

# Interstitial urban spaces: housing strategies and the use of the city by homeless asylum seekers and refugees in Trento, Italy

Fondazione Cassa Di Risparmio Di Trento E Rovereto This contribution presents the results of an ethnographic research, conducted in the Autonomous Province of Trento (Italy), which investigated the living conditions of refugees and asylum seekers outside the reception system and explored the heterogeneous and fragmented world of pathways they undertake in search of work and accommodation. From the point of view of housing, the investigation has shown how individuals put in place different kind of tactics and strategies. Generally, among these, informal settlements seemed to be the most common solution. However, what we focus on relates to both the effects produced on migrants' everyday life by the environments and the material conditions of these settlements and the forms of re-appropriation of the spaces exercised by the individuals. For instance, this is the case of 'Le Albere': a residential and commercial area designed by a famous architect which has become the 'home' of many refugees excluded by the reception system. How does this place affect migrants' everyday lives? Why do they prefer to live in this area? How does their presence re-shape such space? These are the main questions that this contribution aims to answer.

**Key words** refugees and asylum seekers, home-making, urban interstitial spaces, homelessness, informal settlements, reception system

## Introduction

This contribution focuses on housing strategies and the use of urban spaces by refugees and asylum seekers who have left or are expelled from the Italian reception system and its centres. More specifically, the analysis of ethnographic data, collected during research carried out among migrants living in Trento (the capital city of an autonomous province in Northern Italy next to the border with Austria), intertwines the theme of migrant housing conditions with those linked to agency and resistance practices, implemented, from time to time, by individuals who live in socio-material marginality, on the street or sleeping rough.

This paper tries to give a picture of the housing conditions of migrants, showing the range of choices considered when the analytical category of living comes into play, which undermines, on several levels, the reasoning and reflections on international migration. It takes a cue from studies and research that have focused on migrant living

This article is the common result of a shared work of research, investigation, and analysis. However, Giuliana Sanò wrote the introduction, Paragraphs 3 and 5; Giulia Storato wrote Paragraphs 2 and 4; Francesco Della Puppa wrote Paragraph 1 and the Conclusions.

– and, more specifically, the link between home and migration (Frost and Selwyn, 2018; Boccagni 2017a, 2017b; Boccagni and Brighenti 2017; Ralph and Staeheli 2011) – as one of the possible keys to understanding the processes that accompany and mark international migration (Bergamaschi and Piro 2018; Petrillo 2018; Tosi 1993).

However, the premise from which this paper starts and which has inspired it is not limited to the case of the housing solutions devised by migrants, but follows a more articulated analytical framework, within which it is possible to distinguish the variety of meanings that converge in the definition of ‘home’. In an attempt to report the ethnographic experiences collected during the fieldwork, the feature that occurs across the studies to which we intend to refer is the impossibility of thinking of home simply as a physical place, that is detached from the relationships that are produced beyond the walls of the house and projected into an interior space or memory (Boccagni 2017a, 2017b; Boccagni and Brighenti 2017; Buffel 2017; Fravega 2018; Porcellana 2011; Tosi Cambini 2004) and, consequently, to imagine homeless people as individuals who lack something (Barnao 2004; Tosi Cambini 2004; Wacquant 2002).

Within this premise, we approached the object of the research (the housing conditions and strategies of migrants on the margins of the institutional reception system), paying particular attention to the combination of structural and individual dimensions, to show how an analytical hiatus cannot exist between the study of policies (on reception and housing) and the observation of the practices implemented by the individuals towards whom these policies are mainly addressed.

Following this perspective, the geographical and biographical trajectories of the subjects with whom we came into contact have provided us with the opportunity to reflect on the housing strategies of migrants who are outside the institutional reception system, taking into consideration, on the one hand, the mechanisms that produce the so-called ‘administered dispersions’ (Petrillo 2018), that is the dispersions caused by the political criteria that cross the reception system; on the other hand, the housing choices of migrants in the post-reception phase. That phase, in fact, needs deep observation, since in many cases it takes on the appearance of a ‘border’ – a dividing line – at which all migrants who left the reception centres must decide for the first time which path and which trajectory to follow.

Hence, if we observe migrant living on the basis of the history of Italian migration policies (Avallone 2018; Basso 2010; Della Puppa et al. 2020; Gargiulo 2018; Stege 2018), a factor that we certainly cannot ignore concerns the political transformations that have marked the entry and residence of the new migrants in Italy and that, ultimately, have resulted in a gradual ‘campisation’ of the cities and urban areas of arrival. The so-called ‘emergency paradigm’ with which migration policies still manage the arrival and permanence of international protection seekers also ends up becoming the logic governing the creation of camps, ghettos and informal settlements for migrants (Agier 2018; Lo Cascio and Piro 2018).

In their recent work, Queirolo-Palmas and Rahola have outlined the distinction between the notion of camps as ‘the institutional production of a concentration and segregation, a space outside where excess humanity is confined’, and that of encampments ‘where subjects in transit or subjects whose mobility is legally and effectively hindered, construct collective spaces of daily life, waiting, rest, convalescence, self-organisation, accumulation of knowledge, circulation of practices and tactics of resistance’ (2020: 219). Thus, rather than the notion of camp, it is the notion of encampment

that shows several points in common with the housing strategies we observed among the migrants who live outside the reception system of Trento.

The overall picture that emerges is more obscure than ever and can be represented, figuratively, by the image that Petrillo (2018: 32) gives us, when he speaks of ‘men (and women) within the walls’. With this definition, the author literally describes the *interstitial* and *infraspatial* presence of migrant people, who very often continue to remain in a condition of administrative irregularity and marginal housing even long after their arrival. Considering the number of transformations that have taken place in the field of migrant housing, the author makes it clear that the camps are no longer linked to the ‘emergency’, rather they have become ‘a piece of the new periphery’. (Petrillo 2018: 32). So he argues that: ‘Here the long-standing issue of ethnic segregation seems to extend across the whole territory, with a whole wave of migration being pushed back into the residual spaces, not only at the margins, but also in the interstices’ (2018: 33).

While for Petrillo the interstices find their place in the periphery, for Brighenti (2013), the notion of interstice embraces the need to go beyond the classic centre/periphery dichotomy, which ultimately no longer seems to correspond to the new configuration and distribution of marginal urban spaces. Therefore, used to describe a ‘small space of struggle’, surrounded by other more institutionalised spaces (Brighenti 2013), the interstice – or space in-between – would become a potential territorial, social and judicial ‘space of autonomy’ (Fontanari and Ambrosini 2018) for asylum seekers and refugees outside the institutional reception system, but ‘still in town’.

The (in)visibility and the emptiness that characterise these interstitial spaces make them a source of autonomy. Due to their ambivalent nature, both invisibility and emptiness turn out to be crucial elements in the study of interstitial urban spaces, representing the coefficients through which the emergence of creativity and potential within these spaces can be grasped. On the one hand, the interstices reveal the ‘will of the State’ in not recognising, both legally and socially, homeless and undocumented people; on the other hand, they enable individuals to exercise creativity and practices of resistance in their constant ‘struggle for survival’ (Simone 2004; Brivio 2013; Mitchell 2013).

In his work on Skid Row, an urban interstitial space for tramps, Mitchell insists on the relevance of the visibility/invisibility dichotomy in these places and so he writes:

In this struggle for survival, visibility mattered. To the degree that homeless men were confined to Skid Row, then they could be kept out of sight. To the degree that their numbers were not huge, their encampments were hidden away under bridges, in back alleys or behind abandoned buildings, they were tolerated. Episodic visibility – to panhandle or cadge cigarettes, to visit soup kitchens or take an occasional day job – was tolerated in non-Skid Row locales just so long as it became neither large nor more than episodic. (2013: 67)

As the cases analysed below will show, the focus on interstitial spaces allows us to see how invisibility can be replaced by visibility, only to the extent that it consists in something very episodic anyway. Introducing the manifold features and meanings of the interstitial spaces, Brighenti reminds us that ‘issues of visibility and invisibility are always ambiguously played out in between the denial of recognition and the possibility of resistance’ (2013: XX).

Thus, alongside the tolerance shown by institutions towards episodic and non-permanent visibility, on the other side, we need also consider (in)visibility as a strategy

implemented by homeless and undocumented migrants. The effectiveness of their practices is mainly based on invisibility: that is, on operating outside the gaze of institutional power. The invisibility that runs through the informal settlements of migrants we examined during the fieldwork, in this sense, is equivalent to that described by Dovey (2010), who depicts these places as marginalised and protective at the same time.

Along with invisibility, emptiness is the other coefficient through which we can grasp the creativity and practices of resistance made possible by interstitial space. Focusing on the case of Cassinis Park, an urban space in Milan frequented mainly by migrants, Brivio (2013) underlines that it includes all the types of urban emptiness indicated by McDonogh (1993), who distinguishes four possible types. According to him, the urban emptiness is characteristic of places where the distinctive signs of the past once stood; places frequented by dog owners, drug addicts and criminals; those ready to be transformed by building speculation; those used as a form of control or barriers to prevent people from associating or reaching other places.

Thus, rather than being exclusively a negative factor, emptiness and invisibility allowed creativity, conflicts and practices of resistance to emerge among those who live in the interstice which, as Brighenti points out, 'is not simply a physical place, but a phenomenon "on the ground", an "occurrence", a "combination" or an "encounter"' (2013: XVIII).

If Brighenti describes the interstice not simply as a matter of physical space, Lévesque underlines that 'in addition to its spatial character the interstice refers to a temporal dimension as an "interval of time"' (2013: 26). Thus, that permanent temporary and that never ending temporariness (Sayad 1999) which, for example, appeared in the stories of those who lived with their suitcases always ready at the entrance to their home after their arrival, today seems to have turned into the choice to move into informal settlements from which, obviously, it is always possible to leave. However, in both cases, existential and housing transience does not escape the rules of appropriation and domestication of the spaces in which they live. The feeling of being 'temporarily present' is not the same as completely abstaining from the context in which they spend part of their day. On the contrary, the presence of butchers, bars and restaurants within ghettos or informal settlements shows how it is possible to live even in conditions of extreme marginality and social invisibility (Agier 2018; Queirolo Palmas and Rahola 2020). Barnao stressed that street actors 'are not disarrayed actors, [but] they appear to us rather as subjects of selective strategies, capable of adapting to survival on the street' (2004: 415). This reflection conforms to the idea of subjects who, although living within ghettos, camps, sheds or informal settlements, are nevertheless capable of adopting strategies that ensure their survival in these contexts and to 'feel at home' (Sanò and Della Puppa 2020).

Thus, within these premises, the notion of 'home' can be represented as a variety of feelings and relationships that come together and that can hardly be extracted and detached from personal experiences. That is, among the inhabitants of the ghettos and informal settlements there will certainly be someone willing to consider that space as *home*, since it is in this place that most of the activities not normally intended for public space take shape (Betts et al. 2020). Conversely, for someone else, it will be difficult to identify that space as a *home*, since the relationships that take place inside are in no way attributable to a domestic dimension.

However, it is difficult to find an all-encompassing definition of home, especially because, as Boccagni writes, it must be seen 'as an open-ended social relationship, [that]

[home] requires to be purposively negotiated and reproduced – it is not simply out there – and can be emplaced, understood and experienced in different ways and locations over the life course' (2017b: 4).

Within the life course of migrants, it may also happen that not a single space, but an entire area ends up taking on the contours and the meaning of *home*. Elena Fontanari (2019) describes this condition through the concept 'open-air home', that is, a very frequent condition in the experience of asylum seekers awaiting accommodation or a definition of their administrative and legal path. According to Fontanari's ethnography, the fragmentation of the daily life of migrants who live on the streets and spend all day outside waiting and moving from one public service to another (canteen, shower, dormitory etc.) is the reason why these individuals feel the whole city as their home.

In some of the cases that will be analysed in this paper, the condition described by Fontanari is akin to many of the experiences of asylum seekers with whom we came into contact during the fieldwork in Trento. The inability to access the reception system for those who arrive by land – and, consequently, are often subject to the Dublin regulation – or to find accommodation once outside the institutional reception system, has affected the lives of some of these people, who have had to make their own home in the city.

Therefore, this contribution intends to examine in depth the relationships that homeless asylum seekers and refugees in Trento build with certain urban interstitial spaces of the city. In particular, we want to highlight the motivations that prompt the use of these spaces, as well as the social and relational dynamics and ambivalences embedded in these spaces. Furthermore, we want to highlight whether and how these dynamics influence migrants' daily routines and home-making processes (Blunt and Sheringham 2018).

After presenting the features of the group observed and the research context, the paper proceeds with a short methodological note. The empirical material appears as follows. First we focus on how refugees and asylum seekers in Trento can use urban spaces, highlighting the dynamics and ambivalences in their relationships with social services and the local community. We then focus on how, in light of these, their daily lives are temporally and spatially structured, describing 'routes' and 'roots' that activate home-making processes in the city.

## **Features of the observed group**

The research involved 40 male asylum seekers, holders of international or (ex) humanitarian protection, undocumented and with different reception experiences. First of all, among them are those who are waiting for or refused admission to a camp, such as those who have entered the country through the so-called 'Brenner route' (Benedikt 2019). These are mainly young men from Pakistan and Afghanistan who, once they have left their country of origin or another European country (such as Greece, Germany, Austria), apply for international protection in Trento. For some of them the 'Dublin procedure' has then been activated. They are defined as 'territorial' or 'out-of-quota', since they are not included in the ministerial redistribution quotas, like those arriving by sea. Because of this way of entering the country, their right to reception is denied. Among these are also those who, once they have received an offer, refuse to enter a reception project, especially if it is in another Italian city, and decide

to stay in Trento. To these people are added those who left the camps, both in the city of Trento and in other Italian cities, because: they obtained a form of protection, they obtained a definitive negative answer to their application, they have been expelled because of a failure to comply with the rules of the system of reception,<sup>1</sup> or they voluntarily abandoned the project. In addition to the variety of legal statuses and reception experiences (by duration, outcome, location), the individuals within the observed group also distinguished themselves by age (from young adults to around 40-year-old men), national origins (different countries of the African and Asian continents), education in the country of origin (from illiterate to graduates), family status (from married fathers to single men).

## The research context

The research was conducted in the Autonomous Province of Trento, and in particular in its capital city. The city, thanks to the partial autonomy it enjoys, offers various public housing support services – in some cases managed by the same organisations that are entrusted with the management of the reception system – which include apartments with reduced fees and shared accommodation. For those who are homeless, there are low-threshold services, such as canteens, showers, laundries and dormitories, whose availability is expanded during the winter. To these services are added some solidarity initiatives put in place by associations, informal groups and families who manage apartments, promote the use of shared accommodation or offer hospitality to those who find themselves in an emergency situation or are living in precarious conditions. In general, most of these services or housing opportunities are located in the city of Trento and, given its limited urban area, near the historic centre.

Despite these many possibilities, there are several informal settlements in the city, also because squatting does not seem to be a very common practice among the group observed. During our fieldwork, it emerged how squatting was mostly put in practice individually in small towns in the valleys and, therefore, far from all the previously presented low-threshold services addressed to homeless people, which are offered only in the two main cities of the Province (Trento and Rovereto). This distance from all services, also those linked with their legal status, as well as the entry into force of the new Security Decrees in 2018 and 2019 (Sanò and Della Puppa 2020), might have discouraged this practice, forcing refugees and asylum seekers to sleep in informal settlements in the urban area. Although all close to the city centre, some of these night shelters are located in more decentralised areas, such as the disused former Sloi factory and Clarina and Gocciadoro parks. Others are in more central areas, such as Santa Chiara Park and Le Albere neighbourhood, which we will discuss here.

Situated near Piazza Fiera, one of the main squares of the city centre, Santa Chiara Park is entirely surrounded by a canopy, under which benches are arranged. Due to the greater protection it offers, this space seems to be used more by the migrants involved in the research, together with Le Albere and, in particular, the area of the bridges over the Adige river. This informal settlement has some special features and, for this reason, it will be the subject of study of this contribution. First of all, it is located in a

<sup>1</sup> Among the rules that may lead to expulsion there are: exceeding the maximum number of warnings or the income threshold to be able to maintain the right to reception.

neighbourhood that differs architecturally from the rest of the city. Known for being entirely designed by Renzo Piano, in 2013, Le Albere represents an 'example of transformation of *brownfields*, disused industrial land, into *greenfields*, a concrete landscape that has become largely green, the opposite of what has been done for many years in the cities', as the same architect stated (Alessi 2017: 130). In fact, the neighbourhood stands close to the Adige river and is part of a former industrial area, previously occupied by the Michelin factory. Here, the museum of natural sciences, the central university library, a row of luxury apartments with 300 housing units, offices, shops and five hectares of park have been built. Crowded with young professionals, tourists, students and families of the upper-middle class of the city, the neighbourhood becomes very quiet and almost deserted at night because there are still few (around 50%) apartments purchased or rented because of the very high sales prices and rents. Its day-time plentifulness and night-time emptiness, symbols of the success as well as the failure of urban planning, are chosen and readjusted by homeless male refugees and asylum seekers who spend the night under its bridges together, thus enlightening the success and the failure of their inclusion in the local context, as we are going to discuss below.

Also due to the presence of these kinds of informal settlements, the Autonomous Province of Trento and, in particular, its capital city, have proved to be a privileged research context. Its geographical position has allowed the involvement of a highly composite population. Its small size and its partial political and administrative autonomy have facilitated the exploration of different biographical trajectories of refugees and asylum seekers at the margins of the reception system and their ways of sharing the spaces of the city with the local native community.

## Methodological note

The fieldwork took place in 2018–19 and has been conducted using an ethnographic methodology, based on the combination of participant observation with in-depth interviews. The ethnography, which lasted more than a year, was carried out within the urban space (such as parks, squares, bars) and in places managed by local services and associations. During this period the researchers came in contact with 40 male asylum seekers and refugees at the margins of the reception system, and conducted observations, informal conversations and interviews with about half of them. Beyond this, which represents the core of our fieldwork, we collected also 28 interviews with key informants, i.e. with caseworkers and volunteers operating in the territorial services, associations and informal groups in contact with refugees and asylum seekers living in the territory. The collection of their points of view allowed us not only to prepare and access the field, but also to understand the relationship, embedded in their daily support practices, among the observed group and the local community.

All the interviews and informal conversations were conducted in Italian or English and transcribed or reported as field notes, complementing and enriching the ethnographic observations. For the analysis we proceeded with the integral reading of all the empirical material, the assignment of codes to portions of text and the identification of thematic macro-areas within which to systematise and interpret the coding horizontally. The names that appear in the text are fictitious.

## Dynamics and ambivalences of living in the city as homeless refugees and asylum seekers

Almost all of the migrants who took part in the research lived in a 'homeless' condition for different lengths of time, making the city their home. Here we will focus on the relationship between homeless refugees and asylum seekers and some spaces of the city of Trento, highlighting some dynamics and ambivalences. First of all, they regularly make use of the low-threshold services of the city. However, access to these varies according to their legal and residence status, creating stratification among those who have the same needs (Sigona 2012). While access to the canteen service, public showers, refreshments and rest areas do not have any special requirements, night services are accessed differently according to residence.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, despite the fact that during the winter there are more beds available, the number of beds on offer is still insufficient to meet demand and there are several people who are on the waiting list and forced to find alternative solutions. Within the group observed, the functioning mechanism of the dormitories is well known, as is the awareness of having to spend time 'outside' before being able to access them:

Because when you have no job it is difficult to find a house but you can sleep in Bonomelli [name of a dormitory] but it is not a lot [of time], it is not a lot, you can stay a month, you still have to stay three months out, four months out, but 10 days you still have to stay four months, three months out, it's too difficult, too difficult. (Diallo)

Despite different inclusion mechanisms, low-threshold services still seem to be an attractive force for this part of the population, acting also as a factor that may discourage collective practices such as that of squatting or the claim for the right to housing. Karim, for example, recognises that Trento offers better services than the other cities in which he lived:

I'm happy with Trento, with Punto d'Incontro [a low-threshold daytime service], with the dormitories ... Actually, I'm happy. When I find a job, I'll bring the contract and they will give me a place [to sleep]. It's not like that in other cities. [In other cities] when you don't have a residence, it's difficult to find a place to sleep, at most for two days, three days and then away. [...] Actually, I didn't find other cities like this one. (Karim)

Outside the dormitories or while waiting to enter them, these people rarely leave the city and therefore seek an alternative solution, finding hospitality in the homes of their countrymen or volunteers or sleeping 'outside' in informal settlements. According to a key informant, these tend to be frequented by migrants who remain in groups, often for reasons of personal safety, confirming how they can be considered both marginal and protective (Dovey 2010), thus revealing their interstitiality. 'Organised' on the basis of the nationalities, these encampments (Queirolo-Palmas and Rahola 2020)

<sup>2</sup> The stay in the dormitory is subject to the possession or lack of possession of residence. There are 60 days, renewable for residents and 30 days plus 30 days throughout the year for non-residents, renewable only once in the winter for a total of 90 days during the calendar year.



arose in areas surrounding the city centre, from which it is easy to reach the services during the day:

It is better to stay in the central area, as much as possible in groups, so that if something happens I am not alone, this yes and to stay closer to the city anyway, but also precisely because of my movements and how my day will work as homeless, because I know that at some time the library opens, then at 9 I know that it opens Punto d'Incontro, Casa Baldè, Casa Maurizio [all low-threshold services], eh and my world as homeless gravitates around these realities, therefore, and then for a security reason. (Key informant)

Refugees and asylum seekers living in homeless conditions therefore seem to seek shelter in the informal settlements of the central areas of the city in order to be able to take a shower, charge their phone, eat a hot meal at the daytime low-threshold services. From ethnography and interviews it emerges that Santa Chiara Park and the bridges in Le Albere neighbourhood are the most chosen places to spend the night. The first seems to be used mainly by the 'out-of-quota' and people from Pakistan, some of whom also fall into the first category. The two informal settlements, despite being located as we have already seen in the city centre, nevertheless enjoy a different degree of legitimacy from the local native population and the authorities. The police visit both, but for different reasons. If, in Le Albere district, they merely check documents, in Santa Chiara Park the action is more aggressive and often results in the removal of personal belongings:

Always police come to ask for documents, to always ask for documents, but when it is too cold there is one called the Street Unit, they always help us and give us blanket. (Diallo)

In the past few days the personal belongings of people who have been sleeping in Santa Chiara Park for months waiting to enter the reception have been taken away: clothes, blankets, backpacks and everything a person can carry when living on the street. The city hall would have started the cleaning operation, using the contribution of Dolomiti Ambiente and the local police. Twelve people were left with nothing. (Giuliana field note)

These extracts indicate how Santa Chiara Park, frequented by many native citizens in the day and evening time, is subjected to various evictions by the police. In contrast, Le Albere, frequented during the daytime, but desolate in the night, seems to be an informal settlement more tolerated by the population and local authorities. The different levels of legitimacy in the two informal settlements highlight some structures of common sense in the native community, which can be ascribed to the concept of urban 'decorum' (Ascari 2019; Bukowski 2019). The presence of homeless people would not seem to be a problem, not even of public order, if they remain invisible to the eyes of natives and other 'legitimate' visitors to the city, or if their visibility is only episodic (Mitchell 2013).

Therefore, these examples show how the relationship between refugees and asylum seekers living as homeless in Trento and the local community is embedded in some areas of the city and presents some ambivalence that can be traced to the dichotomies visibility/invisibility, attraction/expulsion, tolerated/not-tolerated. Attracted by low-threshold

services and, therefore, visible and tolerated to move around the city during the day, asylum seekers and refugees are excluded from continuous access to these services during the night and forced to sleep 'outside'. At night, they are thus expelled, confined and made invisible in the most hidden places, they are tolerated because they are far from the gaze of the native community. The combination of these processes makes Trento an interstitial city, insofar as the homeless are not necessarily pushed to the outskirts of the city, but are made (in)visible in urban spaces. While, on the one hand, the services, associations and informal groups of the city welcome these people, on the other hand, they contain and make them invisible, offering intermittent rights and hopes, creating boundaries and activating processes of 'campisation' of the urban space, that is, a gradual transformation of specific areas of the city into campsites for the homeless (Darling 2009).

### **Living (in) the interstitial city: daily routine and home-making processes**

In the interstitial city, refugees and homeless asylum seekers move in the urban space, building their own daily routine made not only of tolerated spaces, but also of authorised times, describing geographical and urban trajectories, within which they root home-making processes.

The ambivalences, described above, entail the rigid structuring of their daily routines, confirming how the interstitial city has also its own temporal dimension (Lévesque 2013). Tolerated in hidden places at night, they move to the city centre in the daytime, thus modelling, even according to different temporalities, the dynamics of living the city:

My day is too long. I think, I think, I think, all day long. [...] Then I go to take a shower, at nine in the morning, next to the Punto d'Incontro there is a place to take a shower, we eat from noon until half past one at Punto d'Incontro, for dinner we go above Via Cappuccini at the canteen and sometimes there is also the Baldè house. (Abdul)

The opening hours of the low-threshold services, located in different points of the city, temporally mark out the days of these migrants, also influencing their movements. After having had dinner at the Capuchin canteen – the last stop of the day – those who cannot spend the night under cover head to Le Albere neighbourhood, where they find shelter and wait for a new day, in order to be able to use the services that will be guaranteed in the daytime. The fieldwork shows how this informal settlement looks like a highly inhospitable place due to the presence of dirt, smells and animals (rats and mice) that often eat the food supplies of those who are sleeping:

Today I spent the afternoon with Aliou. While we are walking along the cycle path that crosses Le Albere neighbourhood, he shows me the place where he slept for a long time. It is one of the bridges along the Adige. He tells me that, to prevent the animals from eating the food supplies that he had with him, inside the backpack, he built a structure hanging from a tree branch. (Giulia field note)

Despite being represented as an inhospitable place, it appears to be the place most often used by the homeless migrants involved in our research, so much so that some of them

say that during some periods of the year between 50 to 70 people have slept there. The reasons that lead some of these individuals to choose the bridges of Le Albere as a place to spend the night must be sought, first of all, in the dynamics described above. It seems that refugees and asylum seekers embedded the idea that their presence in these spaces is tolerated and authorised by the native community and the local authorities, since it would not question the common conception and shared representations of 'urban décor'. Indeed, refugees and asylum seekers prefer this place because of the minimal exposure to the gaze of passers-by and the invisibility – which they deliberately seek – due to the small number of apartments sold in this area, which therefore appears relatively deserted at night. In this sense, the emptiness of the neighbourhood offers the basis for an exercise of agency, visible first in the expression of preferences, thus confirming its interstitial character (Brighenti 2013; Brivio 2013):

I never sleep in front of the station. I stay here under the bridge. [...] Here it is ugly, dirty, you do not feel the good air, there are animals, there is that river and there is cold, but I can sleep because there are no people around. (Viktor)

When Morad lives on the street, he prefers to stay under the bridge. He does not like to be in the square because he feels exposed, there is noise and it wakes him up early in the morning. He prefers under the bridge, because is quiet there and he can sleep until 8 am. (Giuliana field note)

The need to hide therefore seems to be connected to the need to be invisible to the gaze of the native population and its sense of attachment to the decorum described above. The embedding of the common sense structures and the invisibility processes they entail, however, also highlight the capacity for resistance and resilience.

In this inhospitable space, homeless refugees and asylum seekers can also settle home-making processes not only by expressing preferences and appreciating some characteristics, but also by weaving practices of manipulation and appropriation, through the provision of blankets and mattresses, aimed at making it more hospitable. In the first extract of the field notes reported below, for example, Samad says he prefers to sleep under the bridge rather than in a dormitory, where the entry and exit rules are very strict. He appreciates the silence and the tranquillity that allow him to wake up at the time he prefers:

He tells us that now that it is hot, he prefers the bridge: 'Here is better than the dormitory. After 9 or 10 in the dormitory you can no longer go out and in the morning you have to wake up early' [...] When we arrive in Le Albere neighbourhood, the first thing he says to me is: here it is quiet, there is silence all around. (Giulia field note)

This expression of preferences for and appreciation of some characteristics of this place can be therefore converted in a housing strategy that can lead some actors to refer to this so very inhospitable place with the word 'home', thus expressing an explicit rooting in terms of belonging:

We say goodbye, before they enter the river's bed to reach their hiding place. Samad says to me: 'I am sorry I cannot invite you into the house, but you know how it is, I do not live alone and the others do not know you.' Then, Teresa and I

sit on a bench. After 10 minutes we notice in the distance Samad comes out walking fast and with a hood on his head. [...] He says: I am coming home, 'under the bridge'. He says it with an ironic tone. (Giuliana field note)

The analysis presented therefore shows some aspects of the biographical trajectories and housing strategies undertaken by a group of homeless male asylum seekers and refugees who live in Trento. These strategies and pathways have spatial and temporal place in different areas of the city, which are affected by attracting and repelling forces, connecting them with the constitutive structural and symbolic aspects of Trento community. These forces are embodied by the actors and, at the same time, they are expressed through bodily and discursive practices, which lead the individuals to make Trento an interstitial city, whose push towards invisible and inhospitable places can be countered and converted in a housing strategy that may open to processes to feel at home.

## Conclusion

This paper describes some of the housing conditions and strategies adopted by homeless refugees and asylum seekers who live in Trento. In particular, the social relationships that imbue certain spaces of the city, which are transformed by the presence of these migrants, have been highlighted. Despite the fact that the city offers different services during the day and at night for all those who are homeless, access to them is regulated by mechanisms similar to those that Mezzadra and Neilson (2013) have identified in the functioning of the borders. That is, using the border as a method, we can interpret dormitories, low-threshold services and other support initiatives as devices that generate processes of inclusion and exclusion and, at the same time, encourage creative housing practices, actions and strategies, useful to reframe some urban spaces as interstitial spaces.

In fact, we have observed how the presence of numerous local services and initiatives, activated during the day and to a lesser extent during the night, can represent an attractive force that influences the choice of these individuals to remain in the city. At the same time, the restrictive and varying rules of access to night services for those who are not resident in Trento, together with the lack of sufficient beds to meet demand, imply that many people are forced to sleep outside. Despite having to sleep in the street, the choice to remain in Trento highlights the individual strategies aimed at improving their material conditions, such as sleeping in informal urban settlements, close to the city centre during the night, and accessing the low-threshold services during the day.

However, these inclusion and exclusion mechanisms are not limited to services and housing initiatives, but extend to the entire city and to the spaces where some informal settlements have been built. As the ethnographic cases reported in this paper document, also with regard to the presence and functioning of informal settlements, among these only a few are informally tolerated, while, in other cases, they enjoy no legitimacy. The ambivalence that revolves around the legitimacy of these spaces actually creates an interstitial city, in which visible spaces and people alternate with invisible spaces and people.

Le Albere neighbourhood is emblematic in this sense. Conceived as the symbol of post-industrial regeneration and local environmental sustainability, it has however encountered resistance to its 're-population' due to the costs of the apartments built by a well-known architect.

The project according to which this neighbourhood should have become a residential area, equipped with all the comforts and constantly monitored by a video surveillance system, had, however, to measure itself against the reality of a place that assumed the role of a dormitory neighbourhood, intended for migrant workers, exploited or unemployed, excluded from the reception centres. If from the point of view of urban policies a certain tolerance towards this district is shown, it is largely due to the fact that here migrants are not visible and therefore do not arouse the concerns and complaints that, instead, are concentrated in other urban spaces converted to informal settlements.

From the perspective of the subjects who 'inhabit' these interstitial spaces, it is interesting to note that they are able to value their position in a certain sense and become familiar with the urban space. This happens to the point of activating a process of routinisation that, spatially and temporally, marks out their days within the city, opening to home-making processes that can be expressed by adaptive mechanisms, preferences, acts of resistance and resilience (McIlwain and Bunge 2018). In this sense, from the point of view of migrants, it is possible to deduce a certain predisposition to a form of 'domestication' of space, even when it appears completely inhospitable. This can be seen, for example, through small practices of manipulation and 'furnishing' of outdoor places that, from very inhospitable, end up being defined by some as 'home': the adaptation of mattresses to make the night's rest more comfortable, the arrangement of blankets to create spaces of privacy, the use of urban vegetation as hangers to store food and personal items, etc.

In order to return to the parallelism with the borders and the opportunity to make methodological use of them, both external and internal borders, and in particular those that exist within the cities, open up new and unexpected possibilities for action. In fact, even those who are rejected from these spaces embed the need to hide and react by expressing them through their own body and through the use of narratives. Therefore, this process of incorporating local common sense, which accepts their presence only as long as they are willing to sacrifice it by hiding and making themselves invisible, leads them to develop preferences regarding the place to live and practice home-making processes, by adapting the space to their personal needs. As already described, such a process of manipulation leads some of them to define this space as 'home'.

Thus, on the one hand, the 're-population' of this space by migrants is the product of a dominant thought that tends to want to hide them from the gaze of local inhabitants, while, on the other hand, this space produces new forms of re-appropriation, which mainly meet the need to 'feel at home', even when it is in a decidedly inhospitable space.

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## Espaces urbains interstitiels : stratégies de logement et l'utilisation de la ville par les demandeurs d'asile et les réfugiés sans domicile fixe à Trente, en Italie

Cet article présente les résultats d'une étude ethnographique, menée dans la province autonome de Trente (Italie), qui a examiné les conditions de vie des réfugiés et des demandeurs d'asile en

dehors du système d'accueil. Il explore également le monde hétérogène et fragmenté des parcours qu'ils entreprennent à la recherche d'un travail et d'un logement. Du point de vue du logement, l'enquête montre comment les individus mettent en place différents types de tactiques et de stratégies. En général, parmi celles-ci, les établissements informels semblent être la solution la plus courante. Cependant, ce qui nous intéresse concerne à la fois les effets produits sur la vie quotidienne des migrants par les environnements et les conditions matérielles de ces établissements, et les formes de réappropriation spatiale exercées par les individus. C'est par exemple le cas de « Le Albère » : un quartier résidentiel et commercial conçu par un architecte de renom, devenu le « chez soi » de nombreux réfugiés exclus par le système d'accueil. Comment ce lieu affecte-t-il la vie quotidienne des migrants? Pourquoi préfèrent-ils vivre dans cette zone? Comment leur présence remodèle-t-elle cet espace? Telles sont les principales questions auxquelles cette contribution entend répondre.

**Mots-clés** réfugiés et demandeurs d'asile, création de foyers, sans-abrisme, établissements informels, espaces interstitiels urbains