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The right to the ecological city: Reconciling ecological sustainability and social justice in a neighbourhood transformation in Turin

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Cities have gained increasing attention in the debate on how to tackle the global environmental crisis. However, urban strategies for sustainability have often been criticised for being insufficient in effectively mitigating environmental impacts due to externalisation and cost-shifting, and for producing social contradictions, such as ecological gentrification. Rather than considering these critiques as reasons to abandon ecological urban transformations, this article advocates for the right to the ecological city, for which the goals of ecological sustainability and social justice need to be reconciled through a degrowth strategy based on the principles of sufficiency, reuse and sharing. However, this theoretical framework encounters several challenges in urban practice. These are discussed through the author's lens as an observant participant in the *Fondazione di Comunità Porta Palazzo*, a community foundation involved in the transformation of the neighbourhoods of Aurora and Porta Palazzo in Turin, Italy, through projects focused on public space and housing. The discussion of these challenges suggests that while the right to the ecological city is hard to achieve, it remains an important goal in the transformation of cities and neighbourhoods, one that must rely on structural change driven by diverse actors across multiple scales.

Keywords: degrowth, gentrification, right to the city, neighbourhood, activism, urban transformation, socio-ecological transformation, land commodification

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Introduction

Studying the transformation of a neighbourhood can serve as a focal lens through which to analyse the intersection of the multiple dimensions of global and local social and ecological crises. These include the urgently needed ecological transformation and the question of its social justice, particularly in the context of already unjust social conditions. This lens can help to understand the connections between processes like gentrification and ecological transformation, which often are treated as unconnected fields. However, the links between the social and the ecological dimension are manifold: on the one hand, wealth is the most effective predictor of differences in environmental impact both between social groups and places (greater consumption leads to higher emissions). On the other hand, low-income groups are more strongly affected by both environmental changes and the negative side effects of policies for the mitigation of environmental impacts. This article reflects on possibilities and challenges of tackling these issues in a combined manner through a bottom-up organisation, using the case study of the Porta Palazzo and Aurora neighbourhoods in the city of Turin, Italy.

Over the last three decades, Turin has been characterised by a profound phase of urban transformation. Once an archetypical one-company town, the city was reshaped following the decline of the Fordist economic model. This transformation involved the physical redevelopment of post-industrial spaces, alongside investments in knowledge, technology, tourism, and mega-events. Austerity urbanism strategies, driven by debt and economic crises, have also been part of this process, leading to multiple cases of gentrification and displacement across the city. These changes were fuelled by investments in neighbourhood revitalisation, with subsequently increased real-estate values (Bolzoni & Semi, 2023).

In this analysis, I propose to interpret Turin's transformation also considering its ecological dimension. While it is often seen as a story of local economic and identity crisis, the process of de-industrialisation can also be understood as part of a global process of externalisation and cost-shifting of environmental impacts from the Global North to the Global South (Krähmer, 2020; Parrique et al., 2019). Much of the pollution formerly produced by industries in Turin, has not disappeared but has been moved together with the industries to other regions. Indeed, while Turin remains one of the most polluted cities in Europe¹, levels of air pollution have decreased significantly over the last decades, as well as locally produced greenhouse gas emissions (Città di Torino, 2022). Although Turin has been deeply affected by an economic crisis with significant social consequences and less economic success than, for instance, neighbouring Milan, Turin remains a city of the Global North with unsustainably high levels of consumption-related environmental impacts² (Genta et al., 2022).

In this context, the neighbourhoods of Porta Palazzo and Aurora, located in semi-central Turin, are at the beginning – if not in the midst – of a process of gentrification (Bolzoni & Semi, 2023; Bourlessas et al., 2022). While this transformation is specific to these neighbourhoods, it is also part of broader city-wide dynamics and can be related to the ongoing global tendencies of 'planetary gentrification' (Lees et al., 2016; Lees et al., 2018). The global ecological and climate crisis (Mayer, 2020) has, so far, had a limited direct impact on these neighbourhoods, but its impacts are bound to increase.

¹ <https://www.eea.europa.eu/themes/air/urban-air-quality/european-city-air-quality-viewer> (Last access: February 2024)

² For example, green house gas (GHG) emissions and other environmental impacts caused by activities for goods and services consumed in Turin but produced both there and elsewhere.

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In the process of achieving much-needed socio-ecological change, the interplay between different scales and processes is crucial, as the social and ecological dimensions intersect in complex ways. However, these intersections are rarely considered together (Knuth et al., 2020; Wachsmuth et al., 2016). On one hand, urban greening initiatives are often indifferent to their social consequences, such as exacerbating gentrification (Anguelovski et al., 2018; Dooling, 2009; Rice et al., 2020). On the other hand, urban social movements often underestimate the importance of ecological issues, criticising them as an elite preoccupation and overlooking the fact that poorer segments of the population are disproportionately affected by the ecological crisis. For instance, Bohnenberger's (2020) analysis of social housing policies and stakeholders positioning in Germany illustrates this dynamic. In this sense, urban social movements sometimes engage in defending the status quo of 'acceptable' living conditions, opposing transformations, including those related to ecological transitions.

This analysis of the connection between social and ecological change aligns with a recent stream of literature which explores the urban – and more generally spatial – dimension of the degrowth and postgrowth debate (Brokow-Loga & Eckardt, 2020; Krähmer & Brokow-Loga, 2024; Knuth et al., 2020; Krähmer, 2022; Krähmer & Cristiano, 2022; Mocca, 2020; Savini, 2021; Savini et al., 2022; Schmid, 2022; Xue & Kębłowski, 2022). This article aims to contribute to the debate on how to imagine degrowth within the specificities of real existing urban geographies, moving beyond abstract debates about the right urban form for sustainability (cf. Knuth et al., 2020; Krähmer, 2018; Mocca, 2020). It intends to support the process of envisioning a *right to the ecological city*, understood as a horizon for neighbourhood and urban transformation that overcomes the apparent contradiction between calls for ecological urban transformation and social justice.

Following the rise of the climate movement in 2018, many calls have been made to reconcile the social and the ecological. However, through this case study I intend to show that in the practice of urban transformation, the intersections between social and ecological issues are easily neglected or relegated to a secondary level of attention. I argue that this is related to the contingencies of urban transformation, namely the need for local actors to be mindful of and respond to frequent and shifting dynamics of change. These pressures often limit the time and resources available to systematically discuss and tackle the complexities of socio-ecological change. In this case, the immediately tangible events of gentrification process in the neighbourhood tend to overshadow ecological concerns, which can seem more distant. I engage with these issues from the vantage point of my long-term involvement as an active participant in a bottom-up organisation, the *Fondazione di Comunità Porta Palazzo (FCPP – Porta Palazzo community foundation)*³, created to influence the neighbourhood's ongoing process of transformation, contrasting the risk of these transformations being socially exclusive and leading to expulsions.

In the following section, I outline a theoretical framework centred on the concept of the right to the ecological city. In the third section, I discuss methods and positionality. Afterwards, I explore the neighbourhood's position, first within the context of the global socio-ecological crisis and then in relation to the ongoing and contingent process of urban transformation in Turin. Later on, I will illustrate how the *Fondazione in Comunità Porta Palazzo (FCPP)* navigates this context and assess the extent to which it contributes to realising the right to the ecological city. In the final section, I discuss findings and draw some general conclusions.

³ www.fondazioneportapalazzo.org (Last access: October 2024).

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The right to the ecological city: from ecological gentrification to an urban degrowth agenda

Cities have gained increasing attention in the debate on how to tackle the global environmental crisis. As Angelo and Wachsmuth (2020) have shown, the perspective on cities has evolved from being seen as the source of all evil (i.e. ecological impacts) to one in which cities are considered as saviours thanks to their compactness and ecological efficiency, on the one hand, and their social and technological innovations on the other. These essentialised perspectives can be ascribed to a static conception of space which ignores its relational constituency (Massey, 2005). This leads to – at least – two important contradictions. The first being a ‘methodological cityism’ (Angelo & Wachsmuth, 2015), where cities are considered to be far more sustainable than they actually are. This is because ecological impacts are often assessed only in terms of their place of production and not in relation to where the consumption occurs that is responsible for these impacts (Krähmer, 2020; Parrique et al., 2019).

The second contradiction lies in the risk that urban policies aimed at locally reducing ecological impacts – such as decreasing car-based mobility and related carbon emissions – can lead to social impacts in the form of ecological gentrification (Anguelovski et al., 2018; Dooling, 2009; Rice et al., 2020). Policies and projects of urban greening, when successful, make urban environments more pleasant to live, leading to an increase in real estate values and the displacement of residents with low incomes. This is not only unjust but also ineffective in ecological terms, as unsustainable behaviour, such as driving, is not changed but simply moved elsewhere. Meanwhile, new residents with higher incomes may not drive, but they often consume other goods and services with significant environmental impacts (Mössner & Miller, 2015; Rice et al., 2020). In this analysis, I primarily focus on the second contradiction of green urban policies leading to negative social effects – and how it can be tackled in the context of a neighbourhood transformation – while not forgetting the relevance of the first contradiction.

For David Harvey (2013), the right to the city is to claim power over the processes through which the city is made and remade. Many of these are socio-ecological processes. Hence, the idea of a collective right to determine how urban transformation occurs is key for overcoming the socio-ecological contradictions discussed earlier. While all the cited contributions, and many more, hint at these contradictions, an explicit discussion of what a right to the *ecological* city could be, seems to be absent from the literature so far. Some have discussed a ‘right to the green city’ but recurring only on specific dimensions of green urban policies, like cycling (Sosa López, 2021) or green spaces (Thomas, 2016) or defining it bluntly as “a term that transfers the right to the city to a green context” (Caputo et al., 2019, p. 148). I found only one publication that used the phrase ‘right to the ecological city’ (Cooper & Baer, 2019, p. 209), defining it as:

predicated on the notion that all urban dwellers have the capacity to live within it in sustainable, comfortable and appropriate housing, and in locations which provide social mobility and access to services, education and employment opportunities, as well as alternative modes of transport.

This definition contains some valuable elements, but it only partially addresses the socio-ecological contradictions discussed earlier and overlooks the power dimension central to Harvey’s concept. Building on this, I propose to define the right to the ecological city as *the right to collectively shape and live in a city that respects planetary boundaries while assuring a good quality of life for all – both locally and globally – with limited material resources*. That

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is the right to lead a good life which is not based on ecological destruction or the social exploitation of others, whether nearby or elsewhere. Defined in this way, the right to the ecological city is closely tied to a critical view of economic growth. It rests on the recognition that a central cause of the contradictions and limitations of existing urban sustainability policies is economic growth itself. The logic of economic growth and capital accumulation drives both the cost-shifting logic of the first contradiction and the private appropriation of collectively produced value (through the dynamics of real estate markets in relation to urban greening) in the second contradiction.

Therefore, to develop strategies to work towards a right to the ecological city, I turn to a de- and postgrowth framing of the socio-ecological crisis and transformation. The post- and degrowth literature (Chertkovskaya et al., 2019; D'Alisa et al., 2015; Demaria et al., 2013; Fitzpatrick et al., 2022; Schneider et al., 2010) argues that (a), the idea of decoupling economic growth from the growth of ecological impacts is a dangerous illusion (Hickel & Kallis, 2020; Parrique et al., 2019) and that, as a consequence, a global but selective reduction of social metabolism (i.e. production and consumption) is necessary; (b) social justice cannot be reached through trickle-down effects of economic growth but rather through redistribution locally and globally⁴, grounded in differentiated responsibilities in the reduction of the social metabolism in different places and between social classes (Chancel & Piketty, 2015); (c) well-being cannot be based on the promise of ever growing material wealth. Instead, it must be based on a conception of *sufficient* material wealth for everybody through public services and goods: 'Private Sufficiency, Public Luxury', as George Monbiot (2021) put it.

Only in recent years, a stream of literature has turned its attention to the relevance of the urban and spatial dimension to the degrowth and postgrowth debates, and vice versa (Kaika et al., 2023; Krähmer, 2022; Savini, 2021; Schmid, 2022; Xue, 2021). Some key principles in this discourse include *sufficiency*, *reuse*, and *sharing* (Krähmer & Cristiano, 2022). *Sufficiency* is a principle that comes before efficiency in order of importance: the idea is that of a system that provides enough to everybody but excessive wealth to nobody; this can also be understood as 'spatial' sufficiency, to be applied, for instance, to per capita residential floor space (Bohnenberger, 2020). What, in particular, is enough and what is too much, must be established by social and political processes, in dialogue with the ecological availability of resources. *Reuse* may appear as an obvious concept in a city like Turin, characterised by decades of urban renewal, focused on formerly industrial areas. However, incoherent with the degrowth and postgrowth framework is the perspective of 'incremental reuse' (Krähmer & Cristiano, 2022) that has been frequently adopted in Turin, i.e. the effort to promote reuse with the scope of achieving economic growth, including the rise of real estate values. *Sharing*, finally, does not refer to the commodified versions of the sharing economy, but rather to the social practices of sharing space. The availability of public and shared space (and services) makes a good life grounded in sufficiency possible. Equally important are shared and collective forms of property, as an instrument of limiting the growth-bound dynamics of real-estate speculation (Hurlin, 2018), for example through practices of commoning (De Angelis, 2022; Micciarelli, 2022), contrasting the commodification of land (Bauman et al., 2024).

These principles can help to resolve the contradictions of urban sustainability policies and to achieve the right to the ecological city in several ways. Sufficiency helps to politicise the question of consumption in a wealthy city of the Global North, placing the differentiated responsibilities due to different wealth and income levels at the centre of attention. Reuse helps to avoid false solutions such as considering only the impacts of buildings during their

⁴ Relating also to a non-universalist conception of degrowth, situated rather in the context of a pluriverse of alternatives (Demaria & Kothari, 2017; Kothari et al., 2014).

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use, neglecting the environmental costs of construction. Sharing supports the search for solutions which are not only sustainable but are also able to guarantee a high quality of life, prioritising common goods over private goods. In a right to the city perspective, a further crucial question is who shapes processes of transformation towards these principles.

In this paper, I intend to apply this theoretical framework to a case study of neighbourhood transformation, asking: first, how can we describe the intersection of social and ecological dimensions at the neighbourhood scale? Second, how can a bottom-up organisation navigate these intersections? Third, what can this case say about concrete pathways towards the right to the ecological city?

Methods and positionality

This article derives from a process of self-reflective intersection of academic research and activism. I have engaged academically both with gentrification (Krähmer & Santangelo, 2018) and the spatial dimension of degrowth (Krähmer & Brokow-Loga, 2024; Krähmer, 2022; Krähmer & Cristiano, 2022), but I have always seen the scope of this research as closely connected to real social change and have been engaged as an activist on the same topics. The connection established between the social and ecological dimensions of urban and neighbourhood transformations is thus both a theoretical and a practical endeavour to me. The present article is based on a work of reflection on our action with the FCPP, of which I am the vice-president, and is conceived both as an output of the work done in this context and as a new input for further developing this work. The article is based on about six years of activism in the community foundation since before its constitution and a conceptual effort to connect this work to different literatures in (critical) urban studies, geography and bordering fields and the de- and postgrowth framework⁵.

I would describe this as a research method of observant participation – rather than participant observation (Seim, 2021) – that builds on the situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988) of a reflective practitioner (Schön, 1992). Concretely, this means the following: while other members of the foundation are aware that I am a researcher, there have been no specific activities of research for the production of this article, separate from the other activities of the foundation. This work is the result of my reflections on our practices and actions, put in relation to insights and perspectives gained from my academic work and the literature. In the foundation itself, we frequently organise meetings to discuss the sense and the direction of our actions: these are no research settings as such and may be distant from academic methods, but nonetheless they have influenced the intellectual work at the basis of this paper. This article, as a consequence, does not presume to be based on an anyway illusionary idea of distanced objectivity (Haraway, 1988). Rather it comes from the situated perspective (ibid.) of an economically and educationally privileged academic and neighbourhood activist. Furthermore, this article does not derive from a pre-defined research methodology; it is rather my active participation that has allowed me to gain the knowledge this article is based on. This piece of research should be understood in its context(s), with the aim of being useful for them, in the sense of a *phronetic* social science (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Lancione, 2013). That is, a social science that rather than searching objective truths seeks to act as a support of social change, while not forgetting Schoenberger's (2007) reminder that the politics behind a research project are fundamental to identify the questions but not to find the answers.

⁵ An important step for the development of this work has been the participation in the *Lisbon Early-Career Workshop in Urban Studies: Social Mobilisation and Planning through Crises* in 2022 during which a draft of this article has been discussed.

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The case study: Porta Palazzo and Aurora

Porta Palazzo and Aurora are two adjacent semi-central neighbourhoods in Turin (see Figure 1). Porta Palazzo is located right on the border of the historical city centre (its name is due to one of the Roman city gates) and is characterised by its huge open-air market of the same name, with a contiguous flea market (*Balon*) on Saturdays. Aurora lies just north of Porta Palazzo on the other side of the Dora River and is of more recent origin, mostly built between the 19th and 20th century in the context of Turin’s massive industrialisation. None of these areas has an administrative definition; both are part of the larger *circonscrizione* 7 (the borough administration). Furthermore, many people perceive Porta Palazzo as a part of Aurora (see neighbourhood maps drawn based on interviews in Cabodi et al., 2020 outlined in Figure 1). Also, there is a great social continuity between the two areas. They are both historically and currently inhabited by a relatively poor working class and largely migrant population. A gentrification process has started both in parts of Porta Palazzo (in the area closer to the city centre) and of Aurora (in the part next to the university campus Luigi Einaudi). The neighbourhood foundation FCPP), together with many other local organisations, operates in both Porta Palazzo and Aurora. For all these reasons, I treat both parts here as one neighbourhood – when I use the word neighbourhood, from now on, I refer to both. I use both names as Aurora is larger but Porta Palazzo, due to its market, is far better known in the city. In this section, I will first situate the neighbourhood in relation to the global socio-ecological crisis, then I will describe local dynamics of socio-economic crisis, in particular the ongoing gentrification process, and finally write about the role of the community foundation FCPP.

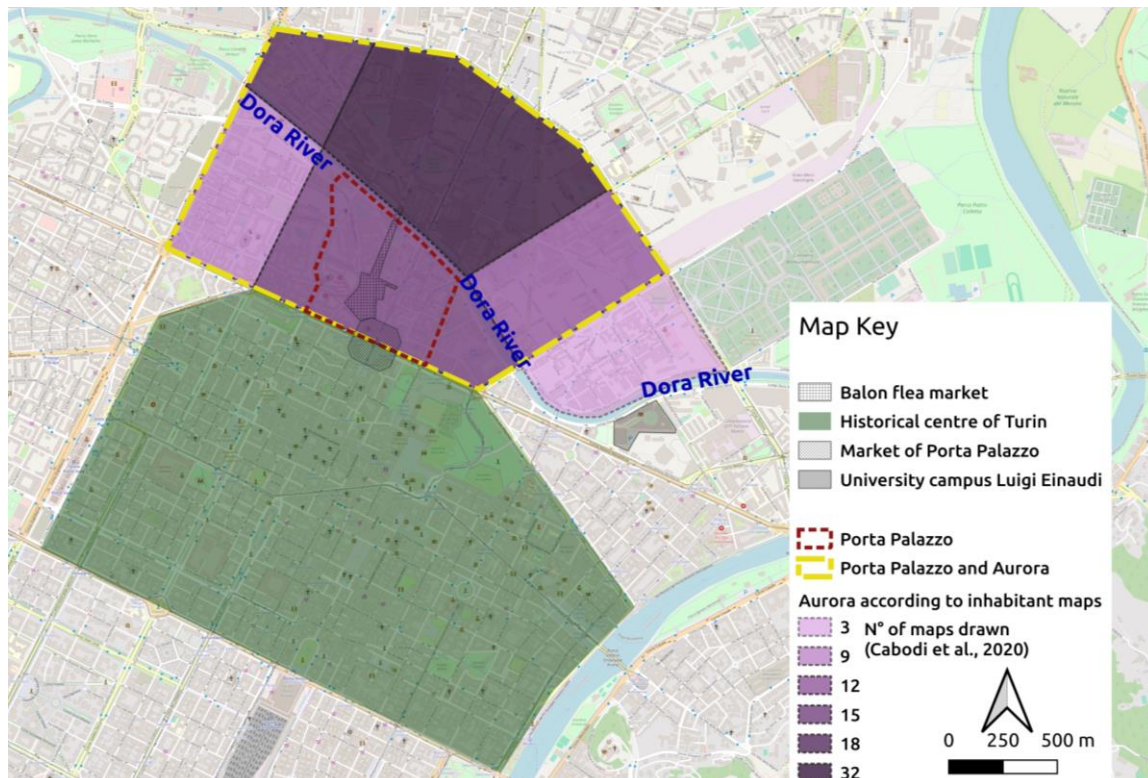


Figure 1. Location of the neighbourhood (Porta Palazzo and Aurora) in Turin. Map by the author on an OpenStreetMap base map

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The neighbourhood and the global socio-ecological crisis

Adopting a relational perspective on space (Massey, 2005), it is possible to identify both the causes and the impacts of the climate crisis in a neighbourhood like that of Porta Palazzo and Aurora. Regarding the neighbourhood's contribution to the causes of the crisis, only reasonable assumptions can be made as, unfortunately, no quantitative data is available at the neighbourhood scale. On the one hand, the contribution of a relatively poor neighbourhood (see next subsection) must be assumed to be relatively low, as income is the dominant factor explaining statistical differences in terms of carbon emissions, both spatially and across social classes (Chancel, 2022; Chancel & Piketty, 2015; Ivanova et al., 2017). On the other hand, some typical characteristics of a large city in the Global North that underlie ecological impacts are also present here: cars are widely used, houses are often poorly insulated, everyday consumption is based on imports from various distances, large quantities of meat are consumed (meat has a major climate impact: Crippa et al., 2021), and significant amounts of waste are produced, with littering being a common practice.

Given the lack of data at the neighbourhood scale, it is useful to provide some at the city scale. The third assessment report of the city's climate action plan (Città di Torino, 2022) highlights a strong overall reduction of CO₂ emissions in the city (-47% compared to 1991). However, the plan limits its analysis to production-based emissions – those greenhouse gases directly emitted within municipal boundaries – which is an insufficient metric for analysing the climate impact of a city like Turin, as much of the consumption that occurs within its boundaries causes emissions elsewhere (consumption-based emissions) (see the analysis of the case of Copenhagen in Krähmer, 2020). Most emissions produced in the city are due to residential buildings (for cooking, heating and electricity), transport and the tertiary sector (Città di Torino, 2022). Consumption-based greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions per capita in Turin were estimated at around 6.2 tons/year for 2015 (Moran et al., 2018) and at 8.4 tons/year for 2018 (Genta et al., 2022) using different methods, while a sustainable and globally equitable level of carbon emissions per capita would be one of approximately 2.3 tons/year (Gore, 2021). Performing a simple proportional calculation based on the income difference from the city average with these two estimates (assuming that income explains most of the variation in contribution to ecological impact), then the average GHG emissions per capita in the neighbourhood can be estimated at between 4.8 and 6.5 tons/year, still clearly above a sustainable and globally equitable level, consistent with Chancel's (2022) data for the emission levels of the poorest 50% in Europe.

Genta et al. (2022) provide a comprehensive analysis of consumption-based environmental footprints for multiple impact categories at the level of Turin. This analysis shows that the consumption of Turin citizens exceeds planetary boundaries not only for climate change but also for particulate matter, ecotoxicity in freshwater, and the resource use of fossil fuels, minerals, and metals. All these impacts are predominantly driven by consumption in the areas of housing (electricity and heating), food (meat and other animal products), and mobility (car usage). Using consumption-based data here is not intended to imply individual consumer responsibility; rather, it serves to account for the fact that large parts of the (socio-)ecological impacts for which urban areas are responsible occur far away (see the first contradiction discussed above). Indeed, these consumption patterns are only to a very limited degree an individual responsibility; rather they occur within a systemic context (Krähmer & Cristiano, 2022). Undoubtedly, in terms of mitigation, most of the efforts for emission reductions must be borne by the wealthier classes. Nevertheless, also a poor neighbourhood in a rich city faces challenges that need to be addressed for a globally just, climate-friendly transition.

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The challenges are even more evident in terms of adaptation. There are impacts of climate change that already affect the area – and will increasingly affect it in the near future. According to the city’s climate resilience plan (Città di Torino, 2020), the main climatic risks include increasing heatwaves (which can pose severe health hazards), less frequent but more intense precipitation that can lead to flooding, and prolonged periods of drought that stress the water system. All these risks are also relevant for Aurora and Porta Palazzo. In recent years, there have been heatwaves and droughts, and there is relatively little green space and no larger park in the area. Floods have occurred as well, as a river crosses the neighbourhood, which is situated at a lower altitude than the city centre. Often, people with lower income are more affected by these impacts, as they have fewer resources to defend themselves: e.g., inadequate or no housing, energy poverty, and a lack of opportunities to travel to cooler places or to use air conditioning in summer. Furthermore, as the area has always been a destination for migration, it is likely to become a point of arrival for an increasing number of climate-crisis-driven migrants.

Currently, there are municipal policies for an ecological transition, including in the studied neighbourhood. However, ecological projects and social transformation initiatives are not integrated, and they only partially adhere to the principles of reuse, sharing and sufficiency. For instance, *Valdocco Vivibile*⁶, a project by the municipality of Turin aimed at increasing climate resilience, has targeted parts of the neighbourhood but has focused nearly exclusively on physical interventions, such as slightly increasing green space and areas for bikes and pedestrians at the expense of parking spaces, adopting a very soft approach compared to the urgency of the climate crisis. Additionally, the project has remained completely disconnected from the socially focused project *Tonite*⁷, which has targeted another adjacent part of the neighbourhood (see also Figure 2).

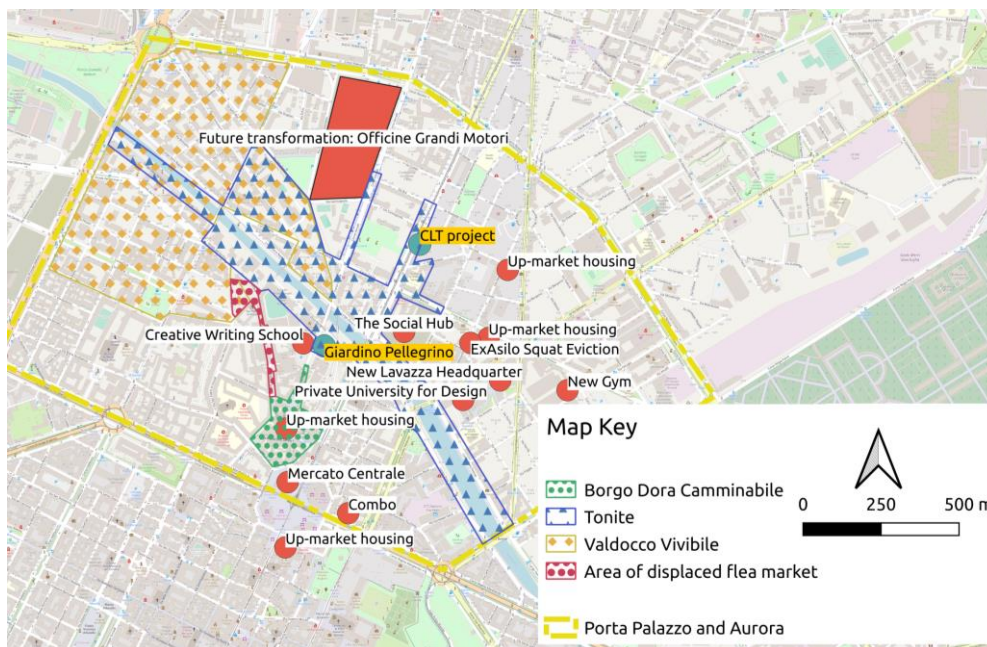


Figure 2. Map of major recent or ongoing projects of urban transformation in the neighbourhood. Map by the author on an OpenStreetMap base map

⁶ <https://www.torinocambia.it/interventi/valdocco-vivibile-lotto-2> (Last access: October 2024).

⁷ <https://tonite.eu/> (Last access: October 2024).

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Porta Palazzo's socio-economic challenges here and now

While the global socio-ecological challenges discussed above are in many ways connected to the local challenges of the neighbourhood, the public debate there is primarily focused on social and economic issues that are more immediately tangible in everyday life. The neighbourhood is characterised by a large migrant population (about 36% of residents, while the city's average is 15%: Cabodi et al., 2020), and many poverty indicators are above the city average, e.g. higher demand for social assistance, lower levels of formal education, higher rates of eviction, and lower real estate values (Cabodi et al., 2020). The average annual income per capita in 2021 was €18,726, which is 23% lower than the city-wide average of €24,427 and less than one-third of the average income in Turin's wealthiest areas (Supino, 2023)⁸.

Several social movements have been active in the neighbourhood. One, implicitly, advocates for a process of gentrification, seeking to end the area's so-called 'social degradation' (see below). Another movement aims to improve the neighbourhood's physical conditions and quality of life while resisting gentrification and displacement. This movement has led to the creation of the participatory community foundation FCPP, which works in critical dialogue with the municipality (see next subsection). A third movement, in the meanwhile, combats gentrification and rejects any collaboration with the municipality. These movements are based on two primary narratives. The first is a tale about the 'degradation' of public space, highlighting the presence of waste and disrepair, and particularly the perception of danger due to unwanted (often not explicitly named) human presences⁹: migrants, poor people, homeless individuals, drug dealers, and consumers – existences that often, but not always, coexist within the same bodies. The response to this 'social degradation', according to this narrative, is a process of urban renewal that removes these presences (to which destination remains unclear), reinstating a sense of "decorum"¹⁰. The second narrative emphasises the value of multiculturalism, highlighting the social and cultural wealth that arises from the meeting of different cultures and argues that, to address the challenges of social coexistence, instruments of integration are needed – i.e., places for interaction, as well as social policies to support people in staying in the neighbourhood or escaping poverty, thus combating poverty-related crime and anti-social behaviour¹¹. These are, of course, simplified models of these narratives. In reality, both more radical¹² and more compromising versions of these narratives exist. However, the aim here is not to analyse these different narratives in detail, but rather to recognise that the public debate in and around the neighbourhood is dominated by them. The

⁸ The newspaper provides this data for the postal code 10152 which quite precisely fits the neighbourhood.

⁹ See, for instance, the 'ethnographic' research done for the Tonite project: <https://tonite.eu/ricerca-etnografica/> (Last access: October 2024).

¹⁰ See, for instance, the website of the 'United associations and committees of Porta Palazzo' <http://ascoriunitiportapalazzo.blogspot.com> (Last access: October 2024), a group that was in favour of the displacement of the poor part of the flea market, as well as of projects of urban transformation which 'clean up' the neighbourhood.

¹¹ See, for instance: <https://www.fondazioneportapalazzo.org/manifesto/> (Last access: October 2024). This is not to imply that the behaviour of these groups is necessarily antisocial. But it should be recognised, at least, that some behaviours, from abandoning waste in public space, over catcalling, to armed street fights between gangs, are considered as antisocial by other inhabitants.

¹² A third narrative, for instance, opposes gentrification radically, including any attempts to improve the neighbourhood's quality of life and rejects any collaboration with the municipality. Also in the 'degradation narrative' one can differentiate between a radical one, with more explicitly racist undertones, and a more moderate one (e.g. in a research for the Tonite project, see footnote 9), in which unwanted presences remain as unidentified shadows and the focus is on a perspective of urban renewal that only implicitly points at their expulsion: through the occupation of public space by other, often whiter, but even more importantly, wealthier bodies that may be integrated into domesticated versions of nightlife.

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conflictual debate between these narratives is also represented in the graffiti slogans that cover the neighbourhood's walls (Bragaglia, 2024). A significant implication of these narratives is that the 'degradation narrative' promotes and welcomes the ongoing trend of gentrification in the neighbourhood, while the 'multiculturalism narrative' opposes it. This applies to the social movements in the neighbourhood. At the same time though, the large real-estate projects in the area promote a distinct narrative of authenticity, in which multiculturalism is a superficial characteristic that can be commodified and can therefore become an instrument of gentrification, also in alliance with a narrative of degradation.

This description aligns well with the characterisation made by Mayer (2013) of neoliberal urbanism and its consequences: surveillance and securitisation, combined with creative city policies, which point towards exclusion and gentrification, enacted through city marketing and real estate investments. In Porta Palazzo, a trend of gentrification can indeed be identified through multiple signals, the most explicit being the promotion of several large real estate projects that aim at a sophisticated clientele, whether middle-class Turin residents, tourists, or students (see Figure 2). Furthermore, in and around the market of Porta Palazzo, a process of foodification – i.e., gentrification through food as a tool of social distinction – has been observed (Bourlessas et al., 2022).

Three of the large real estate projects in the area are particularly prominent and utilise the neighbourhood as a key selling point, depicting it as 'authentic', a typical narrative of gentrification processes (Semi & Tonetta, 2021; Zukin, 2009). The first is a store from a chain of food markets, *Mercato Centrale*. It claims to be a place to 'rediscover the historic role of the market as a destination, a meeting place, something to explore, open to the city'¹³, and is located in the midst of the traditional market of Porta Palazzo – as if the historical market itself was incapable of being a place of meeting and exploration, as if this bustling market, frequented daily by a diverse array of people, was not open to the city. The second example is a branch of the luxury hostel chain *Combo*. They assert, 'a city is only as interesting as its neighbourhoods. That's why we transformed a historic firehouse in (...) Porta Palazzo. (...) Perhaps we were also inspired by the burst of spice that is Europe's largest, multi-ethnic market'¹⁴. In this case the market of Porta Palazzo appears valuable only insofar as it provides an exotic thrill to visitors, helping justify the cost of staying at *Combo*. Finally, a costly student residence and hotel in construction nearby, *The Social Hub*, claims, 'we're the hub of the next generation of changemakers from students to professionals, from global nomads to local influencers, all those who want to learn and grow, and make society better'¹⁵ – a narrative in which social change appears entirely compatible with capitalist conditions – and sells a spot in a shared room in Bologna (rates for Turin are not available yet) at €800 a month, significantly above market rents in the area, clearly targeting students wealthier than the residents of Porta Palazzo and Aurora. These are just some of the larger projects, as illustrated in Figure 2. Another crucial transformation has been the displacement of the poorer part of the weekly flea market Balon from the neighbourhood to a much more peripheral area. The mobilisation against this expulsion has also been a rare occasion of politicized protest by one of the marginalised groups in the neighbourhood: Balon street vendors, who are predominantly migrants.

This ongoing transformation over the last five to ten years¹⁶ has not been guided by an official project of urban renewal or regeneration; only some newspaper articles and analyses by

¹³ <https://www.mercatocentrale.com/who-we-are/> (Last access: August 2023).

¹⁴ <https://thisiscombo.com/location/combo-torino/> (Last access: August 2023).

¹⁵ <https://www.thesocialhub.co/> (Last access: August 2023).

¹⁶ In earlier phases, there has been such an official project, transforming, for instance, decades ago, the

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activists have pieced together the puzzle of this transformation – and there have been some declarations by municipal officials on those occasions¹⁷. Nonetheless, this process can be understood as consistent with a city-wide ‘gentrification strategy’ in Turin’s post-industrial transformation, as discussed by Bolzoni and Semi (2023). These projects have reportedly contributed to a rise in real estate values, an increase in tourism (and relative tourism rentals) in the area (Semi & Tonetta, 2021), and, consequently, to the expulsion of residents who struggle to find a home or are being evicted (Bolzoni & Semi, 2023; Cabodi et al., 2020). This particularly affects migrant families with children, as evidenced by the experiences gained by the community foundation within the context of a support service for residents facing eviction or difficulties in accessing housing¹⁸. Such a process of expulsion seems to have a favourable environment in a centrally located neighbourhood with relatively low real estate values, a built environment often in disrepair, and migrants frequently living in precarious and exploitative conditions without rental contracts – all against a global backdrop of financialisation of housing (Harvey, 2013) and tourism growth which makes real estate investments easily profitable (Krähmer & Santangelo, 2018).

At the same time, there are signs of resilience and resistance to gentrification (Lees et al., 2018) in the neighbourhood: the city in general has a slow real estate market, making it potentially more difficult to promote gentrification in a new neighbourhood while others (San Salvario, Vanchiglia) are still undergoing gentrification. Additionally, while tourism in Turin has been growing, it has started from a very low level. Anecdotal evidence of resilience to gentrification is the fact that the café of the *Mercato Centrale* appears to be frequented more often by families with migrant backgrounds resting during their shopping at the street market than by middle- or upper-class residents or tourists. This suggests that the project may not have fully succeeded in attracting wealthier consumers and partly relies on those who visit the market every day. Furthermore, the construction of *The Social Hub* has recently been delayed by two years¹⁹.

In summary, this section has depicted a neighbourhood facing numerous socio-economic challenges related to poverty, amid ongoing transformations dominated by a narrative that views their solution as a ‘clean-up’. An alternative narrative prioritises social and spatial justice, recognising social value in diversity and aiming to preserve it. The debate in the neighbourhood often revolves around these two narratives. In the long run, however, it may be short-sighted to base strategies for social and spatial justice solely on evidence from the neighbourhood itself, without considering how these might connect to the broader socio-ecological challenges outlined above (Knuth et al., 2020). Reactivating older models of social policies would be problematic not only because they were criticised by earlier urban social movements for their paternalistic character (Mayer, 2013) but also because they were based on the redistribution of the surpluses of a globally unsustainable mechanism of economic growth.

neighbourhood on the other side of the market, called Porta Palazzo before, Quadrilatero Romano now, see Semi (2015).

¹⁷ For instance in this newspaper article: https://torino.corriere.it/economia/17_novembre_28/ostello-lusso-osterie-slow-food-cosi-porta-palazzo-cambiera-pelle-77d86ffc-d417-11e7-b070-a687676d1181.shtml (Last access: October 2024).

¹⁸ <https://www.fondazioneportapalazzo.org/portfolio/la-comunita-e-di-casa/> (Last access: September 2024).

¹⁹ <https://www.torinoggi.it/2024/03/26/leggi-notizia/argomenti/attualita-8/articolo/student-hotel-a-ponte-mosca-rinviato-lavvio-dei-lavori-cantiere-solo-nel-2026.html> (Last access: September 2024).

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The Porta Palazzo Community Foundation: merits and shortcomings of an instrument to influence neighbourhood change from below

In the context described so far, I now turn to the role of the *Fondazione di Comunità Porta Palazzo* (FCPP). The FCPP was founded in November 2020 after a year of collective work by a group of neighbourhood activists and associations²⁰ who had started to collaborate in the fight against the expulsion of the poorer section of the flea market Balon. Losing this fight led to the idea of creating the community foundation. Adopting the form of a community foundation has been a sort of ‘legal hacking’ (Micciarelli, 2022), using a legal structure that could easily attract financial support. Indeed, this process has been economically sustained – though not influenced in its content (at least not directly²¹) – by the powerful *Fondazione di Compagnia di San Paolo*, often criticised in local activist circles for its non-democratic governance and excessive concentration of power. The FCPP is considered by its members²² as an institution built to influence neighbourhood change from below through the direct development of projects, the support of other organisations in Porta Palazzo and Aurora and political agency. Its aim is to improve living conditions in the neighbourhood for everyone, with particular attention to marginalised groups, combating gentrification, and contributing to maintain the economic accessibility of the area, which is seen as crucial for the neighbourhood’s multicultural social mix. In this section I want to discuss if and how far the FCPP is able to contribute to the right to the ecological city; to an urban degrowth agenda that aims for an ecologically sustainable transformation of the neighbourhood, while contrasting gentrification. While the organisation has not explicitly adopted such an agenda, I argue that some of its relevant actions support it.

After four years of existence, the FCPP has shown both ups and downs. On the downside, the opening of the group of founders and the collective processes of decision-making to other neighbourhood inhabitants has been limited compared to initial ambitions, and the group does not reflect the neighbourhood’s social and cultural diversity: all active members until recently were white and can mostly be defined as middle-class. Only very recently some representatives of migrant communities and their associations are in the process of becoming part of the foundation. This shortcoming can be partly attributed to the difficulties of carrying on the founding process during the pandemic, as well as to the relational and communicational challenges of including people from very different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds in collective decision-making processes that employ specific instruments and languages. Another shortcoming is the ongoing economic dependence on project funding, which largely derives from the *Compagnia di San Paolo*.

On the upside, important achievements have been made, including the re-opening of a long-closed public space: a garden at the centre of the neighbourhood, the *Giardino Pellegrino* (see Figure 3). This reopening has been funded both by a crowdfunding campaign and a contribution from the EU-funded municipal project Tonite. Due to this latter link, some have

²⁰ See the foundation’s website for more details: <https://www.fondazioneportapalazzo.org/chi-siamo/> (Last access: September 2024).

²¹ By ‘not directly’ I mean that there have been no direct attempts by *Compagnia di San Paolo* to tell us what to do but that to gain funding, provided through public calls for projects, it has been necessary to adopt at least certain wordings or terminologies: for instance referring in projects to sustainable development or social innovation, in contrast to a more development-critical post- or degrowth terminology. I would argue that we have managed so far to avoid that this substantially influenced the definition of our targets or strategies but readers should certainly be aware of my situated perspective.

²² See the foundation’s manifesto, written collectively during the process of setting up the FCPP: <https://www.fondazioneportapalazzo.org/manifesto/> (Last access: February 2024).

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criticised the reopening of the space as part of the ‘cleaning-up’ of the neighbourhood²³. In reality, though, since its opening, the space has been used by a diverse range of social groups, including those considered ‘unwanted presences’ by the degradation narrative, such as migrants with low income and homeless people.



Figure 3. Collective work to re-open the Giardino Pellegrino (credits: FCPP)

A second achievement has been the creation of a social fund for families in need, in collaboration with a large network (*Coordinamento Aurora*) of other associations and institutions in the neighbourhood. This partly compensates for the current lack of diversity within the FCPP itself, as the *Coordinamento* is also a forum for debate about the future of the neighbourhood, in which migrant communities are among the protagonists. Furthermore, there is an ongoing project to build the first Community Land Trust (CLT) in Italy. Finally, there are attempts to establish a solidary renewable energy community, aiming also at providing affordable energy to low-income residents.

²³ See for example this article by Francesco Migliaccio (an activist and ethnographic researcher in the neighbourhood with whom we collaborated closely in the initial phase of the opposition to the removal of the poor part of the flea market but who has then started to criticise our availability to dialogue with the municipality and is part of what I have defined at the beginning as the more radical social movement in opposition to gentrification) in which he associates the opening of the garden with the expulsion of people living in the street: <https://napolimonitor.it/di-floriere-ostili-e-di-filantropi-riflessioni-e-immagini-dalla-dora-di-torino/> (Last access: October 2024) and see my response in which I argue that these events are unrelated: <https://www.fondazioneportapalazzo.org/agire-nelle-trasformazioni-urbane-tra-coerenza-contraddizioni-porta-palazzo-torino/> (Last access: October 2024).

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Two examples from the neighbourhood can illustrate the challenges arising from considering both the social and the ecological dimensions of transformation: the debate about a pedestrianisation project and the foundation's housing project.

The first example concerns a project called *Borgo Dora Camminabile*²⁴, promoted by another group of residents who campaigned for and obtained the pedestrianisation of some central streets of the neighbourhood. This project (see Figure 4) can be seen as a positive contribution to socio-ecological transformation: less pollution from cars, more public space. At the same time, it has been promoted with a depoliticised agenda that is careless about the socio-economic context in which this project has been realised and does not consider its possible unintended consequences – pedestrianisation can easily become a tool of gentrification, making the area more attractive for visitors, and the pedestrianised streets are located precisely in the part of the neighbourhood already more subject to gentrification, characterised by a 'picturesque' built heritage. The promoters have referred to an increase in tourism and visits from residents from other parts of Turin as an argument in favour of the project. Furthermore, the project has also guaranteed accessibility by car, not aiming to reduce car use and ownership as such; an external parking space has been opened in a square where, a few years earlier, part of the now-expelled poor flea market took place. The community foundation has initially taken a distant approach to the project due to these conflicting arguments. Moreover, the pedestrianisation has been variously opposed by residents, mainly criticising the closure to cars. However, once realised, in the context of its work on public space, initiatives have been promoted by the FCPP to bring activities to this new public space. In particular, local school children have been involved, aiming at a more inclusive use of the newly created public space, rather than mainly targeting afternoon *flâneurs*.



Figure 4. Activity with school children in the pedestrianized area promoted by FCPP (credits: FCPP)

The second example is the foundation's ongoing housing project (see Figure 5). The objective is to take a piece of real estate – recently bought thanks to ca. 80 social loans – off the market, renovate it and ensure it for long-term social housing under collective control through the instrument of the Community Land Trust (CLT), building on decades of experiences in the

²⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/315190176475887/> (Last access: September 2023).

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USA and Belgium (Vercellone, 2020). The CLT entails the separation of land ownership from building ownership (apartments in this case), in combination with a ground lease contract. The ownership of the land will be held by the collectively governed foundation, which will include stakeholders from the neighbourhood alongside residents, while apartments are sold to families with children from low-income backgrounds (mostly migrant families), who will be involved through a participatory process. This target group has been identified because families with children face particular difficulties in accessing housing (see above). The project will help them guaranteeing a housing cost of approximately one-third of their monthly income (as the sale price of housing is lowered by 30-40% thanks to the separation of land ownership) and facilitate access to mortgages.



Figure 5. Party on occasion of the acquisition of the building in Corso Giulio Cesare 34 for the future CLT (credits: FCPP)

Future speculation is impeded through limits on resale in the ground lease contract: families will be able to sell their apartments only at fixed prices to other families meeting the same socio-economic criteria on the foundation's waiting list. This mechanism allows to guarantee the social scope of the project to be maintained in the long run, impeding a speculative use and (re)commodification of the land and housing units, thus contrasting gentrification (Choi et al., 2018). The principle of sharing here will be achieved in relation to land ownership, which will no longer be controlled by the market and individual accumulation but rather by collective governance through the foundation. Furthermore, there will be some shared spaces and facilities (a common room and terrace, a common laundry facility). It is reuse as an existing building is renovated. Sufficiency can be seen in the fact that housing units are designed to meet the families' needs while being as small as possible, also to ensure economic feasibility.

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Discussion and conclusions

The case of Aurora and Porta Palazzo and the role of the FCPP within it speaks in many ways to the questions posed at the beginning of this article. I have described the neighbourhood as a place of intersection of global – or better, multiscalar – socio-ecological and local – also multiscalar – socio-economic challenges. This has, hopefully, helped illustrate the importance of considering these intersections in both theoretical and practical/political terms: the need for thinking about a right to the ecological city, argued theoretically in the second section, and reflected place-specifically by the discussion in the previous section. Nevertheless, developing strategies for the right to the ecological city in the practice of a changing neighbourhood is easier said than done. Strategies to mitigate the climate crisis are characterised by a rhetoric of rapid and urgent change, while fights against gentrification sometimes have a conservative character, aiming to maintain low rents and thus are often critical of changes that improve the conditions of the neighbourhood (also in ecological terms), as these changes in free real estate markets can easily drive up real estate values, contributing to displacement, intentionally or not. I have discussed how, in the case study, different actors assign different priorities to local social goals and global ecological goals.

Social issues (whether those favouring or opposing displacement) seem to be considered with greater urgency by local social actors, at least in the context of a neighbourhood already undergoing transformation, while ecological concerns often seem far away. Even when the importance of both goals is recognised in theory, as by the community foundation FCPP, it is not easy to transfer the awareness about these intersections to concrete projects. The CLT, while responding to an immediate need for housing, relates to the principles of sufficiency, reuse, and sharing, and it fosters the right to the ecological city as it actively includes marginalised groups in the process. The pedestrianisation project, on the other hand, certainly entails a logic of sharing limited public space and it implies the reuse of space. It only follows the logic of sufficiency in a limited way, as car usage and ownership are only superficially addressed. Most importantly, the governance process leading to the project has been limited to a few individuals. The genesis of this project was guided more by an aesthetic desire for the enjoyment of the neighbourhood than by broader attention to socio-ecological transformation. The social dimension of this project is only slowly entering the picture through recent attempts to work towards an inclusive use of this new public space.

There are evident and complex challenges in promoting an agenda that favours both the improvement of the neighbourhood and the reduction of ecological impacts while also combating gentrification. The most apparent risks are, on one side, unintentionally promoting (ecological) gentrification, and on the other side, failing to fully capture the need and potential for socio-ecological transformation. As challenging as it may be, I contend that fighting for the right to the ecological city is necessary, as limiting actions to one side of the equation entails crucial contradictions. Not considering the social impacts of urban sustainability transformation can contribute to gentrification and render policies ineffective in ecological terms. Conversely, avoiding urban sustainability transformations would mean ignoring both the ecological impacts (and related injustices) at the global level and, locally, the particular vulnerability to ecological risks of the inhabitants of a neighbourhood like Porta Palazzo and Aurora.

The projects discussed above suggest that it is possible to partly overcome these contradictions when forms of collective and locally negotiated agency are achieved – whether in relation to the use of public space or the ownership of land and the decisions about its use. To be sure these contradictions can never be overcome in isolation or at a single scale. In this context, decommodification and thus collective control over urban land (Bauman et al., 2024),

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as promoted by the CLT project, avoids that improvements from below are captured by ground rents and real estate values and involuntarily contribute to (ecological) gentrification. Decommodification is therefore a crucial tool for a just ecological urban transformation and cannot be the exclusive responsibility of a third-sector organisation. The experiments that an actor like the FCPP promotes can be a relevant starting point, but other actors at different scales, including the state, must contribute to making the right to the ecological city a reality. Regarding the scientific contribution of this paper, I am aware that it derives primarily from a practical endeavour that has only secondarily become an occasion for theoretical reflection. Therefore, it would be desirable to see further research on the right to the ecological city that strengthens its interconnections with the broad range of literatures that could reinforce this concept.

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