Special Issue Distances

FUORI LUOGO

Journal of Sociology of Territory, Tourism, Technology

Guest Editors

Anna Maria Zaccaria
Maria Camilla Fraudatario

Editor in chief: Fabio Corbisiero
Editorial manager: Carmine Urciuoli

YEAR VI - VOL. 15 - NUM. 2 - JUNE 2023
FedOA – Federico II University Press
ISSN (online) 2723 – 9608 – ISSN (print) 2532 – 750X

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This Special Issue of Fuori Luogo is made possible with the contribution of the Italian Association of Sociology
Section Sociology of the Environment and Territory

This issue is dedicated to the memory of Prof. Gabriele Qualizza, Università Ca' Foscari di Venezia

Summary

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FedOA - Federico II University Press
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Fedoa adopts and promotes specific guidelines on editorial responsibility, and follows COPE's Best Practice Guidelines for Journal Editors.
Authorization of the Court of Naples n. 59 of 20 December 2016.
Director: Carmine Urciuoli
ISSN 2723-9608 (online publication) ISSN 2532-750X (printed publication)

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Fuori Luogo is indexed in: DOAJ Directory of Open Access Journals - ACNP Catalogue code n. PT03461557 - Index Copernicus International ID 67296.

The journal is part of CRIS Coordinamento Riviste Italiane di Sociologia.

Fuori Luogo is included in the LOCKSS (Lots of Copies Keep Stuff Safe) network of the Public Knowledge Project (PKP PLN)

Giuseppe Gaballo[1]

Planning for Accessibility. Lecce: a Case-Study[2]

Introduction

Cities have always contributed to the coexistence of differences (Barbagli, Pisati, 2012). However, social disparities have gradually increased and become more visible, especially in large metropolitan areas, where urban planning has exacerbated both discrimination and exclusiveness (Harvey, 1973; Cesareo, 2007; Secchi, 2013, pp. 21-30; Sennett, 2018). The functional development of cities based on zoning has resulted in a patchwork of badly connected neighbourhoods and neglected peripheries (Gaballo, 2020; Alietti, 2021). Therefore, urban planners have been entrusted with the challenging task of efficiently connecting urban areas, by investing in infrastructure and logistics (La Cecla, 2018; Chan, 2019; Bernardini, Giolo, 2021).

Several new approaches have recently been adopted to enhance neighbourhoods by fostering their dynamism and giving value to bordering areas (Cremaschi, 2008; Fainstein, 2010). This has led to the introduction of the concept of "sustainable city", which correlates the functional reorganization of spaces and services with the effect that an urban planning intervention may have on the city users' lifestyle, habits, and prospects. The social dimension of urban sustainability includes two major ethical aspects: «on the one hand, the idea of the public space as a place where the encounter of diversity facilitates recognition and acceptance of difference; on the other hand, the idea of the public space as an inclusive place, accessible and usable by all people, builds on the concepts of the just city and of the right to the city» (Pinna *et al.*, 2021, p. 526). Such a new paradigm of urban planning includes the concepts of "accessibility" and "usability" (Istituto Nazionale di Urbanistica, 2019). These are based on the principle of "universal design"[3], by which urban transformation projects should have a positive impact on any category of city users (Pinna *et al.*, 2020), taking into account all the factors that may facilitate or prevent access to facilities, services, social opportunities and participatory initiatives (Geurs, van Wee, 2004; Garau *et al.*, 2020).

The idea of a more "welcoming" city is spreading also in Italy, with such a transformation being considered feasible through interdisciplinary measures (Rossi, 2021). Nevertheless, the current legislation is still based on old-fashioned notions, whereas the concepts of accessibility and usability have evolved over time (Lauria, 2012), going to include the improvement of the level of independent living of vulnerable categories. Italy introduced the Piano di Eliminazione delle Barriere Architettoniche (PEBA), a plan for the removal of architectural barriers, with Laws No. 41/1986 and 104/1992. The PEBA plan consists in the inventory and classification of all the architectural barriers that hinder access to buildings and public spaces in a specific area. Local governments are required to monitor, design, and schedule interventions aimed at achieving a satisfactory level of accessibility of spaces, facilities, goods and services.

An example of this innovative approach is provided by the strategy adopted by the Municipal Accessibility Lab (MAL) in the city of Lecce. Established in September 2020 by the Lecce City Council and coordinated by the Public Works Department, the MAL team was made up of three architect-researchers and a sociologist[4], whose work was supervised by three professors of architecture, information technology and sociology at the Universities of Florence and Salento

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2 Received: 07/02/23. Revised: 21/05/23. Accepted: 01/06/23. Published: 30/06/23.
3 The phrase is used in Article 2 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which came into force on 3 May 2008 and was ratified by Italy with Law No. 18 of March 2009.
4 The MAL team included a sociologist only until 31 January 2022, while the three architect-researchers continued working on the project until 31 August 2023.

(Comune di Lecce, 2020; Raimondi *et al.*, 2022). The MAL team mainly aimed at developing an accessibility plan, which implied the revision of a political-administrative management system that used to attribute responsibility solely to the PEBA Department of the City Council and the disability manager. A permanent working group was set up that included municipal employees, researchers, and members of the main local associations of persons with disabilities (Comune di Lecce, 2019, p. 5).
In order to identify the basic principles for the development of an accessibility plan, a theoretical analysis was carried out.

1. Accessibility Plan. Theoretical Premises

1.1 Theoretical Background

Planning for accessibility has led to considering the urban space a social space. Therefore, reference should be made to the concepts of "just city" (Fainstein, 2010, *op. cit.*) and "right to the city" (Chan, 2019, *op. cit.*; Bernardini, Giolo, 2021, *op. cit.*). A review of the literature on the topic (Pinna *et al.*, 2021, *op. cit.*, p. 536) has shown that the inequalities in the distribution of economic and socio-cultural capital are particularly evident in some specific spatial morphology, which becomes both the cause and effect of exclusion and poverty. Such analyses focus on the concept of "spatial configuration" (Hillier, 2007), «the set of topological relations and interdependencies among components comprising a spatial system» (Pinna *et al.*, 2021, *op. cit.*, p. 536), which entails a social logic of space (Hillier, Hanson, 1984, pp. 82-142; Yamu *et al.*, 2021; Garau *et al.*, 2020).
Fainstein (1999) and Friedmann (2000, p. 463) have highlighted what has become a key concept in the work of the MAL team: «[…] justice claims are only made when people have a vision of what should be done» (Fainstein, 2014, *op. cit.*, p. 3). Going beyond Harvey's (1973) and Castells's (1972) merely critical approach, Fainstein has considered the right to the city an ideal of justice that transcends distribution issues and is connected with the right to build. According to Fainstein, the best strategy to practically apply such theoretical concepts is communicative rationality (Forester, 1993; Innes, 1995), also referred to as the collaborative approach (Healey, 2006; Mattila, 2016).
Rationality is not limited to a formal and scientific logic, but it is part of practical reasoning formed within intersubjective communication, thus encompassing all the ways in which individuals come to know and understand reality and use that knowledge in acting (Fainstein, 2014, *op. cit.*, p. 7). Only such a perspective may lead to embracing differences and counteracting the individualistic approach typical of economic liberalism that still prevails in urban planning.
This is the framework within which the MAL was created, with its permanent working group aiming at spreading knowledge of environmental issues, collaborating to find solutions to problems, and contributing to producing systemic patterns of behaviour so as to establish a dialogue between citizens, the local government, and economic stakeholders. While trying to achieve such objectives, the MAL team also attempted to address the miscommunication issues and conflict of values that may prevent a reinterpretation of the concept of just city. As Chan (2019) has pointed out, the concept of proximity becomes fundamental for the disadvantaged. The latter, however, are often invisible to their fellow citizens and are usually seen as unrelated to the urban fabric, with their level of vulnerability increasing. Furthermore, according to Chan, a productive resolution of conflicts, which might result in participatory processes of city development, may occur through two approaches – consensus building and the ethical compromise. Additionally, the concept of urban commons should be reconsidered, as it may lead to persons with disabilities being marginalized and missing opportunities.
In order to move from these theoretical premises to practical intervention, the MAL team focused on five fundamental concepts that became the basis for any action.

1.2 Conceptual Framework for an Operational Strategy

In Italy, PEBA plans mainly aim at dealing with specific issues. However, interventions to improve accessibility should be included in general urban planning and design (Bianchetti, 2008), with the whole local government being involved, rather than just its Public Works and Urban Planning Departments.
Such a cross-cutting approach reminds of the interdisciplinary nature of environmental planning studies (Salet, 2008). Adopting an interdisciplinary approach and encouraging stakeholders to contribute to identifying the possible solutions to problems and the citizens' needs may compensate for a lack of appropriate regulations and specific technical support, while helping to consider all the major aspects of the objectives of urban planning.
In that sense, a systemic approach revolves around the main focus of urban planning – equity. A number of experiments in accessibility (Church & Marston, 2003; Afacan, Afacan, 2011; Lid, Solvang, 2016; Velho, 2019) have been based on an idea of the built environment as a common good. Being instrumental in analysing various forms of discrimination, this approach entails a new concept of "inclusiveness". Besides an object to access, the concept of accessibility includes an agent – the individual who needs to have access to something. An analysis of the process through which they can make use of such resources may ultimately reveal the level of accessibility of a place, a facility, a social opportunity (Borlini, Memo, 2009, p. 21). As Kwan (1998) has maintained, it would be advisable to assess "individual" accessibility. This would allow one to identify differences in terms of social stratification, geographical features, services provided, and even cognitive, sensory, and physical characteristics. This broader concept of inclusiveness fosters multifaceted knowledge and reduces mistakes, thus resulting in appropriate measures and the potential use of the space by any social category.
Furthermore, an adequate accessibility plan may be developed when all the social actors involved cooperate, and a dialogue is established between local government and stakeholders (Porrello, 1983; Wilson, 2009; Sintomer *et al.*, 2008; Warren, Pearse, 2008; Reuchamps, Suite, 2016).
Training is essential for the implementation of good practices. The training of architects, urban planners, engineers, municipal technicians and employees should include the cultural and relational matters linked to planning, designing, and implementing a project (Hansen, 2009). Training also implies the organizational and bureaucratic management of a project. The segmentation of institutional bodies and competences is one of the causes of the increasing mismatch between the levels of development of residential areas, businesses, infrastructures, and transport networks (Borlini, Memo, 2009, *op. cit.*, p. 47).
As architecture influences what people are and may become, neighbourhoods, buildings, monuments, squares, and streets end up playing a role in the formation of individual and collective memory. For this reason, it is essential to know a city before implementing any action that may transform it (Corbisiero, 2013). Based on such reflection, a multi-method approach does not just distinguish between qualitative and quantitative data collection, but it also differentiates between mere data collection and participatory research methods, where the investigation of phenomena depends on the active involvement of the target of the analysis (Lassiter, 2005; Biber, Leavy, 2006; Decataldo, Russo, 2022).

2. Sociological Intervention

In his experience in the MAL team, a sociologist worked to achieve three main objectives: getting to know the area and carrying out a needs analysis; encouraging stakeholders; spreading information and raising awareness. These tasks required a methodological approach that "harmo-

nized" (Matza, 1969, p. 5; Cardano, 2011, p. 17-19) with dynamic, multidimensional phenomena (Cardano, 2020, pp. 43-65).
The multi-method approach chosen focused on qualitative techniques, which were supplemented by quantitative research. Indeed, when carrying out research projects based on participation and interdisciplinary collaboration, the challenge does not lie in choosing the most appropriate methods, but in finding effective strategies to combine various approaches to research and pursue complex – and even partially conflicting – objectives (Decataldo, Russo, 2022, *op. cit.*, p. XI).
The different actions carried out were ideally linked by the verb "to transfer". A strategy was devised to transfer best practices in the acquisition of knowledge of the area to the three main target groups identified: the City Council; architects, surveyors, and engineers; citizens.
The second term that was central to such work is stigma (Goffman, 1986). In order to transfer knowledge, the subjectivity of the other should be protected, taking into account their past, habits, and needs, while fostering cooperative interaction with experts and insiders (Chan, 2019, *op. cit.*, pp. 84-91).
Based on these premises, a research design was chosen to build a complete picture of the city area.

2.1 Preliminary Analysis of the Area. Identifying the Area of Intervention

Having a general picture of the city is essential, as macro-factors influence the needs and everyday life of residents and city users. The urban structure and the geographical position of any individual may be seen as either fields of possibility or factors of segregation.
The statistics and maps available on the city official website (http://dati.comune.lecce.it/), a preliminary study aimed at designing a General Urban Plan[5] (Indovina, 2006), and an analysis of the area carried out by the City Council to develop an Urban Plan for Sustainable Mobility[6] enabled the MAL team to retrace the history of the city in terms of morphological and socio-economic change.
As the study of the administrative and political aspects of an area is influenced by ideas, perspectives, and needs that prevent a neutral analysis, the documents drafted by the City Council over the past few years were also analysed. In said documents, the word "marginalization" is just mentioned, whereas the problem of accessibility is not investigated in any way.
Mainly undertaken in the first nine months of the project, the collection of institutional/official data was complemented by meetings with a technical committee and municipal employees. This led to highlighting strengths and weaknesses in the competences of municipal employees, while helping to compare the past and present perspectives on, and doubts about, the social and urban situation in the city.
Finally, both a theoretical and methodological function was fulfilled by a series of interviews carried out with thirteen privileged interlocutors who experience the city on a daily basis: being representatives of vulnerable categories, the community, and the tourism sector, all of the interlocutors had a deep knowledge of the accessibility issue; the people involved were: a tour guide, two hotel managers, the owner of a popular bookshop in Lecce, the president of Federalberghi Italian hotel industry association, the president of a company owning three major hotels in Lecce, the front office manager of another important hotel in Lecce, a travel agent, two restaurant owners, the president of a cooperative that monitors and assesses the level of accessibility of events and leisure facilities, and two persons with disabilities, one of them being the president of an organization operating in the field of accessible tourism, and the other working as a regional employee and as a professor in the training programme for special needs teachers of the

5 See *Documento Programmatico Preliminare in Adeguamento al DRAG* – 2015, a preliminary document to comply with the requirements of the regional document for general planning.
6 See *Rapporto 1. Quadro conoscitivo. Inquadramento territoriale e socio-economico dell'area di piano – 2020*, report on the geographical and socio-economic characteristics of the area.

University of Salento, while being a member of a cooperative that produces Braille aids for the visually impaired.
On the one hand, said interviews allowed the MAL team to focus on aspects that are often neglected in the studies carried out by local councils. On the other hand, they provided the researchers with a clearer picture of the situation in the city, useful to conduct the subsequent phases of data collection and analysis.
The first phase of the project was aimed at identifying the pilot area where the intervention was going to be carried out. Theoretical-rational sampling, complemented by the area sampling technique (Corbetta, 1999, pp. 343-350) and quantitative data, was aimed at selecting an area that could best represent the urban, socio-economic and symbolic-cultural aspects of the city. The different types of quantitative data collected were related to public services (provided by the city, the province, the state), private services (in terms of religious facilities, shops, museums, and so on), monuments (seen as attractors), size of pedestrian zones and mainly vehicular areas, size of areas used by both pedestrians and vehicles, and accidents.
Therefore, the city centre was chosen, with its historic and more modern areas. It is the most popular part of the city, as a number of facilities providing public and private services are located there, as well as most of the cultural attractions and leisure facilities. Said pilot area consists of a surface of 55 hectares and 13 linear kilometres. With reference to public spaces, about 4,000 items were identified in terms of urban furniture, mobility infrastructure, and "obstacles".
The target consisted of residents who live in the pilot area, commuters, city users, and tourists. The different personal circumstances of the members of each group were also considered, taking into account cases of persons with mobility disabilities, blind and visually impaired persons, deaf and hard-of-hearing persons, persons with cognitive disabilities, and their caregivers. Some other categories that may experience particularly difficult situations were also identified, such as minors, elderly people, immigrants, and parents of young children.

2.2 Data Collection and Needs Analysis

The needs analysis (Frudà, 1989; Altieri, 2009) carried out included data gathering on competences, needs and wants, discussions on possible solutions to problems, inspections of the pilot area and municipal building sites, the assessment of the city official website, and awareness initiatives aimed at the business sector and public and private institutions.
Data collection was mainly carried out by adopting an ethnographic approach founded on different observational techniques (Becker, 2007). Participant observation was used when taking part in activities such as meetings, inspections, informal interviews, and office meetings (Blumer, 1966, p. 542). On the other hand, detached observation was used when the researcher did not participate actively in the initiatives and decisions taken by the municipal staff or the MAL team and in the data collection phases aimed at identifying how individuals and groups use spaces, goods and services in the pilot area.
Another observation technique that proved useful was shadowing (Sclavi, 1989; Paskiewicz, 2002; Czarniawska, 2007; Quinlan, 2008; Mcdonald, Simpson, 2014). The representatives of the different vulnerable categories were made aware of the use of such a technique whenever they actively participated in the activities, while its use remained unknown to the target whenever the social actors were observed during their daily routine in the city. Fourteen on-site observations were carried out in the pilot area in the months of June and July 2021. The individuals observed were visually impaired persons (2), persons with mobility disabilities (7), children younger than 14 years of age (2), teenagers between 14 and 17 years of age (1), teenagers with autism (1), and a group of young adults with cognitive disabilities (1).
Other qualitative methods were also used (Sachs, 1993, pp. 129-130, Barley, Kunda, 2001, pp. 84-86). Semi-structured interviews were useful when dealing with aspects that cannot be inves-

tigated through observation, such as the city users' and tourists' accounts of their experience, the know-how of the municipal employees working on the city transformation, and the conflict between users and local government. Eight more interviews were carried out. Among the people interviewed were an employee working in the management offices of the Lecce ASL local health authority, the mother of a young boy with autism, a person with a mobility disability, two members of a cooperative for the visually impaired, an Italian Sign Language teacher with a hard-of-hearing person, and three municipal technicians.

Focus groups (Barbour, Kitzinger, 1999; Cardano, 2011, *op. cit.*, pp. 199-239) were used to encourage discussions on the different representations of the city and find solutions to problems. Two types of focus groups were formed. The first type of focus group involved participants who shared similar social and health features, which was instrumental in revealing the different perspectives and life experiences within the same social category. A total of 15 focus groups of this type were held, with participants with mobility disabilities (2 focus groups), visually impaired people (1), hard-of-hearing persons (1), participants with cognitive disabilities (3), elderly people (3), parents and educators of young children and teenagers (4), and foreign immigrants (1). Conversely, a second type of focus group involved participants showing different forms of psychophysical, cognitive or cultural vulnerabilities, in order for mediated solutions to be found, especially when different social categories had conflicting needs. Three focus groups of this type were held with participants with different types of disabilities or their representatives.

The engagement activities carried out also involved 48 associations and 6 cooperatives dealing with disability[7], 2 foundations doing social work, 3 employers' associations, 3 trade union federations, the Brindisi-Lecce branch of the Italian national association of service centres for volunteering[8], 4 professional associations of architects, engineers, surveyors, and lawyers in Lecce, and 11 public bodies. In particular, the associations represented all the vulnerable categories facing physical, socio-cultural, and communication difficulties in the urban area. More specifically, the following vulnerable categories were involved: persons with mobility disabilities, visually impaired persons, deaf and hard-of-hearing persons, people with cognitive disabilities, minors, parents of young children, elderly people, and foreign immigrants. Also, the public bodies involved in data collection or the assessment of their PEBA plan were: the Art School, the Regional Agency for Tourism, the Arca Sud Salento regional housing agency, a branch of the Bank of Italy, the prefecture, the Provincial Council, the Archaeological Superintendence of Fine Arts and Landscape, and the Regional Administrative Court. Moreover, the Diocese of Lecce and the University of Salento were involved in the debate on accessibility and awareness initiatives. Finally, an agreement was signed between the local government and the local branch of the National Research Council, in order to deal with the renovation of buildings, squares, and monuments of great cultural, historical, and archaeological value.

More than 150 coordination and discussion meetings were held. The focus groups constituted 15 hours 50 minutes of audio recording, while the qualitative interviews totalled 14 hours 6 minutes. Seven hours of fieldwork were carried out through shadowing, which was documented with (309) photographs and (60) short videos (Stagi, Queirolo Palmas, 2015). Seven inspections were conducted upon the citizens' request, in order to verify the presence of architectural barriers, with five administrative procedures being initiated and three municipal departments being involved – the Public Works, Urban Planning, and Mobility and Transport Departments. Further 10 inspections of municipal building sites were carried out so as to provide advice to improve accessibility, with the involvement of the members with disabilities of the permanent working group.

7 Thirty-seven associations were involved in the project between 1 September 2020 and 31 August 2021, when most activities were aimed at studying the area and identifying its problems.

8 Five-hundred associations were informed and involved in awareness initiatives as a result of the collaboration with the Brindisi-Lecce branch of the Italian national association of service centres for volunteering.

3. Main Findings of the Needs Analysis

3.1. I Am Invisible, Therefore I Am. Reconsidering the Role of Physical Urban Space

Simmel described space as a form of meaning. When it comes to architectural barriers, his reflection on boundaries should be mentioned, as he stated that «the boundary is not a spatial fact with sociological consequences but a sociological fact that is formed spatially» (1989, p. 531). For this reason, choosing the city centre as a pilot area was particularly helpful. On the one hand, the city centre includes the largest number and most diverse types of architectural barriers. On the other hand, it is the area that most embodies the spirit of the city, but also the one visitors and tourists most easily recognize. Such a situation emphasizes "the" social fact: the high density of users and attractors makes the city centre an indicator of marginalization. Physical, cultural, and administrative barriers either prevent some categories from experiencing the city centre or reduce their opportunities to do so. Therefore, the concept of accessibility cannot revolve around the structural aspects of a city if the culture of those who have contributed to building and transforming it is not understood first. (Sennett, 2018, *op. cit.*).

A blind or visually impaired person relies on sound and tactile elements to orient themselves to their surroundings, especially when in the proximity of obstacles and dangers. The experiences of shadowing carried out in Lecce, however, have shown that pedestrian lights are not associated with sound devices, while tactile paving is present on very few streets and fails to meet the essential requirements for usability. Furthermore, the pavement is damaged in several places, with people risking tripping. Crossing the road becomes dangerous due to noise pollution from traffic, which reduces the amount of auditory information blind and visually impaired people usually rely on when orienting themselves. Indeed, an "experienced" blind or visually impaired person – that is how blind and visually impaired people who walk around the city on a daily basis describe themselves – is able to distinguish an empty from a full space, understand they need to go up or down steps, or realize that they have reached a bus stop due to the area being specially built for pedestrians waiting to catch a bus. Finally, the buildings where public services are provided are not equipped with tactile signs and maps that could help users to get to the right office.

Even a small section of damaged pavement or a slightly taller step may become an insurmountable obstacle or a source of harm for wheelchair users, persons with mobility disabilities, and those pushing a pushchair. High pavements, dangerous crossroads in shared spaces, damaged cobbling, restaurant and pub tables placed on the pavement, signposts put on the pavement, cars, bicycles and electric scooters parked outside of designated areas paint a picture of a society that is unable even to imagine what it means to move differently. Another example of that is provided by public works aimed at street renewal, whose potentially negative impact is often underestimated. Shadowing showed that, following these kinds of works, wheelchair users often had to find another way to cross the road, due to pavement ramps, the verge of the street, and the asphalt creating depressions that prevented the wheelchair from moving forward, sometimes even causing the wheelchair user to fall into the road. Public and private service providers know so little about the world of persons with mobility disabilities that they believe that the accessibility of a building is determined by its being equipped with a lift. They fail to take into account the size of the area in front of the lift entrance, the width of the lift itself, the size and shape of corridors. The use of shadowing allowed the MAL team to inspect some municipal buildings in which there are steps before the lift entrance, lifts are too narrow, and the shape of the corridor leading to the lift does not allow wheelchair users to easily enter the lift.

Using the shadowing technique to observe the daily urban life of persons with cognitive disabilities gave the researcher the opportunity to experience what caregivers usually discussed during focus groups. As one of the associations involved is based in Monteroni, a town located

10 km from Lecce, the researcher reached the headquarters of the association in question to observe the organization of a trip to Lecce for a group of young adults. Interestingly, the first aspect their educators considered was the space-time relationship, as a stroll in the city centre may become a source of stress. Secondly, the educators had to decide what places the group was going to visit and choose where they were going to have a break. This step also involved solving the parking issue, described as one of the biggest problems in Lecce. The third was a motivational step, with the educators providing information about the trip and listening to the young adults' reaction. This was extremely necessary in order to prevent anyone from either getting scared and running away or suddenly leaving the group to explore the city. Once in the city centre, the group was arranged so that anybody could be supervised, especially in crowded places and busier traffic areas. While walking around, the educators paid attention to the young adults' emotional state, so as to understand when to stop to admire monuments, look at shop windows, have a snack, and find a restroom. The young people were calm and even enthusiastic, while their educators showed some signs of stress. Everybody's mood changed whenever they met some groups of tourists in the narrow streets of the city centre. On one particular occasion, the young adults stopped walking and gathered together near a building, an anxious reaction caused by encountering a noisy crowd. Identifying some alternative streets to the most crowded ones, with disabled parking spaces and wayfinding elements being available, may allow persons with disabilities to avoid the most challenging areas.

Not only did interviews and focus groups make physical barriers emerge, together with the absence of services and adequate urban furniture, but they also highlighted a lack of empathy among citizens, public and private workers. Spaces and services are still designed for adults with no disabilities, as the persons with disabilities and their caregivers involved in the project repeatedly pointed out. For instance, a person with a disability working in the tourism sector mentioned that in some cases services are not provided,

> «in order not to cause trouble to the staff and not to annoy the other clients» (interview no. 1, February 26, 2021; our translation).

> Furthermore, a visually impaired person complained that services may be inappropriately described as being accessible, especially when it comes to accommodation facilities, eating and drinking places,

> «where the presence of areas accessible to persons with mobility disabilities and visually impaired persons is said to be guaranteed, although such areas fail to meet a number of essential requirements» (interview no. 2, April 20, 2021; our translation).

> Moreover, the people interviewed highlighted how sometimes an attitude is adopted that may threaten one's dignity, with persons with disabilities being treated like objects:

> «as it happened when I went to the orthopaedist, who kind of threw me onto the exam table» (interview no. 3, May 14, 2021; our translation).

During shadowing, the citizens' inappropriate behaviour also emerged. For instance, drivers seemed to be tense whenever a wheelchair user crossed the road, and some even repeatedly honked at them. On another occasion, some people seemed to be annoyed when having to move out of a visually impaired boy's way or when hit by his cane. It also happened that some customers were so displeased to see a group of teenagers with cognitive disabilities approaching the café they were in that the waiter had to serve the young customers in a different area.

As the members of the various associations involved stated, most of these vulnerable people feel humiliated and frustrated when having to deal with the aforementioned issues. They believe they have to be invisible or marginalized in safe ghettos, so as not to bother anybody. Their place in society is not determined by their absolute invisibility, but rather by their absence in the

thoughts, circumstances, and situations characterizing the daily life of the rest of the population.

3.3 Communication as a Factor of Accessibility

Communication is one of the main problems to face when dealing with accessibility. Most categories of users need wayfinding elements that can make the environment "legible", an issue that cannot be merely reduced to providing appropriate signage. The images of the city need to be clear enough to enable people to build their own mental map of the city (Lynch, 1960). In order for the map to be helpful in terms of orientation and use, spaces need to have intrinsic coherence that may help to understand how they are organized. «But an ordered environment can do more than this; it may serve as a broad frame of reference, an organizer of activity or belief or knowledge» (*ibidem*, p. 5).
Communication plays an important role in two main areas of urban life in Lecce. Firstly, in Lecce there is a significant shortage of signage guiding people to offices, public services, cultural and natural sites, and parking spaces reserved for vulnerable categories, including persons with disabilities and pregnant women. Such a shortage causes disorientation and stress, and hence a loss of independence, due to a temporary suspension of cognitive skills in the process of adjustment to the urban environment (Floridi, 2009; McGuire, 2018).
In this regard, the renovation of outdoor spaces such as squares and parks is particularly interesting. Visually impaired people and persons with cognitive disabilities in particular need to know their surroundings through a map. While visually impaired persons can rely on Braille maps, persons with cognitive disabilities need a different type of symbolic communication that is based on specific semantics and syntax (Beukelman, Mirenda, 2014). However, a map should not just be useful to orient oneself in a city, as it should also make the city become easily reachable by car and on foot. Therefore, the MAL team worked to provide the people frequenting the area with adequate and safe parking spaces, traffic circulation, and access to the area itself. As squares and parks are places connected with social interaction and relaxation, they cannot be built without taking into account the comfort and safety they should provide, since otherwise they would not effectively fulfil their function (Lynch, 1960, *op. cit*., p. 6-7).
Another essential aspect of accessibility is related to the provision of services. On numerous occasions, the persons with disabilities involved in the project complained about the inappropriate behaviour of those working in public offices, whose lack of core professional and relational skills often results in discrimination.
Such cases lead to making reference to the concept of social gap. Spaces, goods and services can become actually available only when the cognitive skills of those living in the community and participating in the development of society are taken into account. The categories used to organize the world are characterized by multiple layers of meaning that, having strengthened over time, bear values, imaginaries, and representations containing evaluative aspects that may become crucial in the adoption of behaviours and attitudes aimed at creating distance (Cesareo, 2007, *op. cit.*, p. 63). Therefore, working together with municipal employees helps to become more aware of the structural and cultural factors causing a social gap that translates into both a certain approach to users and specific architectural and urban planning patterns.
The MAL team also advised the City Council on regeneration projects that were already being carried out, providing guidance on the most effective way to secure a construction site, the renovation of inaccessible pavement, the regeneration of an urban park, and the creation of a cycle lane. With the help of one of the architects on the team, inspections of such projects were carried out, with the representatives of the most vulnerable categories being involved. Fieldwork allowed the team to identify different types of gaps, in terms of legislation, difficulty in applying the regulations to specific and complex cases, and inability to understand the needs of potential users. As a result of this process, the municipal technicians involved became more aware of situations that may cause inaccessibility.

Furthermore, one of the main tasks of the MAL was to raise awareness among municipal employees working in different departments, encouraging them to develop a complex and multidisciplinary idea of accessibility. The observation of the bureaucratic machine revealed an organizational culture that fosters individual and intra-departmental work at most, rather than promote interdepartmental collaboration. Although such a gap results in a lack of perspectives and planning, dialogue is still seen as

> «causing a loss in efficiency and leading to no predictable, effective results» (interview no. 4, July 8, 2021; our translation),

as the surveyor in the Planning Department of the City Council pointed out.
This lack of collaboration also causes a delay in interventions whenever citizens complain about any architectural barriers. A more efficient and effective response than the administrative one is sometimes provided by adopting a pre-modern approach. The residents who are lucky enough to have established a relationship with a politician or a municipal employee often manage to have their problems solved. However, these types of interventions focus on specific problems of single people, thus failing to contribute to solving more complex issues concerning the community as a whole. Conversely, this behaviour fosters an ineffective way of dealing with problems, making it become common practice. As the responsible for the project and surveyor in the Planning Department of the City Council stated:

> «This is how we act. We do what we have always done. Then, if somebody complains and their voice reaches the right ears, we act to solve the problem. But this is to be considered a single event, as later we go back to making the same mistakes. […] We often address a complaint after more than a year» (interview no. 6, July 15, 2021; our translation).

Therefore, it remains difficult to develop interdepartmental strategies of intervention, especially when dealing with matters connected with tourism and culture. There is no awareness of the importance of accessible leisure and cultural spaces and events, while the issue of accessibility to shops, accommodation facilities, eating and drinking places is often overlooked. This ends up influencing the quality of life of vulnerable categories, with persons with disabilities becoming invisible.

4. Concluding Remarks

When its multiple factors are not taken into account, accessibility becomes mere rhetoric. However, space has recently started to be interpreted differently, especially due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the invasion of digital technology.
While reconstructing the relationship between sociology and space, Urry (2004) has pointed out how the latter has been ignored for more than a century, with its importance being rarely emphasized in classical sociology. Among the few scholars who did deal with space were Lefebvre (1968), Bachelard (1969) and Benjamin (1979).
Lefebvre included space in the daily micro-, macro-, and meso-practices of social production, often interpreting it in terms of controversial material appropriation, but also as a symbol of individual and community revenge in the processes of identity development. In that sense, reference can be made to the concept of social gap, as it can be seen as both the cause and effect of the conflict over the management of space.
Bachelard focused on the relationship between the individual and the space of the house, giving a spatial dimension to the temporal nature of memory. According to Bachelard, individuals experience the house through their own body and memories, which makes it become an extension

of the individual's body and identity. This concept can also be applied to public buildings.
Benjamin deemed it fundamental to understand how individuals "read the city". This does not just entail rational factors, but also emotions, desires, and dreams, with the aspects that any single individual focuses on usually differing from the way in which politicians and urban planners read the city.
Benjamin's reflection, which Urry has embraced (2004, *op. cit.*, p. 12), helps to realize that sociologists should play a crucial role in urban design and planning, especially when it comes to accessibility. The most difficult task carried out by the MAL team was to reduce the aforementioned social gap, which becomes evident in the urban invisibility of persons with disabilities, the suspension of their rights, and the unproductive conflict over the appropriation of space between categories with different psychophysical disabilities.
As vulnerable categories and municipal employees were involved in the project, accessibility transformed into an opportunity for the interaction of diverse individuals and mutual empowerment.
At the end of the work carried out in Lecce, some issues remained unresolved. These include the excessive sectoral approach to projects, the shortsightedness of interventions that deal with specific problems without taking into account the broader picture, the need to consider the involvement of at least the representatives of vulnerable categories in any intervention on the area, even when just planning a leisure or cultural event. As the collaboration between the Universities involved and the City Council ended once the project was over, some of the aspects of the complex method used, which resulted from the concept of universal and inclusive design, may remain unclear.
For this reason, the MAL should be replaced by a sort of advisory body made up of elected representatives of all the different vulnerable categories, who may collaborate to find solutions to current accessibility issues and monitor their implementation.
Finally, a fundamental importance should be placed on raising awareness among professionals and in schools. Listening to the experience of persons with disabilities is just one of the educational tools that may contribute to individuals becoming responsible citizens. The shadowing technique used has shown how observing and experiencing the daily routine of persons with disabilities first-hand may result in a more cognitively significant and lasting change in the perspective of those who contribute to building the city. An essential role should be played by the concept of "cognitive empathy" (Sclavi, 1989, *op. cit.*). Individuals should not just put themselves in someone else's shoes, but they should embrace and foster diversity in perspectives and ways of life.

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