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## Neoliberal Aesthetics and the Struggle against Redevelopment in an Italian Postindustrial Periphery

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**Emanuela Guano**

## **Neoliberal Aesthetics and the Struggle against Redevelopment in an Italian Postindustrial Periphery**

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The 2017 walking tour of Bisagno Valley's *risseu* (cobblestone pavements) was part of a series on topics such as spontaneous vegetation, the historical aqueduct, and local architecture organized by the Amici di Ponte Carrega (Friends of the Carrega Bridge) activist association of Genoa's Bisagno Valley (Val Bisagno).<sup>1</sup> Led by Luca, a Genoese mosaic artisan and a valley native, the all-day tour took over 20 visitors on a visit of several historic churches. Under Luca's guidance, they familiarized themselves with intricate patterns of black and white sea pebble. Visitors began to identify different styles and spot restorations. They also learned that the art of patterned cobblestone pavements emerged at least 15,000 years before the current era, soaring to unprecedented heights between the 1500s and the 1700s. With the onset of industrialism in the 1800s, however, this form of artisanry began to decline. "Nobody had time, in the modern era, to create or even appreciate beauty," Luca said. He was discussing a particularly exquisite churchyard pavement when a priest parked his FIAT on the cobblestones and stepped out to greet the bystanders effusively. A few audible gasps and some nervous laughter arose from the small crowd. Under Luca's guidance, the cobblestone mosaics that people ignore in their everyday lives had come to be perceived as beautiful and pregnant with history and meaning, and hence worth loving and protecting [Fig. 1].

The valley hosting this tour is not a traditional tourist destination; instead, it is one of Italy's many postindustrial urban peripheries: areas that, since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, have been invaded by the spread of modernist concrete known as *cementificazione* (Iovino, 2018). Since the 1950s, Italy's nexus of rising affluence; ineffective, complacent, or downright absent oversight; developmental rhetoric, and real estate speculations (Settis, 2010) have resulted in the cumbersome proliferation of concrete formations in the form of housing, factories, infrastructural works, and--as of lately--US-style shopping malls reinscribing the role of this country's construction industry as a crucible of financial and political interests (Settis, 2010; Terranova, 2011).<sup>2</sup> A far cry from Italy's historic and artistic heritage sites, cementified working-class peripheries are the sprawl that tourists observe with indifference from their car or train windows, holding their breath in the expectation of the quaint city centers that are their final destinations. As sites of anonymous transit for those who are simply passing through, peripheries invaded by *cementificazione* are often defined as *quartieri dormitorio* and *nonluoghi* in the Italian public sphere: dorm neighborhoods and non-places that, allegedly devoid of history and communal relations (Augé, 1995), are ready to be consumed by unfettered development. A particularly fast cycle of capitalist creation and destruction (Schumpeter, 1965, p. 83)—or of ruination that begins at construction--reiterates these neighborhoods' utilitarian subjugation to the greater good of developmental promises in the face of an uneven distribution of resources and externalities.<sup>3</sup> As forms and processes unfolding in the name of modernization (Mah, 2012, p. 3; Stoler, 2013, p. 19) and the glorification of capitalism, these ruinations are not simply the crumbling away of architectural structures from previous eras (Mah, 2012); rather, they ensue from the predatory top-down appropriation and redefinition of urban space. These ruinations may carve through "the psychic and material space in which people live" as a "corrosive process" that often also blocks

their “livelihood and health” (Stoler, 2013, pp. 1-9). By affecting the material environment, they inevitably intrude into the residents’ aesthetic--sensuous and affective--bond with the places that provide a textured milieu for their quotidian (Malpas, 2011).

This paper investigates how the opposition to cementificazione may find legitimacy in taking on the form of the aesthetic consumption of cities that has gained increasing currency in neoliberal urbanism (Featherstone, 2007; Harvey, 1989; Dicks, 2004). Drawing on ethnographic research conducted in the Ponte Carrega neighborhood of the Bisagno Valley between 2016 and 2019, it explores how resistance to redevelopment may enlist residents’ aesthetic sensibilities even as it attempts to shape them.<sup>4</sup> It does so, I suggest, by seeking to rearrange a distribution of the sensible (Rancière, 2010; 2013) that continues to condemn Italy’s peripheries to cementificazione while intensifying the aestheticization of its historical downtowns. In striving to subvert the categorization of peripheries as non-places (Augé, 1995), the Bisagno Valley activists I describe in this paper draw on deeply intimate, and yet communicable, ways of sensing and making sense (Howes, 2015) to foster dissensus as a “rupture... between what is seen and what is thought” (Rancière, 2010, p. 43), thus teaching residents to see beauty where others do not. By recasting their neighborhood as meaningful and worth protecting, activists thus encourage residents to reclaim their role as heritage consumers (Dicks, 2004; Featherstone, 2007; Harvey, 1989; Harrison, 2012): a role that may allow them to participate in conversations about the valley’s future.

## The Rise of Cross-class Aesthetic Consumption

Abiding by the binary categorization of “center” and “periphery” (Shields, 1992, pp. 3-4; p. 260) that over the centuries has provided a template for many continental European cities, and following the conflation of social with geographic margins typical of Italian urbanism (Gazzola, 2008), many Italian cities have expanded through an inequitable distribution of privileges and responsibilities: while the pursuit of prestige through beauty characterizes upscale downtowns, utilitarianism dominates rapidly overbuilt, and just as rapidly blighted, industrial peripheries (Lefebvre, 1978) surrounding city centers.<sup>5</sup>

As, in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, consumer capitalism re-enchanted the disenchanted world of industrial modernity (Ritzer, 2005), cities all over Europe and the US started being marketed to residents and visitors alike through an aestheticization meant to promote consumption and support a growing economy of experiences (Dicks, 2004; Featherstone, 2007; Harvey, 1989; Pine, & Gilmore, 2011; Sundbo & Darmer 2008; Welsch, 1998; Zukin, 1996; 1989). By implementing a notion of aesthetics that encompasses both the Aristotelian meaning of a “bodily reaction to lived reality” (Larkin, 2013, p. 336; see also Welsch, 1998) and that of “aesthetic furnishment of reality” (Welsch, 1998, p. 8), this turn had profound ramifications. These extended beyond the ubiquitous scenarios of visitability and heritagization (Dicks, 2004; Harrison, 2012; Herzfeld, 2010)—with their frequent corollaries of dispossession and displacement—to include forms of productive participation at the hands of relatively precarious individuals (Guano, 2017; Hill, 2017). Seeking to expand its consumer base, at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the aestheticization of Italian cities (Cavanaugh, 2009; Davis & Marvin 2004; Dines, 2012) accelerated the transformation of traditionally bourgeois cultural fields such as the appreciation of history and the arts into the consumption of heritage (Dicks, 2004), which in turn

became more accessible even to those social classes that had historically showed little interest in such rarefied topics. Forms of aesthetic consumption thus emerged that scrambled the boundaries of taste previously mapped onto class differences (Bourdieu, 1984; Bauman, 2011; Magatti and De Benedittis, 2006). As by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the demand for aesthetic experiences rose, opportunities for urban tourism and mass cultural consumption became increasingly available beyond the traditional Rome-Florence-Venice circuit.<sup>6</sup>

As a rapidly deindustrializing city, by the early 1980s Genoa began to embrace cultural tourism. Over the following three decades, its downtown changed considerably. Historical buildings were restored and obtained UNESCO heritage status; the city center was partly pedestrianized; museums received a makeover, and festivals and fairs started animating its plazas on a regular basis (Guano, 2017). Walking tours and public events became a daily occurrence as well as an option for leisure amongst the many cultural offerings available to residents and visitors (Guano, 2015; 2017). A new aesthetic grammar of urban experience was being shaped that appealed not just to the bourgeoisie and the educated middle classes with its sensuous language of heritage and beauty, but also to members of the working- and service classes who were increasingly participating in the practice of leisure (Galbraith, 1998; Magatti and De Benedittis, 2006). This new sensibility, I suggest, provided Bisagno Valley activists with an aesthetic framework through which they began to challenge the existing distribution of the sensible (Rancière, 2013): one that casts their neighborhood as a non-place subjected to the incessant onslaught of cementificazione even as it promotes the beautification of the city's downtown and the valorization of its historical heritage.

## The Cement Flood

As a string of neighborhoods extending northward of downtown Genoa, the formerly rural Bisagno Valley has undergone several waves of development. In the early 1900s, industrial and housing sprawls began to invade the Bisagno creek's shores, thus increasing the risk of floods. In the 1920s, Benito Mussolini gave the city the "gift" of covering up the creek's downtown delta with streets, plazas, and posh apartment complexes (Rosso, 2014). Unfortunately, Mussolini's engineers miscalculated the creek's flow rate, thus creating a bottleneck right over its delta (Rosso 2014). In line with modern European metropolitan sensibilities, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century nature had become a given to be tamed and disciplined in the name of "progress" (Kaika, 2005, p. 77). Mussolini's intervention turned the creek into the city's uncanny—a temporarily subdued threat that, removed by modern rationality from the urban everyday, became prone to disastrous eruptions (Gandy, 2014; Johnson, 2013; Kaika, 2005). Yet, the fall of Mussolini's regime did not stop the development of the valley. At the time of Italy's "economic miracle" of the 1950s, the formerly rural area underwent additional radical changes: concrete, the element of modernism (Gandy, 2014), spread over its hillsides. Much of the valley industrialized rapidly; its peasants joined the local industrial workforce, toiling side by side with immigrants from the south of Italy. The valley thus solidified its status as Genoa's *periferia*: a blue-collar neighborhood crowded with factories and workers' homes that was also forced to accommodate the city's jail; its soccer stadium and slaughter house; a garbage incineration plant; the public gas company; a sewage processing plant, and a bus hangar. Through reckless interventions on a fragile hydrogeological scenario, soon enough the valley's multiple *servitù* started exacerbating its environmental challenges. Once the creek shores were

overbuilt and the hillsides lost their porosity to asphalt, seasonal heavy rains would quickly flood this narrow valley with catastrophic results.

In 1970, a flood claimed 44 lives; this warning, however, went unheeded. When Genoa's deindustrialization process began a few years later, the Bisagno Valley, too, started losing its employment outlets. Yet, even as local factories were being decommissioned, the state-subsidized construction sector took on the role of Genoa's main employment outlet.<sup>7</sup> In spite of downward demographic trends (Arvati, n.d.), cementificazione went on undeterred, and some of the Bisagno's most dangerous tributaries were culverted to make room for cheap apartment complexes [Fig. 2]. As, in the early 2000s, the first shopping malls proliferated in Italy's former industrial areas, the Bisagno Valley, too, was slated to become a US-style commercial suburb. Inspired by the modernist car-centered planning that had become popular in the mid-20th century US (Avila, 2014), Genoese administrators and developers promoted their plans for the valley—shopping malls, megastores, hotel towers and parking lots connected through new roads and bridges—as the epitome of a progress that would align this working-class periphery with global modernity. Since then, local administrations have explicitly drawn on the example of sprawling north American cities to present this transformation as a service to the collectivity—one that provides peripheries with new, and quintessentially “modern,” North-Atlantic-style shopping venues.<sup>8</sup> By causing further alterations of the valley's socio-natural metabolisms (Swyngedouw, 2006), this redevelopment compounded, among others, its hydrogeological risk.

In their online manifesto, local activists place the blame squarely on the incompetence and the greed of subsequent administrations; they are particularly resentful of “plans for transit, urbanization and cementificazione that [are] injurious to the landscape, the environment, and the cultural identities of the valley.” What they identify as particularly problematic is the dominant



perception of the valley “not as a place but as a service [area]” and of the creek “not as an entity but as an obstacle;” to the activists, both representations are driven by a predatory modernity that cannibalizes history “so that it may not need to deal with the past anymore.”<sup>9</sup> The denial of local history is, in their eyes, at the core of cementificazione. What activists dubbed the “cement flood” (*alluvione di cemento*) of the early 2000s was primarily driven by the COOP grocery store chain and its affiliated developers. Built in 2003, the first megastore immediately became a favorite shopping destination for the whole city. Years later, a team of experts, politicians, and developers resized the valley’s floodplains on the municipality’s hydrogeological maps. This is when developers obtained the permit to build yet another multi-story commercial building hosting a car dealership; a home improvement megastore, and a wholesale grocery store in an area that is notorious for its flash floods. Since then, additional plans have come to include the creation of a large underground parking deck in a flood-prone area and the building of a two-story grocery store in the floodplain previously occupied by a paint factory.<sup>10</sup> Developers also projected the construction of a large complex entailing a new grocery store and a 300-foot-tall hotel that, towering over the ancient Ponte Carrega neighborhood, would cast a permanent shadow on residents’ produce gardens. As the productivist ethos of industrialism (Lefebvre, 1978) morphed into the utilitarianism of consumer capitalism, its modernist rhetoric of job creation (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1995) continued unabated, attempting to obscure the awareness that the newly created low-wage contract positions hardly compensate for the loss of the small businesses that used to be owned and run by local families. Inured to the discomforts caused by decades of cementificazione and institutional indifference, for a long time Bisagno Valley residents did not think much of the ongoing development. Things were to change, though.

## **Building a Platform through Sensing and Making Sense**

On November 4<sup>th</sup>, 2011, the Bisagno creek and several of its tributaries flooded the valley, killing six people, destroying property, and washing away trees and vehicles.<sup>11</sup> The gigantic mud wave left behind a trail of devastation and sorrow. On that day, Fabrizio, a law school student, was trying to go home and barely escaped the flood by climbing on the roof of the local bus warehouse: “I saw a tributary burst out of its banks; the mud wave came toward us... After the wave went by, everything here was covered with two meters and a half [over eight feet] of water,” he said. Monica, a 47-year-old custodian, witnessed the flood of the Bisagno while still at work. Panic-stricken memories of the 1970 flood came back to her; she remembered how, as a six-year-old, she almost drowned when a vortex of mud sucked her into a large open manhole. A day later, her heart broke when she saw her downstairs neighbors discard a lifetime worth of belongings from their apartment. “Clothes, furniture, everything they had was covered with mud and had to go,” she said, still visibly moved. Among those who lost all of their possessions was Sabrina, a Piazza Adriatico resident. “All of my furniture was flushed out of the kitchen window” she told me. “I had to dig into the mud with my hands... and all I recovered was my mother’s wedding ring.” Yet, after being displaced for years, Sabrina managed to move back; as she put it, “this piazza is where I grew up and this is where I want to be.” Susanna and her husband Ivan survived the flood by climbing on the roof of their shop and watched the murky waters wash away their livelihood. “Paradoxically, this is when I started feeling love for the Bisagno. Now I have a great deal of respect for it,” Ivan said. Unlike other residents, he now thinks that the Bisagno is beautiful; he got into the habit of going for long walks on its shores, and now can even wax lyrical about “the smell of the river when it’s dry.”

By mobilizing a surge of emotions, the flood became a catalyst for collective action: Fabrizio, his cousin Mirko, Sabrina, Ivan, Susanna, Monica and many more residents joined forces in the Friends of the Carrega Bridge association to stop the cementificazione of their neighborhood. Their first step was to reclaim and try to promote a pedestrian scale while educating residents' aesthetic sensibilities vis-à-vis the neighborhood. They did so by advocating for bike trails and better public transportation; they also sought to foster residents' place-attachment (Tuan, 1974; Low, 1992) through activities ranging from organizing neighborhood cleanup events and planting decorative shrubs in old flowerbeds to beautifying formerly blighted street corners. Just as importantly, the Amici also took to promoting the habit of exploring the valley on foot.

Walking is arguably a way of making place that roots “the social in the ground of lived experience” (Ingold & Vergunst, 2008, p. 2) whereby sensuous, embodied ways of “thinking and feeling” become the terrain for the negotiation of cultural forms (Bourdieu, 1977, pp. 93-94 in Ingold & Vergunst 2008, p. 2; see also De Certeau, 1984; Moretti, 2017, and Pinder, 2005). Blending verbal narratives with sensuous impressions, walks often produce aesthetic forms of dwelling that shape experiential webs of meaning around people (Ingold, 2011). Yet, the analysis of ways of feeling and thinking while walking also requires an examination of the kind of dispositions--as both shared modes of engagement and personal, embodied experiences--that inform the practice of moving through space even as they emerge from it. Walking deliberately through familiar places, I suggest, may hone an affective intensity that is modulated through the practice of weaving emotional and sensuous tapestries out of contingent perceptions and memories; in turn, these are both personal and collective, scripted and emergent (Low, 1992; Tuan, 1974).

This is the spirit with which 47-year-old Ivan and 30-year-old Fabrizio took me on a trail leading up the hillside of the Ponte Carrega neighborhood. The path is flanked by houses both new and old, by asphalt and cement, but also by the remnants of ancient orchards and produce gardens. As we hiked in the afternoon heat, Ivan and Fabrizio shared memories of verdant yards and the creeks where they used to swim before the area underwent multiple cementificazione waves. They talked about their childhoods, reminiscing about a time when residents still socialized in the streets. Back in the late 1980s, Fabrizio's mother would take the whole morning to do the grocery while visiting with friends and neighbors. "By today's standards, this was hardly convenient; however, this is how we got a sense of our community," Fabrizio commented. Ivan, instead, remembered swarming the streets with other children in the 1970s and paying visits to the elderly lady who would feed them home-baked cookies. For both Fabrizio and Ivan, the turning point was the appearance in 1992 of a large COOP grocery store. By causing the demise of small businesses, the COOP store turned streets and plazas into stages for vehicular traffic. As modernity set in, gone were the neighborly interactions Fabrizio and Ivan remember so fondly.

During our walk, we would make frequent stops to pick plums and wild strawberry grapes from old plants besieged by asphalt. Every now and then, Ivan would hold his steps to adjust the stones protruding from ancient dry-stone walls, touching them with the gentle affection one would use for a small child entrusted to his care. When we finally reached the top of the hill and looked back down to the valley, our field of vision filled with the large commercial complex hosting a hardware store, a discount warehouse, and a car dealership—all carved into a notorious hydrogeological risk area. The gray mass posited a striking contrast to the lush greenery of the hillsides; covered with parked cars, the flat, rectangular rooftop of the large

edifice dwarfed the residential buildings that had been crowding the creek shores since the 1980s. Ivan sneered:

FIAT bought [the land]; not only did they culvert a tributary they should not have touched, but they did not even try to mitigate the eyesore... They could have put a garden on the rooftop, but they didn't. They don't even water the few flowerbeds they have, and all the plants have died.

Underscoring the classed inequities in Genoa's distribution of the sensible and the ruinations brought about by cementificazione, Ivan shook his head and concluded, "*They would never do this in their own [upscale] neighborhoods!*"

The process of ascribing positive and negative qualities to objects is informed by the proclivity of affect and emotions to emerge through and from one's historic relations with materialities, even as one's subjectivity is shaped by them (Muehlebach, 2017; Navaro-Yashin, 2012). Resonating with preindustrial nostalgia templates (Lowenthal, 1985) as well as contemporary canons of urban aesthetics and visitability (Dicks, 2004),<sup>12</sup> our sensuous experiences of that afternoon reinscribed Fabrizio's and Ivan's negative assessment of the valley's cementificazione in myriad ways. While concrete walls reflected and magnified the heat, the remnants of old orchards provided us with respite. The scents emanating from shrubs, trees, and flowers struggled to compete with the pungent smell of hot asphalt, and, cast against the aural background provided by birds and creeks, the noise of traffic sounded all the more jarring. Often accompanied by anger and grief, to local activists like Fabrizio and Ivan such perceptual offenses are the additional aesthetic evidence of the wounds development repeatedly inflicted upon the valley.

If, as Ahmed (2014, p. 13) suggested, what kindles attachment is the injury of losing one's love object (or, in this case, of seeing one's love object being deprived of its cherished qualities), in its awakened form the sensuous experience of the valley's cementificazione contributes to sustaining the resentment against its ruinations and the desire for a different relationship to its preindustrial materialities. Indeed, nostalgia frequently casts the past as an "enclave of harmony and lost social cohesion" (Dicks, 2004, p. 130); however, even though it follows this template, Ivan's and Fabrizio's way of looking to the past is not a sterile escapism (Lowenthal, 1985, p. 60) but rather a platform for activism and the pursuit of change (Isoke, 2011, p. 119). Ready to transform an emotional and aesthetic vision into an explicitly political proposal (Goodwin, Jasper, & Polletta, 2001, p. 19), the sensuous place-attachment that keeps being kindled by the activists' frustration at the ravages of modernity empowers them to envision an alternative future—one where valley residents successfully reclaim a more equitable distribution of the sensible as a protection from the ruinations of cementificazione. Just as importantly, activists' nostalgia for a visitable premodern past resonates with a neoliberal economy of experiences that casts urban space as an object of aesthetic consumption.

### **Visitability and Dissensus**

Once lively sites of petty commerce and public sociability, Ponte Carrega's streets and piazzas have been emptied out by the rise of large stores and the disappearance of pedestrian-friendly small businesses. Susanna and Sabrina, who are both in their 50s, grew up inured to public sociability: as a child, Susanna would spend her afternoons playing with her friends in streets that are now deserted. To her friend Sabrina, the local piazza used to be a "magical place" where "in the evening [residents] would come out and socialize; some would sit on the benches,

others would bring their own chairs, and you would have several generations all hanging out together.” This lively street life is long gone; Fabrizio, who is in his early 30s, remembers that all he had, as a teenager, was “the parking lot of the COOP grocery store.” Nowadays, not only do many valley residents work and go to school in downtown Genoa, but they also spend much of their spare time in its pedestrian-friendly areas. Their neighborhood’s loss of public sociability is just one example of what happens when, in the activists’ own words, multiple cementificazione waves make it impossible to “reconcile the needs of human activities with the respect for the territory, the environment, and the cultural entities that identify it.”<sup>13</sup>

All year round, the Amici di Ponte Carrega continue their struggle against an inequitable aesthetic regime (Dikeç, 2013) that naturalizes the association of cultural and sensuous pleasures with Genoa’s downtown neighborhoods while casting this city’s peripheries as non-places devoid of history and community (Augé, 1995). They do so through a variety of initiatives meant to change the way neighborhood residents care for and perceive their territory: they organize guerrilla gardening and cleanup events; not only do they teach history workshops in local schools, but they also hold street parties; most importantly, they lead walking tours of the valley. In the ethos of urban visitability promoted by neoliberal urban aestheticization projects (Featherstone, 2007; Dicks, 2004), walking tours are often a tool for achieving an aesthetic pedagogy (Moody, 2013) that teaches people how to feel about urban space--how to approach, perceive, and use it (Moretti, 2015; Richardson, 2008; Santos, 2017; Skinner, 2016). Being fully familiar with the popularity of the walking tours that have been leading residents in the exploration of downtown Genoa since the onset of this city’s revitalization (Guano, 2015; 2017), the Amici di Ponte Carrega have taken to organizing hikes through the valley meant to mobilize consensus over the need to protect the valley’s environments. These, in turn, are metabolic

hybrids generated through a thick web of historical connections that blend natural and human-made materialities of the pre-modern kind (Swyngedow, 2006). The activists' goal is to provide experiences that stimulate intellect, senses, and emotions, thus hopefully prompting a shift in how Bisagno Valley residents sense and make sense of the creek and its surroundings. It is only through this shift, activists believe, that residents may find the motivation to stand up for the valley and oppose additional cementificazione. As they promote new and more focused sensuous perceptions of materialities from the past like ancient cobblestone pavements and historical aqueducts, the tours seek to conjure the valley's phantasmatic potential (Navaro-Yashin, 2012) by re-inscribing the preindustrial state into its natural and built environments. What activists call their "civil battle"<sup>14</sup> against the blight of cementificazione is implicitly a "rupture... between what is seen and what is thought" (Rancière, 2010, p. 43) that begins to shape an alternative sensorium—one that may redraw "the frame within which common objects are determined" (Rancière, 2010, p. 139), thus enacting a pedagogy of the sensible that promotes a collective shift in how residents experience the valley. If, through a different way of sensing and making sense, the sensory regime (Rancière, 2010, p. 139) imposed on the valley is challenged, what was previously regarded as in need of being developed may become both beautiful and valuable.

Held on the shores of the creek and led by a retired botanist, the tour of the Bisagno creek's riparian vegetation that took place in spring 2017 was attended by approximately 30 people, all of whom were valley residents. The tour consisted of show-and-tell lectures on the plants that grow in the riverbed and are frequently cast by the media as yet another example of the valley's blight and its alleged need for redevelopment. Walking slowly and making frequent stops, the botanist would pick a plant and utter its name in local dialect and in Latin. He would then describe its uses while passing it along to the visitors so that they may observe it from close



by, touching and smelling it. Much to the surprise of his audience, many of what are commonly regarded as “weeds” turned out to be edible plants that, for centuries, have been used as ingredients in local dishes. Such are the *scixèrbua* (*sonchus oleraceus*) and the *talêgua* (*reichardia picroides*), which used to be part of the traditional Genoese *minestrone* recipe. Other Bisagno plants, instead, have medicinal properties. Among these are the *scrofularia acquatica* (*scruphularia auriculata*), used to cure a tubercular disease, or the *artemisia* (*artemisia vulgaris*), which treats malaria. The botanist also pointed out how the creek’s shores host plants with domestic applications, such as the *saponaria* (*saponaria officinalis*), used in detergent and shampoo formulations, and the *nasca* (*inula viscosa*). Aside from having wound-healing properties, the latter is also an effective aromatic cleanser for the brick ovens that are so popular among local foodies. Through the botanist’s explanations and his use of both vernacular and formal linguistic codes, each plant took on a special meaning: one that merged cultural intimacy (Herzfeld 2004) with historic and scientific legitimacy. Soon enough, the visitors were walking around with their heads down, watching their steps as they sought to discover more hidden treasures on the creek’s shores. The nature the botanist presented was made interesting by its historical connections to local communities. No longer dismissed as matter out of place (Douglas 1966), these plants now had names, uses, and a history; just as importantly, they all reminded attendees of a time when daily needs were satisfied through a walk through the fields rather than a trip to the store. By engaging in a polemic with modernity and its attempt to suppress urban nature and deny its past, the botanist leading this walk had taught his audience a new way of perceiving what had previously been regarded as an unsightly nuisance on the Bisagno shores.

The logic motivating tours such as this is transparent: If residents start perceiving a “worthless” postindustrial landscape (Walley, 2013, p. 129) as meaningful and worth loving,

they may be more eager to resist the attempt to further flood the valley with cement. What activists are pursuing through their public events is the molding of a structure of feeling (Williams, 1977) whereby the sensuous and the cognitive are merged through an aesthetic education that teaches people how to experience the valley's environments differently. Not only does this entail the hailing of a disposition to cultural consumption honed through decades to exposure to revitalized urban settings, but it also includes the cultivation of sensuous perceptions fostering a sense of belonging in the valley. Just as importantly, it seeks to challenge this area's marginal status in an aesthetic regime that dictates how to sense and how to make sense of this periphery (Dikeç, 2013; Rancière, 2010).

### **The Master's Tools<sup>15</sup>**

While this paper juxtaposes the aestheticization of Italy's downtowns to the cementificazione of its peripheries, it still recognizes both dynamics as facets of neoliberal urbanism—namely, its transformation of cities into objects of consumption (Harvey, 1989; Zukin, 1996; 1989) and its role in fostering an economy of urban experiences. Yet, the discourse surrounding Italy's current mallification (Hom, 2015) bears remarkable continuities with the rhetoric of 20<sup>th</sup> century cementificazione. The promise of providing public services is fundamental in justifying capital accumulation in the name of the greater good (Larkin, 2018). If 20<sup>th</sup> century developmental discourse cast infrastructures but also industrial and housing developments as a “modern” response to popular needs, 21<sup>st</sup> century administrators and developers categorize the proliferation of shopping malls in outskirts ravaged by industrialism as a way to satisfy their publics' wishes. Along these lines, contemporary forms of cementificazione continue to be framed as Italy's participation in “modern” global lifestyles

modeled after North Atlantic templates (Hom, 2015). At a time when consumption has replaced production, shopping malls are apt poetic substitutes for the large infrastructural works that were popular in the 1960s (Larkin, 2013): not only do they claim to fulfill people's needs and desires by circulating goods that support an economy of consumption, but they also broadcast representations of national modernity as Italy's successful participation in global lifestyles (Hom, 2015). And, just like 20<sup>th</sup> century infrastructures (Larkin, 2013), contemporary shopping malls abet capital accumulation even as they use the rhetoric of job creation to elicit consent. Yet, with the rise of environmental sensibilities, the contemporary legitimization of cementificazione has developed one more, seemingly irresistible, strategy: sustainability claims (Brand, 1999).

In 2013, a new COOP project suddenly emerged for a dismissed bus hangar in the Bisagno Valley, which was now slated to become a large shopping center. To underscore its extraneity to their neighborhood, residents immediately dubbed the project *l'astronave*, the spaceship: this concrete formation was to become yet another cumbersome, inward-looking alien structure towering over its surroundings. Taken by surprise, activists sought to contact the local newspaper, but nobody answered their calls—out of fear, they speculated, of reprisals by a powerful corporation and its political allies. Most importantly, they tried to engage the city administration, though also to no avail. This is when the Amici resorted to a different strategy. The mall was to be funded by the European Union via CommONEnergy, a project sponsoring shopping malls it touts as “beacons of energy efficiency.” By becoming “temples of energy conservation and high indoors environmental quality,” CommONEnergy's shopping centers purport to implement their state-of-the-art know-how to miraculously “revive” and “requalify” blighted neighborhoods.<sup>16</sup> Wielding technology as the magic wand that guarantees sustainability and job creation for the benefit of local communities, such “win-win economy-environment”<sup>17</sup>

claims have become increasingly popular in the attempt to extract consent even as they obscure the actual costs of redevelopment (White, Jonas & Gibbs, 2004). In the heritage-conscious Italian context, however, “sustainability” also entails a degree of attention to preexisting material cultures, and the mall project was managed by a private research center whose code of ethics is based on the care not just for the environment, but also for “cultural objects.”<sup>18</sup> COOP had justified its plans through the allegation that this area of the valley hosted no historical settlements: a claim that successfully cast the neighborhood as a blank slate ready for redevelopment. Drawing on archival research, however, the Amici wrote a petition demonstrating that the Ponte Carrega settlement dated back at least to the 10<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>19</sup> Undersigned by hundreds of residents as well as several of the valley’s most prominent artists and intellectuals, the document was sent to the ethical committee of the research center. The EU withdrew its funding and COOP had to scrap the hotel tower from its plans. Yet, this was not the first victory the Amici obtained by playing the heritage card.

Built in 1788, in 2012 the pedestrian-only Carrega Bridge was slated to be replaced by a vehicular bridge facilitating transit to a nascent shopping center. The newly-founded Amici di Ponte Carrega association launched a petition to nominate the bridge as one of Italy’s *Luoghi del Cuore* (Places of the Heart) as part of a yearly competition held by the well-respected Fondo Ambiente Italiano (National Trust for Italy) NGO.<sup>20</sup> To their own surprise, the Amici won the bet: within a month, they collected 2,000 signatures, and the bridge obtained the Place of the Heart designation. After its pictures were disseminated nationwide via television, print media, and the Internet, the state’s Heritage Preservation Office decided to subject the now-visitable bridge to a protective restriction, thus effectively bringing the developers’ plans to an immediate halt. Yet another small success was achieved when, in September 2017, the Heritage

Preservation Office included the activists' walking tour of the Carrega bridge trail celebrated by poet Camillo Sbarbaro in its calendar of events for that year's European Heritage Days. At the time of writing, the Office is evaluating the option of extending its protection to this area: a decision which may effectively scrap even the amended COOP mall plans. As these strategies demonstrate, in kindling residents' sensuous, affective, and cultural attachment to the valley and its materialities, activists are beginning to harness the potential intrinsic to their role as heritage consumers—a potential that may allow them to leverage Italy's heritage machine as a “provisional dominant [system]” that is fully aligned with the “neoliberal political order” even as it contributes to shape it (González, 2015, p.411). There is no doubt that such machines frequently lead to displacement and dispossession (González, 2015; Herzfeld, 2010); however, under some circumstances, their power may be strategically exploited by otherwise marginal actors—though only as long as these can persuasively demonstrate that they, too, have a heritage worth protecting (Handler, 1988; Madgin, Webb, Ruiz & Snelson, 2018): one that is consistent with the requirements of neoliberal aesthetics.

## **Conclusion**

Seeking to add nuance to the prevalent condemnation of the aesthetic consumption of cities that began in the 1980s (Harvey, 1989; Mitchell, 2003; Smith, 1996; Zukin, 1996; 1991), in this paper I explored how some of its aspects may be potentially used to strengthen, rather than undermine, grassroots participation in shaping the future of postindustrial neighborhoods. I drew on ethnographic research conducted in one of Italy's postindustrial settings to show how, by enacting a pedagogy of the sensible, Bisagno Valley activists strive to provide a new template

for experiencing the valley's landscape: one that challenges a long-standing aesthetic regime assigning the cultivation of "beauty," "culture," and "history" to upscale and revitalized downtowns and allocating cementificazione to working-class peripheries. Making use of the kind of sensibilities and dispositions that have been honed through the neoliberal transformation of cityscapes into objects of aesthetic consumption, Bisagno Valley activists reclaim their own as well as fellow residents' role as subjects of aesthetic experiences even as they attempt to recast the valley as worthy of appreciation and protection. Yet, while their emphasis on visitability embraces the neoliberal template for the aesthetic consumption of cities, they also promote dissensus (Rancière, 2010) in the form of new ways of sensing and making sense (Howes, 2015; see also Pinder, 2005) of the valley and its materialities; their goal is to subvert its categorization as a non-place awaiting development (Augé, 1995). It is by cultivating sensuous experiences and inculcating them in their fellow residents that activists strive to leverage their role as consumers of urban aesthetics, thus pursuing the kind of neoliberal legitimacy they need to participate in broader conversations about the future of their neighborhood.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> The Amici di Ponte Carrega association's membership is comprised of a broad, cross-class range of blue-collar workers, artisans, students, precarious workers, and professionals.

<sup>2</sup> For an example of cementificazione in Palermo, Sicily, see Schneider and Schneider (2003).

<sup>3</sup> Here I distinguish between "ruination" as the process that accompanies cementificazione and "ruins" as the materialities it leaves behind. While ruins may, in some cases, accommodate residents' creative place-making practices (Edensor 2005), the ruination process is more likely to be perceived as a jarring, if not downright dangerous, encroachment.

<sup>4</sup> Research entailed participant observation as well as 21 in-depth interviews with neighborhood activists. Some of these were conducted as walking interviews (Ingold & Vergunst, 2008) during which I paid particular attention to my informants' affective and sensuous relationship to hybrid built and natural environments. In turn, this methodology informed my choice of evocative language as a tool for the ethnographic description of emotions and sensuous experiences (Skoggard & Waterston, 2015).

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<sup>5</sup> Not all of Genoa's outskirts are postindustrial neighborhoods; however, affluent areas at the edge of the city are never called *periferie*—a label that blends geographic and social marginality.

<sup>6</sup> While the discussion of gentrification goes beyond the purposes of this paper, it bears mentioning that Italian cities are hardly immune from this dynamic (Cavanaugh, 2009; Dines, 2012; Herzfeld, 2009). Yet, at least in some cases (see for example Guano, 2017) the nexus of available materialities and social and economic circumstances caused gentrification to diverge from its allegedly global template (Smith, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> Gianluca Porcile, personal communication.

<sup>8</sup> During the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Italians perceived the introduction of department stores as a modernizing force modeled after the American suburban lifestyle (Scarpellini, 2001); in the early 2000s, the appearance of shopping malls in urban peripheries all over the country was also welcomed by consumers as a form of “progress.”

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.amicidipontecarrega.it/manifesto/>, Oct. 13, 2019.

<sup>10</sup> Within days of the store's 2017 inauguration, the neighborhood's family-owned small businesses reported a 30% loss in their revenues.

<sup>11</sup> The Bisagno creek flooded again in 2012, claiming one more victim.

<sup>12</sup> As Stewart (1988, p.227) observed, nostalgia is a cultural practice with no stable object. Industrial nostalgia, for example, is reported among residents of postindustrial neighborhoods who bemoan the loss of stable employment (Muehlebach, 2017; Walley, 2013). In the context of this research, however, nostalgia for the preindustrial era resonates with the aesthetic regime that has unfolded in downtown Genoa and its valorization of pre-modern materialities. This nostalgia aligns with the role of cultural tourism as a replacement for Genoa's industrial economy and its promise of a better future for this city's residents (Guano 2017).

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.amicidipontecarrega.it/manifesto/>, Oct. 14, 2019.

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.amicidipontecarrega.it/manifesto/>, Oct. 14, 2019.

<sup>15</sup> This is a take on Audre Lorde's claim that “the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house” (1984, p.110).

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.commonenergyproject.eu/modena.html>, Oct. 8, 2018.

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.commonenergyproject.eu/modena.html>, Oct. 8, 2018.

<sup>18</sup> [http://www.eurac.edu/en/aboutus/Documents/Eurac\\_Ethics-Guidelines\\_Nov2016.pdf](http://www.eurac.edu/en/aboutus/Documents/Eurac_Ethics-Guidelines_Nov2016.pdf), Oct. 8, 2018.

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.amicidipontecarrega.it/>, Oct. 9, 2018.

<sup>20</sup> Commonly known as FAI and founded in 1975, the Fondo Ambiente Italiano “undertakes to protect and spread awareness of Italy's extraordinary cultural, artistic, and natural patrimony” (<http://fai-international.org/fai/>, March 23, 2018).

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