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ERSILIALAB IN MILAN. A PARTICIPATORY EXPERIENCE TO DESIGN NEW WAYS FOR ROMA'S SOCIAL INCLUSION

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ABSTRACT

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 gadjé, 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.

Key Words: Social and urban development, Roma inclusion, Self-promoting processes, Participatory design.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Roma camps. The Italian context

In Italy, the majority of Roma communities are traditionally living in nomad camps. While some of these camps are defined as regular —namely legally recognised—, some others are just irregular. The vast majority of them is socially homogenous and spatially segregated, with no direct access to basic infrastructures and services. The greatest part of families living in camps are weakened by economic and social difficulties that deepen Roma's isolation and discrimination. Women and children are the most affected by these conditions, spending most of their time inside the camps. Furthermore, the poor and precarious living conditions in camps make it difficult to regularly attend school as well as to get and to hold a job.

Being located in peripheral and disconnected urban areas, camps are invisible to the city of *gadjé*¹. On the one hand, the invisibility feature helps in building a protected environment in which developing mutual support inside the community, activating small improvement processes of living condition. But, on the other hand, it also consolidates the presence of the unjust law of the strongest, and hence of violence. In an invisible context, prevarication spreads and facilitates the grounding of illegal practices, building an uneven environment in which is difficult to trigger fair improvement processes. Isolation transforms camps in lost places that *gadjé* do not recognise as part of the urban fabric. Indeed, *gadjé* usually perceive Roma's environment as place of mistrust and fear as well as, in parallel, Roma perceive *gadjé*'s city with the same mistrust and fear, perpetuating the reciprocal feeling of distance between the two communities. Regardless of the real level of risk, this reciprocal distance turns into conflict where the invisibility status of Roma settlements falls —i.e. for political reasons as well as for new business interests on lands irregularly occupied by Roma. In these cases, conflict consists in evictions, with police clearing people from the camp. Evictions are frequently unannounced and repeated, worsening the high vulnerability level of people and regressing them along the path of social inclusion hoped-for by the State.

1.2. Roma camps. The Milanese context

Since 2012, the Municipality of Milan has been promoting *Linee Guida Rom, Sinti e Camminanti*², a set of guidelines for Roma's full social inclusion, concerning health, work, housing, education, and rights. The general aim of these guidelines is to improve Roma's living conditions by overcoming life in nomad camps³. Up to now, the Municipality has worked on:

- a progressive dismantling of existing irregular camps, as well as of some regular ones;
- the realisation of three *Centri di Accoglienza Temporanea (C.A.T.)*⁴, that are temporary centres for evicted people —especially if families with children. In theory, these centres offer a maximum of 200 days of permanence and the opportunity to undertake pathways of social integration. To be accepted in a C.A.T., a family has to subscribe a *patto educativo*, an educational pact in which parents commit themselves to look for a job and to send their children to school;
- the realisation of one *Centro di Autonomia Abitativa (C.A.A.)*⁵, a temporary centre dedicated —in theory— to people who already started a successful pathway of integration by getting a regular job, in order to help them in consolidating financial and housing autonomy.

The Municipality's guidelines allow and foresee the presence of private third sector organisations to work in a C.A.T. and C.A.A., in order to promote Roma's integration, with a particular focus on school education, capability building, and women employment.

The guidelines also wish for a rising positive exchange between Roma and their *gadjé*-neighbour, but little has been done in this direction so far.

The current state of irregular camps is difficult to evaluate. A survey led by NAGA⁶ shows that, as a result of reiterated evictions in the entire territory of the city, a very fluid and ever-changing situation has arisen since 2013 (NAGA 2015). Furthermore, NAGA's report highlights that a large proportion of the funds has been spent on emergency measures —mainly on evictions and C.A.T. management—. These measures are a primary concern at municipal level, but, at the same time, they actually constitute an obstacle for the building of long-term positive relations with neighbours by integration pathways —indeed, the physical localisation and configuration of C.A.T. reiterates the typical condition of spatial segregation and ghettoisation that features nomad camps.

1.3. Bonfadini camp and Sacile C.A.T.

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 camp-

¹ *Gadjé* is the exonym given by Roma to all the people that are not Roma.

² See Allegato 1 of D.G.C. 21/11/2012. These guidelines are coherent with Italian *Strategia nazionale d'inclusione dei Rom, dei Sinti e dei Caminanti*, pursuant to European COM (2011) 173.

³ Many Roma are no more nomads, at most they are forced to nomadism by evictions. Living conditions in camps are usually very poor.

⁴ In 2019 just one of the three C.A.T. was still open, but it closed on March 24th. It was the centre in which ASF Italia has worked.

⁵ The camp is located in North-West outskirts of the city.

ing 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 Roma⁶ 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. Roma women are always busy in housekeeping and childcare activities, some of them are also working and a consistent number is alone in family management as their husbands are in prison. Children are daily walked to school by social workers from Somaschi Foundation, but unfortunately the youngest have just few opportunities to see their gadjé classmates out of school time, as Roma mothers scarcely have the time to accompany them out of the camp —the road between the camp and the neighbourhood is dangerous, thus children are not allowed to walk without an adult. The few positive relations that Roma mothers and children established within school fabric are not able to overcome the sense of mistrust that gadjé 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., led by Casa della Carità Foundation, has no collective spaces and its physical boundary is delimited by a fence encompassing 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.

The absence of a relational network outside Sacile C.A.T. hinders the social inclusion of resident families and pushes them to maintain their previous subsidiarity relations as well as their old cultural and economic practices, where the space is conceived as a resource to occupy, and the objects have to be accumulated. The main source of income of families hosted in C.A.T. concerns waste recovery and fixing, to put these objects back on the market in piazzale Corvetto Sunday market.

Gadjé 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-Calvairste-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.



[Figure 1] Top left: Sacile C.A.T. Image by ASF Italia. Bottom left: A detail of Bonfadini camp. Photo by Matilde Saletta for ASF Italia. Top right: Aerial view of Sacile C.A.T. Photo by Elena Mocchetti for ASF Italia. Bottom right: Children playing in Sacile C.A.T.'s surroundings. Photo by Elena Mocchetti for ASF Italia.

6. These 20 Roma families are from Abruzzo; thus, they are Italian citizens, with all the typical rights and duties of all Italian citizens. In 2017, an official survey reported that the camp has 89 inhabitants: 21 children (0-17 years), 36 women, and 32 men.

2. OBJECT OF THE WORK

2.1. ASF Italia's first steps

In January 2015, being called from Somaschi Foundation, Casa della Carità, and Vitality Onlus —the third sector organisations already working inside Bonfadini camp—, ASF Italia conducted interviews and workshops with camp's inhabitants in order to inquire, with a spatial glance, their outlook on the camp and its neighborhood, as well as on wishes and expectations about their own habitat and work future. The majority of camp's women and youngsters were highly responsive to debates, being willing to get in the game. As the first results of the work looked very promising, between April and October 2015 ASF Italia organised a series of wider and more structured debates and participatory workshops⁷ involving not only Bonfadini inhabitants and social workers, but also several voluntary associations of the same neighbourhood, neighbours' representatives, and experts coming from similar experiences, so to define some possible lines of action to improve Roma's living conditions in Milan. As a result, camp localisation and spatial quality of habitat emerged as two main key-issues in determining current and future dynamics of social inclusion/exclusion dynamics. Indeed, physical isolation catalyses the establishment of anti-social and anti-urban practices, and these latter exasperate unfamiliarity, distances, and unawareness between Roma and gadjé. To deal with the two identified key-issues, ASF Italia decided to work with Bonfadini Roma community by gaining their trust and leading them to a progressive development of their relationship with gadjé neighbours, local voluntary associations and work network, stimulating Roma's ability of self-promotion and encouraging concrete exchanges between Roma and gadjé, going beyond stereotypes.

In parallel, at the end of 2015, ASF Italia, Somaschi Foundation, Casa della Carità, and Vitality Onlus together with the Municipality, have started a critical and operative reflection on current models and tools of Roma's social integration, conceived as complementary and necessary devices to overcome life in nomad camps, towards proper housing conditions. Indeed, at that time a discrepancy was present between Municipality's official guidelines concerning Roma and effective institutional activities. The work of Municipality and local authorities⁸ was deeply influenced by political pressures, often conflicting and contradictory, hindering a structured and coherent approach. Thus, a permanent channel of communication with Municipality has been opened in order to trigger a wider change of paradigm on Roma housing and living conditions.

2.2. ERSILIALab. The Relational Library and its Carriage

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 gadjé— 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 gadjé'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. 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 gadjé, 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 gadjé 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 exhibition⁹ and it is the foreground for public work-

⁷ This set of activities composed by debates and participatory workshops was called *Abitare il dialogo - Fabbrica del dialogo con Il Suq delle Culture*, and it was led between April and October 2015 at *Fabbrica del Vapore*, Milan.

⁸ Beyond Municipality coordinating power, at a local level we had to take account of Municipio 4 decisions. Milan is divided in nine wedged sectors; each sector is locally administrated by a Municipio. It may happen that the general Municipality and a specific Municipio belong to opposite political affiliations, thus all the local decisions are fought, slower, and sometimes in contrast with Municipality's broad strategy. Unfortunately, this has been the case of sector 4, the one in which Bonfadini camp and Sacile C.A.T. are located.

⁹ The heterogenous building team decided to call this exhibition *Traghetando ERSILIA* —namely *Ferrying ERSILIA*— as the capacities of moving, evolving,

shops, 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.



[Figure 2] Left and centre: Workshops with children from Bonfadini camp, Sacile C.A.T., and Molise-Calvaire-Ponti neighbourhood. Photos by Elena Mocchetti for ASF Italia. Right: A picture from ERSILIALab Carriage building workshop. Photo by ASF Italia.

3. ASF ITALIA'S METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

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.

To promote development projects means to gradually create strong relations of confidence and sharing between very different groups —i.e. beneficiaries, their context, institutions, third sectors organisations, and so forth.

In this case, we decided to work with children, considering them as our entry point to build trust with both Roma and gadjé wider communities in Molise-Calvaire-Ponti borough. Since July 2017 we organised several workshops for kids and youngsters from Bonfadini camp and Sacile C.A.T., to better dig their specific wishes and needs. After a first group of workshops, we involved neighbourhood schools and local associations that are dealing with children in order to establish a tight-knit pilot group of willing Roma and gadjé children, keen to promote the project to their peers and families. The pilot group reflected the various communities involved: children from Bonfadini camp, from Sacile C.A.T., and from the neighbourhood were together as young ambassadors of an inclusive world. 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.

Working with children had a double result. On one side, it fruitfully enriched us as experts of urban development projects. On the other side, it has allowed us to acquire credibility in the eyes of their parents, who finally recognised us as promoters of 'the good of children' as a cross-cultural value.

Our work with children has gone on for a year. During this period, we established Il Tavolo di ERSILIALab, an operational heterogeneous team aimed at carrying out the project by following a mixed bottom-up and top-down approach. The Carriage building process represented a key-feature of cross-community strengthening. Indeed, the positive experiences of participatory building have been a fundamental step for Roma social inclusion and their mutual understanding with gadjé, permitting to envisage a common future, sharing the same neighbourhood. While building together the Carriage, we have listened to wishes and angers of every member of the team. This continuous state of heated dialogue has enabled the entire Tavolo di ERSILIALab to imagine collectively a different future for Roma in the neighbourhood —a fair future able to maintain the richness of Romani culture without putting Roma on the side-lines of gadjé's world.

ASF Italia always considers communities as main active promoters of their own development. Moreover, we conceive space not as an outcome in itself, but rather as a tool to produce fair and sustainable (self-)development.

4. CONCLUSIONS. THE DESTINY OF SACILE C.A.T. AND BEYOND

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.

Roma's living conditions is an issue frequently affected by politics, whose rapid time of change of opinion is hard to match with a long-term strategy of social inclusion. Indeed, politics have been responding to Roma's social

inclusion need with emergency solutions —thus temporary solutions —, looking at Roma from time to time as a problem to be contained, or as a problem to be hidden, or as a problem to flaunt, depending on the political hue.

Roma families continue to be eradicated, moved, relocated, and, ultimately, confined. By doing so, many children have difficulties to regularly attend school and, moreover, they lost their local network of relations and friends. In the same way, it is very difficult for Roma adults to reach economic stability and autonomy if they periodically have to face the problem of finding a new settlement and organising a new shelter for their families. In these emergency conditions it is very hard for Roma adults to establish a mutual trust relation with *gadjé*, as it is not part of surviving priorities.

Moreover, 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.

The condition of urban marginality that affects a fragile group has a great and immediate impact on all urban society. Firstly, a well-structured —and implementable with no contradictions— response to urban marginality would permit to control the sprawl of exclusion phenomena, and, by so doing, to radically enhance all the urban contexts generally considered dangerous and degraded. Paradoxically, politics find difficult to look at the issue in this way, as they usually consider it as a ‘solidarity’ and ‘social justice’ problem, following a mere assistive logic, not considering the tangible consequences that urban marginality has on its spatial and social contexts.

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-Calvastrate-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.

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