# A "space" of one's own: identity and conflict in two Milan districts

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## Abstract

The article is based on a qualitative data collection on the city of Milan, paradigmatic city as a neoliberal city, at the centre of recent urban, economic and social transformations. In particular, the essay compares the urban space s of two districts of the city, reflecting on spatial categories, recent transformations, forced cohabitations in interclosed and in-between spaces. Drawing on the classics of sociological literature, and on the most recent theoretical proposals of urban g eography studies, the essay attempts to define how and on the basis of which factors urban conflict in the global metropolis has changed.

**Keywords** Urban security and safety · Conflict · Identity · Space

## 1 Urban suburbs in the contemporary city. The case of Milan[1]

Contemporary cities today present a rather complex urban structure: a multiform space difficult to classify, a mosaic of distinct fragments, sometimes agglomerated, each with its own shape, characteristics and populations. These are territories that constitute the "negative" of the city, they are empty spaces that often turn into urban waste, real enclaves. As we will be able to illustrate in the following paragraphs, the concept of periphery can no longer be synthesized in a single spatial dimension, but it connotes parts of cities and marginal human conditions. Peripheries represent, above all, a condition; they are marginal with respect to "powerful" areas where decision-making, cultural and economic activities are concentrated. The city loses its internal coherence and allows itself to be crossed by growing forms of inequality and social polarization.

Jane Jacobs (1961) wrote that cities could provide something for everyone, only because and only when everyone creates them. It is a formula that, on paper, highlights the vital

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[1] While the result of a common reflection, paragraphs 1 and 3 can be attributed to author 1; paragraphs 2 and 4 to author 2. The conclusions are shared.

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link between equality and redistribution that the author connects to the physical spaces, interstices and streets of the American cities that she was observing, and places that were governed by economic and urban models, aimed at the production and reproduction of inequality.

It is a hypothesis that Richard Florida (2002) also proposes after having initially looked confidently at cities as a place dedicated to the rise of the creative class and spaces of possibility, oriented by the values of technology, talent and tolerance. In the recent "The new urban crisis" (Florida 2017) however, Florida argues that that model needs to be revised, because something has gone wrong with the redistribution of wealth.

As Florida argued, it is a geographical iniquity that affects the whole world: with 50 superstar cities where only 7% of the population lives and works, generating 40% of the world economy, and 40 mega-regions (18% of the population) generating 85% of innovation. However, it is also segregation: in the metropolis, gentrification has become "plutocratization", the prices of houses in some districts have risen out of all proportion and the less well-off have had to abandon them, speculators turn buildings into investments and houses are left empty. All this has decimated the middle class: because while the wages of some have risen out of all proportion, those in charge of essential services—education, personal care, transport, security—have stayed the same or decreased (Florida 2017).

The city of Milan, today more than ever, is part of this pattern (Colleoni et al. 2018). After the widespread disintegration of the industrial fabric that had characterized the city, the "moral capital" has been able to reinvent itself through a capacity to attract investments, processes and urban transformations, such as the development of the new areas of Santa Giulia, City Life, Piazza Gae Aulenti and Varesine-Porta Nuova. Between 2014 and 2019, GDP grew significantly in the metropolitan area, in contrast to the national average, and employment in the private sector increased to almost ten percentage points. According to the local Chamber of Commerce report (2020) in the Milan macro-area, in 2019, the growth in added value was 0.9%, a figure that was decidedly higher than the increase achieved both at national ($+0.3\%$) and regional level ($+0.4\%$).

The metropolitan city of Milan confirmed its hegemony, recording the same dynamics at the provincial level as the enlarged area ($+0.9\%$).

At the same time, however, the Diocesan Observatory of Poverty and Resources of Caritas has seen an increase and worsening of metropolitan suffering. In 2018, the listening centres, which were the sources of the research sample, received 13.195 requests. The average number of requests per person increased from 2.8 in 2008 to 4 in recent years, demonstrating a more significant presence of multi-problematic situations of hardship; moreover, 30.7% of the people encountered have been using such services for more than five years and represent situations in which the condition of poverty has now become chronic (Caritas Ambrosiana 2018). To all these elements, it's relevant to add the decimation of the middle class: because while the wages of some have risen disproportionately, those involved in essential services—education, personal care, transport, security—have decreased (Rapporto Eurispes 2020).

The article purposes a secondary analysis of data collected in a European research MARGIN: tackling insecurity in marginalized areas (*A. N° 653,005: May 2015–April 2017), a project funded by the European Commission Horizon 2020 programme.

The Margin project aims to coordinate and support public intervention in the field of (in) security by providing policymakers with high-quality tools for creating and evaluating strategies targeted at the reduction of insecurity among different demographic groups. The research was conducted in five European cities (Milan, Paris, London, Barcelona, Budapest) and was based on a triangulation of qualitative techniques including in-depth

**Fig. 1** The two neighborhoods in the city map

interviews, participant observation and focus groups. The details of the research design included the qualitative phase devoted to a process of qualitative data collection in 10 selected neighbourhoods and the corresponding analysis of 50 in-depth interviews, six months of participant observation and ten focus groups. The participating observation included 300 interviews with residents and city users in the districts studied and an uncovered observation of the daily life of the people under the study. The overall results of the research are available on the official report.[2] The criteria used to select the ten districts in the five European cities analyzed (Barcelona, Budapest, London, Milan and Paris) based on the definition of shared urban security within the project.

The analysis that follows concerns only the city of Milan and two neighbourhoods that significantly represent the above-described transformations. This article's purpose is a reflection on data collected in interviews and focus groups in two districts of Milan: Gratosoglio and the Rogoredo-Santa Giulia district (Fig. 1).

The secondary analysis was carried out on the material resulting from 60 interviews: 10 to privileged witnesses (representatives of law enforcement agencies, citizens' committees,

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[2] The results are available at this page http://marginproject.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Overview-results.pdf). Further analysis can be found in Barabás (2018), Valente and Crescenzi (2019); Valente et al. (2020).

NGOs and public service operators) and 60 to the population living in the two districts and city users and two focus groups (of six people each).[3] The secondary analysis conducted wanted to answer new research questions with existing data. The objective was, therefore, to develop knowledge about how the configuration of the relationships between spaces and identity, with attention given to the conflicts between resident populations starting from data collected for different research purposes. If the Margin research focused on the identification and analysis of the dimensions of urban insecurity from a comparative perspective, the research question of this essay will focus on the study of new forms of conflict in urban interstices.

The research strategy used is that of case studies. Two districts of a metropolis have been studied without the pretension of producing generalizable conclusions. The objective is to describe in-depth two urban suburbs to understand the redefinition of the physical boundaries of a city and the emergence of new spaces.

## 2 Urban interstitial areas and enclosed urban spaces: Gratosoglio and Rogoredo

In recent years, several authors (Castells 1975, 2004; Sassen 2001, 2006, 2014) have highlighted how the processes related to globalization have not only changed the economic, political, social and cultural life of cities, but also how they have transformed their geographical configurations. In contemporary cities, there no longer seems to be a single and coherent logic underpinning spatial and temporal processes; the relationships between the city centre and the suburbs are changing, or rather they tend to blur the boundaries accustomed to considering, distinguishing between the city centre and the suburbs. In urban contexts, while on the one hand the idea of a city centre has not been definitively erased, on the other hand, the centre is expanding, and it is multiplying into innumerable centres (business centres, shopping centres, spaces for public entertainment that spring up beyond the traditional urban area in the suburbs), (Castells 2004). As a result, the traditional concept of the suburbs, i.e. a closed cultural and social universe, a boundary to the established city, inhabited by minorities, characterized by a uniformity of economic, employment and cultural conditions and by problems of social integration, is no longer applicable. Rethinking the suburbs today means thinking of them as a heterogeneous territory, a sort of patchwork in which different populations live together, residential districts and areas of social housing, modern infrastructure and precarious and temporary settlements of migrants, interstitial spaces (Nyers 2018; Brighenti 2009; Lévy-Vroelant 2003). The interesting aspect, in this context of the transformation of the contemporary city, is the redefinition of the internal and external geography of the city's boundaries, understood as physical, political and symbolic mechanisms (Brighenti 2009; Rossi 2017). The social processes induced by globalization transform the forms of space and time in the city, modifying many of its fixed variables, such as central and suburban places. This phenomenon generates, on the one hand, an expansion on the territory of cities and consequently a redefinition of its fixed and linear borders; on the other hand,

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[3] The two focus groups were composed of: members of local police (4 over the two neighborhoods), political figures (the president of local municipality and a member of local neighborhood committee), members of civil society (two school teachers, a priest, two neighborhood activists) and one social worker of harm reduction project as representative of marginalized groups of drug users.

a recomposition of other borders far from their canonical layouts that reconfigure new, delineating spaces, bringing together people, cultures and identities (Castells 2008; Sassen 2001). The redefinition of the physical boundaries of the city, due to the urbanization processes induced by modernity, generates a series of interstitial spaces. Interstitial spaces can be a sort of "neglected spatiality" that we can conceive of as a liminal area that is alien to the prevailing urban rhythm, difficult to classify and characterized by degradation and by a temporary situation of social suspension waiting to be reconnected to the prevailing urban practices (Amin and Thrift 2002; Brighenti 2013; Turner 1967, 1969). Some authors have linked this situation of liminality, of territorial transition, to the so-called "in-between" spaces (Sennett 1991; Hajer and Reijndorp 2001; Shields 1991; Worpole and Knox 2007; Zukin 1991). These spaces are characterized by the degraded and marginal districts of contemporary cities, often abandoned by institutions, populated by social groups with different economic and social capital, language, ways of speaking and often in competition for the use of public spaces. It is difficult to classify such spaces due to the varied population that lives there and the differing settlement situations. However, we can identify two prevalent types: the first type of territory characterized by buildings/industrial or railway areas inhabited by a plurality of actors with lifestyles or routines that monopolize the space, practically excluding the possibility of others being able to benefit from it, with a material exclusion. These are the spaces that are being contested between a series of new urban populations that use them for multiple and diversified purposes. They are, indeed, also spaces in which a culturally homogeneous group of actors makes use of them in such a way that they are perceived by other urban actors as tending to exclude other uses and are therefore preferably avoided, with forms of exclusions based on perception of insecurity. The second type of space refers to an urban settlement of another era, whose importance both on a functional and symbolic level has taken on new meanings. In such a case, the encounter between old and new populations creates problems of communication between different urban cultures in terms of the ways of perceiving and using space. A unifying aspect of these new interstitial spaces comes from the fractures, albeit subtle, that exist between the inhabitants; fractures produced by the diversity of lifestyles, cultural codes, the type of use of the city and the ways of relating to other urban actors (Poli 2007; Rossi 2017). These city spaces, precisely because they take on different values and meanings, become contested places, often the scene of conflict between the inhabitants. Nevertheless, how is the relationship between space and resident populations structured? As Pierre Bourdieu states in his seminal work "The Weight of the World" (Bourdieu 2015), there are "difficult" places, unchosen social spaces, which bring together people who have no contact points, forcing them to cohabit "either in mutual ignorance and incomprehension or else in latent or open conflict—with all the suffering this entails". (Bourdieu 2015: 187).

## 2.1 Urban interstitial areas: the case of Gratosoglio

Speaking of urban spaces, the term 'interstitial areas' refers to the Chicago of the 1920s and the studies of urban sociologists from the Chicago School. Thrasher (1963: 20–33) defined interstitial areas as.

> […] that which belongs to the space between one reality and another. In nature, every foreign substance tends to deposit itself and to encrust itself in every crack, fissure or

hole, that is to say in the interstices. There are also cracks or fractures in the organization of social space. (Thrasher 1963: 20–33).

Interestingly, the gangland represents a territory that constitutes a sort of interstitial barrier inhabited by people without a fixed residence and linked in terms of exploitation to people who manage economic activities in neighbouring areas. Remaining in the context of the Chicago School, Wirth (1928), when speaking about the ghetto, argued that spatial organization and forced isolation inevitably shaped the people who live there both physically and in terms of their personality structure (helping to strengthen specific values or shape attitudes and even pushing them toward some professions rather than others) (Wirth 1928: 57–65). In *The Hobo*, Nels Anderson (1923) also describes "Hobohemia" as a border area, formed as a result of industrial development, and used for economic development, to contain the reserve labour force, capable of adapting to the fluctuations of an expanding market.

More recently, Wacquant (2007) reframed the concept. Wacquant reflections on urban relegation reveals the emergence of a new regime of marginality. Wacquant describes the advanced marginality "advanced marginality tends to concentrate in isolated and bounded territories increasingly perceived by both outsiders and insiders as social purgatories, leprous badlands at the heart of the postindustrial metropolis where only the refuse of society would accept to dwell" (Wacquant 2007: 67). According to the author, these forms of segregation produce the "dissolution of place", "the loss of a humanized, culturally familiar and socially filtered locale with which marginalized urban populations identify and in which they feel 'at home' and in relative security" (Wacquant 2007: 69). Cullen and Pretes (2000) identified two approaches on marginality: recalling Geremek (1979) a classical interpretation of marginality based on economy differences (a region/a city/a neighborhood is marginal when it is away from markets, when it is dependent on primary resources, with a sparse and scattered population, and in general not politically and economically autonomous); a second approach that supports that marginality is primarily a social construction, in which the main determinant seems to be the question of power, its production, reproduction, its configuration and distribution (Cullen and Pretes 2000: 217).

Despite its completely different historical and geographical context, the Gratosoglio district has characteristics that can be identified in the descriptions of Thrasher, Anderson and Wacquant and can be a marginal place (Fig. 2).

Gratosoglio-Ticinello is a neighbourhood located in the Southern area of Milan; a residential neighbourhood made up of inhabitants of social housing programmes of the city of Milan. The current neighbourhood was built in the early 1960s, on the initiative of the IACP (Social Housing institute) of Milano in collaboration with the Municipality of Milan, to give a rapid response to the housing needs resulting from the migratory (internal migration from the south of Italy) pressure of those years.

Gratosoglio is designed by *archistars* BBPR as a "satellite district" following the precepts of modern architecture (in the wake of the French Grand Ensemble). Since its implementation, in 1962, the surrounding context of the neighbourhood has dramatically changed: from a predominantly rural to an urban axis area in constant expansion. Prospective residents were lured to move there by several factors, including the proximity to major motorway junctions and ring roads, the extension of the subway line, the construction of new housing developments and the establishment of extensive shopping and leisure centres. Things did not proceed following the urban plan. The deterioration of the buildings
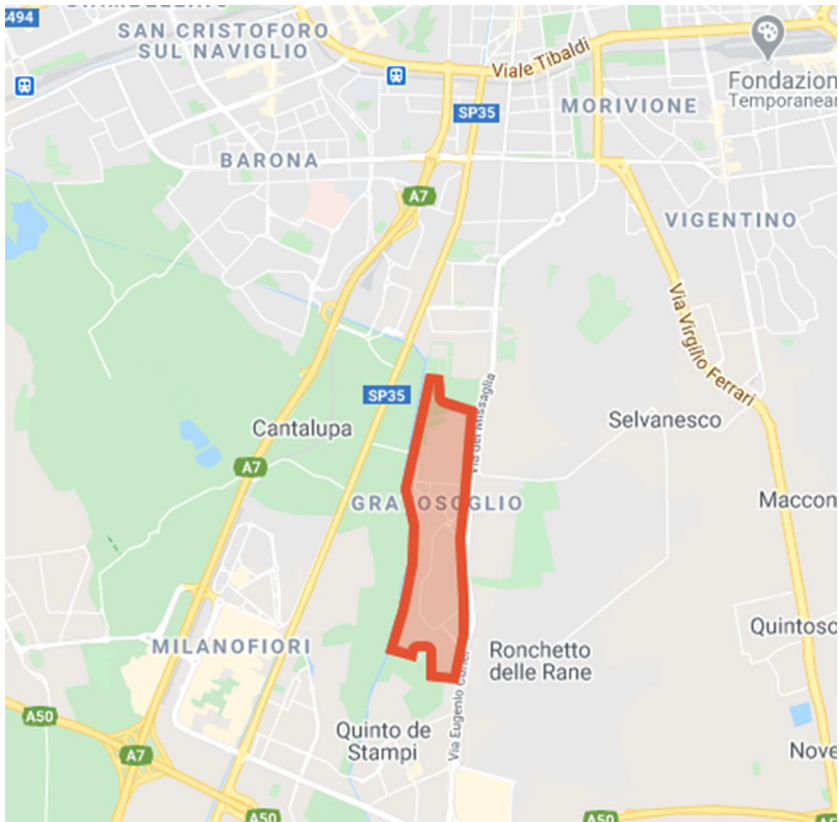
**Fig. 2** Gratosoglio urban area

affects commerce in the area (most shops under the 16-storey towers are empty or closed), and nowadays the neighbourhood is more of a dorm than a living area. The neighbourhood is lightly populated and presents a lower level of education and a higher concentration of older adults (Censis 2019).

The district has an architectural structure and a social composition inextricably linked to social housing. The crowded buildings of the so-called towers, one of which has never been renovated since its construction, are the symbol of a district that is mainly a dormitory town. Despite the initial intentions, it has never become that "vital" residential district that had been portrayed in the project proposals but has suffered a slow depletion, especially of businesses and shops. The district of Gratosoglio represents a sort of "dilapidated" space, characterized by urban degeneration often linked in the public conversation to the presence of diversity and migration. Due to the presence in Via Saponaro of a reception-dormitory-canteen structure managed by the Opera San Francesco, the whole area and the surrounding gardens are configured as a transit area, a dormitory for the homeless and a place inhabited by a population subject to substantial economic and social deprivation. This type of interstitial proximity affects the perception of the residents, who often perceive the structure as a burden and who see themselves in a perpetual state of difficulty due

to the strong presence of migrants both residents in social housing structures, and those who are in transition in the system of urban poverty support.

> In all these years, I have not seen any. I know that once there were gangs but so much was done, and now it is more about the fear of foreigners who could mug you in the dark…there are small poorly lit public gardens that are used as shortcuts, but until they fix them I avoid them and do not go through them, I go around them. These are the big fears. (Local Police, Gratosoglio).
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> Gratosoglio has a significant number of problems: from unemployment to a lack of meeting places for kids, to the problem that no one is looking out for these kids and then there is no relationship between the citizens and the inhabitants of the public housing. I used to live in a place with a courtyard, and people were more united than nowadays. Those buildings, instead, are blocks and there is much mistrust, and there are a lot of second-generation residents. It is nice that there is a mixing of so many cultures. (Teacher, Gratosoglio resident).
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> In Milan, I have seen the differences in the last 20/25 years in a reasonably homogeneous way throughout the city. They are due to what we were talking about before, certainly not from a racist point of view but from a realistic point of view, the arrival of a significant contingent of foreigners has led to changes, both social and daily, that have a significant impact on life and in collecting the testimonies of people on the street this emerges a lot. Twenty years ago, in Milan, even the suburbs were very different from the current ones, and I refer you to what I said before. (Local administrator, Gratosoglio resident).

Nevertheless, residents recognize and differentiate different types of status to the migrants' presence: those living in social housing apartments are "neighbours"; those temporary residents in the reception centre are seen as "invaders".The time lasting presence in the neighbourhood seems, somehow, a reasonable cause of conflict, and right motivation for expulsion, especially if the temporary newcomers seem to enforce the level of deprivation of the area. This economic condition, somehow, is the principal cause of the different use of the public space, that becomes the only space to belong to (Fig. 3).

For this reason, we recall the concept of "hegemonic use of space" of Mouffe (2012). Material conditions, somehow, impose this use and exacerbates the conflict. Gratosoglio is an example in which migration continues to define specific forms of interstitial insertion in a social context in which unemployment, austerity and poverty make Gratosoglio and many other districts of the city of Milan, spaces that are increasingly contested and polarized.

> Here we have another problem, the foreigners, not because they live in the neighbourhood but because they hang out in the area. They are linked to the Casa Gialla (a homeless shelter and a reception centre for migrants ndr.) basically, that does admirable work, but that cannot handle the ordinary lives of people who have nothing to do and who spend the whole day hanging about. Then, if I have understood correctly, there is also a high rate of unemployment among social housing residents. I do not know if they send them here because they are unemployed if it is one of the criteria to get social housing. (Social housing union member, Gratosoglio).

The historical inhabitants consider diversity as something that disturbs what appears to be familiar, undermines the rules of coexistence that are taken for granted, destroys a past and reinforces a sense of insecurity. In particular, this structure of "Casa Gialla" is alien to the
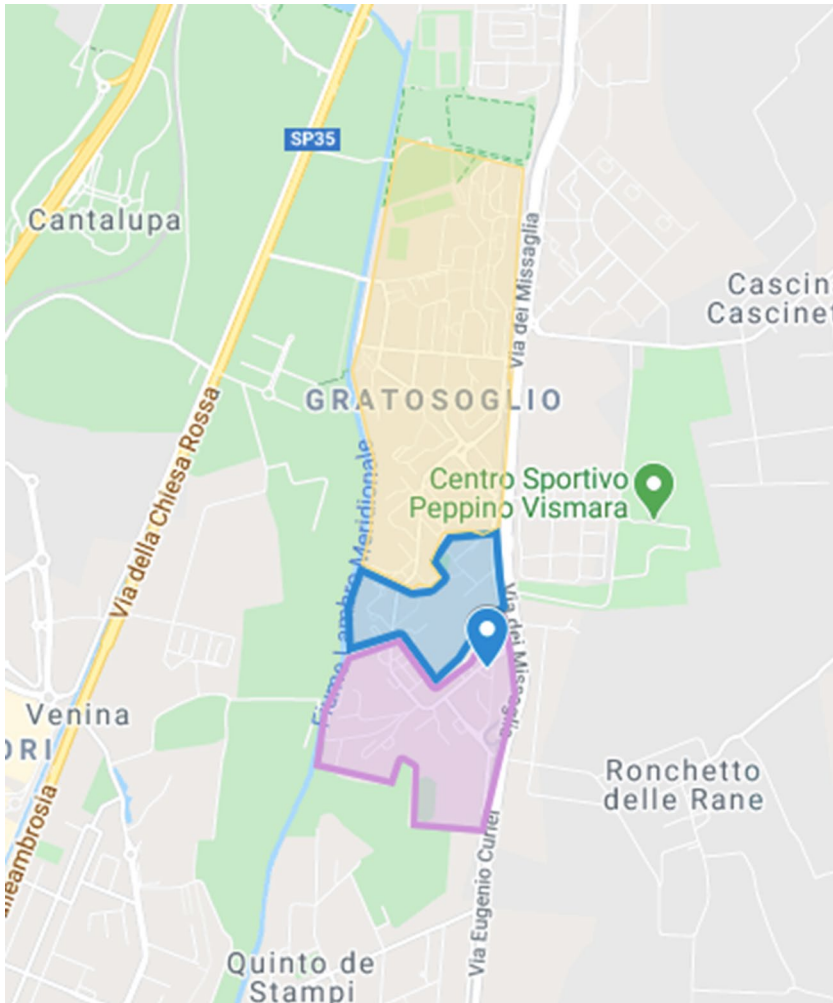
**Fig. 3** Gratosoglio: resident area, social housing area, the margin

territory (in residents' perception) and became a symbol of decisions imposed on the territory of the neighbourhood:

> I believe that it was one of the most politically dismal choices in our neighbourhood, that Casa Gialla. Apart from how it was done: the population was not involved and had to face an experiment in reality with the signing of a thirty-year contract—that is the thing—in the previous municipal administration; so throwing it in a neighbourhood that, among other things, has great difficulty in absorbing such a presence, because it already has many other difficulties. (Local police officer, Gratosoglio).

The spatial segregation of this neighbourhood has a predominantly endogenous nature as a preservation of the cultural identity of a part of the population of old residents who have developed forms of solidarity and mutual assistance. On this basis, space seems to

**Fig. 4** Rogoredo urban area

be relocated into fragmented territorial environments that create boundaries. Boundaries, in this case, differentiate two communities (the old residents and the new mainly migrant communities) from an ethnic point of view (Sennett 1977), but, in this case, more for the time of permanency in the neighbourhood. These boundaries are closed, the expression of a desire of a social group to maintain its identity because of an exclusionary process (Newman 1972, 2003).

### 2.2 Enclosed urban space: the case of Rogoredo

The second case study was Rogoredo-Santa Giulia. The area is in the outskirts of Milan and is administratively included in the zone 4 district. The neighbourhood is well connected to the centre by underground MM3 Rogoredo (since 1991), and the Rogoredo Train Station. It is closed in between the railways and the highway, and this has isolated the urban space, giving it the appearance of a suburb/little village. It has undergone a process of industrialization with the establishment at the end of the nineteenth century of a steel-processing factory (the Redaelli Steelworks). It was precisely the industrial settlements that significantly increased the population of the neighbourhood and determined the urbanization of the area (Fig. 4).

The industrial surroundings created a homogeneous population of working-class inhabitants, and the geography of the space isolated the area, providing the suburb with
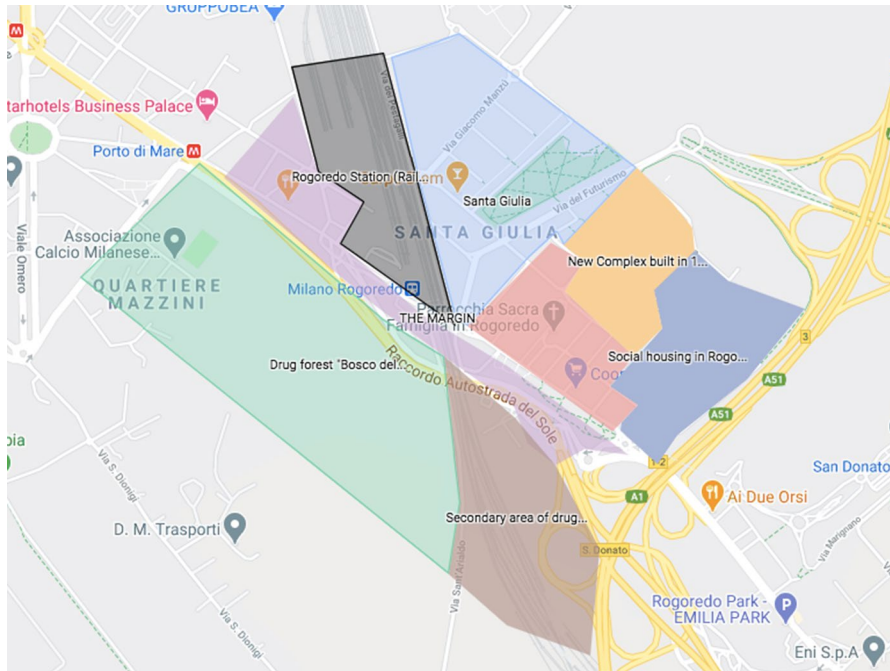
**Fig. 5** Rogoredo: The station, Santa Giulia residential complex, Social Housing area, the drug forest and the margin

the dimension of a community, like a small village. In the mid-2000s, the new neighbourhood of Santa Giulia was established from the dismantled industrial areas occupied by the former Montecatini and Redaelli factories. All of this caused a massive increase in users of the railway hub. The neighbourhood park, set up in the late 1960s along the elevation of the Pontinia overpass overlooking the railway, once belonged to the vast estate of the nearby Abbey of Chiaravalle. The neighbourhood is quite populated and presents a higher level of education than average compared to the city of Milan. The composition of the neighbourhood is multicultural, and the percentage of older adults is considerably less than the average of the city (Census 2014). The neighbourhood is divided into different homogeneous sections. The historical nucleus of the neighbourhood is the core of the suburb; the abandoned area of social housing corresponds to vegetable gardens; the new residential spaces of Via San Mirocle and Santa Giulia represent recent newcomers in the area (station users, National TV station employees, professionals, etc.). The geographic "margin" of the neighbourhood is the park, close to Via Rogoredo and the underpass of Via Orwell. The park seems quiet during the day, even if it is crossed by the coming and going of drug consumers and residents. Also, the context needs a process of adaptation/invisibility to be part of the marginalized space. There is no connection between the vibrant part of the neighbourhood, with its strong sense of community, and the segregated urban space. However, in the last three years, space has been the focus of intense social alarm among residents and in the media, coining the epithet "the drug wood". Social operators of the street unit for harm reduction affirmed that about 600 people per day (regular users) cross the area of the forest station. The characteristics described above refer to spatial segregation caused by exogenous factors that impact on the morphology of the territory, creating closed districts,

the so-called "privatopias" or walled/gated community (Mckenzie 1994) whose access, as well as coexistence, are set by regulations. These closed and self-referential spaces inevitably produce boundaries, territorial fragmentation because of an attitude of rejection and cultural prejudice in the face of diversity, or instead of lifestyles that are different from one's own and that are feared to modify the social environment of one's neighbourhood negatively (Fig. 5).

Somehow, the railway, the motorway bridge and the historical stratification of urban development in the area have defined three different communities: the old community of Rogoredo, that of Santa Giulia, and a sub-cultural and deviant community of grove heroin consumers. The areas are identified in the words of the residents:

> It is a complex neighbourhood because it consists of—if you walk you can see it from Santa Giulia—as they said—is more residential, then there is Rogoredo that is different, then there is San Martino that is different again. It would be nice to be able to create a strong bond from this difference and see what comes out of it. (Social activist, Rogoredo resident).

In the opinions of the interviewees, it is also clear that there is a significant economic and status difference between the residents of the different areas of the neighbourhood:

> We, at least myself, but many inhabitants of Santa Giulia, when they decided to buy here, to invest here, were attracted by a specific type of project […] our vision was of the neighbourhood as represented by the masterplan of the projects, a neighbourhood that frankly set aside to some extent Rogoredo and that we got to know later when we arrived here. We came here because there was a significant redevelopment project in an area that was to become—as they described it—a new centre. (Local committee member, Santa Giulia resident).

The story of the socio-economic transformations of the neighbourhood is a story that conveys the difficulty of building a social bond and identification between the various residents.

> This aspect of the different origins of the various parts of the neighbourhood is something that is undoubtedly a virtue, but it is undoubtedly at the same time, the hard thing. In the sense that you have a neighbourhood like Rogoredo that is structured, in the sense that it has a part of the 1920s and 1930s and another part of significant development of the 1960s because they were merged. Then there was a constant addition of pieces in which, however, there was no real design for the union, in the sense that they were isolated pieces, Santa Giulia was established, San Mirocle that is the area plan, the area plan is these houses behind, in fact, those that live there call it "middle ground". (Social activist, Rogoredo resident n°2).

According to the interviewees, the community ties of the Santa Giulia district have been strengthened because of conflicts with the developers over the redevelopment of the Parco Trapezio area.

The groups maintaining an internal division, have joined forces in relation to the presence of heroin consumers around "Parco delle Rose" in Via Sant'Arialdo and the area of Via Orwell:

The main problem relates to the comings and goings of drug addicts, and therefore to everything that can come from the presence of so many drug addicts in that area. So, the main problem is the problem of seeing these people who are sick, and the associated problem is that, to get the drug, or maybe even there is a time when they are a little less lucid, they can commit crimes. So that is the concern. As I said, here is something that has arrived but in a very isolated way, but it is a problem that is probably on the road to Rogoredo. (Local police officer, Rogoredo).

With different forms, based on very different urban structures (economic and social), the two neighbourhoods observed have developed forms of conflict and polarization concerning a real or perceived "right to the city".

## 3 Urban spaces and social identities

In the previous paragraph, we have seen how the social transformations of recent decades (processes of globalization and restructuring of the economic system, immigration, technological developments, increasing development of illegal drug markets, crises in the protection of the welfare state) have transformed both the structure and functioning of cities, reflecting on individuals, on their way of life, of interpreting social reality and of relating to others. The urban system is configured as an extensive network of interconnected spaces that have their strengths in urban nodes (Borja and Castells 2002). Cities become part of an urban system that no longer follows a logic of territorial continuity but is structured in the function of nodes (urban centres) and axes (flows of goods, people, capital and information) that connect them. In this context of change, the emerging phenomena of the city summarized in fragmentation, complexity, fluidity and flows, profoundly affect the relationship of continuity and significance between inhabitant and local populations (Harvey 1989; Sennett 1991; Bauman 1998; Castells 1996; Putnam 2000). As Sassen (2006) says, we are witnessing the multiplication of boundaries that isolate or interrupt the flow of communication and resources between the different areas that make up the contemporary city, creating new inequalities and disparities between the territories and the people who live there. In increasingly globalized cities, poverty, marginality, illegal drug addicts and consumers and difference are concentrated and sometimes segregated in suburbs or run-down neighbourhoods, ultimately creating intense social polarization in urban spaces where the rich are opposed to the poor, and the indigenous population is opposed to foreigners. New metropolitan models of socio-territorial organization emerge, replacing traditional forms of urban society, neighbourhood and community. The conformation of spaces strongly influences the identity of the inhabitants, just as social practices and relationships shape spaces (Simmel 1998). According to the Simmel concept, space is not considered as an objective fact, but as a condition of existence of social organizations, a property of society. Spatial forms are, therefore, those configurations of social relations that find their concretization in space. For this reason, we believe that the concept of the neighbourhood should not be given a priori, but represents space, the result of the interaction between different subjects and processes, in turn, conveyors and producers of different identities. An urban space, a "neighbourhood", represents the stratification of different identities defined or imposed from the outside in relation to the images one has of that context.

Although some spatial conformations (the urban fabric, popular types of construction, the historical phases that led to its construction, etc..) can be identified and clearly

defined, and often constitute the reference for the lives of the inhabitants or its visitors, a "neighbourhood" remains difficult to define. The urban spaces we consider (Gratosoglio and Rogoredo-Santa Giulia) are very uneven in their social composition, and this diversity arises not only between the inhabitants of the two urban contexts and the rest of the city but also between the inhabitants themselves. The research material collected in the "neighbourhoods" of Gratosoglio and Rogoredo-Santa Giulia shows that it is impossible to think of them as isolated and closed local communities based exclusively on endogenous social relations. Locally-based identities intersect with other identities. As one of the interviewees explains, the Rogoredo district is more reminiscent of a town than a metropolitan space:

> I share the idea of a village because it is a neighbourhood that has a barrier from the rest of the city, consisting of the railway station, so it is closed as a neighbourhood. It is a lively neighbourhood that could be better lived because then you have the feeling of a place where people know each other a bit, where you create divisions, where some innovative tools such as social networks lead to make acquaintances that are sometimes more virtual and to take positions that are sometimes firmly held on specific topics while sitting on your sofa. (Foreigners school teacher, Rogoredo resident).

Social memory, historical identities, as well as urban practices developed in daily life, can represent other sources of meaning. The residential neighbourhood can be one of the multiple worlds of people's lives, where it is possible to choose whether and to what extent to participate in public life, to create social relations and to leave it if local conditions, interests and motivations are no longer present (Janowitz 1951). Moreover, it is widely known that settlement and housing patterns are often "imposed"in cities, which can then have an impact on the establishment of local urban identities. Dwelling may not be a choice, but it can be very much conditioned by urban situations and the dynamics of the real estate market. There are sections of the population that can afford to choose where to live and, as Savage says, "where you live therefore becomes an important identifier, probably the most important, of who you are. The selective process by which people decide to live in certain places and abandon others is at the heart of contemporary battles for social distinction" (Savage et al. 2005: 207). Living becomes an essential factor in the re-articulation of social identities and in the structuring of life opportunities for city dwellers.

This struggle is found in the words of a resident of Gratosoglio:

> Most of the complaints we have come from the old residents of Gratosoglio concerning this type of social infiltration. It is an infiltration difficult to digest. It is undoubtedly not harmonious assimilation, a very strong clashing that manifests itself—this is one of the themes that we, as local police, face the most—and a whole series of illicit phenomena such as the occupation of the Aler areas. It happens of course with the garages under the towers, and, in general, the parking of caravans with the widespread phenomena of disrepair under the houses is a nucleus that requires energy because it has the fragility within it also for the type of population that it houses. For many, it is smoke and mirrors. (Local police officer n°2, Gratosoglio).

But even in the words of a Rogoredo interviewee:

We have seen that sometimes there have been difficulties of integration between Italians and non-EU citizens, there is often conflict. We noticed it in the redevelopment of Feltrinelli at 16; the famous houses have been practically renovated and reclaimed from asbestos—if I remember correctly—that it was present and, there, there are Italians, non-EU citizens, from any nation, Peruvian, Morocco, Egypt and so we also say the difficulty, often the conflict between the parts a committee has also been set up to deal with any conflicts that may arise between these people. (Local police officer n°2, Rogoredo).

The search for residential environments where one feels at ease, concerning specific habitats, generates a sort of "elective belonging" to the residential environment and new configurations of status recognizable by oneself and by others (Savage et al. 2005), and as a counterpart, the perception of living in 'penalized spaces' (Pétonnet, 1982). This phenomenon, which characterizes the residential area that is the subject of our analysis—Rogoredo Santa Giulia—highlights the process that Atkinson (2006) defines as "enclavism" of the medium–high population. The search for social homogeneity pushes the upper middle classes to look for "protected" housing dimensions, which are socially and culturally homogeneous and provide the illusion of living in a community (the gated communities). These traits can be found in Santa Giulia, which was also according to this point of view. The resulting risk is that the city will become a territory characterized by homogeneous enclaves of different types and with different levels of isolation (from gated communities to enclaves of disadvantaged social groups confined in degraded, penalized spaces).

## 4 The city's conflict at the margins

A definition of the "right to the city" is offered by Lefebvre (1996), when he writes: "the right to the city manifests itself as a superior form of rights: the right to freedom, to individualization in socialization, to habitat and to inhabit. The right to the oeuvre, to participation and appropriation (clearly distinct from the right to property), are implied in the right to the city" (Lefebvre 1996: 173–174). Reflection moving from interviews with residents underline how it is as if the right to use had been exchanged with the right to property, expressed based on historical forms of belonging:

I say that although I have a personal position totally open to the theme of integration and reception of migrants, I believe that it was one of the most politically dismal choices in our neighbourhood that Casa Gialla (Yellow House). Apart from the way in which it was done: the population was not involved and had to face an experiment with the signing of a thirty-year contract—that is the thing—in the previous municipal administration; so, throwing it in a neighbourhood that, among other things, has great difficulty in absorbing such a presence, because it already has many other difficulties. (Local Priest, Gratosoglio).

According to the 2019 Censis[4] report, local dynamics reflect a general sense of fatigue, and above all, what Bonomi has hailed as "the society of resentment" (Bonomi 2008). The

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[4] Censis is an Italian Research institute, founded in 1964, with a specific focus on socio-economic research.

report shows how people's expectations of their own economic conditions have changed. In 2008, according to Censis Conad report (2019) the year of the crisis, it was 19.6% who thought that their condition would improve and 20.8% who thought that the condition of others would improve. The most recent report shows how 69% of Italians are convinced that social mobility is blocked; 63.3% of the workers believe that in the future they will remain firm in the current socio-economic situation because it is difficult to climb the social ladder; 63.9% of entrepreneurs and freelancers instead fear the downward slide. The generational question, the social cost of pensions and the difficulties of employing young people are only some of the submerged currents of the conflict, which are, however, distorted on the battle table with the enemy. Poverty and migration, often combined, are the basis of the narration of the conflict in the neighbourhoods, cities and Italy in 2019.

Moreover, as Battistelli (2019) wrote, the conflict changed between industrial and post-industrial period: if the industrial period conflict was more gathered in the spaces of the production (the factory), in the post-industrial period, the conflict spreads, especially into spaces, both private and public ones.

The concept of "conflict" in this specific case applies Ralph Darhendorf definition. The author, in his classic "Towards a theory of social conflict" (1958), describes the social conflict briefly, as "the frictions between the rulers and the ruled in given social structural organizations" (Dahrendorf 1958: 173). This frictions can be seen in the two cases analyzed distinguishing the rulers and the ruled on precedence in the space: the ones who own a home (even if social housing apartments) and connected to the institutional system (politics, elections, welfare) are the rulers; the temporary "hovers" are the ruled, and the weakest presence in the conflict.

The essential approach of the structuralists, who recognize—each time—a habitus (Bourdieu 1977), a system/institution (Giddens 1979) and a correlation between practices and positioning (Bhaskar 1979) as a form that defines and determines interactions and places them in each space and in each time, can enrich these reflections, even if they mostly do not considered, however, the relevance of space and the geographical implications of these perspectives on social ties, and which forms of.

An interesting explanation can be found in Webber's reflections (Webber 1964:108–109): "the idea of community has been tied to the idea of place". Although other conditions are associated with the community—including "sense of belongings", a body of shared values, a system of social organization, and interdependency—spatial proximity continues to be considered a necessary condition. However, it is now becoming apparent that it is accessibility rather than the propinquity aspect of "place" that is a necessary condition. As accessibility becomes further freed from propinquity, cohabitation of a territorial place—whether it is a neighbourhood, a suburb, a metropolis, a region, or a nation—is becoming less important to the maintenance of social communities.

Although the phenomenon now appears as clearer in the definition of conflict, some authors argue that the differentiation of spaces has always followed systems of power, which produce and reproduce margins. As Ferguson said, "When we say marginal, we must always ask, marginal to what? But his question is difficult to answer. The place from which power is exercised is often a hidden place" (Ferguson 1990: 9). A power which can be similar to the process of *brutalization* (Laroche 2017; Mbembe 2020), which starts with the destruction of social ties and solidarity, continues with the exclusion of marginal groups (such as poor people and foreigners), from community and "enabling an everyday barbarism against them which eventually becomes generalized across society" (Hanafi 2020: 7).

Cohabitation establishes relationships of strength and develops the "right to the city", often perceived as being related to homeownership, to the historicization of presence, and to the use of the neighbourhood itself:

> I can say one thing, so then … the little wood is a problem for me, a big problem, but not because… The problem is significant, and it should not have been created. They left it on purpose, in the sense that it was needed, it was useful because in the time of Expo having a place away from Expo could be more convenient than having it somewhere else. A policeman said: "But Rogoredo where is it? Your fucking problem, because that is an area that's not monitored very much." (Local committee member n°2).[5]
>
> A problem located beyond the station, is the problem of drugs, of drug dealing of which you will be aware, let's say that much has been said about it also on television, it is a problem that creates more damage than a security problem, from my point of view, at least here, on the Rogoredo street and in school no, because they are the presence of drug addicts, of syringes, is a problem. (Social worker).

The informant referred to the broader risks of the presence of the drug market: not only an issue of security, but a sanitary risk, a social issue and a more complex phenomena, affecting boths, residents and consumers. A policeman exposed the broader picture of security and safety in the city, starting from the specific case, and showing off how, sometimes, these issues can be politically useful:

> Look, politicians and citizens only care about petty crime. The former because it affects them directly, the latter because it is easier to find and put remedies in place. The problem here has been around for a long time, but we are not interested in children, who are also their victims, we try to understand what is behind it, but it is a struggle because the agents must be used in demonstrative actions to appease the fears of citizens. Have you heard more about the mafia? Do you think that we thought that mass actions were decisive? It was to give people the feeling that something was being done. It is like having a tumour and treating yourself with aspirin for a fever. That is not how you solve problems, but nobody is interested in the real problems of the city! (Policeman, Rogoredo).

Vulnerable people, such as drug buyers in the little wood of Rogoredo, also perceived the conflict:

> But now I think the police and the *Carabinieri*[6] are mistaken for these actions. They do not realize that we are going to be scattered all over the city. Why do they think that they only sell here? Only here it was more straightforward; it was like with cows, it is better if you keep them all in one fence. Furthermore, I say this as a user.

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[5] The informant is referring to the localization of the park and the position of the EXPO site, and the political decisions adopted in the months preceding the Universal Exposition of 2015. The former EXPO exihbition was planned and sited in the Western part of the City of Milan, close to Rho-Fiera station; the Rogoredo park is in the Extreme South-East part of the metropolitan city, probably one of the farest points in the metropolitan area to the exposition. The movement of consumers registered by the informant started at the beginning of 2015, just before the opening of the EXPO.

[6] Carabinieri are the national gendarmerie of Italy who primarily carry out domestic policing duties.

Because I am harmless, but that one there (pointing to a guy who passes high and agitated) is dangerous, I imagine that my mum would be afraid of someone like that hanging around" (Heroin consumer).

A difficulty that is perceived and attributed both to social levelling:

Because socially, Gratosoglio is a neighbourhood that has been levelled to the bottom, based on devastating political choices here as well, in the sense that the families that find space in the neighbourhood are multi-problematic families. (Resident).

as well as to the choices of urban and social planning:

I think there is also a social concern about the distribution of certain realities, in my opinion, at a city level, I throw it out there, I know it is a bit utopian but I always have to say: instead of being so busy discussing "I'll take your house away or I won't take it away", I'm not talking about the allocations of public housing, I'm talking about widespread empty houses, that empty house that hasn't changed for five years, we could use it for something: housing four families, three families, two families, so as to spread in the fabric—otherwise we end up with pockets of real concentration, even a little 'imagined, even a little' real-life experience, with everything that comes with it and that we have also told each other now that they become counterproductive to know each other, to try to do things together, etc.. Some modern challenges should be faced together, that is, I want to say without hesitation: neglect, etc., we face it with those people, after which we face it in part with opposing factions, as well as not solving the modern challenges probably we won't solve this either. (Social activist, n°3, resident Rogoredo).

Aspirational desire, especially in the Santa Giulia district, separates projections and representations from proximity:

So, our vision was of the neighbourhood as represented by the masterplan of the designs, a neighbourhood that frankly left out a bit of Rogoredo and that we learnt later when we found ourselves here. I did not come here and many like me because Rogoredo was here, because San Martino was here, or because there was the City of 2000 (Città duemila). We came here because there was a major redevelopment project on an area that was to become—as they described it—a new centre (Local committee Santa Giulia member).

The potential distance and physical proximity in the two cases examined, regardless of the generational differences of the spaces, produce and reproduce a conflict based in public narratives on expectations and inequalities of material conditions, but, concretely, in a previous and more stable occupation of space, and somehow, the use of the space as a public one. The strong connection between private and public life of the margins in public spaces (the guests of Casa Gialla; the drug-addicted city-users of Rogoredo) transform the use of the space into a hegemonic one (Mouffe 2012), and force the conflict. In a way, the "misery of position" (Bourdieu 2015) is due not only on material value but also on the fragility of presence and permanence in space, which produces waste lives and metropolitan suffering (Stefanizzi and Verdolini 2019).

## 5 Conclusions: broadening the spaces of the city

The transformation of cities into an increasingly complex metropolitan space has contributed to articulate the spatial structure of social inequalities in a more varied set of socially diverse areas, making the representation of social geography-based exclusively on the opposition between the centre and periphery obsolete (Mela 2006). In contemporary global cities, it is misleading to think of neighbourhoods as homogeneous entities because it is possible to identify different types of individuals in them, from the most highly marginalized to those on the edge of the poverty line, low-income workers, foreigners, groups linked to illegal activities and, in some cases, even those in a relatively affluent condition. According to Lefebvre's concept of *heterotopia* (2003) in the urban space, liminal, threshold, passage spaces are delineated, where the most disparate groups meet, the urban space is "the place of the other, simultaneously excluded and interwoven" (Lefebvre 2003:128), a place/space defined by differences and marginalized by forms of power. The presence of these substantial differences has an ambivalent role: on the one hand, as emerged from the interviews, it can make cohabitation more difficult, fueling conflicts or making the meaning attributed by the various groups to belonging to the neighbourhood too dissimilar; on the other hand, it could constitute a factor of social mix, which acts as a sign against the creation and stereotyping of a marginal identity. The two neighbourhoods analyzed emerge from the intersection and interactions of local social relations and broader social processes. We have seen how such constructions can imply different forms of conflict and mediation that affect not only the nature of physical spaces (and the meanings attributed to them) but also the physical and symbolic definition of their boundaries (Massey 1991), and the symbolic and practical use and significance, transforming places in spaces (Wacquant 2007). When public spaces become (or are perceived) as private ones, or belonging only to those which exercise forms of (economic, social) power, the friction between social groups increases. The different physical and symbolic uses of urban space by different social groups presuppose not only different forms of recognition and belonging but also different times and ways of living in the city. The observation in the neighbourhoods, and the analyses of the preceding paragraphs, not only indicate a constant process of enclaving/segregation/expulsion (Sassen 2014). As Massey wrote, it is difficult to define what we mean with the idea of "place" and the relationships we build up with them, especially in times of antagonism to newcomers and outsiders. If the economic dimension is a factor of differential accessibility, it is the other forms of capital (social, cultural, symbolic) that guide the different forms of identity aggregation. However,

> If it is clear the assumption that people have multiple identities, then the same point can be made about places. Moreover, such multiple identities can either be a source of richness or a source of conflict, or both. (Massey 1991: 2).

Those forms of conflict that we encountered in the words of the interviewees take shape and substance, mainly because of interstitial spaces and in-between spaces. The fragmentation of identity spaces, the interconnection with micro-communities becomes one of the generative factors of conflict. The data collected in the two districts of Milan confirm the overcoming of a traditional comprehension of space in which human interactions have a negligible effect on its constitution. Mutualizing the distinction between place and space in Thrift (2003) it is observed that in the neighborhoods analyzed space is produced by the rhythms of life that reflect the stories of individuals, which give places a personal

resonance. The social body of the city is the place of socio-spatial segregation and within it the spatial stigma is mapped. Alongside the social stigma that provides a definition of what are acceptable and unacceptable individuals and groups, the spatial stigma helps to form a powerful cognitive map of the places that are acceptable and unacceptable. Moreover, where border situations arise (as in the case of the Rogoredo neighborhoods) actors transform social space by producing on the one hand power relations and on the other hand conditions of liminality such as marginality and exclusion. Massey (1991) argues that only by widening our gaze, by restoring the depth of the global to the local, and by looking at disparities from a deeper perspective, can we go beyond micro-conflicts. In other words, only when space becomes firstly a place, a city, a state, a global network of relationships and connections (Castells 1996) can we find forms of realignment of conflicts, precisely because micro-borders, that space of differentiation (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013) and reproduction of inequality can become more labile, and conflict less close.

## Compliance with ethical standards

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

**Human and animal rights** The involvement of human subjects requires that these research activities comply with conventional social science research ethics. Ethical safeguards in these activities are generally foreseen in the project by the authors. This article does not contain any studies with animals performed by any of the authors.

**Informed consent** Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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