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SUSTAINABLE
FOOD
PLANNING
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11TH CONFERENCE

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PAPER SESSION 3.E
FOOD
PROCUREMENT,
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Re-imagining foodspaces- welfare nexus across scales: building proximity networks

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Re-imagining foodspaces-welfare nexus across scales: building proximity networks¹

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Recently, researchers highlighted how diseases and inequalities built by the contemporary food system express and spatialise themselves differently worldwide, prioritising extreme conditions while shedding light on their material expression, territorial distribution, and urban planning responsibilities in drawing these geographies. This contribution aims to underline forms of food poverty in contexts where the phenomenon is turning again into a structural issue, even though less extreme. Italian contexts well represent this condition (the case study of Trieste, in the Friuli Venezia Giulia region, will be considered in this contribution), where recent global crises are indeed increasing the number of people in poverty, considered in its multifaceted dimensions. In this context, the emergence of downscaling micro-strategies and practices represents a potential prime mover towards more structured welfare strategies and politics. On the other hand, micro-strategies and practices could be upscaled through interconnections among foodspaces and between these and the city. Three case studies are thus analysed to underline foodspaces' potential in generating welfare networks. In these examples, residential and domestic spaces are reconfigured in strict relation to urban spaces, designing urban infrastructures for collective care. Considering these premises, the main objective of this contribution is to unveil foodspaces potential as potential devices towards the welfare re-territorialisation.

Keywords: foodspaces, welfare strategies, proximity networks.

Food as a central dimension of poverty. An introduction

Among the various challenges of the contemporary world, in the last decades, research started recognising the food system as a potential key driver of the transition towards more liveable, sustainable, and just cities (Pothukuchi, Kaufman, 2000; Feagan, 2007; Morgan, 2009). Recently, research highlighted how diseases and inequalities built by the contemporary food system express and spatialise themselves differently worldwide, underlining unbalances in power relationships (Patel, 2007). The emergence of food-accessibility disparities at a global scale led to prioritising the examination of north-south divides as they constitute their most clear representation, underlining the need to delineate strategies and actions for the Global South, which then gradually reduced the number of people in food poverty². The combined climate change, Covid-19 pandemic and Ukrainian conflict crises recently raised the number of people globally facing food hunger in recent years³, exacerbating existing inequalities. Then, research gradually started investigating the Global North context, giving first attention to extreme conditions again, such as well-known studies on food deserts and connected marginalisation in North America (Coppola, 2012). Despite the specificity of the geographical and social situation, it represents a turning point in the food system-spatial justice nexus perspective. It, therefore, contributed to highlighting its material expression and territorial distribution as well as urban planning responsibilities in drawing these geographies.

These premises suggest the need to deepen the study of the above phenomena and to explore their diverse forms in those contexts where, even though food poverty is less extreme, understanding its impact and distribution seems ever more urgent. What geography emerges

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² The percentage of people in hunger decreased globally from 12.1% in 2005 to 7.5% in 2017 (<https://www.fao.org/hunger/en/>).

³ E.g., after 2015, the Prevalence of Undernourishment indicator (i.e., the percentage of the population with insufficient habitual food consumption for maintaining an active and healthy life, as defined by FAO) started increasing up to 8.0% in 2019, 9.3% in 2020 and about 9.8% in 2021 (FAO *et al.*, 2022, p. 11).

from such a food poverty exploration in these contexts? Which other forms of poverty can be related to it? What role can foodspace play in intercepting these fragilities?

From food poverty to foodspace as a fragility-interceptor space

In recent years, in many wealth contexts of the Global North, poverty has arisen again as a structural issue (Maino, Lodi Rizzini, Bandera, 2016). In 2022, in Italy, people living in poverty were 9.4%, while fifteen years before, the phenomenon affected only 3%⁴ (Caritas Italiana, 2023). In its 2023 summary report, Caritas Italiana⁵ highlights the increasing poverty's multidimensionality in Italy. Therefore, more than half of their users manifested at least two levels of need, the most common of which are economic fragility, occupational and housing uncertainty, familiar issues, physical and mental health, and migrations.

In this context, the city of Trieste (in the Friuli Venezia Giulia region, north-eastern Italy) represents an interesting case study for exploring the foodspace-welfare nexus. Therefore, Trieste's socio-geographical conditions – such as the close presence of the national border and the geographical marginal position in the Italian context – exacerbate some of its fragilities concerning the various dimensions of poverty. At the same time, an existing network of actors, spaces, and practices is intercepting and trying to reduce poverty through foodspaces. This network also represents a fertile and active social and spatial tissue to be studied, implemented, and informed by case studies from other contexts.

Poverty as a multifaceted question

In recent years, in the city of Trieste, the number of people living in fragile states increased (Caritas Trieste, 2022; Fondazione Luchetta, 2023) and chronic⁶ and intermittent⁷ poverty persisted⁸. Despite the historical widespread of services for fragile people⁹, this condition suggests the partial inability of existing urban welfare services to intercept poverty's multiplicity. Indeed, the contemporary world's complexity provides a multifaceted photograph of poverty-related fragilities and makes the phenomenon even more jagged. At the same time, this condition represents a design opportunity in which poverty-related fragilities' spatialisation can inform welfare spaces' typology, organisation, and location in the urban context. Making visible the diverse levels of poverty is thus central to urban design and planning and reviewing the phenomenon through its multiple facets.

Among Caritas Trieste's data (2022), some aspects seem particularly relevant to the design question. Firstly, the relationship between health and poverty: the increase of over-55 people in poverty is strongly related to health issues, introducing socioeconomic and healthcare conditions leading to premature ageing. Secondly, solitude and social isolation affect people who are usually already in a fragile state, and this is particularly intense for the large number of elderly living in Trieste¹⁰, with more than a quarter experiencing solitude (Tonerio, 2023). In addition, the 850 minors within the families supported by Caritas Trieste also introduce the relationship with education as they are more likely to encounter discriminating and cognitive difficulties as adults. Moreover, other contemporary phenomena – such as the energy crisis and the persistence of food poverty – further stress fragile situations. Finally, the presence of asylum seekers and people in transition represents an additional level of fragility, increasing uncertainties in unveiling the fragile urban social tissue and, consequently, in building effective human- and place-based strategies for an (at least partial and tentative) solution.

⁴ Since the beginning of 2022, the increasing number of Ukrainian citizens significantly increased poor people's percentage. However, even excluding this effect, they amount to 4.4% (Caritas Italiana, 2023).

⁵ Their task is to promote personal development and social justice, particularly for people in fragile states.

⁶ People supported for at least five years.

⁷ People living on the verge and unstably independent are more fragile in relation even to events of a small entity, which could make them easily return to poor conditions.

⁸ This affects 48% of the more than 5000 people contacting Caritas' listening centres (Caritas Trieste, 2022).

⁹ E.g., with the Habitat Microaree programme (<https://habitatmicroaree.online.trieste.it/>).

¹⁰ The city's population average age is more than 48, with 265 over-65 people/100 under 15 (https://www.istat.it/it/files//2022/03/Focus_Censimento-permanente-della-popolazione_Friuli_Venezia-Giulia.pdf).

Foodspaces: existing practices in Trieste

Therefore, food poverty is only one of the various fragility dimensions affecting the contemporary condition. In Trieste, the progressive development of diversified food micro-strategies and practices underlines the gradual emergence of multiple forms of poverty as a potential design core for the foodspaces-welfare nexus, whose main actors are parishes and associations. Some of their practices do not seem to impact space, such as food surpluses redistribution to families in poor conditions by the *Trieste recupera* association¹¹. On the other hand, some actions occur in public spaces and temporarily but regularly transform them, such as the case of *Montuzza* friars¹² practices – distributed in baskets and usually consumed in informal open spaces close to their church – and the *Linea d'Ombra* voluntary organisation¹³, distributing food to asylum seekers in the train station square.

Furthermore, Caritas Trieste is a central organisation in the urban food-redistribution network. Indeed, it disposes of structures specifically dedicated to food processes and takes resources from institutional funds, food banks, private donations, and distribution surpluses. Recently, it started articulating and differentiating its services and spaces, attempting to respond to various poverty, fragility, and marginalisation forms. At least three foodspaces are central to diffusing different spatial answers, integrated by some practices (e.g., food package distribution) and equipment (e.g., the means of transport for food distribution) with no spatial impact. The first space, the kitchen, is where they prepare meals for both individuals or families living in Caritas' residences and homeless people. The second space, the refectory, is the main consumption space, a low-threshold facility located in the building close to the kitchen. Users are mostly asylum seekers and people in transition, while residents represent a small percentage. Thanks to the contact between users and volunteers, the refectory also constitutes a central space for intercepting and addressing other needs – such as health issues and solitude¹⁴. Finally, the solidarity emporium is a small supermarket where residents (in this case, mainly working poor) can buy food by paying with a 'points card' whose value depends on the household size and income. Free choice and autonomy are central to this space's idea, enabling people to purchase and transform food independently within their houses. In the emporium, distribution is thus the central food phase, while transformation and consumption happen elsewhere.

It seems thus now relevant to highlight how existing food micro-strategies and practices suggest the need for integration with other actions, practices, and actors within the city. Therefore, this process could generate a progressively diffused and differentiated network of place-based practices, where foodspaces should play a central role. Which new spaces could progressively help diversify the response to multiple fragility-related necessities?

Two questions, three case-studies

Two issues seem thus emerging as central matters. The first one questions which welfare politics could effectively support new inclusive and accessible forms of inhabitation, where the collective act of caring should result from democratic and collective negotiation among inhabitants. The second core matter investigates the spatial dimension, investigating possible design strategies for creating original forms of coexistence starting from food. Foodspaces could thus come out of house boundaries intertwining with the city and start organising and configuring complex urban infrastructures for collective care (Bassanini, 2008; Belingardi, Castelli, 2019; Davis, 2022; Chincilla, 2022; Marinelli, 2002; 2015).

Three case studies are thus analysed, in the attempt to shed light on some possible tentative solutions rather than outlining a final answer. Selected projects seem particularly relevant due to the central but different roles foodspaces and practices play in spatialising inclusive,

¹¹ Literally 'Trieste recoups': <https://www.triesterecupera.it/home>.

¹² <https://www.montuzza.it/mensa-dei-poveri/>.

¹³ <https://www.meltingpot.org/tag/linea-dombra-odv/>.

¹⁴ As emerged during an informal interview with Caritas Trieste Foundation (January 2024), solitude as a reason for attending the refectory concerns people in transition and asylum seekers as well as residents, especially the elderly.

affordable, and innovative politics through the project. At the same time, the proposed case studies represent different interpretations of foodspace as a broader urban infrastructure for collective care, potentially extending beyond the domestic while influencing and organising urban spaces (Puigjaner, 2019; 2023).

The solidarity restaurant

In Milan, the Ruben restaurant¹⁵ hosts disadvantaged people by selling dinner for 1 euro. Its simple but playful environment helps valorise the donation of a meal and dignify the act of receiving it. The restaurant was built as the core element of *Oltre il cibo*¹⁶, a social housing and professional reinsertion project within the *QuBi* programme¹⁷, whose main objective is reducing food poverty. The core project idea is decreasing inhabiting uncertainties through consumption spaces, overcoming the concept of the solidarity restaurant as a concluded project. The house then constitutes an opportunity to build virtuous networks for territorial care, employing economically and socially disadvantaged people. The *Spazio Aperto e Servizi* and *Cascina Biblioteca* cooperatives thus collaborated within the *Giambellino 143* project to renovate and comply five flats – two- and three-room apartments within mixed blocks of flats (i.e., including both private and public housing) – while involving and hiring ten restaurant users. In 2018 the flats' renovation and compliance were completed, providing different forms of inhabitation. The first, composed of two flats, houses families in extreme poverty with babies. The second space, made of two other flats, gives social hospitality during emergencies and is thus characterised by a high resident turnover. Finally, the Municipality suggested a family for occupying the fifth flat.

Within this project, the organisation of the kitchen is independent of the private dwelling's reconfiguration. Despite this, it is central to generating a territorial solidarity network offering accessible inhabiting solutions to socially and economically disadvantaged people, involving privates, public actors, and associations.

The collective kitchen

Cabanon de Symon is an inclusive housing project sustained by the French government and built by the *Simone de Cyrène* association, in Marseille. Within its houses, people with and without disabilities live together in a community progressively opening to other neighbourhood dwellers. This is the case of Evelyn and René, two elderlies living in an apartment in front of the inclusive housing project. *Cabanon de Symon* is both a collective kitchen and a space for creativity and socialisation. The environment is simple and flexible, with transparent glass walls encouraging visibility between built and open spaces. The well-known architect's organisation Collectif Etc.¹⁸ designed the project and managed its construction site, which included a participating process involving *Cabanon's* inhabitants in the kitchen building process.

Three main elements are central to the organisation of its spaces. The first – the most intimate environment – consists of about 30 square meters, including a small kitchen area, and a bathroom. However, the second space represents the core element for inclusion. Indeed, the collective kitchen fosters gathering, exchange, and convivial practices. Painted wooden panels cover one of the walls and can be transformed into tables when needed. The third element is the relationship with the neighbourhood, facilitated by the overlooking towards the street. *Cabanon's* proximity space – a footpath along a residential street – is often the theatre of food preparation and consumption. The street thus becomes a place for sharing everyday practices, both among the *Cabanon's* inhabitants and between them and others. Even though the design purposes did not consider this street use explicitly, urban proximity represents a central aspect

¹⁵ It was built by the Pellegrini Foundation in 2014 within the Giambellino neighbourhood in Milan.

¹⁶ Literally 'beyond food', the project was supported by the Pellegrini Foundation, Ruben Volunteers Association, *Spazio Aperto Servizi* (literally, 'Open Space Services') Social Cooperative, and Cariplo Foundation.

¹⁷ In 2017, the Cariplo Foundation founded the programme (<https://ricettaqubi.it/ricetta-qubi/>), sustained by Intesa Sanpaolo and the Foundations Peppino Vismara, Romeo ed Enrica Invernizzi, *Fiera Milano*, and Snam.

¹⁸ <http://www.collectifetc.com/realisation/le-cabanon-de-simon/>.

of the proper realisation of the project. Preserving and developing social relationships and dwellers' autonomy is encouraged by public transport stops, stores, and services proximity.

The urban farm

La *Ferme du Rail* is an agro-urban space in Paris connecting agricultural production, work, residences, and professional reinsertion practices for fragile people. A multidisciplinary group¹⁹ promoted the tangibly utopian farm project, including various types of spaces for responding to social and environmental issues and offering new forms of inhabitation. The organisation of the agro-urban system consists of private residences guaranteeing both intimate and private spaces and collective environments allowing and fostering gathering activities. The first space, the farm, employs about twenty people in addition to residents, working in productive greenhouses, a mushroom bed, and permaculture, aquaponics, and sack farming plantations. Secondly, the residences include fifteen accommodations for housing fragile and under professional reinsertion people and five further houses for students. Central architectural and urban design devices are tables in open spaces, transparent glass walls allowing the sight to the affordable restaurant's inner spaces opened to the street, and – on the upper floor – greenhouses where raw materials for the kitchen are grown. Underneath the restaurant, a tiny wooden building houses approximately twenty people under professional reinsertion and students from the Breuil school, the *École des Ingénieurs de la Ville de Paris*, and the *École Speciale d'Architecture*. The open spaces' design involves a wide range of materials promoting biodiversity and guaranteeing sustainability²⁰, with particular attention to recycling resources²¹ and practising composting.

The ethics of relationship-centred care is dominant, highlighted as a necessary condition for inhabiting the planet while reciprocally relating to humans and other living beings. Ecological construction principles enrich the project from the architectural viewpoint while constituting a virtuous environment for people working and living within its spaces. Moreover, the project's social engagement is well represented by some associations involved (the *Travail et Vie* association works for the professional reinsertion of precarious, and the *Bail pour Tous* association for guaranteeing fair and high-quality dwellings to people in difficulty).

Partial conclusions and perspectives

Intertwining the Triestine case study with analysed projects provides some elements informing new foodspaces-welfare nexus' interpretations. Some questions seem particularly relevant to overcome the traditional idea of food poverty towards the concept of foodspaces as fragility-interceptor spaces.

The foodspaces-welfare nexus: some elements for new perspectives

The first matter questions the foodspaces' role in reinventing the welfare-dwelling connection. On the one hand, the examples show how guaranteeing the "right to food" (Rodotà, 2014) is central to intercepting other fragility dimensions while generating virtuous processes such as professional reinsertion. On the other hand, when food preparation, consumption, and sharing spaces are central, inhabiting actions can develop collaborative and care-oriented practices.

In the welfare renovation process, overcoming the tight relationship between the right to food and food poverty is central. Recognising food practices as intrinsic caring communities' generators is thus fundamental for a foodspaces' change of perspective from charity-oriented to enabling- and collective care-centred, capable of intercepting the multifaceted dimensions of poverty as a foodspaces-welfare nexus' core question. Going beyond the reuse rhetoric represents an intermediate but necessary step, now strictly correlating the struggle against food poverty through food surpluses' redistribution. This step is fundamental for at least two

¹⁹ The project won the Reinventing Paris programme launched in 2003 by the Municipality to promote restoration projects. It involved socially committed associations, architects, and landscape designers (<https://www.fermedurail.org/>).

²⁰ E.g., using recyclables or requiring low maintenance.

²¹ E.g., recovering rainwater and reducing water consumption.

reasons. Firstly, if reducing losses within the whole food system is a sustainability objective, food surpluses' relevance within redistribution practices seems at least inconsistent. Secondly, this rhetoric challenges marginalised people's enabling processes, emphasising their dependence on what the food system throws away.

The spatial dimension of enabling processes: multiple scales

The second issue informs the spatial dimension and its potential role in guaranteeing enabling processes across various scales. At the architectural scale, the analysed projects focus on thresholds rather than private spaces. Even though intimacy and privacy need to be ensured also in collective housing structures, the threshold between shared environments and the spaces beyond them is thus fundamental. Moreover, sharing spaces' accessibility is central in both the *Cabanon* and the *Ferme du Rail* projects. In the first case, *Cabanon's* transparent glass walls – facing the street and the walking path – design a fordable threshold, where community practices occasionally dump beyond inner spaces within the neighbourhood. In the second case, the *Ferme di Rail's* terrace – a hybrid space, which is also an access and a collective space – is the threshold towards the affordable restaurant. While revealing the productive activities happening inside, it also constitutes the physical relationship between the urban context – on top of the difference in height within the site – and the lower level, consisting of the horticulture space and the home's access. Even though making the kitchen visible is necessary, the minute reconfiguration of thresholds as transitional spaces between the various inhabiting dimensions (intimacy-sharing; individual-collective; collective-public) is crucial.

At an urban scale, the partially centralised organisation of the Triestine foodspaces' network suggests a dual interpretation. From the management viewpoint, this is certainly the most effective and economically sustainable since it reduces distances and makes their foodspaces recognisable. However, in overcrowding periods – especially in summer, when the migration flow is more intense – their foodspaces tend to lose their social and fragility-interceptor role due to the high users-volunteers ratio. This condition suggests a widespread distribution within the urban context as more effective in answering to diffused and diversified forms of fragility, marginalisation, and poverty.

Between public, private, and mediating actors

The third question concerns the role of actors. Both the analysed projects and the Triestine network's urban organisation suggest the need for public administration involvement within these processes. Therefore, this is necessary for overcoming the single operator's understandable economic sustainability viewpoint while implementing its resources and prioritising social-based spaces' diffusion. The democratic negotiation of caring thus reaffirms the need for a strong public actor's agency in increasingly complex multi-actor processes. Its potential impact should involve, for example, reconfiguring balances between actors, creating alliances with privates, finding ways in legislative intricacies for experimenting with innovative forms of welfare and producing innovative spatial rootings of shared and democratic dwelling.

Even though public actors are necessary, the case studies show how strong mediating actors are central to emplacing caring spaces. Their agency guarantees and promotes emplacing practices of collective care, overcoming the construction process. On the one hand, mediating actors are fundamental to ensuring spatial design and realisation. On the other hand, they also safeguard the democratic sharing of caring practices while preventing excessive interferences with intimate dwelling. In the case of France, central figures for guaranteeing the process fulfilment are the *bailleur social* – a lessor specialised in social house building and managing and authorised to ask for subsidies and funding – and the 'care supervisor'.

Authorship attribution

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