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Making sense of "heritage" from the bottom-up. An exploration of the places and spaces of Marghera (Venice, Italy)

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Abstract

The discourse on heritage management increasingly emphasizes the involvement of communities in the definition and maintenance of the cultural resources of their territory. However, these approaches to heritage still lack a thorough understanding of how a community may spontaneously develop a sense of place thanks to elements of their environment that may not fit with institutionalized definitions of what is a cultural resource. This study seeks to provide clarity on this issue through an ethnographic research work that, drawing upon the literature on place and space, sheds light on how the residents of a peripheral town in Italy (Marghera, Venice) socially construct a set of cultural resources that are valuable to the community. The results of the analysis show that the community's sense of place unfolds along three interrelated conceptual nodes: the relationship between heritage and the past implying an interplay between collective memory, history, and the present; the relationship between place and space representing the interplay between meaning-making and material practices; the relationship between bottom-up and top-down mechanisms through which those meanings and practices may accrue or undermine the sense of place of the community.

Il dibattito sul patrimonio culturale enfatizza sempre più l'importanza del coinvolgimento delle comunità nella definizione e nel mantenimento delle risorse culturali di un territorio. Tuttavia, questi approcci spesso mancano di un'approfondita analisi delle modalità attraverso cui una comunità può sviluppare autonomamente il proprio *sense of place* anche grazie a elementi dell'ambiente che non sempre corrispondono a una definizione istituzionale di risorsa culturale. Il presente lavoro mira a chiarire tali questioni attraverso una ricerca etnografica che, appoggiandosi alla letteratura su luoghi e spazi, illustra come i residenti di una cittadina periferica (Marghera, VE) agiscono un processo di costruzione sociale delle risorse culturali di valore per la comunità. I risultati dell'analisi mostrano che il *sense of place* della comunità si sviluppa lungo tre nodi concettuali: la relazione tra patrimonio e passato, che implica un'interazione tra memoria collettiva, storia e presente; la relazione tra spazi e luoghi, che rappresenta il nesso tra processi di significazione e pratiche materiali; la relazione tra meccanismi dal basso e scelte di governo dall'alto attraverso cui quei significati e quelle pratiche possono accrescere o indebolire il *sense of place* della comunità.

1. *Introduction*

Since the so-called Faro Convention[1], the ongoing discourse on heritage management and conservation has decidedly revolved around how a community should be engaged in defining and maintaining the cultural resources of its territory. The Faro Convention's focus on heritage communities promotes a genuine ideal of cultural democracy that is different from simply extending access to cultural resources as contemplated in the democratization of culture

[1] Council of Europe 2005.

approach[2]. If in the 1960s and 1970s an emerging sensibility toward making culture less elitarian advanced the principle that citizens of any socioeconomic background should be included in experiencing arts and culture[3], in more recent times cultural policies increasingly aim to involve citizens as active participants in cultural endeavors[4]. By stressing the interactions between people and the cultural resources of their environment, this kind of cultural policy would favor the "local" against the "global"[5] and may potentially realize a form of social sustainability that, otherwise, risks being adumbrated by purely economic considerations[6]. Accordingly, participatory approaches are increasingly advanced in a variety of heritage professions such as museum curatorship[7], archaeology[8], and architecture[9]. However, concretely realizing what the Faro Convention aspires has often proven complex, costly, and full of tensions[10], especially because it may be challenging to precisely identify what a community deems to be valuable and worth preserving. We believe this difficulty is first of all due to a lack of comprehension of how and when a "community" may consider an element of their territory as a "cultural resource".

Our aim with this research work is thus to provide some clarity on the issue by highlighting the conditions through which people living in a territory may develop, toward specific elements of their environment, a set of meanings and affections that ultimately give sense to what can be conceived as "valuable" and that, as a result, define what is to be conceived as a cultural resource. In particular, by focusing on a community of citizens living in a peripheral urban area, we apply a theoretical framework borrowed from human geography that characterizes a city's places and spaces as the elements that may create identification, symbolic and emotional attachment, and a sense of belonging. It is when some of these urban elements stimulate a "sense of place" that we grasp what can be considered as a cultural resource *for* the community. These dynamics are particularly salient in peripheral areas that, being usually overlooked by cultural institutions, have resident communities that may be unaware of the heritage resources of their environment[11]. These resources are possibly not even identifiable as a set of material and immaterial artifacts recognized to be "heritage" on the basis of their aesthetic or historical significance, as evaluated

[2] Belfiore *et al.* 2023; Evrard 1997.
[3] DiMaggio, Useem 1978.
[4] Bonet, Négrier 2018.
[5] Magnaghi 2010.
[6] Becattini 2015.
[7] Simon 2010.
[8] Volpe 2019.
[9] De Carlo 2015.
[10] Rabbiosi 2022.
[11] Capriotti, Cerquetti 2016.

by heritage institutions. Nonetheless, they may constitute an ongoing process of *heritagization* when the community engages them in an alive relationship.

Our empirical setting is Marghera, an urban site in the Venice area planned and built in the 1920s for the sake of endowing Venice (and the entire Veneto region) with an important industrial sector. Just next to the industrial area, a residential neighborhood has been erected following the plan of the architect Pietro Emilio Emmer who designed a "Garden City" project to ensure a pleasant living environment for the workers employed in the factories. Marghera has always been rife with controversies because of its industrial traction, which made it one of the most important Italian settings of workers' struggle during the 1960s and 1970s. Nowadays, the area is heavily characterized by the industrial decline that affects much of the Western world, with the consequence that a conspicuous number of plants and buildings are abandoned. This context is therefore rich in places and spaces that, although not immediately identifiable as "heritage" according to the institutional definitions, have a fundamental – but not always unproblematic – role in constructing a sense of identity and belonging for the people who live there.

We performed an ethnographic research work, aimed at eliciting from our interviewees their memories, desires, and narratives of Marghera's places and spaces. Our analysis illustrates how a community-based characterization of heritage unfolds through dialectical processes. Specifically, we highlight 1) how the relationship between heritage and the past implies an interplay between collective memory, history, and the present, 2) that an ongoing interplay between meaning-making and material practices gives rise to the sense of place of the community, and 3) that this sense of place may be accrued or undermined as a consequence of how the relation between bottom-up and top-down heritagization mechanisms unfolds.

2. *Theoretical background*

Recent approaches to heritage studies following a constructivist epistemology[12] are best suited to inform research on how communities living in a territory may actively contribute to the definition and maintenance of heritage resources. This constructivist perspective has been most comprehensively outlined by Laurajane Smith, who argues that «heritage is about a sense of *place*»[13]. Her work, as well as the present paper, thus largely draws upon studies in human geography where the construct of "sense of place" originated: this literature

[12] Graham 2002; Harrison 2012; Smith 2006.
[13] Smith 2006, p. 75, original emphasis.

has foregrounded the idea of *place* as the pivotal element in the analysis of how human beings interact with, make sense of, and ultimately dwell in the spaces composing their environment. Generally, understanding the relationship between space, place, and people has guided much research in the last four decades, revolving around the question of «how do people attach meaning to and organize space and place?»[14].

The answers to this question have been varied and, most crucially, there has been debate on the very terms *space* and *place* on which there is no generalized consensus[15]. Some scholars tend to prefer one over the other, according to their epistemological posture and their objects of inquiry. In both cases, questions on place and space do not simply address *where* things happen, but also the *how*[16]. In fact, if traditional geography mostly hinged on an abstracted conception of space, intended as the pure geometric dimensions of human and social life, recent studies concur in framing both space and place as social constructions that depend on actors' interpretations and practices, and in turn shape their behaviors and cognitions[17]. We agree with Yi-Fu Tuan that:

> The ideas 'space' and 'place' require each other for definition. From the security and stability of place we are aware of the openness, freedom, and threat of space, and vice versa. […] If we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place[18].

This highlights how the adoption of "space" as a unit of analysis typically entails a phenomenological and process-oriented perspective centered upon how people have bodily experience of their surroundings[19], how they enact movements and rhythms in their stream of actions and interactions[20], and how their pre-conscious and emotional sphere interrelates to those movements and bodily experiences[21]. On the other hand, by focusing on "place", we may better analyze the processes through which people engage in a meaning-making activity about specific elements of their environment[22], anchor their identity and self-narratives[23], indulge in remembrance, and project their imagination[24].

Since a comprehensive survey of the existing literature on this theme goes far beyond the aim of the present paper, the above distinction between space

[14] Tuan 1977, p. 5.
[15] Agnew 2011.
[16] *Ibidem*.
[17] Shields 1991.
[18] Tuan 1977, p. 6.
[19] Beyes, Steyaert 2012
[20] Nash 2020; Stephenson *et al.* 2020.
[21] Thrift 2006.
[22] Cresswell 2004.
[23] Kimmitt *et al.* 2023.
[24] Cartel *et al.* 2022.

and place is the one we use as a theoretical guideline to inform our research work. It is important to highlight that, although distinct, the two constructs are inextricably connected. Human existence is always structured through an interplay between cognitions and emotions, discourse and practice, meanings and actions. The distinction between place and space reflects these dichotomies so that we cannot make sense of one without the other. John Agnew[25] assumed place as the central construct of human geography, which is theoretically definable by and empirically investigable along three dimensions: 1) *location*, intended as the mere spatial individuation of a specific site as connected to or distinguishable from other sites; 2) *locale*, intended as the settings where everyday life concretely happens; 3) *sense of place*, intended as the identification and sense of belonging that people may have with a particular place. This third dimension is particularly important for the subsequent discussion: the sense of place is a central concept in human geography, intended to describe the particular ways in which human beings invest their surroundings with meaning and affection[26].

Thomas Gieryn[27] borrowed and partly refined Agnew's definition, by positing that place has three fundamental features: 1) *geographic location*, 2) *material form*, and 3) *investment with meanings and values*. Gieryn's sociological stance entails that his categorization, differently from Agnew's, emphasizes meanings as collectively constructed at the community level, not only at the subjective level. Moreover, the material form of places typically embodies society-level structures of power, imposing constraints and hierarchy on social groups. In this sense, places have their own agency: they are not simply the results of someone's design, building, and interpretative efforts, but they actively "do things", shaping how social life unfolds[28].

A third seminal thinker whose contribution informs our research is Henry Lefebvre. His framework of space as a social product[29] develops along three analytical axes that are dialectically related to one another: space can be perceived, conceived, and lived. *Perceived* space is the realm of spatial practices, the bodily experiences of people engaged in daily routines and movements. *Conceived* space, instead, is the more abstract realm of geographers and urban planners who rationalize how space is to be organized. The perceived and conceived realms thus reflect the Cartesian dualism of body and mind, which needs to be transcended by *lived* space. This third dimension pertains to the realm of symbolic and cultural endeavor, through which spaces can be reappropriated by exerting imagination. Lived space, in this sense, not only

[25] Agnew 1987 and 2011.
[26] Hubbard, Kitchin 2010.
[27] Gieryn 2000.
[28] Gieryn 2002.
[29] Lefebvre 1992.

transcends but has the power to refigure the balance between the popular, perceived space and the official, conceived space[30] by advancing its fundamentally qualitative, fluid, and dynamic character.

These theoretical arguments on place and space, as mentioned beforehand, have long since been adopted in heritage studies[31]. Consequently, there has been increasing attention to the bottom-up processes of heritagization as fundamentally activated thanks to the sense of place of those who inhabit a specific territory or site[32]. Under this perspective, the city typically becomes the preferred level of analysis to explore how the interactions between people, spaces, and places may give rise to forms of heritage that risk being neglected through purely top-down approaches[33]. Indeed, the city may offer fertile soil for the activation of collective creative endeavors taking place throughout its spaces[34]. However, there is still a cleavage between the theoretical, place-oriented discourse on heritage and the managerial and institutional activities of heritage professionals[35]. Thus, for example, the cities included in the official UNESCO lists are judged to offer some cultural value recognized as "outstanding" and "universal"[36]. This entails cultural policies oriented toward the valorization of urban sites to be treated as an economic resource[37], at the detriment of locations that are not at the center stage of the cultural world[38] and that are not endowed with any particularly recognizable cultural asset. However, the potential for urban sites to create social bonds that activate a community's sense of place and identity stems also from the mundane and banal practices that citizens may daily enact[39]. It is through the appreciation of these small and apparently trivial elements composing urban practices that a community may transform a merely perceived space, into a lived one[40], or may reclaim their sense of place from the abstract vision of top-down urban policies[41]. Therefore, emerging processes of heritagization may take place also in sites that do not have any interest under an institutional perspective but have a strategic value for their inhabitants.

[30] Shields 1991.
[31] Graham *et al.* 2000.
[32] Schofield 2015; Schofield, Szymanski 2016.
[33] Schofield, Rellensmann 2015.
[34] Beyes 2010.
[35] Winter 2013.
[36] UNESCO 1972.
[37] Evans 2009.
[38] Power, Collins 2021.
[39] Amin, Thrift 2002.
[40] Lefebvre 1992.
[41] Relph 1993.

3. *A glimpse of Marghera's history. Garden city or industrial site?*

Marghera is one of the mainland districts of the Venice municipality, located to the south of Mestre, and divided from it by the railway line. While Venice is mostly known for its historical center, located in the lagoon, its municipality comprehends six administrative districts, four of which are located on the mainland. Our interest in Marghera is due, on the one hand, to the fact that, despite (or due to) its vicinity to Venice, one of the most important heritage sites in the world, it goes almost completely overlooked by heritage institutions. On the other hand, its peculiar industrial and urbanistic history makes it an area potentially rich in heritage places.

In the early 20th century, Marghera was still a mostly empty area, besides the lagoon of Venice, with some farmhouses occupied by a few hundred people. It was a poor countryside, characterized by infertile land and affected by malaria. At the beginning of the 20th century, the lack of suitable spaces for the commercial development of Venice was addressed with the idea of moving the port to the mainland, precisely in that depressed and unhealthy area that went then by the name of Bottenighi[42]. The intention of the administrators was not to create a new city, but rather a neighborhood that was an extension of Venice. The entire toponymy of the area had been then changed to celebrate Venice's Risorgimento[43].

The residential area was designed and carried forward by the Venetian administration and the lobby connected to it. Count Giuseppe Volpi, a tycoon in the energy sector, was the main responsible for the Marghera project. Pietro Emilio Emmer, an engineer from Milan, was appointed to design a neighborhood for 30,000 people[44] in an area of approximately 150 hectares. Emmer's project of the new urban district took inspiration from the Anglo-Saxon model of Ebenezer Howard, the Garden City[45]. Its construction began in 1921, but the development of the residential buildings suffered many delays due to, among other things, the costs of individual housing units. In fact, Emmer had imposed very precise constraints for the new constructions: the height was set at a maximum of 3 floors, each house had to be no less than 15 meters away

[42] For an interesting report on the incidence of malaria on the population of the municipality of Mestre and in particular of the Bottenighi area, see Barizza 2011.

[43] The Bottenighi area was renamed Marghera, after the military fort that had played an important role in Venice's resistance against the Austrians in 1848; Via Cappuccina was renamed Via Fratelli Bandiera, in memory of two patriots shot in 1844. Many similar changes were also made.

[44] The inhabitants of the residential area of Marghera remained below the 10,000 units until the demographic boom of the 1950s when the population increased up to 27,000 in 1960 and remained more or less constant since then (see Barizza, 2011). Today there are about 28,000 residents.

[45] Howard 1902.

from neighboring ones, and had to be surrounded by a garden four times wider than the built surface[46]. Moreover, Emmer's project envisaged a neighborhood full of public spaces and a generous central area to host buildings and services for the community. Great attention was thus paid to urban beautification, with relevant investments to set up green areas and spacious tree-lined avenues. Emmer's Garden City project had never been entirely realized but its initial imprinting can still be recognized today.

On the other hand, the earliest industrial zone was settled between Via Fratelli Bandiera and the lagoon, which means that the industrial activities were, from the beginning, very close to the residential zone. That area became the site of mechanical and electrical workshops, building materials plants, and companies in the chemical, food, and textile sectors (e.g., Berengo workshops, Metallotecnica, Galileo, Cotonificio Veneziano, Feltrificio Veneto, Vidal), most of which have ceased[47]. In the southern part, many other important heavy industrial companies were established: the Sade thermoelectric power plant, one of the creations of Giuseppe Volpi; the San Marco electrometallurgical company, also controlled by Volpi; the Predil mines and quarries company, the Venetian aluminum company Anonymous (Sava)[48].

Besides these many firms, the most important industrial production located in Porto Marghera, which substantially marked its history, is the petrochemical industry. The most southern (and largest) part of the industrial area is entirely occupied by the petrochemical plants. The two companies that controlled most of the petrochemical area were the private Montedison and the public Enichem. The petrochemical site has been at the center of legal disputes because of the health and environmental hazards that its production processes have generated, which resulted in an important trial[49]. Porto Marghera, in fact, had been one of the main stages of the Italian environmental movement's political battles. Today the chemical industry hub is experiencing a long phase of decline, which began between the 1970s and 1980s.

To summarize, notwithstanding it has always been subject to Venice municipal administration, Marghera's peculiar history and geographical location render it relatively detached from the historical center, allowing us to inquire about how the residents experience the urban spaces and places as if it is an autonomous town.

[46] Barizza 2011.
[47] Cerasi 2007.
[48] *Ibidem*.
[49] Bettin, Dianese 2002.

4. *Data and analysis*

Our research design follows an ethnographic approach to place and space[50] supported by interviews[51] and non-participant observations[52]. Our interview data collection followed a snowball sampling approach[53] that is frequently used when a researcher needs to gain access to a specific community[54]. In our case, this approach allowed us to reach a consistent group of informants whose viewpoints give an in-depth perspective of noteworthy places and spaces of Marghera. First, we contacted a few renowned people (i.e., the seed informants[55]), purposively selected based on our research objectives, whose personal histories may offer a vantage point to understand how Marghera citizens attach meanings and values to their places. These informants are indeed widely recognized for their activism in the social, cultural, and political spheres and have somehow shaped Marghera's collective identity. This initial set of interviews helped us begin to identify relevant places of Marghera and provided us with contacts of other citizens whose activities and experiences are informative to our topics of interest. We thus proceeded with the snowball sampling, contacting and interviewing this second group of informants to deepen our emerging understanding of the places and spaces of Marghera. This sampling approach allowed us to reach a group of people (a total of 20 informants) all of whom have strong connections to Marghera, being born and raised there or being based there for their current activities. In short, our group of informants consists of people who have at least mobilized some of their energy to contribute to the image and identity of their city, rather than representing a statistically representative sample of all Marghera residents.

We adopted a semi-structured approach to these interviews, namely, we asked similar questions to all informants, fine-tuning the questions from one interview to the next, and feeling free to ask questions not previously included in the protocol if some interesting topic emerged[56]. The interview protocol (Tab. 1) included questions related to both the professional and personal accounts of our informants, specifically asking them to tell us about their main social and cultural activities, their memories, future projections, and emotions about places of Marghera significant to them, aided by the use of a map, similar to the one displayed in Figure 1 in the appendix.

[50] Low 2017.
[51] Fontana, Frey 2003.
[52] Lofland, Lofland 1995.
[53] Lincoln, Guba 1985.
[54] Noy 2008.
[55] *Ibidem*.
[56] See Galletta 2013 for a practical guide on semi-structured interviewing.

Question set 1: professional background/community-related activities
1. If you would define yourself in relation to Marghera, how is your work or activity connected to it? 2. Have you always performed this job/played this role in Marghera? 3. What are your activities/initiatives that have been most successful and why? 4. What are the unsuccessful ones? 5. What kind of people do you usually interact with because of your work in Marghera? 6. Do all your work-related activities take place in Marghera? 7. If so, how do you take advantage of Marghera urban spaces for your activities? 8. Does Marghera's industrial history somehow influence the significance of your work-related activities?
Question set 2: personal and emotional relation to Marghera's places
1. What is your first memory of Marghera? 2. What are the places about which you have pleasant memories? Which ones are associated with unpleasant memories? 3. Do you think that Marghera generally has a good quality of life? 4. If you need to meet someone, where will you arrange the meeting? 5. Where do you usually go to buy your essential commodities? 6. Which places do you associate with the following words: Pride? Anger? Serenity? Danger? Past? Future? 7. What would you desire for Marghera that will never be realized? What future project about Marghera do you think is instead realizable? 8. What is your relationship with Mestre and Venice?

Table 1. Interview protocol

Table 2 below summarizes all of the 22 interviews we conducted (two informants have been interviewed twice), indicating the date of each interview, and the informants' role in the community. The number of interviews was sufficient to reach data saturation, as no new significant insights emerged from the last three interviews. However, it must be highlighted that for the purpose of this study, we heard the voices of the most active citizens, leaving out the groups of less engaged residents who might nonetheless contribute to creating Marghera's sense of place. Overall, the average age of our informants is 47 (minimum 19, maximum 74) and the proportion of females is 41%.

To supplement these interviews, we have also performed 15 ethnographic observations of events that were held in Marghera (between May 2023 and April 2024), focused on the themes of space usage (e.g., an open meeting where one association proposed urbanistic interventions alternative to those of the municipality), of Marghera identity (e.g., some cultural walks through the city to talk about what is Marghera for its residents), of the community in general (book presentations, public seminars, etc.). The events were all open to the public and always attracted a variety of people ranging from 5 to a few hundred participants. These observations allowed us to directly acknowledge how citizens utilize certain urban spaces, corroborating or complexifying some of the issues emerging from the interviews, and we could also get in touch with other potential interviewees. Table 3 lists all the events attended with a short description of the initiatives, and the approximate number of participants.

Interview number	*Date*	*Profession/role of the informant*	*Born/raised in Marghera*	*Based in Marghera*	*Length*
1	May 2023	Entrepreneur in the cultural sector	✓	✓	1h37m
2	June 2023	Worker in the cultural sector	✓	✓	1h38m
3	June 2023	Cultural mediator		✓	45m
4	June 2023	Entrepreneur in the cultural sector	✓	✓	1h20m
5	July 2023	Cultural mediator		✓	1h31m
6	July 2023	Worker in the cultural sector		✓	49m
7	July 2023	Civil activist/unionist	✓	✓	1h43m
8	July 2023	Politician/former administrator	✓	✓	1h35m
9	October 2023	Architect/researcher	✓		1h20m
10	October 2023	Entrepreneur	✓	✓	1h00m
11	October 2023	Civil activist	✓		1h15m
12	October 2023	Civil activist	✓	✓	1h35m
13	November 2023	Civil activist	✓	✓	1h12m
14	November 2023	Civil activist		✓	47m
15	November 2023	Civil activist	✓	✓	51m
16	December 2023	Worker in the cultural sector	✓	✓	31m
17	January 2024	Civil activist		✓	2h02m
18	March 2024	Worker in the cultural sector		✓	55m
19	March 2024	Social designer/researcher	✓		1h31m
20	April 2024	Entrepreneur in the cultural sector	✓	✓	1h22m
21	May 2024	Civil activist		✓	1h10m
22	May 2024	Civil activist	✓	✓	1h34m

Table 2. Summary of the interview data

Following consolidated practices in qualitative research methods[57], we analyzed our data by patterning the semantic categories emerging from the interviews, further elaborating these categories thanks to the observations. We specifically applied a two-cycle coding procedure[58] starting with inductive first-order coding to descriptively elicit how informants attach feelings and meanings to specific places. Then, we performed a second-cycle pattern coding[59], using theoretically informed categories of meaning to aggregate first-order codes by

[57] See, for example, Grodal *et al.* 2021; Locke *et al.* 2022; Miles *et al.* 2014.
[58] Miles *et al.* 2014.
[59] *Ibidem*.

Event number	*Date*	*Event observed*	*Number of participants (approx.)*
1	May 2023	Open citizens' meeting	~25
2	July 2023	Public movie projection	~80
3	September 2023	Cultural walk	~10
4	September 2023	Cultural walk	~10
5	October 2023	Cultural walk	~80
6	November 2023	Community lunch	~60
7	December 2023	Book presentation and debate	~40
8	December 2023	Concert/community dinner	~70
9	January 2024	Public seminar	~40
10	January 2024	Book presentation and debate	~200
11	March 2024	Community lunch	~60
12	March 2024	Book presentation and debate	~40
13	March 2024	Book presentation and debate	~30
14	April 2024	Open citizens' meeting	~5
15	April 2024	Open citizens' meeting	~20

Table 3. Summary of the observation data

focusing on diverse properties of urban spaces and their effects on people's sense of place. To summarize, our analytical approach follows an abductive perspective[60] that allows us to make sense of the specificities and complexities of our empirical setting while expanding the scope of our theoretical reflections to broader issues debated in the literature. The finding section below represents a summary of our interpretation of how Marghera residents construct their sense of place and, ultimately, their community's identity.

5. *Findings*

Our data analysis revealed that Marghera inhabitants typically possess an acute awareness of their identity as *Margherini*. Although this kind of strong identification with one's city is probably common in small urban centers, the processes observed in our empirical case are peculiar because of Marghera's history and spatial configuration. More specifically, we observe distinct mechanisms and dialectical processes through which the structuration of Marghera's

[60] Tavory, Timmermans 2014.

identity unfolds. We identified them as distinct processes of anchoring identity to places, opening spaces for identity construction, contesting space for community, (dis)engaging with the industrial places.

5.1. Anchoring identity to places

The built environment of Marghera presents structural features that constitute immediately recognizable identity markers of the city. In some cases, specific elements can create a sense of identity through a process of symbolization. This is the case, in particular, of the water tower that has been almost unanimously indicated to be the "symbol" of Marghera (Figure 2). This tower, located in the north-western part of the residential area, was erected a few years after the foundation of the city. Its architectural style is thus typical of the 1920s and, although it no longer serves its original function, it has been recently repainted and renovated in a way to preserve its original appearance. Residents of any age have confirmed that the water tower emanates a sense of belonging. A person who was born and raised in Marghera but who lives now in Mestre told us:

> One of the first times I was in Mestre shopping around, from a distance, I gazed at the water tower and I felt an intense feeling, I know it may sound weird because, I mean, Mestre is just next to Marghera, but at that moment I got very emotional because when I see it, I think "I'm home".

This water tower shapes Marghera's identity primarily thanks to its material form and its geographic location. Its tall structure makes it visible from a distance and, being located toward the inland, close to the railway and the beltway, it is the first thing in sight to people coming from other towns by train or by car; furthermore, it is nearby one of the urban streets with the greatest car traffic, and therefore frequently stands out for those passing through Marghera. Interestingly, it does not represent a lived space, according to our theoretical framework, because it is not part of the citizens' daily practices. Additionally, its original function does not play any role in its current signification besides its naming (being called "aqueduct tower", or "water tank"). Nonetheless, we observed how this tower may generate a strong sense of place for the people of Marghera, being constantly present in their minds.

Another urban element frequently evoked in our investigation as a distinctive feature of Marghera's identity is represented by the roundabouts and, more generally, all the green areas characterizing the Garden City neighborhood. In this case, the original meanings and significance of these abundant green areas, which had been inscribed along the intention of Emilio Emmer, proved time resistant and still today positively influence the life quality of the residents:

[Marghera] is much better than an outsider would imagine. And the central area, even if the Garden City project was never fully realized, has a high quality [of life] compared to other residential areas of the city.

These green areas, differently from the water tower, play a key role in the everyday life of the residents. They fully represent a lived space in Lefebvre's sense. This is facilitated because its conceived and perceived dimensions seemingly do not create any friction with one another:

Marghera is characterized by roundabouts and they are also actively lived because they are very wide, there are playgrounds and benches, so every roundabout is absolutely relevant to our lives.

In short, the green areas have an effect on the identity construction of Marghera which is strictly dependent on its (inscribed) material properties: the abundance of trees was envisioned to create a favorable living environment for the city residents, and it kept faith with this promise. The sense of place that emanates from these urban elements, differently from the water tower, does not derive from a *post-hoc* symbolization, but from the ongoing, persistent practices that the residents exert in these areas.

Overall, however, both the water tower and the green areas represent places that are taken for granted by the citizens in their iconic character as distinctive identity markers of their town. They have, therefore, a constraining force on this identity construction process and, in some cases, this kind of constraint is consciously perceived:

The object that everyone would associate with Marghera is the aqueduct [tower]. It has become the symbol of Marghera. […] I don't like very much to have this water tank as the only monumental reference. But anyway…

5.2. Opening space for identity construction

Although some of the urban elements inherited from the past have a constraining power on its identity, the history of Marghera is very recent, compared to the vast majority of other Italian cities (let alone the close Venice). Being part of a "young" town is a shared feeling among the citizens, which is accompanied by a certain sense of freedom about the future and about what can be done with the places and spaces of Marghera:

Marghera was born on nothing, it's the only place in the metropolitan Venice area that was planned to emerge in the countryside between the lagoon and the inland, right? […] So, the people who come here don't have a local history [to deal with], they have their history that they carry with them, and a history which is still to be made.

This sense of openness toward a future that is still to be written is probably associated with some disposition of living the spaces informally, just for the sake of activating community-building practices. For example, an informant told us about her initiative to informally attract groups of people in the market square, the most central place of the Garden City area (Figure 3), to just hang out, chat, and play music:

> Our main intention, especially in the aftermath of COVID, is rooted in a strong family and cultural legacy: the desire and will to come together without a specific reason or ultimate purpose, other than the act of being together, getting to meet one another, and connecting the diversities that each of us brings. This is the fundamental principle. […] The main idea is to start making use of the square, which, apart from the market and the few activities offered during the summer, is usually an open space that remains unused for many months. Instead, we are suggesting that, for instance, in the afternoon, people can gather in the square, have a chat, and play some music.

This kind of initiative represents an informal, bottom-up repurposing process of the city spaces. In fact, the market square, specifically designed to accommodate the local marketplace, because of its central and easily reachable location, and its amplitude (a material feature), would lend itself to be identified as a place of social aggregation. However, to sustain its social function, the square needs an active and self-conscious involvement of people who are willing to continuously infuse it with this sociable meaning through their informal practices.

Another significant example of appropriation of places by citizens, in contrast with the initial function of the place, is represented by the Rivolta social center. In 1995 the abandoned Paolini & Villani spice factory was occupied by a group of activists who, a few years later, obtained the concession to manage the space. The social center rapidly became one of the most recognizable places of Marghera, also to people coming from nearby towns, as a venue for concerts, shows, meetings, and debates. Even if nowadays the center's political activity is probably less intense than a few years ago, this place is rooted in the imagination of the residents as an important element of identity for the community and was cited by almost all our informants as one of the main places of Marghera's cultural events.

5.3. Contesting space for community

The willingness to freely and informally utilize the spaces of the city is sometimes challenged by the troubled relationship between the citizens and the city administration. Again, although complaining of the inadequacy of the choices made by the political power is commonplace, the peculiarity of Marghera is that, from an administrative viewpoint, it has always been part of Venice's municipality. Although institutionally united, Marghera and Venice

(historical center) are profoundly different in the kind of issues and interests that characterize them. This is part of the reason why the Marghera population oftentimes has had to loudly raise its voice to be heard by the local political power. This animosity has been a constant notwithstanding the varying political and ideological affiliations of the parties who have ruled the municipality in the past. To be sure, many of our informants lamented that the current right-wing city council (elected in 2015) is one of the most irresponsive ever to the requests coming from Marghera citizens. As a consequence, many of the urban regeneration projects that have been advanced by the municipality in recent times are negatively perceived by the population as disrespectful to the identity of Marghera. For example, the municipality has recently inaugurated a swimming pool. Although it was one of the requests of the citizens to have a swimming pool in Marghera, it has been built in the industrial area, without providing adequate public transport systems to reach it. Many of our informants would see in favorable terms having opportunities for bridging the residential and industrial areas; however, the common feeling is that the inauguration of this swimming pool was just a political operation of self-legitimation:

> If this were a normal country, with this great and full of infrastructures [industrial] space, you could do amazing new projects. But they did not invest anything in that [...] do you believe anyone gives a fuck about the swimming pool? It seems to me that they are again making fun of us.

Building this kind of new structure can be perceived as an example of economic exploitation of Marghera's spaces that does not do justice to its potentiality by, for instance, reviving abandoned places. Complaining about the lack of consideration of an abandoned building (a former daycare center) positioned in the heart of the garden city, an informant told us:

> Everything has been abandoned, everything closed, everything... So, if you don't revitalize the area, keep everything closed, and decentralize me, what do you want to do? Just restaurants and hotels? I don't know... That's not how it works, Marghera is not used to that kind of stuff.

On the other hand, when the proposals for using the public space come from below, citizens oftentimes perceive the administrative power as an obstacle and not as a facilitator for their initiatives. An informant, involved in cooperation and civil activism, tried to organize some community initiatives in the public space:

> A couple of years ago, we needed to ask for permission to organize events here in the outdoor area, to set up about fifteen chairs. After a three-month process of requests and paperwork, we eventually gave up. However, we had a meeting that was the first one we ever organized, and we were supposed to hold it outside. The day before, they told us that we couldn't do it without authorization, so we had to hold it inside.

Even in the past, with a different (and leftist) city council, the use of the urban spaces had been involved in disputes between the citizens and the administration. In some cases, the result was a harsh contestation through which the citizens managed to win some controversies. The main difference with the current situation lies in the fact that, in recent times, Marghera has lost the little administrative autonomy that was granted to it in 2005 through a partial devolution of the Venice municipality's power to the neighborhood. Most crucially, this entailed closing the space for the citizens' assembly, which always represented an important platform for spotlighting the community's desires and preoccupations.

5.4. (Dis)engaging with the industrial places

The place that has historically catalyzed most of the mobilization of the community in opposition to political power has been the industrial site. The factories and plants that occupy all of the space between Via Fratelli Bandiera and the lagoon (Figure 1) represent the very reason why the residential neighborhood was originally planned. Therefore, the identity of Marghera is inextricably linked to the site:

> The residential reality and the industrial reality are divided by Via Fratelli Bandiera [...] But the interpenetration between the two dimensions has always been, I repeat, constitutive of the experience of living in Marghera.

However, differently from the green areas, this is a highly controversial element for activating identification and sense of place amongst the population. This controversial character is implied in the fact that, in particular, the petrochemical plant has historically been one of the most important employers in the region, creating jobs and wealth on the one hand, but polluting and imposing environmental hazards on the population on the other hand[61].

We have had, as a confirmation of its problematic character, diverging opinions on the relevance of the industrial site for the identity construction of Marghera. It should be noted that the workers employed in the industrial area, differently from the earliest plan of Marghera, frequently came from adjacent towns. The inhabitants of Marghera were therefore only partially interested in the offer of new jobs, feeding the perception of factories as a cumbersome and potentially dangerous foreign body.

Anyway, those who had a direct connection with the industrial site, though recognizing some criticalities, may have a positive opinion of its role in the life of the city. One informant, who has been working there for a long time, told us: «I would defend the petrochemical until the end of my days…». To add, shortly after:

[61] Bettin, Dianese 2002.

I'm also a citizen of Marghera. So, I request that things are done respecting this, this, and this [workers' safety requirement]. It is not just about jobs. Yes, I understand the importance of jobs, but you can't want the job and pretend not to see the other aspects as well.

On the other hand, people who never had a direct connection with the industrial site of Marghera told us that its existence somehow entered into their imagery of what Marghera is about, but typically in an indirect way, through reading the newspapers or some reports. In many cases, therefore, the industrial site was paradoxically experienced as a distant place, which could occasionally evoke its materiality and actual vicinity because of some of the smell coming from its production processes:

Marghera was a different thing [from the industrial area] which was beyond Via Fratelli Bandiera but it didn't [enter my life] except, you know, because of the smell, that's what I remember, this pungent smell.

In some other cases, this perceived distance from the industrial site has the interesting effect of generating a sort of exotic fascination:

I am captivated by the industrial context. When I was a kid, oftentimes, even in the evening hours, I went there, just because I love those lights, those huge monstrosities.

The futuristic architecture of the plants (Figure 4) creates a somewhat disorienting contrast with the small residential buildings of the Garden City area, amplifying the almost antithetical relationship between the two parts of Marghera. This dialectics between the two parts, however, does not necessarily translate into a rejection of the material and architectural places of the industrial district; not only because the skyline of cranes and chimneys has entered the collective imagery, but also because for some they are capable of expressing a certain beauty that may further imbue sense of place to Marghera:

They call it the cable-stayed bridge... and at night, it was even more beautiful because it was well-lit. […] In fact, when they built it, I thought, «Amazing! they made this beautiful thing in Marghera. What a lovely gift».

6. *Discussion*

To summarize the above results of our ethnographic research work, we would focus on three conceptual dimensions that may stimulate further research and possibly inform cultural policy. First, the reconsideration of the relationship between heritage and the past: although it is etymologically connected to something inherited from the past, heritage is always a product of

the present[62], developed in response to current needs and demands and thus purposefully *selected* as something worthy to be passed on. The conceptual conundrum in this respect is whether the past to be selected and interpreted through heritage resources should correspond to the "objective" history of a certain place or the "subjective" collective memory of its community. The first possibility would represent the traditional manner of using the authorized heritage discourse to reify past events with the effect of crystallizing a supposedly immutable value of heritage resources. Whereas, in the second case, memory represents an active cultural process in which the past «is continually negotiated and reinterpreted, through not only the experiences of the present but also the *needs* of the present»[63]. This second possibility is what we evidence as relevant for the community of Marghera, where an authorized heritage discourse is not dominant thanks to its peripheral position and its relatively recent history. Our informants narratively constructed their heritage as consisting of places that are meaningful to their personal and collective memories. The consequence is that, for example, the industrial history of Porto Marghera is perceived as less important than expected, while banal elements of the urban environment, such as trees and benches, are experienced as having a pivotal role in the construction of residents' collective identity. Both industrial plants and playgrounds technically are inherited from the past, but the key resources to construct a sense of place are those that best catalyze the livelihood of the community. That is why, for example, the urbanistic plans revolving around an abandoned daycare – an architectonically unimportant structure – spur a much more heated debate than any other regeneration project on the many disused buildings of the industrial site. Moreover, and more profoundly, heritage is itself a historically contingent process[64], so it is important to account for the generational differences that may imply a varied perception of what the community defines as heritage.

This set of considerations opens a second reflection emerging from our research, namely the relationship between places and spaces. As explained above, the two concepts, though interrelated, have different connotations. Heritage literature and practice increasingly leverage the concept of place[65] specifically because of its *representationality*: heritage facilitates the construction of «a sense of identity, self and belonging in which the "power of place" is invoked in its representational sense to give physical reality to these expressions»[66]. In other words, it is typically convenient to ascribe the value of a heritage place

[62] Tunbridge, Ashworth 1996.
[63] Smith 2006, p. 58, original emphasis.
[64] Harvey 2001.
[65] See, for example, the report published already more than 20 years ago by the English Heritage agency (2000).
[66] Smith 2006, p. 75.

to its capability of symbolizing, through its material forms, the historical importance of a community. While symbolization has been indicated also by our informants as a key process for the construction of their collective identity (e.g., when relating to the water tower), our findings advance a more nuanced understanding of these processes. In fact, besides the representational quality of certain places, a dimension emerging as fundamental for the activation of a sense of place is the possibility of enacting non-representational practices throughout the spaces lived by the community[67]. This implies that heritage, in a sense, is not only about places but also about spaces. This emphasis on the lived dimension of space[68] projects heritage resources in the present, focusing on the current practices, bodily experiences, and affections that certain places activate for a community. Grasping these elements and measuring their value surely proves complex. However, it is important to account also for this pre-representational dimension of heritage places because, thanks to it, the social relationships of a community can be nurtured, and an overall sense of place may flourish.

Finally, from these speculations on the dialectical relationship between space and place, we derive insights also about a third and fundamental conceptual tension that may inform further heritage research and policy, namely the relationship between top-down and bottom-up heritagization mechanisms. This tension is inherent in any heritage practice adopting some form of community involvement[69]: managing heritage typically requires the exertion of a professionality that may not be possessed by community members, who thus need some top-down guidance to implement their bottom-up initiatives. However, our study goes at the core of how this tension gives structure to the very definition of specific places that may or may not become heritage. In a nutshell, Lefebvre's distinction between conceived and lived space must warn policymakers that overlooking the narratives, practices, and emotional dynamics emerging from the bottom-up would prove detrimental to the sense of place of the residents. The result, as already happened in Marghera, would be that "heritage" may become an empty signifier used to brand a certain place as valuable, but without capturing its significance for the community or, worse, distorting this significance. For example, regeneration projects implemented in the industrial district through a purely top-down procedure were made without considering the current usability of those spaces, or without admitting how the industrial history of Marghera left controversial traces in its community. It is important to note, however, that top-down modes of heritagization do not per se fail to meet the interests and emotions of the citizens.

[67] Beyes, Steyaert 2012.
[68] Lefebvre 1992.
[69] Colecchia 2019.

For example, the meaning of the green areas of Marghera maintains the value that had been intended by the city planners in the early 20th century. Many of those early top-down urbanistic interventions created spaces that still nowadays catalyze social life and relationships, enhancing the community's sense of place. So, it remains an open question to understand how policymakers and urban planners may intercept the signification processes coming from the bottom-up or may trigger them through interventions that do not disrupt the sense of place of the community. In fact, the conceived dimension of space may never transform into a lived dimension[70], without a strong connection with material practices and symbolic understandings that the people living in a territory perform in their everyday life.

7. *Conclusion and future research*

By analyzing the places and spaces of Marghera as the potential elements to undergo a process of shared heritagization, we could shed light on the importance of mundane practices and narratives. Our research confirms that the value of potential cultural resources does not always fit with the intentions of planners or institutional actors. Research, for example, has shown how even settings that would be definable as non-places, according to Marc Augé's[71] terminology, might be actively lived by people and eventually imbued with new meanings[72]. In other words, it is always possible to find "places" where one would not expect, or in ways different than planned[73]. Our analysis could serve to inform future research and policy on the conditions that may activate this sort of unexpected and unplanned place-making process. As we have seen, the physical location, the material forms, and the inscribed or emergent meanings[74] play a role in entrenching specific places into the collective memory of a community, making them somehow entitled to be considered "heritage".

Moreover, our research highlighted that heritage places, although may remain mostly unmodified in their material form, are not stable entities, and their anchoring in the past is always capable of creating fractures in the present[75], precisely because the communities living around and inside heritage places are themselves fluid and in constant motion. Thus, future research may attempt to rethink the perspective of heritage conservation in light of possible re-purpos-

[70] Lefebvre 1992.
[71] Augé 2009.
[72] Shields 1989.
[73] Squire 2023.
[74] Gieryn 2000.
[75] Crang, Travlou 2001.

ing and re-interpretation of heritage places. In a sense, material preservation should be at the service of ongoing semiotic transformations and take as well into account that possible deconstruction of heritage places or *de-heritagization* processes may happen when communities begin to lose the sense of belonging and attachment toward specific places. To maintain this continuous generative power, heritage management may aim at preserving the inherent dialectical character of places, other than their material condition, acknowledging their possibly dissonant nature[76]. Communities may have ambivalent emotional and cognitive dispositions toward certain places, especially when the history of these places is somehow controversial. This ambivalence reflects the fact that places may indeed be as constructive as destructive for community and identity[77]. However, overlooking or even negating the destructive elements of places through top-down heritage narratives would entail reconstructing for an alleged authenticity that in reality returns just half of the sense of place experienced by community members[78], or that half that has been chosen as the authentic narrative.

Finally, although the research work performed here held an ethnographic focus, it is important that future research, from a methodological viewpoint, acknowledges the multimodal aspects inherent in the construction of community identity and sense of place[79], which entails warranting a multidisciplinary approach[80] to future research endeavors aiming to capture the dynamic nature of heritage places.

One limitation of our study that future research may try to address concerns the kind of community that we contacted. To reconstruct certain specificities of Marghera it was important to acknowledge those residents who are native to the context or who, in any case, make efforts to participate in social and cultural activities *about* Marghera. This methodological choice was necessary to collect meaningful representations of the investigated territory, but it left out from our consideration a rising component of Marghera residents, namely the many immigrants (most of whom come from South Asia) populating the shipyard's workforce or employed in the backstage of Venice tourism industry. This segment of Marghera inhabitants puts in place specific community-based cultural initiatives that, while mostly detached from the main collective memory and identity of the town, will surely shape the future configuration of Marghera's places, spaces, and heritage constitution. To be faithful to Faro Convention principles, and go beyond the debate between cultural democracy and cultural equality[81], future research should inquire

[76] Tunbridge, Ashworth 1996.
[77] Crow 1994.
[78] Zukin 2011.
[79] Jones, Svejenova 2017.
[80] Capriotti, Cerquetti 2016.
[81] Belfiore *et al.* 2023.

how cultural policies aiming to advance participatory approaches to heritage should account for changing communities, or communities underrepresented in the public discourse that frequently risk being excluded from cultural endeavors.

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Appendix

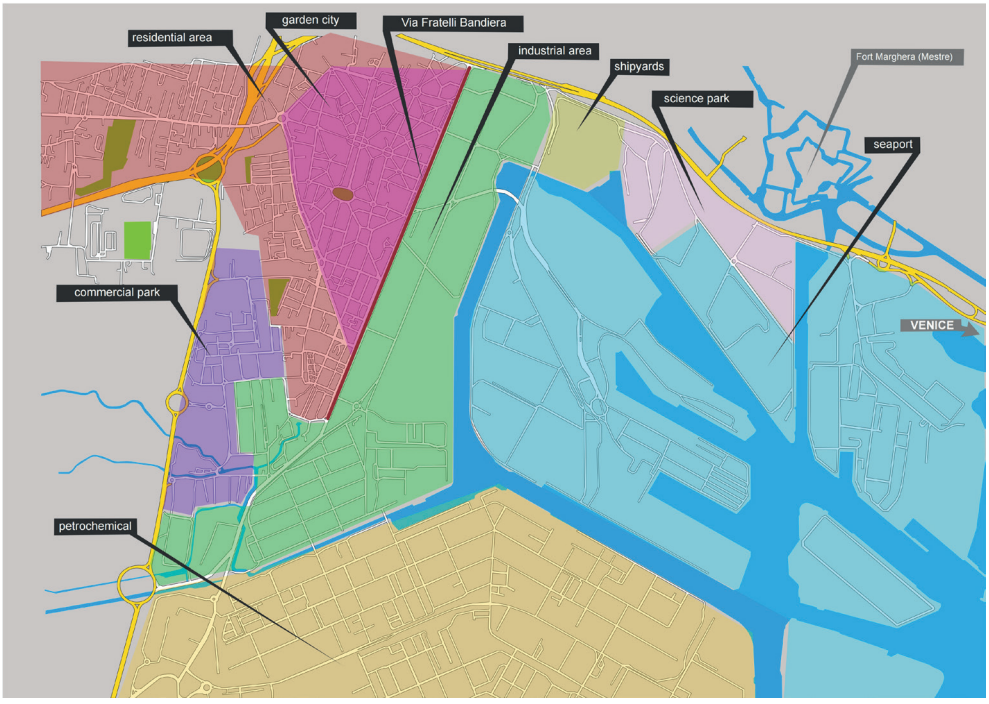

Fig. 1. Map of Marghera differentiated by zones (source: own elaboration)

Fig. 2. The water tower

Fig. 3. The central market square

Fig. 4. Futuristic architectures in the industrial area

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