliano 2022; Padovaoggi 2023). This is a rather common hasty assumption, already noted by Tosi (1994) in many other cases in Italy, according to which public housing suffers the stigma of discomfort, danger, and social problems, and the only possible solution seems to be to let housing ownership and rental issues be regulated simply by the market, thus leaving public policies on the sidelines (Tosi 1994). According to this view, those who are tenants of public housing can be considered inhabitants of a place, but not a part of the community, not able to have a real "sense of a place", and even less able to have an attachment to it (Entrikin 1991; Mansour et al. 2023), as though only ownership and/or residing long term in a place can guarantee the necessary involvement in caring for a living space (Vaske and Kobrin 2001).

It is at this kind of juncture, as Debord (1956) argued and as Vazquez has also asserted (2010), that the methodologies of psychogeography come into play in a useful and effective way. Listening and talking to people, while walking together on the streets, in pairs or in small groups, guided not by maps or itineraries, but by memories, habits, suggestions, and stories from the present and the past, allow the participants to relax and forget the 'frame' of the interview. This allows the main focus of the problems to really emerge because, while walking, people come across places that evoke something in them, that say something about an issue that was never or is no longer spoken of, at least not in an emotional way. And this is what happened in Palestro, when one of these knots emerged on a walk as the people were passing through a certain area of the neighbourhood (Caduti della Resistenza Square), which caused many of them to remember a moment in the area's history, dating back to a period between the mid-1990s and the early 2000s, when a pharaonic redevelopment project was initiated by the local authorities using public money (Lironi and Tridenti 2001) and then it was gradually shelved by successive municipal administrations of different political perspectives and ideologies (D'Errico and Guadagnini 2003; Boscaro 2021). This left a few

¹ A list of the interviews realised during this research project available in Bortolami and Perini, 2022 and retrievable at this link: https://rsld.padovauniversitypress.it/2022/3/14.

² We want to thank Mr. L. C., resident of the ward and author of a home video dedicated to the history of the ward who kindly granted us the vision in 2022.

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artefacts on the ground (e.g. the square), but mostly left the community frustrated, wounded, and speechless (Licari 2003; 2006), as several families were forced to leave their homes indefinitely, with no certain prospects of returning ('I had been living in this apartment for 46 years, now I am 89, and they moved me, telling me it would only be for a few months. Instead, they did not start their work in time and I never entered my old home again' (Interview 12). This situation produced a significant rift between the inhabitants and the institutions ('When we hear the word "renewal" now, our hair stands on end'-Interview 15) that is mainly dormant today but is capable of re-emerging at any time. As one of the participants pointed out, 'the institutions acted hastily in Palestro in 2021 by walling off the apartments, because this ward, since the failed project of the 1990s, has the stigma of being a difficult place, inhabited by people who do not always get along with institutions' (Interview 12).

The crisis that in 2021 led to a string of evictions and thus to these apartments being made unavailable to local residents – which the local media justified on the grounds of numerous reports of drug dealing and delinquent behaviour, mainly attributed to the migrant communities living in the neighbourhood, who allegedly posed a risk to residents, especially the younger ones (Boscaro 2021) – finds its true origin here, in this knot of history that is able to cast a stigma on Palestro, a knot that has never been fully untied: 'We are distrustful of everything now. Nobody ever asked us for anything (...) we liked this place the way it was, we were attached to it' (Interview 8); 'Yes, there were things to change, to improve, but we had our neighbourhood dimension, we used to go to the bar and get to know each other, greet each other... There were relationships (...) instead they swept everything away' (Interview 4). As many of the voices in the neighbourhood pointed out, not only are institutions not listening and not granting residents any say in the policy decisions the institutions are making, but they are a exhibiting a lack of trust in the community of residents' ability to develop a sense of place, an attachment to it; they do not see the residents as stakeholders for change simply because they are living in social, subsidised housing. As Jorgensen and Stedman (2001) and before them Giddens (1990) pointed out, those people who live in a place, even if they rent, even if they live in subsidised housing, and even if for a short time, still develop an attachment to their hard-won space, which is made up of relationships that are valuable, because they may be the first ones that people may have had in a long time, because they are the ones that have saved lives, that have welcomed and given a sense of being safe, that have allowed a person to finally feel good. According to Giddens, it is the major urban upheavals, architectural turnover, and unclear, unspoken uses and designs that undermine the connections between people and places more than anything else, because it is the 'vacuum' of knowledge that erodes the ontological security of residents, whatever their status, tenants or owners, long or short term. And that is what has happened in Palestro: the entrances to residential buildings are walled up, these homes are no longer recognizable as homes, nor stores as stores, nor services as services, or gardens as gardens. They become spaces off-limits to human presence, the resident community remains disoriented and disjointed, and feels threatened because it does not understand. This rupture, which began with the failed project in the 1990s and the displacement of residents, continues to this day with the buildings that were walled up in 2021, again at the very centre of the ward. The uncertainty and insecurity that have been created have cultivated in people the feeling that they are living in a territory they do not know, in a hole in the city, and no one knows how it will be filled. Will the houses still be houses? Will the buildings be demolished? In Palestro (and of Palestro) nothing is known today.

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The transformation of the ward after 'the exodus'

In their accounts, most of the interviewees highlight the vitality of the time 'before', a point in time located in a sort of mythical past, sometimes not even experienced personally but learned of as it was recounted by parents or relatives, when the relationships between families were serene and cemented by memories of the Resistance and a shared political affiliation, and were characterised by mutual trust and a strong sense of place, a time when 'there was a habit of not locking the doors of the house for the children to play, moving from one house to another, without fear of intruders and without the perception of possible dangers or threats' (Interview 8). On the other hand, the 'after' narrative focuses on the trauma of the 'exodus' and on what happened after that: 'There was a transformation, all of a sudden, the beating heart of the neighbourhood emptied out, the world around changed; after years and years of uncertainty, many had found a different housing solution and stayed there, in the areas they had moved to, and many perhaps even died' (Interview 5).

And this before/after narrative has been further strengthened by looking at the present, because in recent decades the neighbourhood's social fabric has completely changed: the failure of residents to return after the 'exodus' due to the redevelopment project has been offset, starting in the 2000s, by new housing assignments, this time to families not necessarily local, not necessarily of Italian origin, and sometimes with difficult and very different migration histories, the result of a multi-ethnic transformation of the social fabric of the city and the entire country (Vianello 2006). An epochal transformation, which for Palestro created an additional line of tension with the public authorities, since in the early 2000s many Nigerian families arrived in Palestro after the ghetto area in the northeast part of the city, known as 'Anelli Street', was dismantled.³ On that occasion, the institutions were again hasty and myopic in their reaction, 'concentrating all foreign communities in the city within a single area, 'without taking the slightest account of the diversity of needs and habits, interpersonal relationships with other residents and others belonging to their own community' (Interview 1).

In the case of Anelli Street, to justify the force and violence of the institutional intervention that ended up with six blocks of flats being enclosed behind a brick wall, was the rhetoric of a dangerous migrant community, engaged in drug dealing and itself the source of the decline of the place (Vianello, 2006).

The similarities with the case of Palestro are, therefore, evident, even in the eyes of the many residents of the ward, who unsurprisingly cite this perception to explain the kind of action taken against them by the institutions in 2021, and also to explain the image of social problems and public housing in particular. As Mantovan and Ostanel (2015) recently noted, in the case of Padua, diversity and multiethnicity are associated with construed images of insecurity and conflict, with the urban decay of a place, and with the perception of abandonment by the local institutions. In recent years, some national-level issues (such as the prolonged inattention of Italian policy toward public housing, for example) have been compounded by more urgent local problems: the decline of neighbourhood activities and services is one of the problems most acutely felt by all types of residents in Italian cities. Specifically, the voices collected in Palestro, above all, highlighted the lack of territorial public health services (counselling centres, social services, outpatient clinics, pharmacies) and, in parallel, the absence of public transportation to reach these same services in the

³ The reference to Anelli St. is interesting: in order to deal with a case of excessive concentration of migrant families and people in a certain area of the city (the place was not coincidentally called the "Bronx" of Padua), in the early 2000s the municipality decided to deal with it by building a wall to effectively isolate the ward from the rest of the neighbourhood and then proceeding to relocate the families by demolishing all the apartment buildings (Vianello 2006; Bianchi 2015).

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adjacent neighbourhoods; the lack of a post office or bank branch is also reported. 'These situations are certainly not new to local institutions; they have been reported for a long time, some since the 1960s' (Interview 14). However, it is only now, in this post-pandemic time, that the feeling of 'loneliness' and 'abandonment' by institutions among the residents of Palestro has become almost intolerable – now that the walled-up buildings appear alongside empty stores. 'Palestro is a neighbourhood definitely abandoned to itself: apart from a tobacconist, a pizzeria, and two bars, along the whole main street there is a total lack of public cultural and gathering spaces, where a person doesn't have to pay to stay (...) In Palestro, everything is private, because it is a large neighbourhood of houses. But you also live outside the home, don't you?' (Interview 11). A neighbourhood of homes, where the public spaces are automatically associated with problems, with decay, and the only solution proposed in public policies seems to be sale, privatisation, 'and if you can't do that either, then instead of dialogue you build walls and wait for houses to collapse' (Interview 4).

Actually, it is difficult to trace the real causes of this neglect and decay recounted by residents (and clearly visible on the streets of the ward). Over the past decades, there has been a succession of local governments, from the right and the left, that have not really changed anything. Even the failed 'neighbourhood contract' for urban redevelopment, mentioned above, has passed from one mayor to the next, without finding a solution, and in fact exacerbating the effects of the continuous delays on the population. And this is the main reason why, even today, any urban redevelopment action announced by public institutions, even before it is formulated, is a priori seen as a threat to the residents of Palestro ('no project will ever be ameliorative if they do it' – Interview 10).

In this case, therefore, it is rather difficult to understand whether what has happened in Palestro is the result of a particular political strategy (scuttling public policies to justify the arrival of private investment, as some interviewees fear) or is simply the result of a series of misreading of the territory and a lack of knowledge about its needs that have accumulated over time.

'Decolonise Your Eyes': new narratives needed

While it is true that many of the interviews conducted for this research located the origin of the neighbourhood's most critical issues in moments of the past and in the modus operandi typical of local politics, it is also true that glimmers of a desire to build new narratives for Palestro do exist, and they emerged especially during walks with a group of young Palestro residents. On the occasion of the 'Decolonise Your Eyes' (DYE) project (Frisina et al. 2021), active between 2020 and 2021, thanks to a collaboration between the City Council, the University of Padua, and a high school in the neighbourhood, and with the participation of many local associations, the desire to look at Palestro with new eyes has acquired a very realistic and participatory form. Thanks to DYE, some of Palestro's streets have been retraced with participatory neighbourhood walks, telling the story of their names, almost all of which are linked to Italy's colonial past in Eritrea and Somalia in the years between the two world wars: Palestro, Tirana, Mali Spadarit, Benadir, Amba Aradam are, in fact, all names of streets but also of battles fought by the Italian army in the name of fascist colonialism, and whose true meaning no one in the neighbourhood or the city remembers.

It took the new residents of the neighbourhood, sometimes from migrant families who came from those very countries, who with their multiethnicity and need to recognise their own history in the places they live in now, for the neighbourhood to discover this aspect, this 'other' history of its own, one of the many never before told and a harbinger of new connections and new networks, different from those broken by poorly managed urban

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interventions in recent years. Working on the interconnectedness of streets, flowerbeds, and intersections, rescuing them from the oblivion of their names and bringing their meanings back to light, the DYE project has highlighted how the smallest details (street names are small things within the larger complex of urbanism and its policies), the interstices of living in the margins that we no longer see (Ballo Charmet 1996), are instead decisive for changing perspectives, for building new narratives of place capable of overcoming resistance and fear, for dissolving tensions, and for creating solidarity, attachment, and a new sense of place.

Conclusion: make no big plans!

Fatally, when places become marginalised from the main history of the city, as has happened so far in Palestro, when they disappear from the urban map, there is usually a reason, and very often this reason escapes the logic of social policies because it is linked to the logic of capital, to the logic of the market. However, fortunately, there is a growing tendency among residents to question the existence of these abandoned areas, and increasingly there is a need for planning that involves even the least obvious places. As reported in several interviews, today, in the 21st Century, one still cannot stubbornly think that 'public housing is in itself a social problem and, only according to this scheme, continues to deal with everything that happens around it' (Interview 9); 'if you don't untie the knot you have to go around it, you have to find a way' (Interview 5). It is not clear to any of the interviewees what kind of plan is needed to unravel the threads of a wounded community and a hopelessly compromised urban body ('by now the buildings have been massacred' (Interview 6); apart from a few voices from the latest generation of residents, most of the ward's residents cannot imagine solutions other than stopping all redevelopment projects.

In an era when all kinds of public funding are dramatically diminishing, residents of a place like Palestro clearly feel they do not have much chance of coping with the slide of their ward into the hands of private investors, and of overcoming, as Lyon et al. (2017) put it, the feeling of being 'disempowered by the choices of those in power anyway'. As Lyon et al. (2017) suggests for the case of one of Chicago's neighbourhoods, when there is a lack of motivation to feel community and a depletion of the power and confidence to participate, all that is left is to begin again to 'engage the younger generation and schools in "observing" how things are going in the neighbourhood, how policies are working or not working, what is needed and what is not; in touching urban issues, in designing their own lives' (p. 45). Perhaps this contribution of content and knowledge about the city that the younger generation is building do make sense for Palestro, so that they take the fate of the place they live in to heart, developing an attachment to it and enjoyment of it. The DYE project represents one such attempt: there is a dimension of 'care' that operates through people within and between the meshes of plans and rules, policies, and practices, and expands on them by making possible the activation of a 'counter-narrative' of places, a use for them other than the standard one (Gans 2002), in which there is a glimpse of a solution, albeit a temporary, non-standard and small one ('small plans'), and in which there is room for what Sandercock calls 'indigenous and progressive practices' (1998) that produce a more distant vision, capable at times of leading the way and transporting places and people beyond the obstacles in their path.

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