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Silos in Trieste, Italy

A Historical Shelter for Displaced People

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When you arrive by train in Trieste, a city in the northeast of Italy on the border with Slovenia, a huge historic building welcomes you just a few metres from the station: the so-called *Silos*. The word 'Silos' literally means a container. It was built as a granary in the commercial hub under the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the mid 1800s, during a period of rapid economic growth. The enormous warehouse covers a vast area of 45,000 sq.m, and for a long time was a tangible symbol of Trieste's wealth, which originated in its strategic position as a place for maritime transit between the Balkans and Central Europe. *Silos* was built as a huge three-storey warehouse, with a central body at the front behind that lies a long, open air space for railway tracks and freight trains. It was built using the then recently discovered technique of concrete construction and still today its location in the heart of the city is a prominent example of industrial architecture dominating the urban panorama of Trieste. It was originally constructed for purely practical purposes, as a port facility for storing grain at the edge of the quay by the sea. The trains that entered it 'loaded or unloaded goods directly from two long sheds' (Semerari and Tamaro 1998: 162).

Today, this enormous structure is private property, mostly abandoned after a fire. The one exception is a small area, occupied by a pay car park and a coach station, which is the last stop in Italian territory. After the original edifice burned down in 1994, only the facades remained, which stood

as a sort of infrastructure or a mask, surviving on three sides of the building. The old walls still house beautiful floor slabs and structures that are no longer fit for use, but since 2014, many refugees and asylum seekers have been occupying this vast empty area, mostly from Afghanistan and Pakistan. They have populated the space on the ground floor with makeshift shelters, tents, cardboard boxes, blankets and rags. The average number of migrants settled in *Silos* has varied from between 50 and 150 people, but this represents only the latest layer of several streams of displaced people who have moved through the building over the past seventy years. In this chapter, I draw comparisons between the way *Silos* has been used in the past and the way it is used in the present. The aim is to illustrate how a single refugee shelter can accrue layers of meaning, becoming a regular reference point for journeys due to its important strategic position. My central argument is that the benefit of spaces like this lies in their flexibility: they are located at important crossroads, yet informal enough to develop social spaces that allow mobility and a form of partial protection on the move. In terms of structure, this chapter first looks at 'then' – the history of the shelter – before turning to 'now', discussing the same building today.

Then

The decline of Trieste as a border town began in the first half of the twentieth century, with the outbreak of the two world wars (Ara and Magris 1987). In 1938, Trieste was chosen by Mussolini as the venue to announce his new racial laws; consequently, in December 1943, *Silos* became the last gathering place for Jews and the departure point for the first train to Auschwitz. It was the first time *Silos* had been used as a container for people rather than grain. It worked as a collection point for those interned in the Risiera S. Saba, the only camp in Italy with an operating crematorium. Between December 1943 and the spring of 1945, 159 trains departed from *Silos* in Trieste, transporting them to their final destination. As a plaque on its façade reminds us, *Silos* constituted the last gathering place and departure point for many Jews, who waited and were collected there for a journey with no return.

   At the end of the Second World War came the Treaty of Paris (1947) and the London Memorandum (1954). Subsequently, a large flow of Italian refugees leaving Istria and Dalmatia were hosted in *Silos*, which became the main centre of aid and first reception for people fleeing from the east. There are no official statistics even today, but historians more or less agree that an average of 280,000 Italian exiles escaped from the territory handed over to Yugoslavia under the socialist regime of Marshal Tito (Pupo 2005). Indeed, between 1943 and 1956, almost the whole of the Italian population of Istria and Dalmatia moved to Italy in several migration waves due to the effects

of the war (Ballinger 2003). *Silos* became a 'CPR' or Refugee Collection Centre, which registered the new arrivals and provided an identification card for recognition and assistance. One-third of the Italian exodus from what became Yugoslavia remained at their first stop, Trieste. This use of *Silos* as a centre for first reception is well described in many archival sources and in literature. Indeed, in a novel written by Marisa Madieri, the wife of Claudio Magris, the daily life in *Silos* is depicted particularly vividly. The ground, first and second floors were almost completely dark, with no natural light, while the third floor was illuminated by large skylights in the roof that could never be opened. Thousands of Italian refugees were camped for several years here in the 1950s, and on each floor the space was divided by wooden walls into many small compartments, called 'boxes'. Each was placed right next to the other with no intervals, 'like cells of a beehive' (Madieri 1998: 68). Such sources underline that refugees felt like a series of numbers, living in modular *loculi*, in a kind of small artificial city set apart. *Silos*, in this period, was sometimes called 'the village' by refugees – a place for exiles in the heart of the real town.

The identical 'boxes' in *Silos* were all composed of two rooms. In the case of a family, there was one kitchen/dining space and a common bedroom with numerous beds separated only by a curtain. The 'boxes' were sometimes named like villas to customize them, and were also numbered and separated by thin wooden walls, connected and crossed by internal alleys named by the refugees after their place of origin. Inside the camp, there was a hierarchy based on a system of 'first come first served', sometimes disrupted by personal power. The most coveted 'boxes' were those close to the few windows or those on the third floor with sunlight, as walking through *Silos* was often like going through 'a Dantesque landscape, a nocturnal and smoky purgatory' (Madieri 1998: 68). The worst problem was the smells: a mixture of canteen, kitchen, refugee camp and sweat. Sources recount the pungent smell of the disinfectant used upon their arrival, the situation of total chaos, with temporary beds, straw mattresses and bed bugs. Sources also describe the total lack of privacy and of intimacy. Such conditions have remained etched in the memory of the displaced who transited through *Silos*, even though there are also signs of domestication of space, evident in the Christmas photos depicting decorated trees, tablecloths, furniture and posters adorning the plywood walls.

The internal pavilions in *Silos* allowed the refugees to literally share a life as a community: rather than a neighbourhood, it was more a sort of cohabitation, with both positive and negative repercussions. The doors of the boxes were always left open during the day, a common habit that helped them feel less alone in the squalor of exile, but also had more practical reasons, offering more ventilation and lighting. Within such an enormous human container, there was always a background buzz punctuated with

louder pitches of the radio, coughing, screaming and children's crying. The heat in the summer was unbearable, forcing the refugees to spend as much time as possible outside. The harsh winters, with rain dripping from the skylights, obliged refugees to use emergency heaters, which constantly blew the precarious electrical system. There were communal water and sanitation facilities and an external canteen. *Silos* was supposed to be a centre for the initial period of emergency, but actually several witnesses can confirm that they lived there for many years; the youngest attended the state schools in the city, while others organized a chapel in which to pray and to celebrate the Catholic Mass.

It is interesting to observe how this community of the same national language and citizenship tried to interact and to insert itself into the local life of the new town. Often this came with an ingrained sense of shame, because the displaced people were not well accepted by the local residents and had been stigmatized due to political reasons resulting from ethnic conflict and civil war. For many decades, 'refugee' was a common insult among children in Trieste, as heavy as an insult to one's mother or family. Indeed, the meaning of the word 'refugee' is far from neutral and it is important to underline the entanglement of reactions. Like other European resettlement programmes after the war, locals were sceptical about the displaced Italians' unknown past, raising doubts about the reasons they abandoned their homes (Audenino 2016). They were often accused of political infidelity or ambiguity, considered 'not only homeless, but also without a country' and, consequently, 'with no moral and legal ties' (Vernant 1953: 4–5; Salvatici 2007: 71).

Therefore, refugees were looked upon with suspicion: as significant rivals for the few available jobs and public housing. *Silos*, meanwhile, became a place of transit and suffering, inhabited by people stuck between war and normalization. This hub became a 'temporary' centre of hospitality, with all the goods and properties of displaced people stacked and crammed into a nearby warehouse at the city's old harbour. This, famously known as Warehouse 18, is even today full of furniture, pictures, photos, piles of dishes, pots, cutlery, books, personal effects, work tools and chairs, hundreds of wooden chairs stacked one on top of each other, which remain unclaimed and have become the symbolic visual representation of this exile (Altin and Badurina 2018: 192–93). The warehouse is located in a special area of the old port in disuse, near *Silos*, where no free circulation is permitted. This has created an extraordinary zone where the objects of ordinary daily life have been interrupted, a kind of frozen frame of domesticity in other times and spaces. It is of course particularly ironic that this has taken place in a port and a train station, which also symbolize mobility and movement.

The goods and chattels are still waiting to be reclaimed by their owners, who were expected to come for them once they had settled into new homes.

But the displaced people who gradually moved out of *Silos* in the 1950s and 1960s were spread out to other structures, when the Italian government set up camps on the Karst Plateau, an area largely inhabited by the Slovenian minorities. The camps, designed with housing in wooden shacks, were built near the Yugoslavian border in order to colonize the territory linguistically through the presence of the Italian refugees. These so-called Istrian 'villages' were planned with a view to maintaining cohesion among the Italian exiles, and later still the barracks were replaced with apartment buildings as a campaign of 'public housing' for the displaced. In the meantime, many refugees moved elsewhere, throughout the Italian peninsula or abroad, leaving their possessions behind in the warehouse 18 near *Silos*.

Now

After the 'Arab Spring' and the subsequent Syrian Civil War, the Balkan route resumed its old function as an overland passage from the East to Central Europe. *Silos* therefore once again became a refugee shelter, a space of first arrivals. Part of the roof still covers the half-abandoned, semi-destroyed area of the historical building and, together with its thick walls, it provides partial protection and shelter. However, on its own, the structure is insufficient as a cover and in 2013–14, in an unobtrusive and semi-invisible way, the first of many cardboard houses were built in the internal colonnade, with wire, ropes, cardboard boxes and other materials. In 2015, which became known as the 'the year of the Balkan route', over 850,000 people travelled to Central Europe over land, mostly through Greece and the Balkans. Many were passing through on their way to more northerly destinations, but at the end of 2016, around 950 asylum seekers had arrived to stay in Trieste, with approximately 50–100 of them finding no form of formal hospitality except in *Silos*. The advantage of this location was partly its accessibility: only a plastic fence divided the edifice from the railway and coach station a few metres away, so it was easy to locate and move into.

In 2016 and 2017, when the flow of people along the Balkan route slowed down, the number of asylum seekers in Trieste actually increased. A group of predominantly young males, aged twenty to thirty from Afghanistan and Pakistan, arrived overland after being smuggled over many Eastern European borders, often reporting physical violence on the way. After border closures throughout Europe, many became trapped in places like Trieste, so the numbers of asylum seekers in the city grew. A long experience with the previous inflow of refugees generated a system of integrated hospitality to deal with this inflow, which had neither a purely authoritarian nor a purely humanitarian character (Basaglia 1987; Fassin 2012; Verdirame and Harrell-Bond 2005). The system was organized through an agreement

between the Prefecture, the Municipality and local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) allocating asylum seekers to one of a network of scattered accommodation in small apartments or facilities, such as hotels or hostels in disuse. After their personal data was registered by the police and the state authorities, the migrants were entrusted by the prefecture to NGOs, which housed them in various structures with a maximum of seventy hosted per establishment. Each group of refugees was supported by a social worker, and NGOs gave them legal, medical and financial support. Nevertheless, they needed to actively throw themselves into local life in order to meet their needs.

The demographic decline and large number of elderly people in Trieste has allowed this system to fill empty houses and promote interaction between Italians and refugees. The asylum seekers tend to spend an average of two years living in small groups of the same nationality. By grouping people together in this way, refugees and other migrants are able to organize the house according to their idea of 'homing'. The difference with those living in isolated camps and barracks (cf. Altin and Minca 2017) is therefore evident: rather than waiting in a state of emergency where normal life is suspended, people in the more formal system can generate stability and a sense of community. However, the weakness of this system is its inability to provide immediate hospitality for large numbers: it cannot operate at scale. *Silos* therefore works as a buffer and decompression area in the event of mass arrivals. Everyone knows exactly what the situation in *Silos* is – and the police occasionally evict the refugees and clear out all their belongings – but after a while, everything goes back to the way it was before. Indeed, the area of *Silos* represents a black hole: a compromise that emerges from the lack of a large hub, but at the same time provides a free space for the refugees' agency. As a low threshold shelter, it is a place of rest for new arrivals in search of protection, but also a choice for people on the edge, who prefer initially to avoid the rigid apparatus of hospitality and want to resist being labelled as a bureaucratic category (Zetter 1991).

Therefore, the contemporary function of *Silos* is not only to provide a roof but also a sense of 'home' in this new unknown world, whose rules and procedures for asylum are constantly changing. In a context of increased biopolitical checks, such as fingerprints, x-rays for minors and so on, informal spaces like *Silos* offer some kind of protection or respite from surveillance. Most Afghan and Pakistani refugees arrive from the same region, the Khyber Agency in the North West Frontier, where they speak the same languages (Urdu and Pashto). As soon as they cross the Italian border, they can find in *Silos* some countrymen who provide information on their ethnic migration network. Indeed, behind *Silos* there is a large square where asylum seekers gather; even those provided with hospitality in the formal system prefer to stay here, in 'their' part of the city life, close to the centre.

They come here to talk, to play ball or cricket, and then, in the evening, they return home. It is a sort of village square and information point, a place in constant movement. Of course, it does not exist in isolation, but is part of a much wider sheltering process that includes a range of other and more formal services: the day centre for homeless people, soup kitchens, health services and NGO sites, which are all in the nearby central area.

In the huts built under the arches in *Silos*, one can find three types of migrants: irregular migrants with expulsion orders, people who have just arrived and also, paradoxically, those who have been accorded the right to international protection in too short a time. The latter have obtained a permit to stay and to travel in the European Union, but no access to the formal hospitality services of the state. If they have not had enough time to learn the Italian language, they are not able to settle or to organize their life independently, so some refugees prefer to have their first application for the status of international protection rejected in order to appeal and obtain social assistance while waiting for the procedure of recognition to be concluded. *Silos* therefore houses an 'overflow' of migrants, both in terms of numbers, when they find no hospitality, and as a form of 'surplus' humanity: displaced, rejected, undesirable (Agier 2011). However, the ambivalence of this shelter, today as in the past, is to serve as a protective and collective space, but also as a place where migrants are pushed back to the margins, to abandoned spaces, to no man's land. On the one hand, the semi-abandoned structure provides unorganized protection and semi-invisibility to the migrants. On the other hand, it allows them to get to know public spaces and practise their everyday interactions. This partial protection and invisibility escapes any controls and bureaucratic procedures, constituting a kind of social infrastructure, a buffer zone in the process of inclusion/exclusion. Migrants in transit use *Silos* as an anchorage or a temporary settlement, when they need an interim place to rest or, again, get into contact with other refugees.

Conclusion

Silos is a site with historical layers. While long being used as a refugee shelter, there have been changes in its function and use. For the last eighty years, the same building has served as a prison, a reception camp, and finally as an informal shelter occupied by the Afghans and Pakistanis in search of international protection. While it was built to hold commodities for a rich multinational empire, it has in the twentieth century been used to shelter people on the move, and its varied functions have included reception, accommodation and detention with functional segregation. All over the world, settlements for refugees and asylum seekers have come to

be known as 'camps', and the various forms of accommodation suggest a process of 'campization' (Kreichauf 2018). This is reflected architectonically and sociospatially in diverse structures, with different living conditions: the camp symbolizes a consolidated and secluded space separated from urban settlements. However, *Silos* allows asylum seekers a central dwelling with no biopolitical controls. It represents a way of resistance through urban practices and identity formation, while also offering some protection after long and dangerous journeys (Malkki 1992; Sanyal 2012).

Indeed, violence along the Balkan route emerges from many of my interviews with residents; after crossing several checkpoints, refugees trust no one and choose not to be biomonitored with fingerprints. Those who have just arrived prefer to be helped by other countrymen with the same languages and cultures, and they would rather have improvised but self-organized cooking facilities and makeshift beds than something more comfortable and formalized. Like the previous displaced Italians in the 1950s, in *Silos* 'homing' means having intimacy with their peers, achieving an almost partial form of autonomy and agency. This shelter represents the first (concrete and symbolic) step to building control over their new lives and to obtaining a settlement with a sense of protection with no external dependency. The building exists at the intersection of various infrastructures, since it is a few metres from the port, the trains and the coach station as well as close to the soup kitchen, hospital and prefecture. It allows new arrivals to start learning the everyday tactics and dwelling in a new country.

In its first era, around 1850, the sea came up as far as the ground floor of *Silos*. It was then used as a customs warehouse because at that time the whole city was a tax-free zone. Currently it is a different kind of 'free zone': used by the refugees arriving via the Balkans in Europe, finding shelter in this peripheral border area. Not accidentally, it also involves a new form of tidemark (Green 2011), a term that has been introduced into the debates to understand the processes of (re)drawing Europe's Eastern peripheries (Ballinger 2016: 44). The image of a tidemark highlights the role of a 'waiting room' for migrants, a liminal zone of transition, which describes the symbolic and tangible floating settlement of *Silos* as a hub and home. This particular environmental position makes *Silos* a perfect place of anchorage for displaced people without a definite path or final destination. The central position allows a process of learning of the local habits through daily interaction with Italian residents. As a buffer zone, it introduces a slow process of mutual knowledge for both the hosting and hosted parties, without the stress and the fear caused by the isolated organized refugee camps. In this sense, we can observe a process of a free choice of 'homing' in transit, an interstitial area where it is possible to stay without undergoing rigid controls. Whereas in large and formal reception centres the refugees become too visible, ending up trapped in the processes of racialization and territorial

stigmatization, *Silos* allows mobility and a place of partial protection on the move.

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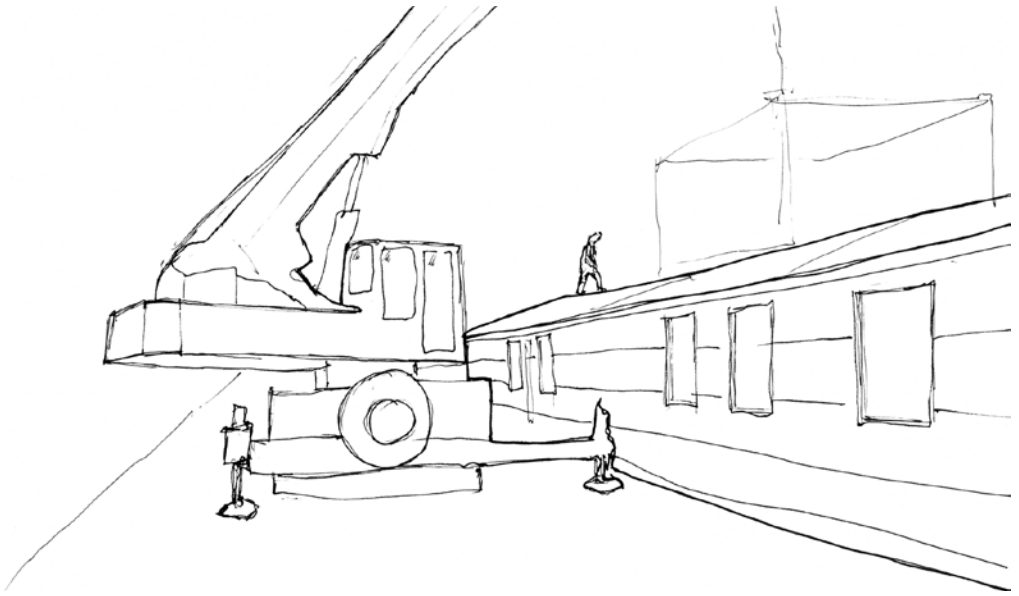
Figure 16.1 Modular shelter from the 'Refugee Villages', Denmark. © Mark E. Breeze, based on an image supplied by Zachary Whyte and Michael Ulfstjerne.