

Landing

The need for a renewed urban vocabulary for hospitality (and the city)

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Abstract: Within the framework of recent socio-demographic changes, migratory flows have gained a crucial role in the European context, challenging territories and cities, opening up renewed questions for urban governance. Along the migrant trajectory, the paper focuses on migrants' *first arrival* in the city and on first reception dynamics, addressing a phase preceding settlement and rather regarding populations with a temporary perspective in the relation to the territory. The work considers the case of Milan, which in Italy has particularly experienced the temporary dimension of first arrival, being until 2015 a transit area and then quickly turning into an arrival city. Assuming the background of existing policies, the work draws on a qualitative observation of Milanese first reception, with specific attention to hospitality "practices", broadly defined. The observed scenarios show an oversimplified answer to the conditions of temporary populations, often translated in "exceptional" reception spaces and emergency-based policies. The work argues the urgency of a renewed and more complex definition of arriving migrants' condition and the relevance of existing practices as a powerful mean to challenge ordinary urban governance tools. Questioning the common understanding of arrival may be the first move to imagine the transition towards alternative urban futures and structurally receptive cities.

Keywords: migrants' first arrival; first reception; temporary vs permanent; Milan

Introduction

The relation among migratory flows and urban environments has deep roots, often strongly bonded to the birth and growth of contemporary cities or parts of them. Recent fluxes around the Mediterranean Sea have once again strengthen the link between migrant trajectories and cities, often redefining the role of certain centers in an international network, but also transforming diverse urban areas and introducing "new populations". Recent migrations make us reflect on the capacity of the city to offer plural ways of inhabiting its spaces and in general to support the presence of these populations, instead of simply opposing and resisting to them. Such considerations and the structural nature of the migratory phenomenon force to consider migration within a contemporary urban question and to conceive migrants' arrival and reception as more and more ordinary and structural functions of our cities.



The work aims at investigating the conditions of intersection between migratory flows and the city, particularly reflecting on the short temporality of the firsts and the longer temporality of the second. At this aim, the contribution chooses as point of observation the dimension of first arrival, or landing¹, and first reception of migrant populations within the city, conceiving it as the moment preceding settlement. Such choice is based on two considerations: on the one hand, the nature of recent migration policies has stretched the dimension of first arrival, enhancing the figure of the “asylum seeker”, as almost the only way to access Europe; on the other hand, the dimension of first arrival seems to be representative of further urban phenomena, opposing their short temporality to the longer one of the city. Thus, looking at first arrival is intended as a chance to challenge the urban vocabulary of hospitality, but also, more broadly, that of certain urban spaces, services and policies.

The paper draws on the work of a Master Thesis in Architecture, at Politecnico di Milano, which explores the case of institutional first reception centers in Milan between 2015 and 2016 and starting from a closer observation of the spaces tries to investigate the relation between first arriving migrants and practices of first reception². The contribution is organized as follows: the first two sections outline the main reasons why it seems relevant to look at the moment of first arrival and the key points of the used methodology, it follows an introduction to the Milanese context of incoming flows and a summary of the main observations and results of the work, finally some conclusions are drawn.

The territorial dimension of first arrival

Background

Addressing the migration question within the urban realm leads to deal with an extremely complex and necessarily interdisciplinary topic; among the possible study fields, the contribution chooses to look at the territorial dimension and to investigate the intersection between migratory flows and the city starting from spatial practices and spaces of arrival and reception.

Literature dealing with the relation between migration and the territory identifies two parallel paths: on the one hand, global networks, flows and national policies, and on the other, a rather *local* scale, where municipalities, inhabitants and local policies (re)act, developing everyday experiences of hospitality. The crucial scale to understand tools and processes of territorialization appears to be the local one, which looks both at the dynamics occurring in city districts and in smaller towns (Balbo, ed., 2015; Caponio, 2006). Urban studies have further built a rich framework around the territorial dimension of migration, focusing on immigrants and populations who are settling (or already settled) in urban areas. Within this long-term perspective, literature describes the processes of territorialization of immigrants (Tosi, 1998; Lanzani and Vitali, 2003; Blockland and Savage, 2008)

¹ The term *landing* is used to refer to the first phase of arrival on a territory ("primo arrivo e prima accoglienza" in Italian), and to differentiate it from the following settlement processes. In the following pages will be regarded simply as “first arrival”.

² The term practice here is broadly defined, as unexpected uses of space, non-institutional actions, and unplanned answers by the Municipality.

and discusses the tools of urban policies towards the multiethnic city (Crosta, 2010; Lo Piccolo, 2013; Briata, 2014).

In a different way, the will to focus on the temporary dimension of first arrival implies to assume the mentioned studies as a background, and to shift the gaze from the notion of *im*-migrants to that of migrants, who interact with the territory in a clear perspective of mobility (Tarrus, 1993). The theme of first arrival, regarded as a temporary condition that migrants undergo before settling down, raises diverse questions: the French anthropologist Agier started the ‘Babels Research Program’, revolving around the concept of the city as a border and investigating “what migrants do to the city and what cities do to migrants” (Agier, 2016); more recently, the issue of first arrival has been addressed within studies of social policies related to first reception systems. But, while different research fields (anthropology, sociology, law) on migration start addressing this temporary dimension, urban studies still struggle in considering it as a subject by itself, so that the territorialization processes and tools of first landing still remain a rather unexplored field. A consideration may make more evident the reason of this gap: urban studies and policy are asked to deal with populations who are not (yet) territorialized and settled, but already using intensively urban spaces (Pasqui, 2008).

In this sense, the dimension of first arrival triggers a wider issue: the contradiction between the short temporality of some contemporary urban phenomena and the strength, of resistance and inertia, of urban territories, both in terms of planning and regulation and in terms of physical transformations. Among other temporary populations, migrants express an extreme condition of mobility, intensively involving urban areas.

Mapping first reception

Methodology

Within the given framework the contribution carries out a qualitative observation of the institutional first reception centers in the city of Milan, between 2015 and 2016. The choice to look at the case of Milan is based on the fact that in those years the city undergoes a crucial transition, having been a transit place since 2013, in 2015 it quickly turns into an arrival and destination city. The will to focus on the institutional answer to first arrival is based on the belief that in a long-term perspective hospitality should more and more be seen as an institutional and ordinary urban function, relying less on informal solutions. In this sense, it appears significant to investigate the answer and outline the main characters of the reception system, planned at a formalized and institutional level.

In order to carry out the qualitative observation of the reception system and to build a knowledge framework of the Milanese system, it has been chosen the tool of a *qualitative and multilayered mapping* (Figure 1). The map allows to maintain throughout the work the reference to the spatial dimension, while the multiple layers help building a richer framework able to include not only information on space, but also on time, actors etc. Within a specific timeframe (April 2015 - November 2016), the observation has been carried out on three main levels: collection of newspaper articles and reports to draw a map of existing reception centers in Milan, in depth interviews with various actors involved in the system and direct observations and insights on the spaces and life in the centers. The use of the news to detect the opening and closing of reception centers allows to overcome

the static information often provided by institutional documents and to rather express the dynamic nature of the geography of reception; the visits to the centers are “windows” on realities where often unexpected environments are outlined beyond very introvert spaces; the interviews give voice to a broad set of actors, from the Municipality to the third sector institutions managing the centers, to their hosts, passing through the associations more lightly involved in the hospitality of newcomers. The three maps have been drawn at the same time, always considering the crossed-relations between them.

Milan, from transit to destination city

Context

The system of reception in Italy considers three main steps: First Aid and Identification, First Reception, and Second Reception and Integration; each moment is meant to represent a specific phase of the reception path, and it should correspond to a stage of the legal procedures for the achievement of a recognized status and to a set of services and spaces provided. Soon after accessing the country and being identified, migrants should present their request for asylum; while waiting for a temporary staying permit, they are hosted in the so-called Hotspots, i.e. centers of first aid and assistance mainly placed in the border areas of the country. When - and if - having obtained a temporary staying permit as asylum seekers³, migrants wait to be called by territorial commissions; during this period they should be distributed among centers of first reception (Centri di Accoglienza per Richiedenti Asilo [CARA]), or Hubs across the country, big structures where basic services are provided. After being called by the commission and while waiting for a definitive response, asylum seekers are supposed to undergo the phase of Second Reception and Integration, spending their time in smaller centers distributed among different municipalities where both primary and complementary services for integration are delivered (Sistema di Protezione per Richiedenti Asilo e Rifugiati, SPRAR). Such structured system very rarely develops according to the expected and planned steps, both in terms of time and space; in the case of first reception spaces for instance the duration of staying should not exceed one month, but people often end up spending in the centers up to two years, similarly the transfer from first to second reception facilities is often based on the availability of spaces rather than on the correspondence to a certain stage of the legal procedures. In 2014, moreover, due to the increasing crisis of reception management, Italy introduced a further typology of reception facility with a clear “extra-ordinary” nature and with lower managerial and spatial requirements (Centro di Accoglienza Straordinaria [CAS]), which soon became the most common center across the country, used both for first and second reception (Bovo and Lippi, 2017).

Among the Italian regions, Lombardy is between the firsts for the role it plays in the reception system, it counts 13% of the country reception, and Milan also plays a central role in the regional context. The most recent migratory fluxes start involving the city during August 2013, when the first Syrians arrive

3 When the asylum request is not accepted, migrants are rejected and destined to repatriation centers (originally, Centri di Identificazione e espulsione [CIE], from 2017 Centri di Permanenza per il Rimpatrio [CPR]), often very similar to detention structures, where people are supposed to be waiting to go back to their home country.

at Milan Central Station; for the two following years the Municipality hosts 74500 people, of which less than 1% asks for asylum in the city, but only spend there from five to eight days, before continuing the journey towards other European countries. Milanese reception in these years is shaped around the figure of the transiting migrant and the city grows as a transit place. The situation dramatically changes in autumn 2015 due to the enclosure of the Italian Northern borders, so that in April 2017 the amount of asylum seekers is set around 99% and Milan is no more a city of transit but of destination (Municipality of Milan, 2017).

Temporary populations and spaces of first reception

Observations and results

Within this context, the work of mapping tries to investigate the conditions of intersection between new arriving populations and the city, conceiving it as an interaction, or dialogue, among the claims and needs of the firsts and the tentative answer of the second, particularly explored in its territorial and spatial dimension, i.e. starting from the observation of first reception facilities.

Populations at first arrival experience very different interactions with the urban environment, often depending also on their personal background, networks, and in general terms, “capital of use” of the territory. It seems reasonable to address their presence in the city as expressed by their needs. The claims of arriving migrants in their first period - months - of staying certainly compose a quite complex mosaic of different situations, nevertheless some common traits outline the importance of considering the variable of time when dealing with such populations. Within the first days of arrival, migrants who enter the reception system seek very basic services, such as a night shelter, medical and legal assistance, nutrition and acquisition of certain information; the essential nature of such demands makes it easily sharable by a wide target. Even if still deeply uncertain of the possibility to settle in the city, migrants often express some further, and complementary, needs, regarding education and information, recreational activities, worship, food’s and clothes’ purchase and transport. If the essential claims could (mis)lead to an interpretation of migrants’ way of inhabiting the city as a mere presence “at low intensity”, the consideration of the complementary needs clearly outlines the complexity of such presence, in a phase which is instead often concerned as merely and continuously “of emergency”. Whereas the mentioned definition of needs may appear easy to outline, their complexity lays in the consideration of their extreme variability in time, the same service or space may be oversized or undersized depending on the amount of people arriving, on their origin or family composition. In other words, transitory migrants may be defined as special inhabitants, “dwellers with an individual impermanence and a collective permanence” (La Cecla, 1999). Thus, in a perspective of spatial answer to these needs, the factor of time not only becomes an essential element to consider but it is also what makes the answer more complex. In other words, the observation of the claims of arriving populations outlines the need for reception spaces not only able to provide specific services, but also able to adapt in time to their dynamic nature.

With the aim to respond to such temporary populations, the institutional system of first reception opens, between 2015 and 2016, seventeen facilities in the Municipality of Milan, some managed by the Municipality and some others by the Prefecture. The work maps them in a moment of transition from spaces mainly devoted to transiting migrants to structures hosting for several months asylum

seekers willing to stay in Milan. The location of the centers depends on the real estate availabilities of the management institutions, since in most cases the call regards the service and the space of reception; therefore, the distribution obtained does not respond to any lodging criteria and could vary in time. Based on the great number of transiting people in the previous years, in 2015 the Municipality decides to open a filter space, the Hub, very close to the station, where people could spend few hours or days before continuing the journey or being relocated in the city. Once gone through this first filter, asylum seekers are displaced in more traditional structures, mainly functioning as dormitories. The kind of spaces may be grouped in five typologies: former barracks, disused schools, reception facilities, big-sized structures and small-sized spaces normally devoted to other services. The barracks, accommodating on average three hundred people, maintain a military character and result extremely fixed and evidently close to the surrounding, often with high walls preventing to look through. The schools host averagely two hundred migrants at time, they provide more welcoming spaces often surrounded by small gardens or sport halls, but the organization of the space makes them hardly usable, often the beds also cover the common spaces. The third case is that of buildings already functioning as reception facilities, both for homeless or as previous hostels; these spaces are much more suitable, thanks to the way space is organized and to the size of each room, the number of hosts is usually lower. Reception facilities are also big-sized structures originally conceived for other uses, such as sport halls or former warehouses, where the reception function rarely fits the space; the most evident case is the one of a sport arena, where migrants are accommodated in foldable beds, asked to free the space during the daily hours and on Fridays, when Milanese Muslims use the structure for collective worship. Finally, there is also the interesting case of smaller buildings, which normally have different functions and that try to host a limited number of migrants while keeping on their activities; this is the case of Cascina Cuccagna, the Shoah Memorial and the San Marco library. Besides the centers, should be briefly mentioned a network of further spaces, also used by migrants: i.e. daily services. These spaces include day-care centers, canteens and public showers; only few of them are originally thought for refugees and asylum seekers, but their nature allows also migrants at their first arrival to access them.

Looking back at the relation between quickly changing needs and the answers in terms of reception spaces, at least three main issues arise. Firstly, the fact that the geography of first reception does not follow any localization criteria, but largely depends on the real estate availability of the managing institutions; such consideration showcases how, similarly to other welfare fields, also in the case of reception the public actor currently does not play a role of complete control on the system, but rather of overall coordination, in this case worsened by the emergency-based approach towards migrations. The second observation refers to the way the services are provided within the mentioned structures; first reception facilities provide the hosts with dormitories and canteens and only in some cases further services are offered, in most cases anyways all services are concentrated within the reception centers, such polarization leads to a strong isolation of the structure from the rest of the neighborhood, limiting the need and the opportunity of any kind of interaction between migrants and local residents. Thirdly, the physical features of first reception facilities should also be taken into account; the most used building typologies are indeed characterized by a strong rigidity, which prevents any kind of adaptation to the changing needs described above, and are therefore often implemented with rather temporary solutions, such as tents, indoor and outdoor.

In conclusion, the mentioned dialogue between arriving populations and spaces appears to be a *mute* dialogue, where the spatial answer to the structural presence of temporary populations struggles in building an effective reaction to migrants' arrival and rather opposes a certain degree of inertia.

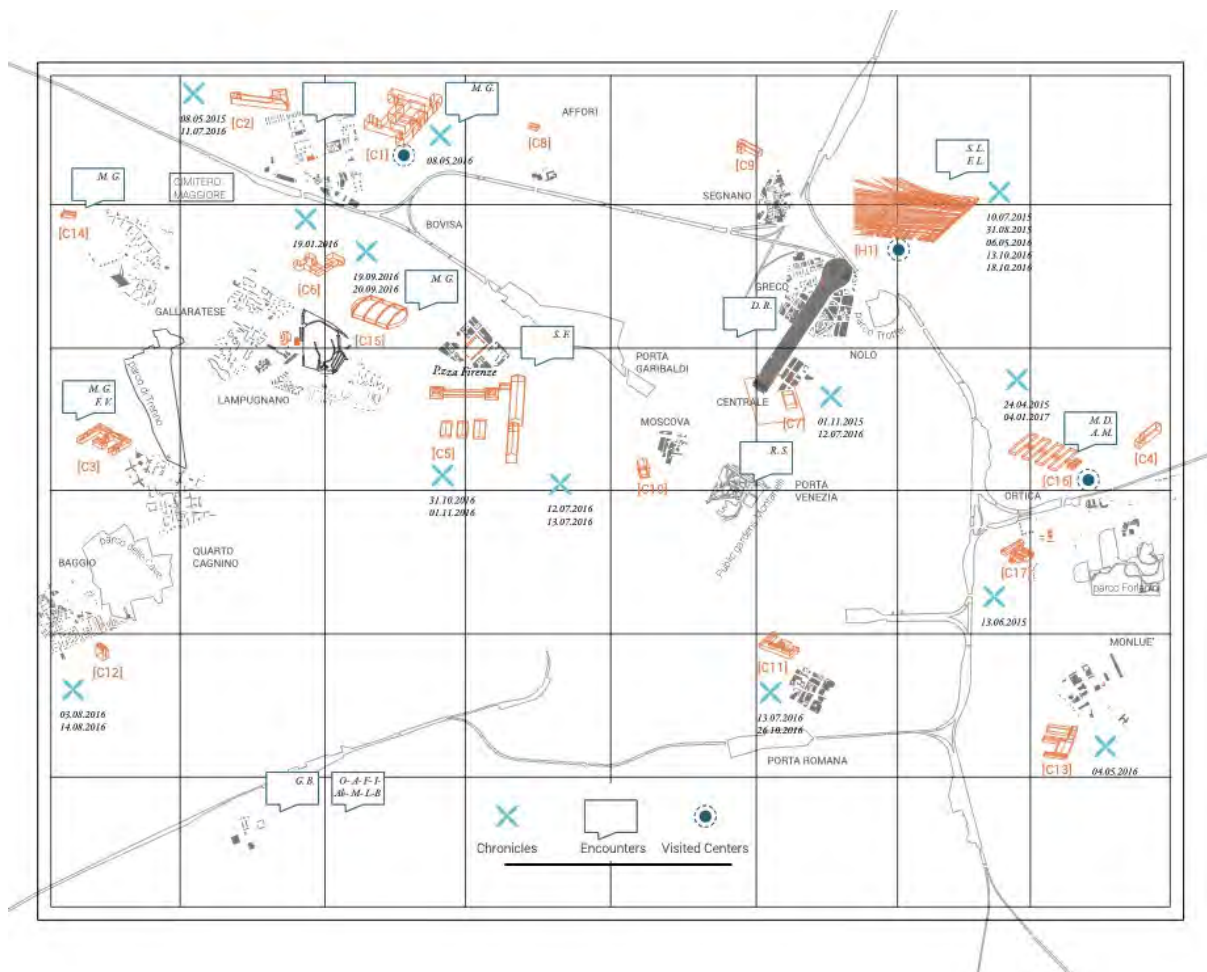


Figure 1. Map of Milanese First Reception, between 2015 and 2016 (Bovo and Lippi, 2017)

Towards a renewed urban vocabulary for hospitality

Conclusions

The structural nature of migrations and the clear impact they have on cities underline the urgency of considering reception as an ordinary urban function. Exploring the less ordinarily-managed part of reception, i.e. first reception, in this perspective, reveals different issues, and focusing on the spatial dimension outlines at least one main theme.

As seen, the lack of any localization criteria, the polarization of reception services within single facilities and their rigid physical character hint at the incapacity of the space to deal in a not temporary way with populations that are only individually temporary, but collectively permanent. Investigating the intersection between the short temporality of the latter and the longer temporality of the physical city opens up a broader question, i.e. the contradiction between *temporary and permanent*

and the apparent impossibility to combine the two within a spatial answer to reception. Interestingly, the same theme has been developed by professor Mehrotra in his work on Ephemeral Urbanism; by looking through very different cases of temporary settlements, Mehrotra argues that the arising distinction between permanent and temporary should not be conceived as a binary but should rather activate a broader understanding of permanence. In this sense, one of the clearest example refers to the Hindu festivity of Kumbh Mela, which every three years gathers millions of people - in 2007 they were 16 million - for only 45 days; here what makes such temporary settlement successful is the fact of being organized, in terms of management and space, as if it were permanent, i.e. by following rules very similar to those of long-term settlements (Mehrotra, 2016). Such theme opens up the question how the design of spaces of reception could build a structural answer to populations even at their first arrival. In this perspective some of the crucial characters of first reception structures are very much challenged: on the one hand, the notion of reception space as confined within single centers prevents hospitality to be combined with other urban functions and to build any interaction with the rest of the city, thus it could be interesting to shift from the existing single structures to a system of spaces, scattered in the territory and combined, when possible, to exiting services; on the other hand, the physical inertia of reception centers introduces the theme of *plural spaces*, broadly addressed in the debate on the design of contemporary (welfare) facilities (Crosta, 2010; Oosterlynck *et al.*, 2015; Bricocoli and Sabatinelli, 2017).

In conclusion, the developed map of Milanese first reception certainly represents a partial picture of reality, in terms of space and time, but it seems to reveal both the specificity of the dimension of first arrival and some crucial issues emerging from that. In other words, looking at the intersection between migratory flows and the answer of the city through the spatial dimension of first reception outlines the urgency of working on a renewed urban vocabulary for hospitality.

Looking through first arrival to the city

Open questions

The choice to consider first arrival as a privileged point of observation does not aim at defining it as a predetermined and fixed condition of precariousness, but it is rather based on its understanding as an interesting lens to discuss the relation between certain populations and the territory.

As seen, the dimension of first arrival outlines issues around the vocabulary of reception, but it also opens up questions that more broadly deal with the city. In the first place, the definition of arriving migrants as temporary populations with a structural presence suggests a comparison with other temporary populations (Pasqui, 2008), crossing our cities that - with the due differences - also build with the urban environment a relation limited in space and time; thus the question arises how does and might the city support their presence. Secondly, the spatial dimension of reception reveals the contradiction between temporary and permanent, which is crucial in the case of first reception spaces but is also very relevant in the current debate on Ephemeral Urbanism. Similarly, the dimension of

first arrival seems to be able to trigger broader and relevant debates also when seen from the perspective of services, actors and policies⁴.

In conclusion, the mentioned considerations certainly still remain as open questions, but the fact of being raised starting from the investigation on first arrival and of going beyond the realm of first reception, might be an evidence of their relevance. In this sense, the dimension of migrants' first arrival seems to be an interesting starting point to address *also* broader dynamics challenging the contemporary city.

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⁴ Such fields are currently object of investigating within the PhD research of the author.

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