

Special Issue Combining Safety
and Equity in the Post-Covid City:
New Trends between Local Policies
and Bottom-Up Practices

FUORI LUOGO

Journal of Sociology of Territory,
Tourism, Technology

Guest editors

Gabriele Manella
Madalena Corte-Real



Editor in chief: Fabio Corbisiero
Editorial manager: Carmine Urciuoli

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Introduction

According to the scientific literature (Abusaada & Elshater, 2022), the pandemic was primarily an urban phenomenon: over 90% of confirmed COVID-19 cases were located in cities, and Wuhan, Milan, Madrid, and New York City were the first and most affected ones (UN Habitat, 2020). The pandemic's repercussions had a significant influence on both the urban structure and the consumption patterns of residents, city users, and tourists, resulting in shifts in user lifestyles and the utilization of spaces (Florida *et al.*, 2021). Indeed, 2020 revolutionized how we work, study, travel, spend leisure time, and, in general, how we live (Samuelsson *et al.*, 2020) and plan for the future, thus affecting global mental health (Alzueta *et al.*, 2021). In various European countries, government-imposed lockdowns, implemented to protect public health and curb the spread of the pandemic, provided Western populations with an unprecedented experience, which modified precedents relationships with natural spaces (Vimal, 2022). This meant abruptly interrupting the relation with the city, in its socio-spatial entirety, and particularly relinquishing the use of public spaces. Suddenly, cities were deserted, and for the first time, the typically fast-paced, constantly bustling, and densely populated urban landscapes came to a standstill (Kaufmann *et al.*, 2020). Conversely, the imposed lockdowns «profoundly transformed the familial spaces of home» (Rose-Redwood *et al.*, 2020, p. 99), which now acted as a multifunctional space for work, education, and leisure activities. Moreover, the lack of interaction with intermediary spaces forced everyone to adapt to this substantial reduction in spatial usage, which had implications for the well-being of both young and adult individuals (Kaufmann *et al.*, 2020; Pancani *et al.*, 2021). Italy, with 16 million contagions and over 160,000 deaths associated with SARS-CoV-2 infection between March 2020 and April 2022, has been one of most affected European countries, especially in the initial phase of the pandemic (Zeneli & Santoro, 2023), and Milan has been one of the top 10 European metro areas with the most decelerating population growth rates (Wolff & Mykhnen, 2023). Progressively stricter restrictions initiated a cyclical phase of closures and re-opening that, for the first time, highlighted the special relations of Italian people with their cities, bringing to light a need that is usually taken for granted under normal conditions (Bottini, 2022). However, since the second quarter of 2021, there has been a gradual resurgence of pre-COVID routines, although old habits have undergone some modifications. According to the Annual Report, Italy started to experience a gradual normalization of daily routines specifically during the last part of the year (Istat, 2022). This is stressed by the fact that most citizens (with percentages ranging between 57% and 85%) were dedicating the same amount of time to many activities as they did before the pandemic. The resurgence of residents' habits of frequenting public spaces led to what has been termed "the rebirth of cities". Indeed, the concept of urban rebirth after the COVID-19 pandemic encompasses the process of urban rejuvenation, revitalization, and meta-

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This paper is a joint work. However, in line with standard academic practice, we indicate that Rosantonietta Scramaglia wrote paragraphs 1 and 2, Ariela Mortara wrote paragraphs 3 and 4. The rest of the paper is a joint work. The paper presents some results of a broader research project titled "The Rebirth of Cities as an Economic and Social Opportunity Among Realities, Perceptions, and Hopes". The research project has been founded by two departments of IULM University.

morphosis that numerous cities underwent in the aftermath of the global health crisis (Buonocore *et al.*, 2021; Zgórska *et al.*, 2021; D'Onofrio & Trusiani, 2022). As the world began to recover from the pandemic, cities found themselves compelled to adjust and reimagine their identities in order to face new challenges and embrace opportunities for positive transformation. Indeed, the pandemic underscored the significance of resilient infrastructure and technology within urban landscapes (Gade & Aithal, 2021), encouraging investments in the modernization of transportation systems, healthcare facilities, and digital infrastructure.

The crisis related to the global spread of the COVID-19 virus, which initially required European states to employ emergency measures to address the first phase of the pandemic, was now calling for the adoption of structural administrative reforms that could enable the effective implementation of projects outlined in the National Recovery and Resilience Plans, financed through the European Recovery Fund (Di Lascio & Delgado, 2023).

Regarding the future role of cities, the pandemic impacted urban economic geography at intra- and interregional levels in the context of four major forces (Florida *et al.*, 2021, p. 1511): the social scarring caused by the pandemic, lockdown as a forced experiment, the need to secure the urban built environment against future risks, and changes in urban form, real estate, design, and streetscapes. At the macro level, the pandemic is unlikely to significantly alter the economic geography and spatial inequality of the global urban system. At the micro level, however, it could produce several short-term and some longer-term social changes in the structure and morphology of cities, suburbs, and metropolitan regions.

Since the spring of 2021, there has been a notable increase in cultural activities, such as music festivals, theatre performances, and urban cultural events, particularly in metropolitan areas. From June 25 to 27, Milan hosted a unique rendition of Piano City. This event turned the city into a music extravaganza publicly accessible, featuring numerous free concerts scattered throughout the urban landscape. The 2021 edition was meticulously crafted with a program encompassing live performances and streaming broadcasts, enabling those unable to attend in person (due to COVID-related restrictions) to partake in the festival from a distance. For residents of Milan, this marked a pioneering offline/online event that brought the prospect of a return to normalcy (Colli, 2021).

From September 5 to 10, 2021, Milan was abuzz with the Supersalone, a globally renowned trade fair dedicated to the furniture and home decor sector, and an adaptation of the traditional Salone del Mobile. Simultaneously, the city came alive with Fuorisalone, the Design Week. Supersalone brought 262,000 visitors to the pavilions at the Rho exhibition centre and over 400,000 people participated to all the events in the city (Tgcom24, 2022). Fuorisalone extended its influence across various locations, filling the city with exhibitions, creative concepts, product innovations, and unique events in unconventional venues. Following that, it was time for Fashion Week, which occurred from September 21 to 27, albeit in a "phygital" format encompassing both in-person and online runway presentations (with 42 in-person and 23 digital shows). This revival of live fashion showcases generated immense enthusiasm, leaving a profound impact not just on those within the fashion industry but on the entire city of Milan. It instilled a sense of great optimism and signalled a true renaissance for the city.

In mid-November, Milan hosted Bookcity from November 17 to 21. This event traditionally stands as the autumn highlight in the city, celebrating books and reading.

All these events, among numerous others held in Milan, have breathed fresh life into the city's tourism and hospitality industry, which was among the most severely impacted sectors. They have also revitalized the broader economic ecosystem intertwined with it. Even Carlo Sangalli, the President of Confindustria, acknowledged at the end of December 2021 that Milan had experienced a renaissance. This is noteworthy, considering it was one of the cities mostly affected by the pandemic in 2020 (Confindustria, 2021).

In April 2022, Italy saw the conclusion of the COVID-19 pandemic state of emergency, leading to a gradual relaxation of significant social distancing measures. These changes included the stop

of mandatory mask usage both indoors and outdoors, as well as the discontinuation of the regional color-coded system used to assess the severity of the contagion spread. The return to unrestricted social interactions and the full resumption of mobility practices sparked a noticeable resurgence in the reclamation of public spaces. The connection with urban space takes shape and develops over time through socio-spatial practices, and the preferred location for these practices to occur is public space, such as parks, squares, and green areas, as well as the so-called "hard public spaces" like local markets and commercial areas (Bottini, 2022).

In order to understand the rebirth of cities after a pandemic event, it is crucial to highlight the inherent adaptability within the urban landscape. The city capacity to modify and transform its physical and urban components in response to external shocks is a vital consideration for urban policymaking (Lai *et al.*, 2020). This re-evaluation presents an opportunity to upgrade areas and structures that were rendered vulnerable by the pandemic, to restore interrupted socialization processes, and to encourage interactions once again among various groups of individuals, including residents, city users, and tourists – which decreased significantly across the board. Indeed, due to the pandemic, the year 2020 had ended negatively for Lombard tourism with very high losses: -66.3% in arrivals and -60.9% in overnight stays. In 2021, there was a recovery compared to the previous year, although the tourism had not yet returned to the levels of 2019: +51.7% in arrivals and +59.9% in overnight stays compared to 2020; -48.9% in arrivals and -37.3% in overnight stays compared to 2019 (Cavedo, 2022). As for Milan, tourist arrivals fell by -76% between 2019 and 2020, reaching a historic low of 1.9 million visitors in 2020; 2021 and 2022 saw a gradual recovery, with 3 million visitors in 2021 (Assolombarda, 2023) and 6.7 million in 2022 (Milano Today, 2023) aiming to bring cultural consumption and the use of key venues like museums, theatres, cinemas, and libraries back to pre-pandemic levels. In addition to this factor, it is essential to consider the inherent effect produced by the desire of the population, especially younger age groups, who have particularly felt the psychological impact of forced closures (Pancani *et al.*, 2021; Ramkissoon, 2020 Orgilés *et al.*, 2020; McKinlay *et al.*, 2022), to reclaim the city. These elements empirically confirm the absolute relevance of the relationship between social and individual well-being and the ability to enjoy urban space.

While, on the one hand, the resurgence of public space attendance serves as a genuine urban driver toward renewed vitality and dynamism, on the other hand, the sudden surge of strength in those months highlights issues related to urban safety and environmental sustainability due to the increased presence of external visitors and tourists (Pasquinelli *et al.*, 2021). In the same period, people were contending with the impacts of a multitude of interconnected challenges throughout the globe. The ramifications of COVID-19, the climate change issues, the disparities in social equity, the disruptions in supply chains, the persistent high inflation rates, and the looming possibility of recession present formidable barriers to the advancement of healthy societies and the establishment of climate resilience leading to a "polycrisis" (World Economic Forum, 2023).

While cities are focal points for these challenges, they also hold the potential solutions. Despite changes in our cultural landscape that have reshaped our lifestyles and professional routines, urban centres continue to thrive. In the eve of the outbreak of the pandemic, over half of the world population (55%) lives in cities, a significant increase from the 30% in 1950. Projections indicate that by 2050, this proportion will surge to 70%, with an estimated 2.5 billion individuals moving to urban environments within the next two decades (United Nations, 2018).

Based on this scenario, the paper presents the results from the research project *Italian Cities Looking for a New Normal: Economic and Social Opportunity Between Reality, Perception and Hopes. The Case of Milan*. The next paragraphs will discuss: 1) the post-COVID Milan; 2) research project's aim and methodology; 3) results and discussion; 4) conclusions and limitations.

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1. The post-COVID Milan

Amidst the pandemic, some European cities have embraced place-making approaches arising from a renewed interest in public spaces and contemporary environmental concerns. In Milan, following the guidelines of the urban plan for sustainable mobility (PUMS), the Strade Aperte initiative started in 2020 as a responsive strategy to the pandemic. Its aim was threefold: to promote sustainable modes of transport, to adapt public space to new crisis-related needs, and to create a more inclusive urban transport network. This effort proved particularly successful in the creation of emergency bike lanes that connect the entire city (Comune di Milano, 2020). The pandemic has highlighted that in the so-called Healthy Cities, there have been 1/3 to 1/10 fewer casualties compared to conventional cities. Therefore, the need to restructure our urban areas according to the principles of Healthy Cities, which enable a healthy life based on pedestrianization and accessibility, is now clear (Tagliaventi & Diolaiti, 2021).

In April 2020, the international network C40 Global Mayors established a COVID-19 Recovery Task Force, chaired by Mayor of Milan Giuseppe Sala, to share knowledge and experiences aimed at expediting economic recovery following the COVID-19 crisis (<https://www.comune.milano.it/>).

In Milan, just like in many other capitals, a range of strategies have been put in place with the goal of transforming the metropolis into a "15-minute city," particularly in the post-COVID-19 era (Whittle, 2021). This paradigm provides that citizens can reach everything they need within fifteen minutes: jobs, health facilities, schools, stores, cultural facilities, sports facilities, cafés, and restaurants. This model, proposed by Carlos Moreno (2016), gained notoriety when the mayor of Paris, Anne Hidalgo, included a plan to implement it in her 2020 re-election campaign.

In a recent paper, Moreno *et al.* (2021) highlighted the need to rethink cities and make them safer, more resilient, more sustainable, and more inclusive in the wake of the pandemic, which has contributed to an increase in social inequalities and brought unemployment to record levels worldwide, as reflected in the UN Sustainable Development Goal 11.

Prior to Mayor Giuseppe Sala's declaration in February 2021 that Milan should emulate Moreno's model after the COVID-19 pandemic, several neighbourhoods were already moving in this direction thanks to the collaboration between residents and businesses. We use the term neighbourhood to identify a specific city district in which everyday urban life events take place (Citroni & Karrholm, 2019). According to Rossi *et al.* (2020), in Milan there are 88 neighbourhoods, also called NIL³.

Indeed, neighbourhoods as Isola, NoLo (North of Loreto), and the more recent NaPa (Naviglio Pavese) are good examples of these networking skills. While the case of NoLo is now extensively documented (Trimarchi, 2019; Gerosa & Tartari, 2020), NaPa represents a new gastronomic neighbourhood that includes fourteen commercial activities, including restaurants, cafés, and gastronomic centres, as well as a winery and agencies involved in supplying the neighbourhood (Bruno, 2021). The success of events like the NoLo Fringe Festival, which filled all the spaces in the neighbourhood north of Loreto and expanded to all neighbourhoods in its 2022 edition, or the several themed "weeks" (Fashion, Design, Game, Digital) organized by the Municipality of Milan, which have now evolved into a catalyst for hosting events in unconventional locations, clearly underscores the conviction that economic revitalization is attainable through these endeavours. Most of these locations can be described as hybrid spaces (Oldenburg & Brissett, 1982; Oldenburg, 1989; Mortara, 2000, 2021), presenting a diverse combination of functions and activities serving public and general interests, the coexistence of nonprofit activities alongside commercially oriented ones (such as cafés, restaurants, and shops), and a wide range of legal structures for managing entities (e.g., associations, social enterprises, limited liability companies, cooperatives, etc.). All the activities described offer the opportunity to rehabilitate areas and structures

³ NIL (Nuclei di Identità Locali - Local Identity Centers) represent specific areas or places within a city or region that have a strong sense of local identity, culture, and community.

that have become unsafe due to the pandemic, to restore interrupted socialization processes and to re-establish exchanges and relations between different types of people.

2. Research's Aim and Methodology

The research project aimed to investigate the revival of Milan through the resurgence of social life in the city. We have conducted 100 face-to-face semi-structured interviews with managers, owners, and operators of as many hybrid spaces (Oldenburg, Brissett, 1982; Oldenburg, 1989; Mortara, 2000, 2021) where various types of activities take place (commercial, educational, leisure and cultural activities). Indeed, according to Tricarico and De Vidovich (2021, p. 308)

«Small- and medium-sized commercial activities, as well as craft and manufacturing companies, represent the privileged target of an urban agenda aimed at steering proximity as the key element for an offer calibrated on a neighbourhood scale, and as vehicles of systemic innovation in sectors considered at the margins of political agendas for a considerable amount of time».

The 100 selected spaces have been identified based on those listed in the final report of the Department of Labour, Productive Activities, Trade, and Human Resources (2016-2021) under the leadership of Cristina Tajani, Councillor for Economic Development and Labor Policies for the Municipality of Milan. This range encompasses everything: from the historic shops to coworking spaces, socially impactful enterprises, cafés, and restaurants, as well as cultural spaces such as theatres and workshops (Comune di Milano, 2021).

The interviews were conducted in November 2020 and, upon securing the necessary privacy permissions, either recorded or videotaped. Subsequently, these recordings were transcribed. We conducted the analysis grouping responses into categories capable of reflecting the key themes and concepts that emerged, accompanying the analysis with exemplary verbatim quotes. Specifically, as in other research studies (Spiggle, 1994; Mayan, 2016), a content analysis was conducted in four phases (coding, categorization, comparison, and theorization), in order to classify and interpret the acquired knowledge.

The interview guide used is based on the conceptual framework of Florida *et al.* (2023). According to them, the COVID-19 pandemic is producing four main forces with the potential to lead to relatively long-lasting transformations of cities and regions as we know them. In our interview guide we have referred to these forces to address significant changes in Milan through the point of view and the activities of entrepreneurs. We have asked about "social scarring", the consequences of citizens' and users' fear instilled by the pandemic on the economic viability of their businesses. We have inquired how the "forced experiment of the lockdown" have influenced traditional ways of interaction or substituted them with the digital fruition. Thirdly, in order to understand if the informants were concerned about the "need to secure the urban built environment against this and future health and climate risks", we have investigated about the safety measures taken to protect the health of the users of the spaces, also in anticipation of future pandemic risks. Finally, we have focused on "different configurations of indoor and outdoor spaces". Starting from this conceptual framework, the interview script, having gathered details about the interviewee's role within the business and their contributions to its conception, execution, or organization, initially reconstructed the history of the establishment.

Afterward, a second set of questions delved into the business' response to the pandemic and its potential connections with the local community. These questions explored opportunities for networking with other entities, both physical and virtual, as well as the nature of relations with institutions. Additionally, there was an exploration of whether such relations had evolved, possibly due to participation in specific calls for proposals. The discussion also encompassed future projects, with a particular emphasis on sustainability considerations.

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The subsequent segment of the interview pivots towards examining the context, assessing any alterations and how those transformations have unfolded. Concurrently, it delves into the nature of the customers and whether there have been shifts in how they are catered to. Interviewees have been invited to clarify if they glimpse at resurgence signs and to pinpoint areas where they envision possible social and economic revitalization, as well as any perceived threats.

In the last phase, the last two inquiries revolve around informants' perception of possible indicators of rebirth within the city of Milan.

The following paragraphs categorize the results of the interviews into thematic categories.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 The Pandemic Effect: Towards a Return to the Status Quo

As anticipated, all interviewees recognized the influence of pandemic on their businesses. This effect was particularly high for those organizations that had cultivated their identity as hybrid spaces (Oldenburg & Brissett, 1982; Oldenburg, 1989; Mortara, 2000, 2021). The restrictions mandated by ministerial decrees, pertaining to operating hours and the capacity of indoor spaces, proved especially detrimental to establishments like restaurants, cafés, and even retail stores. These businesses expanded their primary operations to include event planning, such as hosting live music, exhibitions, theatrical performances, and similar activities.

Another pivotal factor in assessing the pandemic impact was the capacity to offer patrons outdoor seating. In this respect, establishments such as Cascina Cuccagna – a farmhouse with a bookshop, nursery and restaurant – and Capoverde – a flower store with an adjoining restaurant – were able to resume their catering services at an earlier date. Indeed, in line with the Ministerial Decree, the reopening of outdoor dining services exclusively for table service began on April 26, 2021, for both lunch and dinner. Consequently, these businesses had a more extended window for recovery after months of forced closure. Furthermore, if the outdoor areas are embedded in a green environment and are not located on a busy street, customers are even more inclined to visit these facilities:

«In the evening, it's wonderful to eat here, especially outdoors. People prefer to dine here rather than amidst traffic because they get a moment to breathe» (Capoverde).

As widely acknowledged, the pandemic years have greatly accelerated global digitization (We Are Social, 2022; 2022a). Indeed, many interviewees revealed that they had adapted their operations to the new needs. They managed their social media platforms more actively to maintain connections with existing customers and engage with new ones. Moreover, they transitioned to online events as alternatives to in-person gatherings and introduced food delivery services for restaurants.

Virtually all the interviewees acknowledge the indispensable nature of technological possibilities, as they have felt the urgent need to adapt their equipment and skills to navigate an increasingly digital reality. Despite recognizing the pivotal role of digital technology in ensuring the survival of many businesses during the pandemic months, the interviews generally reveal a strong desire to move away from the online realm and revert to the pre-pandemic situation. Managers are among the first to hope that people will return to physical spaces, and they recognize a similar longing among their customers. In some instances, such as with Casa delle Donne – an association dedicated to women of all ages, sexual orientations, diverse backgrounds, and cultures, committed to combating gender-based violence, promoting talents, and valuing women's knowledge – the online dimension will complement in-person activities. Certain events and meetings will continue to be available through streaming platforms to accommodate those

who, out of concerns about the virus, remain hesitant to participate in person. Some of the interviewees noted that their decision to opt for home delivery has opened up a parallel line of business that they do not want to do without. This approach allows them to expand their customer base and reach different age groups.

«An opportunity opened up for all delivery-related activities. Digital skills have also expanded at a personal level for people, and many online activities have emerged and grown» (QF. Coworking with a nursery).

The imperative of maintaining social distancing among individuals has frequently resulted in a rearrangement of available spaces, often requiring a decrease in the number of patrons. A case in point is Santeria Paladini – a multifunctional space encompassing a bar/bistro, a record store and bookshop, an exhibition area hosting concerts and literary events, and a coworking space. They regarded this as a positive development, enabling them to concentrate exclusively on their loyal customer base.

From the customer's perspective, the pandemic appears to have carried out a natural selection process: often, loyal customers are among the first to return, bringing others with them. The intermittent closures and mobility restrictions have reduced occasional customers, and in the case of coworking spaces, the user profile has partially changed:

«Those who live far away no longer use the coworking space or use it to a very limited extent (by purchasing an entry package). However, there has been an increase in companies that use the office flexibly (for example, only a few days a week) or rent it for their employees, engaged in smart working, as a meeting and networking place» (QF. Coworking with a nursery).

In addition, some interviewees state that thanks to the increased use of social media channels, the age of regular visitors has decreased, as the manager of the Candiani Denim Store – an urban micro-factory for customised jeans – says:

«By promoting heavily on the social platform that is now more clearly used by young people, we have attracted curious students and younger customers, with an average age around 25-27 years» (Candiani Denim Store).

3.2 More Focus Towards Networking Within the Neighbourhood and Institutional Relations

The relation with the neighbourhood emerges as particularly relevant for entities with a stronger social focus, such as Cascina Biblioteca, a cooperative specialized in social inclusion, personal services, and employment placement. Their communication director states:

«We focus on the neighbourhood, after-school activities, and summer camps. Therefore, we respond to both social and community needs. Through various grants, we are able to organize activities for schools. For example, we have recently started a project called Inclusive by Nature, which is an activity we used to do, in the past, in a less structured way. We collaborate with many educational institutions, from preschools to high schools» (Cascina Biblioteca).

The interaction with institutions tends to be more polarized, often viewed as a means to secure financial support either directly or through targeted grant applications. Notably, initiatives with a pronounced social mission are typically more proactive in seeking institutional backing. For instance, the director of Spazio Rab, a unique establishment where young individuals with intellectual disabilities are employed, elaborates:

«We applied for a grant from Cariplo, a private foundation, to receive funds. At the municipal level, we did not receive assistance, and we also applied for various regional grants with rather limited payouts, not sufficient to cover the 70% drop in revenue in 2019» (Spazio Rab).

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Purely commercial enterprises – as Spazio Nolo, a store with an eclectic calling, presenting itself to customers as a boutique-café-wine bar, promising a sensory experience encompassing food, wine, and designer objects, or Bici e Radici, a shop born from a unique concept that revolves around the world of bicycles and green culture with the precise goal of promoting sustainable practices – take a distinct stance, as they generally do not place a significant emphasis on seeking institutional assistance.

«Regarding Spazio Nolo, truthfully, we don't pursue institutional support. We still fall into the category of self-funded entities, and our company maintains a strong financial footing. While it may seem like we have some bad luck in this regard, at the same time, we consider ourselves fortunate because we don't require such assistance» (Spazio Nolo).

«In the past, we engaged in a variety of institutional grants and projects. However, over the recent years, the number of such initiatives has dwindled. Our interaction with institutions has consistently remained fairly neutral, lacking any particular affiliation. Consequently, we haven't had the opportunity to foster stronger ties with them» (Bici e Radici).

The manager of Capoverde, speaking about future opportunities, says:

«I don't think there are any growth opportunities because there is no real policy to help businesses on the part of municipalities and local administration. Over the years, I have learned that everything you can achieve is because you put in your own effort. There is no help from the authorities» (Capoverde).

3.3 Future Projects and Sustainability Perceived as Challenges

Not all interviewees are able to discuss their future projects. In some cases, it seems that the primary need is to regain the time (and money) lost during the months of the pandemic, making it challenging to plan for the future. However, this is not the case for Santeria Paladini, whose director explains:

«In 2021, we initiated training courses at Santeria, offering both in-person and remote learning options taught by professionals skilled in both modalities. Our inclination is to persist with these courses, diversifying the range of options available» (Santeria Paladini).

The manager of Farm 65, which describes itself as a culinary hub with a mission to offer memorable experiences related to cooking and the preparation or enjoyment of beverages, says:

«We aim to expand this concept of a hub. We want to tell the story of food, cooking, and what lies behind eating in a true and sincere way, far from everything that television has created in recent years, which in our opinion has also somewhat spoiled the real world of cuisines» (Farm 65).

When it comes to planning projects, the focus is usually on people's desire to come together without the constraints imposed by the emergency situation. The intention is often expressed to resume projects that have been postponed due to the pandemic. Regarding sustainability, the primary emphasis is on reducing plastic consumption and giving priority to recycling and reusing in order to reduce waste. Sustainability is also reflected in specific choices related to organic farming and a general environmental awareness:

«In discussions about agriculture, the primary emphasis consistently revolves around organic farming. The objective is to cultivate fields while simultaneously rejuvenating fallow lands, establishing a supply chain that, via cattle grazing, culminates in cheese production» (Cascina Biblioteca).

3.4 Opportunities and Looming Threats

The opportunities that respondents perceive are largely seen as future challenges, driven by the idea that their businesses represent a unique and valuable proposal:

«Opportunities are numerous since our bookstore is an interstitial space. Indeed, this physical space has a one-to-one value, which will be exploited as a future opportunity» (121+ Libreria exTemporanea).

Given their awareness of the value they offer to users, many interviewees struggle to pinpoint tangible threats:

«The threats faced are inherent to urban living in a city like Milan. From one vantage point, it's a city characterized by its fast pace, ambitious objectives, and aspirations to compete on a global scale. These threats encompass challenges commonly encountered by expanding urban centres, spanning mobility issues, the rising cost of living, including rent, sustainability concerns, and income disparities that may not align with those of residents in global cities. Nevertheless, there are also factors that work in favour of our business, such as the establishment of a new metro stop, presenting an opportunity» (Santeria Paladini)

For companies focused primarily on live events, such as Blue Note – a Jazz Club with restaurant – and Campo Teatrale – a cultural association organizing events and offering theatre courses – the biggest threat appears to be the possible tightening of restrictions to contain the pandemic. Such measures could undo progress made in efforts to restore a semblance of normalcy to this point:

«The biggest threat is inevitably another closure. The organization behind it is not minimal. It's not just about setting up a room but planning tours, and between authorizations, contacts, and bureaucracy, it's not easy for us to stop this machine once again» (Blue Note).

«If another lockdown was imposed, it would entail another months-long interruption in our operations. This presents both a risk and a looming threat. Our work, which cannot be substituted by online lessons or performances, becomes challenging to sustain without in-person interaction. Additionally, the evolving audience attitude toward theatre poses another significant threat. The uncertainty of knowing the show's attendance numbers until the day before means uncertainty about the return on the investment made in its organization» (Campo Teatrale).

3.5 The Signs of Milan's Rebirth

As stated earlier, the interviews were conducted at the end of autumn 2021, a period during which Milan was revelling in the triumph of a summer season marked by the return of tourists, including international ones.

It is inevitable, therefore, that for most interviewees, in light of the revival of many events that traditionally mark the course of city life, the signs of recovery are more than evident. According to the manager of Le Bicicletta, an art bar and bistro which hosts vernissages of emergent artists:

«We fell, but we all got up immediately. Milan has risen and been reborn, everything is a sign of rebirth» (Le Bicicletta).

As previously mentioned, the resurgence is frequently associated with the opportunity to host in-person events and the return of tourists, a sentiment underscored by the son of the owner of Osteria del Treno, not just a restaurant but a versatile place that transforms itself in base of the occasions, also serving as an events hall and wine bar:

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«Yes, I've seen many tourists return that I hadn't seen before. Obviously more of them are European rather than American; Asian tourism is still missing to some extent. But American tourism is returning, and this is very important because Milan has been working a lot in recent years and is being shaped by tourism. It wasn't like this before; people used to come for business, but they didn't come to visit Milan. This seems to me a good sign of rebirth» (Osteria del Treno).

According to the Director of Communication at Pescheria Spadari – the venue belongs to the Historical Shop network of Milan, it sells seafood and offers a restaurant – and to the manager of Cascina Cuccagna, the renaissance of the city is intricately linked to the concepts of urban revitalization and sustainability, which Milan has been ardently dedicated to (Ballabio, 2022):

«Through urban development efforts, an increasing number of districts have undergone revitalization during this period. This includes the creation of bicycle lanes that promote eco-friendly mobility. Additionally, new ventures such as coworking spaces are emerging, which, in my view, are crucial for fostering community engagement and aiding the city's post-pandemic recovery» (Pescheria Spadari)

«Milan has demonstrated a keen and responsive approach to sustainability concerns, actively championing urban revitalization initiatives. The endeavours aimed at rejuvenating public spaces for the community serve as a prime illustration of this commitment» (Cascina Cuccagna).

Although enthusiasm and optimism seem to prevail, some interviews reveal more cautious positions, as expressed by the CEO of Santeria Paladini and a member of the board of Casa delle Donne:

«I don't know, I hope. For now, real signs of rebirth are still very timid. This is also due to the high costs of the city and labour, and all that they cause (e.g., undeclared work)» (Santeria Paladini).

«Let's say that in these months (September/October/November) of 2021, the city of Milan is slowly returning to full swing in its activities... You can't call it a rebirth but more precisely a slow resumption of rhythms and processes that existed before the health emergency» (Casa delle Donne).

Despite the pandemic, from the privileged perspective of those managing a project like 121+ Libreria exTemporanea, the city of Milan has shown particular signs of resilience:

«In Milan, it seems that nothing has happened. Even comparing it with other cities and having visited other cities, including Buenos Aires and Barcelona, where you can perceive a change after the pandemic, Milan seems not to have been touched at all. I think that Milan has an adaptability characteristic that it has exploited during this period» (121+ Libreria exTemporanea).

However, it is not necessarily a sign of inertia, as the administrative manager of the bookstore points out:

«No, I haven't perceived any signs of rebirth, and I haven't noticed any kind of innovation. I think Milan has continued in the same direction as before COVID» (121+ Libreria exTemporanea).

On the contrary, although a minority view, the president of the social cooperative that includes Capoverde expresses a clearly different perspective. Despite the revival of activities and clear signs of a return to socialization, he does not see an improvement in economic and working conditions:

«No signs of rebirth, after two years like this, being the president of the social cooperative that manages the restaurant, I have seen people's desire to be together, to go out, to be outdoors, to socialize. But from a work perspective, in my opinion, we haven't learned anything from what happened to us as a community. In my opinion, everything has become much more difficult. If you ask me for an evaluation

from a work perspective, everything is much more difficult because everything has become too hectic, traffic has tripled, people are not in a good state of mind, so everything has become too difficult» (Capoverde).

4. Conclusions and Limitations

The interviewees well represent the diverse landscape of activities in Milan: shops, social cooperatives, hybrid places, coworking spaces. They are all privileged points of observation for what has happened at the micro level, in the neighbourhoods where they are located, but also at the macro level, in relation to the institutions.

Despite the international uncertainty and the alarming news about the consumption habits of Italians, who are willing to travel less (23%), reduce spending on clothing (16%) and on restaurants and entertainment (12%) in the face of the loss of purchasing power due to inflation (Wine-News, 2022), and although COVID-19 has affected Milan and the north more than other parts of Italy, our results show that most Milanese entrepreneurs are still confident about the future.

Overall, the interviews offer a generally optimistic picture and view of the situation, although the pandemic period has seriously challenged many institutions, which, despite fruitful summer months, still complain that they are far from pre-pandemic levels and want to return to a state of normality. Even in the face of a number of perceived threats, primarily related to the possibility of new restrictions and perhaps another lockdown, many respondents also recognize the opportunities that the past difficult months have presented, primarily the push towards higher digitization, but also the opportunity to network with other organizations and serve as a hub for the neighbourhood.

As widely acknowledged, the pandemic years have greatly accelerated global digitization. By January 2022, 4.95 billion people, equivalent to 62.5% of the world population, had gained access to Internet, and the number of social media users had surged to 4.62 billion, accounting for 58.4% of the global population. This represented an impressive growth of over 10% if compared to 2021 (We Are Social, 2022). Turning our focus to Italy, approximately 51 million of people (on 59 million residents) were Internet users, reflecting a 1.7% increase from the previous year, with 43 million actively participating in social networks, a 5.4% rise from 2020 (We Are Social, 2022a). Furthermore, our results highlight the expectations expressed by entrepreneurs about the public policies for recovery, as stressed by other studies too (Rachmawati et al., 2023), which recommend strengthening public space planning and use of public services to meet the needs of various activities.

The general positive attitude is confirmed also by the data from the annual ranking conducted by Sole 24 Ore (2021) on quality of life, Milan rose from the tenth position to the second among the Italian cities, mainly thanks to the indicators of Wealth and Consumption and Business and Employment, with an improvement also in the sectors related to Culture and Leisure.

Activities and projects that have emerged from our research project suggest that they are a starting point rather than a goal: despite the complex pandemic situation, at the time of the interviews, our informants perceive Milan as a place where evolutions and revolutions are happening. It's a city ready to put forward ideas, energy, and enthusiasm even during a critical moment. The resilience that the Milanese have shown during the long months of lockdown is reflected in their ability to rely on their skills and use resources wisely, as well as in the hope for a "new future" that was still in its infancy at the end of 2021 but is now materialising. Indeed, what emerges from the interviews is confirmed by the aforementioned activities organized at the neighbourhood level by local associations and residents, as well as at the city level promoted by the municipality. Regarding the limitations of this study, the first concern is related to the qualitative methodology, which does not allow for any generalization to the territory of Milan. Additionally, the research was conducted in the last months of 2021, a period which seemed to offer some stability

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after the summer months, only to be undone by the spike in infections around Christmas and then by events related to the war in Ukraine.

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