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SILVIA NESSI and BEATRICE GALIMBERTI, Architetti Senza Frontiere Italia ERSILIAlab in Milan

A participatory experience to design new ways for Roma's social inclusion

Urban poverty and its spatial manifestations are linked to social production of cities (ASF 2012). In this direction, ASF's understanding of exclusionary practices and processes in the built environment is based on the idea that spatial structures are the means and outcome of social relations. ERSILIAlab is a social/urban development programme in which ASF Italia aims at overcoming Roma's difficult living conditions in informal camps and at promoting relationships between Roma and their nearest neighbours — called *gadje*, namely not-Roma. Italian political agenda has been studying possibilities of Roma's inclusion for long, but no shared answers have been already achieved. Since 2017, ASF Italia has been working in a Roma camp located in South-East Milan urban fringes. After a yearlong process, Roma and some neighbours have built together ERSILIAlab's Carriage, a mobile public space to spread overlooked Roma's culture and to share mutual knowledge, providing a participatory opportunity for cross-cultural relations.

Introduction

Four regular camps are still open in Milan at present. One of them is the camp of via Bonfadini, located in South-East urban fringes. It has been established in a specific area that Municipality assigned to nomad camping in 1987. Bonfadini camp is a case in point concerning spatial segregation, as it is a triangular buffer zone delimited by three railway lines, close to an industrial area now partially dismantled. The camp is utterly separated from the housing blocks and the facilities of the neighbourhood. Furthermore, the camp is accessible only through an underpass systematically flooded when it rains. Bonfadini camp is inhabited by approximately 20 families of Italian Roma who gradually established a permanent settlement in which self-constructed barracks and houses replaced previous trailers. Even if no collective space is present inside the camp, children and women spend most of their time inside of it. The few positive relations that Roma mothers and children established within school fabric are not able to overcome the sense of mistrust that *gadje* neighbours feels for the environment of the camp, considered as a no-go area.

In 2016, the spatial and social segregation of Bonfadini camp was made worse by the opening of Sacile C.A.T., a temporary centre located on the corner of via Sacile and via Bonfadini.

Sacile C.A.T. encompasses about 12 housing containers. Each container measures approximately 100 sqm and host promiscuously 5 families —each sub-unit is separated from the other four by a curtain. Some other smaller containers are dedicated to collective bathrooms and kitchens and, when the weather gets mild, the open space in-between containers gathers collective life.

Gadje neighbours are paralysed by cultural distance and incomprehension of Romani way of living, moreover they are sometimes victims of theft. As a result, fear and exasperation risk to turn in hate and racism. The surrounding neighbourhood —called Molise-Calvaire-Ponti— is very multi-ethnic and many economically fragile families live there, so it is featured by a great number of associations socially committed, a fertile place for working on social inclusion issues.



We conceive space not as an outcome in itself, but rather as a tool to produce fair and sustainable (self-)development.



Bonfadini camp. Photo by Matilde Saletta for ASF Italia



Sacile C.A.T. Photos by Elena Mocchetti for ASF Italia



Conclusions

Following a Municipal ordinance, Sunday 24th March 2019 Sacile C.A.T. was permanently closed.

Some of the 130 people inhabiting the centre have been progressively relocated in other Milanese centres, while some others have just been dimessi, that is to say left on their own to face an immediate future on the street, probably followed by landing in an irregular nomad camp.

The fast successions of hosting and discharging dynamics refers to a political level and not to a structured institutional one. This political level continuously reaffirms relationships of subordination between Roma —or another fragile subject— that need to be hosted, and public authority who hosts fragile subjects in a mere assistive logic.

As ASF Italia, we are now beginning a new design phase involving a great number of families previously living in Sacile C.A.T. The final aim is to facilitate them in establishing a self-construction cooperative to renovate and inhabit an abandoned public building — made available by the Municipality and located in the same Molise-Calvaire-Ponti neighbourhood. This new project has started to take shape during the participatory realisation of ERSILIAlab's Carriage. We are strongly working to fulfil this goal, so to contribute in promoting the self-development of a deprived community towards new decent living conditions.

Object

During 2016, ASF Italia's work with Bonfadini inhabitants and their neighbours has evolved in a spatial project called ERSILIAlab. The Relational Library. Meanwhile, Sacile C.A.T. was established and its Roma community was involved as well. Women, youngsters, and kids —both Roma and *gadje*— have constantly been the beating heart of the work, during all the participatory sessions and parties.

The project went through different phases because of external obstacles —mainly political— that recurrently asked its remodulation. In its first version, the Relational Library gathered Roma and *gadje*'s aspirations around the participatory realisation of a temporary wooden library, located in one of the neighbourhood parks —parco Alessandrini—, placed halfway between Bonfadini camp, Sacile C.A.T., and the rest of the neighborhood. The construction would have been supported by local associations and working activities.



ERSILIAlab Carriage building workshop

However, in the Spring 2017 —just a few weeks before beginning the realisation—, local authorities of Municipio 4 have started to openly oppose the Relational Library project on media, by riding the contingent wave of worsening characterising local political conflict. Thus, ASF Italia decided not to expose the Relational Library and all the people involved as an easy political target. This would not have helped the achievement of the project general goal, so the Relational Library conceived as a temporary pavilion was put on hold.

Nevertheless, a mixed, and willing group aggregated around ASF Italia's activities, and we developed together a new version of the project, in response to Municipio 4 interferences. The new project aimed at raising awareness and at promoting cross-cultural relations between Roma and *gadje*, so to open the way to a future Relational Library. Thus, ERSILIAlab and all its heterogeneous team conceived a sort of library without walls, starting from a reinterpretation of Roma carriage, so to diffuse and carry around Romani culture in the context of Municipio 4, as well as in the rest of the city.

In ten days of late Spring and Summer 2018, Sacile C.A.T. extraordinarily opened its gates to *gadje* neighbours, Bonfadini inhabitants, and third sector volunteers, in order to design and build together ERSILIAlab's Carriage. They have been ten days of feast and positive collaboration, defeating prejudices and mutual distances.

During the following months and up to now, the Carriage and its mixed team have been crossing the entire territory of Milan. The itinerant Carriage hosts a multimedia exhibition and it is the foreground for public workshops, aiming at introducing Romani culture, at promoting social inclusion and cohesion, and at triggering debate on current camps and centres living conditions in the city.

Methods

When a new project of community enhancement starts, ASF Italia always pays great attention in identifying appropriate entry methods to get in touch with the community by building a state of reciprocal trust. In this case, we decided to work with children, considering them as our entry point to build trust with both Roma and *gadje* wider communities in Molise-Calvaire-Ponti borough. Since July 2017 we established a tight-knit pilot group of willing Roma and *gadje* children, keen to promote the project to their peers and families. The pilot group attended a number of child-centred theatre and photography workshops on urban environment future, in order to work on mutual knowledge, on the overcoming of stigma, and on the creation of positive relations. By means of the artistic practices of theatre and photography, children nourished their imagination and wishes; they expressed the necessity of a new relational space, even if the Relational Library project was paused.



Workshops with children. Photos by Elena Mocchetti for ASF Italia



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