3 Spaces, Interaction Regimes, and the Social Infrastructures of Everyday Life
Pathways to Liveability and the Urban Countertrend of Santa Marta, Venice

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Summary 3.1 Introduction. – 3.2 Venice's Urban Exodus: A Historically Situated Phenomenon. – 3.3 Notes on the Research. – 3.4 Episodes of Everyday Life in Santa Marta. – 3.5 Rituals, Space, and Social Infrastructures: A Virtuous Circle Against Disembedding. – 3.6 Final Remarks

> È inutile stabilire se Zenobia sia da classificare
> tra le città felici o tra quelle infelici.
> Non è in queste due specie che ha senso
> dividere le città, ma in altre due:
> quelle che continuano attraverso gli anni
> e le mutazioni a dare la loro forma ai desideri
> e quelle in cui i desideri o riescono a cancellare
> la città o ne sono cancellati.
> (Italo Calvino, *Le città invisibili*,
> ed. Mondadori 2009)

3.1 Introduction

This research began with a simple yet revealing observation. While navigating data from *Inside Airbnb,* a project collecting and aggregating all sorts of information on the presence and impact of

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Studi e ricerche 43
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the famous rental platform on communities, it is hardly surprising that the whole Municipality of Venice is constellated by tourist rental options, with a marked majority on the main Island. The data from OCIO – Osservatorio Civico sulla Casa e la Residenza (Bonzanino, Camporese, Vianello 2023) speak for themselves: as of September 2023, the city counted 49,639 tourist beds – outnumbering its 49,304 residents. This outcome is not accidental, but the product of a long historical trajectory shaped by successive socio-spatial dynamics. The disproportion between residents and tourists is a concrete symbol of overtourism, signalling housing disruption, which in turn has its roots and consequences in an alarming depopulation of the city and the reduction of its socio-economic fabric to a tourist monoculture. However, in a city that has been so transformed and redefined by touristic consumption, exemplified by the preponderant presence of short-term listings, the data from *Inside Airbnb* reveal a notable countertrend, situated on the South-Western fringe of the main island: the Santa Marta neighbourhood.

The neighbourhood's low presence in the Airbnb dataset, particularly striking in contrast to nearby zones in Dorsoduro, and even to smaller islands of the Lagoon and with the mainland, prompted a delicate question: what socio-spatial conditions must be in place for an area to remain largely untouched by the pressures of touristification? In a city where Airbnb listings have become indicators of a deeper structural shift, marked by a rentier economy of housing commodification and socio-demographic erosion, how can a single neighbourhood be characterised by such relative absence? These questions guided a theoretical and ethnographic inquiry into the social reality constructed and reproduced in Santa Marta, asking what sets it apart from the rest of Venice.

The following chapters will unfold the findings and interpretations of the fieldwork, consisting of direct observation of everyday rituals of the various urban populations experiencing Santa Marta, to provide an answer for these questions. Drawing from the extensive work of Somma and Zanardi, the first section will focus on the historical background of the city, which has been shaped by two opposing socio-spatial forces since the twentieth century: the monumental city, curated for the growing 'foreigner industry', and the overlooked popular neighbourhoods, marked by poor housing, low hygiene, and diseases of despair. In particular, it will be stressed how the urban exodus, jointly with the progressive withdrawal of the Public from housing and spatial issues starting from the 1970s, contributed to the present-day situation in the city, allowing for the uncontrolled expansion of touristic infrastructures at the expense of public spaces, vital for the community. The second chapter will be devoted to the presentation and discussion of the theoretical framework and the methodology that guided the research: here, evolving concepts like

flânerie and the practice of 'wandering' of the *Stalker* group will prove necessary to examine an urban space in ways detached from the functional purposes which I am already used to experience. As it will be illustrated, these practices were necessary to examine the rituals of the people in the neighbourhood, fundamental for the construction and reproduction of the social reality in that inherently interactional and re-negotiated: insights from Durkheim, Goffman, and Collins' emotional energy are precious sources in this regard. The results of the observations were then distilled into five main episodes of the everyday life of Santa Marta, presented like ethnographic written vignettes and supported by photographic material in the third chapter. The findings, explicitly presented as spatially situated rituals, will be the core of the last section, focusing on their discussion. Drawing from Klienenberg (2018) and Barbera's (2024) overlapping conceptualisations of social infrastructure, and Star's (1999) classic formulation of the three main elements of infrastructures – embeddedness, transparency, reach or scope – it will be argued that the answer to the questions is to be found precisely in the abundance and diversity of social infrastructures present in Santa Marta. By anchoring urban populations in situated rituals and collective routines, these infrastructures remain embedded in the neighbourhood's social reality and foster a durable 'ethics of togetherness' (Barbera 2024, 354) sustaining civic life. They are central to urban liveability not only for supporting everyday needs, but because they mediate belonging and recognition: for these reasons they are acting as a buffer against touristification by promoting resistance through continuity, adaptation, and collective maintenance.

3.2 Venice's Urban Exodus: A Historically Situated Phenomenon

3.2.1 Peculiarity or Polarisation?

Understanding a social phenomenon requires its attentive analysis, and analysing means in turn to take into consideration all the dimensions the phenomenon in question acts upon and is acted upon. The basic premise on which this work rests is that the city is not simply a spatial container, where causal networks of populations and situations take turns in an equally casual way. On the contrary, the city, the urban space, is the setting and at the same time the heart of a concrete combination of social connections, where both strong and weak ties exist, and social institutions, within which power and information flow (Granovetter 1973). A first step into its understanding is to acknowledge that the phenomena thus occurring

are historically situated and rooted in time: the historical context is precisely the point of departure of this dissertation.

Venice has been the object of many arguments about its uniqueness and peculiarity: the city is "as precious as it is difficult in its singular relationship with water and land, clearly representing a countertrend in that it is 'naturally' pedestrian and car-free" (Settis 2024, para. 38). This rhetoric has been the alibi for many policies and actions that have made the city what it is today through the centuries, encouraging a thriving touristic sector; at the same time, it has been the justification for the political inaction (Busacca 2024) and the lack of effective mitigating solutions characterising the present scenario. However, to understand the current look of the city, pointing out Venice's oddity alone is neither sufficient nor satisfactory, and risks trivialising the underlying dynamics.

It is necessary to draw from a further past, before the advent of overtourism, and look for the long-term tendencies that have dismantled the poli-functionality and the heterogeneity of the city (Zanardi 2020) to show how the much-trumpeted 'peculiarity' is not an insurmountable obstacle for the city in itself. If anything, what was really peculiar is the crafty and long-standing process of re-functionalization of the urban space according to specific utilitarian logics, which started from the nineteenth century. Put differently, the succession of events which has brought Venice to be intended – and thus *planned* – first as a home for luxury residential and representative palaces, and then as a cutting-edge touristic destination, or, as Lord Byron describes it in 1818, "the pleasant place of all festivity/The revel of the earth, the masque of Italy" (Byron [1818] 2008, Canto IV).

Either way, between the lights and shadows which have characterised the city, one crucial thing is revealed: since then, Venice has been shaped by two opposing socio-spatial forces. On the one hand, the monumental city, curated for the growing 'foreigner industry'; on the other, the overlooked popular neighbourhoods, marked by poor housing, low hygiene, and diseases of despair. And thus, a long-term analysis cannot start but from the acknowledgment that 'the drawing room of Europe', an expression which came to define Saint Mark Square for its beauty attracting an elite of intellectuals and travellers from all over Europe, coexisted for a long time with "filthy, dark, decaying, unhealthy houses and hovels where so many poor people immiserate, without bread, without air and without light" (Somma 2024).

3.2.2 The Exodus from the 19th Century to the Present Day

In briefly reconstructing the socio-spatial dynamics that have affected Venice from the nineteenth century up until today, I will draw from Zanardi's terminology by using 'exodus' as a key term (Zanardi

2020) to indicate the action that many people took – or were forced to take – at the turn of the last century. The exodus was twofold: while in an initial phase, before the construction of the industrial pole of Porto Marghera, it was a "movement between sestieri" (Zanardi 2020, 82), from the central areas of the island to the more marginal ones, with the development of Venice on the mainland it became a "movement between districts" (Zanardi 2020, 82). In both cases, however, it is worth noting that "the working classes constituted a pawn to be repositioned in the chessboard of the urban areas, so that they would not be an obstacle to the property development and reconversion operations of the historic city" (Zanardi 2020, 58).

The reconversion that the city authorities longed so ardently was necessary for the modernisation of the city. In an initial phase, it was believed that the latter could be obtained through a massive industrialisation of the island: marked by the construction of the railway bridge between 1842-46 and by the establishment of a maritime station in 1880, the city was subject to a nineteenth-century-style urban reform, where each area had to have its precise function. This led to a first relocation of the lower classes to the margins of the island: the "large-scale social compartmentalisation of urban space" (Zanardi 2020, 29), paved the way for the construction of entire working-class neighbourhoods that coincided precisely with the peripheries of the island. The reason was twofold: on the one hand, they were transferred to be closer to their working places, leaving the central areas for the upper-middle classes, and on the other, as a matter of decorum, a recurrent element in the story of the exodus. After all, "the workers' houses do not add to the artistic appearance of the city and would offend the aesthetic sense if they were seen lined up in front of the beautiful St. Mark's Basin" (Zanardi 2020, 30).

Tourism, in this phase, did not constitute an impactful element for the modernisation of Venice: from the mid-nineteenth century, despite the reconversion of some buildings into hotels and pensions, the entrepreneurial bourgeoisie did not consider tourism a cutting-edge investment, given its uncertain and seasonal nature. Nevertheless, tourism brought the first investment and profits with the large-scale spread of indoor bathing, in tune with the contemporary European success of balneotherapy (Zanardi 2020).

It was only with the revolutionary founding of Porto Marghera in 1917 that modernisation could openly advance on both fronts and in two different geographical areas: the mainland, for port-industrial development, and the island, the historic centre, to be displaced and freed from poverty and decay, so that tourism could find fertile ground. In this context, as observed by Somma (2024, 122), "alongside the tightening of measures for the repression of begging […] a project for the transformation of the entire social structure of the city took shape, the cornerstone of which was the sorting out of

the inhabitants and their relocation in the urban space". Inhabitants were sorted out in that poverty, misery, and disease were rampant in working-class neighbourhoods, and the authorities feared that this might have ruined the city's interests: in fact, as stated by Count Foscari, "(Venice) must remain a limpid gem set in a golden circle. Therefore, we must displace (the Poor) out of immediate material and moral necessity" (Zanardi 2020, 53).

The expression 'human reclamation' (Zanardi 2020, 42) fits this scenario perfectly: in view of a collaborative and synergetic union of two Venices, the industrial one and the touristic one, united for modernisation, there was no room for crowds of beggars in the latter. Even the institutions that were set to provide help and assistance intervened to fill the demands of industrialists or the middle classes. The Social Housing Institute, instead of filling the dramatic need for adequate housing instead of dilapidated hovels, explicitly redistributed the inhabitants by selecting acceptable groups and re-directing them in different parts of the city (Somma 2024). This happened on the basis of both their suitability to be employed when needed and of their capability of living up to the price required in the specific areas.

The reclamation did not stop even after the First World War, when, after the first but brief mass exodus from the island, building renovations gave a new boost to the real estate income of both geographic poles: this was made possible by getting rid of the hovels and immiserated homes of the poor, that threatened the value of hotels and guesthouses all around.

During the fascist era, we encounter what really was the consolidation of the touristic industry: by acting directly on the ideology, memory, and feelings of the people, Venice became a 'city-image' (Zanardi 2020, 66) where enhanced traditions and rites were the driving force and the object of a touristic fruition of the urban space. All of this paved the way for the development of the "spectacular and mythological machine of Venice" (Zanardi 2020, 66). At the same time, authorities wanted to proceed with the redevelopment of the historic city, this time by displacing people across the newly built bridge, a direct link to the mainland. The idea spread that, also thanks to the new fascist infrastructure, those who found work in Marghera could also take up residence there, and this would have facilitated the "epuration and moralisation" (Somma 2024, 144) of the city from the "human encrustations that undermine its tourist, cultural and representative function" (Zanardi 2020, 71). The declared goal behind these initiatives was that of facilitating a "natural adjustment of inhabitants to the income value of individual city areas" (Somma 2024, 149): the working-class people who still could live on the island had to move to the margins, closer to their artisanal activities, so that the upper-middle classes would have

consequently moved in the central areas, closer to the representative and public administration offices where they were employed.

The above-mentioned process of 'natural' re-location of different income classes will be the *fil rouge* connecting all subsequent years. After WW2, the main objective was the economic recovery of the city. What better way to achieve this than to focus public and private efforts on the already galloping tourism sector? The consequence of this spontaneism, of seeking quick solutions to the city's serious problems was an "often irreparable anarchy of private initiative" (Zanardi 2020, 42). On the one hand, the latter branched out in the continuation of the displacement of the historic city, combined with a hypertrophic building of the peripheral areas on the mainland, and on the other, in the encouragement of touristic development.

The exodus is further enhanced by the end of the sixties, due to the further accentuation of the functional differentiation of urban areas: the fact that industrial activities have been expelled from the island adds to the fact that the island's economy is increasingly tertiarised to meet the growing demand for tourism. Zanardi (2020, 83) notes how, due to what has been called "the policy of exodus", namely eviction, renovation of the accommodation and its conversion to tertiary use, the city lost the 4,16% of the total availability of houses in a ten years' span of time (1961-71).

3.2.2.1 From Mass Tourism to Overtourism, and the House as an Exchange-Value

The two decades from the 1970s to the 1990s have seen the establishment of a legislative framework whose result has been the transformation of the housing issue, until then a social question managed by the public administration, into a private matter in which speculation could take hold.

The forerunner of this phenomenon was the 1973 Special Law (L. 171/1973 *Interventi per la Salvaguardia di Venezia*). Leaving aside the bureaucratic and administrative complexity that this law brought, the most fundamental aspect was that, while nominally aiming at safeguarding the city, it effectively codified a withdrawal of public responsibility from the housing sector. In other words, with this normative basis, private speculation in the building and residential sector took hold: evictions spurred and the renovation of houses for touristic use increased even more.

The promulgation of the 1973 Special Law (L. 171/1973 *Interventi per la Salvaguardia di Venezia*) is part of a national trend which, in those very same years, witnessed the end of housing and land regulation policies contemporary to the speculative boom (Gainsforth 2025). It has been observed, however, how the lack of public policies was, in

reality, a deliberate choice – one that supports the financialization of the economy by driving up property values (Gainsforth 2025): this legislative framework of the state's abandonment of direct intervention on the housing issue, then, falls perfectly in line with the rise of neoliberalism.

What is more, the normative basis adopted by the city can be considered the cornerstone of a deeper phenomenon, acting on and influencing the socio-spatial dynamics in a more overarching way than just normatively. I am referring, that is, to the formalisation of the transition from mass tourism to that of contemporary overtourism, of which Venice is the highest expression (Salerno 2020). Mass tourism, according to the International Encyclopaedia of Human Geography, is a "type of tourism characterized by the consumption of inauthentic spectacles and staged productions for the benefit of tourists, isolating them from local culture and creating a tourist bubble environment" (Edensor 2009). It is the form of tourism that emerged between the two World Wars and developed at its maximum capacity after the Second World War: the key term in its definition is 'consumption'. With mass tourism and its implications, even the notion of 'tourist' changed accordingly: with a higher availability of allocations, prices fell, seasonality expanded, and the tourist went from being a mere commuter to a sojourner (Zanardi 2020), spending their money on hotels, guided tours, cultural heritage, food, and all that could be commodified.

The urban de-regulamentation of which the 1973 Special Law (L. 171/1973 *Interventi per la Salvaguardia di Venezia*) is an epitome, by effectively releasing the municipality from overseeing the housing system, was a first step towards the further disruption of this scenario, up until the arrival of overtourism. This latter "refers to the phenomenon of excessive tourism that creates human, environmental, and social challenges" (Chaney, Séraphin 2023). It is different from its previous form in that it damages the social, ecological, economic strata of the city of destination. Under this form of tourism, the fact that the house went from being a primary commodity to a bargaining value for the shrewdest investors was consolidated. How was that possible?

To answer this question, it is appropriate to draw on the theory of value expressed by Marx in the third volume of his *Capital*. Times have evolved, and several online platforms now facilitate the purposes of private owners, "consolidating a subsistence system based on passive land rent" (Zanardi 2020, 180). In Marxian terms, what we observe is not merely a shift in housing practices, but the intensification of a rentier economy, where income is generated not through productive labour but through the monopolisation of the urban space. As Marx noted, rent arises from the exclusive control of land and property, allowing the owner to appropriate value produced elsewhere in the social body (Marx 1894). In other words, through the renting out of

private properties – in recent times rendered even easier thanks to the digital infrastructures under 'platform capitalism' (Srnicek 2017) – landlords no longer need to engage in any productive activity; surplus is extracted by simply offering access to an asset they already control.

This process found fertile ground in a city already emptied by the weakening of public policies and decades of demographic declines – a vacuum that would soon be filled by the tidal wave of global tourism. The perfect storm emerged when a depopulated urban core met the rising demands of late-capitalist travel economies. These latter filled the void, but in doing so, reinforced it: the more the city became dependent on tourism, the less space remained for the residents, the more opportunities for rent for those who owned the properties appeared.

Today, the exodus is unstoppable: the house, and specifically its conversion of use, are still the main driving force of this phenomenon, reinforcing societal division between those who own properties and those who are displaced by its speculative refunctioning. In Marxian terms, residential properties are not use-values anymore, centres of dwelling and social reproduction, but have become exchange-values, namely assets that, owned by a few, are now mobilised for profit. The island of Venice has thus officially become the tourist district of a large conurbation (Somma 1993).

3.2.2.2 In the Heart of the Matter

I frame my research question starting precisely from the online renting platforms characterising this phase of capitalist economy. In particular, the question stems from a simple observation, which started from the available data on the undisputed leader of them all: Airbnb.

As shown in figure 1, retrieved from the *Inside Airbnb* project – a mission driven initiative providing data and advocacy on Airbnb's impact on residential communities – the island of Venice is punctuated by listings. At first glance, this is unsurprising.

The site dwells deeper into the data about the specific characteristics of the allocations: out of the 8,163 total listings as of December 7th, 2024, 76% is constituted by entire homes and apartments. The impact of such high percentage of entire allocations available for mostly short-term rentals, i.e., 99.2% of all the bookings according to the data (Inside Airbnb 2024), is self-evident: despite the original purpose behind the creation of the platform, namely that of home-sharing, a system that implies the renting out of a space while the owner or resident is still there (Gallagher 2017), in the current situation the whole apartment is left to the short-term renter. This jeopardises the relationship between the resident and their house: as Zanardi notes, short-renting out property units to tourists has assumed unprecedented ubiquity and importance in the city (Zanardi 2020). This practice is stressed to the point that "a kind of ethical taboo has even developed with regard to those who exercise it, especially among small landlords and historical residents" (Zanardi 2020). Because it is seen as a pushing out factor, and it is the most invasive opponent of urban residency, Zanardi (2020) adds, "it is not uncommon for landlords to feel called upon to make a moral decision, where they choose and claim to rent to Venetians instead of tourists".

Moreover, the site provides a comprehensive map of Airbnb presence for the whole Venice-Mestre area, including the islands of Murano, Burano, Sant'Erasmo, Lido, and Pellestrina in the Lagoon, and Marghera, Favaro Veneto, Tessera, Zelarino and Chirignago on the mainland. All of the abovementioned contain a variably high density of Airbnb allocations: even the most remote islands, that might be considered less-favoured among the tourists given their distance from the places of interest and the consequent time needed for commuting – let alone the price of the transportation itself – contain various short-term rental opportunities.

Let us take Burano Island as an example. Burano is a 0,2108 km^2 piece of land located in the North-Eastern Venetian Lagoon, counting 2,195 residents as of June 2022 and internationally known and appreciated for its brightly coloured homes, the lace work, and the folklore built around them. To reach the island, it takes approximately from one to one and a half hours, taking Venice railway station

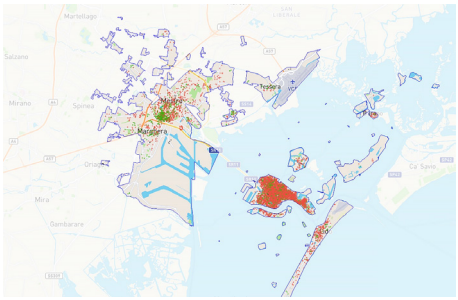

Figure 1
Beatrice Gervasi, 2025.
View of the presence of Airbnb allocations in the Municipality of Venice, 2024. Source: Inside Airbnb

stop as point of reference, and, given the connection in the midway island Murano, a total of two waterbuses must be taken. Given these premises, it is hard to imagine the presence of short-term rent options there, or that tourists might decide to stay there for visiting Venice and bear the burden of cost and time for commuting: however, according to *Inside Airbnb* (2024), Burano counts 33 listings, 86% of which are entire homes and apartments. And this is not the only case where Airbnb for touristic purposes is spread in such unusual areas: Pellestrina, even further from the main island than Burano, counts 10 listings and 100% private houses and apartments, and Murano, despite its relatively limited area of 1,17 km^2 accounts for 81 listings. Several allocations are also widespread one or more bus rides away from the island of Venice, in the mainland: the latter accounts for the 20.4% of total listings, namely 1,664 out of 8,163. The neighbourhood of Chirignago alone, part of the municipality Chirignago-Zelarino, one of the furthest from the main island as shown in the *Inside Airbnb* (2024) analysis, has 21 listings, but less than Favaro Veneto in the North-East mainland Venice area, accounting for 50 listings. In Marghera, the southern extension of Mestre, a town articulated in a residential neighbourhood and a trading harbour with an important industrial park, so-called Airbnb entrepreneurs have nevertheless found room for 160 listings.

The above-mentioned examples show the ubiquitous presence of short-term rental options in the Venice-Mestre municipality, in various degrees and with diversified densities, and do so by taking into account only those listings that are present on the Airbnb platform. The significant presence of touristic allocations would exponentially grow should we consider apartments and rooms available by other means or the wide availability of hostels and hotels. But that is not all: even when extending outside of the Venice-Mestre municipality, in the administrative area of the Metropolitan City of Venice stretching dozen kilometres inwards from the coast, a fast check for listings on

Figure 2 Beatrice Gervasi, 2025. View of the presence of Airbnb allocations on the main Island of Venice, 2024. Source: Inside Airbnb

the Airbnb platform, and a look at the reviews from the guests, soon confirm that the offer meets the demand of tourists visiting Venice, who are thus willing to spend their nights so far from the island itself. As a consequence, even in the small to medium urban centres and the rural areas around Venice, such as Cavallino-Treporti, Jesolo, San Donà di Piave, Portogruaro, and many others, there is a pulling factor for the overnight stay of tourists.

At a closer look of the map in figure 2, however, it is impossible not to notice how a small yet defined area in the South-West border of Venice lays mostly untouched by the carpet of red dots signalling the heavy presence of Airbnb allocations. An urban space on the very island of Venice with so little presence of short-term rental options, namely roughly twenty listings, should catch any viewer's attention, especially when considering the above-highlighted substantial presence of the listings further from the heart of the historic centre.

The space in question is the Santa Marta neighbourhood in the district of Dorsoduro. Santa Marta, as described on the website of the Municipality of Venice (2019) "occupies the western end of the city, where ancient settlements have been replaced by working-class neighbourhoods and industrial buildings constructed between the nineteenth and twentieth century". Over time, many of these structures have been converted into university facilities, making the area "a true university citadel".[1]

How come, then, that an urban space *on the main island,* whose entirety is otherwise so heavily absorbed by touristic allocations, can be so devoid of touristic allocations? While being free of the massive presence of short-term rentals, have tourism infrastructures absorbed economic heterogeneity in the neighbourhood?

1 Comune di Venezia (2019) *Santa Marta*. Available at: `https://www.comune.venezia.it/it/content/santa-marta-0`.

The dissertation aims to explore these questions by examining the socio-spatial dynamics of the neighbourhood, seeking to understand the factors that have allowed Santa Marta to avoid the pressures of touristification that have reshaped much of Venice, and that are here exemplified by the presence of Airbnb allocations.

3.3 Notes on the Research

In the previous chapter I focused on the urban exodus that Venice has been facing since the nineteenth century, and which shows no sign of stopping. I argued that this socio-spatial phenomenon is today reiterated by an increasingly high number of homes left empty for the historical vicissitudes of the urban fabric. On the other hand, it is paired with a more profound social change declined within a capitalist rentier economy (Harvey 2010), where the house becomes a value-exchange asset in the hands of a few. This phenomenon is in turn exacerbated by the advent of digital rental platforms, facilitating the process of urban displacement. However, in a city where the presence of Airbnb is predominant and stretches beyond the insular borders, one exception emerges: the Santa Marta neighbourhood. My research question concerns the understanding of the phenomena that make it possible for the neighbourhood to resist the presence of short-term rentals, and of the reasons why touristic infrastructures do not penetrate the socio-urban fabric. Before getting into the heart of the research by presenting the data, I shall dedicate this chapter on a few essential points as far as the theoretical framework and methodology adopted are concerned.

One thing I feel I must anticipate is that the choice of this research topic is inevitably influenced by my belonging to the urban landscape of Santa Marta. I moved to the neighbourhood almost three years ago, for study reasons, leaving the Friulian countryside that saw me born and raised for the previous years. One of the first impressions I had on Santa Marta that I still remember very vividly is the immediate thought that came to my mind while I was still dragging my suitcases under the blazing sun of that September morning: "This is *not* Venice". Even years before I approached an awareness, albeit partial, of its dynamics, the neighbourhood seemed somehow special to me, as it had absolutely nothing to do with the polished postcards of the most renowned monuments, or the horde of people queuing to visit them that I instantly pictured in my mind when thinking about the city.

Today, I cannot claim that my positionality corresponds to that of an insider: I have had first-hand experience of the urban space and its dynamics from before starting to collect data, but I was also aware since the beginning that the neighbourhood would have been a transitional space for me. However, I am not a complete outsider,

either: my experience cannot be totally reduced to the utilitarian purpose for which I approached Santa Marta in the first place.

It is the liminal space in which my relation towards the neighbourhood is located that primarily influenced the theoretical lenses and the methodology I adopted. The following section will explore the first element, according to which I chose to focus on the observation of rituals as epitomes of the socio-spatial dynamics of the neighbourhood. The subsequent one will then draw from the concept of *flânerie* to illustrate the methodology used.

3.3.1 Theoretical Framework

As anticipated, in an attempt to analyse the socio-spatial dynamics of the Santa Marta neighbourhood, I have chosen to focus on the role of rituals. Émile Durkheim, in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* [1912] (2008), famously described rituals as "rules of conduct which prescribe how a man should comport himself in the presence of sacred things". For Durkheim, religion provided the most visible and traditional expression of a deeper social mechanism: the collective enactment of meaning through symbolic action. Rituals, he argued, are the vehicles through which individuals are bound into a "moral community" (Durkheim [1912] 2008) not simply by belief, but through shared emotional experiences that generate cohesion and a sense of collective identity. According to the French sociologist, the proximity of the actors and their reciprocal action are the foundational conditions of rituals (Benvenga 2024): these generate collective consciousness, an instrument exercising influence over the conduct and thinking of individuals. This is, overall, an experience that is capable of generating and maintaining an order: the psycho-social boundary, neatly separating those who partake in the ritual from the outsiders, is here interpreted as a moral force.

While Durkheim's analysis centred on religious life, his insights have since been extended by anthropologists and social theorists to encompass a broader range of everyday, secular practices. One of the first and most significant sociologists who were able to apply the Durkheimian emotional potentialities of rituals on everyday practices, or "profane rites" (Goffman 1988, as cited in Benvenga 2024, 5), was Erving Goffman. According to the American sociologist, a certain form of adherence to the established norms did not only emerge in official or religious ceremonies but governed all interactions in the everyday life, guiding individuals' expressiveness (Benvenga 2024).

In other words, with the intention of providing "a version in modern dress of Durkheim's social psychology" (Goffman 1988, as cited in Benvenga 2024, 5) Goffman extends the traditional theory of rituals to the behaviours of secular individuals in contemporary

society. The core of these behaviours, according to this view, is a 'just' representation of the Self: the rituals thus identified are the rules of 'face games' – ritualised performances of the Self in social life, namely interactions where participants' mutual respect and dignity are at stake, and where all parties tacitly agree to uphold this respect to avoid 'losing face' (Benvenga 2024). Therefore, the Self "is a dramaturgical effect emerging from a scene being performed" (Goffman 1988, as cited in Benvenga 2024, 6). Among contemporary interpretations, Randall Collins offers the most directly relevant framework for this dissertation. One of its merits is that of having provided the macrostructures of societies with micro-interactive foundations that integrate individuals into networks or communities with shared values (Henry 2001). Let us explore this concept further. According to Collins, rituals mediate between the micro- and macro-social dimension through the emotional and symbolic solidarity deriving from them. This interpretation bridges the Durkheimian emotional and symbolic experience with the materialistic and rational model offered by Goffman. Individuals are connected by a certain degree of reciprocal obligation, and through their shared experience and sense of belonging towards a 'sacralised' symbol they can reproduce what Collins named Emotional Energy (Benvenga 2024). The latter may also serve as an instrument of group control, not far from the moral force identified in Durkheim's work, through which the group may identify on the one hand, and protect on the other, by excluding those whose subjectivities conflict with the dominant moral standards. Moreover, Emotional Energy establishes the fact that, for Collins, social action is emotional rather than instrumental. He identified four main fundamental characteristic defining a ritual, from which many other conditions emerge: the first one is the necessity for at least two people to be close to one another, to "exert a reciprocal bodily influence" (Benvenga 2024, 9); then, a clear definition of the situation is needed in order to clearly distinguish members from non-members; the third aspect is the presence of and the focus on a common activity or object, becoming 'sacralised'; finally, the emotional intensity of the action. Emotional and symbolic exchanges are at the core of another concept developed by Collins, namely that of the "theory of chains of ritual interactions" (Collins 1988, as cited in Benvenga 2024, 10). According to this theory, social interactions – of which rituals are the foundations – function as 'conversational markets' where individuals seek not material goods but emotional and symbolic rewards. These exchanges involve diverse 'cultural currencies' and the pursuit of emotional resonance: for this reason, successful rituals generate emotional energy that solidifies group bonds and ignite flows of emotional alignment that may sustain social cohesion.

These three theoretical approaches to rituals are fundamental because, despite their similarities and differences, they offer a clear

and most contemporary framework for addressing this socio-spatial analysis. I argue that these theories can be summarised and united by establishing that, in its broadest sense, a ritual is a practice that takes place in a public dimension and creates norms crucial to the existence of a community, transcending the individual. Ways of being and of living are conveyed in day-to-day interactions by virtue of the very existence of interaction, which ties the members and activates social and psychological mechanisms related to a sense of belonging, at least temporarily, to one and the same context. I believe that these characteristics render the observations of rituals suitable for the investigation of the Santa Marta neighbourhood: if it is true that, as Zanardi (2020, 207) observed, Venice's spatiality is characterised by "a tightly knit fabric, where people tend to identify and recognise themselves in their own district and even more intensively in the sub-neighbourhood area where they were born or live", rituals thus framed truly are precious resources for a broad understanding of certain social mechanisms that characterise this particular neighbourhood and distinguish it from the others.

In conclusion, this framework was chosen in an attempt to uncover the underlying causes for Santa Marta's exceptional character – namely, the features that make it a countertrend with respect to the rest of Venice – starting from the neighbourhood's everyday social reality. The latter, since it is upheld and stabilised by routinisation (Berger, Luckmann 1966), is constructed through the continuous interactions and negotiations among individuals. As a result, the construction of social reality necessarily unfolds to a large extent through rituals, interactional and structuring by definition. Their analysis is therefore fundamental to understanding the reasons why touristic infrastructures do not penetrate the neighbourhood's socio-spatial fabric.

3.3.2 Methodology

The most insightful – and yet intuitive – way to explore rituals and everyday interactions in the neighbourhood proved to be that of direct observation. Before outlining the theoretical influences that shaped my observational approach, a brief clarification regarding the spatial boundaries of the research is in order. In fact, although Santa Marta has a well-defined administrative parameter, I chose not to restrict my investigation to it. The observation extended to adjacent and functionally connected spaces that are regularly frequented by the residents and users of Santa Marta – areas which, while not formally within its boundaries, are nonetheless experienced and recognised by the urban populations as integral to their daily life.

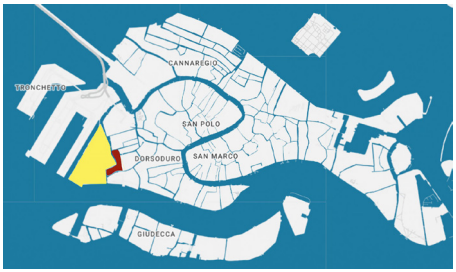

Figure 3
Beatrice Gervasi, 2025.
View of the area where the research was conducted. The yellow filled area indicates the full administrative area of Santa Marta, while the red marks the area outside of the administrative boundaries within which data collection also took place

As anticipated, I have been living in the neighbourhood for almost three years. This prolonged residence has meant that my movements through the space have typically followed familiar, goal-oriented routines – walking through the surroundings according to functional needs and daily rhythms. However, for the purposes of this research, I deliberately sought to estrange myself from this habitual mode of navigation. In an attempt to subvert the instrumental relationship I had developed with the urban landscape, I embraced its opposite: direct observation was to be carried out without temporal or spatial limits, without specific aims, detached from the established codes of my spatial cataloguing.

3.3.2.1 Variations on Flânerie

"Time that is lost is space that is gained": since its creation in the 1990s, this has been the motto of the urban lab *Stalker* by the architects Francesco Careri and Lorenzo Romito (Cocco 2018). The project, an interdisciplinary 'nomadic observatory', in Careri's words, has always aimed at analysing the city in stark contrast to urban functionalism, where order and utilisation prevail, tending instead towards an authentic experience of the urban fabric. In other words, at making the city an action and not an object (Cocco 2018). Although the work of the collective has always focused more on peripheries and connected marginality, therefore not inherent to the object of the research, a fundamental lesson can be drawn from this, serving as a starting point of data collection: walking is a transformative practice of a space and its meaning (Careri 2006). It is through the act of walking that a space becomes a place, and it was necessary for the purposes of this work to walk through *this* place, the Santa Marta neighbourhood, to understand aspects where, for how familiar, it was unknown. This was obtained through roaming the neighbourhood – *andare a zonzo* – or "wasting time wandering aimlessly" (Careri 2006).

The above-mentioned is none other than the preeminent action of the *flaneur*. The latter, a leading figure of the nineteenth century,

found its origin in a bourgeois Paris, and was popularised by poets such as Baudelaire, but was also a key inspiration for artistic movements starting from Dada (Careri 2006). Sociologist Giampaolo Nuvolati has explored the figure of the *flaneur* in several works: he defines it as an "urban animal par excellence" (Nuvolati 2013, 2), reflecting the individual's longing for a form of wandering freedom, constrained by the pressures of mass consumer culture and societal expectations, in an effort to reclaim a more thoughtful, intentional rhythm of life. Through walking, he engages with the city not merely as a physical space but as a field of interpretation, reading its surfaces and movements in an attempt to access its perceived authenticity – its "*genius loci*" (Nuvolati 2013, 1). However, for the purposes of this research, a distinction is in order: alongside the *dandy*, bourgeois, bored *flaneur*, in search of an individual and aesthetic experience – albeit with an intention of rebellion and breaking away from society – is another type of 'doing' *flânerie*, which finds its roots in the artistic movements that emerged in those same years. I am referring, that is, to the Lettrists and Situationists movements, whose *flânerie* is epitomised by Guy Debord's concept of "psycho-geographic drift" (Careri 2006, 76). The purpose of the drifts to which the situationists were committed to was to waste 'useful' time by transforming it into "constructive playtime" (Careri 2006, 77): in other words, participants were to be guided through the surrounding by their subjective feelings and experiences, without a predetermined route, to unveil the "unconscious areas of the city" (Careri 2006, 77). However, seeking pleasure and adventure was not the only aim: although the perception of the Urban strongly recalls the subjectivity of the *flaneur* (Nuvolati 2013), their work was ideologically driven, in that it aimed at showing how a city can be collectively experienced in a detached way from the false conviction that urban circulation is strictly and solely related to the functionalization and division of spaces for production. Thus, from *flânerie* as an individual, aesthetic investigation of the places, Situationists get to another dimension, the re-appropriation of a place through walking, which also calls into question the other actors present in an area, if not the entire community (Nuvolati 2013). The practice of 'walking in an estranged key', drawing from the experience of the *flaneur* now altered by its critique to urban functionalism, would have been embraced by many movements, starting from the Situationists and up to the *Stalker*s (Nuvolati 2013, 106).

At the heart of this analysis lies an attempt to engage in direct observation by roaming the neighbourhood. Here, walking is neither a purely aesthetic or intellectual pursuit, nor a utilitarian act aimed at reaching a destination or completing a task. Rather, it is approached as a playful time and a constructive discovery. Put differently, field notes were collected at the intersection of the concept of *flânerie*,

its evolution into the Situationist *dérive*, and the established tools of ethnographic research – anchored in the awareness that walking is not just a means of locomotion but can itself serve as a method of inquiry.

3.3.2.2 Data Collection and Analytical Process

Data collection took place intermittently between February and May 2025, with the intent of capturing a nuanced picture of Santa Marta's socio-spatial dynamics across different seasonal and daily rhythms. This temporal span allowed me to observe part winter and part spring, and to attend to the ways in which daily life unfolds across various time slots – morning, afternoon, and evening.

Observation was carried out in two distinct ways: the majority of the data was collected through walks specifically organised for this purpose, following the insights outlined above. However, close attention was paid to the urban space during my regular, day-to-day traversals of the area, and some data derives from these instances as well. After each observation, at the end of the walk, my considerations were recorded in a digital document, using notes taken on my phone while in the field to assist me. At times, I opted for recording my immediate thoughts and observations as voice memos in place of phone notes: I would later listen back to these recordings and, when relevant, incorporate them into my written fieldnotes. When possible, the fieldnotes were further enriched by photographs taken *in situ*, with the aim of preserving a more vivid sense of atmosphere and spatial configuration to support later stages of reflection and analysis. Overall, I tried to keep my field notes organised according to emerging thematic strands, based on recurring elements such as specific places, repeated actions, or notable interactions. It was precisely the identification of a correspondence – a certain pattern – between repeated behaviours and spatial settings that began to guide the subsequent phase of analysis.

The interpretative and conceptual framework for data analysis was not fully predetermined at the outset. Rather, it took shape progressively through extensive desk research conducted alongside fieldwork. Initially, I engaged with literature on the core topic of the research, namely neighbourhood vitality and socio-spatial dynamics to ground my observations. As new empirical material emerged from the field – whether through patterns noticed in routines, spatial practices, or social interactions – I expanded the desk research to include correlated or intersecting themes. This recursive movement between fieldwork and theory allowed the conceptual tools to evolve in response to the material itself: this process was facilitated by the thematic threads that emerged during data collection on the

one hand, and by my own embeddedness in the social life of the neighbourhood, which I believe provided an additional layer of interpretative depth, on the other.

3.4 Episodes of Everyday Life in Santa Marta

This chapter presents the findings of the fieldwork carried out in the neighbourhood of Santa Marta. As previously anticipated, data were progressively organised into thematic threads during the research process. These threads emerged through the temporal recurrence of specific actions, spatial elements, or patterns of interaction among different urban actors, and were developed using a combination of written fieldnotes and photographs, some of which are included here to visually support the presentation of the material. Over time, these thematic threads were distilled into five main 'episodes' – recurring moments of everyday life in the neighbourhood that involve consistent types of social actors and spatial practices. These episodes will be presented here and will serve as the starting point of the analysis that will be provided in the following chapter, where I argue that these practices function as epitomes of the construction and reproduction of everyday social life in Santa Marta. This is because they represent both socially shared routines and ritualised uses of space, and as such, offer a lens through which to understand the socio-spatial dynamics that characterise the neighbourhood.

3.4.1 L'Aperitivo: Inside Informal Evening Gatherings

Every weekday, from around five in the afternoon until seven or even later, Fondamenta de l'Arzere gradually fills up. Groups of people move along the waterfront, peeling off here and there to stop at what seems to be *their* usual spot. This stretch – running from the border with San Sebastiano all the way to the wooden bridge that marks the edge of Santa Marta – is lined with bars, bistros, and a handful of restaurants. And as the light softens, the place comes alive. Students spill out from their last classes, construction workers still in dusty overalls drift in from nearby sites, other workers in a jacket and tie. But some arrive on purpose and do not just pass by: older residents make their way slowly toward the bar on the corner by the Santa Marta bridge, sometimes in pairs, sometimes with a caregiver.

An older woman and a younger companion sit on a low wall surrounding a planter in front of a bar, adjacent to the one on the corner. With them are two small chihuahuas, perched on laps and being gently stroked. The dogs become a point of attraction, especially for two young girls pulling their glittery scooters behind

Figures 4-5
Beatrice Gervasi, 2025. View of Fondamenta de l'Arzere during *aperitivo*. April 15th, 6:21 pm

them and holding their father's hand. Still wearing their backpacks after school, the girls ask to pet the tiny dogs. Their father allows it: he has just run into some friends at the bar opposite and takes the opportunity to enjoy a spritz, an ever-present, almost foundational symbol of this time and place.

From the opposite direction, another child arrives holding his grandmother's hand. His attention, however, is captured by a football being kicked between a group of students playing in a circle, their backpacks and cardboard models piled against the bar wall. Their movements, so coordinated that they manage to juggle a ball with one leg while holding a spritz on the other hand, almost resemble a choreographed dance, punctuated by laughter and shouting. Others prefer a more static *aperitivo*, seated at tables or resting on the low planter walls – couples, small groups, or larger circles of friends. Sometimes, a member of one of the groups wanders off in search of an extra chair: "Mind if I take it?" A nod. "Thanks". And the *aperitivo* can begin for all.

Music comes from some of the bars – clear enough to set a mood, soft enough to talk over. Those standing, without a table or waiting for their friends to finish their game, move rhythmically to the beat, always keeping an eye on the bowl of chips. It seems almost expected to run into someone you know, and greeting nods explode: an old classmate, a colleague, a neighbour, a flatmate's friend, and even the bartender.

And then, gradually, people start to move again. Some head home: "see you tomorrow!". Others gather their jackets, pick up their bags, and walk a little farther along the Fondamenta to a bistro known for its live music and more socialising, which sometimes even local associations choose as a focal point for their meetings and events. It seems the natural next step of the evening gathering.

3.4.2 Mondays at the Farmer's Market

Unlike the tidy, horizontal row of stalls along Calle Longhi, the crowd gathering for the Monday farmer's market in Santa Marta seems far less orderly. Some stand patiently in line, holding their ticket number, while others wander toward the stalls that spill over into nearby Calle dei Bagni Baghei and all the way to Campiello Longhi.

Their gestures, conversations, and ways of being in the space make it clear that not all live the same kind of life – and not all come from the neighbourhood. A large portion are students from the nearby residence: backpacks on shoulders, mostly in pairs or trios, chatting as they decide what to buy. The market trip seems to become a moment to plan their week's meals: some already talk about a lunch together, eager to try recipes with the last seasonal bunches of black cabbage they just bought. At the busiest stall, though, most customers are elderly, each with their colourful shopping trolley pulled up beside them and their number ticket in hand. Waiting is softened by casual conversation:

"Luckily the rain stopped",
"It is my granddaughter's birthday – after this I will stop by the flower stand",
"My wife could not make it today, so she instructed me. Hope I do not mess this up!".

The laughs that follow seem part of the sentence, too.

Not everyone passes the time so easily. A young boy, hand-in-hand with his aunt, sighs, asking how much longer they have to wait: "kids" states an older woman smiling, entertained by the show. After picking up some greens and eggs, they head toward the *imbarcadero,* the waterbus stop at Santa Marta. When the boat arrives, they board and disappear into the stream of people coming and going. The stop is never busier than on Monday mornings.

The waterbus is not the only way people arrive: from the main street of Santa Marta, an older man in a tracksuit tells the baker that he has done his daily workout. The farmer's market location makes it accessible for vendors, too: vans pull in, allowing workers to constantly swap out empty crates with fresh product. Still, what defines the morning is slow life: people take their time choosing; they ask for advice on how to cook this or that vegetable; some return to tell the vendor how last week's tip turned out. At the busiest stall, a regular customer is gifted with a small bundle of herbs. A woman arranges to meet a friend later for coffee, while two students wave at G., an older man known by some in the neighbourhood for his kitchen garden and his cheerful stories. One woman, in running gear, joins the queue where a friend has held her spot: no one seems in a rush,

Figure 6 Beatrice Gervasi, 2025. View of the area of Santa Marta's farmer's market on a Monday morning. May 5th, 9:18 am

even though it is Monday morning. After picking up their vegetables, bread, eggs, meat, or cheese, some linger by the flower stall: "When should I plant these?". This is just one of the examples showing how the exchange is continuous, animated, and personal. Some vendors know exactly what to set aside for their regulars, before they even ask.

This space reaches the ears before the eyes: dialectal chatter, laughter, the knock of crates, the beep of the cash register, the bark of an impatient dog chasing a pigeon while its owner lingers in conversation. Only when the last of the colourful trolleys has turned the corner do vendors begin to dismantle the stands and boxes are stacked back into the vans. Until next Monday, that is.

3.4.3 A Saturday Morning

In front of the Santa Marta student residence, a small fruit and vegetable stand sets up a few days every week. Right across from it stands the neighbourhood's newsstand and tobacco shop. On Saturday mornings, within this short stretch of street, the sequence of actions seems almost choreographed for some people: buying the daily newspaper, exchanging a few comments with the shop owner about the front-page headlines – when time allows for it – and then joining the line at the stall. Some are shopping because "my daughter and the grandchildren are coming over for lunch tomorrow", others because they simply do not feel like walking all the way to the supermarket.

Yet not everyone is there for the stall: some have come out to have breakfast at the café just a few steps away. This creates a scene that is almost comical in its clear contrast: at the blue and yellow tables outside, younger people sip their cappuccinos and eat brioches, while older residents drink an *ombra* together, a local term for 'glass of wine'. All of this happens simultaneously, at the same hour. Small dogs dart around the tables, chasing each other and drawing laughter from the people seated nearby. Sometimes, the dogs' exuberance

becomes a medium and the pretext of a conversation between these two apparently so distant groups.

On the other side of the café, there is a small playground, where a few children play on the slide and jump, while parents watch from nearby benches. Others supervise from a bit farther away, keeping an eye on them while sipping coffee. The playground extends into a basketball court, where the two hoops seem to divide the space naturally: young boys on one side, older ones – among which, students – on the other, tossing the ball in turn and running after it, hardly acknowledging the group with whom they share the court.

Some prefer to just observe. Three teenage girls walk through the neighbourhood with music playing from their phones, sometimes mimicking a viral dance, sometimes passing a ball back and forth between them.

3.4.4 At Lunchtime: Breaktime for Students (and Workers)

At either end of a ping pong table, two students are in the middle of a match. Around them, a group of onlookers comment on the game with loud voices and jokes. Their backpacks are dropped to the ground, beside a tree; plastic containers with homemade lunches are held in their hands. This ping pong table sits between the entrance of one of the Santa Marta student residence buildings and the outdoor sitting area of the latter's restaurant. This presence is marked by the presence of tables, umbrellas, and people eating from full plates, but also from the bright sign that reads: "*Food affinity space: come here to eat, study, work!*". The restaurant, in fact, like the inner park of the residence, is open to the public. It is no surprise, then, that the place comes alive at lunchtime.

Four members of the coast guard, just down the street, stroll up slowly in their uniforms, stopping to look at the daily menu before sitting down and exchanging a few words with one of the waiters. Nearby, a long table is packed with students who, having just finished an exam, are now celebrating. Not everyone, though, appears so cheerful: two others, each with a sandwich in front of them, are completely absorbed in their laptops, seemingly unfazed by the noise from the ordering queue and the music speakers. Some men and women, dressed formally, eat quickly in order to leave the table to an elderly woman, who arrives with her dog and now sits quietly enjoying her coffee and reading the newspaper. A construction worker recommends a dish to his colleague recalling the same thing he ordered on a previous visit and is about to have again. The first signs of spring are in the air, and indeed, some take the opportunity to lie on a blanket in the grass after lunch. A wide variety of people seem to populate this shared space at lunchtime. Some form a circle

and start tossing a ball around, and it does not take long before the circle grows: others join in, including those who had been waiting too long for their turn at ping pong.

The constant flow of people, also due to the fact that the lawn is a transit area between the three gates of the residence, and thus three different areas of the neighbourhood, makes this a particularly dynamic spot. It is easy to lose sight of friends if you linger too long while ordering, as demonstrated by the disoriented look of a boy holding a tray, spinning around in place, unaware that his four friends are waving and shouting to him from the other side of the sitting area, laughing.

3.4.5 A Birthday and a Graduation: The Exceptional in the Ordinary

This paragraph, rather than offering a snapshot of everyday life, is meant to serve as a brief testimonial note on a specific trend I observed in the neighbourhood. I am referring, that is, to the private use of a public space – or, more precisely, the extension of a private event into the public realm. In Santa Marta this can be witnessed with some regularity. Let us take, for instance, two spaces that have already been introduced earlier–the bar and the playground in front of it.

On a Wednesday afternoon, two celebrations unfold simultaneously and just a few meters apart. Both mark important milestones, making them *exceptional* events. And yet, they take place on the main street of the neighbourhood, a distinctly *ordinary* location. On one side, in the playground, colourful balloons occasionally obscure a group of children wearing a paper party hat. They play on every piece of equipment, and from time to time, prompted by the parents, they burst into a cheerful '*Tanti auguri*', each with their own rhythm and pace, producing a result that is amusing at best for the adults nearby. The parents, in between chatting and handing out snacks, keep busy cleaning up trash or scolding the more fearless children. Their voices, however, blend with another chorus nearby: "*Dottore, dottore!*": the guests at a graduation party at the bar, prosecco glasses in hand, have stood up to sing for the graduate. His parents, also in attendance, remain seated, perhaps slightly embarrassed, but their admiration shines through the photos they are taking of the scene.

Every now and then, the sound of confetti cannons from one group seems to mingle with the pop of a balloon burst by a child in the other, tying together two celebrations in the very heart of the neighbourhood.

3.5 Rituals, Space, and Social Infrastructures: A Virtuous Circle Against Disembedding

In the previous chapter I presented the findings of the fieldwork, namely the results of my direct observation of everyday practices characterising the neighbourhood. The episodes are dense with people, spaces, actions, and elements whose meaning for the construction and vitality of the social life of the neighbourhood, and thus possible reasons for its presumed difference compared to the rest of Venice, will now be unfolded.

First, I will attempt to link the actions – that will be presented as rituals – and the subjects undertaking them to some well-defined urban spaces, to show the tight relation between the two. This connection will serve as a starting point for introducing the concept of social infrastructures into the discussion: it will be maintained how these latter influence the way in which people interact, and, in doing so, sustain the socio-spatial vitality neighbourhood. Building on this analysis, I will explore how the presence and reproduction of social infrastructures may be linked to the presence of heterogeneity and vitality I observed in Santa Marta, and to the absence of touristic infrastructures, and how these elements interact with each other creating a virtuous circle. Finally, I will reflect on how and why these social infrastructures have been preserved or re-created in the neighbourhood, attempting to offer a possible explanation for its resistance to the dynamics of overtourism.

3.5.1 The Space of the Ritual, the Ritual in the Space

The series of episodes described above, while consisting of seemingly ordinary actions, revealed a deeper patterned quality. These are not isolated or casual actions, they are recurring practices – either daily, weekly, or occasional – embedded in the temporal and social rhythms of the neighbourhood's life. In other words, they are everyday rituals, which, as anticipated, amount to a repetition of acts that contribute to shaping both social relations and a shared sense of place. This emerges clearly upon analysis of the data: all the five episodes I described contained roughly all the elements of rituals as conceptualised earlier. These patterns of behaviour take place in the public sphere, are interactional, and do seem to create norms which transcend the individual experience.

Let us take the farmer's market as an example, a public event par excellence: quite a few ritualised behaviours can be found there – right from the beginning. The most trivial of these behaviours is the simple action of taking the number ticket and waiting in line for your turn at the stall: I have described how everyone performs this

action, and it is also visible in the photographic support. Now, imagine what would have been like had someone not known this fact – which has become an established and reproduced norm – and just ordered their vegetables, surpassing all the other clients queuing. Someone would have surely reproached them, and the newcomer would have just gone back to their place in the queue. That would have just been the moral force at work, in Durkheimian terms, repairing what has been misled by who failed the ritual, someone who 'lost face', in Goffmanian terms. In other words, even queuing with the ticket number is ritualised and it is a participated experience to maintain a certain order – here, in the most literal of terms. The chats softening the waiting for some elderly people is also part of the ritual: it is the most relational side of this, and it is enabled by a common objective, i.e., buying food, and repetition. The dialogues I heard and partially reported also convey emotional and symbolic exchanges: platitudes and small talk are intertwined with personal questions and follow-up conversations, and all of these elements hint to a collective and shared universe. And so, at the farmer's market, one might find that Collin's 'theory of chains of ritual interactions' (Collins 1988, as cited in Benvenga 2024, 10) applies: people do not just go there to buy goods; for many, it is an occasion of interaction, a pretext to exchange a few words with the people they always see and meet there, with whom they have created a specific symbolic universe. Possibly, this leads to the generation and channelling of emotional energy, which solidifies the group ties, and reinforces the ritual.

This is just one example showing how the episodes observed contain a variety of ritualised patterns, grounded in tacitly shared norms that regulate the behaviours and account for the creation of a social reality. The people wandering from table to table during *aperitivo* and asking for an available chair, students gathering around the ping pong table and waiting for their turn to play at lunchtime, the small talk hovering above the bar on a Saturday morning, and even the division of the basketball court among different teams' players, are all signs and symptoms of a way of living in the neighbourhood that is well-defined and continuously adapted both by and to the people who inhabit, traverse, or make use of it in different ways. Just like in the 'profane rites' (Goffman 1988, as cited in Benvenga 2024, 5) conceptualised by Goffman, in these everyday actions the mutual respect and dignity is at stake, and silently, perhaps even unconsciously, everyone upholds the social reality thus established, by playing their role in every context. Again, it would not be seen favourably were someone to come at your table and take a chair without that preamble, just as it would be unkind not to exchange greetings with the elderly you meet every week at the bar and who talks to you about their grandchildren, and even popping up at the basketball court and occupy both nets would be awkward if you are

alone and it is your first time in Santa Marta. These interactions not only maintain a shared moral order, but also produce a locally intelligible grammar of behaviour, a way of knowing what is expected, accepted, or might be disapproved of.

Having established that the episodes observed consist in rituals, another important consideration is due: these patterns of behaviours are not abstract, but unfold in, and are shaped by, specific urban spaces. Indeed, looking at the data, the first thing that becomes clear is how all the actions taking place in the situations above described are spatially situated: the bar, the playground, the court, the garden, and so on. This observation, for how obvious it may be, is actually a fundamental step in the continuation of this analysis: since people live in places, their everyday activities and well-being are strongly influenced by the spatial configuration of their surroundings. Zanardi has noticed how, especially in Venice, the urban space is not simply one destined to transit: it is a full-fledged *place*, dense with social interactions (Zanardi 2020). Take for example the *aperitivo* I described in the last chapter, and the dad stopping to join two friends while walking home with the two daughters: what was probably meant to be a commute back home, became an occasion for social interaction for many other subjects around. This episode alone allows for at least two other considerations as far as spaces and rituals are concerned. The first one regards the polyfunctionality of the site: the most disparate people experience it in the most disparate ways. The pictures show it quite clearly: Fondamenta de L'Arz-ere, at its intersection with the Santa Marta bridge, widens and, besides functioning as a stallage for a bar, leaves a spatial void that during such gatherings gets filled with diverse purposes. Someone is sitting, someone is standing, someone is simply transiting, someone is playing football in a circle: one thing that all of these actions have in common, however different, is that they entail a certain degree of contact and social interaction.

The above leads to the second consideration, concerning the types of people acting in the space: the rituals are characterised by heterogeneity of urban populations and their ages, and, even if interactions tend to be confined within the same group, leaking between them is not uncommon. I have said it since the beginning: Santa Marta, historically a working-class area, has now become a university citadel through the reconversion of many former industrial buildings to academic and residence use. Therefore, it is not uncommon to witness a space that is experienced by residents and students; what is more, given its proximity to various offices and even the headquarters of Coast Guard, workers' presence is registered in significant numbers. The variety of urban populations, each with its own times and ways of experiencing Santa Marta, translates into an urban space that is constantly renegotiated and re-adapted to its users (Zanardi 2020). There, encounters are imbued

with authenticity, as they are often unexpected or spontaneous: the dad at the *aperitivo* epitomises this tendency, similarly to the people meeting at the farmer's market or at the bar. This strengthens community bonds and a sense of belonging.

Data offer yet another consideration as far as the urban space, its use and the emotional symbolism they convey are concerned: I am referring to the private sphere leaking into the public one, as exemplified by the last episode of the previous chapter. The child's birthday party is an event which is private at its core – an intimacy which is extended only to the closest friends and relatives of the children, as it is usually expected with invitations. However, it is not happening within the domestic walls, nor in a house lawn: it takes place in a public playground, right in front of another personal celebration – a graduation party – occurring in the bar opposite to the park. Not only the two events are not privately carried out: they share parts of the very same public space, to the point where the observer, a passer-by, can see it, and where the voices of both distinct groups are intertwined, and so are their celebrative chants. The effect that is conveyed is nothing like what could be usually witnessed in other cities or different neighbourhoods very often. However, the extension of a private event into an ordinary public space is typical of working-class neighbourhoods like Santa Marta, where historically houses were so unsanitary that activities and functions were mainly carried out in the *calle*, where people preferred to spend more time (Zanardi 2020). In fact, Mancuso (2009, as cited in Zanardi 2020, 206) noted how, between the private and the public, there is a "profound integration that is not found in any other city, where people undertake activities and functions – and share social events – that would elsewhere be confined to the domestic walls". In other words, urban public spaces become an important setting for the displaying of social relations and rituals.

The reason why these ritualised behaviours and activities take place in specific locations is that the latter provide material and symbolic scaffolding for the practices occurring there. At the same time, as it has been noted, these places are continuously re-signified by the multiple actors succeeding one another. The consequence of this is a dynamic interplay between the ritual and the space: if the space makes the ritual possible on the one hand, the ritual gives meaning to the space on the other.

3.5.2 Social infrastructures: the Vitality and Potential of "Third Places"

What has been discussed and analysed in the previous paragraphs are what Oldenburg (1999) defined as 'third places'. The latter refers to all the places that are experienced by people outside of their home

and workplace, respectively the first and second places, and which are frequented voluntarily during one's free time. This expression is the precursor of what Klinenberg (2018) then conceptualised as social infrastructures, namely "physical places and organisations that shape the way people interact", which help their users to build trust and enhance social ties. I argue that these infrastructures constellate the socio-spatial reality of Santa Marta and ultimately correspond to the physical places in which the observed ritualised interactions occur – with significant consequences.

As above mentioned, a foundational element of social infrastructures is that they correspond to an interaction regime (Barbera 2024): in fact, data show a consistent number of interactions in all the five episodes. These latter were casual and unexpected among acquaintances, like during the *aperitivo* in a frankly crowded environment; they were planned, like the lunchtime or the basketball game; sometimes, they were situational among relative strangers, as the case of the ping pong game or the small talk at the farmer's market convey. The level of acquaintance and the strength of ties within a network does not alter the existence of a place as a social infrastructure: on the contrary, one of the qualities of the latter is precisely that of presenting means and characteristics able to amplify the relations between people as they are sites in which "strangers can meet and mix with others with whom they share their neighbourhoods and cities" (Latham, Layton 2019, 2). What is more, social infrastructures encourage people towards an interaction across differences: in the case of this neighbourhood, these are directly limited to age, gender, and urban population of belonging. Let us take the episode of the Saturday morning as an example: the setting of the bar in which two distinct groups of people were gathering allowed for the presence of multiple and different people. In particular, due to the nature of that place, i.e., a bar, social connection can happen in two ways: it can be a gathering place where people actively plan to meet on the one hand, or, being its stallage located in a transit area, it can be a 'bumping place' (Banwell, Kingham 2023, 4) on the other, namely an area where casual encounters unfold during one's daily routine. These fulfil an important social role, while having a functional nature – the bar and farmer's market have a commercial function, the park and basketball court are conceived for leisure and sport activity, and so on – namely that of providing meaning and significance to social interactions, for how casual the encounter may be. The kinds of relations thus constituted in third and bumping places are weak ties: in a daily context, acknowledging and seeing people you share a neighbourhood with, despite differences, and even if the encounter brings about low contact and low emotional intensity, can still provide positive effects (Banwell, Kingham 2023). Among these, the fact of adding contacts among different contexts

in the same environment, as well as enhancing a certain feeling of belonging, or as famously put by Granovetter (1973), enabling the diffusion of knowledge and information among community members.

Going back to the example of a Saturday morning in Santa Marta, this can be seen quite clearly: from the comments exchanged over the front-page headlines to the nods of greetings at the newspaper shop or queuing at the vegetable stand; from the parents' socialising and small talk while supervising the children playing to the passers-by smiling and weaving. All these micro-interactions are not emotionally invested, and yet are the glue of the social reality created and reproduced in Santa Marta. This is because people are used to that, as it is an everyday ritualised behaviour and it is carried out in places which, for their spatial affording and a physical arrangement, further favour this kind of relations. As anticipated, the bar offers a good framework for observing the mixing of groups: in that case, the dog running between the tables offers the pretext for these groups, i.e., the elderly drinking an *ombra* and the young people having breakfast, to interact. It also offers the occasion to highlight the considerable co-presence of pets in social infrastructures of the neighbourhood: from this scenario to the *aperitivo* one, and even at the farmer's market, as the photographic support shows. Much has been said about the presence of dogs in public spaces: they are a mark of distinction for some owners – here, they are all accompanied by elderly women – and, because they need to be walked daily, they make an intensive use of shared spaces (Tissot 2011). Dogs favour "engagements among the unacquainted" (Goffman 1963, as cited in Tissot 2011, 276) because they have automatically visible and self-evident positive effects on human relations, especially for similar people living in a neighbourhood consisting of a tight-knit fabric. In other words, as social catalysts and signs of domestic rootedness, dogs subtly indicate a well-used and emotionally invested urban structure: dog walkers' routine walking patterns frequently lead to chance encounters with others in bumping places like the bar.

3.5.2.1 Embeddedness through Symbolic Universes and Everyday Learning

In all the examples provided in the previous chapter, the 'social' element stands out much earlier than the fact that these spaces are actually infrastructures. From this, a question might emerge: how can we be sure, apart from long-standing observation, that what is being witnessed is an interaction happening within an infrastructure and not just a situational and contextual exchange? This question amounts to asking what makes an infrastructure–here declined as a social one–such.

Social infrastructures, just like spaces, are not fixed entities, nor merely material: they are relational and practiced (Latham, Layton 2019). From this notion, at least three characteristics of the infrastructures can be derived: they are embedded, transparent, and have reach or scope (Latham, Layton 2019). Santa Marta's farmer's market offers a good example to test these three characteristics. First of all, it is embedded: it unfolds within pre-existing networks and relationships, here epitomised by a specific supply chain, commercial relations between sellers and clients, arrangements on the allocations of the stalls, and so on. It is transparent, in that people frequenting the farmer's market have interiorised its functioning, and do not rearrange it every week, i.e., they do not need to re-establish a ticket for the queue, and the actions they carry out are almost taken for granted. Finally, and obviously, the market has reach and scope: this is shown by the fact that it can be repeatedly used weekly, and because it offers a heterogeneous array of products – as well as casual interactions. Santa Marta's farmer market is just one example of social infrastructure properly said: roughly all episodes are useful to highlight aspects of it.

As far as reach and scope are concerned, let us think about the birthday and graduation parties, or the use of the basketball court: these are examples of how public space accommodates multiple and overlapping rituals without formal coordination. Yet another concept can be drawn and applied to this: 'heterarchies' (Stark 2009, as cited in Barbera 2024, 354), namely the capacity of a system to host multiple evaluative principles simultaneously. This is connected to the reach and scope of infrastructures as noted before, highlighting how the same physical location supports different uses, rhythms, and urban populations – often at the same time. There is no apparent top-down control over who uses what space or when, yet the outcome is orderly, cooperative, and rich in vitality.

In the light of this multi-functioning and heterogeneity of users, one's role and behaviour within the infrastructure is learnt through participation, to the point where it becomes transparent and exhibits a certain 'taken-for-grantedness' (Star 1999, as cited in Latham, Layton 2019, 3), as examples like the queue at the farmer's market or at the restaurant at lunchtime illustrate. Even the different nets to use at the basketball court and where to sit during *aperitivo* are learned through membership to the infrastructure. In other words, it is through repeated exposure to the dynamics of the neighbourhood, to how others queue, relate, laugh, play, walk, and move, that one acquires the capacity to *properly* stay within the infrastructure, rendering the micro-rituals observed not merely social actions, but pedagogical moments for the community. The ultimate purpose of this co-learning, tacit process is a non-instrumental interaction, where emotions are shared and the same mutual meaning is conveyed

(Benvenga 2024). What is emphasised here is therefore not a material end in the interactions, but a symbolic and collectively constituted end: social infrastructures can be seen as those distinctive elements of the urban fabric that ensure the recognisability of a place while enabling the collective construction of a vivid and functional image of the environment for those who inhabit it, which serves not only to navigate it physically but also to interpret and organise it symbolically (Zanardi 2020). This characteristic is what brings some people at the farmer's market every Monday morning as part of their daily life, as much as it is what guides other people in their patterned movement from the newspaper shop to the bar on a Saturday, or what pushes parents to choose the playground as a party site: people map their social environment, both spatially and emotionally, also thanks to the face-to-face embodied interactions that happen within it, and maintain it through use and negotiation over the same spaces.

Therefore, the places observed are not neutral locations: they are socially charged environments that seem to produce an 'ethics of togetherness' (Barbera 2024, 354), where a local moral order rooted in reciprocity, recognition, and implicitly shared norms – even in the absence of a strong tie – stands. A virtuous circle emerges at the intersection between the people, carrying out everyday rituals, and the spaces, when they constitute social infrastructures: these, in turn, favour ritualised activities and interactions, resulting in visible vitality of the neighbourhood. The observation of these infrastructures, by virtue of their very characteristics, can give many insights on the well-being of the urban environment: in fact, given commercial or political activities can contribute to close down and modify particular kinds of spaces (Latham, Layton 2019), and therefore disembed social infrastructures from the networks and relations of people.

3.5.3 An Antidote to Overtourism?

What has just been described is precisely what is going on in Venice: social infrastructures rely on the heterogeneity of users, spaces, accessibility, and are responsive to the people's needs, which are satisfied through negotiations and establishment of ritualised behaviours. In other words, thanks to them being embedded in the local context, they are able to provide for their users' sociality and – albeit inadvertent – sense of place and belonging. For these reasons, they are precious indicators of the liveability of cities or neighbourhoods. The anticipated discrepancy between Santa Marta and roughly the rest of Venice lies at the core of the research question, and it is based on the alleged dis-embedment of the social infrastructures of the latter which, having lost all their foundational

characteristics, have ceased to exist as such and have disappeared, or become touristic infrastructures. The consequences of overtourism on the city, as well as the root causes which have allowed for such effects, have already been explored in the first chapter: when the progressive withdrawal of the Public on land and housing regulation met a city already devoid of residents by the long-standing exodus, a rentier economy took hold, which translated in less space for resident housing and the rise of a rampant touristic monoculture.

The Rialto Market is perhaps the most glaring example of a social infrastructure that has been lost to tourism. It is not frequented much by the few residents around, as they have been experienced an excessive touristic pressure and have retracted (Zanardi 2020). How could this happen? Two complementary causes contribute to understanding this phenomenon. As anticipated, social infrastructures are closely linked to both a functional and a symbolic end: the primary purpose of a market, be that Rialto or Santa Marta, would be that of buying goods or, as we have seen, socialising with neighbours. However, due to the centrality of Rialto, both as a transit space and as a site of interest for tourists, the ritual practice associated with the place changed, and it did so due to structural conditions over which the actors have no power. As a consequence, the residents ceased to frequent it, they started excluding themselves as they felt increasingly deprived of that infrastructure (Zanardi 2020), which in the long run became a tourist monopoly. So, the first cause of the loss and transformation of social infrastructures in this context is the exclusion – sometimes the self-exclusion – of the local urban populations. This is because the urban space is re-moulded whenever the dominant activities change and, when the touristic performance takes over, practices that do not conform to this type of configuration suddenly prove inadequate (Zanardi 2020): therefore, the residents who live in these areas stop frequenting those places, from going out to the market to the *aperitivo*, from breakfast to the evening walk, until, as it has been noted, they stop living there in the most extreme conditions.

The second cause for the loss of social infrastructures in the rest of Venice, hitting differently than in Santa Marta, is precisely a socio-demographic one. History can provide a solid background in this respect: as it has been illustrated in the first chapter, the city's social fabric has undergone many changes, albeit forced. First, the plan to industrialise Venice, making it on a par with other northern cities, through the construction and expansion of various production chains on the margins of the island, and the consequent populating of those areas by the working classes; then, after a parallel strengthening of the tourism industry in strategic locations, a progressive 'human reclamation' took hold, where the plan of creating two Venices for two different purposes – mainland for industry and island for tourism and representation – was consolidated. Progressively, for the already

mentioned political and market mechanisms, tourism grew evermore on the island, and so did its economic effect: the margins of the island got more and more populated, while the centre weakened by pulling out residents. It is therefore no surprise how, when it became rampant, tourism found more fertile ground precisely in those areas where the civic fabric got dismantled in time and had a minor effect on certain marginal neighbourhoods – like Santa Marta. I argue that, on a first level, the relative resistance of the neighbourhood to the full impact of touristification lies in the continued presence, use, and defence of diverse social infrastructures – spaces that are practiced, meaningful, and collectively maintained. On a second level, it lies on the defence by the residents, the workers, the students, and other urban populations that were able to stay there – and who could do so because that area has not historically suffered such a strong impact of depopulation. Through repeated use and informal stewardship, residents, workers, and other city users have effectively defended these infrastructures, allowing them to act as a buffer against the flattening effects of touristification. What is more, through collective maintenance by heterogeneous users, exhibiting transparency through routinised practices and sustaining relations and a wide range of activities – in Stark's terms, by ensuring heterarchies to exist – social infrastructures perpetuate their embeddedness And this can be clearly seen through observation: in a city where testimonies reveal a sense of emptiness and bitterness about the disappearance of the children playing among the *calli*, whose disappearance is felt as a great loss (Zanardi 2020), in Santa Marta they laugh and celebrate in the park, they play basketball or ride their scooter, they sing and dance in trios in the streets. And again, where the elderly exploit all sorts of shortcuts and hideaways to escape tourist fluxes during the day (Zanardi 2020), in Santa Marta they populate the *calli*, some dragging a trolley, some walking the dog, some sitting at the bar.

The above-mentioned behaviours are not casual, nor contextual: they are signs and symptoms of a relatively strong civic fabric, and in any case capable of defending the social infrastructures within which it reproduces itself. Spaces are not disembedded, de-coded, or flattened into logics of consumption: they were, are, and remain places for the people, shaped by and nurturing interactions and rituals of the everyday.

3.6 Final Remarks

What began as a simple observation gradually unfolded into an ethnographic and theoretical inquiry, culminating in an infrastructural reading of how public life and social reality are reproduced. Faced with the presence of a real urban deprivation – the

fast yet long-standing wearing away of the socio-economic fabric due to the uncontrolled expansion of a complex macro-social phenomenon such as tourism – the glaring countertrend of Santa Marta is promising. Where Airbnb presence was used to exemplify the compromised relationship between residents and their city, and thus a social reality that has been changed as its roots, the fact that Santa Marta is exempt from this, despite being a relatively small neighbourhood, has potential.

This research is not intended to ascribe special qualities to the neighbourhood, nor to prove how it is an idyllic bubble that has managed to escape the pressures of overtourism – as it would be impossible to affirm this indefinitely, given the flexible nature of tourism, which, as it has been noted, has been able to adapt through history on a par with the socio-economic conditions that sustained it. On the contrary, it ultimately argues that responding to this social challenge need not rely on exceptional measures or *ad hoc*, special policies, nor should it be dismissed as too complex or unsolvable.

The case of Santa Marta proved to be useful and telling precisely because its inverse tendency is epitomised by the presence of social infrastructures which, by etymology, are embedded in established networks and relations, and, given their foundational nature, are not exceptional. The cases taken into consideration show it quite clearly: observations revealed 'third places' (Oldenburg 1999) fulfilling commercial, recreational, and transit functions. As it was argued, behind the immediate objectives that could be met in those specific places, there was another one, underlying and shared, namely the aspiration for people to interact and be together in a non-instrumental way (Barbera 2024). This makes the concept of social infrastructure analytically powerful, as it drives beyond visible economic or demographic indicators and attends to the relational and performative foundations of urban vitality. This form of maintenance and resistance is about the reproduction of this given social reality by virtue of interactions, acknowledgments, heterogeneity of users and functions – in other words, through adaptive and sustainable heterarchies (Barbera 2024).

To conclude, one final consideration is worthy of note: as true as it is that social infrastructures are present and act as a buffer against touristification in Santa Marta, it is also true that they owe their existence, first and foremost, to a historical and socio-demographic dynamic that differs from the rest of Venice, i.e., civic fabric that had not been compromised in such an impactful way by the exodus. Rejecting a determinist view that wants to equate the presence of social infrastructure with the absence of tourism, or the *ad hoc* creation of social infrastructure to solve the problem without other social, political, and economic issues also being tackled, this thesis ultimately limits itself to saying that social infrastructures, when

present, are a good indicator of the liveability of a place. Embracing an infrastructural approach to public life broadens the conceptual lens through which we grasp the structures and intensities of urban sociality (Latham, Layton 2019). Therefore, while not being a panacea for the urban crises of our time, and although they cannot be mechanically created when all is said and done, their presence alone often signals something deeper: a form of situated and relational density that anchors liveability in the everyday. Recognising them might enable social scientists to perceive and engage with urban mechanisms through a renewed analytical lens and offer planners an entry point for thinking beyond technocratic solutions.

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