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Texts and contexts in the change
Culture, civil sphere, and social infrastructure
in urban public libraries

Doctoral dissertation

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ABSTRACT

The project aims at contributing to the sociological study of civil society and interaction in public by assessing the notion of social infrastructure and addressing the potentials and criticalities of the public library in providing conditions for solidarity and justice. Arguments about the dissolution of the public domain have enlarged the attention for a spectrum of scenes and meeting places as catalysts for civil life and participation. Despite transformations and challenges, libraries can play a critical role in urban environments and constitute an undervalued but remarkable field for social research. Public libraries can be identified historically and sociologically as institutions of contemporary society and have proved to express both hegemonic power and transformative forces. Recent trends in digitization, social and cultural diversity, and urban vitality have revived the research agenda on the bond between libraries and the social fabric. Furthermore, the Covid-19 pandemic has fueled existing trends and called for greater reflection. Based on a critical account of the literature and the historical development of the public library, aspects of the civic sphere and social exclusion are explored through an extensive qualitative case study in Bologna, Italy.

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Lo studio mira a contribuire allo studio sociologico della società civile e dell'interazione nello spazio pubblico, esaminando la nozione di infrastruttura sociale e affrontando potenzialità e limiti della biblioteca pubblica nell'offrire condizioni di solidarietà e giustizia. Dibattiti sulla dissoluzione del dominio pubblico hanno esteso l'attenzione per nuove scene urbane e luoghi di incontro come catalizzatori di partecipazione e vita civile. Nonostante trasformazioni e sfide, le biblioteche possono giocare un ruolo critico nelle città e costituiscono un campo di studio promettente e poco esplorato per la ricerca sociale. Le biblioteche pubbliche possono essere identificate, storicamente e sociologicamente, come istituzioni della società contemporanea e sono state espressione sia di egemonia che di forze trasformative. Tendenze più recenti legate alla digitalizzazione, alla diversità sociale e culturale, e alla vitalità urbana hanno rilanciato linee di ricerca sul legame tra biblioteche e tessuto sociale. La pandemia da Covid-19 ha inoltre alimentato tendenze esistenti e richiesto una più ampia riflessione. Sulla base di un resoconto critico della letteratura e dello sviluppo storico della biblioteca pubblica, aspetti della sfera civile e dell'esclusione sociale sono esplorati attraverso un'analisi qualitativa delle biblioteche comunali di Bologna.

*In the last two years, many have lost loved ones;
others have lost their way.
I dedicate this dissertation to all of them.*

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Introduction

This work illustrates civic public libraries as a significant field for social research, aiming to critically evaluate the concept of social infrastructure and contribute to the study of physical and relational conditions that can produce sociality and inclusion. Focusing on the library as a public place, the research had two specific objectives: to assess the positioning of libraries with respect to civil life, and to clarify their relationship with urban transformations and the achievement of social justice. The project involved a qualitative study of Bologna's Library and Cultural Welfare Sector (formerly the Libraries Institution of Bologna) between 2019 and 2022.

Much of the research has been conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic. The calamity has heavily affected fieldwork, causing delays and requiring adjustments. However, it also exacerbated ongoing trends in the field of study and emphasized the relevance of research topics. During the pandemic, I observed how many librarians continued to support the population and how many citizens have looked for libraries as spaces to participate and understand the world around them. For instance, librarians contacted elderly, isolated community members; while disadvantaged parents and children sought personal help to address home-schooling challenges. Many others have been left behind, and vital activities have been canceled. Nevertheless, even what was missing brought light to the library as a form of social infrastructure.

The work supports the possibility of identifying a preferential set of 'civil spaces' to trace situated practices as roots of collective life, provided that they are taken as working hypotheses, not falling into a tautological approach that assumes as social infrastructure any space in which there is social life. The literature and the historical evolution of libraries confirm them as pivotal examples of inclusion and community building. Libraries comprise

relevant activities such as the contribution to lifelong learning, free access to means and skills for democratic participation, and support to local communities in contrast to economic or social disadvantage. From a different but complementary point of view, we observe the transformation of public libraries in terms of sociability, with the emergence of services beyond traditional cultural ones and forms of meeting and socialization. These are inspired not only by the ancient myths of political deliberation but also by the new scenes of coexistence and vitality in the city, extending a cosmopolitan character to the idea of urban amenities with innovative functions and design.

Despite transformations and challenges, public libraries seem to be key actors against the dissolution of the public realm in urban environments and represent critical examples to observe the conditions for new forms of common and the shaping of urban identities. Furthermore, spaces such as libraries may provide public arenas otherwise denied to the most vulnerable, support advocacy, and contrast isolation and exclusion, thus better achieving social justice compared with more conflicting market-based meeting places. However, any political management of the public space reflects contending belongings and representations, regulating the proper use and legitimate disorder, penalizing behaviors, and stabilizing long-standing and novel forms of exclusion. As captured by some scholars, while libraries participate in significant processes that support entire neighborhoods, innovations might share codes and designs that target specific interests and tastes, or sustain broader culture-led transformations of the city image with uncertain outcomes. I argue that the relationship between social identities in these places of coexistence cannot exclude the political dimension of who and what is put into *publicness*, into visibility. Suppose we address the free accessibility of libraries as a historically negotiated regime of social recognition inherent to the public domain and its ambivalences. In that case, we may question the asymmetries of power and the boundaries of urban ownership and belonging in constructing the urban common.

Overview of the structure

The first part of this dissertation elucidates the subject in the context of previous studies and relevant theories. Chapters 1 and 2 constitute a single argument but attempt to break down two facets of the sociological problem: the understanding of the library as a public space and the link between the library and the social fabric, often articulated through the theme of the 'social library.' Established perspectives and processes from the library literature are exposed under a sociological gaze and enhanced with a novel discussion based on philosophical-political and sociological theory.

Contrary to the image that some may have of libraries, they are indeed contending places,

(re)producing competing representations: both in their own regard, vis à vis a long-debated ‘social’ function, and concerning their patrons. In a broad sense, the library’s history is ancient, but the local public library can be historically and sociologically identified as an institution of contemporary society. It also proved to be a significant institution both of hegemonic power and progressive forces. Considering a *longue durée* perspective, the library institution reminds us how a traditionally public place may not belong to everyone and always maintains ties to issues such as public order and the control of the development of the urban fabric. Part of the ambivalence originates in the nineteenth-century development of the English and American *Public Library*, which took part in the project of the public sphere. Attempting to move beyond differences of class and status, nevertheless it reflected matters of pedagogical and paternalistic intervention on the working class and the growing cities, through forms of censorship and criminalization of conducts. Observing spaces such as the library, I suggest we question the ‘suspension’ implied in their socially constructed neutrality and address the idea of recognition: the mutual relationship between social identities cannot exclude the political dimension of what has been put into *publicness*, into visibility. Otherwise, we lose the political role these spaces assume in the making of the community. In this perspective, I argue that the public domain is not and does not belong to a specific group but emerges as a territory of visibility, a precarious regime of recognition shaped by the practices of hegemonic subjects and counter-actors.

Keeping in mind the political dimension, I approach a framework at once promising and challenging to a certain degree. I implement Klinenberg’s idea of *Palaces for the people* (2018), borrowed from a Carnegie libraries’ motto, to address a comprehensive set of theories that converge on the emphasis on physical settings fostering community, creating social ties, and allowing forms of suspension of chaotic urban life, and public arenas of peaceful interaction. They share an interest in the dissolution and recreation of democracy in the city and the focus on a broad set of public and semi-private meeting places related to ideas such as the ‘*third place*’ (Oldenburg 1999). Some scholars draw on traditional discussions on social capital, civility, and urban vitality. Others focus on topics such as ethnicity and ethnographic works. There are also heterogeneous social theories in the library and information science, such as the conceptualization of ‘low-intensive meeting places’ (Audunson 2005) or the idea of libraries as ‘knowledge piazzas’ (Agnoli 2009). A prominent topic concerns the problematization of these places as ‘authentically public’ and how they re-shape the ambivalence between hegemonic power and the impulse toward inclusivity, as constantly intertwined in the contemporary city. The idea of the ‘paradox of the public’ reminds us of the ambivalent development of a *common* in which recognition and accessibility coexist, but also control, restriction, and exclusion. This tension emerges prominently in the ideal of

universalism ascribed to the venues of the social infrastructure as a realm of suspension of social difference.

In order to analyze the conditions provided by the places of the social infrastructure to the creation of an urban common – a collective arena of civil life and justice – my argument suggests placing them in the *public domain*, intended as a precarious territory of affection and intervisibility based on flexible but persistent asymmetries shaped by hegemonic subjects and counter-actors. As a *heterotopia* (Foucault 1984), the library can play a role (neither neutral nor spontaneous) in circulating the ‘texts’ of collective life; that is, acting on the definition of what on who should be made visible (thus recognized) and providing the means to act on this visibility. By combining symbolic distinctions and situated practices, the kind of rearrangements posed by libraries seems primarily marked by civic codes (Alexander 2006). Ethnographic and relational approaches can observe the regimes of accessibility to the *Other* – physical and human – overcoming idealizations and pointing out the trajectories, discontinuities, and forms of interaction that are the substance of this civic translation as a mode of association (Latour 2005). From this perspective, I started my fieldwork in Bologna public libraries.

Research involves a series of alive and entangled moments. To that of textualization correspond the responsibilities of argumentation and restitution. Often, a doctoral dissertation is neither the only nor the last opportunity to synthesize a project, but it fully recalls the urgency of these responsibilities to the attention of a specific ‘community of inquiry’ (Tavory & Timmermans 2014). Thus, Part II is dedicated to my choices and my research path. As a novice sociologist, I have often encountered and questioned the themes of the validity of social research and the generalization of its results, particularly along the lines between the concepts of applied sociology and social theory and between the fields of quantitative and qualitative methods. My personal and provisional stand is situated in a path that I consider quite acknowledged, if not established, and which emerges in chapters 3 and 4 in the form of ‘conditional plausibility.’ I am convinced that carrying out qualitative research is what La Mendola (2009), recalling Melucci and Buber, described as the elaboration of a ‘plausible representation of representations’ for which we take responsibility. As researchers, to present the contours of our representations it means to consider our initial personal and methodological ‘postures’ and all subsequent adaptations that have been chosen or experienced during the investigation, from its design to its conclusion. These aspects do not intend to justify preconceptions or support methods’ primacy over experience. On the contrary, they critically and reflexively place scholars vis-à-vis the *Muses* of social research (Cardano 2020) and present how we chose to follow them through the different moments of inquiry.

Building on the arguments presented in Part I, Chapter 3 outlines my research questions, recalling their theoretical foundation, interest, and acceptability. Chapter 4 presents the most relevant factors of mutual adaptation between question, method, and empirical context. Through a narrative history of my research, the chapter represents an essential opportunity for reflexivity and clarification. Both sections address aspects related to the Covid-19 pandemic. As mentioned, this exceptional phenomenon has led to a series of relevant changes for the social system as a whole and the library field precisely, with effects that are still uncertain. For this reason, reformulating the objectives and research questions has considered limits and new demands. The health emergency has also represented the most significant personal and professional challenge along the path of my doctoral program.

The last part of this work is focused on discussing the case study, framing Bologna libraries in their urban environment, and considering social and cultural trajectories in the city. My analysis is guided by documents, observational notes, and interviews. To further outline the relationship between libraries and the city, I illustrate how libraries responded to the difficulties associated with the lockdown. Many interesting themes have emerged from this very moment of discontinuity. Local public libraries have faced some rooted issues and offered answers to the unexpected scenario, mobilizing matters of organization, communication, and solidarity. Chapter 5 provides a bridge in the overall structure, relating research questions to the scenario of Italian libraries and Bologna's civic libraries, and introducing some relevant dimensions to develop their exploration. Among the most relevant issues to date, I highlighted the role of the library in an integrated idea of well-being, the topic of citizen involvement throughout life, and the strategic importance of outstanding cases in a fragmented and data-deficient scenario. Concerning Bologna, I have given particular interest to historical specificities and the connections between the present network of municipal libraries with new facets of urban planning. Current phenomena are marked by tension between the city's 'historical' and 'intended' polycentrism and new trends that undermine the proactive potential of Bologna civil life. In Chapter 6, I delve into the relationship between libraries and change, focusing on the most recent and contingent themes: the organizational transformation of the Library and Cultural Welfare Sector and the pandemic crisis. The two processes jointly questioned latent and emerging elements in the relationship between libraries and society. Looking beyond the emergency, they offer opportunities to observe the behavior of libraries in the face of rapid discontinuities and to interrogate in novel ways the elaboration of critical aspects of the library as a form of social infrastructure: the digital, interaction in the library, the role of expertise, and the role of the library in the city. Some of these processes contribute to exploring the library as a social object in novel ways. From the concept of 'explicitation' (Sloterdijk 2015), revisited from a

sociological perspective, I suggest a theory of organization consistent with the proposed theoretical framework. The last chapter addresses the central theme of forms of sociality in a complex sense, describing how they are understood and observable in Bologna. Through some observations, I shed light on observed phenomena. Then, in a novel way, I study the library's role during the crisis and discuss boundary-making processes related to the library and their implications in terms of the civil sphere.

In summary, the study has followed critical sites of the public library – space, interaction, discourses – trying to translate them from challenging landscapes of meaning (such as the social infrastructure or the library as *Piazza*) into a new dense description. While the formers constitute eloquent but 'uncertain' models addressing a 'social' that has yet to be defined, the approach elaborated here sought to hold together the different sites that shape the library as a complex system. In the Conclusion, I present a synthesis of the overall arguments and illustrate the library through the idea of *civil rechainning*.

Part I.

The sociological study of libraries:
framework and emerging questions

CHAPTER 1

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LIBRARY AND THE PUBLIC

In sociology, urban studies, and library science, many reflections on the library as an agent of integration and democracy describe it as a quintessence of the public space and an ideal expression of the public sphere. In order to understand what this might mean and in what terms the library might represent a place of interest for the study of society, this chapter offers an argument that situates this sociological object in the notion of the public. This primary reflection will allow us to present the first set of discussions in support of the relevance of this field and some of the emerging research questions.

A preliminary clarification of the ‘public library’ in the context of this thesis is in order. First, I am not referring specifically or exclusively to libraries administered by the community through a public entity, such as the state or the municipality. More comprehensively, the object of this study is the general ‘free access’ library. This provisional definition responds to the extensive criticism against the rigid assumption of the public-private duality, to the extent that such formal distinction is complex and possibly misleading in studying localized social practices. In most national contexts, local public libraries are indeed publicly administrated. However, these services are defined by various norms and supported by diverse subjects among public and private actors, foundations, and philanthropic institutions.¹ What these libraries have in common – progressively clarified in the chapters –

¹ As for the Italian scenario, I mainly refer to generalist libraries under public ownership. However, the Italian expression ‘*biblioteche di pubblica lettura*’ (public reading libraries) is somewhat ineffective and misleading. The Italian public reading library does not fully overlap with the Anglo-Saxon idea of ‘public library’ (cf. 1.1) and does not correspond only to publicly managed services but indicates a type of function oriented toward the public library standard. According to Istat, this phrase denotes libraries that meet the information, educational and recreational needs of the entire community and ensures book lending, i.e., providing general services to the entire population of a local community, generally through public funding (ISO Standard 2789:2013). In Chapter 5, I will return to the topic, discussing the very fragmented scenario. Municipal general libraries constitute the main example of library with a universal character and provide some degree of comparison for the purposes of this

is the vocation of free access and the promotion of cultural heritage and education for all. Academic libraries, school libraries, and archive and documentation libraries will not be specific objects either, although they will be considered comparatively regarding accessibility and the definition of target publics.

As will emerge, the issue of public management nevertheless stands as a critical dimension, at least from four perspectives. First is the range of funding and norms offered by nation-states to ensure access to documents and services. Second, the meanings associated with library public access as part of the democratic process (in many Western countries since the nineteenth century). Third, the emergence of a cultural service capable of limiting or counterbalancing, to some extent, the exclusive interests of the competitive market. Finally, the theme of 'public management' brings up the problem of the public responsibility for the service, mobilizing (similarly to other sectors) claims and judgments regarding its collective value and the margins of its legitimate use.

Another due consideration is that the following analyses will address sociological problems primarily pointed at the libraries in the Global North. More specifically, many of the debates, the questions, and, not least, the experiences observed refer to forms of the so-called Anglo-Saxon Public Library and to the alternatives and transformations that have been inspired by it. I will attempt to problematize this specificity where possible and pertinent. Moreover, I hope to persuade that many of the reflections herein may shed light on different institutions and offer a broader contribution to urban public space and social justice in all democracies, in effect and in becoming.

I have outlined at least three coordinates concisely to orient my discourse on the positioning of the library provisionally: 1) the public as a form of *collective management* institutionalized in the modern state; 2) the public as an expression of *accessibility* to a collective good by citizens; 3) the public as a *varied* ensemble of private subjects. Jointly, three arguments appear to be relevant in the discussion: a) the *lability* between public and private; b) the link with the idea of a *common* (a possible sphere of collective life); c) the *porosity* of the public between the spatialized dimension (the public place) and the abstract dimension (the civil sphere). The following pages will address these concepts, mobilizing some perspectives in the vast theoretical reflection on the concept of public space. It is neither in the interest nor in the possibilities of this work to offer an exhaustive overview. In my argument, I will solicit scholars from various disciplines who have extensively used theories and tools of social research and political philosophy in studying libraries and comparable spaces. They constitute the principal framework within the library science debate on the forms of the

study.

‘social library’ in the past decades and for those who approach the topic in the fields of urban sociology and civil society. Bringing these discussions into dialogue with some of the more accomplished theories on the public allows for discussing some of their limitations, theoretically justifies some connections between fields of study, and supports the sociological relevance of my questions.

Before getting into the core of the discussion, a historical reconstruction of the local public library as a contemporary institution of the public sphere will present a long-term reading of the phenomenon and introduce some early insight into the connections between public space, citizenship, and democracy in this field. The following paragraphs will discuss a theoretical framework that accepts the dimension of the public as a heuristic and sets the base for the next chapter, which will focus on the civil sphere and libraries as meeting places.

1.1 A long history in brief: contemporary public libraries

Although the precise processes by which libraries engage in the public sphere seem empirically underdeveloped (Vårheim et al. 2019), the connection between the development of public libraries and the bourgeois arena of deliberative exchange has been supported in many research areas (Barbier 2013; Karstedt ([1966] 1980); Newman 2007; Traniello 1997, 2005; Williamson 2000). Sociologically, the modern evolution of libraries is framed in the industrial emergence of new informative, educational, and recreational requests. First, the institution had moved from an erudite notion of the public (library as *bibliotheca*) to a national good to be preserved and made accessible for the common interest (as in the French *dépôt littéraire*), introducing the idea of a popular service driven by the concept of utility (Barbier 2013). Then, the nineteenth-century institutionalization of *Public Libraries* in the United Kingdom and the United States reflected the liberal development of a public sphere (Traniello 1997; Williamson 2000). Modern libraries progressively included a broader segment of the population, addressing the problems of illiteracy and democratic participation among the lower classes. However, the association between the library and the public sphere is not purely historical since the notion lies in the founding ideals of free access and equality that represent the official guidelines of the contemporary library worldwide, and many scholars have turned to the public sphere and civil society theorizations to interpret library position within the multidimensional role of social infrastructure today.

Early development

The histories of the library (and of libraries) are many and diverse. Most prevalent among

them are ‘universalizing’ attempts, accounts directed at understanding the meaning of the library starting from antiquity and looking worldwide. Some accounts respond to disciplinary interests, but the shared risk is to offer a ‘blurred’ image and favor the evolution of the book as a material form or object of lending (see the valid study by Frédéric Barbier, 2013). Others lack a historically grounded reflection on the social impact of the library (Solimine 2004) or, as pointed out by Petrucciani (2003), favor “erudite macro histories” that focus more on collections or architectures and underestimate “what it meant for a library to be ‘open,’ how much it was so, how many and which people went there.” In this regard, Karstedt ([1966] 1980) and Traniello (1997; 2005) suggested studying the contemporary local library from its earliest formulations in post-revolutionary France, and the United Kingdom and the United States during the nineteenth century².

The emergence of the bourgeois public sphere (Habermas 1989[1962]) was combined with the spread of the press and a new attitude toward knowledge as a tool for the benefit of commerce and the common man. Thus, it constituted a shift from the *publicum* as the counterpart of public power to a sphere of private subjects. This new body politic – still distinct from the people (vulgar public) – was composed of the bourgeoisie and new intellectuals, who contributed to reinterpreting the notion of the library from an erudite accumulation (the *bibliotheca*, as storage of knowledge, as opposed to the pragmatic *librairie*) toward a national asset, to be made contemporary and accessible (Traniello 1997, 2005)³. The expropriation of many library collections and their reorganization – in France after the revolution and in other contexts due to Napoleonic influence – introduced the first great examples of public libraries. However, based on insufficient resources and anchored on a strongly nationalist idea (reverting, to a large extent, to the idea of cultural heritage), the first libraries of contemporary Europe lacked the necessary elements to become truly open to all. This happened through the subsequent formulations of popular libraries.

The idea of popular libraries and the ‘Public Library’

In the context of nineteenth-century England, along with the expansion of local political autonomy, new educational and informational needs emerged, determined by the social

² To observe the origin of the library in modern and contemporary history it is not to deny the role of ancient and humanist traditions but to acknowledge the link between contemporary public libraries and the development of liberal democracies. It remains interesting to problematize how, despite historical specificities, the idea of ‘authentically’ public often passes through the account of private and erudite collections, or ideals such as the *piazza* and the *agora*, both in the common sense and in the field of library professionals (cf 1.3).

³ A detailed study of the lexical passage between *bibliotheca* and *library* in different contexts sounds illuminating in this regard and might be compared with Habermas’s analysis of the evolution of ‘public,’ ‘popular,’ ‘publicity,’ and ‘public opinion.’

changes of the industrial revolution. The explosion of periodicals and *cabinets de lecture* was followed by new issues related to the subordinate classes: political claims, but also the concern for their literacy in the interest of the economy and the social order. As an answer, a new reflection emerged regarding libraries, combining the idea of cultural heritage with the promotion of education and information addressed ‘to the present day.’ Moreover, the need for truly freely open venues (i.e., accessible to all and free of charge) was effectively endorsed for the first time (Barbier 2013, Capaccioni 2017, Traniello 1997). In the second half of the century, on the initiative of liberal William Ewart and librarian Edward Edwards, the creation of new free libraries funded by a special local tax was legislated (*Public Libraries Act* 1850). Traniello (1997:257) emphasizes how the Anglo-Saxon *Public Library* transformed the ‘public,’ adding to the meaning of “public accessibility of the structure” the qualification of a place “established by a public act of a community and intended for a [growing] public toward which it is called to perform an active function.” In this way, the English public library emerged as a public space aimed primarily at educating the growing urban masses and mitigating their revolutionary potential (Williamson 2000, Peatling 2002, Audunson 2005, Newman 2007). In North America, public libraries funded by states and foundations emerged similarly, with the overall goal of responding to cultural consumption among emerging social groups and promoting acculturation and pacification of large migratory flows through reading (Campbell 1971, Boyer 1992, Wiegand 2015). Thus, the library took part in the slow transformation of the democratic space and the public sphere toward more inclusive accessibility, albeit one marked by significant exclusions (Fraser 1990). The demarcation of public library space reflected a typically liberal, legally regulated demarcation that did not fully capture the complex practical conditions and limits (including symbolic ones) that restrict the mere ‘freedom’ to enter (Lees 1997). Since its early stages, the Public Library embodied the liberal idea of meritocratic access to the means of self-development and the nineteenth-century attention to morality and control. Based on stigmatized assumptions about specific groups, a broad spectrum of leisure practices and information needs have been targeted and criminalized, calling attention to public decency and reflecting the interests of hegemonic classes (Peatling 2002; Williamson 2000)⁴. At the same time, one of the most significant concerns of conservative forces at the time (expressed by the Tory opposition to the bills) highlights the revolutionary potential of this new library model. Through the very means of cultural elevation, the possibility of a critique of the order itself was nurtured (Traniello 1997,

⁴ We should recall in this regard not only the bans to ‘dirty’ people, but also the cut of periodicals pages relating to betting, or the condemnation of genres such as the *penny dreadful*, typically oriented to the working class and considered scandalous, uneducational and complicit in inspiring reverie and social discontent.

2005).

The connection between the Public Library and the idea of widespread popular libraries is a crucial element in understanding the role of the Anglo-Saxon model in comparison to many other national cases. Between the 1800s and the early 1900s, popular libraries emerged as solutions against illiteracy: night schools, early school libraries, editorial productions aimed at the popular classes, and circulating collections. Developed throughout Europe by the private initiative of intellectuals and religious and political groups in the United States and the United Kingdom, they took the specific and fortunate form of the Public Library. Except for some northern and central European countries, where the Public Library was quickly translated, in most national states libraries did not assume such a structured character until after World War II due to new socio-political transformations (Traniello 1997, Barbier 2013)⁵.

Focusing on Italy, the pre-unification documentary patrimony constituted a vital legacy, coming from humanist and ecclesiastical collections. However, with the emergence of an Italian public sphere, such collections appeared rich in number and prestige but meager in size and “not in step with the times” that is, unsuited to the new cultural and scientific needs (Traniello 2005). The fragmented library policy after 1861 and the multiple factors of backwardness, which persisted for a century, repeatedly highlighted the inadequacy of public initiative and the development of popular libraries mainly on private initiative. Increasing literacy and secularization of readings were not followed by investment, reproducing a vision of libraries primarily as a heritage to be preserved – an image that not only perpetuated the scarcity of readers but persists, with due distinctions, in many current problems (*cf.* Ch.5). The private initiative, which in Italy was supported by subjects from the Catholic world and the private market, was typically oriented toward the poor and opposed to the slow and uneven state action (as in the evocative case of Giulio Einaudi; see Del Fabbro 2019, Faggiolani 2020). However, even private initiatives could not support the birth of libraries homogeneously and systemically.

Moreover, these experiences were particularly imbued with an elitist character: promoted by privileged subjects and aimed at popular education as a sense of elevation and participation in the values and models of bourgeois society. For a long time, the Italian library remained split between large special collections and popular libraries intended as donations

⁵ An interesting case, which I will not explore here, is that of totalitarian regimes. As for the national varieties in the acceptance of the English model, I recommend Traniello’s distinction between contexts that ‘assimilated’ the Public Library (Norway, Sweden and Denmark), the ‘nationalization’ of popular libraries (Netherlands, Belgium and Finland), and the dualistic evolution between civic and archival libraries (Germany, Austria and Mediterranean countries). On the comparison between German civic libraries and the Public Library, see also Karstedt ([1966] 1980).

to the lower classes⁶. Nevertheless, the panorama of popular libraries generated a vibrant range of experiences, which formed a local base for later municipal libraries and forms of appropriation as places for the local community.⁷ Although local public authorities own many public libraries in Italy today, the legal definition in Italy has long been fragmentary. Even the dissemination and decentralized management of libraries, inspired by the Public Library (approached typically from an American perspective, partly due to the political scene), was the subject of a long discussion that came to merge, in the 1980s, with the late institutional completion of the Italian administrative regions (Del Fabbro 2019).

The library also inherited from the nineteenth century the expanded ideal of citizenship and equality. It is still revered as a perfect embodiment of democracy, a promoter of the knowledge necessary for participation, and a communicative agency open to all members of society (IFLA 2001). The library can interpret and modify its political and social environment through its resources and expand the effective inclusion of disadvantaged groups (Reith 1984, Bloch & Hesse 1993). Tools and resources for people with disabilities, expansion of services in collaboration with municipalities, job searching support and other welfare services, rooms for local communities and associations, language courses, and creative workshops for teenagers are some of the many initiatives experimented with in libraries around the world. On the one hand, these activities testified to new ways of actualizing the library ideal of access to the “knowledge useful for shaping happy individuals and societies” (Del Fabbro 2019: 64). On the other, they realized a gradual extension beyond the traditional centrality of the book and collective memory, arising new questions (Agnoli 2009, Bergamaschi 2015, Galluzzi 2019). In the next chapter, I will return specifically to these developments, as they are central to emergent debates about the possible boundaries of the ‘social function’ of the public library (Faggiolani and Galluzzi 2018, Del Fabbro 2019, Ferrieri 2020) and the *popularization* of services and forms of aggregation close to the world of consumption and urban everyday life (Lees 1997, Skot-Hansen, Rasmussen, and Jochumsen 2013, Klinenberg 2018).

⁶ From Del Fabbro’s case study an undervalued hypothesis emerges. In response to long-term limits, local participation, as opposed to centralized and top-down promotion, emerges as a promising way for reimagining Italian public libraries. This is a slippery subject, but one that supports the relevance of cases characterized by polycentrism and civil participation (such as Bologna) in the sociological analysis of the library as a place.

⁷ By instance, Chiara Faggiolani (2021) recently addressed community-building experiences in the libraries of Ina-Casa neighborhoods.

1.2 Hegemony and social change: positioning libraries in the public domain

Theoretical reflection on the concept of public space is unarguably extensive. Concerning the local library debate, I refer primarily to the strand that questions the relationship between political and physical expression of what is public and private in the context of urban spaces. In particular, it concerns those very diverse perspectives that share “the belief both that there is a strong connection between urban public spaces and citizenship and that the social mix that can be created in public spaces (i.e., in free spaces open to the public) is the precondition for a shared civic formation’ (Mazzette 2013: xxiv). The starting point, however, is the much-cited concept of the public sphere.

The contemporary library and the public sphere

Starting from the historical contexts of England, France, and Germany between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Jürgen Habermas (1989[1962]) has outlined the ideal type of the bourgeois *public sphere*. The concept identifies a body of private subjects who come together based on common interests to discuss issues that contribute to the public interest. This idea took shape in modern Europe as a sphere opposed to absolutist states, and the history of the book collections made accessible for common utility, which Habermas himself briefly analyzed, illustrates an appropriate socio-historical step (*cf.* 1.1). The adequacy of this concept and the analysis of its development have been the subject of numerous critical elaborations, especially since the 1990s. One debate particularly relevant to this analysis concerns the ability of the public sphere to adequately capture the role of different groups in the context of the social transformations at the origin of European democracies. This recalls what has been mentioned about library patrons and is inscribed in a critical ambivalence between democratic extension and social exclusion, which I will provisionally call the ‘paradox of the public.’

Among the predominant positions, Nancy Fraser (1990) argued that the public sphere is a liberal idealization, a bourgeois utopia never realized. This successful critique is carried forward by considering all those groups excluded from the sphere described by Habermas (at least in his first reconstruction) or by recognizing the political agency of some of these subjects as members of non-bourgeois public spheres. The first contribution is undoubtedly that of the feminist tradition (see, among others, Landes 1988, Ryan 1990, Eley 1991). The problem of gender exclusion can be summarized as the consideration of the public sphere as a sphere predominantly represented by bourgeois men who were going to delineate themselves as a universal class governing society. Proponents of this critique highlighted the female role played by members of alternative civic spheres, such as voluntary political

associations of women and reformist and philanthropic societies. Outside of similarly bourgeois contexts, another contribution was that of women involved in the class struggle. A similar critique of the Habermasian public sphere can also be extended to the consideration of many other groups, as in the case of the broader mobilization of the urban proletariat (Thompson 1963) or the invisible minorities within the new migratory flows to large industrial cities (Audunson 2005). As I have recalled, in this complex social transformation, the exciting history of the Public Library began as an exceptional tax-funded service motivated by political reasons, along with other cultural institutions (*Museum Act* 1845). Fraser wonders whether this was a beautiful, failed experiment or whether the public sphere was not an emancipatory force but rather an instrument of domination. In sum, she argues that the public sphere established itself as an ideal norm, a bourgeois conception that did not require the elimination of social inequality for democratic politics.

In critiquing the public sphere, the concept of counter-publics stands out as a vital component. Margaret Crawford (1995) embraces the argument of the public sphere as terrain of exclusion but claims that much of urban collective life, beginning with the myth of the agora, has always been built on binary logic in action. She then proposes an idea of the public as a heuristic to be tested in the field and able to recognize the role of counter-publics. Crawford's focus is on marginalized groups – especially the homeless – offering an approach aimed at testing through the study of practices the forms of civil solidarity based on accessibility and confrontation, even conflictual. Crawford dwells mainly on the “new forms of insurgent citizenship’ (1995: 6-8): homeless citizens, for example, who live most of their private dimension in public space, can claim new forms of citizenship in the latter. The topic of the homeless and marginal ethnic groups is particularly representative in the case of the library. Indeed, even in this place, they are bearers of blurred and porous boundaries between public space and domestic life (Paugam and Giorgetti 2013, Marler 2020). These groups have long interrogated legitimate library use practices and the library's role in formulating stigma and criminalizing procedures (Chelton 2002; Ferrell 2010). The issue, which developed from forms of control of the public and censorship of practices as early as the nineteenth century, has been elaborated in the discussion of the so-called ‘problem patrons,’ ‘problem behaviors’ or, more recently and more critically, ‘patrons with special needs.’ Despite the emergence of critical understanding and a growing sensitivity to language, a dominant reading of the phenomenon remains prevalent in the debate. The political agency of vulnerable subjects can often be fragmentary, with a limited regime of visibility, or characterized by a prevalence of utilitarian motivations over ethical-political ones; nevertheless, it challenges the hegemony (Brighenti 2010). Significant legal cases and news accounts indeed witness these efforts (Barrows 2014; Shuman 1989), but so do everyday practices that redefine one's visibility

(Marler 2020). Helping to shape usage practices and highlight new needs and rights (Barrows 2014; Gaudet 2013; Kosmicki 2020; Hagen-McIntosh 2016; Williams 2016), marginal patrons sometimes lead to the creation of partnerships with social services or forms of proximity welfare in libraries themselves (Ayers 2006; Richter et al. 2019; Willett and Broadley 2011).

Mazzette (2013: xxviii) identifies Crawford's proposal as divergent from the skepticism of scholars such as Richard Sennet, Michael Sorkin, or Habermas himself, who – in unarguably different versions – share a 'narrative of loss.' Crawford's idea of public and democracy seems capable of grasping the asymmetries of power within urban areas and the possible redefinitions able to reaffirm an extended 'right to the city' (Lefebvre). In summary, the issue of the library's most vulnerable patrons does not constitute the primary focus of this study, but it does provide critical arguments to approach the multiplicity of the public through a conceptual lens. Rather than following the sense of distrust evoked by the end of public life, the most refined contribution to keep a critical edge is precisely the redefinition of 'publicness' outside binary readings and attentive to the redefinition of who and what is made visible.

Social solidarity and the politics of visibility

The hypothesis about multiple publics and the analysis of the practices that redefine the asymmetries between them further support the extension of theoretical reflection between political and spatial conceptions of the public. Andrea Brighenti (2010; 2016), highlighting how public communication does not simply "occur" but "takes place," proposes an approach that weaves together the political-communicative analysis of the public sphere, the procedural-performative aspect of interaction in public, and the dimension of materially mediated power in urban public space. From the first set of reflections, he embraces the contributions to understanding a public sphere as world-in-common, elaborated by scholars such as Habermas, Arendt, Bobbio and critics such as Fraser and Calhoun. He emphasizes how normative-procedural visions of democratic social space offer the possibility to grasp the conjunction between visibility and publicity (part of the *Öffentlichkeit*). The study of public space practices, starting from interactionist sociologists such as Goffman and Lofland, would shed light on the contribution of intervisibility between actors in the production of the public through social rituals. Finally, the consideration of the "city public" indicates the urban environment as a complex territory of visibility and asymmetries, in which the ideas of access and recognition assume extreme importance. To outline this "territory of ecologies," he suggests applying the concept of the public domain to be interpreted and analyzed as a regime of visibility. In this perspective, "the public domain exists as the point of convergence and

in the one of indistinction between material and immaterial processes” (2010: 110). In aversion to traditional dualisms, he implies that the meanings of the public as a common are produced between a *here-and-now* of living and an *elsewhere-and-at-other-times* in acts of “inscription and projection” in associative form (Latour 2005). According to Brighenti, these are the processes in which we need to observe and evaluate power arrangements, understood in the Foucauldian sense as “ways of associating and dividing, distributing and partitioning, visibilizing and invisibilizing” (Brighenti 2010: 111). The idea of the public domain as a territory defined by a regime of visibility is in analogy with Foucault’s notion of the *régime de veridiction*: “the management of visibilities is a social enterprise whose output is a field of interactions [...] defining the reciprocal constitutions of subjects through their positioning within a field of visibility symmetries and asymmetries.” This discursive regime constructs the space in which the visibility positions of actors define the normative dimension and the tensions “between the possible and the proper, between what can be seen and what should or should not be seen, between who can and who cannot see whom” (p. 45). This regime can undoubtedly present itself in the form of hegemony (Gramsci 1971[1929-1935]), exercised as normative forms of the division of power, of the articulations of civil society, and of the expressions of the public sphere: indeed, the strategies of visibility consist in the possibility of selecting *publicity*, designating the horizons of social life. The reflection on the effectiveness of the public sphere raised by the feminist critique, which recalls the problem of the plurality of subaltern counter-publics, is resolved according to Brighenti by distinguishing the dimension of the public (“or better, publicity”) from any specific associated group or arena in which it is encountered. If the public domain is a regime, “one cannot be the public, one can only be in public: the public, in other words, is ‘bridging’ rather than ‘bonding.’” a register of interaction that calls the idea of recognition⁸ (2010: 175).

The existence of communicative formations alternative to a hegemonic public sphere is a fundamental reality, but by maintaining the idea of multiple spheres, they risk being non-public publics (pp. 114-117). On the contrary, by investigating the regimes of visibility that define the public, we can recognize the different degrees of the possibility of being subjects in these relations. A certain ambivalence is constitutive of all visibility, but by scrutinizing current regimes – and I argue that the library can be studied as such – it is possible to trace the specific conditions under which recognition is (re)defined⁹. This perspective suggests a

⁸ In this respect, Brighenti follows James Donald’s (2003) distinction between the *fact* of community and the *question* of community. According to him, the public refers to the latter.

⁹ In other words, Brighenti suggests that «visibility can be attributed to sites, subjects, events, and rhythms. The social effects of visibility are not linearly related to visibility per se, but rather depend on the interaction of certain sites, subjects, and rhythms.» Therefore, «places and social sites can be explored on the basis of both the affordances of visibility that they offer to different types of actors

stimulating way to address the problem of the multiplicity of publics through a theoretically rich gaze based on an empirical mapping of practices and meanings. Continuing from the critical revision of the public sphere, we can deepen the theme of solidarity and the symbolic dimension of inequalities, approaching the discourse on the intersection between the public and civil society.

In light of the criticisms raised, Habermas revised his notion, remarking on its regulated nature and ideal-typical function as a structure of intermediation, but acknowledging some limits in his account. On the one hand, he recognizes the existence of other ‘publics’ and alternative spheres to the bourgeois ones, not only as historically defeated forms but as capable of rebalancing power arrangements (Habermas 1989). On the other hand, he also admits the partial inadequacy of the public sphere in the context of democracies based on the welfare state, recognizing the existence of scale differences on the global level and different levels of communicative density, as in the case of the “ephemeral” public sphere realized in the streets or cafes, and the “abstract” one created, for example, by private readers (*id.* 1996). Embracing some of the feminist analysis and reassessing the role of the ‘plebeian’ public sphere, Habermas identified the self-transformative potential of the liberal public sphere. Its contradictory institutionalization involved a series of social tensions that, in the transition to the mass democracies of the welfare state, expressed a contrast with the early political public sphere (of the nineteenth century). This transformation has been possible because, unlike the eighteenth-century opposition between the *public* and the *people*, culture and counterculture have met in a way that transformed bourgeois discourse and its self-referential premises from within (*id.* 1989).

While not addressing the dialectic around the concept, this renewed interpretation of the public sphere has recently found its way into analyzing the library as an institution of a “sustainable public sphere” (Audunson 2005; Audunson et al. 2007, 2019, 2020)¹⁰. Combining a focus on the Northern European context with an international and historical perspective, the proponents of this approach identify a transformation of the library’s public sphere over time. In particular, multiculturalism and digitization, interpreted as the most relevant socio-cultural transformations to understand the role of local libraries (and LAMs institutions in general) today, would mark a difference between a first ‘library as public

and the use that is made of these affordances.” To capture the complexity and ambivalence of visibility as *affectiveness*, a socio-technical and bio-political demarcation of the social space, he connotes three types: visibility of recognition, visibility of control, and visibility of spectacle (see 2010: 37-52).

¹⁰ This research network is composed of social and information scientists clustered particularly around the research projects ‘PLACE – Public Libraries Arenas for Citizenship’ and ‘ALMPUB – [LAM] ALM-Field, Digitalization and the Public Sphere.’ These projects represent interesting examples in the librarianship scene, moving from themes of the public sphere to explore the forms of the library as a ‘low intensive’ meeting place (*cf.* Ch 3).

sphere’ – in which assimilatory logic, paternalistic and hegemonic vocation, and a strong belief in the book as a means of integration prevail – and a second ‘library as the public sphere,’ more oriented toward the realization of a mature ideal of democracy based on the recognition of diversity (Audunson 2005). The first aspect, once again, refers to the historical origin of libraries in the socio-cultural changes during the industrial revolution of the nineteenth century and the first great migratory waves: the library, as part of the project of ‘useful knowledge’ supporting the aggregation of subjects into the public sphere, acted as a positivist-utilitarian institution for the social integration within the new cities. It was not yet an instrument for the realization of a “tolerating and stimulating pluralism” but an expression of bourgeois integration “into the economy and culture of the industrial society – into the dominating culture” (pp. 430-434). Later and progressively, this new educational and cultural arena participated in new periods of cultural and demographic ferment, taking part in “the coming of the multicultural society as we know it today.” The defining shift would be the cultural revolutions of the decades 1960-1970. The institutionalization of teen and youth cultures as fields of alternative expression, the critique of canons both in everyday life and in the fields of knowledge and education, and the relevance of new migratory flows from the global South are some of the processes that would be involved in shifting the traditional role of the library from the promotion of cultural and scientific standards to an idea of democratic solidarity based on acceptance and expression of diversity (*cf.* 3.1).

The concept of multiculturalism mobilized by these scholars is taken as a simplistic image of the present day and remains somewhat vaguely distinguished as a specific form of integration into a democratic society. However, taking these transformations as trends, the idea of the library as an expression of a sustainable public sphere can benefit from the language of Civil Sphere Theory, with particular reference to the modes of incorporation into civil society (Alexander 2001, 2006), and interpret the critique to the public sphere as a matter of consensus implied in the democratic project¹¹. Conceived as an alternative theoretical strategy, CST offers a non-parsimonious account of civil society that attempts to de-idealize the public sphere and fully capture the performative nature of the processes that materialized the collective ambition for a ‘common.’ Whereas each non-civil sphere creates specific inequalities underpinned by their respective norms, the civil sphere of solidarity perceives actions contrary to its egalitarian terms as violations. Such actual intrusions generate occasions for the *de-fusion* of civil life. However, the democratic process persists as a social fact in constant becoming through acts of contestation and reparation performed

¹¹ This potential is partly captured in Larsen (2020), who reads libraries as institutions of the civic sphere in that they can simultaneously support integration and potential for social criticism.

according to collective meaning-making structures (according to Alexander, these are typically binary codes: good and evil, sacred and profane, just and unjust). Institutions such as the library could be interpreted as a liminal mediator between civic and non-civic values, reinforcing symbolic boundaries and fostering civic repair. Interrogating Audunson's proposal outside the field of information science, it seems clear that a sociology of the library cannot but frame this sociological object within a sociology of cultural and political processes, emphasizing the circularity between this vital institution and the ambivalent historical expressions of 'public,' 'culture' and 'tolerance' concerning the civil sphere.

Much of the reflection this research intends to address is invested in the "challenge of achieving cultural community and accepting and promoting cultural diversity" (Audunson 2005: 432), but there are still pieces that should be added to the scenario to understand what place the public library is and what social relations it promotes. The existence of liminal or outer space of production and circulation of discourses about society remains a research topic. Attempting to capture such a property in urban space, Soja (1996) reinterprets Lefebvre's 'spaces of representation' and speaks of the *Thirdspace* as an arena for the construction and discussion of meanings of the places we experience. The hypothesis of a civic space that favors the common good realized in places of the *ephemeral* Habermasian public sphere, or low-intensive communication (Audunson 2005), also recalls the different but much-cited notion of *Third Place* (Oldenburg 1999). The latter, focused on the aggregative (and 'expositive') quality of spaces of urban vitality, constitutes another theoretical framework for discussing the social function of public libraries. The notion of the public's *thirdness* is rooted in the old sociological problem of distinguishing civil society from other spheres (Kivisto and Sciortino 2021) and invoked a broad spectrum of reflections. Provisionally, the idea of the plurality of subjects who provisionally meet and the idea of regimes of inter-visibility, probed so far, may constitute working hypotheses for interrogating the connection between the civic project and the role of social relations expressed in the idea of the library as a meeting place. In the next chapter, these topics will be further discussed.

The ambivalence of the public and the role of the library

The appropriate application of the concept of public domain invites the consideration of scales of action, different levels of density, and the lability between the public and the private in today's cities. Thus, it is promising to question whether and how the library relates to other urban spaces that redefine the relationship between accessibility and belonging. As I will illustrate in the next chapter, much of the debate about the (traditional and innovative) functions of the library as a form of social infrastructure also invokes similarities and differences with other scenes of sociality that interrogate the relationship between culture,

urban political economy, and democracy. In other words, I argue that the library can take part in critical reflection on the idea of the ‘just city’ (Fainstein 2014).

The idea of accessibility that has emerged as a constitutive dimension of the public domain understood as the ‘third’ sphere of encounter between subjects or as a regime of inter-visibility, refers to a common ideal of democratic solidarity. Institutionalized and spatialized; however, the public is inevitably negotiated and temporary. The sociological study of the arenas of everyday living related to an ideal common offers a variety of analyses, starting with a critical study of the forces at play. On the one hand, there is the consideration of public space as “an open political arena without coercion of any kind,” in which each subject would also have the opportunity to take voice through practices that redesign the space itself. On the other, the idea of public space as subjected to “appropriate” use (Mazzette 2013: xxxviii). These two seemingly “opposing and irreconcilable” positions offer instead a continuum capable of capturing the complexity given by the hybridization between the public and the private, the sense of ‘openness’ offered by new scenes of consumption, the strategic use of security (both practiced and narrated), and the meaning of the ‘authentically public’ within registers of social diversity.

In the context of critical urban sociology, Sharon Zukin (2013) pointed out that concerns about the erosion of public spaces refer to an ideal tradition rooted in the agora of ancient Greece and the forum of the Roman city. These were places that excluded women, enslaved people, and foreigners. Nonetheless, “they represented for us a model of public space that was open to all and for that very reason democratic, in contrast to the baths or the banquet hall” (p. 129)¹². In pointing out this distinction, Zukin also recalled the modern connection between the public and democracy but notes how Parisian urban culture anticipated class distinctions in practice and how free access to libraries and museums in London and New York opened community property to the most diverse social groups before they all had the right to vote. Zukin acknowledged that these achievements were not due solely to spontaneous urban vitality or demands from below, but she recalled how the hegemonic classes had imagined these spaces first and foremost as devices to discipline urban life and cultivate the minds of the lower classes. Nonetheless, she argued, “the ideal of open access confirmed the spaces as ‘authentically’ public and helped define the modern public. Public parks, museums, and libraries broke down traditional barriers that excluded women, the

¹² As Mazzette points out, the reference to the *agora* – also present in Crawford and Mitchell – is widespread, despite its known distance from the ideal of universal inclusion. It is useful to compare this tendency to what I mentioned about classical references in the library. In Sala Borsa library (Bologna), the underground Roman ruins serve as a symbolic marker: deliberately shown through the glass flooring and included in the guided tour on the building’s history, they evoke the image of the new *Piazza Coperta* as rooted in the forum of Roman *Bononia* (cf. P.III).

poor, and children from taking their place in the same public space as everyone else” (*ibid.*).

While evoking the same historical dimension, this account of the public sphere is not entirely analogous to that suggested by Habermas, “who traces the modern public sphere back to the gatherings of more elite groups (educated middle-class men)” (p. 264). Instead, Zukin implicitly recalls Crawford’s critical proposals (whose field of study is precisely the commercialization of public space and its exclusions): evoking the multiplicity of publics, she explains that authenticity of the public “in this case means democracy, which in politics as well as physical space can often be loud, unruly, and unpredictable. And also dangerous: allowing the bodies of strangers or members of unlike groups to mingle arouses fears of danger” (pp. 187-188)^{13 14}.

Thus, where does the public library fit into the democratic challenge today? Does the relationship with the public end in its most ambivalent forms, or does the library act as a promoter of a sustainable and just public domain? As discussed, one of the facets of this problem is the debate on ‘improper uses’ and the risk of exclusion. Furthermore, there are at least two other underestimated dimensions: the link between innovative libraries and the ambivalent openness granted by other urban scenes and the role these libraries can play in broader forms of ‘domestication’ of the public domain.

The recurring debate on the legitimate uses of library spaces, originating from the concerns of the developing city (those related to the ‘popular library’), recalls the (re)emergence of security concerns in the democracies of the welfare state in the 1980s and 1990s. I refer to the theme of the domestication of urban public space and its effervescence (as evoked by Zukin) through the increasing pervasiveness of surveillance and the political success of order and decency as codes in the moral distinction between ‘civil’ and ‘uncivil’ people (Pitch 2013, Bukowsky 2019). Remaining on the topic of marginalized groups, Don Mitchell shows how even typically accessible places can be the scene of conflict between practices of use and processes of regeneration (or pacification) that can exclude some subjects as part of the public. In his well-known analysis of People’s Park in Berkeley (Mitchell 1995), activists and homeless people on one side and redevelopers on the other

¹³ Zukin also recalls, emblematically, how ‘problematic’ users included children and adolescents, whose right to a library card was a slow recognition (*ibid.*). Today, not only does the library card constitute for many young people an important step toward the adult privileges of the public sphere (Wiegand 2015), but service to children is one of the most curated and renewed dimensions in recent years, comprising a significant number of the activities promoted by community libraries.

¹⁴ Like any form of authenticity through cultural performances that include symbolic scripts, symbolic means of production, and power, the ‘authenticity of the public’ is subject to criteria of success and failure (Alexander 2006). Above, discussing to the role of the library between hegemony and social change (*cf.* 1.2), I mentioned the emergence of moments of civic *de-fusion* and *re-fusion* – and the consequent shift of libraries toward an increasing pluralism. I argue that this cultural process can be read as the crisis of authenticity in the context of an increasingly complex social organization (*id.*).

showed two opposite ways of conceiving the right to be visible in the common space. Through forms of *annihilation of space by law* (id. 1997), definitions of legitimate order and disorder – shaped within evident asymmetrical relationships – favor what Lefebvre calls *representations of space*, denying the multiplicity, even conflictual, of common life. For Amin (2006), this plurality, on the contrary, would allow overcoming the homogenizing risks of the increasingly commercialized space, realizing what he called the ‘good city.’ The latter can be likened to an urban project of the civil sphere: oriented toward solidarity through “relatedness,” it requires mixed uses, reduced surveillance, and adequate security, provided it is intended against the oppressive forces of the market. From a different perspective, Zukin proposes a reappropriation of ‘public authenticity’ outside the logic of the cultural economy and through an awareness of its ambivalent use in the cosmopolitan practices of the new urban middle classes (1995, 2013).

Conclusion: the (just) library and the (just) city

Indeed, many cases analyzed by urbanists point out how publicity fails with the loss of public management and free access, but also how they are not two sufficient principles (Mazzette 2013: XLIV). The “paradox of the public,” following Zukin again, also shows us how private control can make space “more attractive” and how state control can make it “more repressive, more narrowly ideological” (2013: 158). Sometimes explicit security strategies come to inhabit the social infrastructure through pervasive surveillance, defensive design, and militarizing policing. Even in libraries, there are many checkpoints and deterrents: guards, cameras, seats unsuitable for rest, access to certain areas subject to payment, library cards, turnstiles, or video intercoms¹⁵. Other times, indeed, we might question whether new symbolic and design-led transformations of the social infrastructure can establish a central inclusive role or whether they risk reiterating inequalities. Although the idea of innovative library models supports the distance from market-based logic and exclusion (Agnoli 2009, Klinenberg 2018, Ferrieri 2020), the idea of new multipurpose libraries seems to be nourished by imaginaries that are not immune to commercial landscapes (*cf.* 2.2). The idea of the concept store, the mixture of consumption and leisure, the importance of circularity and openness are essential, by instance, in the model of Idea Stores and the logic of the *passage*,

¹⁵ Among these are some Italian examples. For instance, in January 2017 the University of Bologna implemented turnstiles at the access of a library, arising violent protests. On another occasion, during my fieldwork at the Central Municipal Library of Trento (2017-2018), I observed the controversial use of intercoms to access public restrooms. In the light of an unfortunate case of overdose and a widespread narrative on urban blight, this device was also the subject of public debate, yet it remained in action.

implied in the library as a *Piazza* (Agnoli 2009). These characteristics are crucial for developing vital and attractive spaces for all citizens (Muscogiuri 2014, 2015, Bergamaschi 2015), counteracting the exclusive symbolic boundaries in old and austere traditional libraries. However, fashionable ideals and models might contribute to the simplified and acritical embracing of strategies (Faggiolani and Galluzzi 2018), if not echoing the restricted codes of cognitive-cultural capitalism (Miles and Paddison 2005; Scott 2014), thus reproducing exclusion through other means. Some scholars have identified the risk that iconic cultural institutions can participate in culture-led forms of regeneration that respond to the interests and tastes of specific social groups (Miles and Paddison 2005; Skot-Hansen et al. 2013) or the challenging idea of urban *amenities* (Florida 2019). The magnetism of pioneering library projects might foster the mere reproduction of genre and codes that contribute to unequal transformations of urban landscapes through the dystopian logic of theme parks (Sorkin 1992). These spaces may also foster popularization and commercialization according to the logic of “*agoraphilia*” (Goss 1993), that feeling of nostalgia for traditional public places that has guided the formation of the new ‘open’ spaces of commerce – from the gallery to the large malls, up to the most recent shopping centers that parody the structure of old towns and villages. Such examples are affirmed today as vital places in the experience of public life and urban encounters, acting, in return, as part of an overall aesthetic sought after and imitated. Addressed primarily to the middle and upper classes, these spaces not only colonize the authentically public as forms of Sorkin’s *ageographia*, but also reaffirm and amplify the ‘strangeness’ of the different, who is ‘out of place’ if it does not respond to expected uses or is not equipped with the codes of certain lifestyles.

In his reflection on the processes of domestication of urban space, Rowland Atkinson (2003) notes how the most disadvantaged, even with no strict policy of exclusion, can feel uncomfortable or alienated from the aesthetics and codes of innovative public spaces, as in the case of the Vancouver Public Library studied by Lees (1997). In his rich analysis, Lees presents the case of the (once) new and innovative Canadian library, recognizing its criticality as an ‘ageographic’ guarded fortress, founded on the thematic evocation of the Roman Colosseum, performing an open public space that hides ambivalent strategies of popularization. However, through further elaboration, she suggests how the material and ideological arrangement of the library show a more profound contribution to the state of the public domain and the problem of contestation. Acknowledging the concerns and the analyses of Sorkin and other ‘skeptics’ in the study of some libraries, Lees recovers as an antithesis of the Foucauldian *heterotopia*. The concept defines “real places – places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society – which are something like counter-

sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (Foucault 1984: 23-24). One such place, capable of interconnecting and accumulating ‘all times,’ is precisely the library (p. 26). Following Soja’s (1995, 1996) interpretation, Lees shows how innovative libraries maintain a democratic potential in the production of an “intellectual space,” understood not only as the set of cultural patrimony but also in the means and languages that allow access to every member of society and a reinterpretation of the library space itself. Today, spaces of this type are emerging globally and have represented for at least two decades one of the most captivating themes in the revival of libraries. Certainly, Lees wrote, they maintain “an unpredictable mix of ideology, power, and architectural and social imagination,” a set of constructed contradictions that she suggests approaching with the perspective of *autopia*. With this postmodern notion, the scholar intends to summarize the two positions of *ageographia* and *heterotopia* as constitutive of today’s hybrid and contested public domain. Specular and complementary, they are united by utopian desires, by the collective need to redesign a less segregated and controlled everyday life. In its historical connection to the project of liberal democracy, the library as *autopia* offers an intellectual space that is a precarious counter-site with uncertain accessibility. However, for this reason, Lees writes, libraries and civic spaces like Mitchell’s People’s Park seem more appropriate for assessing the state of the public domain than market-oriented spaces (or sites mostly related to the *non-civil* market sphere, using Alexander’s terminology).

In conclusion, the present chapter introduced interconnected threads concerning the public library as an object of study and formulated emergent questions related to its *publicness*. First, I have elaborated on the advantages of addressing the notion of the public as a heuristic to tentatively situate the idea of ‘accessibility’ to a communicative space, critically addressing the meanings attributed to the ideals of the public sphere, free access, and democratic function. Second, I showed that the multiplicity of the public is relevant even for the library space, both concerning the social groups that access it and the notion of the public sphere of deliberation. The consideration of the library as a territory of the public domain can, in this sense, manifest the different *regimes of visibility* that different actors and devices bring into play, (re)defining how it can manifest itself as a sphere of recognition of the Other. Third, I expressed how reflections on the library’s publicness contribute to questioning the state of a just public domain in contemporary cities while also invoking the complex ambiguity of the ‘authenticity’ of the public and the ‘openness’ offered by new scenes of aggregation. In recalibrating the problem of the ‘public’ in terms of the Civil Sphere, places like libraries and parks can interrogate the ambivalences between thematic landscapes and spaces of democratic life. However, to find possible answers, a careful investigation of the relationships

that compose the precarious and ambivalent territory of the library seems appropriate. Regarding the asymmetries within these spaces, we need to question whether the neutrality/thirdness of the library is built on the suspension of social differences or their active involvement and whether the social relationships promoted are 'ephemeral' forms around a core 'intellectual space' or dense forms of interaction.

CHAPTER 2

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LIBRARY AND THE SOCIAL

The following pages will provide a further step in the framework of the public library as a place that supports forms of discussion and sociality in favor of civic life. The present chapter could be titled *Library and Sociality*, *Social Library*, *Social Librarianship*, or *Library and Social Infrastructure*. As I will illustrate, these notions express different and contending interpretations of a broad and multifaceted phenomenon, which have a common ground in the emphasis on the library's support of more 'social' needs of the population as opposed to distinct and traditional 'cultural' ones. The decision to emphasize the *social* as a critical notion is meant to capture this complex picture temporarily and to propose a dialectic with the other vital connotations: the *public* one, that is, the vocation disclosed in the preceding section, and the *cultural* one, as a comparative element concerning the 'mission' of libraries. Below, I will gather several reflections that interpret the social relevance of the library, sometimes as an integral aspect of its cultural purpose and sometimes as a complementary or alternative facet.

Reference to a generic and inclusive 'social' as a defining attribute may lead to restricted analyses in the form of *panoramas*, as understood by Latour (2005). His much-debated recalibration of the sociological method defines these 'grand pictures' as comprehensive explanations of institutionalized behavior through the very social artifacts they constitute. Such analyses capture the alterity of the social dimension, but by tracing as cause or context a social 'whole' with its own nature (a social canvas), they overlook that what is *social* is properly the very connections between the entities of phenomena. Indeed, the various debates about the revived openness of libraries show a similar impasse, represented by gradually more extensive and porous notions of 'social' that struggle to describe existing relationships. If the library is 'social' in the most varied meanings related to the support of collective life (from the access to information to social capital, from the fight against inequalities to conviviality), there is a risk of blending phenomena and missing the

peculiarities that may delineate a relevant type of place. If the publicity of libraries and other ‘civic spaces’ can be approached in terms of reciprocal dispositions in the urban landscape (*cf.* Ch. 1), the so-called ‘social’ aspect similarly requires an analysis that avoids simplified frames and tautological interpretations. Since this study intends to problematize such ambivalences and contribute to the analysis of urban sociality, the connection between the library and the social – denoted by the title – is meant as a research question. Herein, I address what a social facet of the library means and how it is configured.

In order to address the debate about the social role of libraries, I consider previous approaches on the public domain as *thirdness*, that is, a situated political space for the formulation and imagination of the civic sphere. My argument suggests deconstructing several theses about the social relations crystallized in or enabled by these spaces, especially regarding the most recent perspectives on ‘innovative’ libraries. On the one hand, a vast body of works identified a continuum between the core ideals and services of the Public Library and a comprehensive social function. In this view, the free access to means and skills for democratic participation implies an intrinsic expansion of libraries toward forms of gatherings, able to include subjects and interests as varied as possible, and even toward welfare services to remove socio-economic barriers. On the other hand, some scholars emphasized more recent trends, reading the phenomenon as a shift in approaches and meanings aimed at reviving library spaces, especially since the 1970s. In this perspective, libraries, affected by investment cuts in the public sector and acknowledging the scarcity of readers and frequenters of libraries, responded to the growing concern for a declining public domain, offering new opportunities and seeking recognition and revitalization. In other words, the progressive opening of the library’s ‘mission’ through an inclusive reinterpretation of services might be explained by the crisis of the classical model and the extension of libraries as enduring and vital public spaces. These extremes constitute a tentative framing of a complex scenario: many views connect, coming closer or further apart, and occasionally overlap in formulating manifestos and strategies. In one way or another, they emphasize *new faces of the public library* (Bergamaschi 2015), epitomized by the emergence of architecturally innovative and stimulating libraries that stress both potentials and criticalities of the trend.

In light of the previous chapter, two themes seem prominent in the topic. First, the problematic overlap between the different meanings of ‘public’ involved in the cultural-educational function of the library, as inherited from the Enlightenment and later utilitarian ideals. In the next paragraph, I will display how this dimension generated a vicious circle between interpretations in continuity or rupture with the Public Library paradigm and its ability to respond or participate in social changes. Second is the challenging idea of neutrality, which refers to the role of libraries in society and the regime of interaction among the social

groups that inhabit them. In this regard, I will discuss the leading theories on interaction and civil society adopted to study the links between collections, population, and space, with particular attention to the latter as a connecting element. Then, I will outline the hypotheses that emerge, combining these issues with the argument in the first chapter, and explain how a sociological analysis of the library can offer meaningful answers.

2.1 The rest of the story: from the ideal of publicness to the ‘social function’ dilemma

As traced in the previous chapter, the public library, in its contemporary sense, emerged in the middle of the nineteenth century as the development of Enlightenment ideals and a transformation of the space of public opinion in the context of liberal society and its new questions in the field of democracy. The principles and transformations of the Revolution of 1789 had introduced, first in France and then in other parts of the continent, a new notion of the library that went beyond the accessibility to an erudite public, typical of the private collections and the courts of the *ancien régime*. Following the secularization of ecclesiastical collections and the expropriation of those of the exiles, the library came to be understood as ‘public’ as an instrument for the reorganization of national assets in favor of the broader community now opposed to public power and, according to a new idea of ‘useful knowledge.’ Although there were no national networks of public libraries in France, this phase had fundamental results in the scientific field, and many collections flowed into the first national libraries and the new school systems. In a few decades, the centrality of the ‘new knowledge’ in the various national states grew and influenced new debates on the modernization of collections and free access to knowledge. Later, in a transformed social context, the British and American Public Library model constituted a decisive shift, progressively spreading, over a century, two fundamental innovations. First, the reinforcement of the idea of ‘public’ as free access by a community was understood in an increasingly inclusive sense. As a popular library, the Anglo-Saxon public library aspired to the idea of knowledge as a widespread form of cultural elevation and civic improvement aimed at every segment of a democratic society. In this regard, I have already addressed how some interpretations of accessibility have been problematized over time and how a critical but flexible interpretation can capture the changes and potentials of this set of meanings. Second, the Public Library introduced the distinctively contemporary idea of responding to individual and collective interests through a local service supported by the state bodies through financial resources. As expressed by Traniello (2017), the new public and local library

. . . ended up becoming an institution, an infrastructure, of the society and culture of the industrial age and established with that society a biunivocal relationship. On the one hand, it relied on the massive surge of growth that affected all industrial infrastructure and contributed greatly [. . .] to that growth; on the other hand, it accepted in its self-presentation a role of ratification, assurance, and integration within that very society (p. 379).

Once it emerged, the library's 'self-presentation' within democratic societies and its symbolic boundaries were progressively problematized. The problem of reaching all social groups (*did the library serve a privileged audience or the whole of society?*) and the focus on the collective responsibility of the service (*what needs of society did this public investment address?*) converged in a broad reflection on the discourses of library legitimacy and the existence of its social function.

My argument in this paragraph is that the literature on the social functions of the public library is best understood in the long term and through the examination of two trends that show neither a perfect continuity nor a specific break with the nineteenth-century model but rather a series of oscillations characterized by critical moments. The 'long tail' of the definition of target publics has cyclically questioned the educational mission of libraries and its effective universal vocation, also regarding the distinction between 'high' and 'popular' culture linked to entertainment and leisure. The library's aspiration to be 'for all' has inspired efforts to measure its social impact and has represented an initial field of contention to include or exclude, in a frame of meaning, specific uses, and services aimed at including certain groups and responding to new needs. Coupled with this sort of "permanent state of ideological crisis" related to the ideal of publicity (Raber 1997: 18), moments of social and economic transformation appeared as accelerators of circumscribed crises, in which the library's reputation was challenged, and new practices were established.

A democratic institution between apologies and criticism

Once again, the American debate proves particularly significant, with two fundamental strands emerging in the 1950s and 1970s. At the beginning of the twentieth century, under the influence of personalities such as Melvil Dewey, founder of the Decimal Classification, the United States had become the leading field in the institutionalization of Library Science and the formation of a professional body of librarians. One of the major contributions was made by the establishment in 1926 of the Graduate Library School at the University of Chicago (Zandonade 2004), where new interests in reading and education were influenced by the scholarly orientation of thinkers such as John Dewey and the emerging school of sociology. One of the heirs to this milieu was Jesse Shera, promoter of a Parsionian reading of the library as a social agency and one of the theorizers of social epistemology. Through

his influential *Foundations of the Public Library* (1949), Shera was one of the leading figures in a season of renewed interest in the historical origins of the tax-supported civic library in the context of English and American industrial society that characterized the late 1940s and 1950s. Another work that would have a large reception was *Arsenals of a Democratic Culture* (Ditzion 1947), which focused on the contribution of philanthropic initiative and the development of the first *free libraries* as a project of democratization. In 1950, on the other side of the ocean, Peter Karstedt ([1965] 1980) observed the sociological permeations in American librarianship, noting the substantial separation between librarianship and sociology in the European context, where the public library was still pursuing a tortuous path. Hoping for a novel research agenda in both disciplines, in his *Studien zur Soziologie der Bibliothek*, Karstedt investigated the relation between civic libraries and the social fabric with a historicist and Weberian approach, focusing notably on the emergence of the modern state.

In the United States, historical accounts like those of Shera and Ditzion took place during major economic and social changes. In those years, the ALA's Committee on Post-War Planning formulated a National Plan for Public Library Service to revive the idea of enlightened citizenship and respond politically to the neglect of certain services to benefit the world conflict. To achieve its goals, the association aimed at an empirical inquiry that would aid a renewal of the library that would strengthen its identity and reflect its social relevance as an educational agency (McCook 2001). The famous *Library Inquiry* was a pioneering research project supported by the Carnegie Foundation and conducted and published between 1947 and 1952. Led by political scientist and economist Robert D. Leigh it has the goal of examining "the objectives, function, structure, organization, services, and personnel of public libraries" (Leigh 1950:11). Despite the positive impact of the study on library survey design and in the development of policies, the study had the significant and unexpected outcome of raising doubts on the belief in the power of free reading to transform attitudes and maintain democratic order, which was first named *Library Faith*.

In less than a decade, criticisms were dismissed, and the goal of universalism regained momentum, reinforced by the faith reposed in marketing to reach the entire population and the idea of eliciting unconscious educational needs (Galluzzi 2018b). However, the concept and content of library faith have endured and continued to be central in American and international librarianship until today.

Since the 1970s, there has been a shift in the library's image, marked by the rise of social programs aimed at the poor and minorities and a growing mix of activities aimed at popularizing cultural services. This responded to a more integrated and inclusive idea of well-being, but also to those instances of cultural change that began to transform the idea of the library and cultural canon from below (Audunson 2005, Newman 2007, Wiegand 2016).

However, confidence in social programs began to waver, and by the middle of the decade, there re-emerged the idea of interrogating the origin of the public library and its basis of legitimacy to assess whether and to what extent it fulfilled its aspirations. In two debated articles, Michael Harris (1973, 1976) interpreted the public library as a paternalistic initiative and an instrument of conservatism and assimilation of foreigners, underlining a decisive gap between the offering capabilities of middle-class librarians vis-à-vis the life of the ‘common man.’ Incapable of substantial change in publics and languages, the library converged primarily on the more educated classes interested in private reading. The debate unfolded by this account marked a crucial shift in public library historiography (Wiegand 2000). Harris pointed out how the library, born as a political instrument of social control, nevertheless succeeded through the library faith, which he calls the ‘*democratic dogma*.’ Another relevant position was that of Phyllis Dain (1975), who responded to Harris’ hypotheses with a more attenuated reading of the phenomenon. She stressed some crucial advances to the advantage of the lower classes and the higher flexibility of libraries compared to other public institutions, nevertheless confirming the ambiguity of the library in its early paternalistic and authoritarian intentions:

Public libraries were operating within the stratified, materialistic, laissez-faire capitalistic society and were a part of it. This reality may have accounted for some of the difficulty in defining and achieving goals for an institution purveying intellectual and cultural goods to a general public. (p. 264)

In her *Ambivalence and Paradox: the social bonds of the public library*, she draws conclusions in line with what emerged in the previous chapter, arguing that the ties between the library and society arise from the multidimensionality and the conflict inherent in its public aspiration.

The emergence of ‘innovative’ libraries and the role of discourses

At the turn of the 1970s and 1980s, the critique against library ideology was combined with the crisis of confidence in culture and other public services for individual development in a time of increased economic instability. While a prevalence of the language of economics and management librarianship became established in the library sector, the debate over public expense examined its relevance as a ‘merit good’ (Galluzzi 2011), a service supported by public taxation recognized in its ability to generate positive externalities. The inability to meaningfully serve the poorest and least educated and the fact that the library was used by a minority of the most culturally active or interested in recreational activities (as it still is today, in most areas) questioned the positioning of libraries in the realm of collective services (Weaver and Weaver 1979; White 1983). Moreover, it is worth remembering that by this

time, the debate had become international, having reached those parts of the world (such as Italy) where a civic library scheme was being established. In some cases, these libraries suffered from even more marked disadvantages, due to their underdevelopment and widespread symbolic barriers, both in the case of the great ancient architectures and in those of the new generation, often oriented toward glorifying books and culture. These reflections did not have direct repercussions, and elements of the ‘dogma’ often returned as a response. These years began a 30-year period of innovative libraries (Agnoli 2009; Dondi 2016). In a phase of apparent contradiction, the decline of public investment coexisted with the multiplication of models to interpret and redefine the public library and the emergence of pioneering structures, promoting the library as a space for experimentation with an ‘open-ended’ mission (Galluzzi 2018b, Martel 2018). Some models focused on the creation of dislocated, multipurpose community centers. In other cases, in partial contrast with neighborhood libraries, they encouraged the creation of impressive central architectures to emphasize innovation and propose a new role of libraries in the city landscape.

The revival of libraries also consolidated a specific debate on the relationship between individual and community needs. The first movement was the ‘libertarian and individualistic wave’ of the 1980s, which consisted primarily in rejecting any authoritarianism and elitism in favor of a service aimed at the aspirations and interests of the individual (McCabe 2001; Galluzzi 2018b). In these years, educational vocation lost ground in favor of informative purpose, and space was given to an increasingly wide variety of activities, leading to a problem of purpose (Williams 1998). From the limits of this comprehensive approach, the second movement of library innovation emerged, linked to the revived interest in the civil community that characterized part of the political and social reflections of the 1990s. In the library field, where the theme contributed to a new balance between services to the individual and the community, the most influential strand was the communitarian one (Day 2006). In contrast to the ‘libertarian’ public library, a new model of *civic librarianship* emerged, one that reimagined the library’s role as a social agency in community development and local problem-solving (McCabe 2001; Newman 2007). Much of the literature of the following decades followed concerns about the role of libraries in a time of declining social capital and civil society, in the direction popularized by scholars such as Etzioni, Bella, Fukuyama, and Putnam.

As digital innovations intensified, new needs emerged to reaffirm the identity and future of the public library, combining civic engagement with a commitment to support the information society. In 1994, the *IFLA/UNESCO Public Library Manifesto* of 1949 was renewed, becoming the guideline for libraries worldwide to support free and equal access to information at the local level (see also the *IFLA/UNESCO Guidelines for Development* 2001).

Equally representative was the ALA volume *Libraries & democracy: the cornerstones of liberty* (Kranich 2001), a sort of manifesto strongly inspired by the works of the 1940s and characterized by a reconfirmation of the principles of library faith and by the emphasis on local communities. There was no direct mention of the ‘democratic dogma’ in the text, and the historical and theoretical account of the role of Library Inquiry was fully framed in the mid-century orientation toward professional identity and democracy. Galluzzi (2018b) recently recalled the problematic assumptions of such analyses, which uncritically repurposed the “causal connection between the existence of the library [. . .] and the effectiveness of an informed citizenry, as well as between the latter and the good health of the democratic institution” (p. 201). However, because of the recurring relevance of these debates, the scholar recognizes their significance in the global library context:

Therefore, in the face of the indifference that the political class has repeatedly shown toward libraries, the response of ALA – and more generally of librarians throughout the Western world and beyond – is an even more insistent advocacy effort and the construction of campaigns and promotional tools, all centered on the vital link between public libraries and democracy and the essentiality of these institutions for a free society (*ibid.*).

Galluzzi’s analysis, which has recently refreshed the ‘ideological’ theme in Italy, drew on the American literature in the explicit conviction that the principles of the debate contribute to the problem of the social function of local libraries even in later and geographically distinct scenarios. Indeed, this approach is supported by the various international studies on the institutional history of the public library. On the one hand, as illustrated, the critical reading on the origins of the contemporary library identifies the dialectical relationship between the political problems of the nineteenth-century Anglo-American model and its current ramifications. On the other, we can highlight how the American field has produced a significant *discourse* due to the strategic role of its institutions and academic advancements.

. . . Throughout the American debate on public libraries from their founding to the present day, it is clear that the library world’s fondness for the library faith, an ideology for all uses and all seasons, arises, on the one hand, from the fascination inherent in the possibility of attributing a high and transversal meaning to libraries that, by their very nature, are highly conditioned by the specificity of contexts and eras, and, on the other, from the political expendability of the principle that underlies it. And these are certainly useful and not negligible motivations (p. 202).

While the rethinking of the public library had peaked at the beginning of the century, in the face of a threatened collapse before the opportunities offered by the market and the web, the economic crisis of 2008 once again accelerated the debate. Indeed, the new instability re-proposed the link between social change and identity crisis (Wiegand 2015). The growing

number of people in a condition of vulnerability has generated a significant expansion of needs concerning, for example, shelter, the fight against the digital divide, and support for job search (Agnoli 2009). The advocacy device represented by the library faith returned with vigor, both in the librarians' daily practice and local policies, enriched with new significant elements. First, there was the consolidation of the idea of the library as a community center and part of community welfare, both as an expression of the now-expanded mission in favor of civil society and as a specific response to the deteriorating capacity of public funding (Anzivino and Caligaris 2014, Ayers 2006; Galluzzi 2011; Frederiksen 2016). Second, the library was vital as a bulwark against the erosion of the public domain. Thus, evoking the set of meanings dissected in the first chapter, alongside the *library faith* emerged what we might call an *agora faith* (cf. 2.2). Libraries gained attention in the study of the places of sociality, concerning the perceived erosion of the public or the emerging of new forms of civic dynamism. Some scholars identify libraries as critical meeting places within a broad spectrum of public and private environments capable of merging the 'thirdness' proper to the concept of *common*, the attention to social gatherings, and the idea of democratic participation related to the public sphere. Drawing on concepts such as the '*third place*' (Oldenburg 1999), some scholars pointed out how diverse generations of libraries aspired to revive civil life around information and knowledge, from the extensive 'new downtown libraries' to 'community libraries' and 'culture hubs,' to the last 'participative libraries' (Martel 2018). In the 'social' libraries, the promotion of diversity and the enrichment of personal cultural and social capital would suspend social conflict but also the *blasé* attitude of urban life. Novel transformations turned the focus on practices beyond traditional cultural services, in favor of forms of public gathering and 'togetherness' inspired by the myths of political deliberation but also by new urban scenes.

The developments described above may help frame the library's main theories as an expression of the social infrastructure and to understand how they relate to sociological problems and political and professional discourses. Below, I will focus on the more recent perspectives on the study of gathering spaces and civil society. Finally, I will return to the problem of models and discourses across the line between 'social librarianship' and a sociology of the library.

2.2 *Palaces for the people?* Library 'thirdness' and the civil sphere

The first chapter stressed how the positioning of the library in the public domain recalled the sociological theme of the civil sphere concerning a set of urban spaces. Two working hypotheses emerged for interrogating the connection between the library and the social

fabric: the idea of the plurality of subjects who provisionally meet and the idea of the public as a regime of inter-visibility. The previous paragraph illustrated some complementary aspects of this interest, which have deepened the connection between the public nature of the library, its recreational-cultural role, and social solidarity. Below, the most relevant perspectives on the library as a place are summarized, clarifying some of those mentioned and introducing new ones. The present contribution is among the few sociological studies on this topic. Some of the following reflections have been developed by sociologists and other scholars studying libraries and similar places. Other relevant theories and concepts from political and social theory, although rarely focused on this subject, have been applied in library and information studies or appear promising for problematizing the topic.

*The library of the **common** – thirdness as a political-communicative realm*

Regarding the positioning of the library in the high and civic dimension of politics, Ferrieri (2020) has recently mobilized the idea of the *common*. According to him, the world of the commons constitutes the natural environment of the library, from its earliest political manifestations to its current ‘thirdness’ with respect to the public-private dichotomy and neoliberal trends (Ferrieri 2020: 65). This thirdness is not a refusal of the public origin of libraries, as state/collective management, but the recognition that the common is grasped through a complex regime: it imposes to recognize how “not everything public is common, just as not everything common is public” (p. 66). The reference to the common can illustrate a critical move concerning the historical link with the public function. According to Ferrieri, the common does not simply consist of the ‘third sector’; nevertheless, it primarily involves a break with the ‘statist’ vision, that is, “a profound and radical break in the relationship between the library and the state” (p. 68). The author identifies in this overlap between state and public – along with others – the crisis of the Habermasian public sphere and the identification of the library as its “important ring.” Indeed, the contemporary public library had become “democracy in action” through the end of the monopoly of interpretation: first, that of the church in favor of free reading, then, that of public power in favor of a public culture of citizen-subjects. As Karstedt ([1965] 1980) pointed out in its sociological account, the public library was both product and basis of the modern state, but also, as noted, of the public sphere of civil society and its limits. Eventually, Ferrieri wrote, the public library has surpassed the library ‘of the State’ but has nevertheless continued to struggle between a knowledge that has been (Focaultianly) an instrument of empowerment or an instrument of power, according to the case. The contemporary library developed and retained its own “anti-statehood” – as an opposition to the sovereign’s gaze, not to collective management, as an alternative to control, not to the definition of common well-being – but it did so

ambivalently, eventually mimicking “the power of the state over catalogs and shelves, ending up [. . .] as an instrument of the book order, which has its counterpart in the social order” (p. 69). While Ferrieri recalls, in this regard, the most grievous examples of epurations and censures in dictatorial times, I have already recalled the control over cultural consumption, the rules governing legitimate public use, and the symbolic barriers associated with monumental libraries. In short, these aspects also relate to the relationship between the public library and social order, in which both administrators and librarians have often sought sources of legitimacy.

The library, simultaneously in continuity and rupture with its founding paradigms, appeared “increasingly a place and a vital ganglion of knowledge production, post-production, and sharing” (p. 68), through a transformation, an evolution, along that centuries-old relationship between power as domination and democratic appropriation of knowledge. This transformative tension (or, perhaps, transformation in tension) recalls the vision of the public library as an image of that ‘self-transformative potential’ of the public sphere indicated by Habermas and captured by the promoters of libraries as institutions of a sustainable public sphere (i.e., capable of transforming the public sphere in a sustainable way) (Audunson et al. 2019; Larsen 2020). It seems to evoke, namely, the positioning of the contemporary library in the ‘paradox of the public’ and its potential as a civic space, as the *Other Space* of heterotopia (Lees 1997, Vivarelli 2010), capable of giving (counter)space to democratic disorder (*cf.* Ch. 1). Assuming all the consequences of this transformation, Ferrieri suggested, means developing a proactive vision of the service that abandons the idea of the library “for everyone” in favor of the library “of each person” and relaunches its potential as a “laboratory and political community.” This kind of proposal hopes for the synthesis between the old and new faces of the library through the idea of self-management of knowledge. It is a renewal of self-learning and lifelong education as means of emancipation from a given regime of interpretation. Such a declination of the library’s thirdness as a space of political redefinition seems to support the strategy of mapping its publicness not only as *accessibility* (through low thresholds between commons and subjects) but as a negotiation of what is visible and recognized. Even in the library, the *Public* emerges as an institutionalized social form in search of a *Common* (Brighenti 2016), in which stabilized regimes of visibility can be observed as acts of association exposed to potential redefinition based on configurations of power.

The positioning of the library as a social space has been predominantly grounded in the categories of the public sphere and civil society yet transcending the theoretical-political dimension in the direction of how relationships *take place*. In short, these reflections have fallen, albeit marginally, into the varied examination of modern universalistic solidarity

rooted in sociological thought and its precursors (Kivisto and Sciortino 2021). Although the ideal dimension of emancipation from the state and the market maintains its own relevant space in the conversation, the primary testing ground has become library thirdness as a *spatial* dimension, understood as the link between the library as a space of cataloging and its ability to connect texts and subjects across space and time. It is worth noting that in this regard, the relevant languages are those of bonding and bridging social capital, voluntary association, and the revitalization of democracy. Therefore, I shall briefly link the use of these concepts to their sociological development.

*The library of the **piazza** – thirdness as an urban scene*

The relationship of the library with its spatial dimension is deeply rooted in its evolution (Vivarelli 2010, 2016): spatiality characterized its first contemporary configuration and the terrain of its possible transformation, ranging from the idea of social and territorial proximity (increasingly extended) to the fight against the ‘fear of the threshold’ perceived by citizens, central to a truly egalitarian vocation (Agnoli 2009, Ferrieri 2020). To cite just a few crucial steps, direct access through open shelves, the German tripartite library, and the French *médiathèque* were some of the innovations that most redesigned accessibility and the relationship with the public, starting with a reconfiguration of space and services that would ensure intuitive contact between people and cultural resources (Dondi 2016; Galluzzi 2009). In the last two decades, urban design, “the underlying idea of space and relationship with the city” (Ferrieri 2020: 79), gave space to a new interest in the library as a *third place* (Oldenburg 1999). The library has gradually taken on a different role in the urban space and is considered a “metaphor for the city” (Galluzzi 2009: 15) and one of the “most critical forms of social infrastructure” (Klinenberg 2018:32).

The debate about the library as a *third place* is already vast and widespread. For David Lankes (2011, 2020), one of the most recent and influential exponents of the *participatory library*, today’s library is a center of learning and an indispensable network for social safety. The library welcomes the indigent, supports research skills and undifferentiated access to Wi-Fi; it is “one of the few spaces that remain available to all community residents” (2020: 58). The notion of the *multipurpose library* (Galluzzi 2009) equally incorporates some elements of the library as a multifaceted *third place*. It points out the extensive capacity of large central libraries as new city hubs. Amandine Jacquet (2018) offered an overview of the prodromes and developments of the library as a *third place* in the French context, where it constituted an evolution of the most innovative *médiathèques*. In Italy, Antonella Agnoli (2009) proposed the idea of the *Piazze del sapere* (Knowledge Piazzas), opening a vibrant debate (e.g., Muscogiuri 2012, Vivarelli 2010) and bringing an innovative international perspective in an

environment historically characterized by scarce and fragmentary experimentations. The notion of *Piazza* has at its heart the removal of any symbolic and physical barriers that impede an inclusive library related to monumental architecture, the austere conception of ‘cold’ culture, and the very distinction between high and low culture. Moreover, it opposes preclusion to the activities promoted in the library to make spaces more and more hospitable, appealing, and varied for the multiple needs of the changing city (cafes, wi-fi zones, coworking spaces, dislocated municipal services, exhibitions, and courses...).

The diverse proposals based on the *third place* have invited to decisively renew and popularize the library. Well represented by the metaphor of the square, they emphasized the linkage between the library as a *common* and the idea of the library as an accessible gathering place that responds to territorial inequalities and the domestication of the public realm. However, such a seduction will likely fuel envy among innovative architecture and competition among cities that aspire to a strategic role in reinvesting in proximity and culture. Moreover, the promoters of the third space-library invite to learn from the successes of the commercial sphere to enlarge the audience and grant accessibility, starting with signs, marketing, design, and the architecture of shopping malls. However, attractiveness, conviviality, and emulation of other spaces of urban vitality compose the slipperiest terrain of innovative libraries: they risk limiting the social space in the form of a *landmark*, foster competition with commercial spaces, and the introduction of the market into the library itself (*cf.* 1.3). On the one hand, there is the problem of innovative central architectures, which can slide toward *ageographia* or exclusive forms of regeneration on a cultural basis. In this perspective, another reported risk is the emergence of a “library franchise” incapable of interpreting the sense of place and building relationships (Ferrieri 2020: 80). One of the most debated examples is that of the Idea Stores in the East End of London, libraries and training centers strongly inspired by bookstores and other commercial models as a response to the decline of services in the area (Agnoli 2009, 2021; Galluzzi 2010, 2011; Pitnam & Saint John 2017). On the other hand, there is a more general risk of reversing the original concept of *thirdness*. As Ferrieri noted, libraries do not appear in Oldenburg’s work because the sociologist suggested

bringing bars, or refreshment and aggregation places, closer to libraries and not vice versa. The mercantile vision in which the discourse is sometimes confined represents a form of return to the ‘second’ place (that of work), losing sight of the very reason for a third proposal, which is to escape the social and cultural degradation induced by the polarization of the first two spaces (2020: 81).

Such a hypothesis seems to guide Eric Klinenberg’s theory. In his *Palaces for the People* (2018), inspired by a famous motto of Carnegie libraries, the sociologist moved the concept of *third*

place into a broader conceptual umbrella, which openly identifies civic places like the library as archetypal. In the ‘social infrastructure’ – the set of spaces “that invite people in the public realm” and “promote civic engagement,” gathering, mutual learning, and the possibility of having a common ground prevail (*infra*). While the social infrastructure comprises private organizations and establishments, spaces like green areas and libraries would diverge from ‘commercial’ *third places*, neutralizing and limiting their exclusive effects. Lankes (2012) also spoke of the end of *mcdonaldization* in innovative library development and the need for the third-place library to be developed at the scale of the target communities. As understood by Oldenburg, the notion of neutrality is primarily leveling: it is an egalitarian requirement, inherent in removing social differences. Therefore, according to Ferrieri (2020:77), the neutrality of the third place-library should be intended as the thirdness of the *common*, not as ethical impartiality, “otherwise the square becomes, rather than an agora, the land on which the desert wind of reality blows: not a *third place* between state and market, but, on the contrary, the place where the market, and the related phenomena of exclusion, rage with all their inclemency.”¹⁶

However, such distinctions struggle to emerge pragmatically, especially when regeneration policies are at stake, and so tension remains regarding the idea of a ‘neutral place,’ central both in Oldenburg’s notion and Klinenberg’s social infrastructure. Jacquet (2018: 199) argues that “the third-place library is a model suited to its time: it responds to users’ expectations and speaks to policymakers.” On the comparison between the *spirit of the time* and the *spirit of the place*, some scholars depicted the idea of libraries as spatialized expressions of actuality (Galluzzi and Faggiolani 2015, also *cf.* 1.1). According to Vivarelli (2010), a sociological interpretation of the library as a constantly updated reflection of society risks losing the critical ability of ‘decanting’ implicit in the idea of the library as *heterotopia*, that is, able to suspend, connect and question society. The model of the social library implied by the *Piazza* thus poses a “fragile crest” that recalls the traps of “ethical pathos” (the library dogma) and the risks of losing the ‘documentary’ languages in the ‘architectural’ ones, undermining the idea of the library as a territory of dialogue (pp. 16-17). Sharing a common ground with the ‘democratic dogma,’ previously discussed, new discourses on the ‘social library,’ that is, a library as a gathering place able to nurture democratic life, risk emerging as an *agora faith*, whose vital advocacy leverage maintains and reproduces narrative ambiguity.

As I argued in paragraph 1.3, on the politics of visibility and justice in the city, ‘civil spaces’ such as libraries maintain a set of contradictions that relate to *ageographia* and *heterotopia*

¹⁶ There are some stimulating and controversial research agendas that address the issue of neutrality and shows how librarianship can question its own political commitment. One example is the *progressive librarianship*, proposed by library scholars such as Civallero (2007, 2013).

as a constituent of today's porous and contested public domain. We should observe the library as a precarious but pivotal counter-site with a negotiated regime of mutual accessibility. As summarized by Evans (2018:63), social libraries offer an exciting synthesis, partially imprinted on urban sociology ("to the politics of arrangement of public space"). However, they invoke the need for empirical sociology to probe deeper into practices: "in some ways, they pose more questions than they bring answers, and this for research is good news."

A neutral haven? – deepening the forms of interaction and visibility

Once we look at what the neutrality of the library actually means when it takes shape, further significant questions emerge. As Dominique Lahary (2018) explained, the library as a *third place* was anticipated in France by the idea of the city's *living room*, intending to capture how media libraries guaranteed the possibility for anyone to find in public a private dimension elsewhere denied or insufficient. This can mean freeing oneself from the obligations and social restrictions of the Second (workplace) or even of the First place, that of the family, as the feminist tradition reminds us (Lahary recalls, in this regard, Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*). The boundary between the public and the domestic is also relevant in the case of those who do not otherwise have a home or connections, as in the case of the homeless. Given the centrality of the topic, Lahary identifies the sociological study of the *Bibliothèque publique d'information* (Bpi) at the Centre Georges Pompidou (Paugam and Giorgetti 2013) as the first French 'handbook' of the library as a *third place*. The study focuses on subjects on the margins and the relationship between practices of use and space design (*cf.* 1.2 and 1.3). However, forms of possession and belonging in space constitute a highly significant terrain of conflict and discrimination, especially when issues of social and ethnic difference are brought into play. How, on the contrary, can the library be a place of social-mixing? What does this cohabitation consist of? In other words, what forms of interaction characterize the library as a place of encounter?

Ragnar Audunson and his colleagues (*cf.* 1.2), posing this very question, have interconnected the themes of the public sphere with those of social interaction in the public space. The idea of the library as a low-intensive meeting place (Audunson 2005; Vårheim 2007; 2008; Audunson et al. 2007; Aabø et al. 2010) has addressed the issue of places of civil sphere production by focusing on the notion of a sustainable public sphere and the interaction between subjects of different affiliations. Some authors have elaborated closer links with the social capital literature on inter-group relations, sometimes maintaining a problematic overlap between concepts. According to the current promoters, social capital is primarily understood, following Putnam (2000), as generalized reciprocity and trust

structured through networks of relationships, with particular emphasis on the relationship established with subjects outside one's significant groups. The library, as a public space defined by the institutionalized principle of equity of access, would be able to produce social capital: 1) as a place of reflection and knowledge in support of the public sphere; 2) by supporting associations and participation in the community; 3) by offering informal and accessible meeting places in the form of the 'low-intensive' place (similar to aspects of the *third place*); 4) as a resource of institutional social capital. It should be noted that such a broad interpretation overlaps different dimensions of universalism and contribution to civic society (Calhoun 1993). However, the idea of a low-intensive meeting place can represent an attempt at different conceptualizations of places in support of civil society, starting with the political-discursive idea of the public sphere and the analysis of the modalities of interaction in public space (Goffman 1971):

High intensive meeting places are probably vital in constituting people's identity and providing their lives with meaning and bonding social capital through contact with similar people. Low intensive meeting places are meeting places where people are exposed to values and interests different from those that create their core identities by having contact with diverse people. They may be important in creating bridges between people with different values and belonging to different cultures (Audunson et al. 2007: 4).

Ragnar Audunson (2005) has attempted to reconnect these themes within the space of civil society, identified between the Habermasian concept of the public sphere and the political theory of Giddens (1998). The proposal is to focus on the library as a space and to break down the academic discourse on the settings fostering civil society. Following sociologist Skot-Hansen (2001), he identifies three broad strains: 1) the 'political-communicative' proposal, framed on the promotion of dialogue among citizens in a community (Habermas 1989); 2) the 'communitarian' reading, focused on common values and the moral voice (Etzioni 1995); 3) the line on 'social fragmentation' and the aggregating role played by voluntary associations and meeting spaces (Putnam 2000, Oldenburg 1989).

Seen through the whole sociological discourse on civil society, the division appears partial but captures the character of the library discourse at the turn of the century. Following the taxonomy proposed by Jeffrey Alexander (1993, 2006), most perspectives turned to a 'civil society of the first type' (Civil Society I), combining concerns about the erosion of the public with interest in a 'diffuse inclusiveness' to revive democracy. This return to social ties as the roots of common life has proved unable to lead the reinterpretation of civil society beyond the link with bourgeois culture (Calhoun 1992; Cohen 1982; Cohen and Arato 1992) toward a new reading of a civil sphere capable of incorporating the broader conditions of solidarity and exclusion (Cohen 1999; Lamont and Fournier 1992) and *conflict* as a constitutive

component of civility (Mouritsen 2003). According to Alexander, political philosophy approaches civil society through a universal dimension, but sociologically, it requires further insight into cultural pragmatics, that is, the adoption of interactional theories that draw on symbolic codes and narratives (Alexander 1997)¹⁷.

With this fundamental argument in mind, I agree with Audunson (2005: 435) that the three groups can identify functional segmentations in the debate of the library as a meeting place. The perspectives are not mutually exclusive but appear complementary to different concerns about the function of places of coexistence concerning civic solidarity: *discussion* of common problems, *arenas* that support shared values, and *cobabitation* of different social groups. The first emphasis on the civil sphere is the political-communicative one, promoting dialogue between citizens understood as a rational discussion of social and political problems. In line with the Habermasian perspective, the library as a meeting place delineated as such would be a ‘*discursive room*.’ Once again, there is a clear link between some of the founding elements of the modern and contemporary library. The community proposal corresponds to the image of a predominantly culturally conservative arena in favor of a delimited idea of a ‘core group,’ to which cohesion must be ensured. In this regard, Audunson recalled the relevance of McCabe’s (2001) critique of the libertarian library as an excessively individualistic expression of personal fulfillment (*cf.* 2.1). We can hypothesize, following Audunson, that the library intended as a meeting place in a communal sense constitutes a ‘*moral room*,’ an environment of moral bonding. The third field of study, on fragmentation and cohesion, undoubtedly shares some of the concerns about moral community (particularly in the North American context) but shifts the focus on the spaces fostering civil society as spaces that allow for the creation of social ties, conceived as an essential element of collective living. Audunson suggests naming such a library a ‘*social room*,’ a broad interpretation that supports the idea of the library as a *third place* and a form of social infrastructure.

The theory of low-intensive places adds a further factor of complexity, represented by the double contribution of digitization to the support of communication between social differences and the increase of fragmentation and individualism. The thesis is about cultivating specialized universes of information and knowledge across geographic boundaries but avoiding or reinforcing distance with different or opposed spheres of opinion. Moreover, according to Audunson, as long as there is the possibility of a market, these circumscribed

¹⁷ The idea of publicness as ‘public domain’ (1.2) moves from a similar thesis: according to political theory, the contours of publicness are sketched primarily in terms of communicative rationality, whereas for interactionists it has a properly ritual element. Addressing the public as a ‘territory of convergence’ in which the *common* is formalized and contended, we can observe the ‘inscription and projection’ of civic values in associative forms, involving the material and the immaterial.

spheres of interest will be increasingly promoted and commercialized. On the other hand, a democratic project understood in a multicultural sense presumes the need to encounter diversity and recognize in it a possible value. Fragmentation and communication between cultural groups are not, according to Audunson, the only challenge emphasized by digital: a critical aspect of modern democracy is the gap between institutions and citizens. One aspect of the latter is the relationship between the geographical root of political institutions and the increasing virtuality of participatory contexts relevant to our lives. Therefore, to consider the public library as a meeting place in the multicultural and digital context (Audunson et al. 2020) is to consider the library as a vast space between the virtual and the digital, as a bridge between the communities in which they are geographically anchored and virtual collectivities. For Audunson, these aspects converge in need for appropriate meeting spaces to achieve the cross-cultural tolerance that advanced democracy presupposes, and libraries are the most suited institution for this purpose. The theory of low-intensive meeting spaces would thus represent the path to rethinking and revitalizing the library's role today. The existence of spaces that perform this function and the fact that the library is one of them, however, remain two working hypotheses.

In summary, the idea of the library as a low-intensive meeting place seems to arise from the question of solidarity posed by multiculturalism and digitalization as challenges of the present, to propose a solution based on a specific regime of interaction, thus tightening the link with the research strand on the 'places of sociality.' Here, ambivalent references to the front stage and backstage behavior (Goffman 1959), and different kinds of 'togetherness' offered by interaction, are fused:

a back-stage arena place might be an arena you meet the same people as front stage, e.g., your classmates or colleagues, whereas it is a central point with low-intensive arenas that they will facilitate meetings between people who are not exposed to one another on other arenas. In today's society, such meeting-places with a potential of making us visible to one another across social, ethnic, generational and value-based boundaries are extremely important. (Audunson 2005: 436)

If the place of low-intensive encounters is distinguished as a space where one places oneself in mutual visibility beyond social barriers, a static overlap between "interests and engagements" and forms of belonging may emerge. Moreover, can the 'low-intensive' interaction be promoted to some extent by transversal interests, as some theses on the library as a communicative and participatory environment seem to allude to, or would it be more passively a form of exposure and co-existence? It seems then that the micro-interactionist perspective needs to be deepened to understand what kind of encounter is promoted by low-intensive places. In this regard, the theme of neutrality is once again significant if understood

as the character of a specific regime of action, as in the case of the library as a *third place*. Before returning to this point, it is worth stressing how the potential of low-intensive places is posed in terms of mutual *visibility*, intended as the ground for recognizing diversity and its legitimacy¹⁸.

Arguments like low-intensive places are promoted, in slightly different ways, in the proposals of the *social infrastructure* (Klinenberg 2018) and the *cosmopolitan canopy* (Anderson 2012), which identify types of spaces that facilitate social relations predominantly based on tolerance and intergroup encounter through interactional forms of ‘learning’ about the world around us. According to Eric Klinenberg (2018:32), “the library is among the most critical forms of social infrastructure that we have.” It constitutes a significant case for understanding the conditions to improve community vitality and contrast isolation and exclusion. Klinenberg defines social infrastructure as the physical places that shape how people interact, constituting the conditions determining whether social capital develops. Emphasis is placed on how spaces constitute the material foundations of social life, promoting “civic engagement and social interaction, both within communities and across group lines’ (2018:16). Some examples, the author states, are primarily public institutions and places such as libraries, gardens, schools. Clubs and associations are part of the social infrastructure, but only if they provide gathering spaces. Significantly, commercial spaces are also considered in the social infrastructure; in combination with profit purposes, they operate as *third places*. Two fundamental elements characterize his approach. First, Klinenberg’s direct positioning in the sociology of social capital and civil society, which he intends to develop. Second, how he focuses on the spatial dimension, linking the theoretical developments on interaction and community-building to urban space in the broadest sense. To clarify the social perspective, it is helpful to start from the fact that, according to Klinenberg, social infrastructure is not social capital but the set of physical conditions that participate in it, understood as a measure/set of personal relationships and interpersonal networks. This notion of social capital openly refers to the tradition that sees social links as the development of civil life and the formation of democracy through the American perspective on cohesion, communitarianism, and democracy. Klinenberg refers, on the one hand, to the interpretation of social capital brought to the fore by scholars such as Putnam (2000, 2009) and, on the other, to the idea of urban vitality and diversity supported by intellectuals such as Jane Jacobs, Elijah Anderson or Ray Oldenburg.

¹⁸ They are “meeting-places with a potential of making us visible to one another across social, ethnic, generational and value-based boundaries.” “[...] Tolerance presupposes that we are exposed to other values, interests and preferences than our own and, that we re-conciliate ourselves with their existence and accept them as legitimate” (*id.* pp. 436-37).

While openly addressing how forms of social infrastructure relate to problems such as gentrification, displacement, and middle-class security concerns, Klinenberg tends to be optimistic, supporting the human contact, vitality, and safety emphasized by Jacobs (1961). Criticizing this type of ‘urban authenticity.’ Zukin (2010) recalled the historical relevance of the ‘paradox of public space.’ The ideal of free access confirmed spaces such as the library as authentically public and helped define modern citizens by breaking down barriers that previously excluded subaltern social groups (p.129). However, she also reminded us how the discipline of unpleasant behavior in such ‘publicness’ has led to monitoring policies and cultural premises that continue to produce and reproduce inequality and injustice (*cf.* 1.3).

The notion of social infrastructure allows us to observe the modalities in which some spaces shape the bases of civil life. However, to exploit this potential, it is necessary to identify places based on their contribution to social capital, which should be empirically validated. Therefore, it is necessary to adopt this notion critically, without taking its boundaries for granted and using it as a methodological mindset to map the potential environments and deconstruct how they relate to issues of social capital, accessibility, and social justice

The library as a space of cohabitation can be read through the lens of what Elijah Anderson calls a *cosmopolitan canopy* (2004, 2012), referred to by Klinenberg. Drawing on ethnographic experience in the covered market and other shared spaces of Philadelphia, Anderson has identified ways to develop cosmopolitan civility toward diversity. Cosmopolitan canopies offer an environment for social learning, a space to learn the competence of *folk ethnography* that help people revise their own prejudices. Germain and Radice (2005) offer a similar analysis, noting how Montréal spaces for interethnic cohabitation are decreasing but are concentrated in parks and libraries. The folk ethnography described by Anderson seems to allude to an idea of putting into play stereotypical forms that strongly emphasize the ritual act of meeting strangers, albeit conceived as porous. Ideas and representations about the other would be tested as interactive hypotheses, sensitizing concepts in ‘popular’ and ‘spontaneous’ forms. However, such an interpretation cannot disregard the prolongation of the performance of the self in a game in which the Goffmanian sense of ‘guard’ – which Anderson intends to suspend – does not disappear. However, it can only be reformulated if not strengthened by cultural differences.

Sofya Aptekar recently highlighted *The Unbearable Lightness of the Cosmopolitan Canopy* (2019a). The sociologist criticized the optimistic view of public space as a safe space for learning and acceptance of difference: cosmopolitanism and tolerance coexist with forms of conflict due to the broader structures and cultural pragmatics that also act or characterize spaces such as squares and markets. Through an ethnographic study in a working-class

neighborhood of New York City, Aptekar (2019b) also read the public library into a similar ambivalence, affirming its interest for urban researchers as a reproducer of hegemonic ideologies but also as exciting spaces of resistance in which middle-class librarians and more vulnerable publics redefine possible alternatives to the neoliberal city.

On the side of the relational forms that characterize the public, Lyn Lofland (1998) has also emphasized the centrality of categorical forms of relationship. Although Lofland is oriented to a certain pessimism toward the power of technologies of control in orienting the population toward consumerism rather than to encounters and debate, the scholar defines the public as a space of relationship between biographies of strangers in coexistence: it becomes a space of active learning, of suspension of oppressive ties and where to practice a political dimension out of conflict. In the hypothesis of studying the library as a place of unfocused exposure and interactions, it might then be helpful to speak of ‘fourth places’ (Aelbrecht 2016: 134), characterized not by conversation and active engagement but in-between activities such as observation, waiting, ‘killing time,’ but also all those forms of ‘pubic privatism’ associated with the ‘wireless city’ (Hamton and Gupta 2008). In other words, we might approach the bridging element of the third-place library, if not primarily, through Goffman’s more ephemeral interactions based on civic inattention (Daconto and Manella 2016).

While Erving Goffman depicted the public as a stage of unfocused encounters between strangers, the Canadian sociologist has also shown the intricate binary codes as the basis of the sacralized recognition of the individual (1959, 1971). Moreover, in the rituals of intervisibility, he brought out the politics of identity in the form of the stigma (1963)¹⁹. Although few scholars in the interactionist area have structured a reflection on civil society (e.g., Fine 2012), the development of cultural pragmatics within the study of civil society is, as mentioned, one of the significant points of Civil Sphere Theory (Alexander 2006). As described by Kivisto and Sciortino (2021), the interest in cultural relations and stigmatization helped conceptualize the modes of incorporation in civil society, and the micro-sociological approach constituted indirect bases for the development of CST. This perspective, together with a situated focus on the diverse rearrangement of inter-visibility, can hold together many of the questions explored so far and open the hypothesis of the library as a translator or agent of the civil sphere (*cf.* 1.2). Moreover, such a cultural and historical approach seems the most promising way to hold together the ‘grand narratives’ of the public library with the capacity of actors in remapping the public through politics of representation that involve

¹⁹ Some studies (e.g., Ferrel 2010) have applied labelling theory to processes of stigmatization of library users in the form of ‘problem patrons.’

places and texts (Newman 2007).

Conclusion: reassembling the social library(-ies)

In this section, I have discussed some perspectives and processes that have characterized librarianship and the study of libraries in recent decades, offering some critiques and directions for development based on political and sociological theory.

Following the threads of this section, we can observe how the idea of the library as an institution devoted to cultural reproduction and dialogue involves different interpretations of its ability to support *conversations* in the social fabric. A link emerges between the idea of spatialized and heterotopic collections of 'texts' and the discourse on democratic consensus on a conflictual/dialogical basis, starting from the ambivalent support of the library to socio-political emancipation within the nineteenth-century liberal culture, up to the challenge of the civil solidarity oriented to the recognition of difference (Alexander 2001). This two-fold configuration emerges through a range of relations that make the library space a civic place, territorializing library's civil desires within symbolic and social barriers. Having addressed the complexity cast by the different views on library thirdness, the associations that compose the library can be temporarily observed as situated material-cum-immaterial conditions, expressed in terms of mutual visibility, coexistence, and learning.

My arguments do not support any determinism but rather intend to make more significant, and maybe less rhetorical, the recognized porosity between the library and its social environment and its role in changing sensibilities about democratic solidarity. For example, addressing the interpretation of the library as an institution of the Habermasian public sphere, we can identify the analysis of the library as an observable field of critique of the sphere itself, in which opposing tendencies contribute to interrogating the boundaries of hegemonic definitions of the common, starting with *what* and *who* should be visible. This applied, by instance, to the very first role of the library in the bourgeois reformulation of *public* knowledge to redefine the social order. Or, later, to the effect of the hegemonic conception of free access to education promoted by the Public Library in terms of emancipation and inclusion. And today, to the recognition of pluralism within the advanced Welfare State and the relationship between the global North and South. In a field described as such, the transformation and critique of the public sphere can be identified as a social fact in which relational definitions of publicness could be observed based on gender, class barriers, and all those categories pointed out by Habermas' successors. However, to capture more globally the spatial and performative characteristics of the social function of the library, it seems more appropriate to rely on a broader concept such as the civil sphere (Alexander

2006).

The public library's role in supporting the civic sphere cannot be understood merely through the reconstruction of its *publicity* in the context of contemporary societies and democratic life. However, it neither can be investigated by separating historical processes, narratives, and everyday practices within libraries. In the last decades, social librarianship – understood as the study of the library as a social system – turned to the scientific analysis of meanings and narratives as an escape from “the pitfalls of ‘impressionability’ [of models] and library faith” to design libraries, identify their identity and extend their impact on well-being (Faggiolani and Galluzzi 2018: 452-453)²⁰. Going further, the sociological approach to the library (and, broadly, to the social infrastructure) should draw on the long reflection on meanings and performances to map its *sociality*, seen as the dense associations that constitute the library as a complex object, including collections, interactions, *and* relevant discourses. As such, library sociality does not refer to any social function or role which overlap with the socio-historical development of the library. The ‘social impact’ on civil life and justice can emerge from the latter as the result of the interweaving of relationships and conversations²¹.

To date, the study of the public library proves to be highly dense and stimulating (albeit restricted and underappreciated), both for the cultural sector's and social research's specific interests. Combining the languages of librarianship and sociology, these chapters have outlined the most important questions. The two significant contributions I have suggested are the consideration of library ‘publicness’ through the lens of the regimes of association and a way to address the social relevance of the library beyond its democratic ideal or a specific denotation of a ‘social’ library as a meeting space. In the former case, my argument is that such library's public domain is a system of relationships spatially sedimented and symbolically oriented to the values of civil solidarity. As *autopia*, the ‘intellectual space’ of libraries maintains an ambivalent character in the demarcation of a ‘common’ through mediation and accessibility. Nevertheless, it offers critical potential as a civil agent. In the second case, I stressed the possibility of adopting library ‘thirdness’ as a sensitizing concept as long as we delve into the forms of interaction and recognition involved in the underlying

²⁰ The Italian debate on the topic of ‘social librarianship,’ which is not limited to the study of the ‘social library’ (understood as a space of gathering), is extensive and stems from the writings of Traniello and his successors (for a reflexive note on the influences of Shera and sociologists such as Weber and Luhmann, see Traniello 2007). As pointed out by Galluzzi & Faggiolani (2015), in the Anglo-Saxon literature, the expression ‘social librarianship’ does not exist, as the discipline already embedded the ‘social’ connotation (*cf.* 2.1). Indeed, the focus on the library as a set of relationships emerges through diverse international approaches. The Italian expression does intend to capture this ‘paradigm shift’ and to address the rapid emergence of new questions and methods in the national sphere, including contributions from the social sciences. This work is primarily oriented toward the latter, seeking to offer an informed ground for interdisciplinary dialogue.

²¹ I will return to the idea of sociological interpretation of the library in the Conclusion.

idea of ‘neutrality.’ I thus selected from the main perspectives a set of elements that deserve researchers’ attention and marked the risk of tautological and teleological approaches, that is, to interpret the social character of spaces such as libraries based on assumed characteristics or ideals. Both arguments converge on the possibility of making sense of ‘what happens’ through the dense observation of social experience through fieldwork to hold together materiality, performance, and also the semi-autonomous role of relevant landscapes of meaning. With the latter, I refer to theory as well as to the derivative models circulated in the reference community, where interpretations, as frames for the reduction of complexity and the planning of reality, become part of the library’s cultural performances (Alexander 2011) and librarians’ idioculture (Fine 1979). The expression follows Isaac Reed’s (2011) discussion on interpretation in the social sciences but also plays on Latour’s (2005) extensive use of ‘landscape.’ Following the French sociologist, many of these representations, while instructive, emerge as those specific landscapes called ‘panoramas,’ in opposition to the flattened landscape required by the sociology of associations. Panoramas provide ‘grand narratives’ and amplify what Petrucciani (2003) called the ‘impressionability’ of library models. From a sociological perspective, “their totalizing views should not be despised as an act of professional megalomania, but they should be added, like everything else, to the multiplicity of sites we want to deploy” (Latour 2005:189). Moving from this framework, the following sections will refine the scope of my contribution.

Part II.

Reading the library:
research design and trajectories

CHAPTER 3

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OBJECTIVE AND DESIGN

Based on the theoretical arguments of Part I, this doctoral project aimed to analyze the public library as a sociological object to critically evaluate the concept of social infrastructure and contribute to the study of physical and relational conditions that can produce sociality and inclusion at the local level. Focusing on the library as a meeting place, the research aimed at two specific contributions: to assess the institution's positioning with respect to the civil sphere and to clarify its relationship with urban phenomena and the efforts toward social justice.

The first intention was to critically engage with a strand of research that perceives the public library, both historically and ideally, as a component of the nineteenth and twentieth-century public sphere, providing free access to information, the means for civic participation, and a crucial meeting-place. This complex topic is relevant to the traditional role recognized to libraries in the democratization of knowledge and the current research for novel paradigms. The debate on the future of LAM institutions (libraries, archives, and museums) in the digital age addresses participation in the public sphere through accessibility, lifelong learning, and the digital divide. However, it progressively amalgamates the topic with the idea of the 'social library' as a public meeting space to support communities, fight social disadvantage and produce bonding and bridging social ties. In the metaphor of the social infrastructure as a material focal point of civil life, the aggregative function became a complementary and, at times, contentious discourse vis-à-vis the (in)formative one. The mixing of these dimensions creates uncertain readings both in scientific debate and daily practices, with relevant outcomes on the issues of economic and symbolic investment (*what kind of places should public library investments create?*) and the target public (*who should use these spaces and how?*).

Indeed, the relationship with the broader social fabric impelled complementary research

sub-questions on the library population. The foundation of public sphere institutions reflected the ambivalence of the public, providing recognition to underprivileged sections of the population along with the paradigm of control through the themes of morality, cultural consumption, and legitimate behavior in the common space. In the last half-century, attention has grown to the reproduction of inequalities in urban spaces. Innovative forms of the social infrastructure, especially if connected to market rationale, are not immune to stigmatization and exclusionary aesthetic codes. Among them, spaces like libraries, whose equality seems crucial, can counteract these dynamics or participate in transformations that favors models of space and vitality directed at specific publics to the detriment of others. Observing three ideal-typical positions on the function of the library – urban frontier defending the most marginalized, *third place* for the cosmopolitan city, or amenity for the middle class – the problem of social justice through the social infrastructure remains unresolved.

3.1 A challenging scenario: Covid-19 pandemic and new questions

The main phase of fieldwork, which started in November 2019, overlapped with the Coronavirus (COVID-19) emergency, which began in Italy in February 2020 and is still ongoing. The period of risk and extreme change resulted in prolonged and repeated mobility restrictions and closures of many public spaces. Libraries were subject to access restrictions even during less critical phases, and quarantine periods were required for documentary assets. The uncertainties and limitations hindered the project's development in its initial configuration, and since June 2020, the project has been redefined to capture new issues and cope with difficulties (Ch. 4).

On the one hand, many of the topics about the library as a social infrastructure have presented themselves in a new form and with extreme urgency: digital transition; coexistence in the public space; the importance of physical affordances, the deepening of inequalities in the access to information, culture, and the web; the role of librarians in building solidarity and meaningful relationship with citizens. On the other, new ones emerged. In Italy, for example, the seeming lack of strong actors in the field to discuss regulations and plans during the emergency and beyond, and the risk of a further deterioration of the world of culture and entertainment to the benefit of the platform economy.

A few months into the emergency, many began to wonder what would become of shared spaces and libraries specifically. While the profound social impacts of the health crisis were inscrutable, it seemed plausible that economic effects, health risks, and distancing measures would not have annihilated them. Nevertheless, the vulnerability to such an event and the

importance assumed by intermediation and digital media raised relevant questions for the study. The crucial issue of inequality has intensified due to the new demand for welfare, but also in light of unequal opportunities to access means and information to cope with the crisis. While the library as a form of social infrastructure seemed a possible resource, it would otherwise have experienced a new disregard. The need for distancing and the promotion of digital resources have already begun to transform the library, opening the possibility for enhancing the individualistic and functional use of public space. Moreover, it was conceivable that the debate on the future of these institutions would have mingled with the topic of platforms and delivery, vis à vis their role during the emergency. In this direction, the ‘social’ facet linked to the civil sphere could have been mitigated, and a ‘smart’ model of information and cultural provision could have been strengthened: services on reservation, self-lending, promotion of digital resources, and ‘on demand’ consultancy and resources. Some branches, especially those peripheral and already penalized in the distribution of resources, might have been closed or rearranged. Whether and how local branches could have been reorganized in favor of local communities had further sociological relevance.

In brief, the emergency added new tensions and accelerated the long-standing ones. Considering this, even though the pandemic was typically exceptional and can restrict much of the global analysis over the last two years, it was appropriate to consider two aspects of interest to the topics at hand. First, one of the theoretical contributions of the project is the comparison between reflections on significant historical contingencies and perspectives on more profound tensions between our societies and public space, ultimately stressing the oscillatory character that has characterized the link between the library and the social fabric. Thus, while acknowledging the novelty and severity of the pandemic, its challenges could be approached, suspending a perspective anchored to the emergency and short-term effects and studied as the most recent and rapid crisis posed to the library and, more generally, to the social infrastructure. The shock caused by Covid-19 has invoked a desire for predictions and reassurance, but without a critical look that connects unsolved questions and new trends, no interpretation would be relevant. Second, assuming as a working hypothesis the capacity of social infrastructure to provide cultural and social resources to support communities in their daily challenges as well as in crises and disasters (Klinenberg 2018), it seems promising to observe how libraries responded to the event. Preliminary observations and accounts illuminated the role of libraries prior to the pandemic, but what I observed in the following months could show the relevance of what *remained* and what was perceived as *absent*.

3.2 Research questions and approach

Based on the above observations, I rejected the possibility of identifying a ‘post Covid-19’ social infrastructure and re-modulating the research toward its analysis. However, responses for the near future were taking shape in a context that menaced to further de-fragment the use of space, favor platform economy, and speed up the redefinition – or fall – of cultural institutions such as the public library. The risk of a growing gap between a minority of the public already involved and a large segment not served by libraries – now due to a radical problem of accessibility – could have proved crucial.

While re-adjusting the study, I confirmed the intent of analyzing the potentials and criticalities of the public library as a place supporting civil life. As discussed, the goal was not merely to adopt or reject the library as a critical expression of the social infrastructure but rather to assess the idea of territorialized conditions for creating civil life and responding to the limits exposed by the debate. This aim has been expressed through this overall research question:

RQ. How can the physical and relational conditions posed by the public library as a place promote social solidarity?

In order to capture the key issues that constitute the sociological problem, the research has been guided by the following related sub-questions:

Focus on the civil sphere

sQ1. Regarding the enhancement of civil life, what are the connections between a public sphere-related mission and the role of social ties and aggregation?

Focus on the target population

sQ2. What is the declared and tacit position of the most vulnerable citizens within the target public of contemporary libraries?

Focus on the regimes of interaction and visibility

sQ3. How do material and symbolic conditions shape the way all the different publics of the library move, interact and express themselves in the public domain?

Focus on urban politics and justice

sQ4. How can public libraries act as ‘civil spaces,’ contributing to counter-action in the public domain?

The research design entailed the realization of a case study based in Bologna, Italy, over a period of about one year. The study finally spanned approximately between November 2019 and May 2022. According to the project's premises, the methodological approach aimed at answering the research questions in a historically informed and conditional approach (Small 2009), thus identifying significant regularities about the phenomenon that are theoretically capable of manifesting themselves elsewhere. Namely, the qualitative, close account of a library network allows a generalization in terms of an 'authenticity area' (Topolski 1975), that is, based on a case study as an eloquent synecdoche (Becker 1998) in a diminished form, as recently discussed by Cardano (2020). Following the argument from analogy, the extension of the observed to the unobserved is supported by a 'thick description' of the case (Geertz 1973) to be compared to that of the broader phenomena. Such comparison generates a study "where the part studied is *not* meant to represent the whole but to speak – possibly eloquently – on some relevant aspects of the phenomenon studied" (Cardano 2020: 98). Ethnographic approach allowed the immersion in the library as a system of relationships, observing and experiencing the lives of librarians and patrons, and following the links between people and the environment, the digital and the physical.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, to evaluate difficulties and potentialities, it was necessary to break down the different techniques used to appreciate the field as a set of relations – namely, participant observation, interviews, and content analyses. After a complete suspension of more than three months, the study was protracted and supplemented by phases of minor involvement and remote data collection. On the one hand, my immediate decision was not to turn to an alternative direction of study. On the other, uncertainty and time constraints force me to re-evaluate an extensive immersion in the field. Increased attention was given to interviews with privileged informants, and most conversations and meetings were scheduled (both online and on-site). Direct observations were aimed at deepening the understanding of the spaces that compose the library as a form of social infrastructure, assessing the link between them and practices, and adding my representation to that of the actors. The focus on spaces made it possible to integrate the dimensions of accessibility, regulation, and agency with the relationship between groups. In other words, it emphasizes the material conditions of the social infrastructure. Visits prior to the pandemic remained valuable, and further opportunities arose during the times of partial opening. However, the degree of access to common areas and the organization of events changed dramatically and constantly, and participation was critically affected. As an integral part of the observation, my presence in the field was intended to be progressively more active. In the library, some practices are individual, but it is possible to interact with employees, readers, study groups, friends, and families visiting the spaces. Many branches offer rest areas and

support services or organize open meetings and workshops. Participation allows to deal with practices in action and facilitate access to people other than the library staff. Access to the practices and experiences through the actors' representations remained a fundamental aspect. Administrators, experts, librarians, and diverse patrons have different degrees of organization and visibility. The problem of approaching this diversity, already present, was intensified by the limited access provided by the health crisis, calling for a critical reflection on the type of subjects involved. The whole research process came to be a composite journey that deeply touched on relational and emotional levels, bringing out a dense reflexive need, pregnant with personal and sociological relevance concerning the field. I offer a more narrative account of the fieldwork in the next chapter.

By the end of the fieldwork, I had conducted about two hundred hours of direct observation and participated in about twenty online and offline events. In addition to documentary material and informal conversations in the field, I collected in-depth interviews with key informants (*cf.* Appendix). They included the president and the former director of Libraries Institution, the coordinator of the Bologna Reading Pact, the head of the Department of Culture, Sport, and City Promotion, a professor of archival science and librarianship, a project manager of the Foundation for Urban Innovation, the founder of MediaLibraryOnLine, and seven librarians with management responsibilities.

The main object of the study was the Library and Cultural Welfare Sector (Libraries Institution of Bologna, until 2021), including a varied set of libraries. This municipal library network is part of the Bologna Pole of the National Library System, alongside many other private and university libraries, and has a coordinating role within the Metropolitan City of Bologna and on the digital lending platform Emilib (MediaLibraryOnline – MLOL). It is one of the significant cases in the national library sector, consisting of diverse libraries in terms of history, architecture, and public. The network consists of ten 'general information' libraries in the six city districts, the historical Archiginnasio study and research library, the Salaborsa multimedia library (with the dedicated section Salaborsa Ragazzi and the new Salaborsa Lab Roberto Ruffilli), and four specialized libraries: Casa Carducci, Centro Amilcar Cabral, Italian Library of Women and the Parri Institute Library.

During the 20th century, the pioneering founding of the city 'quarters' and the creation of local libraries spread across these administrative divisions distinguished Bologna as one of the most interesting cities in terms of experimentation and territorial governance; a path that continues today with significant urban design strategies inspired by the ideas of proximity and active citizenship. In 2000 Bologna was declared the European Capital of Culture, and the municipal library network began a process of promotion and rearrangement still relevant to its current identity. With the foundation of Salaborsa, a multimedia library and covered

square, Bologna appeared among Italy's most representative examples of innovative and plural public libraries (Agnoli 2009; Daconto and Manella 2016; Galluzzi 2009). The site followed the model of the *Piazza*, offering a cultural space that attempts to integrate new technologies, design, and support for sociality. The structure results from a renovation of a section of the very central Palazzo d'Accursio, the ancient historical headquarters of the Municipality, overlooking Piazza Maggiore. The connection with the central area of the Culture Quadrilateral (*Quadrilatero della Cultura*), along with the prestige of the ancient library of the Archiginnasio, provided the basis for the new identity of the Libraries Institution. Founded in 2008, the Institution stimulated the renewal of the entire municipal service by developing a semi-corporate management system and unifying pre-existing branches into a single network.

Bologna proved to be relevant in the study of culture-led urban regeneration, policies of exclusion, and the 'right to the city' (Bergamaschi, Castrignanò, and Pieretti 2020; Bergamaschi, Castrignanò, and Rubertis 2014). While previous studies have explored significant cases in the area, such as Salaborsa central library (Daconto and Manella 2016) and the House of Knowledge (*Casa della Conoscenza*) in Casalecchio di Reno (Bergamaschi 2015), no research addressed Bologna municipal library network in the attempt to include neighborhood branches (or proximity libraries) and considered a more comprehensive account of the historical and broader urban processes involved. Chapter 5 will provide a complete discussion of the case and current processes, positioning and delimiting my field in the scenario and setting its conditional eloquence.

CHAPTER 4

THE ENIGMA AND THE JOURNEY: A HISTORY OF MY RESEARCH

As anticipated in the Introduction, the following pages are dedicated to reconstructing the contours of my research as a plausible ‘representation of representations.’ I introduce the methodological and personal perspectives that have shaped this project and the many adaptations chosen or required during the investigation, from its design to its conclusion. We know that the very choice of a research object often has intellectual and disciplinary reasons, as well as biographical ones, arising from personal experience and motivations related to our engagement with society and its problems (Lofland and Lofland 1995). Therefore, I shall start here: *how did I get here?*

4.1 On some opening postures

Before approaching this field of research, I had crossed the threshold of a civic library very few times, and I had no intense curiosity for this place. I started to enjoy reading at a young age, even though I cannot claim to have been a ‘strong’ reader. There have always been books in my family, and I have always been able to get new ones. However, I cannot say that I had no experience with libraries before. The first and most important ones were school libraries. My elementary school was one of those lucky ones that could claim a moderately stocked school library. We used to be accompanied by our teachers to browse through the books, choose one and take it home for a few days, where we could proudly flip through it and tell stories that, at the time, I felt I had exclusive access to. I challenged myself to explore them all, and for the first time, I developed a particular fascination for those rooms full of shelves, which I perhaps associated with the palaces of fairytales. When I went to my high school, one of the things that struck me most was its extensive library, originally developed thanks to a family donation. I spent much time there when I was not taking religion classes or doing

most of my extracurricular activities: I joined a reading group for the first time, prepared with my classmates and teachers for philosophical debates, and delved into historical periods that my institutional curriculum only partially covered. It was a pleasant, familiar environment to get lost and discover books I had only heard of or never thought could exist. Since then, the few libraries I frequented for several years were academic ones; the first, well before joining a lecture hall, in preparation for my high-school graduation essay on Hegel and the historical study of philosophy. For the first time, I felt the sensation of genuinely independent access to study and research but also the sensation of entering an impregnable, intimidating stronghold: I had to make a card, carefully detail my requests, and wait for a librarian to descend into the mysterious archives to give me her precious ‘university’ tomes²².

However, before entering a municipal library for the first time, as a researcher, I never had the occasion to reflect on these experiences. My sociological curiosity about this world arose, as sometimes happens, somewhat accidentally. I was then living in Brno, Czech Republic, in a rather uncomfortable dormitory in front of the very pleasant *Moravian Library*, which offered me a welcoming and stimulating place to spend my free afternoons after classes and to get interested in my papers. I was completing my master’s degree, and when I applied for a researcher trainee position at the Trento Municipal Library, it seemed like an exciting direction to take on my return. In early 2017, I thus entered a world that I had only taken for granted without really knowing it. On the one hand, I had never had a chance to delve into the phenomena, trends, and reflections related to the library, neither as a service nor as a public place. On the other hand, the lack of time and economic resources allocated to this research did not allow me, if not marginally, to develop a preparatory phase for the field investigation.

Despite some limitations, the experience was an opportunity to test some of the techniques and theories with which I was most familiar. My research touched on important issues related to inclusion, stigma, and public interaction. However, I had the opportunity to approach some texts on qualitative studies in libraries and innovative library models, and my collaborator and I converged on a research design oriented to the Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967). I had approached GT at the Sociology Department in Padua and, in the wake of authors such as Chiara Faggiolani (2012), it was a familiar and appreciated method

²² I experienced a certain fascination for these ‘book vaults’ a few years later, when I worked in the archives of the university library in Trento. I often joked about the fact that I *touched* every single book on sociology, and I was really thankful for the chance to see some of the contesting dissertations from the 1960s. Anecdotes aside, the image represents a typical example of a closed-shelf library, and of the physical and symbolic boundaries involved in the management of the ‘library threshold.’ On top of procedures, awe, gatekeeping, and discretion are crucial not only in libraries aimed at specific publics, such as university or private ones, but to all libraries open to the public, shaping their effective accessibility.

at the municipal library of Trento. Grounded research, in its strongest declinations, envisages a preparation for the field that is undoubtedly solid but free from robust theoretical models, giving prevalence to an inductive logic that leads to the production of theoretical interpretations starting from experience, even though unexpected stimuli and themes. However, 'groundedness' involves identifying concepts and speculations during theoretical sampling, reasoned choices that must be constantly tested, and emerging categories. From the limited literature and data collected, the analysis that emerged mainly addressed the distinction between 'inappropriate' and 'proper' uses of spaces and between traditional or innovative conceptions of the library as a contemporary space. However, some of the limits of an ineffective bottom-up elaboration also emerged, such as conceptual inefficiency and the reiteration of hypotheses and interpretations later found in the literature.

This early experience was one of the reasons that led me to a more 'informed' approach to the field. Before my doctorate, I returned to my data to develop my master's thesis, hoping to deepen the topics and answer questions I had not been able to answer in the commissioned research. In the library, I had become fond of playing with my distance to the field. On the one hand, as an Italian student, I possessed key codes necessary to interpret the mechanisms and spaces of the library. On the other, I observed the work of librarians 'from the outside.' I had quickly become a (hopefully appreciated) 'nuisance,' continuing to ask for explanations of what I was seeing but not taking them for granted. Many aspects fascinated me: why did library's trends seem unnoticed by the wider public? How come I perceived a gap between a sense of extreme hospitality and a problem of mutual tolerance? Why did some features and codes described by librarians seem unfamiliar to those who entered?

When I had the opportunity to return to my data by asking new questions, I decided to start with the history of public libraries and explore the ambivalent relationship between the idea of universal access and processes of stigmatization. Nonetheless, at the end of the journey, I was convinced that I still had a lot to dig into the social bonds of libraries and people's experiences. Young asylum seekers had shared with me (incapable of deep understanding) their first experiences in the country through the welcoming halls of the library. Librarians have described with passion their life paths and professional and human doubts in the face of daily challenges. Local elders had met daily to read the newspaper, chat, and maybe comment on a few misplaced happenings. Ultimately persuaded of the sociological significance of the library as a field of experiences, I wondered how this ambivalent and often ignored place was, for many, a source of passion and confidence, an image of the community and its challenges. My main interest became to deepen the perspective of the most vulnerable citizens and to understand better what the contribution of neighborhood branches (or 'proximity' libraries) was in the broader urban context, that is,

both concerning ‘central’ libraries and the broader social and cultural infrastructure.

By the time I reached the planning stage of my doctoral project, I was interpreting my approach to ‘groundedness’ through the lens of abduction and conceiving theory as an ally of the creative process (Tavory and Timmermans 2014). Along with this reflection came the familiarity with some of the problems and phenomena related to the research object: while not having already an exhaustive and solid theoretical background, the first formulations of this project followed categories that arose in a ‘diffuse field’ across biography, literature and new questions from the field. The continuation of an abductive and theoretically informed approach brought together the richness of a dense scenario with the need to question some theoretical notions and open to unexplored facets.

Moreover, the potential of the qualitative and participatory approach found support in the critique of some prevailing assumptions and the problematic relationship between ‘models’ and planning (*cf.* Part I). As diverse conceptions of ‘public’ and ‘place’ assume critical importance in the design and promotion of certain forms of the library – and the city – the slippery invitations to prediction and prescription should be kept in mind. While it is undoubtedly true that the researcher’s fear of imposing himself on the field implies a “misplaced sense of omnipotence” (Semi 2010: 31), knowledge can partake in forms of power and legitimacy. Albeit to a limited extent, in a field where various meanings compete to create space and demarcations, the risk of justifying or being mobilized toward some perspectives seemed present.

Alongside the personal and theoretical reasons developed in the first research experience, there was a further political drive: the personal interest in a city for all. The lack of free water and toilets, the closure of parks, the presence of sound and physical dissuasion, and the ‘militarization’ of squares were not just distant academic debates but observed and experienced phenomena. Moreover, I had to question my own condition of privilege: relative, of course, but evident in comparison to the people most affected by urban inequalities. As an educated White man, I could not avoid questions of gender and lifestyle. Regarding my research topics, the role of culture and consumption over urban change and the ambivalent relationship between the middle classes and social-mixing were two significant issues. Within my daily experiences, they particularly recalled the role of students and the debate on the so-called ‘radical chic’ left, a somewhat problematic expression, but a possible symptom of the perceived detachment between some progressive stances and part of the social fabric. When I decided to move to Bologna and ask myself *what a city that declared itself distinctly cultural, progressive, and participatory was doing with its libraries*,²³ it was also to question

²³ I owe thanks to Antonella Agnoli for my full awareness of this question, and her relentless

the possible role of libraries between culture and the city, between politics and participation, between exclusionary transformations of the urban fabric and alternative resistance. Without hope or certainty, indeed. In Trento, as in the literature, I observed how libraries were tangled up in complex relationships and city discourses but also capable of questioning themselves. I wanted to ask new questions that I felt had been evaded in a project that looked *through* the walls of the libraries.

4.2 Adjusting the wheel: choices, negotiations, challenges

Qualitative inquiry is characterized by a distinctive “submission” of researchers and their methods to the peculiarities of the empirical context (Cardano 2011). Accessibility to the field, understood as a circumscribed and conditioned product, is thus a fundamental and relational dimension. The consideration of “right spaces” and “right times” can be a valuable lens for reading the choices and limitations that have facilitated or negated such accessibility (Semi 2010).

The very notions of specific spaces, such as those of *‘quartiere,’* ‘public library,’ and ‘neighborhood library,’ were immediately far from definitive. Porous conceptions and boundaries imposed operational choices and the sensitivity to welcome different points of view, which I have attempted to render in my analysis. Moreover, some spaces are more sensitive than others. Thus accessibility requires a significant set of relationships and reassurances. This concerned, for example, the observation of backstage spaces in the work of librarians (typically limited) and visits during the pandemic (occasionally allowed to me). During this very peculiar juncture, the entire library became a space at times precluded to the public and at times liminal, in which new relational forms emerged (e.g., redistribution of work, new checkpoints, online interactions, the return to the ‘closed-shelf,’ the extension of the library ‘outside its walls’).

Other relevant issues were introduced by the institutional transition of the Libraries Institution of Bologna into the Library and Cultural Welfare Sector during the study. First, the partial transformation of the field compromised some relationships, trust, and positioning aspects. Second, this transformation was accompanied by an internal project of investigation and training carried out by the Kilowatt group and the Urban Innovation Foundation. Thus, the process caused overlapping but opened diverse possibilities for triangulation and feedback.

The possibility of accessing people’s lives and representations depends to an extreme

ability to evoke, with passion, what libraries and citizens can create.

degree on their relationships with them. Another way to reconstruct these relationships is to look back at the role assumed by the researcher, as revealed in the degree of participation in the relationships and in the degree of ‘covering’ research aims. Any form of observation assumed by a researcher is a communicative form, which participates in the system of relationships and determines responses. On the continuum of forms of participation, I found myself in just about every position during this study, from ‘full observation’ to ‘full participation.’²⁴ The latter instances were less common, but on a few occasions, I had the opportunity to arrive as an observer and then actively collaborate in the success and discussion of certain activities. This was the case, for example, of an urban walk promoted by two libraries, during which I helped some participants and exchanged opinions on the experience.²⁵ The various public meetings I attended were further examples of varying degrees of participation (as part of an audience, in some debates, etc.). I have also been guided during some visits and conducted on-site and virtual interviews. All these moments have their own rich relational configuration, in which one attempts to ‘dance the listening’ (La Mendola 2009), and which involved me at least as much as the people who kindly offered me their time and presence.

Many occasions were almost devoid of participation: those dedicated to exploratory visits and the so-called ‘naturalistic’ observations, the most distinctly characterized by a covert role. Regarding this last aspect, the general position I adopted was a ‘soft’ covering, circumscribed to the contingencies of the observation, similar to what I experienced in the past in the study of public conferences and lectures. My identity and purpose were concealed when communication would have been difficult or when ethical concerns were marginal in a public context. I did not formulate any strong rationale for concealing myself generally, and in almost all informal exchanges or interviews, I chose to make my aims and actions clear, presenting an appropriate information sheet. Envisioning different roles, sometimes within the same space, describe a porous boundary for which one is responsible, relying on a continuous deontological reference and knowing that a ‘common sense’ sensitivity within a given context (such as that of a public library) cannot account for the unexpected, nor assure full respect of others. Since I rarely advance strong reasons for disguising or concealing my work, I have always been ready and willing to make my activities evident should anyone have

²⁴ Recently, Cardano (2020) suggested an articulate taxonomy of qualitative research techniques through the image of ‘islands in an archipelago’ accumulated by family similarities, in the sense proposed by Wittgenstein. They are distinguished by degrees of perturbation given by the intrusiveness of the researcher, the primary focus (subjects or relationships), and the artificiality of the collection context. This study outlines the possible variety of islands needed to navigate the field, and the attempt to consciously render one’s own positionings.

²⁵ In this case, in a game of perspectives, I also participated in additional *performances*, as one of the subjects in a documentary.

requested it or when certain aspects of my presence (e.g., note-taking) might have caused concern or misunderstanding.

In many cases, activities such as reading or writing fell into the ‘normality’ of the place (Goffman 1971), placing me among a multiplicity of people intent on similar actions. Other situations can give rise to different interpretations, such as glances or notes during book presentations or workshops (*did I seem to be a journalist? An enthusiast? An unusual person?*). These ambiguities, which it is right to keep in mind, have occasionally altered the timing and form of data collection, remaining in the case of notes. There are some situations where the degree of involvement and the covering is quickly redefined, sharply questioning the researcher. At times, some of those present were unaware of my identity, but others informed them as we exchanged opinions and personal accounts, although I had not anticipated such an eventuality. One morning, as I sat down to take some notes, a man who had recently become homeless and unemployed decided to sit by my side and talk, and we shared and questioned significant aspects of our lives. In such circumstances, the motivations for continuing without ‘revealing’ ourselves relate to the complex judgment regarding inclusion and exclusion choices. Not so much regarding presence in the field – as interaction always occurs and generates – but with respect to the relevance of what is shared and gathered. In other words, my moral choice never ended with specific positioning. There are times when the researcher is, first and foremost, a human being who welcomes and shares experiences and chooses where to place them within the flow of their professional experience. The range of roles in the course of work well outlines the different chances of access that I chose to give myself and those offered to me.

As mentioned, accessibility to the field arises as an effect of specific ‘temporalities’ and ‘spatialities,’ that is, as a *setting* (Semi 2010:23). From the organizational transformation to unexpected encounters, ‘wrong times’ contributed to illuminating unique or otherwise invisible aspects, which raise critical reflections on the phenomena observed, the power dynamics that characterize them, and the relation between me and the field. The major challenge, indeed, was the pandemic. In 2019, I chose to focus on the municipal libraries of Bologna and moved into the city to pursue an ethnographic exploration and engage with the experiences and relationships in the various urban areas. In November, having presented the project, I began to visit the city and set the stage for my incremental access to the field. For over two months, it was challenging to find a home: on the one hand, this stimulated me to immediately consider the impact of some macro-phenomena that were transforming the city (not least, the rental market for temporary workers and students) on the other hand it allowed me, between one search and another, to explore some areas of the city by foot and put urban observation into practice. Exploratory observations were slowed down; nevertheless, they

were beneficial and confirmed the interest in the case study. In February 2020, I finally found accommodation in Pescarola, a northwestern area of the city served by the nearby Lame-Cesare Malservisi library and characterized by peripheral green areas and dense social housing. I then began to contact the former director of the Libraries Institution to better evaluate my position and my access to the field, in view of more active participation alongside the librarians and within the activities promoted in the library. In those days, I also tried to contact some organizations that could help me address local homeless people's condition and consider the involvement of some vulnerable library patrons.

However, in a few days, the first cases of Coronavirus disease were detected, and soon access to public spaces such as libraries was the focus of local and national debate. Considering access to libraries a potential risk, many activities were canceled, and some spaces were closed to the public. During this great change, I monitored public debates on social media and rapid political decisions. I observed the decline of visitors in person, and several appointments with potential participants were missed. Worried not only about the research but also about my new life in the city, I was overwhelmed by the confusion of those days. According to the measures established by the Decree of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers issued on March 8 and a subsequent ordinance by the Emilia-Romagna Region, all library facilities were closed to the public, with subsequent extensions following the consecutive national measures for the epidemic containment. The rapid effects of the first wave of the pandemic led to the restriction of movement between regions and began the extensive changes that have marked our lives to this day. For over three months, I found myself in another region and unable to access libraries. Like many, at that early stage, I was insecure and hopeful about the long-term effects. As the situation became critical, I was personally impacted by the concerns of the pandemic, unable to make final decisions and uncertain whether I would be able to resume my research project or continue my doctorate.

As the months of emergency extended, I decided to gather some opinions and redefine the research design (*cf.* 4.1). In May 2020, Bologna libraries gradually opened, reflecting the attenuation of national containment measures. Between June 2020 and September 2020, when libraries attempted to recover, I took an exploratory approach and organized a plan of focused interviews with some key informants and experts in the field to assemble a new body of data and assess where the field was heading. I also decided to continue monitoring communication and online activities during this period. Since then, it has been beneficial to collect the most diverse supplementary materials, to build a comprehensive mapping of the field, and return secondarily to the most significant sources.

Between October and December 2020, the so-called second wave of the pandemic occurred, once again precluding access to libraries, affecting the relationship with librarians,

and precluding observation of users. This particularly disruptive period forced many librarians to schedule their work from one day to the following, impacting disposition and availability. Overall, the connection with the field, a dimension continually renegotiated and imbued with an “emotional dimension” (Semi 2010: 35), became even more fragile due to widespread uncertainty and my loss of confidence in the project²⁶. However, I established new contacts and scheduled helpful follow-ups with some of the first interviewees to deepen some themes and gather impressions on the progress. Then, between January and March 2021, the situation improved, and there were attempts to reopen the services. However, in March, the ‘third’ wave of the pandemic struck the country, forcing new restrictions on mobility and limiting access to libraries and public places, which once again were among the places most affected by the restrictions. This period was one of the most challenging and discouraging. Despite attempting to reschedule interviews and follow some online events on ongoing discussions within the library scene, the accumulated delays and continued difficulty reconnecting with librarians led to a significant psychological breakdown. As I struggled to find a balance, by the summer, I had to begin planning the final stages of the work. I took advantage of the period of low involvement in the field to develop some initial elaborations, fortify my theoretical framework, and participate in academic and sectorial events.

4.3 Leaving the field

Another significant temporality that characterizes research is the moment we *leave* the field. Sometimes, researchers reach the end of a prescribed time frame or achieve the so-called data ‘saturation.’ Other times, major events lead to an early end or limit the relationships and opportunities needed to continue. Both occurrences can be filled with emotion and loosen relationships. In my case, the progressive stages of the pandemic slowly set the stage for the

²⁶ As recalled above, building relationships and trust is vital in ethnographic research. In the difficult circumstance, even the simple transition to more structured interviews was not a smooth one. For some participants, the idea of an interview is still something ‘strange’ or ‘official,’ for which you need to be ‘someone,’ an ‘expert,’ or to be authorized to answer. In this regard, the use of a narrative and dialogic approach (*cf.* Appendix), communication with coordinators, and the reassurance that I was valuing personal experience were crucial. The interviews thus allowed for moments of reflection and listening that were felt as significant. However, several participants expressed a preference for ‘getting to know each other’ and having informal discussions, before or rather than providing data or stories – as is often essential in the field – but this was as beneficial as it was difficult. On some occasions, common difficulty was a bonding factor. At other times, lacking a strong relational base, I felt uncomfortable entering others’ daily lives – at times with no clear direction or intent – and I sensed the risk of a ‘predatory’ attitude in phases so marked by urgency and stress. This resulted in a greater fear for judgment and ‘distant’ observation, protracted in the final moments of fieldwork and in the writing phase. Thus, the research was also a tortuous emotional journey, which continues to characterize and interrogate my ‘researcher self.’

ending of the project. As a result of extension measures for doctoral activities and improved health conditions, I stayed a few months in Bologna and gathered additional elements. During the months of analysis, writing, and revision, I had further meetings and continued visiting libraries and other relevant places. In the spring of 2022, I left the city.

We often aspire to change our field of research in some way: it rarely occurs, but most of the time, it changes us. Has this sort of ‘ethnographic flow’ (Piasere 2009) in the world of public libraries, begun in 2017 and relaunched in 2019, changed me in any way? As a person and a sociologist, I do not doubt that some encounters and experiences along the way have been unforgettable, for better or worse. Perhaps not as much, but my view of libraries has also changed. While writing my master’s thesis, I visited Trento library several times to relish the atmosphere and observe the changes. Then, returned to my hometown, I discovered that some old friends of mine had begun to spend time in a couple of small neighborhood libraries *to experience the periphery a bit*, they said, *and get away from the crowded halls of university libraries*. I thought it was time to change my habits and throw myself among the public, and I did – but just for a few weeks before moving again. Nevertheless, my view of the library had changed by then. On a couple of occasions, I even considered working in that changing world.

As I pursued my sociological journey in Bologna, I gathered new experiences and unexpected revelations. Given the circumstances, what I finally found was enriched through other personal journeys, which unprecedentedly mobilized emotional and relational dimensions. Although my experience in the last couple of years was deeply marked by the pandemic and its outcomes, putting my choices and aspirations to the test, the libraries and people of this city have sowed in me new perspectives, and I feel I could return to raise my curious nose among books, meetings, and armchairs. I am grateful to those who supported me through difficult times. Furthermore, to the women and men who allow me a glimpse into their lives and a spark of their passion, I return some precious words they gifted to me:

“Thank you; we talked profusely about everything close to my heart!”

Part III.

Case study:

Exploring Bologna Libraries

CHAPTER 5

BOLOGNA MUNICIPAL LIBRARIES AND THEIR TERRITORY

Today, in the excavations underneath the glass, a path back in time winds its way along the walkway, hanging from the structure, and guides us along a historical journey of great suggestion and fascination. From the mighty wall of the Renaissance cistern of the Terribilia, stepping over the paving stones and foundations of the Roman basilica, skirting the boundary wall of the medieval tower house, we catch a glimpse of the star-shaped basin that stood in the center of the garden, attesting once again to the centrality of the place in its new destination as a library, a *Piazza* of knowledge and contemporary multi-media culture.

– *Salaborsa, History and Mission*

The following pages present the municipal libraries considered in the study and delineate their ‘territory,’ that is, the provisional set of scales and sites that composed my field. In the economy of this text, the chapter favors a descriptive and introductory approach and is a cornerstone in the argumentative structure. First, it provides a bridge between theory, design, and data, critically marking how themes take place in the case, what specificities it presents, and what phenomena contribute to the research objectives. Second, the chapter offers a map for approaching the following thematic sections, establishing operational delimitations and primary elements. By providing coordinates and a vocabulary, the overview will allow me to explore the specific problems, actors, and places. Third, the section constitutes the lever for my argumentative effort, as it continues to address the interests of the ‘community of inquiry’ (Tavory & Timmermans 2014) and sketches the plausible perimeter for the extension and significance of results, supporting the ‘eloquence’ of the case study (*cf.* 3.2).

This objective is pursued in two stages. First, I will present the scenario addressed by the study just before the pandemic, providing a set of data on libraries in Italy and Bologna. In the second part of the chapter, I will get to Bologna civic libraries, which have their own specificity linked to the urban conformation of the city and its historical polycentrism, which

has made local branches important hubs for each neighborhood. Therefore, I partially reconstruct the city's urban history, considering some critical milestones. These two angles confer depth to my sociological gaze and identify Bologna as an outstanding example. However, the peculiar set of vantages, anticipations, and challenges does not make the case alien to the scenario but can question the latter on its limits and emerging trends. Furthermore, the role of trend-setting institutions, through delicate, is invoked by today's complex contingency.

In conclusion, moving from some of these specificities, I point to crucial phenomena that have influenced the evolution of libraries as much as the emergence of current urban tensions, such as the one between participation, urban innovation, and culture. Consistent with the premises of this study, these dimensions will serve as Ariadne's thread in further analyses.

5.1 The pre-pandemic scenario (Italy and Bologna)

To trace the coordinates and delimitations of the research field, it is worth considering that in the national context, libraries are still under-studied and lack uniform and systematic data²⁷. Only the last years have laid the ground for new data availability. Regarding the mapping of Italian libraries and some major indicators, the most relevant sources that emerged are The Italian Libraries Database (*Anagrafe delle biblioteche italiane*), coordinated by Central Institute for the Union Catalog of Italian Libraries and Bibliographic Information (ICCU), and the Census of Libraries conducted by Italian National Institute of Statistics (Istat). The former developed from a project begun in the 1990s to establish the first general and uniform information tool on libraries in Italy. Following the publication of the "Catalog of the Libraries of Italy" in the early 2000s and extended to the National Office for Ecclesiastical Cultural Heritage, the Database has been online since 2013. The new Istat Census has been conducted in collaboration with ICCU and the Italian Episcopal Conference (CEI) under a memorandum of understanding co-signed with the Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities and Tourism (now Ministry of Culture), the Regions and Autonomous Provinces. Available for the first time since 2019, it currently addresses 'public' libraries, that is, open and free of charge to all citizens, thus proving to be the primary statistical reference for the topic at hand²⁸. A significant amount of data is still unavailable for some libraries due to

²⁷ For a recent reconstruction, see for example Faggiolani (2019, 2021b).

²⁸ The Census includes libraries operated by both the state and local authorities (as is generally the case in Italy), as well as private, for-profit, and non-profit economic organizations. Libraries declaring a different primary function (e.g., specialized libraries, dedicated to preservation, or belonging to

partial responses or the mere recovery of their opening status. Nonetheless, the census has offered the collection of new data critical to scholars and policymakers, allowed for the correction of repetitions and gaps, and strengthened the Dataset through new annual surveys (alternating short and long formats).

As of 2018, the Library Dataset can be integrated with the Istat indicators *Museums and Cultural Institutions* and *Aspects of Daily Life surveys*, which featured a dedicated battery of questions. Until then, the use of library services was monitored exclusively through the five-year *Citizens and Leisure* survey, with indicative changes in the range of response categories. Based on this data, only in 2020 two critical library-related indicators were introduced in the *BES – Equitable and Sustainable Well-Being in Italy* report: *Reading of Books and Newspapers* and *Use of libraries*.²⁹ Further data on reading and libraries is offered by the Italian Publishers Association (AIE) and the Centre for Books and Reading (Cepell), recently identified as the coordinator for the pioneering *National Action Plan for the promotion of reading* for the years 2021-2023 (Law no. 15 of 13 February 2020)³⁰. In particular, in light of the pandemic and novel approaches to advocacy for reading and libraries in Italy, the first *White Paper on Reading and Cultural Consumption in Italy* (Cepell and AIE 2021) was recently published, offering an integrated reading of the significant available collections and insights from the *Survey on Reading and Cultural Consumption in the Covid-19 Emergency*.

As for the local level, national surveys attest to how forms of monitoring services and users are still minimal. In 2019, just over one out of five libraries claimed to conduct research to guide their activities and probe the needs of their target territories, if only on an occasional

research institutions) were also considered eligible, provided they ensure public use. School and university libraries, on the other hand, are excluded, as are, more generally, libraries reserved for an internal or private user base, or lacking catalogues for management and use. Thus, the survey includes, but is not limited to, those libraries defined as ‘public reading libraries’ (*biblioteche di pubblica lettura*), i.e., general and universal services that meet the information, educational and recreational needs of the entire community and ensure book lending (ISO Standard 2789). Such a broad scope addresses the complex Italian landscape of public libraries, not entirely adhering to the Anglo-Saxon understanding of the concept (*cf.* Part I)

²⁹ *Reading of Books and Newspapers* indicates the percentage rate of people aged 6 and over who read at least four books a year not for strictly educational or professional reasons (print books, e-books, online books, audiobooks) and/or read newspapers at least three times a week out (print and/or online). *Use of libraries* indicates the percentage of people aged 3 and older who went to the library at least once in the 12 months preceding the interview.

³⁰ The introduction of the Plan represents the first legislative act to recognize reading and the synergy between libraries, schools and other cultural venues as strategic areas for a new sociocultural policy. Key objectives include, for example: promoting attendance at bookstores and libraries; spreading reading; expanding the intercultural character in libraries and schools; and initiating social policies for people with language and learning disorders, disabilities, or who are socially vulnerable. The Center for Books and Reading is an autonomous institute of the Ministry of Culture engaged in policies to support the world of books. Among its major strategies is the promotion of *Pacts for Reading*. These territorial networks can gain unseen centrality in the field and are now recognized as governance tools under the Law no. 15.

basis. Moreover, most analyses aimed at applying library performance indices and describing their publics. In contrast, multidisciplinary research and qualitative methods are still very scarce and fragmentary despite their strategic role. Different approaches would support not only the deepening of needs, practices, and meanings but also integrated impact evaluation, in line with the aspirations of libraries to support the UN Sustainable Development Goals (IFLA 2017, n.d.). Likewise, the continuous and automated management of recorded data for organizing purchases and services, a topical issue for the physical and digital cultural market, is still unexplored in Italian libraries (Blasi 2019; Vivarelli 2022).

As I argued in Part I, a crucial dimension in the debates about this field, though not exhaustive, is the configuration of actual and potential publics. Therefore, a few starting points are decisive in critically approaching a sociological study of libraries in Italy. Some trends are known or consistent with other cultural and leisure practices, but it is worth recalling them given the recent lack of interest outside the field and the emergence of updated contextual data. Briefly, reading and library use are minority habits that present traits worthy of concern, both in absolute terms and relative to other countries. Moreover, the spectrum of practices unfolding ‘beyond the book’ and the more traditional uses of libraries (such as lending and studying) is also proportionately small. However, trends in both established and ‘innovative’ practices reflect, first and foremost, a ‘supply problem’ posed by predominantly small, underdeveloped library facilities with insufficient human and material resources to guarantee a varied service. In the following, I present an introductory overview of this scenario, progressively positioning the case study³¹.

Who goes to the library?

The available data on library attendance reflects the negative scenario depicted by the leading indices on skills, education, and life-long learning – which already place Italy at a disadvantage among OECD countries – and once again confirms the dramatic territorial asymmetries along the country³². Regarding the documented use of services, the *impact index* (percentage

³¹ Unless noted otherwise, following statistics on cultural practices and libraries in Italy derived by Istat datasets and refer to 2019. Considerations on the Bologna Library and Cultural Welfare Sector are developed from Istat microdata, the Italian Libraries Database, and municipal open data (Data and Open Data Office). For historical accounts, I drew on field narratives and the invaluable physical and digital archives offered by municipal libraries (*cf. Bologna Online*, edited by Salaborsa, and *Da cento anni per tutti. Books and Public Reading in Bologna, 1909-2009*, Archiweb – Digital Collections of the Archiginnasio Library).

³² Italians show deficiencies in their ability to access information, understand instructions and read texts. In 2019, only 24.8% had valid comprehension and analysis skills (last among major European countries; 10 percentage points behind, for example, France and Germany) and the percentage of people with minimal scores was the highest (43.6%). Similarly, participation in lifelong learning (8.9%) was below expectations (11.4% EU27, 35% in Sweden, 20.7% in France).

rate of active registered users out of the population) in 2019 was 15%, with an average of 1230 active users per library in the entire country. The territorial differences are, again, substantial. For example, active users were 35.7% in the Autonomous Province of Trento and 4.6% in Campania. In the Emilia-Romagna region, where the case study was conducted, the index stood at 21.6%, with an average of 1683 active users. However, more than half of the libraries attested to fewer than 500 active users, with peaks of 79% and 65% among municipalities with less than 2,000 inhabitants and those considered ultra-peripheral. As for the *book lending index*, about one transition per citizen was recorded (1.4 in Emilia-Romagna; 2.1 in Bologna municipal libraries).

As emphasized by several interviewees, libraries are one of the few typically open-access cultural services in Italy, providing a free basis for facilitated and broad access to knowledge and more. The monitoring of physical access to libraries provides another crucial and typical indicator. During 2019, Italian libraries recorded an average of 8309 entries (about 48 million total). The ratio of entries to population was around one visit per citizen, with double values only in Valle d'Aosta (2.4), Province of Trento (2.1), and Emilia-Romagna (2.3) – where Bologna municipal libraries recorded a significant 4.7. As a reference, in the same year, there were about 130 million visitors to museums and similar institutions (2,800 per institution), while cinematographic and theatrical events recorded about 105 million and 24 million entries, with or without a ticket (SIAE 2020)³³. However, comparisons of access estimates between diverse cultural services should be cautious and based on further investigation of publics and uses. Those who claim to have been to the library offer a preliminary insight. According to the *use of libraries* indicator, 15.3% of the Italian population has been to the library at least once in 2019 (Tab. 1). Again, frequency is higher in the Northeast and Northwest regions (21.7% and 19.8%, respectively) than in the South and the Major Islands (8.6% and 9.1%). The Emilia-Romagna region, ranking fourth, records 21.6% of users, while the lowest quota is in Sicily (6.9%). The highest percentages are among young people (38.5% between 6 and 14 years, 35.3% between 15 and 19 years, 36.1% between 20 and 24 years), with a drop in attendance after age 25 (16%), and the lowest values after age 54 (10%). This is relevant data considering current policies to promote reading and library attendance among younger people and the attention paid to older patrons.

Unfortunately, analyses of potential users and loss of users are still lacking. Hypotheses on the low visits among adults are lack of time, territorial accessibility, and reduced opening hours. Even though these factors are worthy of attention, as I will mention, it is necessary to

³³ Compared with a spread of about 7425 libraries open to the public across the entire territory (excluding school and university libraries), SIAE reported 5385 cinematographic and 15255 theatrical venues. According to Istat, museums open to the public were 4880.

supplement these hypotheses by deepening current strategies for the involvement of younger people and the fragile socialization to cultural practices throughout life, both aspects urged by the pandemic (*infra*).

What do Italians who frequent the library do primarily? In 2019, the two most prevalent activities among respondents were “borrowing books” (57 percent) and “reading and studying” (40 percent). According to a recent study, the experience of ‘heavy users’ also confirms this trend (Faggiolani 2021a)³⁴. Even among the most ‘loyal’ patrons of Italian libraries, the main activities carried out in the library turn out to be the most ‘traditional’ ones. In contrast, while relevant, participation in more hybrid or ‘innovative’ activities seems minimal and significantly conditioned by age and territorial differences (*intra*). In this regard, besides its results – which encourage cautious interpretations – the study presents two exciting and eloquent factors to interrogate the scenario. First, the different sociodemographic conformation of the sample group – the ‘loyal user’ – compared to previous surveys. Indeed, it urges us to question the gap between the statistics on frequentation and the respective degree of identification and use over time. Although the limitations of a non-representative sample, differences suggest that the habits among the most frequent patrons, such as the youngest, do not correspond to strong ‘user loyalty,’ both in terms of participation and library reputation. The second aspect, not in importance, is how the survey design and the answers collected among ‘heavy users’ render, once again, significant territorial differences. The respondents’ distribution strongly reflects libraries’ uneven capacity for broad and diverse services. Moreover, libraries express their different ability to have – and specially to *intercept* and *engage* – a varied loyal audience: young respondents and those over 75, while constituting target publics, appear to be a minority, while foreign or more vulnerable citizens, despite their presence, practically disappear from this type of survey (Faggiolani 2021:48-51).

In addition to what has been said about frequentation, these additional elements invite a cautious interpretation of national estimates relative to library use and its meanings. The youngest segment of the population (as mentioned, a large class of frequenters but characterized by sporadic visits) is approached mainly through partnerships with educational institutions or through activities with families aimed at early socialization. Attendance then

³⁴ *The library for you*, led by BIBLAB (Laboratory of Social Librarianship and Applied Research in Libraries, Sapienza University of Rome) was the largest study in Italy aimed at integrating available data on the role of public libraries in people’s lives. I refer the reader to the report for specific cautions about the results, which, through a self-selected and non-probabilistic sample, returned “a deepening, an immersion in that segment that frequents libraries in Italy that Istat quantifies as 15.3% of the population. Probably the most loyal users who took the survey as an opportunity to make their voices heard” (p. 151).

grows through adolescence but seems limited to educational needs and a supplementary role of libraries to schools and universities, with no persistent habit, especially without a strong propensity for reading or active involvement. The propensity and frequency of library use, patron loyalty, and participation in diverse activities do not overlap, mainly when generational differences are observed. Analyses such as those offered by the White Paper on Reading and The Library for You suggest that Italian libraries respond to different clusters of interests, partially segmented along sociodemographic demarcations (but solid, generalized analyses are still scarce), and leave open vital topics such as the relationship between individual and collective practices, the interaction between groups (low- or high-intensity encounters), or the conditions offered by libraries as infrastructure (posed by some in terms of affordances).³⁵

Libraries and reading

Although central, reading practice constitutes only one aspect related to analyzing the library as a socially relevant place. However, data on reading offer a crucial framework regarding the actual and potential publics of Italian libraries and, more generally, cultural fruition. On the one hand, Italy confirms that it has not developed a delineated institutional model for public libraries, leaving a fragmented landscape both territorially and normatively. Many library services are in historic buildings, sometimes valuable but often unsuitable for adaptive and inclusive service. At times, they are located in second-best facilities, especially in suburbs or small towns. On the other hand, Italian libraries lack a robust collective imaginary: they are certainly known and loved by many but remain places frequented by a minority and generally associated with the traditional image of archives and reading, sometimes idealized and assigned to the needs of scholars and students (AIE 2019).

With libraries predominantly associated with books, one might wonder if the low usage has to do with other sources. However, while a mere 11% of readers say they get their books from the library, reading does not dwell in the home either: nearly a quarter of households do not have a library of more than ten books, and only 7% have more than 400 books (Cepell & IEA 2021). The most essential “reading infrastructure” consists of bookstores. However, even this sector is mainly supported by a small number of ‘strong’ readers and is marked by significant transformations to the benefit of the online market, franchised bookstores, and

³⁵ I refer here to the various research questions opened in Part I. In the cited research (Faggiolani 2021:104), the author proposes the concept of ‘library affordance’ to capture the gap between designed and practiced uses. Following psychologist J. J. Gibson, it is understood as the property arising from the relationship between space and user, manifesting a range of potential uses (see also Faggiolani & Federici 2018). While recognizing the concept as useful, in this investigation I favored a more flexible theoretical framework, focusing on the typology presented in Ch. 2 and the analysis of associations.

non-specialized retailers.³⁶ Regardless of the sources used, the reading practice remains transversally scarce in our country and aligned with established inequalities in terms of cultural capital and geographic distribution.

Estimates of reading also emphasized some effects of the pandemic crisis on the future of public libraries. Reading habit, although experiencing a slight increase during 2020, has suffered fluctuating effects that are not easy to interpret, raising concerns, especially about younger readers and the shifting habits among the strategic minority of ‘strong’ readers. To understand the phenomenon, several actors are thus questioning the need to address reading and new languages in a more varied, inclusive, and comparable way between scenarios.

What can be said about reading habits? Despite the uneven nature of international data, statistics firmly place Italy at a disadvantage concerning reading propensity and frequency. The primary statistic in Italy is the percentage of people over the age of 6 who have read at least one book in 12 months for reasons not strictly educational or professional: in 2019, these readers were 40.0% of the population. The value had an upward trend between 2000 (38.6%) and 2010 (46.8%) but then declined to the levels of the early millennium, stabilizing from 2016 (40.6%).³⁷ However, 44.3% of readers did not read more than three books a year, while ‘strong’ readers – those who read at least 12 books – were about 15.6%.

The distribution of readers shows remarkable similarities with findings on library use. First, the highest quotas were among young people: 56.6% among those aged 11 to 14 and 54.1% among those aged 15 to 17. The estimates confirm the centrality of this segment of the population and are encouraging with respect to the role of schooling and reading promotion policies aimed at younger children. However, long-term comparisons again highlight that investments struggle to achieve lasting results as age increases (CEPELL & IEA 2021). Moreover, the decline from 2010 to 2016 appears to be predominantly driven by

³⁶ According to Cepell & AIE (2021), in 2019, 16% of readers purchased 36% of books, while ‘weak’ readers (1-3 books per year) just 22%. 74% of readers said they purchased from franchise bookstores, 24% from malls. Online bookstores made up 44% of the trade market, with a gradual growth over the past decade (in 2010 Amazon entered the Italian market). The analysis on purchase decline provides insights into the competition with large online platforms: the major problems are limited opening hours and inadequate supply (delivery time, variety, reduction of nearby stores). Combined with the fact that most readers say they “discover” books thanks to the exposure and serendipity offered by bookstores, all these elements are also significant for libraries’ capabilities to serve. On this point, however, the White Paper reports the crisis of traditional subjects supporting reading: only 9% of readers indicate the advice of librarians or teachers as the source of their choices, 7% indicate the advice of booksellers.

³⁷ The available research is conducted with different methods and operationalization. We know, for example, that 68.5% of Spaniards over 16 have read at least one book in the past 3 months. In Germany, 68.7% of those over the age of 15 say they are interested in reading. In the U.S., 76.0% of the population over the age of 18 have read at least one book or eBook, or listened to an audiobook in the past 12 months (Cepell & IEA 2021).

the massive loss of readers aged 11-17. As Solimine (2021) pointed out, the introduction of economic supports such as 18app³⁸, aimed precisely at that generation, seems to have supported later stabilization, but it is insufficient³⁹. In response to increasingly fragmented and digitized practices, future strategic plans should incentivize the exploration of complexity in the Web, support the development of necessary skills, and promote innovative hybrid content that enriches cultural experiences.

Table 1. *Main indicators of reading habits and the use of libraries (Italy, 2019)*

Area	Readers (≥ 1 book)	'Strong' readers (≥ 12 books)	BES – Reading of books and newspapers	BES – Use of libraries
<i>North-west</i>	47.6	18.3	44.2	19.8
Piemonte	46.4	17.7	42.8	17.2
Valle d'Aosta/Vallée d'Aoste	52.0	18.4	49.0	32.7
Liguria	47.0	19.7	44.2	14.2
Lombardia	48.1	18.4	44.7	21.6
North-east	48.1	17.1	47.8	21.7
Trentino-Alto Adige	51.0	20.5	57.2	35.4
– Bolzano/Bozen	48.7	21.1	60.3	36.6
– Trento	53.2	20.1	54.1	34.1
Veneto	48.4	16.4	46.5	19.6
Friuli-Venezia Giulia	48.9	20.1	52.0	19.2
Emilia-Romagna	46.7	16.3	45.8	21.6
<i>Central Italy</i>	42.5	16.0	40.6	14.1
Toscana	45.1	17.4	44.7	17.3
Umbria	41.1	15.3	38.6	14.7
Marche	40.7	12.1	39.0	14.1
Lazio	41.4	16.1	39.1	12.0
<i>South</i>	27.9	9.0	24.8	8.6
Abruzzo	34.5	11.9	35.5	10.5
Molise	31.4	7.8	27.9	8.9
Campania	26.7	8.4	21.4	7.7
Puglia	27.8	8.5	26.4	9.2
Basilicata	30.2	8.1	24.3	10.5
Calabria	25.6	9.8	23.8	8.0
<i>Major Islands</i>	29.1	12.1	29.4	9.1
Sicilia	25.9	9.7	24.2	6.9
Sardegna	38.9	16.9	45.0	15.9
Italia	40.0	15.6	38.0	15.3

Source: author's elaboration based on Istat dataset.

³⁸ Bonus Cultura-18app is a government initiative dedicated to those reaching the age of 18. It offers a €500 voucher to spend on cinema, music and concerts, books, museums, visits to monuments and archaeological parks, theater and dance, audiovisual products, music courses, theater courses, foreign language courses, and subscriptions to newspapers, including digital formats.

³⁹ In the 18-21 age group, readers increased from 46% in 2016, to 54% in 2019, counterbalancing the average trend.

I mentioned the problem of the spatial distribution of libraries and bookstores. Reading habits show just as much variability among regions (Tab. 1). There are more readers in the Northwest (47.6%) and Northeast (48.1%), while they drop significantly in the South (27.9%). Although trends are clear, there are interesting regional differences, such as between Sicily (25.9 percent) and Sardinia (38.9 percent), which seems to have recently made an exceptional investment in libraries and Reading Pacts years. Territorial disparities are confirmed among different types of urban areas: readers are 48.2% in metropolitan city centers, 41.8% in cities with over 50,000 inhabitants, and only 36% in those with less than 2,000 inhabitants. The frequency of readers in Emilia-Romagna is above average (46.7%), with a slight advantage regarding ‘strong’ readers (16.3%) and ‘weak’ readers (41.9%).

There are more readers among women than men (44.3 percent and 35.5 percent, respectively)⁴⁰ and Italians with higher educational qualifications (71.9% among college graduates, 46.1% among high school graduates), but values are declining. Moreover, the distributions among professions reveal a worrying scenario: 40.8% of entrepreneurs and upper management workers say they do not read any book, 38.2% among middle managers, and 70.4% among students. Indeed, it should be noted that reading and education, especially today, are not limited to books and reading for recreational purposes. On the one hand, the decline in reading for non-educational and vocational purposes in these categories from the 1980s to the present, with substantially reversed values for students, indicates notable social changes. On the other, interpretation calls for a new research agenda to explore the complexity of lifestyles. The past few decades have raised concerns about the ability to delve and explore outside one’s own knowledge, but they have also witnessed the complexity of media and the changing meanings related to work, professional fields, and interests. Complementing the picture are summary indicators that seek to capture reading habits extensively. The BES indicator ‘reading books and newspapers,’ for example, still exclude school and professional reading, but it captures the percentage of people who read at least four books a year (as mentioned, 44.3% of Italians read no more than three books), and those who read newspapers at least three times a week. Overall, values do not depict a significantly different scenario (Tab. 1). Differently, AIE Observatory proposed the indicator ‘reading as a whole,’ focusing on a smaller sample (15-75 years old) and including school and professional reading and the ‘light’ reading of travel guides, manuals, and recipe books. In this case, ‘overall’ readers extended to 65% of the population (Cepell & IEA 2021)⁴¹.

⁴⁰ The gap has existed since 1988, following an impressive catch-up among women due to the emergence of more equal educational opportunities. Women’s greater inclination to read is also found in the intensity: 16.7% say they read an average of one book per month, compared to 14.1% of men.

⁴¹ In this regard, see the reflection offered by the Bologna Reading Pact during this research,

In summary, the link between knowledge, lifelong learning, and the proliferation of languages identifies a vital scope for the whole cultural welfare and understanding of libraries as a form of social infrastructure. Reading and fruition of libraries proved to be important starting points, but we shall expand any preliminary reflection. It is worth recalling that in 2019, out-of-home cultural activities generally involved around 35% of Italians, while a fifth of the population declared to be never engaged in any cultural activity outside the home, nor in the individual reading of books and newspapers (with local peaks, in the Centre-South, above 30%)⁴². As for Bologna, more than half of the citizens had been engaged in three or more activities (42 percent in the hinterland).

This is particularly important if we consider that before the pandemic, 15% of municipalities lacked any ‘cultural facility or event,’ and 10% indicated the library as the only ‘cultural presidium’ present. For the coming years, it will be critical to understand what kind of libraries we have in Italy, what they can offer, and what degree of proximity they provide. To complete the elements of interest, I will briefly turn to some key characteristics of these spaces and their services.

What libraries?

According to the Census of Libraries, there were 7425 libraries open to the public (1.24 per 10,000 inhabitants), and they were present in 58.3% of municipalities. Among them, 77.3% were publicly owned (68.5% were municipal libraries). Libraries are widespread: one per 2.7 km² of inhabited area; 72% distributed in small and medium-sized towns. However, there are territorial concentrations and strong asymmetries in terms of characteristics. First, 58.3% of libraries are in northern Italy, 17.5% in the Center, and 24.2% in the South. The top seven regions collect two-thirds of existing sites. The most favored regions are Lombardy, Piedmont, and Emilia-Romagna, but while the first two have the greatest territorial fragmentation, with about half the municipalities with no library, the latter stands out for the number of towns with at least one library (88%). The cities with the most libraries are the large centers: Rome (300), Milan (133), Turin (97), and Bologna (94).

As for general characteristics, most libraries report a predominantly ‘general reading’ function (63.8%)⁴³. Preservation and ‘specialized’ libraries, i.e., targeting specific categories,

which envisions a future study that has already drawn Cepell’s interest.

⁴² Percentage of people aged 6 and older who participated in two or more cultural activities in the 12 months preceding the interview out of the total number of people aged 6 and older. Six activities were considered: 1) went to the movies at least four times; at least once to: 2) theater; 3) museums and/or exhibitions; 4) archaeological sites, monuments; 5) classical music concerts, opera; 6) concerts of other music.

⁴³ *Cf.* footnotes 1 and 28.

are 8.5% and 14.4%, respectively. Nevertheless, among the latter categories, about two-fifths of libraries offer multidisciplinary resources. The Census of Libraries also records the main activities carried out, suggesting a summary index based on five main categories: only 5% of libraries can offer a varied service simultaneously. Comparing the national data with those of the Emilia-Romagna and Bologna regions, we can again find a generally varied scenario (Tab. 2). Limiting to the libraries included in the research – those managed by the municipal sector – they cooperate in offering the most comprehensive service. Some libraries can provide almost all of the thirteen activities included, and local libraries in Bologna's quarters stand out for their ability to organize activities that focus on education, involvement, and support of citizens.

As noted in the literature, what libraries offer the population results not only from institutional strategies but also from architectural factors, investment plans, human capital, and expertise. In Italy, only 8.6% of libraries provide users with a space of at least 500 m² (291 m² on average), and 13.5% offer more than 50 seats for reading. About half of the libraries have suitable spaces for meetings or cultural activities, 12.1% have refreshment points, and 33.1% have accessible outdoor areas. Libraries with spaces equipped for young people aged 0-6 years and 7-17 years are 42.7% and 38.9%, respectively. Accessibility to the public also shows lights and shadows. Four out of five libraries ensure continuous opening throughout the year, but a quarter open less than 12 hours a week, and only 9.0% at least 40 hours – while evening and holiday openings are rare. Just over half of the libraries fully guarantees accessibility to users with disabilities, and a fifth only partially. The total of 94 libraries in Bologna guarantees twice as many libraries per inhabitant as the national average. The 17 branches of the Library Sector guaranteed a public area of 1616 m² (around 942 m² per library) and 1947 reading seats (115 per branch). Almost all of them guaranteed accessibility for users with disabilities, and an average opening time of 53 hours per week (50 to 71), for 274 days per year.

Only one-third of libraries have more than 20,000 total resources (books, periodicals, audio-visuals, theses, ...), and the very expense for acquiring books is a critical factor: in 2019, it was estimated to be less than 1 euro per inhabitant (47.5 million euros)⁴⁴. Investments in the digital sphere are also still limited. Less than one-third of libraries have initiated a digitization process of their collections, and digital lending is offered by about half of the libraries, primarily through dedicated platforms. Only 18.8% of libraries provide more than

⁴⁴ For comparison, during the pandemic, 30 million euros were allocated for purchase by libraries through local bookstores to support the sector. The intervention thus amounted to 63% of ordinary spending – although this was unevenly distributed (Cepell & IEA 2021). The measure was repeated in 2021 and in 2022 (<https://www.librari.beniculturali.it/it/contributi/Contributo-alle-biblioteche-per-acquisto-libri/>).

three computers with access to the Internet. However, access to a wi-fi network is offered by 74.7% of facilities. Bologna's municipal libraries offer about 135 computer stations (8 on average) and represent the main sites throughout the territory for wi-fi access to the local civic network.

Finally, libraries have an average of 3 workers, with minimal differences between regions. As many as 72.2% of staff are volunteers, trainees, or external workers with no specific librarian function, and 39.7% of libraries are managed entirely on a voluntary, unpaid basis.

Table 2. *Main activities carried out in Italian libraries (territorial comparison, 2019)*

Activities carried out	Italy	Emilia-Romagna	Bologna	
			Library Sector	District libraries
<i>Promotion of reading, book workshops, reading groups (not for children)</i>	54.0	50.8	94.1	100
<i>Activities and workshops for children (0-13 y.o)</i>	49.0	27.0	70.6	100
Guided tours of the library	47.4	25.9	76.5	70.0
Conferences, conventions and/or seminars	41.0	39.5	94.1	100
Other educational and/or training activities	37.0	60.9	82.4	90.0
Permanent and/or temporary exhibitions	34.7	27.8	76.5	70.0
<i>Support in writing CVs, filling out forms, doing homework, etc.</i>	26.6	58.3	41.2	70.0
Study and research activities focus on local territory	25.1	49.2	35.3	30.0
Film and/or video showing	24.3	22.4	41.2	70.0
Concerts, plays and/or other live performances	23.6	24.1	29.4	40.0
<i>Activities supporting information literacy</i>	14.2	45.7	52.9	60.0
<i>Activities supporting digital literacy</i>	12.6	29.2	47.1	60.0
Publication of scientific books and/or catalogs (both print and digital)	11.0	14.1	11.8	0.0
<i>Supply capacity index</i>	5.0	7.8	17.6	30.0

Source: author's elaboration based on the Istat Census of Libraries.

Note: the synthetic index shows the percentage of libraries able to offer all the five activities listed in italics. As for Bologna, percentages refer to the total of the 18 municipal branches (except the new Salaborsa Lab) and the 10 'neighborhood' libraries.

In summary, reading and cultural participation appear consolidated at low levels. Although fluctuations and growth have occurred due to historical conjunctures, recent data remained stable or declining. In particular, the picture confirms a context lacking a scheme for developing libraries as a generative place, building on the emergence of popular libraries in

response to the sociocultural changes of the last century. In Italy, libraries are not rooted in lifelong educational and recreational activities as much as in schooling. However, a clarification seems necessary: this overview does not reject the premises of this study but, on the contrary, allows an appropriate consideration. Italian libraries offer exceptional interest in their sensitivity to international debates about their functions, the variety of activities promoted, and the ongoing changes⁴⁵. The scarce use of libraries compared to other opportunities for education, recreation and aggregation represent additional drivers for reflection and investigation in comparison with other contexts. Once again, data call into question whether and how libraries have a role in developing equal opportunities at the territorial level. More and more, in recent years, this role is framed in a comprehensive sphere of well-being, where support for cultural participation and empowerment intertwined with other dimensions, such as the risk of a more radical abandonment of traditional places of culture and sociability or, conversely, their enhancement within the new strategies for sustainable development. Although these reflections are not prevalent, they have long been present in Italy despite (or in response to) the lack of interest in libraries, and they have been revived by the pandemic and more recent debates about the future of cities⁴⁶.

Anticipating the topic, it should be noted that almost all of these indicators suffered significant declines during and following the pandemic, particularly among young people. In some cases, the results were dramatic and protracted even after reopening measures – prolonged and fragmented in the cultural sector – and thus difficult to assess⁴⁷. Cultural participation outside the home (35%) dropped to 29.8% in 2020 and to 8.3% in 2021, while the portion of Italians who attended a library (15.3%) dropped to 12.2% and then to 7.4%. Moreover, while 31.9% of libraries had completely suspended all activity in the first year of the pandemic, in 2021, as many as 60% of them reported that they had not reopened, and 20.5% did not know whether they would have done so (with regional peaks as high as 47%). Most libraries closed permanently or temporarily were the only ones in their municipality (generally small towns). Predominantly small and run by volunteers, they could not implement the containment measures or lacked the staff and resources to continue. As I

⁴⁵ Regarding the emergence of popular and public libraries in Italy as compared to the international scenario, I refer to sections 1.1 and 2.1.

⁴⁶ As I will elaborate in Ch. 6, it is possible to expand the hypotheses disclosed in Ch. 2 about the moments of crisis and debates about the social library, by delving into the aspects of ‘exceptionality’ and ‘latency.’ I will also identify possible connections between the critical role of libraries and other ‘civic’ places (*cf.* 1.3) and the current revival of ‘proximity’ in urban space, moving from the positioning of the case.

⁴⁷ The culture sector, albeit unevenly, has been one of the most affected by phases of total closure and intermittence. Following successive pandemic waves and containment measures, the direct effects on access and participation have lasted until 2022.

quickly reviewed, the underdeveloped and uneven state of library service was a necessary premise for the research. The scenario certainly penalized libraries in adapting to severe stress, but it called further attention to critical issues and best practices⁴⁸.

5.2 Bologna and municipal libraries: a historical-urban perspective

Some delimitations

As mentioned, there are ninety-four libraries open to the public in Bologna, in addition to the vast number of university libraries. Consistent with the theoretical premises of the research and the peculiar characteristics of the Italian scenario, the fieldwork entailed an operational delimitation, focusing on public libraries belonging to the municipal system, the most represented category in the Italian territory. Clearly, the scope of the libraries included in the study is not limited to the institution but encompasses a wide range of networks and partnerships, which the study sought to monitor. Examples include support for school libraries, collaborative pacts with patron associations and managers of other ‘reading points’ and small libraries, the collaboration of specialized libraries with universities or as part of the *Specialmente in biblioteca* network (eighteen libraries of various types), and the significant Bologna Reading Pact, a governance tool that includes public and private entities. Without a broad, attentive look at these and other forms of cultural and social infrastructure, the panorama would have been partial. However, the primary focus on this specific institution made it possible to select an approachable group of spaces in the field, composed of libraries of universal character, sufficiently varied in type and characteristics, and able to offer critical insights about the relationships and dynamics of a unique organizational system. Moreover, the historical and organizational specificities of Bologna’s municipal libraries offer interesting points of contact with the evolving history of the contemporary public library.

The Library and Cultural Welfare Sector is part of the Bologna Pole of the National Library System alongside many other private and University libraries and has a coordinating role within the Metropolitan City. In 2021, the municipal Sector replaced the Libraries Institution of Bologna, founded in 2008, as a public, semi-corporate management scheme for the renewal of civic libraries. It is one of the significant institutional entities in the national sector, consisting of highly diverse libraries in terms of history, characteristics, and profile of visitors. The municipal network consists of ten general information libraries in the six

⁴⁸ Chapters 6 and 7 will explore whether and to what extent it is possible to appreciate the contribution of libraries to communities during recent difficulties, as a widespread form of social infrastructure.

administrative districts, two ‘central’ libraries – the Archiginnasio study and research library and the Salaborsa multimedia public library – Salaborsa Ragazzi section and the decentralized Salaborsa LAB (a new multimedia/multipurpose library), and four specialized libraries: Casa Carducci, Centro Amilcar Cabral, Italian Library of Women, and the Parri Institute Library. Through their diverse partnerships, minor dedicated collections and services of Bologna municipal libraries also reach theatres, hospitals, parks, and other culture institutions, such as the Cineteca, one of the world’s major film archives.

The following few pages help clarify what kind of libraries I am talking about and how they relate to the phenomenon under consideration. As some researchers have recently shown, to understand Bologna at large, it is necessary to refer to the contemporary history of its urban fabric (Bergamaschi, Castrignanò, and Pieretti 2020). The appreciation of certain specificities and the critical exploration of emerging social processes must benefit from a historical dimension, i.e., a historically informed sociological gaze, interrelated with an urbanistic dimension, which gives appropriate relevance to the “physicality of spaces and places” as a framework for the “social dynamics addressed” (p. 5). This approach responds to the strategy adopted in this project, that is, monitoring how tools and processes of planning, governance, and transformation of the urban fabric are ‘brought into play.’ They relate to and express themselves through places, contributing to and explicating more deeply the languages and forces of signification and contestation in the field (as regimes of visibility and recognition). In line with what has been proposed in the first part of this paper, I intend to elaborate below a synthetic overview that will allow us to weave together, at the first level of mapping, some processes concerning municipal public libraries, urban design policies, and the tension between culture and the city. Based on this early framework, it will be possible to follow some threads that link the case study to the broader phenomenon explored so far, productively delineating the traits of similarity and the elements of exceptionality that may prove eloquent for the general understanding of the public library as a form of social infrastructure. The analytical paths developed in the following chapters emerge from this initial insight.

Prodromes: 1800-1900

Following the dynamics recalled in Part I, Bologna’s first public library also emerged from the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and the donation of private collections for ‘public use.’ The first experience arose, with similarities to other national cases, with Marquis Zambeccari’s donation to the Jesuit College of Santa Lucia, which led to the founding of the Libreria (note the naming, as opposed to the term library). With the advent of the Napoleonic invasions, the collections – increased with other donations – suffered confiscations and

selections for the benefit of French libraries and new local libraries of national and departmental type following the foreign experience. After a series of chaotic measures, the first civic library came into being in 1801 as the primitive form of an institution accessible to an erudite public and under municipal management. The material was transferred in 1838 to the sixteenth-century palace of the Archiginnasio, the first headquarters of the University, which had been relocated precisely as part of the Napoleonic edicts. In the new location, collections were divided by subject and progressively enriched, including materials collected by the religious congregations dissolved by Napoleonic measures and, later, by the new Kingdom of Italy. The latter, as already discussed, did not implement a model oriented to the emerging Anglo-Saxon public library, and few institutions – such as the one in Bologna – could ensure the ‘public’ use of pre-existing libraries (Montanari 1981). However, at the turn of the century, the model of the popular library in Bologna gave further enhancement.

By the second half of the century, the city was significantly smaller and confined within the ancient walls and the ancient Roman and medieval infrastructure, marked by a dense mix of public spaces, private palaces, and porticoes. However, the city, with a population of 100,000, was already the eighth largest in Italy and was home to a relative sociodemographic ferment driven by the emergence of a new economic system. This tension culminated in 1889 through the first urban plan to extend the urban fabric. It entails the ‘technical’ and ‘hygienic’ strategic line that characterized the great Italian cities of the time, from Naples to Milan, and opens the first of the critical stages that mark the significant urban policies of this area (Evangelisti & Manaresi 2020). The plan’s idea of modernization and rationalization was oriented toward the experience of European cities that had already experienced industrial expansion and was determined to expand and overcome the irregularity of the old city through the emergence of new ‘suburbs’ rationalized according to ideas of order and cleanliness. Such forms of development lay the groundwork for separating the higher-value areas inhabited by the professional bourgeoisie from the dense settlements of the emerging working class. The great ring roads and new infrastructures still constitute material and symbolic landmarks of segmentation and suburbanization. In this period of change, we observe those forces and ambivalences typical of the nineteenth-century industrial cities, when the contemporary library had already emerged through the idea of the free and popular library (*cf.* 1.1). With some delay, in line with the national panorama, the first shift of the public library toward a new model was accomplished in the early twentieth century, with a clear political orientation. In 1903, the opening of the Archiginnasio Library during evening hours (8 p.m. to 11 p.m.) and home lending enabled use by the working and popular classes, responding to

“a severe lack of service [...] as far as it relates to the needs of the public who frequent our library, whose specific character must be one of general culture and truly popular, and that is, a reading time that everyone indiscriminately can take advantage of, from the professor to the worker. The need for evening reading is especially felt and lamented by people whose daily commitments coincide precisely with the hours our library assigns to the ordinary distribution of books. (Letter from the director to the Councilor for Public Education, Archiginnasio, One Hundred Years for All)

The ‘truly popular’ character was remarked by the innovation of the structure and the acquisition of new resources for the benefit of the growing, albeit narrow, segment of the population that was gaining access to a common good previously limited to the more educated social classes. To the collections, newspapers, technical-practical manuals, popular science, and ‘self-help’ books were added.

The growing desire to better serve the new public led to the establishment of the first Popular Library, in 1909, which later became the Central Public Reading Library. The new creation represented an exemplary case, emerging in dialogue with the very few similar experiences in Italy, including, for example, Milan, with the founding of the *Popular Libraries Consortium* promoted by the Humanitarian Society (*Società Umanitaria*). The sources of the time, such as the opening speech of the Councilor for Public Education (Archiginnasio 1909), already emphasized its pioneering character, the continuity offered to school paths against the fight against illiteracy, but also its normative-moral character (*cf.* 1.2). Indeed, the People’s Library also emerged as an instrument of a “wise culture of the spirit,” a remedy against “the useless and harmful newspaper,” “free reading,” and the “mismatched culture that the working class is precisely acquiring” (*id.*). With the birth of the Popular Library, returned to the church of S. Lucia, Archiginnasio began to assume the research and preservation function that has increasingly distinguished it until today. Later, the recognition of the institution’s excessive urban centrality – to the benefit of educational institutions but to the detriment of the working class – led to the fundamental political will to create detached libraries in more distant and proletarian areas. The goal was to realize “a concept of distributive justice and the just expansion of culture; since one cannot and should not expect the workers of Crocetta, Bolognina and S. Ruffillo to come to a Library [in the center] for their books” (Sorbelli 1917, quoted in Montanari 1981). Thus, in the midst of World War I, the socialist administration led by Zanardi implemented the creation of the first new branch libraries: between 1917 and 1918, the “Antonio Luca Tosi Bellucci” library in Crocetta, the Zucca library, the “Ettore Zanardi” library near Porta S. Vitale, and the one in Roveretolo (Lame) were founded. Compared to today, and at a time when libraries and librarians’ skills were still very underdeveloped, these locations provided a limited but pioneering service: from 8 p.m. to 10 p.m. on the weekdays and from 10 a.m. to 12 p.m. on Sundays.

During Fascism, the civic service was gradually depleted, to the advantage of the Casa del Fascio library: open from 12:00 to 24:00 and very busy, it nevertheless constituted one of the cultural strategies of the totalitarian system. Shortly, the civic libraries were massively affected by the wartime and post-war crises that characterized the entire urban evolution of the city, oriented progressively toward repair and, later, toward aspirations of maximum economic and territorial development. It was only with the coming of the significant increase in housing and new immigration flows between the 1950s and 1970s that the municipal library, which had fallen into disuse and been relocated several times, was able to re-emerge and expand back into the territory, alongside new programs of administrative decentralization and the creation of dislocated ‘centers of life.’ Therefore, this second critical moment again overlapped with a significant social and urbanistic change.

The foundations of today's topography: from the post-war period to the turn of the century

The 1958 Master Plan demonstrated an expansionist character oriented toward a ‘Greater Bologna’ in continuity with the neighboring towns and based on a capillary extension that aspired to a population growth never recorded. On the one hand, it welded the city to nearby towns by introducing industrial areas and a new set of infrastructures – such as the ring road – that would re-propose the problem of land values and are still relevant demarcation lines in areas at risk of marginalization. On the other hand, the planned social housing plans suffered the pressures of rapid urbanization in distant low-value areas generating – again – outer and isolated areas that still constitute ‘ERP neighborhoods’ today, monitored for levels of potential fragility and risk of ethnic and economic segregation (*cf.* Fragility Indices, Municipality of Bologna 2020, and General Urban Plan (2021)⁴⁹). The judgment of the subsequent communist administration (1960) was that the plan appeared “unconsciously made for speculators and not for citizens” (Campos Venuti, in Evangelisti & Manaresi 2020:21), and sensitivities to new forms of decentralization, which had matured in the 1950s, marked the new season of territorial planning. Indeed, this debate, which led to the establishment of neighborhoods in 1960 (the first in Italy), had been anticipated in the second major policy wing, the sociocultural one. Meanwhile, in 1954 the first large Children’s Library was born in the Margherita Gardens. During the decade, Bologna hosted a varied series of national and provincial conferences in which librarians progressively called “together all the living forces, of every category and tendency [...] on the problem of the development of local public libraries and the penetration of books and culture in all social classes” (Atti di

⁴⁹ *Cf.* “General Urban Plan (PUG). Profile and knowledge – cognitive insights.” The documents and spatial analyses were developed with the support of the Foundation for Urban Innovation and the University of Bologna

Convegno, in Montanari 1981). The emerging strategy was the development of a “radiating” library, which would be “the propelling center of capillary organisms that in the progress of time will be destined to envelop all the neighborhoods of the city.” Again, Milan was among the pivotal examples, as “the first and only city in Italy that gave life and development to such a movement” (*id.*). Between 1952 and 1953, the Ministry of Education authorized the lending networks of the National Reading Service at a time of scarce municipal funding allocated to cultural activities. Bologna, in contrast, was able to benefit from two strategies: the birth of the Provincial Public Reading Consortium (1958) and the (re)foundation of a system of Decentralized Libraries.

Thus, two essential trends converged in a moment of profound cultural changes. On the one hand, authoritative government figures and institutionalized forms of participation allowed the modified urban development to avoid the accusations of dirigisme that characterized Anglo-Saxon urban planning at the time and to establish a peculiar city in the Italian panorama (Evangelisti & Manaresi 2020). On the other hand, in a historical phase in which more mature systems had begun to challenge the Anglo-Saxon public library model (*cf.* 2.1), Bologna’s libraries emphasized the experience of popular libraries – already distinctive in the scenario – and anticipated the import of the American experience into the Italian context (Cionci & Montanari 1986). The decades 1960-1970 introduced a series of new branches – the basis of the current system – and allowed for a quantitative growth of services and a programmatic and professional development, gradually oriented toward multipurpose cultural centers. In 1960, the San Donato district library was born, followed by those of Lama and Borgo Panigale (1961). Next came the Malpighi and Santa Viola libraries (1964), Bolognina and San Vitale (1966), and San Ruffillo (1968). Meanwhile, the system became autonomous from Archiginnasio through the new Directorate of Decentralized Libraries and the new Central Library in Palazzo Montanari.

The development of libraries as local ‘cultural centers,’ experienced and discussed in various parts of Italy over time, offered the changing city a renewed cultural service that was widespread and sensitive to civic involvement and diversity of initiatives. The model, which was later questioned in light of the ‘mission’ crisis, began to be challenged by the ‘civil defusion’ typical of the period, as in institutions such as libraries conflicting cultural paradigms surfaced (*cf.* 1.2). Moreover, the 1970s in Bologna was a period marked – in addition to youth movements – by a population decline and an urban design oriented toward the ‘redevelopment’ of the present (including the historic center) and the creation of infrastructure. The birth of libraries continued in the decade: the Costa Saragozza library, the Saffi library, the Mazzini library, the Irnerio library, and the key one in the Villaggio Pilastro, where the library emerged as part of the political ferment of Luigi Spina’s Tenants

Committee. They gradually twinned with the emergence of ‘civic centers,’ multipurpose structures that linked recreational and cultural facilities with administrative, political, and welfare entities. For instance, the library that emerged with the civic center in Corticella was the last in the series. As emerged from many interviews and visits to the sites, many of these libraries represent part of the city’s history and maintain and reproduce common memory, documented in their resources and embodied in its current inhabitants. These years also saw the emergence of some of today’s specialized libraries, such as Casa Carducci and the Cabral Center library, founded when Bologna welcomed many refugees from the countries they focused on, such as Latin America and Africa. Also born between 1978 and 1979 was the group of women who would contribute to the conception and birth of the influential Women’s Center and its Italian Women’s Library (1983), the most important specialized library devoted to women’s literature and culture, feminism, and gender studies. It is currently a hybrid library ‘connected’ to the system, whose organization is shared between the Orlando Association and the municipality.

The 1980s and 1990s gradually undermined the interplay between urban policies and cultural institutions that had fostered accessibility to participation and sociality, albeit with ambivalence. The decades constituted a shift in favor of a new neoliberal posture that changed the rationale of territorial planning and the strategic role of culture in the aspirations of successive administrations (Borghgi and Olori 2020). In the urban fabric of Bologna, the conjunction of urban redevelopment policies proper to those years and of local and national waiver measures generated a contradictory and slow development of some ‘interstitial zones,’ which in some cases result to this day still incomplete and central to the public debate on the use of abandoned or disused areas (as, for example, the former Navile Market area).

While, internationally, the library faced a mix of crisis and revival in its most innovative and politically attractive forms, Bologna experienced a similar trend. In these years, a renewed interest emerged in the history of Bologna’s libraries and attention to the declining potential of branch libraries, including through pioneering user studies (Pallotti 1989). By 1990 the branch libraries were fully devolved into administrative districts, but the latter began to be depleted of their crucial role in local development and democratic engagement. Investments were scarce and the renewal drive continued to lose momentum in the branch libraries, which were places of proximity but increasingly disconnected and understaffed. Therefore, the creation of a cohesive system suffered delays, reviving within a different political framework. In this phase, Bologna was one of the cities developing a contradictory government of the territory, characterized by conditions of polycentrism but also by the new paradigms of ‘centralization’ and ‘verticalization,’ also fostered by the intense personalization of mayors and the divisive concerns on urban order and ‘decorum’ (Borghgi & Olori 2020, Bukowski

2919).

Two consistent drivers sharply reshaped the symbolic definition of space, especially public space. On the one hand, Bologna ventured on a path to reposition itself in the international panorama of the new forms of culture-based urban regeneration within the complex and debated framework of the “creative city.” The following two decades were thus characterized by exposure to international tourism, urban marketing, and branding policies, and the reframing of culture within new instrumental strategies oriented to economic ends (Pratt 2008, Scott 2009). Places and services of culture were reinterpreted within a passive conception of fruition, limited to entertainment and the narration/rediscovery of ‘traditions’ – first and foremost, the image of ‘Bologna of food.’ Resources were directed to significant events, central points of interest, and the promotion of the historic center – enhanced for its arcades, squares, and ‘authenticity.’ One move, for instance, was the Urban Park of Piazza Maggiore, a project that included intervention squares and central buildings, including the former Salaborsa complex.

The project for the revitalization of libraries focused on the latter. Between 1992 and 1995, a “covered square” and a multifunctional multimedia center were planned and included among the strategic proposals of the administration’s Mandate Plan and Bologna’s candidacy as a ‘European city of culture.’ The transformative process of culture as a critical sphere will thus continue in a non-linear but continuous way, with “effects on the processes of capitalization, touristification, commercial homogenization, etc.” (Borghini & Onori 2020:75).

On the other hand, on the cultural level, a break with the movements of the 1970s and the counter-communities of the city was definitively marked. Moreover, the problem of the slow and conflictual redesign of unused urban spaces became more and more acute – also flowing into controversial force eviction and opposition to the self-managed social centers (returned after the pandemic). Aspirations to reposition Bologna as a progressive cultural city fostered the contradictory emergence of new urban scenes of vitality and consumption, with risks of showcasing processes and alienating those social categories excluded by new codes and increasing costs. Meanwhile, symbolic-moral distinctions supporting such asymmetries also found their way into local government, which reinterpreted and exacerbated the connections between incivility, legality, and security, driven by ‘zero tolerance’ policies (Bukowsky 2019). Such discourses – rooted in binary distinctions between the ‘civilized’ and the ‘uncivilized,’ the ‘appropriate’ and the ‘improper’ – inevitably intertwined with the new sites of ‘creative’ and ‘cosmopolitan’ culture.

The Libraries Institution and other emerging actors

Since 2000, when Bologna was declared the European Capital of Culture, the municipal

library network began a process of promotion and identity building that is still relevant in terms of its social mission. With the foundation of Salaborsa, a multimedia library and covered square, the service became a leading case in Italy. The building refers to models and debates in the international scene, offering a cultural space that merges innovative technologies, design, and sociality, also integrating with the historical center. The structure is a significant section of the central Palazzo d'Accursio, the ancient historical headquarters of the Municipality overlooking Piazza Maggiore. The semi-glazed floor shows the ancient ruins below the palace and emphasizes the continuity with the idea of the “public hub” in the Roman and medieval city. Pictures throughout the building emphasize and valorize the many different facets of its past (for instance, a botanic garden, a cover market, a bank, a sport arena, and a post office). Then, the framing of the new Salaborsa and the prestigious Archiginnasio within the central area of the *Quadrilatero della Cultura* (Culture Quadrilateral) – evolution of the Parco Urbano – provided the basis for a new phase and the foundation of the Libraries Institution.

Libraries Institution was founded in 2008 as a scheme for the renewal of the entire civic library service through the unification of pre-existing branches into a single semi-corporate management system to develop stronger coordination, flexibility in management, and the establishment of a more visible identity. In the same year, a new urban design scheme came to completion under the administration of Sergio Cofferati. The new vision, represented by the ‘Seven Cities,’ intended to re-propose a reinterpretation of Bologna as a polycentric city, as an alternative to center/periphery dualism. However, due to the contradictions above, this ‘city of cities’ did not reproduce the past’s governance strategies. On the contrary, in recent years, the relationship between culture, city, and citizenship has reached its ultimate complexity, emerging as the most recent expression of the public-private ‘ambivalence’ (*cf.* Ch. 1).

In the new millennium, the question of co-production paths in urban design resurfaces in new, interesting forms, which have inevitably converged with emerging processes (Carlone & Landi 2020, D’Alena 2021). Through the creation of the Urban Center – which emerged on the very top floor of Salaborsa – new processes and spaces for participation have emerged in various areas of the city, and Bologna has sought to bring forward ways of involving citizens in the discussion of common goods, public space, and the future of the urban fabric. Salaborsa itself, expanded and renovated in 2008, activated a restyling mode through a ‘participatory library’ path. The new spaces emerged through consultation between architects, experts in participatory processes, librarians, and users. The project thus elicited physical and communicative aspects otherwise not imagined. Civic collaboration policies then intensified with the birth of the civic network Iperbole, among the first in Europe, and

Incrediboll, a project supporting ‘cultural and creative enterprises’ in the reuse of public spaces. Between 2014 and 2015, there was the introduction of the Regulation for Common Goods, by which Bologna introduced collaborative pacts between citizens and the administration, and the second reduction in the number of quarters, coupled with new formulas such as the District Labs and the Office of Civic Imagination, born through the efforts of Urban Center, which later became FIU – Urban Innovation Foundation (2018). Just between 2017 and 2019, the strategies intensified and became more institutionalized through the governance unit of the Office of Civic Imagination, the Urban Innovation Plan, the District Labs, and the new figure of the ‘proximity agents.’ In 2018, thanks to new municipal policies and the role of FIU, Bologna won the Bloomberg Foundation’s Engaged Cities award, which was then used to fund the *Futuro Prossimo* plan, a project in collaboration with Libraries Institution. As mentioned, such processes forcefully revive a pivotal territory of political confrontation and the ambivalences inherent in Bologna’s recent positioning among global cities. I will return to this field of dissent, whose ‘dynamic contradictions’ point to Bologna as a particularly evocative case (Boarelli 2018, Borghi & Olori 2020).

Working on the promotion of a new graphic image, reinforced through the leading Salaborsa library, Libraries Institution progressively partnered with the Urban Center/FIU to become one of the leading actors of cultural promotion of the city and to communicate a renewed sense of continuity with the different peripheral branches. The latter has maintained considerable autonomy in their extensive production of services in the interest of neighborhoods and marginalities. However, an effort has also been made to systematically collect data on services and users to coordinate the offer and strengthen a common identity. In 2018, during the qualification of “Reading City” (Cepell – Centre for the Book and Reading), an additional transformative element was assumed by the *“Patto per la lettura di Bologna bene comune,”* a participatory process launched by the Department of Culture and City Promotion in collaboration with the Foundation for Urban Innovation. According to the administration, the Pact introduced “a catalyst for the cultural ferment of the city, generating new meetings, exchanges, widespread experimentation and activation of places, with the main objective of rethinking Bologna through reading, knowledge, involvement of people and the relationship with public and private spaces.” It is a ten-point document and, most notably, a network of public and private actors cooperating to promote programs, initiatives, and events. The Pact currently counts over 190 memberships, a new website launched in February, and an active Instagram account with a participatory editorial staff. The enhancement of the Pact’s role during the lockdown suggests it is a vital actor to be monitored for the future of civic libraries.

From 2008 to 2019, the renovation brought by the Institution has been limited by the

diminishing of municipal employees and the increment of outsourcing, whose results are still under discussion (*cf.* Ch.6). However, the demand to build a cohesive organization and identity has been maintained and was confirmed for the period 2019-2020 through the modernization of some buildings, the introduction of coordinated logos and the new name of Bologna Libraries. At this stage, however, the new Sector replaced the former Institution while facing the pandemic crisis.

Conclusion: promising processes and case significance

In summary, this chapter has outlined ‘what we are talking about,’ illustrating how the analyzed case fits into the scenario and presenting arguments about its relevance to the research questions. These pages also provided some initial analysis of the context and existing dynamics.

In the first half of the chapter, I discussed how some Italian specificities trace a downward-oriented scenario and convey the current expression of the long-standing issue of the impact of libraries in society (*cf.* 2.1). On the one hand, the use of library risks remaining a marginal practice due to low attitudes toward reading, out-of-school education, and other cultural and recreational activities. On the other hand, the role of libraries in promoting these practices within cultural welfare faces substantial territorial inequalities, a severe lack of investment, and poor policy assessment and evaluation. Among the most relevant issues to date, I highlighted the role of the library in an integrated idea of well-being, the topic of citizen involvement throughout life, and the strategic importance of outstanding cases in a fragmented and data-deficient scenario. In this regard, I provided some comparisons in Italy and presented an outline of the case study.

Then, a historical insight showed how Bologna’s civic libraries are a rather representative case of the emergence of libraries in the second half of the 19th century from a process of secularization of knowledge and a progressive sensitivity to a ‘useful’ and public use of educational and informative sources. Not an isolated case in Italy, it nevertheless represented one of the few centers particularly sensitive to international trends and equipped with favorable economic and social conditions for an Italian-style ‘public library.’ We have seen similarities with other contexts about the transformations of branches and modes of service, primarily based on reasoning about the symbolic values of specific spaces and the relationship with texts, the importance of spatial and temporal accessibility to documentary sources in order to offer a universal and attentive offering even to the working classes. In Bologna’s case, I also identified the ambivalent links between educational needs, the normative function of education, and the empowering potential of knowledge. I have

focused on some points of contact between changes in the library sector and specific urban dynamics, including demographic changes and the relationship with urban areas that are spatially peripheral to the historical center. Two historical moments highlighted analogies with the discussion of Part I: the emergence of ‘popular’ municipal libraries in the early twentieth century and the revival of libraries in the districts in the 1970s-80s. These two phases laid the groundwork for contemporary thinking about the link between knowledge, plurality of the public, and territory, which anticipates the role of libraries in the discussion of proximity and city planning.

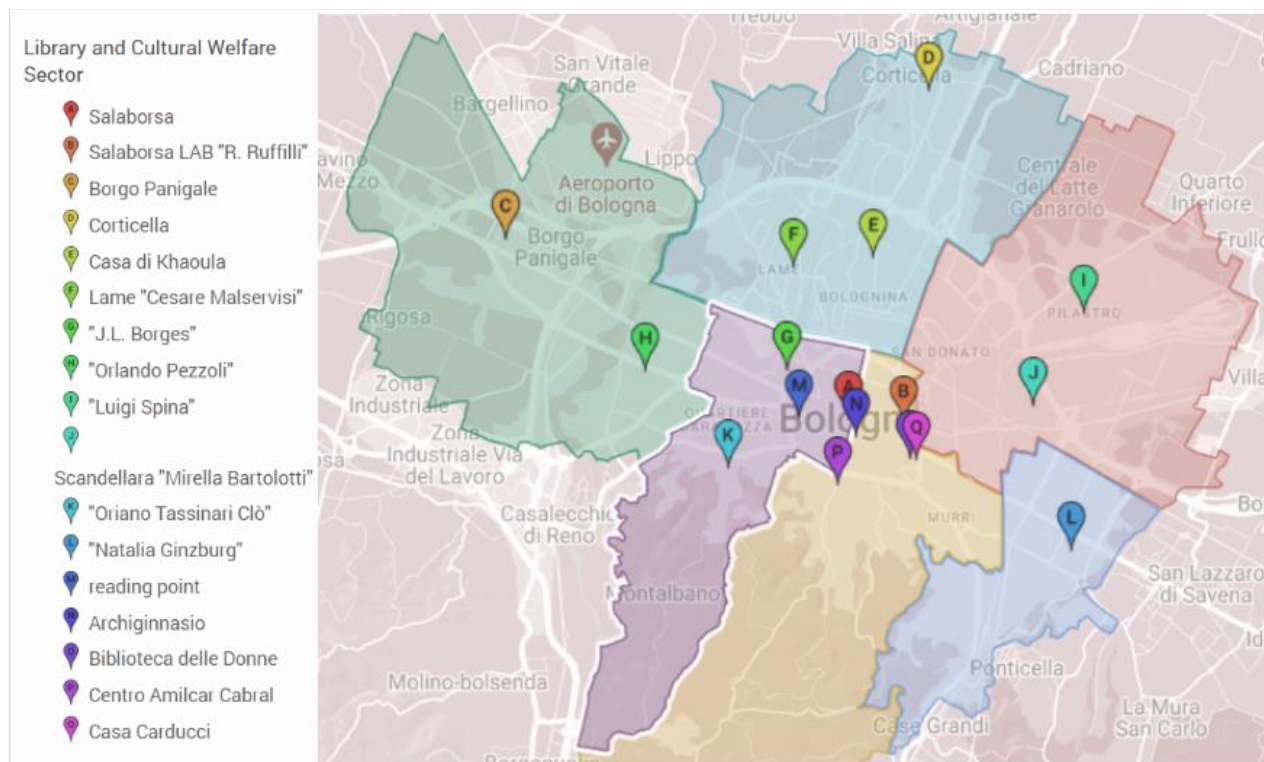
Finally, I have given particular interest to the present mapping of municipal libraries and their partial overlap with new faces of ‘urban imagination.’ Current relevant phenomena appear marked by a tension between ‘historical’ and ‘intended’ polycentrism and conflicting phenomena that risk stifling the proactive potential of existing cultural and civic paths. Proximity and participation risk being drained of meaning to the benefit of forms of ‘peripheralization,’ understood not as mere spatial status but as an overlay of ‘socio-political issues’ (Bergamaschi et al. 2020). The current phase, characterized by the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic and organizational transformations, further demands a critical gaze. We need to grasp the complexity of crucial actors – such as libraries, universities, the municipality, and the Foundation for Urban Innovation – and how they act as co-producers of ongoing processes but also as critical forces. As discussed in Part I, this theme is vital to question the role of spaces such as libraries.

If deprived of the trends presented, a case study would be sterile and less equipped with argumentative leverage. Although the issues can be dissected here in a limited way and without the aspiration of exhaustive answers, this study hopefully provides some contributions to the debate. The attention to these phenomena – and their relative sociological questions – allows the selected case to be woven into the broader system of relationships, exploring to the fullest the library’s potential and thus responding to research interests. Therefore, these thematic dimensions constitute useful threads throughout the following chapters. Rather than direct interpretations, they provide ‘questioning stages,’ i.e., a thematic compass to orient the sociological gaze toward the questions that emerged in Part I.

In considering ‘what is happening and how,’ this urban canvas becomes an eloquent case precisely for its particularities. The sociological study of the library, rather limited, has focused on the practices within its walls or addressed dynamics that operate on a large scale, not appropriately exploring the connectors – spatial, temporal, subjective – that link global dynamics to individual libraries and other relevant actors. In other words, libraries have been investigated through micro-relationships or regarding the major themes of sociocultural

transformations. However, as argued in Part I, it is most fruitful and necessary to weave the particular and localized associations that *take place* through specific symbolic and material entities. This line of reading, intended to frame the present contribution, will be taken up and deepened in Conclusion.

Fig. 1. Municipal Libraries (Bologna, Library and Cultural Welfare Sector)



Source: author's elaboration; Google Maps and Bologna Open Data.

Urban Innovation Lab, by FIU, is an exposition and multimedia narration of urban transformations



CHAPTER 6

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TURNING THE PAGE?

EMERGENCY, TRANSFORMATION, EXPLICITATION

I think that limitations sometimes allow you to think beyond and to think bigger. And so, while we are suffering the limitations that our users necessarily now suffer, we are experimenting and coming up with ways, activities, and services different than before. And this – kind of – *excites* us. Meaning that we have seen possibilities that we never saw before.

– a library coordinator

This chapter will focus on the months when libraries, like all other cultural institutions and venues, face the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic. These months also coincide with the necessary change in the direction of my research. This change was accepted with reluctance and concerns about the possibility of fieldwork research or the need to exclude relevant aspects. The research could then have taken two main directions: it could be transformed into an analysis of what libraries were *before* the pandemic or how libraries act *during* the pandemic. Exceptionality could have prevailed over any other approach.

However, such a moment of severe crisis brought out elements otherwise covered by the veil of daily life and highlighted the importance of relationships. Alongside an account of the response to the pandemic, the chapter analyses how libraries' relationship with their communities has endured during the lockdown. In this regard, digitalization plays a crucial role, but also personal initiative and emotions made it possible to restore social ties, practices, and partnerships. Moreover, while elaborations on the past (*what were we doing?*) and the future (*what will we do?*) have been accelerated, they were pivotal in ongoing transformations. In fact, the Libraries Institution of Bologna dissolved and transformed into the Library and Cultural Welfare Sector, through a participative process that invited librarians to discuss and reflect on their profession. Thus, the institutional renovation and the total closure of the branches

brought to the foreground the discussion of two founding themes throughout my research: the relationship between ‘center’ and ‘periphery,’ i.e., ‘central’ and ‘proximity’ libraries, and the library sector as embedded in the urban and socio-cultural fabric of the city. Many sub-themes on the relationship between the library and society have been revived during these transformations and presented in a new light. Tracking the two processes and their overlapping, the research elaborated on how ‘library communities’ processed a moment of strong discontinuity. Experiences tested the hypothesis on the relationship between social change, library practice, and librarianship. They also offered diverse readings on the ‘crisis’ through the ideas of continuity, acceleration, and realization.

How libraries have questioned themselves between 2020 and 2022 and what narratives have emerged in the field are the questions that guide this section of the study. The first half of the chapter presents the critical events following the emergence of the Coronavirus, merging general data on the sector, the perspective of interviewees, and my own experience. The paragraph opens with a descriptive account of the main phases. Then I analyze different interpretations prompted by the calamity and question how actors dealt with previous debates and the transformative potential of the Covid-19 pandemic. The second part discusses the governance’s renovation, addressing choices and narratives. Again, the elaboration of past and new challenges has been revealing, while librarians’ reflexivity opened the way to new strategies. I conclude with a reflection on the role of knowledge and theory in coping with change and a summary.

6.1 Disruption and recovery. The challenges of the Covid-19 Pandemic

(Lame, 03/22)

After weeks, I promised myself to go back to some libraries to study and write. To try to gather some more insights, but also to make peace with the field, facing blocks and insecurities. [...] Some study rooms still require reservations, others do not: doubt does not help to release the tension, to cross the threshold and listen, ‘let it flow’ [...] At one point, I focused on the large room on the second floor: almost two years earlier, I was observing it for the first time, full of people, and the air charged with a certain vitality (the elderly, the children, the librarians). Almost instinctively, my eye is drawn to the windows, open for air exchange, the photographs moved, the elements ‘out of place’; that is, returned to ‘live,’ to move. The change in ‘home decor’ triggers something inside me. I feel that I have to take a few photos, and capture the same perspective immortalized by the shots taken during my first visit, to emphasize and imprint this ‘gap,’ and carry with me a trace of the return, which is somehow enriched and multiplied in the juxtaposition between the two frames, personal and at the same time collective, that I was intentionally producing. For a moment, my feeling quickly changed. A mark was produced between the two space-times of my ethnographic experience, from point A, pre-Covid, to point B of the new everyday life. Not a line nor comparison, but a discontinuity in a fabric. A scar along my *journey*. This sign, at once evidence and a void of something that ‘has been,’ for a moment, connected with a different invisible force my life experience to that place: not through stories or interactions, in this case, but through the feeling of being ‘at home,’ an attunement to an image that, in a rather unobservable and untold way,

captured the idea of a shared experience with a place and its inhabitants. A place that suggested, ‘do you remember too? ...Don’t worry: *that something* will be sewn up..”

Fortunately, day after day, spring brought a more decisive return to normality in the room, culminating in the warm and beloved celebration of April 21, the Anniversary of the Liberation of Bologna, shared among local citizens and protagonists of the time. Today, albeit cautiously, libraries in Bologna and around the world have returned to serve their communities. However, in those two very long years marked by the pandemic, these places also experienced a journey packed with emotions and experiences that modified and questioned their relationship with society. Attempts to make sense of this collective trauma through words or other languages have been many, and more will follow.⁵⁰ The next pages provide an overview of what was observed in this research.

Mass lockdown experiences

Between January and February 2020, human-to-human transmission of Coronavirus Disease was definitively confirmed by WHO, and the Wuhan region (China) was placed under general lockdown. When the first cases were recorded in Italy on February 21 and the threats posed by the coronavirus progressively emerged in Europe, libraries also entered the debates and concerns of citizens. Before the shutdown of public places and the ban on movements within the national territory by government decrees, librarians already began to report a loss in patrons. In the early days of public debate, I visited the Salaborsa library, one of the most frequently accessed libraries, several times: there was a vivid impression of a smaller, well-segmented public in the spaces. A few days after International Mother Language Day, which had brought a final flurry of activities to the municipal libraries, I turned up again for some photos and to survey the situation, observing the first spontaneous preventive measures and limitations: closed study areas, sporadic students and readers, visitors limited to a few spaces

⁵⁰ This cannot be the space to address the images and languages used in the performative and processual elaboration of the pandemic as a social and cultural trauma (Alexander, Eyerman, and Bernhard 2004), but they will be an interesting research topic. In the field, I have personally experienced with interest the relationship with photography. Images are credited with a significative role in the materialization of memory and the production of narratives, but also in the risk of the spectacularization of the tragic. During periods of lockdown, we have witnessed a proliferation of images, with multiple effects. See, for example, Bologna’s video storytelling *The Life to Come* (<https://www.wildlab.it/portfolio-item/video-bologna-covid19/>), the accounts offered by the Instagram account @PattoLetturaBO, and the updates by Salaborsa Facebook page on the ‘behind the scenes’ of library life. Something similar emerged in my need to take pictures of the field, as a form of compensation for the loss of circumstances to observe and the inability to verbalize some experiences. Despite we told we would talk for long about the social experience during lockdowns, at present I am not sure whether it is appropriately explored in depth or the desire to move beyond it is prevailing instead. Regardless of future research agendas, I believe that the sensorial stimulations experienced by researchers during this period will be valuable resources for methodological reflection.

on the ground floor and the sofas in the first gallery. During the first closure measures in Bologna, on February 27, libraries were an exception compared to other cultural facilities closed to the public. In the hours following official announcements, concern about their accessibility also culminated in complaints from some librarians, reaching the pages of newspapers and social networks, with mutual rectifications and denials between the Institution (primarily through Salaborsa), citizens, and the mayor. Months later, confusion and concerns were still alive among protagonists:

... you had already summarized the initial phase briefly, when Italy was beginning to close... Bologna was beginning to close, libraries were among the last to close, and this created some problems because... let's say, it was an issue that was somewhere between the awareness [of the danger] and the formal qualification of libraries as an essential public service. We know that libraries are not an essential public service; it goes without saying; however, it is really a formal definition, in the sense that for a whole series of reasons that we are not going to explain, the minister at the time, Franceschini, had included libraries among the public services that could not be closed except for certain serious reasons [...] This is why when the region decided that cultural institutions had to close, this codicil appeared overnight that excluded libraries [...] we realized that we could risk closing a service that, formally, could not be closed. After a few days, it was realized that, in fact, the problems, serious problems, were there [...] with a whole series of problems, of even union issues [...] But, in the end, the libraries closed.
(library coordinator)

Yes, the libraries closed last – with some protests from the staff. Hmm, also because they were saying, rightly so, why do we have to be the last to close? *(president of Libraries Institution)*

The core of the discussion was the high density of visitors to facilities such as Salaborsa, whose covered square accounts for hundreds of admissions per day. Nevertheless, all public events were canceled, the number of seats was reduced, and most study areas were closed, thus limiting the presence of students and other groups. However, the danger involved not only the health of workers but also that of the elderly and children, who were then considered particularly vulnerable:

... in Emilia-Romagna, libraries remained open even after schools closed. And that resulted in the fact that we had the library full of children. Well, lots of children, for goodness sake; however, at that time, I understood that it was very risky, very dangerous for them and us. We didn't have masks then, the indication was that only those who were sick, if they knew it, had to wear a mask. At that moment, we were in total ignorance. I mean, we got away with it!
(library coordinator)

Well, when lockdown came, I was quite happy to close and to organize *smart working* for my colleagues because ... there are priorities, I don't know how to say. *(library coordinator)*

According to the measures established by the Decree of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers issued on March 8 and Regional regulations, all libraries' facilities were closed to

the public until April 3, with subsequent extensions following the consecutive national measures for the epidemic containment.

No one thought at first that [the lockdown] would last this long. We hoped it would be a passing thing, right away we didn't think of alternatives. (*librarian, Corticella Library*)

[...] it lasted a few months just the closure, during which we had, as contacts with our users, the mails, the telephone, the telephone information service, which was taken, of course, by storm and ... the socials, which in that case were invaluable (*librarian, Salaborsa library*)

Sanctions for not returning books and other resources were quickly suspended. Following the extension of the lockdown, Libraries Institution established more active online communication through its institutional website, social networks, and new tools. However, as the possibility of developing forms of long-distance contact opened up, the first critical issues also emerged, such as the different involvement of users and the difficulty of expanding or homogenizing existing ties at such a time.

[social networks] were, as I might say, a warm relationship, if not warmer as before... but with a SMALL but significant segment of our users... The users of libraries [...] let's say the Italian cultural scene is made up of a very small, tiny slice of strong users, therefore strong readers, great frequenters of libraries. [There is then] a segment sadly still too large of users who are completely disinterested in reading, in books, in frequenting places of culture, and an intermediate zone that is the one with which one has the possibility, or the hope in short, of increasing that small hard core (*library coordinator*)

[...] certainly, here certainly with the more 'experienced' users, hehe... I mean no, 'strong' users, as there are 'strong' readers... [then] we also have strong libraries and some libraries... (*former director*)

According to the Census of Libraries, nearly one in three libraries suspended all activities during the 2020 health emergency. Libraries compensating for the lack of services during the containment measures (about 68%) primarily increased online services. The most implemented activity was Digital and 'Quick' reference through remote communication tools (36%). In about 14% of libraries, chats, email, and telephone constituted new forms of contact than in the past. Similarly, 11% have developed or increased their presence on social networks. The availability of digital resources was also a strategy to support users (30%), but few introduced the availability of e-landing platforms (7%) or increased digitized material (5%). The response of Bologna libraries in this scenario has been quite ready and varied.

One of the most relevant topics was digital lending, which Bologna libraries offer through Emilib, the regional digital library supported by the Cultural Heritage Institute of the Emilia-Romagna Region, based on MediaLibraryOnline, one of the leading platforms in the country.

The emergence generated unprecedented growth in Italy: 89% more users than the previous year, 102% more loans, and 108% more access. The increase characterized the first lockdown and the second lockdown in the fall. However, loans reflected local disparities: for example, there were 600,000 loans made in Lombardy and 30,000 in all southern regions combined. Platforms such as this have not only given the population access to e-books and audio-visual resources but especially to an unprecedented number of newspapers and magazines, thus providing an incredible resource for updating during the lockdown and partial compensation for the large numbers of users, especially the elderly, who frequent public newspaper libraries. As I will elaborate on, some relevant factors were the communication of the service, which is still very little known in Italy, and the simplification of registration procedures. According to Libraries Institution, in the first few months of lockdown alone, the Emilib service saw an increase in registrations of twelve and a half compared to the same period in the previous year. As reported by the previous director, Bologna already counted on a good situation: the municipal libraries were among the first to adopt the MLOL platform and had “already done much work.” In 2019, he pointed out to me, “the Institution had recorded about 1,850,000 physical visitors to the buildings, while “web visitors, accurately counted across all the various digital declinations,” totaled 1,925,000. During the lockdown weeks, the e-landing service was also reported in national newspapers and television, offering unprecedented visibility. As, for example, the president told me:

[in March] I was interviewed by Tg3, talking about this possible service during the lockdown, right? And during my interview, we had 60 subscriptions, because people were hearing, they were tuning in, and so you can imagine... That, though... that is [only] reading.

Another significant difference, in fact, has been the ability of libraries to adapt digitally other cultural and participatory activities, previously carried out exclusively in presence – something that only one-fifth of Italian libraries have been able to do at some level (Mostly educational workshops, reading aloud and reading groups). Many libraries in Bologna have tried to continue these activities, especially on the initiative of individual librarians and coordinators. The institution quickly embarked on a program of further activities and partnerships, including within the *Patto per la Lettura* of Bologna. This crucial network came into being through a participatory process initiated in 2018 with the Foundation for Urban Innovation, in conjunction with the “City that Reads” designation awarded to Bologna by *Cepell – Centro per il Libro e la Lettura*. As discussed in Chapter 5, Pacts are recent governance tools that are gaining centrality in the multiple strategies of cultural promotion on the territory. The Reading Pact for Bologna, among the most active and numerous in the Italian scene, is signed by nearly two hundred actors (public, private, associations, and individual

citizens) involved in reading and access to knowledge. It also promotes forms of active citizenship, for example, through Collaboration Pacts. For Foundation for Urban Innovation, “The Pact is a catalytic tool of the city’s cultural ferment, generating new encounters, exchanges, widespread experimentation and activation of places, with the main objective of rethinking Bologna through reading, knowledge, involvement of people and the relationship with public and private spaces⁵¹.” During the lockdown period, the Pact fostered its networking and promotional role, fostering engagement and storytelling through the new Instagram account and amplifying the voice of several subscribers⁵². In this period, the partner Foundation for Urban Innovation activates the metropolitan project R-innovating the city – Observatory for the Coronavirus Emergency to “analyze and design proposals to respond to the socio-economic effects of the crisis by activating the city’s widespread skills and energy⁵³.” One of the actions was creating an online space for discussion through the program of events “*Il volo del colibrì*,” streamed on the institutional website, Facebook, Radio Bologna Uno, and cross-posted on the pages of other organizations and institutions involved in the Patto per la Lettura. As described, it was “a mix of information service and entertainment” that features citizens facing the discontinuity and challenges of the pandemic (starting from reading groups, bookshops, and all other realities within the Patto per la Lettura) but also various national celebrities. Some sessions have been streamed from the Salaborsa key scene; a setting re-proposed also during an interview by BiblioBologna. During the lockdown, this active association of volunteers and supporters launched a new website and, like many others, digitally promoted its longstanding connection with civic libraries.

As pointed out passionately by some interviewees, Libraries Institution was already engaged in strategies defined as ‘pop,’ that is, the creation of varied activities aimed at breaking down symbolic thresholds and stimulating attractiveness to all citizens (in addition to the many public events, another example was “*Le biblioteche in piazza*,” a festival organized in various areas).

⁵¹ The main channels of the *Patto per la Lettura* are the collaborative Instagram newsroom @PattoLetturaBO and the institutional website <https://pattolletturabo.comune.bologna.it/>.

⁵² The new profile came into being as ‘participatory management’ through one of the collaborative pacts activated through the *Patto per la Lettura*. The account involves, in addition to the coordinating office, a group of ‘bookstagrammers.’ The project, born during the pandemic, was based on a shared chat and a clear editorial plan, geared toward enhancing ‘materiality,’ understood as linking content to images of books and other reading-related elements. Production is rooted in a series of common collections and columns, then consolidated. In the manager’s words, the account expressed the Pact as “something fluid and interesting,” capable of acting as a “content producer” but essentially based on “an alliance,” a “hub of actors.” The multiple contaminations recounted through the new channel represents an example of the possible “positive contaminations” and the Pact’s goal: “to work cross-culturally [...] to re-count and re-generate.”

⁵³ <https://www.fondazioneinnovazioneurbana.it/progetto/rinnovarelacitta-osservatorio>

...we had to break this threshold boundary, right? These doors, right? [...] that you always struggle to take that step, to cross that threshold, especially those who have never been in the library (*president of Libraries Institution*)

Continuing the attempt to create a “libraries without walls” through digital media⁵⁴, publication on social networks was intensified, and online ‘pop’ services were launched or re-proposed: recordings of conferences and seminars, the video-reading series of fairy tales “*Voci in prestito*,” the series of reading tips on fantasy literature “*The Book Rover*,” and the web-series of reading tips “*LibroClip*,” organized with *OfficinaAdolescenti*⁵⁵ and featuring celebrities from the culture and entertainment sector.

Moreover, library services were promoted as a source of information on the coronavirus pandemic and similar topics, such as the web archives of the Amilcar Cabral Centre, specialized in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, or the Archiginnasio’s analysis of the Spanish plague. “Sometimes with a bit of hilarity,” – a librarian tells me – “but it is useful to show how these places [specialized and historical libraries] dialogue with the present.”

Many activities, as mentioned, were also conducted at the local level thanks to the initiative of some librarians and the enhancement of stable and strong relationships with some user groups. Librarians from different locations have invited reading groups to meet virtually, especially supporting those who have found themselves – like most Italians (Cepell & IEA 2021) – to relate with remote communication tools and online platforms for collaboration. Locked in libraries or directly from home, employees have made themselves available to offer reference service, organize story and book readings for families, or facilitate sign-ups for online services even outside of service hours.

However, a significant dimension that has emerged regarding the relationship with users is the ability to question each person’s skills and needs, paying close attention to the sense of ‘care’ and valuing experiences and ‘strong connections’ rather than just direct adaptation. Some librarians, for example, expressed themselves in this way:

... the first story is addressed to the reading groups, particularly “the historical one,” composed mainly of local senior citizens. The decision had been not to move the meetings online, since “the historical participants,” having not the means to attend, would have risked not continuing. The idea of not wanting to exclude some members, therefore, prevailed

⁵⁴ With this expression, evocative of the longstanding commitment in outreach activities around the world, the president of Libraries Institution offered advice on the official YouTube channel for navigating online resources and staying in touch with librarians.

⁵⁵ *OfficinaAdolescenti* is a free educational and creative space within the teen area of the Salaborsa Ragazzi Library, offering workshops, internships, meetings, exhibitions, events, and competitions. The area also provides study rooms, informal spaces, and the OARrecords music recording room. *OfficinaAdolescenti* has been co-designed together with high school students. Later, as a result of the conflicting relationship with some teenagers, the service created an important partnership with street educators, transforming the area in a more inclusive way and attracting new young patrons.

decisively. Instead, the librarians created a new group made up of teenagers, which garnered a growing number of readers: “an online explosion” compared to the classic numbers, she tells me, with new students also being approached by word of mouth and some teachers, alongside online teaching. After the first lockdown, the groups were revived, with a couple of in-person meetings, before the new lockdown. (*unrecorded interview, Scandellara Library*)

We had chosen not to do that one instead. We did not do any video readings [...] we felt the web was flooded with these readings. Everyone was reading, and it seemed to us, though, that this fact that everyone was reading was more a response to personal anxiety. ‘What do I do that I have nothing to do?’ I propose, I propose.... I really appreciated that, for example, there were teachers who told me that every night they read to their children, and in my opinion, the dimension of reading has to be one that involves a strong relational aspect. So, you can read at a distance if you’re a grandmother and you read to your grandchild that you can’t see at that time, or if you’re a teacher reading to her class because there is this need for distance [...] I think it was more important to give parents tools so they could read to fill in the lockdown days in a good sense, even with readings to children. [...] it’s perfectly fine, for example, those librarians who read to groups of kids. [...] we have a reading group of middle school kids and also one with kids from the last years of elementary school, and with them, the colleague who is in charge of running the group has kept in touch online as well. So they continued to see each other, compare books, and do activities about books, but there was already a strong, pre-existing relationship, a meaningful one. (*library coordinator*)

There has been no lack of reasoning about the scenario as a whole and analysis of the lights and shadows of the library sector in Italy during the most challenging months. I will mention these in the next section, dwelling on the insights stimulated by the pandemic. As far as most of my interviewees were concerned, the awareness of belonging to a ‘lucky’ scenario emerged. The first aspect was an awareness of the existing resources, however below aspirations, and the actual capacity to cope with the emergency:

Mh, sure ... the municipality has adopted devices for us, which is fundamental. [...] I know many people from other regions who dream about the libraries in Bologna, it has to be said... Every neighborhood has a library, with beautiful books, selected, staffed, and ample opening hours. It’s not so obvious in other places, and so even though it’s always improvable, let’s not forget that here we’re still a ... some realities are much more efficient, more avant-garde, but also many realities where there are no libraries at all [...] however here the libraries are there. And we are trying to make them work as well as possible here (*library coordinator*)

One particular issue concerned financial resources. In an already suffering sector, the ability to cope with extraordinary expenses, uncertainty, and slowdowns in many other sectors (such as publishing) threatened a further decrease in resources. During the pandemic, some regions, such as Emilia-Romagna, were able to support the cultural service. Another vital measure was Decree 267/2020, which allocated a portion of the Emergency Fund, amounting to 30 million euros, to the support of publishing through the purchase of books by public reading libraries, offering an unprecedented source of funding. The measure aimed to overcome the rigidities of maximum-bidding tenders and enhance the outreach services of local libraries. Both large and small library systems, spread across all regions, applied for

access to the Fund. However, again the applications reflected the fragmented nature of the Italian scenario. The first region, Lombardy, acquired a quarter of the first funding, followed by Veneto (3.2) and Piedmont (2.6), while Sicily raised about 1 million and Campania less than 800,000 euros (CEPELL & AIE 2021).

In Bologna, funding for direct expenditures, i.e., net of personnel costs, utilities, and rent payable, amounted to 4,368,249 euros in 2019 and was supported by internal revenues, the City Council, other libraries, the University, and the Region. The institution did not suffer a direct cut and received extraordinary support of eighteen thousand euros. However, direct income, consisting partly of tourist activities, has been impacted by declining visitation. A library manager offered some additional details about purchases:

In twenty days – I marked it down, from March 19 to April 3 – we spent 13,000 euros and purchased 1,400 titles, including eBooks and audiobooks. [...] I talk about figures because they are important and because I realize [...] we have continued to purchase [...] I still realize, particularly in these last months, let's say from June onwards, *that not all Italian libraries are purchasing at the same rate as before*. [...] We have not had any cuts on acquisitions. [the drop elsewhere] signals to me that it could mean that some public institutions have gone to touch budgets... having more spending on other fronts, they have gone to touch budgets... I don't have precise news, but it is absolutely clear that we are putting books in the National Catalog first. And good or bad, I mean, with large entities that may be the Lombard or Tuscan libraries, other more important and significant entities, they were often already in the catalog. Now no.

Like other departments in the cultural sector, Italian libraries benefit from meager resources and suffer from a lack of employee turnover and heavy use of volunteer, external or precarious staff. However, unlike in other areas and other countries, many employees have benefited from the protections offered by public management. During the lockdown period, 43% of libraries allowed activities to be carried out through 'smart working' ['agile' remote working]. Thirty-six percent suspended the activities of some employees by resorting to vacation, leave, and the like, while 17 percent introduced layoffs (especially for external workers), and 15 percent provided for shifting schedules (especially for internal employees). Four out of five libraries had contracts with companies and VAT holders: of these, almost a fifth temporarily suspended or terminated their contracts. Bologna's municipal libraries also attested to a continued decline in municipal employees, partly offset by an increase in auxiliary staff (+60% between 2012 and 2019). At the dawn of the pandemic, the latter covered about 30% of the total, expressed in full-time equivalent.

Some interviewees also reflected on the different ways of working between libraries and other cultural services, especially when the first opportunities to reopen arose:

Maybe, um ... public libraries are more likely to maintain this, how to say, this attractiveness, let's say – it obviously also depends on how you manage them, how you make

them attractive compared to other spaces that are closely tied ... to programming. To say the theater has programs, it has costs, a preparatory work that makes everything much more difficult and tiring in a time of uncertainty like this. [...] We rely on continuity of supply, right? That makes it very different to... That is, we, in my opinion, have to continue to be there and to be present and to be open and to offer the maximum we can offer to our users... where there is programming, again, I see it really hard. (*librarian*)

I can say that – we are happy, but not happy enough. Because there is still the feeling ... however, I must then confess that talking with others, not only with other libraries, for example, the reality of museums is still at an even more backward catching up situation, in the sense that museum visitors have not started to come back, have not started to come back to museums [...] the library, in that small percentage of users, is part of the, let's say, the horizon of *places to go* [...] especially here in Salaborsa, which is a place... it may like it or not; however, it deludes itself to be a nice place, haha, and so anyway we have frequenters. (*library coordinator*)

However, even the confident and generous remarks about local conditions did not limit the emergence of criticisms and judgments about the ability to take advantage of starting conditions, the lack of means and skills among employees, and the gap between generations and between internal and external employees.

It is improvable, I must say, it is... In my opinion, certainly, there are realities... less functional, others more... Bologna ranks in a good average in short, I think, no? [...] on the other hand, let's say that in Bologna we are the city of culture, if you will, a city of culture par excellence. So, if we don't do that ... it's a bad example. On the contrary, as I will illustrate, both past experiences and new stimuli have revealed a wide range of second thoughts and concerns, further amplified by the unexpected escalation of the emergency.

Tales of change: "phase 2"

During May, the re-planning of services intensified, reflecting the attenuation of national containment measures. The scenario was complex and stratified at international, national, and local levels, with various recommendations and guidelines expressed by different authorities. In the public debate, the idea of so-called 'phase 2' emerged, involving the suspension of lockdown periods and the gradual reopening of many services, subject to new and continuously updated protocols. The period between June and September 2020, in Italy, was marked by continuous changes and a heated debate on the different opportunities for businesses, entertainment venues, and cultural services.

On a domestic level, the National Public Libraries Commission, through AIB – Italian Libraries Association (2020b), has published the document *Designing phase 2: planning the reopening of public libraries*, proposing a summary of guidelines and a preliminary analysis of both critical issues and transformative opportunities introduced by the crisis. Among these topics are the need to expand investment, the attention to new digital publics and forms of the digital divide, the importance of developing information literacy programs and improving

remote accessibility, and the need to enhance cooperation with welfare services to share support policies. A significant cause of delay and disorder, for example, concerned the sanitation measures for surfaces and materials and the estimated quarantine period required for books and other resources, with different indications from the Ministry of Health, international associations, ICPAL (Central Institute for the Pathology of Archives and Books) and individual experts (*cf.* 6.2).

In Bologna, in late May, Libraries Institution gradually opened. The central Archiginnasio and Salaborsa offices opened alongside five local branches, quickly followed by the rest of the Institution, but all provided limited opening hours and allowed limited access. No meetings, desk services, or associative activities were rescheduled, and only a few tourist sites were opened with regulated access. Physical lending was again extended, and people requiring reference services were redirected to online services such as “*Ask the librarian.*” Those wishing to return or lend could visit the libraries only by appointment. Some libraries arranged books on windows, used as display cases, to show them to the public. Material resources such as periodicals and specialized archives remain unavailable or strictly regulated for months. Gradually, limited access to seats and library spaces was allowed. Each of these stages was communicated not only through the institutional news section but also preserving the engagement pursued during the lockdown via social networks, such as through the ‘exorcising’ format “*Free from today,*” which periodically presented and promoted the books returned and then “liberated” from the precautionary quarantine.

Recalling the difficult times, many interviewees highlighted how the design of new service arrangements, while highly desired, required moments of confrontation and debate. Unprecedented suspension of this kind highlighted previously unimaginable problems and needs, which limited the possibility of mere ‘transposition’ or ‘limitation’ of services but questioned, day by day, the relationship between spaces, needs, personal emotions, and regulations-which entered overbearingly into a ‘new everyday life.’ Thus, for example, some managers recount:

Then at some point on May 18 came the authorization to open the libraries, with only lending and return operations; that is, you could come to the library, ask for a book in advance, and only come to pick up the book or return the books you had on loan. Finally, a beautiful situation for us, because we could finally find our users and for the users to return; however, after a few days, we realized *how frustrating* this was. That is, the library is not... a place that gives you books; I mean, the library you also have to attend. So after a few days, the protests of our users began to arrive ... [...] exactly one month later, finally, after a very complex work done with metropolitan security tables, in which the Labor Inspectorate, union representatives, libraries, the Local Health Authority participated, [...] as well as another table, on the other hand, at the regional level, run by the Institute of Cultural Heritage, so a whole series of meetings... I never saw my colleagues as often, even if by video, as I did at that time... my colleagues in Parma, whom I saw more often than my colleagues... But, in short, we finally managed to bring home these documents that authorized us to open with certain regulations,

which guaranteed the safety of the operators and the public. Basically, there were five, the usual five: masks, hand sanitization at the entrance, the distance between people, sanitization of spaces and libraries, environments used by users, and, possibly, reservation of seats.

[...] Yeah, I'm kind of – I'm telling you frankly, like, right? I mean this whole sense of malaise, grievance, etc.... I have to tell you the truth a little bit: it's starting to piss me off... in my opinion, at some point, it's not that we did all this because of somebody's mania. There was a pandemic: we needed to close! Gradually, looking around, one step after the other, everything is reopening [...] The important thing, in my opinion, is to design a series of ... The *world*, in truth, you have to redesign it in a different way.

A critical aspect of this phase was the loss of the direct relationship with the materiality of the library: one example was the loss of the exploration and 'serendipity' offered by the 'open shelf', so much observed in library halls: physical proximity allows you to go, in the distance of a few fingers, from an "*Antica Smorfia*," to a photography manual, to M. Vitta's "*The Voices of Things*," experiencing unimagined connections and paths. However, one of the most significant elements after the first lockdown – gradually emerging in the various national comparison sites – was the vivid perception of an 'emptying of meaning,' experienced as never before. As evoked above, the reflection involved users and librarians in various ways.

Yes... undoubtedly, our social function suffered a lot [...] I was asked the same question yesterday by a journalist from Repubblica, who asked: 'did it suffer?' 'Eh, of course, it has suffered.' On the other hand, the schools have also suffered... the social function was not there for anyone... now we have reopened with the lending by reservation, and we are waiting for the regional ordinances to see how to resume, in short, when to resume by spacing out the reception to the public... By seating them, one chair yes and one chair no, I would say... And then, however, of course ... we, especially in, let's say, real civic libraries – because we have libraries of all kinds, don't we? – neighborhood libraries, of course, suffered even more from this decline in sociability, because that's what they used to do, they used to give their homes to the weaker sections of the population: the elderly, the children, right? [...] Yes, but in short, now I hope that when we reopen, with all the necessary precautions, we can do a few things... Otherwise, it's a tragedy here if we can't offer our services... Or why are we even reopening?
(president of Libraries Institution)

... Initially, we used to get users in who had previously made a loan request, so there was all the preliminary work that we do for them, the telephone service, or online, etc., or they were able to do remotely with the accreditation on the servers, the personal service area. It was quite strenuous [...] which brought disappointing results. Then, having heard all the security committees, etc., we decided to open the library to regular services with a limit of 100 people. I know you know the library; the spaces are quite large. We eliminated all the seating so people, let's say, booked the study seat to stay to study ... but they couldn't just come and sit without the specific purpose of reading or studying *(librarian)*

In July 2020, for example, I returned to a library to drop off a book I had been saving for months. With the occasion, I hoped to visit the library and collect some testimonials, but I was soon dissuaded by the closed door and the kind but resolute voices of the librarians. I, therefore, remained at the building's entrance along with an older man who lived nearby,

who had come to return a voluminous bag containing at least a dozen texts. The employees, visibly busy behind their desks, urged us not to cross the threshold and quickly leave the texts outside the building, where a container overflowing with books contained the volumes destined for “quarantine.” Many did not know that the libraries reopened after the lockdown, but many others were affected by the prolonged restrictions. That day the man and I stood briefly in front of the door, talking to each other through our masks: we were surprised and sorry that we could not exchange a few words inside, although the fleeting encounter allowed us a minimum of understanding and mutual closeness. The containment measures, the difficulty of informing and calming users, and the subsequent lockdowns brought back to the forefront what Ferrieri (2020) called the ‘lending-machine library’ (“*biblioteca prestificio*”):

The risk [of a purely functional use], indeed, for the time being, is there [...] Now there is a collaboration with a chain of bookstores, the Coop Bookstores, which are very active... and so the meetings will take place in the library... it is also functional, how should I say, to recall. At the time when you call up authors who are important and known to everybody, you could call up some audience to the library, in short... so that they can realize that there is no particular risk in going to the library rather than... going to the supermarket, I’m just saying. That will – hopefully, give a little bit of – revive that a little bit. Because now, looking at the social network, right? So, all the user responses, right? [...] great enthusiasm, great support, etc.... But, in reality, we are still at a *very functional use*. (*librarian*)

What do you want to give libraries? Especially with a library network like the city library network that is so capillary. Because, you may have seen it, it’s happened to so many libraries: the *theme of proximity* has come back powerfully. However, let’s say, that *draining of meaning* also came back with vigor. Because, you know, we are not repositories of books; you have studied them. Indeed we did everything to make it clear – Agnoli *docet* – that we were not only repositories of books but precisely small, large, medium-sized squares, let’s say, of knowledge, of opportunities. And now, instead, we’re kind of returned to being considered in almost ten percent of a library’s potential. Maybe 15. Whatever, I don’t want to give numbers now, but I mean, I feel very discouraged these days (*coordinator*)

Therefore, providing new opportunities during the summer, including benefiting from the weather and outdoor public spaces, proved vital. One of the first and most vibrant frames was, for example, the *Cortile in Comune* series of events, a “cultural review for the city of the future” curated by the Foundation for Urban Innovation at the Guido Fanti inner courtyard of Palazzo d’Accursio, adjacent to Salaborsa. Events such as these have been able, albeit through limited and contingent forms – small public, spaced seating, and reservation – to generate meaningful moments of meeting. While some events have attracted a diverse audience, including celebrities or well-known intellectuals, many gatherings have been attended by ‘restricted’ networks of citizens drawn through a common interest and word of mouth. As is often the case in large and small libraries, partly because of limited attractiveness

or communication, conferences and public assemblies simultaneously constitute ‘high’ and ‘low intensive’ meetings (Audunson 2005). In other words, following Goffman, such gatherings in public space are not exclusively characterized by the “typically serious and slightly impersonal” exchange aimed at “producing quietly thoughtful understanding, rather than mere entertainment, emotional impact, or immediate action” (1981:222). On the contrary, they involve different stages and often constitute “a celebratory occasion,” reinforced by liminal and collateral interactions and rituals among organizers and participants (*id.*). Participation by social ‘cliques’ limited to organizers and their acquaintances – sometimes a critical element of cultural events – can also contribute to a particular hybridization of forms of interaction. By circulating varying degrees of emotionality and participation, they contribute to sacralizing pre-existing social networks and including other present subjects in those forms of effervescence identified in a Durkheimian sense (Collins 1988). One such occurrence, as part of the Courtyard in the Commons event, was the presentation of the book *#iorestoacasa*, in July 2020. The meeting, dedicated to a collection of short stories written by citizens during the lockdown, was an opportunity to question together about reading and isolation as human and social issues related to the emergency. Above all, it was a powerful experience to return to public space together and experience the new health regulations and their effects – the queue at the entrance, the hesitancy in using masks to talk to each other outdoors, the uncertainty in approaching others or communicating with one’s neighbor. On stage, along with a journalist who moderated the discussion, were representatives from FIU, the president of the local energy company, the publisher, and a group of readers aloud. The theme and stories generated emotional tension, and some of the authors present joined the readings. About half of the audience appeared to be composed of authors of the stories, organizers, members of the publisher, and acquaintances; however, what took over was not self-referral but a sense of a desired and participated “collective return.” The emotion became palpable, and the moment appeared cathartic, collective processing.

Overall, the summer was, for many, a time of discouragement with respect to expectations and the inability to make predictions or monitor the scenario.

... this opening that until the end of August was on a reduced schedule ... and on the one hand, it was very welcome, in the sense that there’s really a habit of coming to the library to go around the shelves, look at the display cases of new things and pick things out at a leisurely pace. On the other hand, it has not allowed what is instead a habit of fruition of our library, which is to sit and wait for friends, look around and... let’s say it’s a space that is also very much used as a meeting place, as a place where you go to see people you don’t know... Like, our average is four thousand people a day. So, it’s very significant; since September 1 we have opened with normal hours but still with the limit of a hundred people at the same time, and it’s all very slowed down. Evidently, we are certainly not at standard numbers, partly because

a good portion of our audience is made up of university students from Bologna and other university cities, and they have not yet returned – in short, it is not clear to what extent they will return [...] For us, September was the time when we had lines of people signing up for the library because they were landing in Bologna, out-of-town students were writing to the library, etcetera... (*library coordinator*)

My guess is that during the recovery attempt [he calls it ‘phase three’] we had about seventy percent less attendance, roughly [...] The biggest concerns, the discouragements, are the idea of crowding and this quarantined books thing. [...] I often monitor comments on social media and have read some negative comments about the idea of taking books that are circulating. (*librarian*)

Just this week, we started the first reading group – which is partly in-person and partly online, and so we are slowly restarting activities. In September, we will resume author meetings – all very controlled and regulated. (*library coordinator*)

I am not yet able to have an accurate opinion; in the sense that, although you make all your information available, you realize that, in short, your [communication] channels are not read and seen by everyone... (*librarian*)

The following waves and specificities of the field

By the end of the summer, libraries were still burdened with uncertainty, and many significant activities had not yet been reactivated. Particularly vulnerable services were those dedicated to children and families, for whom preventive measures were very limiting. Some librarians managed to activate, independently or with associations, moments dedicated to one family group at a time. Another problem was the consultation of newspapers and other similar activities, which were very important for some user groups, such as the elderly. More generally, the use of the space was still limited to short, non-stationary accesses.

[...] we are in this situation, in which users can come, they come more and more, they can stay in the library, attend it, go to the shelves, etcetera... what we are lacking now is the ability to provide free seats, which are not bookable, so... one speech is the study room for the student, the other is a chair where you can sit even just while you are choosing the book... that one is still missing a lot. We have... we still have to keep the newspaper library closed, so the possibility to consult the newspapers of the day... because obviously the newspapers, having to be subject to quarantine, and a newspaper [...] once read by a user has to go immediately to quarantine, and then the location you have to sanitize it... in short, it creates too many problems. And then the space for the very little ones, which was our ... point of excellence, let’s say, [...] the baby room, which is in the main square, of course, was beloved by parents, educators, grandmothers, aunts, etc. ... and we have to keep it closed. These are the aspects that we miss the most. (*librarian*)

[...] it’s complex; since the closure, the baby room has never been reopened because of an obvious sanitation problem. It’s all like... soft furnishings in which babies crawl, drool and eat food... maybe they are nursed, etcetera... there it’s really a very big problem and the various commissions that guide us, let’s say, in terms of safety, that still don’t allow that, and it’s... that’s a significant loss [...] Now they’re going to start doing it by appointment, [...] but

precisely... a family's life has to be organized by planning to book a time, have a moment, etc., etc., so ban the unexpected. It's all very regulated, hehe... whereas before, I mean, you had a half hour free, and you brought your child to the baby room... Those are all things that we will have to catch up on. (*library coordinator*)

The emotion and 'tangibility' generated by the fragmented situation is, in the course of the interviews, a living source of narrative and reflection, to which I will return. Interviewees spontaneously told me what the relationship between librarians, people, and spaces was like before the pandemic, how it 'defined' the very idea of the library, and how now the latter was no longer taken for granted but rather questioned. Despite the period, some librarians lamented the scarcity of diverse public and tourists, especially at the Salaborsa library. "You can see around that the walking crowd is scarcer," – one librarian told me – "I mean, one thing is to go to work, another is... leisure." The limited upswing in casual visits may also have an economic payoff, given direct funding sources through tourist sites. Above all, the loss of students, casual visitors, and tourists significantly changed the perception of the place and the definition of the situation. The presence of visitors, even "passive" participants (if so), contributes to letting down the threshold, vitalizing the inner scene and coproducing specific frames, such as that of the covered square of Salaborsa, the gardens of the Borgo Panigale and Corticella libraries, or the expansive study rooms of Casa di Khaoula. Compare, for example, moments of extreme calm with a few readers immersed in silence to moments of great sociability during public events, conferences, or busy food courts. Returning to the Salaborsa example, the liveliness and observable movements are not exclusively conditioned by the 'open' and multifunctional conformation of the spaces. The new Music Room, the Innovation Lab, temporary exhibitions, and school trips contribute to a particular effervescence that defines the place and experience.

Challenges and reflections multiplied as the new lockdowns or partial closure measures followed successive pandemic waves, starting in October 2020. During these periods, I had some long-distance conversations and was kindly invited to visit some libraries. The main challenge was dealing with the emotions of the moment and, in the words of one interviewee, continuing to "find myself reprogramming in a situation that changes[goes] almost day by day." One of my visits was to one of the more peripheral branch libraries. At the entrance, I met a voluminous stack of books, the large body temperature gauge, and the welcoming smiles of librarians – partially concealed by masks. The local coordinator and a librarian assigned to the front office gave me a friendly welcome; the atmosphere was immediately informal and direct, occasionally interrupted by the ringing of the telephone. The rooms were empty, but the librarians were buzzing: requests for loans, assistance, and communications with schools, families, and educators; all of them hoping to get back together. Finally, there

was the organization of space and books:

The coordinator took me for a tour, introducing me to some colleagues as we progressed through the spaces. About five to six people were present, as well as the son of an employee. A few steps away, the reading space opens up into a larger room with spacious tables and lots of accumulated material. It is a study room – she tells me – used mostly by university students, but now they use it as a warehouse to handle quarantined books. “We are closed,” she tells me sadly, and they certainly don’t have spaces here like the large halls of Salaborsa.

Standing over coffee, we had a quick conversation with a colleague. I ask them about the history of the building and the relationship with the area. Moving to a more comfortable setting, the coordinator and I discuss the most frequent visitors in more in-depth. She told me about staying in touch with local social workers: the elderly, the “core patrons,” had not been able to resume their many activities – raising many complaints. The severing of the relationship, with some, was drastic. With others, through a few calls, educators, social workers, and librarians maintain a personal relationship. The relationship lost in the library evoked sighs and pauses – “Unfortunately, we don’t have an audience.” There is melancholy; emotion drops a stack of books, ready to be handed over to teachers. Collaborations with schools slowly returned: librarians would visit some classes in the following days. During the summer, once the library opened, students “stormed the spaces.” The need for places to study, access to the internet, and homework assistance emerged strongly during online classes and the first summer of the pandemic. Especially for the most disadvantaged families, the librarian pointed out. She was receiving constant calls and messages from those who desired to reserve a place for their children. Some of these have no one at home during the day or need the support of educators.

Some elderly users were still afraid, and libraries could not guarantee sanitized spaces and reading assistants for young patrons. The front-office librarian tells me, however, about the different strategies that are emerging, starting with users and shared passions. Indeed, in several libraries, alternative or complementary projects have also sprung up, such as the various walking groups – in the wake of the rediscovery of green spaces as a refuge from isolation. “There is much desire to meet,” one librarian tells me, recounting her experience: the group consists of about six stable members but has grown recently because of new restrictions. Similarly, spaces near or adjacent to libraries allowed informal meetings or readings for younger people.

So, again, maybe we could have... er, done better, hehe. We did what we could in the sense that I understand that, out of the blue, from one day to the next, to have the schools closed, for example, and the libraries open for two weeks... and I remember very well it was a moment of great perplexity on our part. Then, they also closed the libraries. And... we probably have

to start thinking just in this way here, contemplating more and more scenarios. And this... I say, for example, in view of January, we were rightly told: 'think of two ways to reopen.' Because we know that the Christmas period, with the mid-shift closure, if everything went well... Let's do this if we stay the same, let's do that if we close; and by now, I think you have to... until this situation is resolved, you have to act like this. Now we have six-seven months of experience; we have activated home loans, and we have activated it also with great difficulty because, indeed, every three weeks, there was a different way of working, and so it was really hard for everybody; but for the whole world, so it's not this. And it is missed a lot; every time we reopen after a closure, everyone who comes in [...] 'thank goodness you're open.' Then it's clear you can't go to the shelves yet, and you have to trust us we go and get the books, eh...

For others, the comfort of some new tools at their disposal allowed them to 'experiment' more.

The summer was very difficult [...] As far as I am concerned, [this] library in June, compared to last year, had 17% less loans – and it is not so dramatic, also because we always had half a day here in June. In July, we were already up to -16% [...] because we were very focused just on readers. [...] actually, there is a break from events and other activities, and so we put up a very personalized service. [...] Now we can come to the library, but before, during the first lockdown, we could not access it. [Compared to the lockdown] we have colleagues from the cooperatives who can offer the readings [aloud], so we are a little more equipped to handle this lockdown. Then home lending started. In short, we already have a lot more tools than we had the first time (*library coordinator*)

The emergence of home lending services has been a fascinating phenomenon. Initially, some libraries implemented local services through volunteers or past partnerships. At the Corticella library, for example, the service began in August through the purchase of a bicycle from a Coop supermarket and entrusted to *Legambiente* (both are based in the civic center where the library is located). The library ran the loan system, and *Legambiente* and community service volunteers organized deliveries. Others, such as the Borgo Panigale library, had obtained funding for a new local delivery system. Subsequently, these resources enabled Libraries Institution to contribute to the pioneering project *Consegne Etiche*, an innovative platform born out of a city partnership and focused on creating a sustainable delivery system. Only 9 percent of libraries in Italy provided a home loan or takeaway service. The partnership with *Consegne Etiche* went further: the project helped establish an alternative service to large delivery platforms and compliance with the 'Charter of Fundamental Rights of Digital Work in the Urban Context,' helping to respond to emerging needs but also to redesign the urban landscape.

...the new home lending was in the works as a hypothesis and has found a very important outlet. Before it was just closed, now – being closed in the midst of a lot of other open [e.g., bookstores] ...you have to come in, continue the service in a different way [...] There is also an ethical action...bikes, as a low-impact means, and deliverymen who are guaranteed a fair labor contract. (*coordinator*)

The project, initially designed for the weaker sections of the population, was quickly expanded to the whole population as new lockdowns occurred. As I had the opportunity to see in some suburban parks – significantly rediscovered during the pandemic – the *Consegne Etiche* flyers were thus retouched on the fly, by hand, and distributed throughout the territory.

The succession of Covid-19 containment measures in the following months generated several discontents and opportunities for reflection on planning and governance. One of the main themes was the difference from other institutions. At some stages, some interviewees blamed the fact that under generally improving conditions (between December and February 2020-2021, the first vaccines were distributed), libraries were in the region among the few places closed to the public – while shopping malls and bookstores, for example, were excluded. “This way,” one librarian said, “raises the problem of accessing spaces and resources for specialized needs [such as those of researchers], but also the preclusion to those who do not have the means.” As was said later at a conference, we were slowly recovering from the crisis, but some were left behind. Not everyone had the economic and digital resources to enjoy alternative services; many inequalities were reproduced and exacerbated. Those who had long found public spaces like the library an indispensable place for their daily survival remained all but excluded.

In addition to ethical-political conditions, there was also a manifestation of discredit, of a lack of recognition of an institutional role. Libraries “have never even been mentioned explicitly in the recent DPCMs [Decree of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers],” lamented one librarian. Moreover, “if we restart tomorrow, the culture sector will have to start over on the rubble [...] Before there were problems, but campaigns were made on users, on so-called publics, to go beyond that... Now, much is reset or to be restarted.” For some, the sector itself seemed unable to move adequately:

In the emergency, we did well to close. We took maybe a little bit too long to reopen. We should have used the lockdown months, let's say April and May, to get more organized because the May 18 reopening, I still remember it, we decided in the last week. [...] even now, it would already be time to think about January 9; instead, we are slightly behind, but of course, I mean, we are always there organizing the opening the next day, haha, and so...

Well, I think that with the arrangements that we had activated from the very beginning, that is, since we reopened [libraries should be kept open]... kind of what I also think about cinemas and theaters, that is, in my opinion, it should not have been closed. At these stages here, you can, as they say, count people; that is, you have to decrease the density of attendance. But I give an example: when we reopened, and it was possible to go among the shelves, even if it was subjected to quota... the library was alive, it was safe, because still, I repeat, we had equipped with all the protocols, and you were giving the possibility [...] We had not activated the Internet [...] however, you could study and choose books. In my opinion, it could be done.

As mentioned, the second lockdown in October 2020 was followed by partial lockdowns during the winter and between February and April 2021. After the major reopening in May 2021, there were alternating times of greater or lesser restrictions. The major limiting factors were personal preventive devices, limited use of certain areas, and personal propensity to use collective spaces. For most of Italy's libraries, the scenario flourished again in 2022. In Bologna, the library sector became the "Cultural Welfare Sector," and libraries are once again offering dozens of daily activities. *Patto per la Lettura di Bologna*, celebrating the return of the *BOOM! Crescere nei Libri* festival, is now described as an established "incubator of occasions," generated by an increasingly broad and metropolitan network. However, by the end of the emergency, Italy's libraries had suffered a severe decline in visitors (-3% in 2020, still -5% in 2021). Compared to 2019, the Library Sector recorded 425,698 fewer visitors in 2020 and 382,214 fewer the following year. As pointed out by some experts (Faggiolani 2022), to evaluate the role of libraries in an integrated system of cultural welfare, these data highlight critical issues that should be analyzed in addition to the overcome emergency.

6.2 How to read the crisis? Library identity between rupture and continuity

Critical considerations and limitations were an essential driving force for new discussions within the municipal libraries of Bologna and the entire sector. The following proposal of the National Plan for Recovery and Resilience (PNRR), for example, resurfaced a consideration of the library divided between a 'classical' type and functionality for the development of tourism and the 'creative' economy. See, for example, the Observations of the Italian Library Association, which notes:

The Plan does not mention libraries in the parts dedicated to digital infrastructure, interoperability, digital citizenship, education, research, training, inclusion, and social infrastructure. It only mentions them in Project Line 1.3 TOURISM AND CULTURE 4.0, as treasure troves of cultural heritage to be digitized and collected in a special platform for preservation, access, and reuse by start-ups and innovative enterprises or to be exhibited for tourist attractiveness. (AIB 2021)

In a period of new pressures, political institutions have mainly shown themselves deaf to new demands regarding the role of libraries and other cultural infrastructures as social infrastructures⁵⁶. Where this has not been the case – as in Milan and Bologna – libraries have taken part in new planning agendas that will be interesting to monitor, and which intertwine

⁵⁶ Similar changes can be seen in the Bologna Single Programming Documents between 2020 and 2022, and in the Library Program Plans between 2019 and 2020. The new General Urban Plan of Bologna also includes some libraries as important neighborhood centers.

renewed issues of proximity with strategic investments for the political-economic repositioning of urban centers. From another point of view, the criticisms made by sector associations, librarians, and scholars, even when belated, have primarily acknowledged the “structural fragilities” and limited advocacy capacities among Italian libraries, giving impetus to new reasoning and aspirations. Some of these have progressively emerged through the in-depth studies dedicated to the new Istat data and the changes taking place, or in discussion spaces such as Bibliopride 2020, the AIB Conference ‘Libraries for Digital Welfare,’ the Stelline 2021 and 2022 editions, and the forecasting of new ‘States-General of Libraries’ through which to raise awareness among institutions and the public of the sector’s needs and strategic potential.

Therefore, the following pages elaborate on an initial analysis of the ‘Covid-19 theme’ in public libraries, particularly in Bologna, working on what has been ‘(re) placed in the foreground’ regarding major library themes. The second facet of this topic concerns previsions, the relationship with ‘normality,’ and the shaping of the future based on collective memory.

Interpreting change: acceleration, realization, explicitation

The library experienced an upheaval that, while exceptional, added to a series of ‘critical’ waves: as noted, the discontinuity posed by Covid-19 seems to have focused attention on a series of *issues* already present but emerged with new force and urgency.

No, [the problems] were already in place, and it was already obvious that we were out of time, out of time. We are not a service seen as attracting a contemporary service. No matter what they [the managers] say, ‘ah the libraries turned out to be the most loved service by the citizens’: it’s a free service, it’s a nice thing, anyway, because we talk about books we don’t talk about vaccinations... it’s obvious that they like us, but a small percentage of the population likes us [...] Anyway, yes, it was already happening; the virus only had the effect of putting it in the public eye. ... and not wanting, or not having, not finding the time, to put oneself in front of the data to reflect – and data, numerical data but also narrative data – this is a short-sightedness that we will pay for (*librarian*)

...it is the world from before that has brought us to this situation; therefore, if we want to start again [...], we do not want to return to the world that caused us all this, do we? I wouldn’t want to; I don’t know. I would like it to be a better world and that we take advantage of it to *redesign ourselves*. [...] for example, do we realize that we don’t have to take very fast trains, we don’t have to travel hundreds of kilometers to do a one-hour book meeting, but we can do it online? Did we understand that or not? I already have people saying, ‘well, let’s start seeing each other now,’ and I say, ‘but why? We can each work remotely’ [...] I don’t understand this fight: ‘now let’s start again like before.’ No, one can do it quickly [...] if I have to go out, I lose three hours for a meeting that lasts maybe three-quarters of an hour. We’re [nevertheless] all together... I’ll see you... That’s a stupid example, a minor one, but we understand each other: at a certain point, we have to understand the *lesson* [...] our biggest risk is that everything goes back to the way it was before, doesn’t it? Because what was before caused the present. So [...] it’s clear that social distancing and whatever cannot go on for a lifetime, but in short, neither

we can go back to the... intensity of before. (*president of Libraries Institution*)

Because the point is, just in these days, with Covid, actually, something quite... let's say Covid has really mobilized something *incredible*, some are taking it just in a way... as a great opportunity. So... a possibility, perhaps a formative one. Indeed, to learn, to be grasped on the fly, even concerning a whole series of contradictions or issues that have already reached unbearable limits. (*coordinator*)

When faced with this kind of tension, common to various current phenomena, sociological analysis can observe two main points of view. The first is oriented toward the accelerative model, i.e., the emphasis on the exacerbation of a previous condition of instability. In other words, problems were present but have taken on a *weight*, a *momentum*, that can no longer be ignored. This perspective, supported by prior analysis, is now being placed, inevitably a posteriori, on a wide range of social conditions. During the pandemic, such a view has often been related to the 'never again as before' narrative. In general terms, some actors claim that the problems that emerged were primarily generated by the fragility of structural conditions and life patterns and simply stretched to a breaking point. Il trauma collettivo, secondo questo primo discorso, ha alimentato il desiderio di riprogettazione e modifica del reale quotidiano.

An alternative point of view is that of 'realization': the dramatic moment would allow for a moment of 'enlightenment,' the realization of something new that sets a point of no return. The (ontological) emergence of an entity that was not there before – in this case, an unknown virus – questioned prior knowledge, overturning a point of view and requiring revolutionary adaptation. In this case, humanity's vulnerability against a virus, despite our knowledge, the absence of sure measures of adaptation, and the limitation of modes of coexistence and interdependence that were established, challenged the status quo and demanded new forms of behavior and common discussion. Being faced with the 'discovery' of an unknown element and of our vulnerability, the reaction – equal and opposite – has been the inventive search for solutions capable of taking back our 'capacity,' of re-empowering ourselves, of guaranteeing the 'resilience' of future systems. In the trauma-processing performances, the imaginaries of the war on the virus, the one of the 'new Renaissance' (and its opposite, the 'new Middle Ages') – widely discussed and criticized in their ambivalences – have become central discourses of this kind of paradigm.

Both the ideal-typical forms animate a demand for solid foreshadowing of the future and, although distinct, evoke a response predominantly based on the idea of 'revolutionary rupture,' a total change, a rebirth. To understand what happened, how, and what it could mean, the third key to interpretation is proposed by the concept of *Explication* (explicitation), introduced by Peter Sloterdijk in his 'spherological' reading of human history. This

philosophical elaboration, articulated in three volumes (*Spheres*), arrives at a vision of social reality as *foam* (Sloterdijk 2015), an aggregation that the philosopher, similarly to Latour, does not understand as an intrinsically ‘social’ phenomenon, i.e., endowed with its own nature, but as a process of a configuration between entities (including individuals and their ‘bubbles’ of intimacy) and spheres of meaning (the ‘globes’)⁵⁷. Within this framework, Sloterdijk elaborates an ‘atmosphero-logy’ through a fascinating history of air, its chemical ‘discovery,’ and the atmo-terrorist use of gaseous elements inaugurated with the First World War. Thus, the very idea of discovery as a modern ‘revolution’ is rephrased, putting it into crisis. Therefore, explicitation does not present a ‘middle way’ but emphasizes a radically different reading of the ‘new’ that *emerges* and its connection with what ‘was’ and what ‘could be.’ The concept, developed by Heidegger’s *poiësis*, is close to Latour’s ‘articulation’ and ‘unfolding’ of the collective: explicitation allows certain actors to ‘discover’ through new visibility and signification of latent elements; it is the act of making things *explicit* and rendered to a public.

Some critical aspects remain. Were some issues really *latent*? Or were they already matters of concern? If we apply the explicitation paradigm in a sociological way – as a complex sensitizing concept – we can see various nuances of meaning. In particular, it is fruitful to reason about another proposal of Sloterdijk’s concerning the way *latent* and *explicit* emerge in the public sphere and whether or not they find space in it. Opposition to the explicitation of latency constitutes one example, which presents itself either as a rejection of what is placed in visibility or in the form of refuge in earlier frames of meaning (as immune ‘spheres,’ or ‘panoramas’). In the first case, the opposition may extend to the relevant scientific-disciplinary powers that do the explicating. In the second case, the problem is the inescapability of the effect in the new scenario, with the consequent marginalization of the explicated or its political articulation. This image appears particularly evocative concerning pandemics – in a broad sense – and shows specific potential as a key to interrogating the *before* and *after* of the public library according to the argument of ‘regimes of visibility.’

This movement derives a different reading of the human response, with an overcoming of the ‘revolution’ in favor of re-design as re-modulation (Latour 2011b). The latter involves overcoming the human-object dichotomy and implies a critical reference to modernity, from which an alternative possibility of weaving together what is considered problematic and the ‘new’ can be derived (Latour 1994, 1996). The elements that have *come-into-being* and the existing system of associations – now perdurable – can lead to a new reaffirmation of *matters of concern*.

⁵⁷ Another analogy between Sloterdijk’s philosophy of explicitation and actor-network-theory, according to Latour (2005), is the one between ‘globes’ – discussed in the second volume of *Spheres* – and ‘panoramas’ (*cf.* Ch. 2).

Through this analytical proposal, I present below some examples that emerged in the field: reflections, criticisms, and observations, which are expressed in different languages and attempts to interpret or describe changes. The different narratives offered some of the repertoires I have described, but I believe that the key of explicitation is an excellent point to segment some central themes and possible margins for re-articulation. Starting with the ‘unsolved problems’ and the idea of the ‘crisis of the public library.’ I will focus on the theme of physical space, the digital, and the idea of social infrastructure. This last point will be explored further in the next chapter.

Predictions that look backward

As mentioned, the lockdown periods prompted moments of reflection and fear for the future. During the first months, the nature and future of public spaces like the library came into question: would Covid-19 definitively deprive this institution of meaning? Once the crisis was over, would libraries reopen as before? At that time, I questioned some critical actors from the sector and the Bologna area, precisely discussing the problem of ‘reading’ these doubts and fears. In this regard, one stimulating contribution pointed to the core issue of the relationship between emergency and complexity:

[...] I would say that to address a sharp question [whether libraries will radically change or not], we must try to formulate the question in the right way [...] To arrive at the prefiguration of a model, let’s call it that, which copes with that rapid divergence: *everything is the same as before, nothing will be the same as before*, is an intuitive, impressionistic polarization. We lack elements. You need to have something beyond opinion [...] There is a formidable bias on this, isn’t it? It’s a bias that constrains everything; it’s an opinion. A predictive model would require, first of all, that we put the relevant elements on the table [...] a map, let’s call it so. And then, we try to see, we do some simulations... it’s a complex subject, but by complexity, I mean exactly this.

The answer to the question ‘what is going on?’ raised two other important questions. First, the basis of the reasoning. It was necessary to understand who was leading the discussion and what role was played by the urgency imposed by the emergency. Second, we need to clarify what was happening before and what models and directions were on the table. In other words, according to the interviewee, the public library needed “neither emergency nor impressionistic” thinking to identify extremes and map the issues “because unlike weather patterns, where there is a response [...] in this case, the model takes on a driving force, it is what becomes the *vision* on which future decisions are determined.” On the one hand, the chaotic aspect of the health emergency hampers the exploration of complexity, evokes the need for models that select and simplify, and fuels the critical role of charismatic or prestigious figures (see, for example, the debates opened by very different intellectuals and

professionals, such as Carlo Ginzburg, or Alessandro Barbero – about the impact on libraries – or the television debates centered on famous doctors and epidemiologists).

Going beyond the emergency, right? And touch the deep levels of the institution's identity. That is, to mobilize the constituent core. And then delve into lines of reflection [...] concerning the use of spaces, the necessary rethinking of this complex concept of 'sociality,' of 'socialization.' A delicate game is played there. [...] when we talk about sociality, I believe that we necessarily mobilize issues concerning identity, for example, answering the question 'what is it, what are its distinguishing features,' as when the ancients asked: 'what is this thing?' *'ti esti?'* [...] We need to recover the pieces of that map – fragmentary, uncertain, like all maps – and on that, to start a reflection that goes beyond the impressionism of individual opinions, but that gives us a serious, meditated, and articulate perspective. And based on that, to start the prefiguration of the future...

Approaching complexity through holistic looks and methods that do not overly depend on the selectivity of a model is a key topic. What I find significant for this research, however, is the possibility of relating what this emergence may have 'unfolded' in the previous intricate scenario and how critical reflection can go not only 'beyond' the emergence but also 'from' the emergence. With the right gaze, the 'proliferation of opinions' can manifest the kind of processes described above, and the aspiration for new configurations solicits the problem of a 'post-paradigmatic phase' that has never been resolved ("And so the game is open, isn't it?").

Through different perspectives, this stake emerged in the experience of Bologna libraries. Covid-19 reopened the need to question previous debates, including local ones. There is no concrete aspiration to find a decisive answer, but positions are being revived: sometimes reinforced, sometimes challenged. The president of Libraries Institutions, for example, expressed the need to take up aspects such as the study of potential users, but he believes it will take time, and it will not be a foregone conclusion:

So, if we put forward the idea of getting out of our seats [expanding the audience], of course, this is not the best time since we are all locked in... In my opinion, we will at first go back to being what we basically were. Then it's up to us, perhaps, to be able to take advantage of a good wave and give the service some innovation.

There are no conditions ('we are all locked in'), but the interviewee also emphasizes the effectiveness of old 'pop' strategies and the possibility of exploiting new trends. Then there is another reason, for some: the risk that the emergency will vehemently bring back the 'confusion' on the multiplication of uses. In order to change, expand, and embrace the stimuli offered by the moment of crisis, libraries should experiment with different languages – the president says – but it would be necessary to reach a stable point. For him, for example, Covid-19 remarked the library as a public sphere, a space for building critical thinking.

... In the end, it is like school: you can do it in many ways [...] The essence, however, is always teaching education and training. For us, it is always access to knowledge. I mean, at that point, then, you can try and find a thousand ways and a thousand languages to say 'come.' In fact, the experimentation of languages is another characteristic, isn't it? And of course, the digital has started to be fundamental in this [...] my concern is that by concentrating so much on what is other than the fundamental mission we risk forgetting the fundamental mission [...] everything is fine, all the innovation in the world, and all the attention should be given, just intelligent, to new languages and so on. However, it must always be kept in mind that we have the fundamental function of supporting that piece there: we give people a chance to know, to know, to understand, and to read. *To have a critical judgment...* which, gosh, if it's not essential today, the fundamental mission, I wouldn't know what it is!

Some questioned the topic in different ways. For example, they questioned some of their own positions and reflected on different overlapping evaluations and feelings:

[one fact I] regretted [...] I realized this after the lockdown when we reopened only for lending and return... it's obvious that you finally say, 'oh finally, I'm doing the job of a *'pure librarian'* hehe – I lend books, I give reading recommendations, I catalog, I put the shelves in order, and I do what a librarian would do... now, I don't want to say normal, because maybe normal librarians don't exist hahaha, but a librarian 'like the one I studied in the manual,' that's it... But I used to see people come and say, 'ah, they gave me an online appointment, but I don't know how to check it because I don't have a phone, I don't have the internet at home,' or the student who had to prepare her high school term paper would come and say 'yes the school gave me a laptop, but I don't have a connection at home, how can I do the paper?' '... and they were all answers that we could not give them, at that time, because you could only come in for borrowing and returning, and so I realized that if these services had been structured over the years, if they had been recognized in some way, and not entrusted to the feeling of generosity or [...] the spirit of service, of citizen, of individuals, perhaps they could also be guaranteed at the time when the library went back to *doing the essentials...* because that is the essentials! I am not saying that book lending is not important [...] it is the minimum level of service. But *there are many other things that are essential but are not recognized*, and so it made me think about how to structure certain activities, especially from a system perspective [...] there is a transformation taking place... however, over the years, the service [...] was very fragmented.

The next chapter will deal further with these processes of symbolic demarcation of the library, as it is crucial for the deepening of the idea of social infrastructure. But moving on to some of these aspects, a required field of reflection has been the relationship between the forms of interaction and mediation in the digital sphere and those existing in physical space.

One of the predominant readings in the reasoning about the different phases of the pandemic and the future has been 'the revenge of the physical.' The different facets of the digital, starting with digitized forms of lending and service, were seen as capable of complementing, but not replacing, library attendance. As emphasized by some librarians, the issue is not only about resources but also the full consideration of the role of materiality in social experiences, in the exploration of resources, and the attention to those who – today – remain 'cut off.' Once again, what is interesting is not only an 'impressionistic' aspect, certainly not consistent and sometimes limited by a simplistic distinction between so-called

‘physical’ and ‘virtual’ realities. However, on the one hand, the moments experienced were charged with emotions and challenges, which it is right to respect and value as forms of communication. On the other hand, taking a step further, I would like to emphasize how the library has emerged as “a space to be preserved,” offering “a fundamental and peculiar physical, social and meeting dimension” (Ch. 7) and note how the limitations, in this case, have highlighted the dimension in ways otherwise unnoticed.

...I can say that the *experience we have learned* during this period is of two types which may seem to be in opposition to each other, but they are not. The first is the need to invent [...] to *provide digital services that can be used remotely*, which are not just eBooks to download online, but which are not just transferring the reading group on Skype... Libraries, which in the common imagination are those dusty places full of books that nobody reads, with the librarian who only knows how to say ‘ssh’ when you enter, in reality, [...] you realize that they are places where innovation, paradoxically, may seem strange but can be practiced. So, inventing new services, new ways of delivering [...] On the other hand, as I said, what may seem in opposition is *a revival of the physical*, of the analog, in a way we did not expect. [...] They want to come and go around the shelves, that is, not only in the strong readers, but this is above all in the not very strong readers, let’s say, not those who obviously come here to the library to pick up a book and then bury themselves in reading... but for a good portion of our users the experience of reading is inserted, it is a segment of a chain of meaning, of much broader meanings [...] So, this is something that we have understood and – we already knew it, eh, now it is not that... – but very often these experiences allow you to focus on these situations. So, this is a lesson that has stayed with us a lot. (*library coordinator, Salaborsa*)

I think that sooner or later we will come back, we will come back, *we will come back but enriched*, in the sense that there will be the time that you can also do it online at that point there, but if you can, you really do it in person it’s a whole different thing. (*library coordinator, branch library*)

‘Enriched’ in terms of the ability to articulate activities on different channels and modalities and on the perception and enhancement of certain meeting moments. In fact, the librarian adds:

In the reading group, we always do a round of opinions; then, at the end, when everyone has spoken, there is some discussion. The last time we did it on Meet, we only did the first part, I mean, everyone said their own opinion, and it’s more difficult: you don’t look each other in the eyes, you don’t see each other... you don’t... we have to get back to the contact sooner or later; that’s it.

Here again, a ‘revitalization of the physical’ but, above all, an awareness that relationships may find new forms and new values. Starting with the librarian-user relationship:

...my aspiration is to go back to before, I mean, when the library was full anyway, people came in, they had ten things to do, not just one, [i.e.] to go to the counter and pick up books. [...] And people need, eh. They need so much contact and relationship [...] we did a lot of

assistance, but we also need stimulation. Because, in short, *we read reality in a different way*. How many users have called us or written, compared to those who come daily? No, that's not a statistic we can have [...] For the vitality of the library, I believe that having people around is fundamental... yes. (*librarian*)

An old "interlocutor": the faces of digital

The digital theme can only develop, again, from some data. One aspect of the phenomenon is the support libraries offer against various forms of the digital divide. In a situation of total isolation, this has come back sharply, however, clashing with the structural limitations of the service. The use of digital resources itself is diversified across the country. The reading of digital books, for example, is widespread among 10% of citizens in the North and 6% of those in the South and is more common in the centers of metropolitan areas (11.6%) compared to municipalities with under two thousand inhabitants. In the United States, for example, it is, on average double. Moreover, as mentioned, many Italians experienced digital tools for reading or buying books for the first time during the pandemic (Cepell & AIE 2021). The landscape is further varied among the different media. Concerning newspapers, for instance, more unique users log on to online pages daily than continue to frequent newsstands. In the e-book market, large groups such as Amazon and Kobo are predominant, but a small number of users benefit from private or public alternatives. MediaLibraryOnline, the service that supports the Emilib digital library, offers an extensive catalog to both libraries and schools: during the pandemic, as mentioned, the service recorded a 115% increase in unique users and a 122% increase in e-book lending in the first lockdown alone. In the same period, compared to the previous year, OPAC visits also increased by 122%, views on the Torossa platform by 280%, and loans through the rete Indaco by 235% (Cepell & AIE 2021). Many of these services were little known or exploited in the past. Their promotion in a time of need was important, but even more crucial was the simplification of procedures and more significant disintermediation of access. More direct and more accessible procedures brought in users outside the typical public. Exploitation, however, also involved libraries unevenly. Supported by long experience, important digital collections, and the Emilib portal, Bologna's libraries were among those that responded flexibly to the incredible increase in requests (with peaks of hundreds of registrations per day). However, as quickly emerged, the 'digital' dimension of the service is much more articulated than 'simple' access to resources.

The simplification of specific procedures, the flexibility of contact with users, remote communication with professionals from other services, the need for new content, and the importance of being able to monitor and plan based on various and up-to-date data are some of the most relevant aspects that have 'emerged,' and that question a 'comprehensive digitization.' I also spoke about these dynamics with Giulio Blasi, founder of

MediaLibraryOnline, a leading e-lending platform and commercial provider of the Emilib service. A semiotician and keen observer of the sector, he put the phenomenon in the context of ‘digital transformation,’ a process that, in the crisis, seems to have been only partially processed. “There are many components,” he told me, “that are not fully perceived and processed, let’s say, by the library system as a whole.”

Two first aspects were highlighted by the e-lending platforms themselves, such as MLOL: such an increase and change in service would not have been managed, for example, without the modern support of cloud computing or an integrated support system such as customer relationship management (CRM), which allows communications from various media or social networks to be collected in a single environment. Do libraries question such processes? What role can they play? According to Blasi, the challenge for Italian libraries already lay in their inability to ‘see’ and implement an integrated approach to the ‘four dimensions’ of digital (Blasi 2019). The overlapping of different aspects and processes – content, procedures, communication, and data – had so far created a bias that slowed down the innovation and enhancement of libraries. The availability of digitized or digital content, for instance, has been available for some years (although not homogeneously guaranteed). But “digitization is much more pervasive, and the look-down has shown this clearly.” Libraries still lack the ability to use data to organize and improve services: “They are not, as they say, data-driven.” Moreover, while most libraries already lack websites and social profiles (either they are old or not very up-to-date), the pandemic has made almost all of them discover the incredible ability to interact through these channels, maintain and develop relationships, be ready for situations of need, make accessible opportunities otherwise limited to a few.

But this applies to libraries, but it also applies to the school system. Think, even before the subject of distance learning, which has become a sort of, let’s say, bogeyman, [...] that from one day to the next, hundreds of thousands of teachers have acquired a digital channel with their pupils and their pupils’ families. This is extraordinary, and it’s one that remains and that, let’s say, even if you don’t do a single minute of remote education, it remains [...] which doesn’t mean removing other channels. But this is a system of empowerment that completely overcomes the ideological theme [...] The same reduplication of physical events, or an author coming to make a presentation at Archiginnasio: fantastic, it is a physical, real event or event, and also a place of encounter, of exchange... But, I mean, is this a good reason not to duplicate it in streaming and get it to others as well?

As Blasi recalled, the first major digitization in history did not involve large platforms such as Google, but the preservation of daily repositories between the 1930s and 1950s, due to the real danger of war and for reasons of space and conservation. The relationship between the physical and the digital is much more fluid than it is sometimes experienced, as in the case of publishing products that today are born in almost completely dematerialized

processes. On the other hand, even today, the theme between analog and digital, and between libraries and competing platforms, is built precisely on this fluidity and the integration of the different faces of the phenomenon. For instance,

Is Amazon a digital system? Of course, it is a digital system. But do you think it is digital because it handles digital objects? No, it is digital precisely because it handles physical objects; that is where its maximum efficiency lies. Now Amazon is an extreme example, let's say, of integrated logistics, but that's the point. Let's say, actually, even the transformation... even the box-moving, even the transfer of kilograms of paper, is something that has its own digital dimension that today is not recognized because it is recognized too little and by very few subjects. [...] I don't see it as an ongoing process. Let's say it is still being fought element by element [...] There are libraries that have already done an excellent, let's say, good digital transformation and many others that have not...

Then “there is the issue of the library system within this library system,” i.e., whether and to what extent those working in the sector have the necessary skills for a digital transformation and the interest and critical gaze to interrogate the process actively. Moreover, in this regard, the possible “awareness-raising” and the drives generated by the crisis assume a strategic value. Some interviewees expressed these concerns:

Then when we were closed, we tried in some way, on the tools, to give continuity to the service. And unfortunately, various difficulties emerged. Colleagues with minimal computer skills, who were at home without help from colleagues or me, were able to do very little. (*coordinator, branch library*)

...but especially the other quite significant thing that came out was that of remote working, which obviously we were all catapulted a bit, as I was saying [...] Then I am lucky, I am quite... let's say, even if I am starting to get old, quite smart, I can move around. But many people who work, in fact, did not have a PC at home or they had one per family and did not know how to use it, so actually, you found that most of your employees did not have the skills to manage a transition, certainly rough, unexpected and urgent [...] but I want to continue toward this process, how can I say, and finally invest in young people. Sorry – I do not say we are all old, but I am, I think, one of the youngest, and it is becoming a bit of a problem (*librarian*)

the only thing you have managed to do online now is the reading group and, above all, the readings for children of different age groups. [...] And what I see is that the parent... now the numbers are not very high, even there are the loyalists, it's an appointment now since November they know that on Wednesdays there is a reading and then child and parents together stand in front to see the librarian reading. So...this health emergency has led us *to do... some thinking* anyway. So, we take the best from all experiences, even the bad ones, the ugliest ones (*librarian, branch library*)

According to the ISTAT Census, following the lockdown experience, the digital services that libraries expressed as most strategic and in need of investment are those primarily user-oriented: expansion of online reservation services (29.5%), increase in digital lending (23.6%) and the enhancement of remote consulting services (20.8%), digitization of owned materials

(19.7%). However, they are also followed by the need to develop the digital skills of the staff employed (17.1%). As it emerges in Bologna, integrated digitization is also a necessary strategy for the cohesion of library systems, e.g., through the reduction of marked differences between individual locations:

Salaborsa is a different thing from the neighborhood library. In short, it works differently; there are rationales, there are internal procedures, and there is a system of operation that are inevitably more sophisticated. Cooperation between libraries, for example, is also a strongly digital issue: the ability to bring the quality of Salaborsa to all the libraries in Bologna is an eminently digital issue, in my opinion. Then they are individual differences... it is clear that if I take them individually [...] well, I can find very important differences, which could be reduced through a good digital transformation.

But there are also those who look beyond:

The important thing for me is that ‘neighborhood library’ is too limiting. [For example] we are doing online reading, through Meet platform we send the link. Parents ask us for readings with them and their children; we send the link, and they log in at the appointed time. But one can also ask for the links... from Naples! Why do we call it a neighborhood library when, in fact, the internet allows me to reach the whole world? Maybe there is a child in New York who speaks English, and maybe he is not interested in Italian readings. But what do I know? Why can’t an Italian-American, who lives in New York and, perhaps, until recently, lived in the Pilastro and knows us, ask for a link to read? So, in my opinion, it is very limiting.

Starting with doubts and experiments, the municipal libraries in Bologna also developed ideas and proposals to ‘test themselves’ and develop future services. One example was the renovation of the Ruffilli library: already planned in the months immediately preceding, it was rapidly revised and extended to become the recent LAB in Vicolo Bolognetti. First, it was conceived as a multimedia library, mainly oriented ‘for those working in digital, video games, educational content production, etc.’ It housed, for instance, Europe’s most extensive collection of video games, previously collected at the Cineteca di Bologna. Nevertheless, the direction has been broadened further: as part of the Liquid Lab project, a ‘cultural welfare project’ financed with PON Metro 14-20 funds, the library has been opened to a partnership of Third Sector entities and welcomed a wide range of activities dedicated to ‘digital and new languages.’ The spaces are fluid, composed of ‘hybrid artifacts’ designed for meeting and socializing, and adaptable to different activities. In 2022, Some of the first activities were digital fabrication workshops, video game design, workshops for young people with disabilities, and digital literacy workshops for migrant women.

Another important innovation was the new institutional website and, more generally, the rethinking of communication strategies, an issue felt particularly by some librarians. Some interviewees lamented the lack of social pages for some libraries or of a general institutional

profile. Others emphasized the lack of coordination within the system or with the recently revamped city cultural portal. New strategies, such as the intensification of communication or the Telegram channel founded in the wake of the pandemic (with daily updates), were born with the coordination of a few people, and seemed to require an extensive and trained team. While Salaborsa had an attractive and modern site for a few years, Libraries Institution had a site that some described as ‘horrendous,’ ‘stomach-churning,’ ‘a disaster’ and ‘invisible to users.’ Again, the period and the consultation between the coordinators led to a new platform, which some described as an attempt to “offer a more articulate presentation” than the “event-based” one. As one interviewee told me, the lockdown gave a ‘loud shout out’ about digital and being backward. The site was a way to rearticulate the elements of libraries, to “continue, or return, to storytelling,” looking at great libraries around the world “like the New York Public Library, where websites are now libraries in and of themselves.”

In general, many interviewees expressed the idea of ‘going further’ and experimenting with new ways to support users:

[Digital] was important, and it was growing... but it’s clear that... I mean, twelve and a half times the subscribers we had... it’s terrific stuff. Now the real challenge in the redesign is to fix the right mix between digital and paper. [...] the real challenge will be to build a set of offerings for, how should I say, education on the internet, right? Education to digital research. This is an idea that Ginzburg [who is a member of the scientific council] holds very close to his heart... I have an idea, though. An idea that is important, in my opinion: the digital product must not be a mere reproduction of the paper one, the analog one... I tell you, if you create a virtual museum, in my opinion, when you move the mouse over a painting, which you would otherwise look at in the museum rooms, you must have a series of stimuli, information, and details that you would not have otherwise; that is, you must have a different experience, enhanced if you like, but different. This would be something on which to design the digital, i.e., not just a reproduction at very high resolution, but enrichment [...] It’s not the mere reproduction of Adorno, to say, or Benjamin’s [...] It is an opportunity, in my opinion, to provide more... (*president of Libraries Institution*)

In the meantime, let us try to think not only about providing online services but making sure that they can use them in a conscious way. And so going to intervene in a targeted way, with courses or with phone calls, to explain to someone who does not know how to connect [...] We need analog support [...] and look for a way to convey information in a non-traditional way. Therefore, home lending is welcome, but we need to focus more on consulting; helping readers and people find their way to their own answers in non-conventional ways. For example, I would like a telephone information service or a chat information service. Okay, we had tried to do a telephone information service, but it was active during the summer months [...], and overall, the approach was to give information, for example, on opening times and how to access libraries, which is a bit reductive. In my opinion, it should become an opportunity for *in-depth reference* [...] But as usual, we are struggling a bit. (*librarian*)

[Digital] has been, for Salaborsa, a very useful training ground in this regard. Here, the idea that in a lockdown, you organize the reading group on Skype is sad, [...] just as the eBook is not a physical scanned book, it is another reading experience. Then, we have to come up with something new. Not because we expect a new lockdown or a new pandemic but because more and more users need to be enabled to use the library’s cultural services remotely. I remember

ten years ago, when the catalog started to come out, and young people were digital natives, so used to finding resources and content on the web. When they consulted the library catalog, they expected that at the end of the search there would be the book, or at least the text, or the scan... and that's not a joke. They actually expected it to be there. Because when you search for information on the web, whether it is a Wikipedia entry or another site, you find the content; you don't find an empty indication, the framework of a presence. Here, in this sense, we have a lot of work to do. The lockdown experience will certainly serve as a stimulus (*library coordinator*)

As pointed out, for example, by the Director of the Department of Culture, Sport, and City Promotion, data analysis, and dissemination will be important in the coming period. Among Bologna's plans to respond to the 'hot topic' is the idea of creating a 'data analysis observatory.' The data will make it possible to understand 'what happened' but also to reason about future developments. According to one manager, the stabilization of digital lending – which is no longer growing massively – should also be repositioned within trends to be understood and valorized: “we are always talking about resources that are free for users and are, therefore, as it were, always available. The activity of the users is omnipresent, depending on its need [...] the logic ‘I must be there and be able to make the widest range of resources available’ is the one that should guide us. [...] Meanwhile, you have used it, you have experienced it.” As Blasi clarified, platforms like MLOL have “many data records, but not the personal data of users,” which are primarily collected and analyzed by individual libraries. Therefore, there is an awareness that we can and should return to more systematic analyses – but with an eye on specific values. Indeed, the public library can contribute to protecting the rights of all, not only through free resources and support for literacy forms.⁵⁸

Some organizations react to the status quo, and they do well to do so because there are *issues that are extra-efficiency*, for example, job protection and many other factors. Efficiency is not the only criterion for ordering the library; there are many others. So, let's say the optimistic part is that there is nothing wrong. [Digital transformation] has to be dealt with as sensibly as possible, in a non-extremist way [...]

With these words, Blasi brings an essential topic to the fore. Another one – evoked, for example, during the recent editions of the Stelline Conference (e.g., Vittari & Uggeri 2022) – is the positioning of *public* libraries in relation to Open Access and copyright, the use of private services for communication, or the issue of personal data usage. Recalling Shoshana Zuboff and the theme of surveillance, the MLOL founder suggests this further insight:

We have a lot of data, quite an impressive volume [...] it is a severe issue, and in the library field, at least in Italy, there has always been an attempt, so far successful, to keep out of the

⁵⁸ However, it is worth noting that in pandemic only 6% of libraries reported to Istat that they supported users' Information Literacy through tutorials and courses.

way, totally out of the way, of all predatory forms of data management. However, from this point of view, [the scenario] has the advantage of providing absolute respect for privacy regulations [...] There is a ‘federal’ system in which each library manages its own little silo of data, and in some ways, this too is a value that I think is worth maintaining. For example, in the United States, particularly at this time, they destroy data because they are terrified [...] Libraries do well, indeed very well, to evaluate this topic of rationalization on the basis of certain values, certain principles, certain modes of organization which are independent.

In this perspective, in a scenario that at first may appear merely ‘technical’ and ‘technological,’ the critical dimension of thirdness re-emerges. The digital has not only shown – similarly to regulations and viruses – the ‘diffuse agency’ between people and things but has also recalled the role that the library is trying to define concerning intermediation and ethical access to information and knowledge.

6.3 Governance redesign: what processes for a “new” library?

In 2020, the Bologna libraries began to address the possibilities and uncertainties that will shape their role in the near future, reflecting how the crisis pushed the transformations already occurring in Italian libraries. In addition to the need for redesign and predictions, Bologna witnesses the dissolution of Libraries Institutions. Framed as part of a pre-pandemic policy of simplification and supported by the need for reorganization outlined by the crisis, the decision opened an organizational reconfiguration aimed at transferring the structure of the library network back into the administration. According to the Councilor for Culture and the current President of Institutions, the transformation would guarantee continuity and minimize the change, possibly preserving the Board of Directors. However, in May 2020, the announcement seemed unexpected, and librarians were invited to join a participatory process, ideally extended to citizens, and aimed at co-constructing the new form of Bologna Libraries. This attempt at cooperation, seemingly consolidated in Bologna, might lead to many directions and gain significance due to its concomitance with the Covid-19 pandemic, the conclusion of a second-term electoral mandate, and the term of the current board of directors. Thus, what format this process would have taken and what library it would have produced following the emergency phase became relevant objects of study.

I initially learned of the dissolution through the press and, shortly after, through some key players: the president, nearing the end of his term, and the director, who had just retired. The emergence of an in-house process to support the reorganization, on the other hand, emerged with surprise during some later interviews: “Now there will be a participatory path...” a manager told me during a call, “I talked about this yesterday during the interview...,” a librarian recounted, “I don’t know if you know, but now there was the dissolution, and we

did interviews in pairs,” another interviewee told me. It was a more than interesting occasion: sure, a new change worried me in the face of the difficulties, but it aroused my incredible curiosity, and I decided to look into it. First, the process confirmed that my questions seemed appropriate and of interest to those trying to identify a valid model of governance. Moreover, the process brought out the possibility of observing in action precisely what questions and answers were emerging from this ‘collective reflection.’ Would the process have shown a political direction interested in simplifying the transition? Or, as it transpired from the librarians, would it have opened up a space for further exploration of some pre-pandemic issues? Also, would it have expressed the extent to which Covid-19 challenges played a role? Observing a process that emerged within the field and confronting it with my own gaze was beyond stimulating, all the more so in the face of the personal and general difficulties that arose in those following months.

Retrospection and representations of change

For many interviewees, the starting point was the very origin of the Libraries Institution, to recall its roots, reasons, and progress. From the accounts, varying in detail and evaluation, a rather cross-cutting repertoire emerged centered on the idea of “lights and shadows.” This key account, from a protagonist of the period, brings together the elements that I have identified as central:

So, my point of view is certainly more positive than negative, that is, the lights prevail, even if everyone is surprised when I say it [...] Well, then, perhaps, the worst thing, the most negative fact, was that it was formally established at the end of the term of the mayor Cofferati, and it was strongly wanted by councilor Angelo Guglielmi. [...] So, the first element: we started from a situation in which in Bologna there were already important libraries, well supported also by the administration, including Salaborsa [...] It was already there, and it was certainly the most important multimedia library or, in any case, of general information in Italy. In short, it was a very avant-garde project. [...] Then there were the neighborhood libraries, which at that time would have seen an institutional change; that is, until then, they were managed directly by the city districts [...], and there was in mind to change the mandates assigned to the districts. And among other things, the libraries, there was absolutely the intention to bring them back directly under the City Council’s Department of Culture, [...]. Certainly, the neighborhood libraries were – as locations, as furnishings, as assets – very different: some quite recent locations, beautiful and very respectable [...] Others actually set up in buildings... that were absolutely not meant to be a library, so adapted, and so on. In short, despite all these doubts [...] Guglielmi, with his signature manner [started the process], but this happened at the end of Cofferati’s term [...] There was no second term [...], and so the process remained in place... but no longer so much supported by the city administration. At that point, however, it is incredible to say, perhaps because of director Bellettini, who, despite his point of view, took it very seriously: ‘it’s been reformed, now let’s roll up our sleeves and let’s work on it,’ and at that point, librarians believed in it and said ‘let’s see if we can find all the things we can put together,’ and then from there come the next lights, that is, all the things we were able to put together by working together [...] In my opinion, the city administration didn’t believe in it so much anymore, I mean, I’m not saying that they cut the taps – certainly, in the economic crises, precisely from 2008 onwards, of course, that also obviously negatively affected the

development of the institution, because the budgets were progressively cut by 30 percent, so another 30 percent on a cut that had already been there... I mean, in short, they were really complicated years. [...] Certainly, more than anything else, funding to compensate for retirements has grown unhealthily for its body [...] compensating with more hours of service offered by cooperatives. And so, it's not that the growth in the budget has necessarily corresponded to new projects that we've funded. I mean, except for the ones I was telling you about, which were actually funded by the Region. The budget, that is, the money used directly by the municipality, has always, actually, largely covered this kind of expense, which is a very, very significant portion of the budget.

The interview also delved into the many difficulties and frictions during the collaboration between diverse librarians and branches. The account briefly echoes what was discussed in Ch. 5. The Institution was born in 2008 as part of a new planning policy, which aimed to centralize some procedures for the renewal of the 'system' as a whole and the enhancement of a new cultural and economic landscape. Thus, the first issue is the political and economic circumstance, which was realized not through a simple 'incorporation' into the department but through creating a new hybrid body. The condition and role of neighborhood branches – placed in the middle of two opposing trends – drew the attention of the library system, and the new role of central facilities, particularly the new Salaborsa, offered an opportunity. The second central theme is the driving role offered by the institution, which through new relationships between branches, has introduced significant innovations in Bologna and enhanced the ability of librarians to work in a coordinated way. The 'fracture' between political direction and co-participation is then the third theme: on the one hand, the creation of the Institution was a "top-down" proposal, surrounded by some doubts; on the other hand, in the time of difficulty, the role of librarians seems to have been decisive. In both cases, however, the availability of funding (municipal investment first, regional intervention later) was decisive for innovation – another issue, as I will discuss, that has returned decisively. In the following years, Libraries Institution – reflecting general trends in public policies – revealed limits concerning outsourcing, public spending, and the development of precarious jobs at the expense of the system. Hence, let us consider some of these aspects, starting with what the institution accomplished from the librarians' perspective.

So... the Libraries Institution was born for a whole series of reasons. When the Libraries Institution was born, other institutions were also born in the administrative landscape, let's say, from the Municipality of Bologna: museums institution, later the institution for social inclusion, the education institution [...] Let's say that historically, then, the Archiginnasio has been there since the 16th century and therefore it has its own identity, its own recognizability. Then in the late 1990s-2001, the Salaborsa opened: a big project of revitalization of library services, those of public reading services. So, you create these two poles, these two institutions, that begin to talk to each other, and from this dialogue, the neighborhood libraries remained outside [...] To make a homogeneous service [...], it was necessary that these realities talked to each other, and so we tried to put them together. It could have been done by putting everything under a department or a system, a sector, let's say so, of libraries. It was not done

because then the Institution allowed advantages in terms of autonomy; it could also allow activating forms of funding access to sponsorship etc., that could potentially be very interesting. (*library coordinator*)

One of the main governance instruments introduced by the Institution was the Board of Directors, appointed by the mayor directly and composed of professionals and intellectuals who express scientific direction and approve the director's program plan and budget.

Since the institution has a board of directors, I was asked first to join the administration and then to join as president. Of course, strictly on a free basis. Since then, I have learned a lot. The board of directors and the president do not have [...] power to manage personnel, determine timetables, etc., because they are basically between the councilor for culture, [...] and underneath there is a director who is the one who makes the operational decisions [...], so the board member acts a little bit as a scientific committee more than anything else, gives directions, guidelines and so on. (*president of Libraries Institution*)

Over the years, the Council has been composed of academics, writers, and consultants for library, architecture, and cultural services planning: Gianmario Anselmi, Ugo Berti, Marco Gaiani, Romano Montroni, Luciano Vandelli, Antonella Agnoli, Fabrizia Benedetti, Davide Conte, Siriana Suprani, Daniele Donati, Carlo Ginzburg, and Our guide Maria Lorusso. During the institutional transformation phase, some leaders expressed the hypothesis of the suppression of this body as a possible effect of the decision-making process. Revised in its functions, the Council was replaced by a similar Scientific Committee.

The new relationship between 'central' and branch libraries was decisive and characterized by "lights and shadows, or at least negative aspects and positive aspects." Among the former, for example,

the fear that size causes Salaborsa to have a... rather than a predominance, a dominance over smaller realities. In terms of general attention, but then, being public libraries, also in terms of attention from decision-makers also, so... that is, Salaborsa is big, and it costs a lot of money. So, the fear is that, actually, in a situation of scarcity of resources, this is going to impoverish smaller realities. (*librarian*)

On the one hand, I discussed some broader dynamics encouraged by such a centrality. In addition, the hiring freeze and modernization difficulties have affected how the branch libraries work. On the other hand, as some point out, budgets have shown widespread attention in recent years. Significant innovations and a new visual identity helped strengthen and raise awareness of the branch libraries. In particular, the 'lights' include the strategic role of Salaborsa and Salaborsa Ragazzi in supporting complex processes and strategic partnerships.

Salaborsa makes it so that it can then be a driving force or support for a whole range of activities that smaller libraries could never do. I'll give just two examples – two big ones, in the sense of very important and very beloved – services in our library system, which have then expanded to the metropolitan city as well, so to the whole province: they are circulating loan, that is, the possibility that users have to ask in their own reference library for a book that exists in another library and have it delivered to them in a certain time and free of charge. Let's say the 2.0 or 3.0 version of the old interlibrary loan, which is instead something much more bureaucratic and much more cumbersome, and often even chargeable. [...] from the point of view of space, logistics, and personnel Salaborsa had the ability to run it even at a loss [...] to the benefit of everyone else. The service was highly appreciated by users from other libraries as well. By now, it is something that libraries can no longer do without. Another example is the digital lending platform, Emilib digital lending. And that was an experiment strongly project an experiment strongly wanted by Salaborsa because we lacked, lacked on the national territory indeed, because I remember that we participated precisely in the first pilot experiments of a platform that would allow the lending of e-books by not purchasing from commercial platforms [...] Salaborsa was able to support with its own strength the birth of this service which then now has also become almost a panorama, that is, it is no longer even an innovative project. (*librarian*)

Salaborsa Ragazzi helps a lot of the libraries in the area in managing and setting up services for kids. Because here we have a third of the library, just as spaces, designated for children. [...] How should I say, very often, Salaborsa Ragazzi acts almost as a catalog for the libraries in the territory [...] For example, there is this program, actually, a national one, which is called *Nati per Leggere*, that promotes reading; so, it has as its goal the promotion of reading aloud in families from 0 to 6 years old. This is a project that we have been doing for ten or fifteen years together; it means we agree on all the actions of joining the program, and it means we design the actions together. I give examples: we did the training for volunteers, and we did it to all the libraries, and we did it all together. The relationship with pediatricians, with Community Pediatrics, we manage it together: we in Salaborsa Ragazzi do a kind of coordination, but it is really the coordination of actions that are then produced in the various territories. Once a month, we get together and discuss the latest publishing releases [...], and we try to grow, and we also do it together with the pedagogists of the education area and also with the da educators who work in the Children and Parents Centers. So, it's a kind of a reading group or self-education group around books (*coordinator, Salaborsa Ragazzi*)

Circulating loans, the single library card, and coordination capacity are some of the most cited elements regarding the institution's impact on the current strengths of the library sector. "It was certainly not about leveling down," says one respondent, who describes the current scene as "a systemic work." Indeed, some transitions affected specific relations that individual branches had sedimented in their own areas.

The first ones were the most challenging: I remember the fact that just getting to establish a single card for users was a kind of psychodrama for the librarians because the card is perhaps a trifle, not really for some [...] then it was quite complicated also because the card meant sharing the rules, because of course one library allowed a forty-five-day loan, another twenty days, another fifteen days, another thirty days [...] And from there, in sum, many other things through, we definitely managed to improve. (*librarian*)

... a strong focus on building an identity of the libraries, that is, to create a cohesive system of fifteen sites – being able to make everybody feel part of the same system is a job that is not taken for granted. No. What we have used are the classic tricks, let's say: the logo, the cross-cutting initiatives, and then somehow we succeeded a little bit [...] If this extended, I would

say... even the connection with the university, it's not that it has been successful. I mean, yes, in the sense that we obviously work together. Thirty-eight percent of our frequenters are university students. But the university, for this reason, used to guarantee us quite a large annual amount; they would no longer want to recognize this contribution, and that's why I say, 'well, you could have done better' [...] and of course with the schools. I think learning to read is a task not only for schools; libraries have to give a strong hand on this [...] I mean, of course, [reading] with a critical gaze [...] And this, I think, is another important thing for the identity. I mean, the image is a tool for identity. (*president of Libraries Institution*)

...the transition from the districts [*quartieri*] was, in my opinion, very desired on our part because there was a lack of coordination ... we understood even on our own that everyone was doing ... what they could and what their neighborhood said they were doing so the idea of coordination and a system was, in my opinion, a coveted goal [...] There we lost something because not all libraries were able to keep close contact with the neighborhood. Let's go back to [...] the territory: for example, Scandellara did not maintain these great contacts with the quartier offices and, thus, with the territory. So, there we lost something. (*librarian*)

At some point, as mentioned, the most problematic aspects emerged. One of the most relevant to current discussions is precisely that of the outsourcing of services: the composition of the staff over time has progressively gone against municipal employees, and some offices, today, even register half, or all, of external parties, "with very different characteristics," someone complains. In this regard, some new directions began to be foreshadowed.

One of the issues to actually think about, and understand if there were these savings that were expected, is that of outsourcing [...] Turnover was blocked, so you couldn't actually activate competitions for new employees, a little bit for a question of cost savings, but actually now at 10-15 years you should do an analysis [...] however you should then do it in a qualitative way, because indeed [...] the impact, let's say sociological or social that you give in an area, and this impact you actually do it for the most part with... through the relationship, and so you have to make sure that, for the relationship, it means to train people, to make them grow, you have to make sure that they are present because, actually, they are the agents of change, let's say possibly for a slightly more meaningful possibility of action, that can't be people who pass, go, don't... and change a little too often.... (*coordinator*)

...It was done in a way... that is, the idea was great, but the legs were not there. For me, there was no structure to support this change; we started a little bit without having the structure [...] The goal is still far, in my opinion, but we made steps forward. (*librarian*)

Actually, unlike my colleagues, I have not experienced this double transition neighborhoods-institution and the future sector: that will be its form. [...] Since I immediately set the goal, partly thanks to my coordinator, as this branch was born, to always think in a... not *systemic* perspective, but still in a coordinated perspective among all the neighborhood libraries [...] Everything lets you see that the institution had in no way, only slightly, changed the previous approach to that of neighborhood libraries: 'I do what I like,' very brutally. [...] This is my biggest fear; I don't know if the change to another conformation, to another reality, will bring an improvement in this sense. I hope so. [...] my fear is that it changes the name, and then the problems remain the same so... but there is a lack of staff because, in fact, the administrative staff, the one that follows the digital services, the one that follows the communication – very important – the one that follows the maintenance is just hard; and you

can't manage ten libraries, plus Salaborsa, plus Archiginnasio, plus the specialized ones [...] there are not the resources to run it that way [...] What I would like to carry with me is precisely this attempt, that was still ongoing, to coordinate as much as possible our activities. (*librarian*)

With the announcement of the institution's dissolution, a new phase of reflecting on the past and foreshadowing a new course began. For some, like the previous director, the decision came as a surprise: "I learned about it on May 4 [...] We had not yet reopened the libraries, and there was this news that really happened a little, not a little, completely unexpected." The explanation that was given by the mayor indicated the opportunity for administrative simplification. For example, as explained by some interviewees, some of the early benefits offered by the institution had been gradually assimilated by the public administration. The former director herself acknowledges a tendency: "Of course, having participated in all the previous years in the life of the institution, I had understood very well that the time had come when further changes needed to be made [...] In the end, this blessed institution did not give birth to many real big projects in which to invest both from an intellectual and economic point of view."

I also talked about this with some of the branch librarians. Some of them recalled their "doubts about the institution" and now express greater "confidence in the new path," while others appeared interested in taking a step toward "the desired integration" but feared it might turn out to be an "empty" process. As mentioned, I find the centrality of 'process' and 'participation' particularly informative to the interests of this work. Again, the accounts show some of the roots of the topic, which has to do with 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' dynamics and, more generally, with the critical role of relationships in the 'articulation' of Bologna public libraries:

So Guglielmi [...] intellectual linked to Group 63... interesting thing because Group 63 had as a point of reference a professor of aesthetics at the University of Bologna, Luciano Anceschi, whose archive was donated to the Archiginnasio - that is influential, in my opinion, to understand, let's say so, Guglielmi's commitment regarding Bologna, the libraries of Bologna. [...] Guglielmi lived in Rome, and therefore he knew the very positive experience of the Libraries Institution of the City of Rome, which, let's say, was born in the years of mayors Rutelli and Veltroni [...] under the guidance of a very important councilor for Culture, the all-round intellectual Gianni Borgna. And in fact, Guglielmi, I was there, called Roman councilor Gianni Borgna to Bologna for a meeting, to talk with us and ponder together on applying this model to Bologna as well. And Gianni Borgna said something actually fundamental, namely that in Rome they had started from such a "degraded" situation of municipal libraries that it was the librarians who had asked to, let's say, give life to this form of management [...] So he told us: 'be careful,' let's say, a new form of management imposed from above, from outside, and not stimulated directly by a strategy or planning, by a project made by the librarians... who knows if it will find the desired success? [...] Again, in my opinion, it was the librarians who then slowly, again, with the spirit of library cooperation that somewhat harbors the spirit of the [Emilia-Romagna] region, immediately took the next steps. (*former director*)

[An exceptional thing] coming out at the end of the term, huh, the dissolution of an institution, even if you're talking about an in-house institution, right? [...] for a whole series of issues, even just to agree [*concertare*]... this word that has also come back to the forefront, forcefully, which was... it seemed like a word of the 1970s or... the word '*concertazione*.' Now, you want it for everything, but including the security conditions that we have [the Covid-19] allows us to refine and see, and especially create from scratch, because to assembly it has meant, again, doing a series of consultations with the various social realities, the social actors around, the various types of workers as well. (*coordinator*)

Self-awareness, practices, and skills (the 'library ethnography')

May 2020 thus marked the beginning of this new journey and after the suspension of the Council and the need for an ad-interim director, the 'management' passed to pivotal figures, counterbalancing the responsibilities of the existing structure with the valorization of established staff in coordinating positions. The management of the libraries was entrusted to the director of the city's Department of Culture, Sports, and City Promotion, who has a broad sphere of competence, assisted by the three intermediate structure managers: the head of Archiginnasio, the head of Salaborsa, and the head of the branch libraries. Interviewees described the ad-interim director as a figure with an "innovative and broad expertise" who sees libraries as part of a "cultural welfare" and adds a "personal merit" to a "set of external causes," such as having to act quickly because of the precariousness of the new pandemic phase.

I met the ad-interim director a few months later at the municipal palace. After climbing the various labyrinthine spaces of the Palazzo d'Accursio I was welcomed into the historical office with enough warmth and interest to counter the coldness of the anti-Covid measures that kept us at a distance. He was quick to introduce his point of view, starting from his career and experience: he introduced himself as a management technician who has progressively found interest in the area of public culture by applying his own 'organizational soul' (not meaning economic efficiency, he stressed). Satisfaction and pride emerged from his account, but not personalism: he emphasized the importance of 'learning from others' and referring to people who 'know how to do,' including knowing how to make 'strategic choices'-such as selecting partners for the internal discussion and design track. The director clarified that the "transformation window" was not "political," that is, that it was a process aimed at the institution and intended to overcome "whatever color" would emerge from the subsequent administration. On the other hand, Councilor for Culture Matteo Lepore – who would eventually be mayor – also suggested addressing the discontinuity as an opportunity for revitalization.

The process, I was told, started from two ideas: first, the promotion of specific the capacity of each branch; second, the impression that Bologna, although a "national

excellence,” required a renewal that goes beyond “the inertia of the actions of individuals” – an expression echoed by several interviews. Three phases were identified. The first, concluded by the fall of 2020, was a preliminary phase of organizational rearrangement: the division between ‘specialized and archive libraries’ and ‘public reading libraries’ (integrating Salaborsa and ‘district libraries’). The second phase concerned internal research and a training program, starting with the involvement of librarians through questionnaires and interviews. The third phase relates to the enhancement of services through a new public competition, the identification of new venues and services, and the improvement of existing services. Two examples were the birth of Casa Gialla at the Pilastro and the Salaborsa LAB “Ruffilli” library.⁵⁹ This phase also involved the Foundation for Urban Innovation and experts in the field, such as Antonella Agnoli, focusing on the idea of a participatory library.

In the following pages, I dwell on the second moment, as it mobilized aspects that can be traced back to the theme of the explication and re-articulation of internal relations in the change-oriented library. The process of ‘listening’ for the reorganization of governance constituted internal research, an “*ethnographic and maieutic path*” entrusted to the Kilowatt group, an example of a hybrid reality active in today’s processes of co-design of urban space (Albano, Mela, and Saporito 2020), based at the regenerated Greenhouses of Giardini Margherita (*Serre dei Giardini Margherita*).

The first phase, termed “library ethnography,” was launched in the summer of 2020, with a questionnaire being sent to all librarians and achieving a comprehensive response (about 70 percent). According to some respondents, the emerging topics were somehow “already known,” but the “soft mode” in which the issues and opinions were exposed, in an unprecedented opportunity for discussion, made all the difference. The first phase ended with paired interviews, composed across hierarchies, and bringing together colleagues who were also far apart in organizational structure or who had never met before, enriching the exchange. As one interviewee said, the time appeared suitable to address ‘old’ issues that were “no longer sustainable.”

Tell them and see whether to come up with solutions or others. Imagine something different. [...] our scission [the dissolution] actually promoted this path certainly urged by some gaps, from which emerges, let’s say not that emerges from macroscopic evidence,

⁵⁹ The latter emerged in vicolo Bolognetti, described as a “very rich context” on the cultural level, “not simple” but to be enhanced, trusting young people who express sensitivity to the “social.” Indeed, it was a reference to the area around the Social Municipality Lâbas and to the fact that the Ruffilli library had been given under partial management to the social center. The area, adjacent to some University departments, other cultural services, and centers of tourist attraction has long been a core part of the historic center, presenting tensions between students and residents, and between different lifestyles

actually, for example, the issue of digital. (employee)

Some specific contexts and passages constitute pregnant moments for this kind of remodeling, helping to rearticulate the set of relationships that make up a library. One of these, for example, was the presentation offered during the last Stellite Library Conference, in Milan. On the first day, a session was devoted to the relationship between libraries and urban regeneration: two presentations discussed launching a new strategic plan for libraries in Milan and redesigning governance in Bologna. Through such events and sites, the public library of Bologna not only recalls similarities and differences with other cities (such as Milan) but also repositions itself as a significant player in the global field of cultural welfare and culturally based urban regeneration. The new library director took the floor, moving from the explicit reference to the previous speech on the case of Milan. She highlights two common themes: first, the keyword '*self-awareness*,' expressing the idea of transformation starting "from ourselves"; second, the desire to change "together with others." However, she immediately makes it clear that the new Sector is doing it in a "Bolognese way," emphasizing elements of continuity and substantial differences. The main one is the co-designing of the internal process and the search for a new strategy instead of coordinating 'only' the themes and interests that emerged in other urban policies. The 'Bolognese way' would express the "character" of a "land of cooperation," attentive to the Third sector to the principle of horizontal subsidiarity. The idea of acting through a vast and varied network, she recalls, is present in the Municipality's Statute and the Three-Year Plan for Libraries, but it has been rediscovered by reflecting on the role of spaces during the lockdown. The theme of co-design is indicated by the director precisely in reference to the "ethnographic and maieutic path" realized with Kilowatt, which, he says, "holds our hands." Collective storytelling is an integral part of this public restitution, right from the presentation: "we are seventeen libraries... and we are spread all over the territory." However, co-design, according to the director, consists not only of the partnership but of the vital idea of self-awareness: the "internal" search for skills and energies for the path of change, questioning the potential of the actors within the institution, of the past experiences, and investing in a new collective design. One of the first landing points is "Salaborsa Mondays," a recurrent meeting during closing time. On Monday morning, all colleagues meet in plenary, in the presence or remotely, to share visions and experiences, to continue the broad "path of transformation of libraries, which is also of the city."⁶⁰ The director pointed out that the transition came as a

⁶⁰ I would like to emphasize the space-time of these meetings: Salaborsa, with its central role but opened to cooperation, and the closing time, a moment that was 'rediscovered' during the pandemic. Several librarians expressed, for example, the idea of delving into 'behind-the-scenes' tasks, or the

new election mandate approached and was accompanied by new tragedies.⁶¹ Therefore, the institutional change needs to be a “meaningful and not just significant” transition.

As mentioned, the internal research path recalled questionnaires full of open-ended questions, including the use of images and bibliographical references. In some moments of discussion with the organizers and some participants, I had the opportunity to deepen this approach. The starting idea was to “deepen and seize a moment of open attention” and carry out a project of organizational and urban regeneration, as the course sought to start from an “exercise of imagination” to arrive at an exploration of the role of the library system in the context of a cultural sector impact assessment. Kilowatt’s team sought to proceed with an approach described as ‘constructivist,’ designed to work on the “*forma mentis*” of librarians, avoid “sociodemographic concepts and categories,” and favor exploration in thematic frames, similar to what was done in my study. Ethnography was, in the voice of its organizers, an “invitation to observe oneself,” to reason about the meaning of one’s profession by experiencing on oneself “the gaze of Perec.”⁶²

Reflections on ‘library agency’ (the ‘maieutic path’)

The outcome of the library ethnography was summarized mainly as a “great demand for training” (especially on relational skills) and intergenerational reflection; aspects confirmed during my interviews. Such training referred to specialized needs of the profession, but also foreign language proficiency and “transversal” skills, impotent for more extensive support to the population and specific groups. According to the researchers at Kilowatt, the internal process, similarly to what I have mentioned, brought out the idea of transforming the widespread “informal doing,” based on the skills and projects of individual individuals, into a more structured form. However, they make it clear that the formalization of training courses cannot be “excessive” and “standard”: librarians emphasized the potential of collaborative learning rather than new structured courses. Undoubtedly, many of my interviewees expressed the need for formal, even specialized, courses. Some wish to improve skills acquired partially or during nonlinear career paths (e.g., librarians requiring archival courses). However, the theme of mutual acquaintance and cross-fertilization within the

possibility of “carving out a space for reflection,” returning to “aspects left behind.”

⁶¹ Pandemic, but also war: a cross-cutting theme of this and other conferences, which moved the opinions and emotions of librarians, generating official announcements but also personal appeals. Further dialogue and reflection on the possible non-neutrality of libraries.

⁶² The reference is to the ethno-anthropological approach underlying *Tentative d’épuisement d’un lieu parisien* (Perce 1975). The image offered by Kilowatt also finds correspondence in Vivarelli (2014), who proposes a reference to the French writer as a representation of a possible library phenomenology. I think the reference may bring out the curiosity and narrative disposition of many Italian librarians and offer an interesting possibility for self-ethnography.

organization is an interesting dimension present in some librarians' accounts (e.g., the idea of finding out who is already involved in specific projects). Individual skills and projects are often seen as a source of stimulation, and a network that can leverage them is perceived as necessary and valuable.

...Here, unfortunately, we are linked to another very big issue, which is that of personnel [...] libraries were seen as a place to put people who couldn't find any other placement. I say this without fear; there were 'finished-perfect' librarians but also a whole range of people who were learning there. So, to be able to overcome with training and with teamwork ... often, over time, these limitations of both personnel, quantity, and skills, was quite a gamble. It has not always been successful. (*library coordinator, branch library*)

because by now even libraries, to be sincere, have found themselves in a... they are also the mirror of the times with respect to the inequality of service conditions, of working conditions, that there are within the same institution and.... obviously that you find yourself in a way... The more people are trained and competent, young, bright ... and the more are those who instead have more disadvantaged working conditions [...] it has been a process that I think has involved all municipal administrations. (*coordinator*)

...Yesterday, I was asked how to cultivate talents.... Eh! I more trivially say, 'to take the best from each of us,' you have to have time to cultivate talents. If I am always behind because there are only a few of us and I have to dust the books ... I don't have time to look up and reflect, as we were saying before, to do that because there are needs. So, employees, and training, skills, are critical, as much as communication. (*library coordinator, branch library*)

The second stage of the process, the so-called '*maieutic path*,' thus arose as a response to the need for 'collaborative learning' and questioning the profession. The first step was a 'library maieutic walk,' i.e., urban walks in pairs (note, again, the reminder to occasions and spaces 'emerged' in the pandemic), in which informal exchanges/interviews were carried out with some individuals with roles of responsibility. Subsequently, the emergence of broader moments of confrontation, such as Sala Borsa Mondays, allowed for the start of a training process focused on 'project occasions' and exchange, favoring experiences over opinions. Consistent with my findings, one discussed topic was the cultural/social dichotomy.

Concluding on this phase, I believe that the emergence of the 'maieutic' lever (referring to Danilo Dolci) constitutes a fascinating element for this chapter and the topic of explicitation (*cf.* 6.2). According to Kilowatt members, the idea of "bringing out what was there" was an instrument of co-design, moving from what Latour calls the "zero moment" or "actors' narrative potential," that is, to expand people's agency from a reflection on their potential. This perspective seems consistent with the proposal of this paper, and I think it is fruitful to expand the role of explicitation as a possibility for an 'organizational' re-articulation that interrogates the agency of the library as an actor-network. As mentioned, from the idea of explicitation as the emergence of latency, we can observe a process of

'*unfolding*' of the different connectors that assemble and signify the role of the librarian and the library. Therefore, I would like to highlight the process of organizational revision precisely through the idea of redesign and conclude with its last phase, which I feel may represent an attempt at re-articulation, in the way proposed by Latour (2011a).

Reassembling (the new strategic vision and work in progress)

The governance redesign process and my interviews revealed the limitation of an unfinished integration process and the demand for a new shared vision. Therefore, also through the consolidation of the partnership between Sector, Kilowatt, and Covenant for Reading, the current strategy is to maintain a "space for thinking unencumbered by routine," renewing moments of shared learning and bringing forth new moments of discussion about *publics*, meetings with experts and the creation of new territorial analyses.

...a cultural proposal with greater uniformity is also *a democratic tool*. It doesn't make sense that because I live in this neighborhood rather than another, I'm unlucky in my library because it has less staff or less expertise, or fewer resources available. Uniformity in a subsystem, in a system like Bologna libraries, should be, I think, a fundamental point, the starting point. Until we have that, I am afraid that we will continue to make an offer [...] a little bit hypertrophic, a little bit bulimic, as the tendency of Bolognese culture is, to offer so much without creating that container that allows those who use the events to find themselves in a strategic horizon, in a clear programmatic horizon. (*library coordinator*)

[coordination] was always there; unfortunately, it was very much limited to always emergency, always material aspects [...] because we have to spend the budget surplus on books, or we decide how to divide the budget. But there was never coordination to think strategically on what to do [...] And that's how it has remained even in recent times, because anyway, from day to day you have to deal with the health emergency, the closure, or how to organize for home service. These are all very practical things... But there's never a moment to understand, 'but meanwhile, what is our role in the city, in society, and in the community? ...If we have it. What is our significance? How can we make ourselves even more visible?' Because we do so many things, nevertheless, we have very low penetration in the community... Never questioning these at the working group level always leads us to follow the *day-to-day work* and never do strategic thinking. [...] I hope that the new leadership that will be established will have this sensitivity [...] because otherwise, I see it very, I see it very bad. (*library coordinator*)

...there was an inability on the part of the administrators certainly to invest in these places with all the issues that precisely we were municipal employees, as I said before you couldn't hire, you couldn't do. Blah, blah, blah. And so outsourcing was going, however precisely obviously a little bit was coming a lot to count the action of the symbol, of the single person working [...] On the other hand, the inability of librarians to know how to value themselves more even in the eyes of the policymakers and also sometimes even confuse themselves only as places to do things, without relating [...] A real coordination, a real system, is yet to come and I think with *this new change* it could, now that we have the experience of ten years. It might be the right time... (*library coordinator*)

Reasoning about the new governance is converging, then, toward two final steps, which

began during the writing of this paper. The first is the formulation of a ‘strategic vision’ for the Sector, or, according to its promoters, a move from *imagination* to *structuring*, based on co-design techniques and the formulation of an impact assessment within the framework of the cultural sector. Co-designing a vision, the director explained, means continuing to think “together with the realities of the territory.” First, through the dense network of the Pact for Reading, as a fundamental “network of cultural agitation in the territories.” Second, through the new office of Cultural Welfare, aimed at “promoting individual and community well-being to foster social inclusion, employment and to combat educational poverty.” To this end, the new segment of the Libraries Sector has narrowed its collaboration with other intervention tools, such as Neighborhood Schools. It promotes projects directly or calls for projects through funding, such as the European Social Fund (National Operational Program Metropolitan Cities 2014-2020) or the PNRR.

The second area of ongoing intervention is, in fact, the range of new services that had been outlined by the director of the Department of Culture, Sports and City Promotion: the creation of Salaborsa LAB, the co-design of Casa Gialla, a new Democratic Memory Hub, and many others. These initiatives are expressed as forms of “opening up to the territories,” through which it is intended, from here on, to bring libraries more and more into the metropolitan city.

The management of these funds and the development of an institutional debate on the library as an agent of proximity and cultural welfare identifies a renewed field for Italian public libraries. In Bologna, this direction has been further pursued along with the initiatives of the Urban Innovation Foundation and its new Urban Innovation Lab at Palazzo d’Accursio. In 2022, the director of the Library and Cultural Welfare Sector also became the Foundation’s new director, strengthening the partnership, and new projects were launched, such as the four-year assignment of public spaces at the *Treno della Barca* for the development of widespread cultural welfare actions. As discussed in Part I, public libraries have already participated in innovative projects and urban design processes worldwide. However, especially on the Italian scene, the emergence of libraries within the debates on new cultural centers and models such as the ‘15-minute city’ is a trend to be observed with interest, especially if they extend beyond sector reflections and take part in a more systemic debate. The renovation of the public library remained, in 2019, an unfinished and fragmented topic of debate, and it gained progressive visibility during the pandemic, as discussed above⁶³.

⁶³ An interesting project opened within the framework of the collaboration between Covenant for Reading and Kilowatt is a “maieutic survey on reading,” aimed at deconstructing preconceptions and stereotypes of the practice and broadening the target readership, including reformulating the very idea of reading with respect to national surveys (Ch. 5). The research design follows what has been done within the Sector and aims to identify some broad frames of meaning, starting from the variety

The context of Bologna will be particularly fascinating in the coming times due to the issue of the re-use of public spaces and the risk of peripheralization. The enhancement of essential partnerships and the opportunities offered by new funds can breathe new life into libraries and nurture their ability to redesign the urban landscape in an inclusive way. They can draw on deep-rooted relationships in the neighborhoods, enhance their ability to represent local memory, and be a reference for citizens in all social conditions. However, the new strategies pursued by the Sector, with FIU, Pact for Reading, and many other formal and informal entities, are not on neutral ground. For example, participatory processes and the reuse of spaces have re-emerged after the pandemic as divisive and meaningful issues. The ambivalence of urban policies and the need to open a comprehensive discussion about spaces has been emphasized in the last months by antagonist groups and by various Third Sector entities. In Bologna, the controversial problem of evictions and the complex relationships with many counter-publics have been particularly vivid in recent years, but the increasing centrality of urban contexts as the ground for global challenges risks acquiring such tensions. To realize a sustainable ‘city of proximity’ in Bologna, the major players in the field will require to be capable of dialogue with the many counter-spaces in the territory. Public libraries, already relevant, can contribute to this dialogue in an articulate and politically significant way. What is at stake is the new role in the history of libraries and their potential to address the ambivalence of the public and contribute to a just city.⁶⁴

Conclusion: the library and change

In conclusion, I shall return to pairing the pandemic crisis with the redesign of the governance of Bologna’s civic libraries as a remarkable opportunity to study an organization urged by the change and to highlight a web of connections useful for ‘unveiling’ relevant elements. The chapter attempted to extend the collected narratives and observed dynamics to a higher level, moving from contextual moments to reflect on processes identifiable in other contexts and at other times. In an occasion of crisis and transformation – but also in a “favored” context – I have shown some generative and critical elements to be addressed

and ubiquity of Covenant members. A more structured survey will follow.

⁶⁴ By instance, some of these issues and the role of libraries were recently addressed during “*The City of Proximity – what we have learned so far,*” a public event by Foundation for Urban Innovation and the master’s degree program Architecture and Creative Practice in Cities and Landscape (Unibo). The encounter offered a moment of reflection on local policies and Bologna’s journey in the scenario of cities engaged in new policies of participation and urban design (such as Paris, Barcelona, or Milan), starting with a dialogue with Enzo Manzini (*cf.* Manzini 2021). For a recent discussion of the relations between municipality and citizens see D’Alena (2021). For a more critical contribution I refer to Boarelli (2018).

concerning places like the library.

The first part of the chapter analyzed how the discontinuity introduced by Covid raised an essential and cross-cutting sociological question in society, which pertains to a spectrum of phenomena related to the idea of ‘latent problems.’ I showed how even in libraries, people have been questioning the idea of interpreting what has happened and how this has related to the theme of imagination and prediction of what is to come. Building on some critical experiences and themes of the study, I explored how the pandemic crisis opened up a possible re-articulation of the central elements in the relationship between the public library and the social fabric. Some aspects have also shed light on ‘diffuse’ agency within such a field: critical elements such as precautionary book quarantine have penetrated practices and highlighted structural fragilities in the sector (e.g., the lack of appropriate decision-making institutional bodies).

The events that followed the dissolution of the Libraries Institution and led to the creation of the new Libraries and Cultural Welfare Sector showed another side of the 2020-2022 period. This transformative process, partially related to the first, similarly illustrated how a library organization could react during major stress. Key elements, in this case, were the examination of the historical specificities in which the change was embedded and the observation of the internal reflection that accompanied the governance transformation. In both cases, the theme of ‘participation’ provided interesting leverage. The accounts gathered during the interviews and the ‘ethnographic and maieutic’ process undertaken by the libraries brought out retrospective analyses of the librarians and their ability to create ‘a space for reflection.’ In addition, elements that emerged in the field, such as the idea of ‘self-awareness’ and ‘maieutic path’ converged with insights from the pandemic. Connecting the ideas of ‘unfolding’ and ‘redesign,’ following Sloterdijk and Latour, I suggested that the institutional transformation and the resulting new ‘city-library vision’ can be interpreted as a possible exercise in rearticulating the library as an actor-network.

Before returning to this point, I would like to highlight the role of knowledge and biographies in these processes. In section 6.2, I began my analysis with an expert’s reflection on the need for a critical approach to complexity to avoid the reductions imposed by emergencies and to approach the problem of post-paradigmatic crisis in public libraries. This idea also led to the importance of approaching possible ‘impressionisms’ with caution and paying attention to the role of expert knowledge as producers of models and predictions. However, this helpful criticism raises the issue of identifying the “cognitive governance of complexity.” As stated by the respondent, to explore a complex situation

it’s not like a serological test: that is, there’s the protocol, you put it in a test tube, you do

the test, and it reacts: yes-no. Here it's a problem of expertise [...] you can't imagine that the individual branch librarian, *sua sponte*, defines a model from below. This is really a *participatory drift* that I think is inapplicable; you have to find a *balance*, right?

In this work, I do not intend to support any *drift* intended as a multiplication of models or a simplification of a complex phenomenon. On the contrary, I believe the interviewee invites researchers from various disciplines to grasp a valuable opportunity. However, consistent with the strategy of this contribution, I give “to meaning reconstruction central pride of place” (Alexander 2007:24). Therefore, a dense look at the ongoing dynamics showed not only how ‘expert’ models and knowledge can be pervasive and become part of the constituent practices of the field, but also how the rearticulation of knowledge and experience ‘from below’ is decisive – and not (only) in terms of participatory practices. During the conversations in the field, it was possible to observe the active role of biographies in shaping their profession and the meanings attributed to the library. For example, one librarian with a background in anthropology expressed a particular sensitivity to relationships. Another, who was heavily involved in the field of communication, read the problems of marketing and cooperation through the lens of their expertise. Other librarians experienced various roles and responsibilities within the municipality and offered their perspectives on differences and similarities. Some interviewees had worked in small rural towns before coming to Bologna, bringing a unique set of sensitivities and experiences related to multifunctionality and the promotion of services. Finally, coordinators and managers who have worked with various board members showed sensitivity to past discussions and the conflict between library models. Furthermore, we need to appreciate how specific actors and communities involved in redesigning the governance have connected library models, specialized knowledge, and participatory methods. Sociologically understood, representations and motivations show how subjects contribute – to different degrees – to rearticulate the link between knowledge, models, and practice. I will return to this topic in section 7.2. A further aspect pertains to the relational dimension intrinsic to the research process: different representations of the field and my work determined gatekeeping, moved information flows, and shaped relationships. By advising persons I ‘absolutely must talk to,’ or favoring specific topics over others, research participants contributed to creating my ‘expert’ account.

From the concept of explicitation, reinterpreted from a sociological perspective, it is possible to sketch a theory of organization consistent with the outline indicated in Part I. By approaching a system as a *foam* – or, as I initially proposed, a stabilized set of associations – it is possible to observe what its compositions are, what its internal relations are, what its immune strategies are, what attempts there are to manipulate its atmosphere (Borch 2011).

Some of these questions have helped to explore the library as a social object. The following chapter will build further on the redesign as a possibility of re-articulation ‘toward the external environment,’ taking up the theme of the heterotopic/critical potential of the library in relation to the city. The experience of Bologna can show concrete ways in which this potential can emerge and what it consists of.



'Bologna Attiva' (DumBO) hosts a bistro, coworking spaces, and the Borges Pop-up library (now Borges @ Bologna Attiva)



Lame 'Cesare Malservisi' library, January 2020

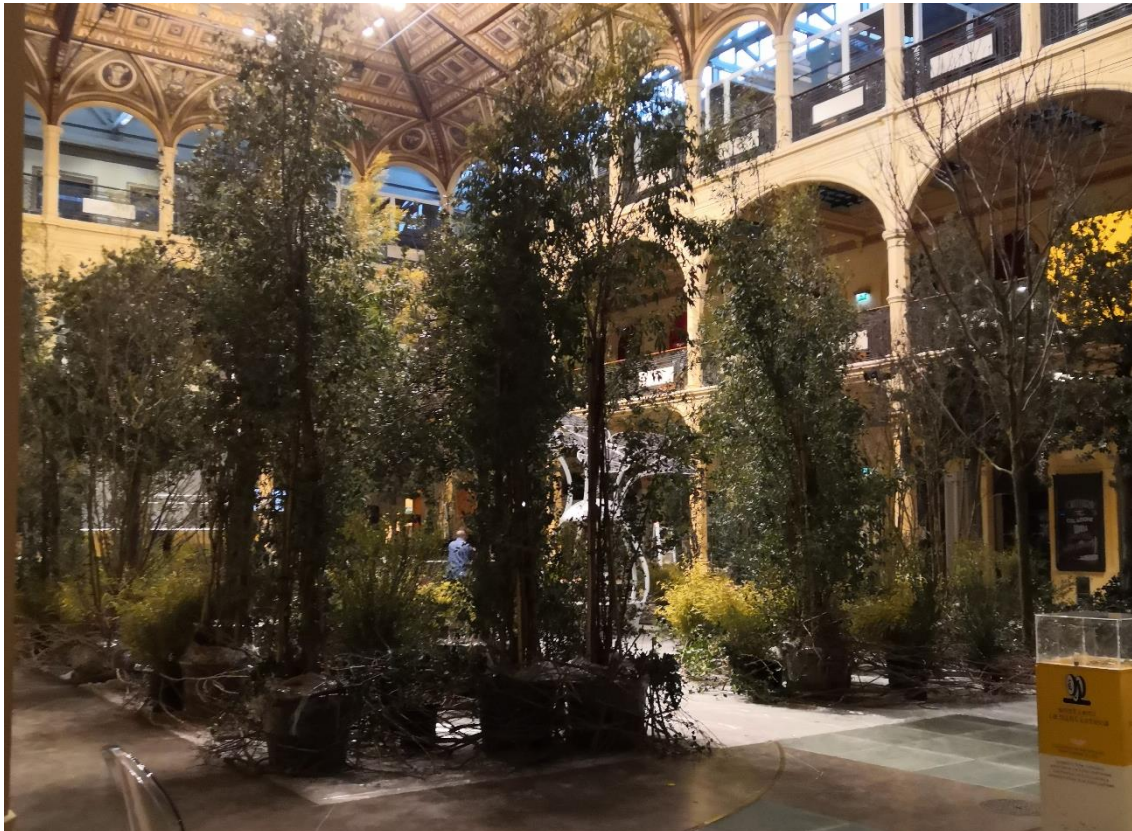
Lame 'Cesare Malservisi' library, March 2022





Oriano Tassinari Clò library during the second lockdown.

Sala Borsa, closed to the public, becomes a temporary forest for the speakers of Radioimmaginaria, a network of teenagers, as they narrate the Sanremo Song Festival



CHAPTER 7

THE SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE OF BOLOGNA LIBRARIES

Ah, who knows?! Ahah, it depends on the library, doesn't it? [...] you find older people who keep each other company, share a chat, maybe a coffee... Especially for children, of course, they need a lot more than others, play and entertainment, and often it allows a little bit the sociality of parents, who are 'freed' from the children for a couple of hours. [...] The reading group shares a cultural path... So, the forms of sociability are many, but whatever goes is fine; it works. I mean, one of the very things we must defeat now is loneliness, doesn't it?

— *former President*

What happens in the library? How to talk about it as a place? This chapter describes libraries as possible forms of social infrastructure, particularly in their relationship with the civic sphere. Through the analysis of observations and accounts, its goal is to understand what forms of sociality are generated in the library and what meanings are given to this space. I will focus on patrons, librarians, and informal groups to highlight the work of social and cultural negotiation.

The following pages confirm many aspects and trends related to the library 'thirdness' as a *common* and as *piazza* and attempt to develop further insight. Part I suggested relating the philosophical-political theory on the civil sphere with the study of pragmatics and situated regimes on visibility. The data collected allowed me to see the library as a meeting place and a place of support, highlighting some characteristics also during the crisis. Indeed, the closure has changed the fruition of libraries and the usual relationships between librarians and patrons. Outreach activities with schools, conferences, courses, and educational projects have been suspended, and libraries lost the most vulnerable users who sometimes found refuge in the library. However, it is also through the impossibility of face-to-face relationships

that libraries have developed new forms of relationships, when possible, and reflect on the old ones. So, there are accounts of what has remained, often in a mediated or fragmented form (communications between librarians and users, online meetings of reading groups), and of what has been lost, an account of the *absence*. It is interesting to dwell on what was perceived by the interviewees as lacking because it has a very close connection to some critical themes of the social infrastructure.

Following my previous arguments, the first paragraph explores different facets of the ‘social’ library. Thus, I focus on the library as a space, highlighting material and symbolic thresholds, frames, and ‘sorts’ (Kärrholm 2012) that shape this fluid topography. Then, I point out what kind of social gatherings take shape in the public library to understand whether we should speak of ‘piazzas’ or more porous ‘social rooms.’ Finally, I deepen into some segments of the public to discuss the role of libraries in supporting education and fighting isolation and inequalities. I will draw on the idea of the library as a heterotopia to propose some new interpretations.

The second paragraph returns to specific representations offered by librarians on the matter of ‘extensive’ sociality *vs* core ‘cultural’ mission. My argument is that such accounts contribute to probing social performance and describe Bologna libraries as an informative example of a situated landscape of meaning.

7.1 The dimensions of the ‘social’

(Salaborsa 10/19)

Salaborsa integrates itself into the historical complex of the square almost without interruption. The external entrance is rather lavish and creates a rather univocal effect. The population at the entrance and inside was numerically high and very diverse. It reminded me of the dense presence in large university libraries or the structure and diversity I have seen in certain foreign libraries, such as the Moravian Library in Brno or the King’s Library in London. At the entrance, in a passage area, there were several people standing around to rest, spend time there, use the phone for a moment, or some tourists trying to figure out where they were. [...] the structure is perfectly restored, offering the feeling that many aspects have been carefully planned for the offer. Signs, colors, and the ‘little shops’ structure indeed remind one of a covered square, but then opens up to spaces that appear more ‘traditional,’ while maintaining modern design and facilities. The mixture of ancient components and new infrastructure appears harmonious but invites one to consider the symbolic character of the architecture. I notice a few things right away: colorful armchairs and small rooms that communicate, in a colorful and ‘smart’ way, the idea of a stopover, sometimes not ‘relational.’ The front desk, with some monitors and the various self-lending stations, recalls an environment similar to certain large services or shopping centers... some pairs of chairs are dedicated to language exchange: chatting in Italian or other languages for those who wish to practice. I then see a girl wearing a hijab talking to a young man and, a little later, a couple of ladies in their fifties. [...] Another prominent feature is the café [...] where a group of elderly people chats, and many others, differing in age, gender and etc., seem to linger quietly. The audience, although diverse, consists basically of people with laptops. Everyone seems to be taking a quiet, extended break or occupying the café tables while working/studying. I take a closer look at ‘what a place it is,’ beyond the first impression of a ‘city center’ bar, including

the prices [...] The Umberto Eco pizza hosts installations and small events: there is now a large UNICEF stand [...] the gallery houses tables and armchairs and the first selection of resources, especially magazines and newspapers [...] but there are transparent walls in which one can glimpse the different environments, dedicated to various sectors, accessed through large glass doors, often accompanied by signs indicating the type of environment. [...] many different people, primarily students, almost all in the study rooms or in the other quiet rooms.

Libraries as spaces: thresholds, connectors, signifiers

As the above description suggests, some libraries can have an explosive character, offering a vast panorama of scenes and environments in which quiet coexistence and lively activities are mixed. I would therefore start from the porosity of spaces and contaminations with other urban scenes.

Salaborsa is undoubtedly the densest and broadest example among Bologna's libraries, but not necessarily the most dynamic. The multimedia library and its covered *Piazza* welcome visitors daily with novelties: exhibitions, reading suggestion stands, sculptures, public events, and more. The environment offers opportunities to celebrate and remember significant figures from the past and engage visitors in the building's history (as through the many photographs or the events promoted during Salaborsa's 18th birthday). The environments are varied but distinct in territorial 'sorts': newspaper library, reading rooms, bar, refreshment area, boxes for associations (such as *BiblioBologna*, volunteers to support libraries, or the Panny Wilton school, which offers Italian courses for foreigners). Sometimes they are marked by clear architectural and informational elements; in other cases, the visitor is left with a greater ability to create or interpret a given definition of the situation, as in the case of conventions or areas that are occupied by users progressively engaged in similar activities (students in the newspaper library, readers in the square, people intent on looking at their phones or video. Armchairs and sofas also invite the tourist or casual visitor to pause and look around. On many occasions, especially in liminal spaces, the Salaborsa 'third space' is more like areas of mere ephemeral passage (streets, sidewalks) rather than places 'of doing.'

Speaking of porosity and contamination, a particular role is assumed by gardens, food courts, and the like. Borgo Panigale, for example, has extended its 'territory' through the project BIG – '*Biblioteca In Giardino*,' in which young patrons of the area have helped expand the library beyond its walls. During my first visit to the Borges Library, on a rare day of intense snowfall, not only did the library provide shelter for many, but the garden became, at one point, the inevitable playground for the various high school students who were studying together. The absence or presence of refreshment areas not only contributes to changing the social climate of a library but also defines relationships with neighboring spaces. In some cases, detached libraries offered the opportunity to stay for a long time without visiting a café or some other commercial establishment, perhaps exchanging a few words

with other patrons. In other cases, food courts were limited or eliminated precisely to deter so-called ‘instrumental’ use by some citizens. Still, environments like Salaborsa express peculiar meanings concerning the *piazza* and the surroundings. As observed and discussed with some employees, despite the bar and large spaces, Salaborsa has a minimal refreshment area equipped with a vending machine near the restrooms. For example, a different area is desirable to accommodate better tourists or the many school classes that visit the library. Some also highlight the opportunity to offer an alternative to the attractive commercial services in the area, such as the regenerated urban markets or the alleys near Piazza Maggiore, which also contribute with their vitality to the ambivalent city marketing of the ‘Bologna of food.’

Libraries in Bologna are often places of meeting or movement, characterized by the ‘low thresholds’ of accessibility, as identified in the literature. However, symbolic and material thresholds are sometimes well-identified and further shaped by discretionary controls.

...It is also a meeting place.... Beyond the usual functions of the library, you come to read the newspaper ... the fact that it has a bar service inside, the fact that it has absolutely free access. I mean, you don’t put your bag down at the entrance, you don’t get recognized, and there’s no form of control, okay? So, you really make it an absolutely open place, and so whoever wants to come in. If anything, the control is ex-post, so depending on the behaviors that one adopts by being in there. (*librarian*)

This, the very fact that at the entrance there is the one from the security that makes you...I mean. It’s that way of being almost repulsive that we don’t like; that’s one reason why, for example, the initial space, the one with the counter that’s at the entrance of the library that has always been deserted by staff, now we put people in there, colleagues who are there, giving information, picking up books, precisely because we wanted to soften a little bit this feeling of going into a place that forces you to go through levels before you enter. (*coordinator*)

In the past, this passageway, the *Esedra*, was pointed out as a missed opportunity for complete continuity with the nearby Piazza Maggiore. Moreover, despite the caution expressed here, the presence of a service desk and librarians can be a critical ‘checkpoint.’ While some may be deterred by the ‘emptiness’ and invited by a human presence, for others, the absence of control may provide peace of mind and break down the so-called ‘fear of the threshold.’ This is discussed, with a very different example, by the same interviewee:

Our north star is to make the user’s library experience as easy as possible, which is why we invested so much, some years ago, in the introduction of RFID technology, which allows the user to register loans and returns with total autonomy [...] Librarians are expected to be sympathetic, receptive, and helpful but if the user doesn’t even want to see a librarian they need to be able to use the library without being forced to ask for help [...] So open shelving, numerous online catalogs around the library, and the self-loan machines. So, potentially, one could come here and not interact with the staff at all.

The consideration of thresholds, checkpoints, and intermediation is not neutral to specific meanings attributed to the library. They assume particular relevance for those users who access libraries to spend time or because they need a safe and welcoming place. These include tourists, casual visitors, and some of the most disadvantaged citizens. Returning to the Salaborsa entrance hall, for example, as mentioned by the interviewee and noted in the past (e.g., Daconto & Manella 2016), it has been at the center of a debate related to homeless and other users, often ethnically connoted.⁶⁵

(Salaborsa 10/19)

Immediately I notice the fork imposed by the desk; there is a guard and the security office. The environments guide me, but I have to take a few more steps to really 'feel in' and in the right direction: I have the impression that the floor has stylized arrows in the opposite direction. [...] As soon as I cross, I meet another guard...

(Salaborsa, 12/19)

I immediately noticed some people resting at the entrance; some users with phones in their hands, and one snoozed instead; an elderly couple was chatting.

In these places of passage and pause, 'interstices' take on an interesting dimension. The 'frame' of temporary spaces and the emergence of liminal ones offer a sense of space that complements and extends more symbolically charged environments, such as those marked by more decisive 'frames' or 'privatized' by particular publics as the elderly and students.

(Salaborsa, 10/19)

Some Black boys sit in swivel chairs similar to or the same as those in the *Piazza* below, using their phones. One, carrying an old backpack, is hunched over to plug his cell phone into one of the power sockets dedicated to librarians' computers, evidently not easy to access nor designed for public use. Many others are in the nearby study room, set up on desks. Perhaps the environment is the reason, or there is not [...] I still notice a lot of students, some seats are free, but many others are 'occupied' with books and backpacks (despite an explicit prohibition).

The climate of the 'square,' with its noise and multiple casual interactions, can foster 'bubbles' of safety and permanence, but also interactions otherwise held back by distrust or 'frames' that may characterize other interactions in the audience. As I have observed, a lonely older person or a user with disabilities may find an opportunity to exchange friendly words with a librarian or student, crossing possible thresholds of distrust. Homeless persons may feel more comfortable talking to their neighbors and seek the comfort of a chat. However, there

⁶⁵ Regarding one of the most recent cases, see also the intervention of the former Councilor of Culture (now Major) Matteo Lepore and the reference to 'flower pots,' which have long represented, in Bologna and other cities (Bukowsky 2019; Pitch 2013) one of the controversial images of urban decoration policies (<https://matteolepore.it/2019/02/15/salaborsa-sia-luogo-di-cittadinanza-non-di-esclusione/>).

are often looks that watch over what is happening, applying discretionary control when desired, or keeping ‘monitored’ certain subjects rather than others.

(Salaborsa, 12/19)

[the man] tells me about his life [...] the experience of prison, unemployment, the loss of his home [...] Sometimes he censors the vulgarities that come between his lips, letting go only after a while [...] Only sometimes does he raise his voice, and I feel a little uncomfortable for those who are close and can hear us. We are watched: three times an employee, I think a librarian, passes by, and we cross our eyes briefly. A security guard also passes by a couple of times, glancing [...] they seem to know him.

(Salaborsa, 10/19)

From above, I observe the square. I notice the guard watching some children as they use the designer armchairs as small merry-go-rounds to spin on themselves. One of them drops the small chair, which begins to roll and makes a great noise that echoes along the height of the covered *Piazza*. No one says anything. After a while, a lady, perhaps the mother, comes and puts the small chair back up without much care or precision.

(Salaborsa, 10/19)

The woman moves the small chair, and the employee, who has been watching her for a while from the counter, rushes over, raising his voice, “Come on! That one can’t stay in the middle, for safety, you know!”. “But the others put it the way they want” – she replies – “What do you want? I’m not moving from here.” The librarian resumes, “It is not possible that you always do what you want. That’s enough now, either you move, or I call the guards.” She insists, and the employee calls for help. As the guards arrive, she runs away.

For example, during the pandemic and the decline of visitors – and the ‘lively’ atmosphere – a more pronounced segmentation emerged, and some users disappeared:

(Salaborsa, 02/20) [ultimi giorni prima della chiusura delle aule studio]

In the different rooms, I notice a precise segmentation of uses/publics, perhaps even more evident now with fewer people. I notice more areas used, as they say, ‘properly’ (as opposed to an expected use), less or hardly anyone resting/sleeping or on cell phones [...] Even today, some students occupy seats during long breaks, leaving bags, pencil cases, and notebooks. Some are studying; a couple seems to be planning presentations with their PCs. In the midst of the young people, a gentleman in a suit and tie also works on a pc. Almost everyone keeps their smartphone or pc charged and keeps a water bottle next to them (despite the ban).

The sense of place is co-determined by several actants and descriptors. As pointed out by some librarians, many locations are derived from old buildings, with interior rooms of widely varying sizes. Through some renovations, some spaces have been extended or repurposed, seeking to create dedicated areas for various publics. On the other hand, someone argued, this “is a concept that, when you build a library for it to be a library, you absolutely tend not to do ... that is, you tend to create a mixture of publics because that is the beauty of the library as well. On this, we struggle a bit.” Spatial limitations and descriptors emerge, for

example, in these notes:

(Orlando Pezzoli, 12/19)

There is parking, but it is not immediate to find the library if one does not know its location. The library is on the second floor of a civic building. There are signs and directions, but they are not apparent from a distance. Some indicate the presence of municipal offices, and I ‘struggle’ to go up, given the dark, empty environment, the lights off [...] It feels like entering the offices of the municipality in an environment not entirely open to the public or open to those who need something. It is not evident if and how I can move through all the spaces and go up. If I wasn’t sure, I would be discouraged, I think. [...] Again, on the walls, a series of posters and posters. Once I reach the library environment, it looks pretty nice and welcoming [...] I don’t see the main directions indicated as soon as I finish the flight of stairs, and I don’t know where I can or should proceed. I understand that on one side, there is a room dedicated to children, indicated by a large colored sign on a glass wall that borders its access. There is no one there (What codes or frames do I have to orient myself? Can they be taken for granted?) Continuing elsewhere, a sign indicates that the bathrooms require a key. [...] I finally reach a large room containing books, which are cataloged and arranged according to Dewey’s classification (explained with simple annotations). Before arriving through some very sparse study rooms. [...] Some posters are hung on the walls, by means of long wooden slats, like those used in some schools. Information resources are very sparse. There is a collection of red volumes in one corner and a stack of chairs (one sheet reads “do not take”). About half of the tables, large and numerous, have one or two electrical outlets nearby. Upon entering, the room is bare and quiet; with each new entry, the stares of those present rise [...] At first, the desk, a series of ‘proposals.’ A shelf, in plain view, offers books from the Harmony series (I recall Labusus’s conference and Agnoli’s reflection on the importance of gender).

(Borges, 12/19)

Immediately the environment is quite different. It is a ‘typical’ neighborhood library, so I sense, tending to be quiet and communicating a definite purpose or little more, a common reading and study room [...] Above, on two sections, the book collection, divided according to Dewey notation, is adorned with images evoking the different sections [...] The offices are also on the loft floor, between the two sections, while down at the entrance, the main desk and a refreshment area with a small table and vending machines. And more comfortable than the one in Salaborsa. To the left are the study and reading spaces with wooden benches and chairs, old, evidently designed, especially for student study. [...] the signs are mostly simple printed sheets; there are, however, signs saying, ‘do not disturb’ and another sign depicting a little man in the act of stealing a purse from a female figure, which warns to beware of possible theft, [...] I notice the under-18 section, separated by a glass wall. I recall the YouTube video of this library branch, assembled just by high school kids. I also noticed two computers, a station in front of the entrance that is exclusive to those under 18, with fixed and limited hours of use, and a reading station for people with disabilities.

(Panigale, 12/19)

The environment is very quiet, except for outside noises, staff voices, and small (quieter) exchanges between people who are together (for example, two girls who left when I arrived). [...] A long bench lines the main hallway. It seems like one large room [...] in the last room, there is a piano and chairs arranged to accommodate events; another has a large desk, long tables, two Blackboards, and several large sheets of paper with colored marker writing on them (they look like notes related to Italian verbs). It is quite cold. The rooms house numerous electrical outlets, with no overt indication of restriction. In the newspaper library section, there is also a food and beverage dispenser with small sofas. [...] Flanking the entrance, a second door signals a small room intended to host classes and study/reading groups. It is currently empty.

Returning to the theme of the porosity of spaces and the relationship with neighboring environments, it emerges how specific environments cannot be fully appreciated without an external reference. Such complementary environments have a more inhospitable appearance or may be part of the city's social infrastructure. An example consists of Salaborsa, the public spaces of the historic center, and the adjacent municipal courtyard. Historic arcades form an interesting form of social infrastructure, hosting small groups of friends and consumers or providing essential shelter for the homeless. The diffuse character of the University of Bologna, similarly to cities such as Padua, also generates different flows among students and promotes territorialized clusters of aggregation based on the different teaching and study sites, including libraries. However, the context is also symbolically pregnant and potentially exclusive through direct and indirect control, strong touristification, and commercialization.

Another very relevant aspect is the positioning of many neighborhood libraries, which, as mentioned, have sprung up at civic centers or near other important institutional 'landmarks':

(Borges library, Saragozza 12/19)

It is a small but well-organized neighborhood library: it is 'wedged' between a community garden, some municipal offices, a movie theater, a kindergarten, and a student residence. Nearby there is also a co-housing project.

(Borgo Panigale, 12/19)

...It is apparently one of the outermost, peripheral ones. I find parking easily in the area, which is purely residential. I am five minutes from the highway but a long way from downtown. In the square near the parking lot, I spot the presence of at least a couple of public transportation lines. This location is also inserted between a sports field, a municipal office building, the police (with whom the library shares the building), and a preschool.

(Orlando Pezzoli, 12/19)

In less than half an hour, but only traveling by car, I find myself at the library. Like in other cases, it is in a residential area, between the Che Guevara Public Park and some communal offices and police, which share the building.

(Corticella, 11/20)

The civic center on Gorki Street actually looks a bit like an old shopping mall: the complex also houses a Coop, neighborhood offices, a CUP [single reservation center for health services], and the headquarters of several associations, such as *Legambiente* and *Cantieri Mettici*. The library is on the second floor, above the civic center.

Finally, I would like to dwell on the theme of 'beauty' between welcoming and normative-pedagogical values. The renovation of environments and furnishings and the care of the design are critical aspects of the idea of the library as a third place, understood as a place that can welcome anyone and invite them to enjoy the spaces. On the one hand, many libraries seem to need interventions, and the necessary funds, as reported by some librarians, are not

always available. Locations that have been able to do so in recent issues, such as the Spina and Scandellara libraries, have paid close attention, providing comfortable and movable furniture that can adapt to the needs of all users and activities

... I transformed it according to... I don't say according to my taste because, I mean, I tried *to study how to transform the library* in a way that would make it... welcoming, flexible
(*coordinator*)

It's a very... very complex and very rich theme for a reality like Salaborsa that goes from deciding, from spending 800 euros for a chair, which might seem like a waste, but it's not... because for us furnishing the library spaces in such a way that there are not only the resultant, disheveled chairs but that it is also a *beautiful place* is a way [...] it is precisely the attention toward those aspects of sociality, the creation of... predisposition, let's say, of an environment
(*coordinator*)

The theme is, as discussed, particularly dear to the idea of the library as a '*Piazza*,' in terms of 'breaking down the threshold' symbolically between library and user, and thus also in terms of inclusion. A design planned to provide a pleasant and familiar space is as capable of not repelling as an austere place with a strong symbolic impact – unless, as mentioned, it favors canons and languages overly calibrated to a segment of the population. Nevertheless, there is more to it. 'Beauty,' and in particular the 'beauty-culture' duality, not unlike presence and surveillance, can embody a pedagogical-normative principle that condemns an aesthetic and moral condition. Such reference, rarely directed, recalls controversial images typical of 'civicism' understood as aesthetic control of urban space and the perception of coexistence as a thorny issue.

It's important to us and that... what do you call that broken window thing in the suburbs, right? If you break one window and you don't fix it, eventually all the others start to break because anyway if you see that there is a situation of decay you don't even bother to fix it [...] a very important issue because [the library] is a very busy place, it's a place that was born to be a nice place, so keeping up with it is very 'tiring'... So that's why I say it's a very complex situation because it goes from setting up, from creating a service that welcomes the very young, from a service that welcomes classes, from a service or a space that welcomes the family with children [...] and the homeless. (*librarian*)

Someone reports to me that when he goes away, at the sports facilities, toward evening, behind the library is not the environment is not one of the best, that's it. But you know, I mean, the cops sometimes make the rounds. I think in a city that's quite normal. And I would add, on this library, this idea that I have fixed on the library that starts outside [referring to an adjacent area] reduced to a pitiful, horrible condition. I would see murals there, or things leading to the books, that is, as an accompanying, natural, while one is walking, in the middle of the fields... as if to say 'look, if you go this way, you go to the library.' Here, then, is a care of the outdoors that we have never been able to achieve in recent years (*librarian*)

Related to the topic, some librarians talk about “movement,” and “general decay.” Sometimes they talk about teenagers (“who are not very polite”), and other times about people sleeping in public or drug trafficking. These are sporadic accounts and sometimes refer to past debates or episodes rather than experiences. Sometimes a few homeless patrons are welcomed, says one librarian, because “it’s normal,” “as long as it’s not a problem.” Some citizens come in to find a warm place or use computers. In the words of some librarians, the aspiration is to manage the ‘complexity’ typical of the public domain: an issue that is sometimes entrusted to ‘expert’ strategies and space design.

The public park is open 24 hours because the gate is open, and you would have to find a fantastic balance between decorum and equipping the green in a way that everyone can benefit from it without spoiling it because, anyway, the area in the evening is not... like a little bit of the whole suburbs, is not perfect... The parking lot across the street here often has broken car windows; it’s not like we’re here to say everything is perfect. But, finding ways with cameras, or whatever, to make it much more welcoming: the park with benches with... and in front with study tables, why not, with a gazebo [...] find the balance that it doesn’t become a bivouac... no longer manageable, I know it’s difficult. But I would like someone with professionalism different from mine... to have... find a way in short [...] it takes professionalism... I just kind of have this idea. (*librarian*)

Piazas or porous ‘social rooms’? Forms of sociality in the library

Compared to other forms of social infrastructure, such as the senior center or the university study hall, spaces such as libraries in neighborhoods can be equally rich in activity and even more socially diverse. Like in third places such as ‘the corner cafe,’ ‘cliques’ of regular visitors are common, and some manifest more pronounced control over spaces. However, the confrontation between different groups can come alive and continually renegotiate the use of space, atmosphere, and relationships. Let us consider, for example, this occasion:

(Lame, 01/20)

A young couple sits in the back with me chatting, and two boys are working/studying in front of their PCs. Another guy is studying photocopies of a book. Around 2 p.m., one begins to hear quite loud talking from downstairs [...] Shortly after, an old man with a serious voice comes up along with two other ones, and they take their seats at the back of the room. He speaks rather loudly, and we can tell, in short, that they are meeting to play chess and seem to be waiting for other people to arrive. The guy with the photocopies seems to have attracted their attention by demanding silence or showing annoyance: the gentleman with the big voice advances abruptly, in a high tone: “*Here from two o’clock, we have the chess room! I don’t know if they told you.*” The other replies sharply, “*No one has said anything.*” The elder returns to the other corner—the other elders urge him to lower his tone of voice, and the boy moves elsewhere. [...] The elders play chess on a phone app [...] only one of the students remains [...] The growing group of elders also invites us to make room. [...] they bring with them large soft chess sets that they begin to unroll on the tables and various pawns neatly organized in sturdy cases. [...] I am again ‘invited’ to move, in a few confusing words. In the meantime, the young man with the pc tries to negotiate position, and so another older man seeks mediation: “*Yes, yes, yes, a little more until the others arrive*” (he also seems to say to his companion, to whom he nods (‘leave, leave’) [...]) One boy arrives and looks at the small study room with the door closed, ponders

whether or not to sit next to the other with the pc, looks for a hold, and opts to move down. Another arrives and takes a seat next to me on the opposite side of the table. [games proceed, moves are commented on by the 'audience' and more experienced members]. "Ob, Lollo has arrived," the man adds: the group becomes very animated and now dominates the atmosphere of the room. 'Lollo' checks the neighboring rooms; the guy with the pc moves to our table and starts chatting with my neighbor. The others are still playing. By my side, the boys also raise their voices a little and discover mutual friends; now they are serene, and everything has rich energy.

Multiple opportunities for 'sociability' can be observed in Bologna's civic libraries. The varied temporary exhibitions, for example, attract the curiosity of visitors, who sometimes stop to converse while commenting on the work. In peculiar situations, such as Salaborsa's birthday or the sale of discarded books performed by the *BiblioBologna* association, they create occasions similar to those of the street market, allowing volunteers and acquaintances to meet and converse. Lending and bibliographic recommendations often provide long chats for librarians and users, especially the elderly. These and other regular users are wont to use refreshment areas and newspaper libraries as periodic gathering spaces among friends. As mentioned, conferences, classes, and events produce even more hybrid and varied social encounters. Regular users and librarians sometimes take on the characteristics of what Jacobs and Oldenburg identify as 'public characters,' that is, key and well-known figures who mediate relationships and 'care' for the citizens of an area.

Undoubtedly, in many cases, libraries are the scene of more individual activities or 'ephemeral' forms of interaction: the worker who gets a book quickly on his lunch break, the tourist or occasional visitor, the individual reading or studying, the stopover.

(Salaborsa, 12/19)

There are mostly students in the study and reading rooms, older people at the magazine reading points, on the chairs between the shelves of the newspaper library, a good third of those present rest with their eyes closed, leaning on their arms or semi-reclining [...] It is mostly Black or older people who are present. They are on their phones, often using earphones. Even at the computer stations, two-three are asleep, someone leaning on themselves, someone else leaning on the keyboard [...] a couple seem to be subscribing to some sites, one is watching YouTube, those who are asleep seem to have done some of this, as I can see from the pages still open...

According to some librarians, some publics, such as students, use "basically the library is a place," a space. In some cases, students are as much as a quarter or more of the visitors, but lending, says a Ginzburg library employee, for example, only minor in that audience. Some interviewees think the university sometimes "engulfs the library," leading to a "colonization" of space, even though they feel they are offering a service. Sometimes such use is an opportunity to meet, exchange, and support each other. I have seen many small groups of

teenagers doing homework together or college students preparing for exams. Occasionally there is a coffee break, a chat about the latest scoop among the companies of mutual friends, or an opportunity to help an older visitor find a piece of information or use a device.

Let's say that the study hall was generally always attended by students bringing their materials and studying their materials. [...] And from what I saw, they were also born a bit often from friendships, maybe students who would see each other every day studying here. I mean, they would come on their own, then maybe they would start coming together, so also... friendships between students emerge as well. More difficult for bonds to be formed between students and other publics.... it happened, maybe, yes it happened that some students would get involved by the volunteer who follows the homework help to do... to give help, extra-curricular support to the homework help children (*coordinator*)

More often, rituals typical of detached interaction in public space, in a sense explored by Goffman (1959, 2008), mainly aimed at controlling one's personal sphere and mutual recognition, are observable.

Only in a small room, there is already another girl about my age, intent on studying (some books open in front, a notebook for notes and markers) [...] a quick glance between the girl and me, of mutual recognition, interrupted with my moving. Later, in a short time (10:26, 10:45, 10:56), something similar happens upon the arrival of three other people: a young boy who arrives at the threshold of the room I am in and then goes to another small empty room; an older Black boy, who glances at me and sits not far away in the hall; and a girl who looks at the other small room and also sits finally in the hall [...] I also reflect on the spaces in the library and the difference between the tables in the hall and the adjacent small rooms: while the wide visibility of the hall and its conformation suggest a certain co-presence and sharing of space, the small rooms open up at the edges of the four corners of the hall and accommodate only one table.

Some spaces in libraries offer a more 'withdrawn,' 'intimate,' and 'study-like' environment. Recalling a theme discussed in Ch. 2, it is appropriate to ask whether the search for 'one's own space' in the library conflicts with the idea of interaction and co-presence. This recalls two aspects. The first is the relationship between the 'functional' use of public space (which, however, can be labeled as 'improper' if it is marginal to study and reading) and the opportunity for a free and neutral place where one can meet or where one can pause. The conflict between the two elements may force the adoption of those 'justification' mechanisms observable in libraries: a book or newspaper placed at one's side, turning on a computer, requesting a library card, etc. Secondly, some individual activities interrogate the sense of the library as a common and 'third' space, even in the absence of collective activities or in the case of mere co-presence. Even Reading is an activity that may be common, but more often, it is private: this activity invokes the idea of the library as a space of individual actions in a common ground: the opportunity of a 'space for each person.' Another perspective is

offered, for example, by the segmentation of the public, e.g., between age groups:

Um, so on this, there are many positions. The libraries in the North, which are sort of leading the way in terms of what concerns librarianship, just but the creation of spaces and possibilities, for the last ten years or so, have been making these very open spaces that slip and mix one area and another. The idea is a little bit that each user then recognizes the collections that they are interested in and colonizes, and uses, that part of the space... Here in Italy, we actually tend more to keep spaces for kids separate still also because often, even though we have made many steps on the idea of the public library, so library as a place where you can find some resources and opportunities, we are perhaps still a little bit attached to the idea of the library as a place where you study, where therefore silence is necessary, so all... all these souls coexist actually. [...] I give another example; we care that, for example, the boys' space is used by the boys [...], so we always send away when college students sit and teenagers when they are in the boys' area. So this, which may seem like a rigidity, is instead *the recognition of a right*. Teenagers... 10-11-year-olds, if they see teenagers sitting at the dedicated tables, which they should be using instead, they don't come near, they don't even come near; therefore, this work that seems like a rigid work of... bearer of a rigid view of the library is actually a view that is the bearer of... *rights* basically, just as babies *need a space*, mothers to breastfeed need to do it in a place – in a sheltered place. The libraries in the North have found a solution to everything, to all these things, of course... um, here, I think it's still good that there is this distinction, although there are places that are starting to intertwine.

The 'library for all' can thus present apparent reversals as a form of positive action. Indeed, as the interviewee adds, 'mixing' can be fundamental and is a growing phenomenon-where else more recognized than in Italy. But it is appropriate to understand how this happens: the identification of a *space for each* within a *space for all* is a complex but vital practice that makes a space like a library capable of ensuring expression and recognition.

Libraries can bring visitors into contact with social and cultural diversity. According to some librarians, this is done predominantly in a 'passive' way, without a specific desire to 'segment' and 're-segregate' categories of users so that they meet. Provocatively, one respondent put it this way:

It's not that there's any logic or design behind it; it's what happens, it's just what happens. To [say] that what you offer you should think about it in relation to that to the kind of connection you want to make... I mean, let's say maybe this is a little too diabolical for me; I mean, I don't get it. I mean, I don't... I've never thought that libraries were saying, 'now we want to make White children and Black children friends.' No, I think they feel the need around them, the pressure around them, the social context in which they operate, and they also respond because of what they know how to do. [For example] Cabral offers courses in Japanese and Arabic because they can do it; they have their collaborators, people, and attendants who can do it.

Encounters with forms of *otherness* emerge in very different forms, from the variety of interests and research that users express to librarians to occasional moments of conviviality. For many interviewees, "ideally, every encounter should have some depth," meaning a "cultural" dimension, but each use is accompanied by or consists of something else, a

“more... normal sociality”:

The librarian also tells me about an incident during an Italian language course for non-EU foreigners, at the end of which participants, having brought food, requested to share, even with others present. The library, she says after the story, is a “meeting of different realities, bringing together different publics” by age, level of education, and background. This “being open characterizes a social being,” “but without distorting” that role, which is made up of “culture ... continuing education.” (in-house interview, coordinator)

Some projects, however, have the specific purpose of promoting intercultural encounters, especially through relationships and the exchange of experiences: some of these are, for example, those organized as part of International Mother Language Day. On these occasions, libraries support reading proposals, learning materials, and events organized by associations. Conversations in these contexts often bring together ‘expert knowledge’ and common-sense judgments and involve meetings between people of various social backgrounds or origins. Debates take on the informal, low-intensity character typical of public interactions; opposing views tend to draw closer and ‘soften,’ avoiding conflict: what Oldenburg, in relation to third spaces, calls a ‘fair game atmosphere.’ However, there is no shortage of opportunities for more lively debate, or critical insights, in the form of “political fora.” Among the many examples are the public presentations of *Limes* magazine during the escalation of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, when the covered square of Salaborsa was filled with interested citizens, and many ‘horizontal debates’ emerged among the public.

Supporting publics: experiences of absence and experiences of proximity

According to Eric Klinenberg, social infrastructure can act as an essential resource in times of personal and collective hardship, including climate disasters (Klinenberg 2018). Many libraries could not offer support during the pandemic’s difficult moments. In countries such as the United States, where they play a crucial role, they have long been closed, raising major concerns. In Italy, too, although support for citizens carries less weight, the role of libraries has long failed or been fragmented. Libraries offer many cultural services of primary importance, such as support for researchers, schools, and continuing education. In addition, users and librarians in Bologna are linked by meaningful relationships, which can also act as networks of mutual help and fight against isolation and inequality. In the previous chapter, I mentioned some of these elements. Below, I compare narratives related to the pandemic period to later accounts to devote space to some groups.

So far, I have mentioned how libraries act as meeting spaces or how they support the primary cultural and intellectual needs of their patrons. Furthermore, depending on the demographical variations of each area, Bologna libraries dedicated many specific projects and

services, for example, to people with limited autonomy, foreign patrons, or other citizens with specific needs. For instance, the Borgo Panigale library represents a local presidium for computer literacy policies, English courses for the unemployed, or Italian courses for foreigners. The Lama Cesare Malservisi library is an inclusive and welcoming cultural landmark, cooperating with many associations and hosting citizens in a condition of social and cultural fragility. The cultural coordination is entitled to Casa di Khaoula library, which is devoted to multi-ethnic exchange and the establishment of spaces for all ages. Another example is the Corticella-Luigi Fabbri Library, a very decentralized library that acts as a local hub for inclusion and co-designed projects. It is worth exploring how existing collaborations and interventions can reach the target groups and what forms of relationship they achieve.

In many libraries, situations of exchange, complicity, and support arise directly through the consolidation of daily actions, from the “classic ladies who came at least once a week” and “the one who comes for a chat” to those that are “not always easy,” as in daily relationship with rebellious teenagers. They are daily theaters of discovery and fun, as shown with humor by a few kids

(Lame, 02/29)

He jokes aloud with the two young librarians, ‘provoking’ them by reading a book he calls ‘for over twelve’ (probably about affective-sexual ed.), shouting “father’s penis goes into mother’s vagina” and other similar phrases. They laugh together, and the librarians go, “*sssh*.” He adds something like, “if I didn’t hear about them first from my father, I would read them like this!”

Regulars frequent the nearby libraries several times a month and establish friendly relationships with librarians and other users: the tone is informal, and some arrive already knowing that the librarian has prepared their favorite books or is ready to support their passions.

Library users of non-Italian origin make up a very heterogeneous set of users. Although there is full awareness among librarians between the charities of differences in nationality and different cultural and informational needs, there is a tendency for this segment of users to be homogenized and to generate those categorical relations typical of coexistence in public space (*cf.* 2.2). On the one hand, such demarcation emerges as an effect of user typologies. Similar to the marked distinction between age groups, it also involves processes of homogenization of uses. On the other hand, these categorizations respond to the awareness, or estimation, of distinct clusters of practices and needs, in order to develop library activities and support those most in need. In many libraries, it is helpful to adopt an intersectional view, as different locations tend to play a primary role in relation to specific overlapping ethnic, social, and generational issues. From this perspective, a large proportion of users

categorized as ‘foreigners’ are new citizens or children of immigrants who present conditions of linguistic or socio-economic hardship or vulnerability. Some libraries, such as the Corticella branch, offer assistance to young adolescents with educational needs but also support young mothers of foreign origin.

Another example is Salaborsa Ragazzi, which has hosted many young people over the years, primarily through the *OfficinaAdolescenti* project. Several librarians observe a strong recognition of library opportunities by these users. Other locations have greater penetration by parents, especially women, to whom language classes, reading groups, or courses for developing digital skills are directed.

Another, how should I say, small segment but actually very important are foreigners because we have all the children who go to middle school, and who are Italian or have just arrived, and yet they are among our best users, they have a – I don’t want so to say a stereotype, not at all – however they grasp the importance almost much more than our young Italians, the importance of having a place like this where they can come freely and for free [...] and we managed, always pre-Covid, to involve about ten foreign mothers. Just as they were taking the children to school. Because there are also these difficulties, that maybe afterward they can’t leave the house, and basically on the way back, after taking the children to school, they would stop in the library and talk Italian with one of our volunteers. And so there we were – we realized that we had caught a need because we had just ten to twelve people, that are even too many. (*coordinator*)

We’ve never done a precise statistic with respect to that; however, we’ve always had the impression that a part of the people who have a history of immigration behind them are much more interested or have a better perception of what it is to use public spaces, so we actually have afternoons [...] that evidently in the children’s room are there are kids mostly belonging to families who come from other countries. In the baby room, we have books for very young children, also there, in many languages, and there are many families of families who attend that space. On the one hand, to also have a place to be, moms meet other moms, *dade* meet other *dade* [parental figures]... But this offer of books in mother tongues, and the proposal that the librarians who work in the baby room make, means that the lending [of] books in languages other than Italian has increased a lot... (*coordinator*)

The pandemic, as mentioned, has generated several more ‘excluded’ users and new perspectives of ‘caring.’ Several foreign users have been among them. First, because of the disruption of critical services, which are sometimes more challenging to replicate in mediated form. Reading groups for foreign mothers, for example, have been discontinued or interrupted several times:

In the summer, we saved the reading group for foreign mothers organizing outdoor activities in a garden, but now it is colder. We have their contacts; some would have liked to restart the language course... we had reorganized it to resume just today, but it got stuck, and they were left waiting [...] the women’s reading group is mainly a pretext for a group of women who are becoming literate... who are on a path. (*librarian*)

Talking with one of the coordinators about this issue, he presented to me what he thought was the ‘third lesson’ of Covid-19 (after digitalization and the importance of materiality): ‘normal’ conditions can hide the needs or habits of some particular users, generating possible distortions in the case of service changes:

You realize, we realize, when in situations of scarcity...situations of scarcity as we know bring out the critical...right? As long as we have money, for example, if the library has the money, it buys everything, and you don't make selections. However, that is not the purchasing policy. You have the purchasing policy when you have very little money, and you have to choose whether to buy an Einaudi essay or an essay by a particular author [...], and we realized that the physical library meets needs for which segmentation, or at any rate audience development, the study of publics precisely, is very useful. [...] for example, I realized that during the period when users could request books remotely and then come and get them, the relative percentage of different age groups did not change from when the library was open. [...] We realized, however, that the...for example, the users for whom we had prepared, with very long works, original language collections, so Russian, Urdu, Chinese, Arabic, Albanian, and so on...those disappeared. That is, that is a type of user that for a whole series of reasons that...we don't say them because we know them, in short, they are not used to using digital, to pick up the phone and call the library...This is something that is obviously not very positive, but that does not depend on us; it is a somewhat more structural issue, let's say, [...] But the lending of books in Russian, which had stellar lending, as a number, for example, has almost disappeared because, not being able to come to the library, users do not ask for them. Then there is also the language filter. If I want to read *The Name of the Rose* by Umberto Eco, it is written in a font that is my own, with a language that is my own: if I have to call, phone the librarian and say I want to read *The Name of the Rose*, I can say that. But if I'm a reader who likes novels in Russian, who maybe even speaks Italian poorly, and I have to call the library, talk to a person on the phone who maybe begins to understand little of what I'm saying, I have to explain to him what book I want...that is, it becomes a really insurmountable situation. So, in addition to trying to figure out how- but it's very complicated -to reduce this *mountain* that this slice of users has to overcome, we realized that anyway, the physical, the analog is something that meets needs, unexpressed, as usual. (*coordinator*)

Another aspect of this exclusion concerns that segment of citizens of foreign nationality who frequent libraries as a space where they stay, use the Internet, and meet. More generally, the closure of libraries has also hit the unemployed, the homeless, and all citizens in severe distress who habitually frequent these spaces. In addition to providing a safe shelter, a favorable climate, and access to some basics (including water, toilets, and the internet), libraries also advertised activities and support services, European and regional projects for the unemployed, etc. As also pointed out in some public meetings, in many Italian libraries, these users have disappeared or decreased, even in the months following the end of the crisis. It will be essential to monitor this phenomenon and integrate it with the broader effects that Covid-19 has had on the lives of these citizens.

[This library] is obviously a place, but we've been telling ourselves this for years now, where *people who don't have... a home*, the *homeless*, etc., etc., stop by... we have some who have been there since opening day and... these days when there is more control at the entrance anyway, we see them all around, in the neighboring areas, or in the areas where the homeless normally

meet in the city. Right now, they are staying outside... And it's obvious that all this has been missing and so let's say the picture is quite... I use a strong word, *desolating*... Because anyway we have been used to living inside this continuous movement of people. Which sometimes is also tiring, but this is, in short, the library... (*coordinator*)

And then, as you can imagine, we have the most diverse publics, for example, the publics we don't have now. I say this in a low voice because... we miss them a little bit; they are the ones who used to come here to *shelter*... that is, the ones we complain about, just in case, in our meetings... Um, for instance, ##, or Mrs. ##... we know them just by name [...] It's a place where they also come because it's cool in the summer and warm in the winter... they used to come and stay all day long, from opening to closing, but now we don't have this segment of the public anymore, *and we're sorry*. We are sorry because we realize that they were now part of the library audience. [...] there was a guy with cognitive type problems, with experiences, let's say, of drug addiction also, who now has ... he only reads books about soccer, about soccer, about soccer players, etc. ... then he actually takes two of them, puts himself in the chair, puts them next to him and dozes off, sleeps all day. But he is our user through; he is a user of the library, of this library. Of course, he would not be a user of the Archiginnasio; however, of this library, he is, and we need to somehow think about that and recover him. That is, it cannot be enough to say, 'I, whoever wants to read a book puts him in a condition to read a book,' because right now, I am not giving the possibility of the person who picks up the book, puts it next to him and then dozes off in the nice chair (*coordinator*)

Two segments of users who get special attention are confirmed to be elderly and young students in terms of recorded users and investment. For older people, libraries provide a place to visit to read, stay in touch with someone, and sometimes even stimulate themselves to exercise, practice their hobbies, or join volunteer groups. Some activities stimulate generational exchanges for mutual learning. For instance, Bread and Internet (*Pane e Internet*), a major regional digital literacy project that pairs senior citizens with students in 'school-to-work programs': they develop curiosity about new technologies, learn how to use a smartphone, or become independent in the use of computers.

Senior citizens, who were particularly vulnerable to the effects of the pandemic, were another group that lost these essential opportunities, being further disadvantaged in accessing digital tools and help networks. Librarians, who often know each of these users by name, have experienced moments of intense emotion and, when possible, have tried to maintain contact at a distance, offering books and assistance in using mediated communication tools.

To the people most... who we know are lonely... we called them home to ask how they were and if they wanted books... and when home lending was activated, to say, 'there is this service,' and we kept going... (*librarian*)

As hinted, the service offered to students and scholars has also been compromised in these two years. Bologna's public libraries significantly supported students through their spaces, textbooks, and access to the Internet. The closure of university libraries, bookstores, and

other spaces also compromised the ability to quickly find resources needed for study or at a limited cost. Similarly, researchers have been unable to access research resources, conduct literature searches, consult shelves, or specialized or special archives.

[I feel] disheartened, especially in regard to I have to tell the truth of you scholars and scholars, female researchers, I mean even a girl wrote to me... I don't have... there is no... Then maybe you will do beautiful things, but doing research at this time is really... [...] you really struggle, and so now we will put... so however also this anger (*coordinator*)

Libraries in Bologna are accustomed to focusing heavily on the very young as well, supporting school libraries and organizing hundreds of meetings a year with school classes, mainly in the form of visits to the library, followed by many loans. Such strategies are understood as a central “sowing a seed” to make the library known, even and especially outside the familiar, who do not always invite children to attend libraries and read. In some libraries, these activities are carried out by employees of cooperatives outside the municipality, mainly laid off during the lockdown; therefore, some remote activities have also been compromised. Some librarians had also put forward the possibility of libraries supporting schools by offering spaces where they could provide class splitting or hybrid teaching. Others pointed out that some limitations were, on the contrary, also opportunities to reformulate services in unexpected ways and serve even more “the individual needs of each”:

...Just yesterday, we had a meeting about a project [Xanadu] that we have had for... more than 15 years, together with the Hamelin association, targeting classes of teenagers and promoting reading among teenagers. And it involves, among other things, meetings with these Hamelin literature experts here in the library. [...] together with the Hamelin people, we librarians, and also some teachers, and we realized that the teachers told us that they wouldn't be able to go out in groups in the morning, you won't be able to go into the school, and so we made an effort to think, even there, another way, another way to carry on the project that we want to carry on anyway. So there is a whole part that is on a platform, so of exchange of the kids with respect to the books. But we also wanted an in-person thing and something that would make the library central. And so the idea that came to us is to create a kind of, in the afternoons, a kind of desk in which very small groups of kids have an appointment with the expert [...] So, it is true that you lose the classroom dimension, but you gain in a dimension of going to see precisely the individual needs of each one, leaving more space even for those who may be in a group do not speak and cannot express [...] Let's say that this need to limit and therefore to address a few people also has implications that seem interesting to us and that we will keep in mind even if this moment. Even if these limits, at some point, will no longer be necessary, we have discovered a dimension ... an *Other* dimension... of reception and access.

By redirecting the exploration of generational uses and segments, it is possible to identify a potential connection with Foucauldian heterotopia, which I have mentioned in Part I. Concluding this section, I would then like to advance a reflection about libraries as

mediations with ‘Other’ spaces and ‘Other’ times in the life course. According to Foucault (1966), the library may be one of those counter-places that suspend the space-time of everyday life by creating windows of existence that are continuous to it and, at the same time, contrary and ‘compensatory.’ A less highlighted aspect of this analysis is what the French philosopher refers to as ‘crisis heterotopias.’ They arise as possible devices for a space-time of passage. Such movement may or may not be related to an institutionalized rite of passage, but it is certainly related to a temporary need to respond to an ‘abnormality’, understood as a condition produced and oriented to the everyday. Such everyday ‘normality’ is understood as the space-time of overall society, but also the flow of the life course. Crisis heterotopia, that is, operates mainly as *heterochrony*, that is, the creation of space-times out of the normal flow of life in order to regulate or facilitate a possible return to normality. Therefore, I suggest that we ask whether use by certain age groups – and, more broadly, by citizens in a particular *status* – may respond to a heterochronic/heterotopic “crisis,” with respect to which the library, as an accumulation of *Other* spaces and *Other* times, acts as a form of support.

Continuing along these lines, we can highlight from Foucault’s thinking two possible heterotopias of crisis emerge, which place different emphasis on the status of those who access them: the heterotopia of crisis and the heterotopia of deviance. In the first case, heterotopia is underpinned by an idea of reversibility. It involves a temporary suspension responding to a condition (illness, age stage, unemployment, information need...) to move to a subsequent *topos* and re-enter the ‘ordinary’ flow, which is typically characterized in a normative sense. In the second case, the reversibility of the condition from ‘normality’ is questioned. From this Foucauldian ‘deviance’, one may never get out, and these heterotopias become places of ‘containment’ of the undesirable (according to Foucault, the extreme case is represented by total institutions such as asylums or prisons). At this stage, it might be interesting to reason that the library acts as a space-time that not only suspends and allows for the interrogation of ‘normality,’ but that it poses in a peculiar way with certain conditions of the individual, responding to specific needs with respect to the possibility of re-connecting life stages and social conditions. Since the library appears to be historically oriented with respect to crisis heterotopia (type I), the ‘movement’ it proposes is figuratively oriented toward a mending, ‘enabling’ the individual. For example, it is a place where the adolescent can escape from the adult world to come to be a part of it, a place to access the social and cultural *Other* to find or question oneself, a place to re-assemble one’s intellectual and technical knowledge (think of the elderly). Furthermore, the more problematic relationship with those conditions which the library perceives as unrelated to its ‘heterotopic capabilities’ suggests another way to address the problem of target publics and the ambivalent relationship between the library and social norms.

In other words, I am taking up the hypothesis of the library as a possible resistive place (Aptekar 2019; Lees 1997), trying to identify a more articulate description from the field. The perception of imbalance and the function of heterotopia refer, precisely, to the call for re-balancing, or contestation, discussed in Part I. It can be read as a reflection on the starting condition from which discontinuity has emerged. Foucault speaks in this regard of a *'space of illusion,'* even more illusory than the reality they represent, but for this reason, capable of denouncing its illusions. In this act of counter-representation, a demand for justice/intervention in the social order may emerge. While Foucault sketches the counter-action of heterotopia as compensation (in this sense, the library as heterotopia can help to counterbalance social inequalities), the possibility of a more radical corrective action remains unresolved. Therefore, I propose to distinguish 'compensation' from a more profound critical act, in the sense discussed in Chapter 1. Both seem relevant to understanding in what sense we can speak of the library as a 'civic place.' In conclusion to this chapter, I will return to this argument, trying to elaborate the concept of 'crisis' more comprehensively through a different expression.

7.2 Seeking balance: *between 'Piazzas' and 'Knowledge'*

Before concluding, I offer a brief discussion of some 'expert' perspectives present in the field, which show some articulations and connectors existing in Bologna libraries as a specific territorialization of the public domain. Symbolic boundaries could act as a vital compass throughout fieldwork and analysis, and the way they relate to specific social boundaries contributes to describing the library's role as a form of social infrastructure.

Matters of boundaries: outside, inside... and possible crossings

As the previous chapter discussed, meaning reconstruction plays a critical role in stabilizing certain boundaries. Here, I refer to the specific symbolic boundaries demarking the territory of the public library in relation to the binary discourse of civil society (Alexander 2007). According to the premise of the study and the early conclusions so far, I argue that the fundamental distinctions within the idea of library *thirdness* are related to how they reflect the aspirations and ideals of social justice. Such definitions emerge from empirical and historical articulations of the idea of the library and variable social referents.

Let us consider an exchange with a library coordinator, which displays the definition of the library's purposes as a precarious *'course.'* The identification of a mission emerges as a precarious attempt to draw boundaries and thresholds through the careful and continuous

reading of the territory but orienting with professional principles. Since she introduced the idea of ‘responding to needs,’ I asked:

– What needs do you think should be, or are currently, that the library creates?

– Well, in our case, they have been to have usable spaces comfortably; one thing that we currently still can’t offer, for example, are spaces.... for shared workstations, *co-working*, I’m just saying [...] they’ve been asking us for years [...] It can be documentation in other languages; this is constantly being asked of us, a little bit beyond our function as a public library. So, they go in different directions. However, spaces for shared study and shared working are a necessity. I mean, it is a necessity. Even the fact that we are [...] a central city also from the point of view of its ... territory, right? Compared to other directions ... makes it so that it can be a meeting place. So, so many times we have been told, ‘er, we come one from here, one from there, we would like to meet in Bologna, which is in the middle, and we would like to work together,’ this is... a quite common request. [...]

– And how do you think these kinds of services relate to... I don’t know; you called it ‘confusion,’ or, anyway, let’s say, the complex definition of what is proper in a space like this?

– AH! ...it’s hard to say... it’s hard to say, in the sense that... Yes, one tries to keep the bar in one direction. But one tries precisely also... to respond to the needs in short. If I have a request to have a shared study space... *how can it make a difference between shared study rooms and co-working spaces?* I mean, they are very, very, very labile things. Differently is the fact of hosting ... courses of all kinds here, yoga classes or things like that, like that. I consider this... I consider it to be *outside*... the scope of the library, in short. (*coordinator*)

Such ‘outside’ clearly emerges within precise frames of meaning, which relate to the sensibilities of those who ‘hold the wheel’ and help plan the library as a place. At a more complex level, ‘direction’ also relates to broader debates and frames, for example, to the theme of the ‘creative’ economy, the extension of public space to support work activities, to the strong sensitivities of the idea of the Knowledge Square (*Piazza del Sapere*), or, today, to the idea of a ‘city of proximity’. I do not intend here to propose relativism – understood in its most negative sense – but to try to plausibly restore, that is, to make sense of, the way meanings are constructed within library *idiocultures* such as those of Bologna libraries. To do so, I consider some concrete examples of how they are formed within *networks* of actors and meanings, which are sedimented but flexible and contested.

– Who or how should pose these kinds of limits?

– Mh... hehe... I don’t know! I mean, over the years, we’ve also adjusted the wheel because we have also been subjected to pushes. I don’t know, how can I say here? There was someone around us, who had a role, who would have preferred, or suggested because then it’s not that... I mean, it’s not that we receive any leg-breaking interventions from anyone; however, someone suggested precisely a... greater openness, and so on... Even there... it’s true that in the United States, let’s say, you look for a job by going to the library... Er, we had a job counter a few years ago, which opened once a week, etc. But the municipality moved it to another place, and it works better; I mean, it is also a cultural fact, I don’t know how to say, it works better... in the sense that yes, it is dedicated and therefore it is more ‘readable,’ clearer. [...] It does not belong to our cultural tradition; I mean... now... hehe, here we are... we are amiably talking about a place that... most of the Italian population does not frequent. Libraries are not attended by.... the universe. Maybe there are customs in other countries that are different...

I find it particularly interesting how the distinction between what is ‘appropriate’ and ‘inappropriate,’ and between ‘innovation’ and respect for ‘cultural tradition’ emerges as layered with meanings and references in a complex geography. The continuity between ‘study spaces’ and ‘co-working spaces,’ for example, may be justified in the framework of a ‘centrality of the city’ and a fluidity between library ‘third place’ and the ‘second place’ of work, but it may conflict with the idea of the library as a social service, in the context of an implicit reference to some promoters of an extended sociality. Beyond the specific declinations, which I consider here only by way of example, the issue highlights specific mechanisms of meaning production within the library and how they are empirically appreciable.

The recent versions of the library debate, thus decomposed, decisively re-present the question of whether the ‘innovative’ library is able to communicate a transformed and clear institutional image to its audiences or whether, on the contrary, it risks attracting a particular audience while alienating others (Evans 2018). In the new production of space, the latter may be the users most loyal to a ‘tradition,’ but also those citizens not curious enough, cosmopolitan enough, or literate enough to the “language in use” of the new urban culture (Semi 2015:103).

On the other hand, there is a more complex aspect to the issue of publics and ‘innovative’ uses. Let us return to the example of co-working spaces and the idea of the library as a second/third place. In public spaces such as libraries, when students, workers, designers, homeless people, and other different users share spaces, some features remain overt while others disappear or are suspended (Goffman 1971). There is, again, a question of visibility:

(Borgo Panigale, 11/19)

I spend some time writing, sitting at one of these tables. In half an hour or so, 2-3 people left and came. Those who remain look like “professionals,” “workers,” in their 50s-60s, with a dark work folder and in the act of reading various papers [...] six students [...] and two other men, again with computers. I wonder if there are or may be individuals in a situation of vulnerability beyond what may transpire from the external features and clothing. Who comes here? Is the absence of certain differences apparent? Are they mitigated because they are “paused” by the “third place”?

They could be – to a certain extent – ‘anyone.’ Indeed, categorical distinctions based on visible characters predominate in public spaces, but some spaces are more exclusive than others. ‘Innovative’ spaces may not only reproduce potentially exclusive codes but also provide thresholds and requirements for access. That is, even in the library, they can segment, exclude, privatize, and expand margins of discretion in the use and open access. The idea of simply ‘acquiring’ or translating existing models within the walls of innovative libraries, as in the case of spaces of sociability and consumption, seems to prevail. However, conversely, it

can activate debates and stir an oppositional ‘civil’ response, that is, through the denunciation of infringements of the values of the ‘common’ so central to library thirdness. Therefore, if the library continues to display and enhance its critical gaze – as we have mentioned in the case of digital – new perspectives could also be put on the table, including alternatives to established or emergent models.

As I have illustrated earlier, Bologna libraries are a context that ponders on library polyvalency and the idea of library’s ‘social’ role, not least due to its innovative character throughout the years and some key figures that have characterized its recent developments.

...I come from a time when libraries were inside multipurpose cultural centers. There was a law of the Emilia-Romagna region that had established them, and so libraries were inside places, often just inside these neighborhood centers, where there was a mixture of cultural activities of various kinds. And then this kind of vision has been abandoned because it is precisely outdated [...] So, in short, this is also one of the reasons why I do not see it in the same way as Antonella Agnoli, among others, sees it, who does nothing but present in this aspect things that in fact precisely we saw in the 70s and early 80s, and then we abandoned because, in short, I remember the librarian of the library where I used to go to ask for things regarding classic school research, and he proposed me to take a guitar course... (*librarian*)

– Well, let’s say... on this issue of openness to the social, there has been a great debate for many years, in which we have also been, as it were, pulled a bit to one side and another [...] There are experiments that are a bit... dunno, a little strange. [...]

– ‘Confusion’ you said... so how do you set boundaries?

– No... not *a priori*... Exactly, one can give oneself an underlying direction, okay? But it is not definable *a priori*. I mean, really, it’s the context that guides you, in my opinion. Again, the fact that we live in a city where there are probably a hundred libraries.... That is relevant, in my opinion. [...] Again, if I had to do my job in a small town where I am the only cultural institution, I frankly don’t know what I would do. I’m just saying this honestly; I don’t ... I don’t have experience with it. I have no experience with it, and I think it makes a very, very big difference. (*coordinator*)

From this perspective, it might be interesting to observe how other transformations, such as new robotics and digital facilitation activities, or the fluid and expansive character of spaces like Salaborsa, are positioned. It is impossible to gather the wide range of discussions on the subject here, but I think these examples identify a significant direction.

[Salaborsa] did not risk confusion because it has very, very *strong services*. [...] the activities that are proposed are somehow related to the library’s collections [...] The conference room at the moment is not; I mean, we also use it as a library, but at the moment, it is not the library’s thing. So actually, we are embedded within, to this that is growing and is called the Quadrilateral of Culture, and so we are within a moving of ‘other’ things, but that is about... that are always about culture. And I find it very nice that the library, with its strong identity [...], is united with all, with all these things. And ... I say strong identity because precisely by the citizens, often, all the things that are done here inside are perceived as things of the library, while instead, not all of them are ... not beautiful things the library. But certainly, the presence of the library, even now, is the one that prevails here inside, even though there are now so many indications with respect to other things that are present. I’m thinking of the music room

that is being built up, and the possibility of accessing the municipal art collections from here, for example. And with respect to the café, I think it's critical that in a place where people are staying, there is a place where they can refresh themselves, and I find that beautiful. It is no coincidence that in all the big European cities, in places of culture, there is always space for refreshment. (*coordinator*)

We shall question, for example, whether such a 'strong identity' rather than ensuring easy distinction creates a homogenization by users, an 'all-togetherness' under the framework of the library. Again, is it possible to rearticulate the library in such a complex way by suspending the problem of the institutional image? (Evans 2018) In the question of porosity between primary and secondary proposals, the discriminating element seems to be the precarious distinction between 'acting as a library' and 'co-codesign.' I will return to this.

The redrawing of symbolic boundaries arises from complex processes embedded in a broad network of relationships. Sometimes, the idea of expanding or crossing boundaries can initiate a redefinition of meaning, often from the emergence of social boundaries. Many of the relevant repertoires express an interesting tension between justice and institutional mandate.

Well, look, [what should be left] *outside*, I don't know. But certainly, pure social service is not our competence; it can also take place inside, but it cannot be carried out by staff who do not have those skills: there is also the risk of doing damage! [...] There is a risk of not being able, for example, precisely if there is a drug addict or a person who needs special needs that are specific to social service. I mean, that it is a social service that gives it not to us [...] So outside there should be nothing left, maybe outside *there should be the market*. [...] we don't sell – in short, access from us is free. Then there can be specific forms of service for a fee; however, we do not sell anything. So this, maybe, if there is one thing that has to stay out, it is the market. (*president of Libraries Institution*)

The librarian is a well-defined professional figure.... Then, *out of kindness* ... in a spirit of '*civil*' service, I would say, toward the community, librarians also fit to do other things ... BUT We also risk making mistakes! Because it's not that the professions are interchangeable; in my opinion, that's it.... Then, instead, if you say, 'okay, one afternoon a week, we have the educator or the social worker in the library' " [...] That I don't see that as wrong, in the same way [...] you can do things with schools. But we don't replace teachers, though. Why do we have to replace other professionals? It is not our job; we are not trained to do that.... (*coordinator*)

Well, I think they are all uses, from the ones that seem more proper [...] to the ones that seem more improper, apparently, are all uses that the library has to guarantee because, anyway, the library has to guarantee *a safe place*... a friendly place where everybody can feel at home and where everybody can get precisely the information that they ask for. And in many cases, unfortunately, they are... er, how can I say.... is an approach that is guaranteed by the humanity of the librarian, the personality of the librarian. In the sense that many people come to us and ask to write their resume, help to check their residence permit, or check their appointment at the department of motor vehicles, and various things... to print an email, which actually we don't have the printing service, but we do it anyway, or the old man comes, and his smartphone is jammed, and then, if I have a moment, I give him a hand... These are all activities, however, that are related to individual skills and *individual humanitarian spirit*, let's

say so, of the librarian. They are not recognized activities. (*coordinator*)

... a discourse of pushed welfare, that is, taking care of the homeless or those who don't know where to go because it's cold. That, in my opinion, I think you could say it goes *a little bit too further*. Or at least it has to be run, maybe the venue can even be the library if it's needed, but it has to be run by competent workers. [...] No, er, I meant to say it's not excluded. Because you just have to put through... get around a table and decide what you want to do and give the tools to do it. I give an example: at the Spina Library, which is from the Pillar, many years ago [...] when they had a problem with kids invading the library without respecting the rules, they did something [...] There was a collaboration, and they did an ad hoc project, which worked. That's what I mean. This example allows me to explain myself better. Practically *nothing is excluded* from the library as a place placed in a neighborhood, in a very specific territory. The important thing is that librarians do the activities of librarians, and everything else has to be shared. (*coordinator*)

What role does the problem of institutional recognition play? In these and other accounts, I recognized three typical discourses. First, a regime of justification for institutional 'preclusion' (i.e., it is not recognized, and should not, respecting the primary function). Second, a question of 'professional expertise' (i.e., the librarian does not have the appropriate skills and responsibility). Third, recognition within a strategic vision (i.e., if it can be recognized in a coordinated and strategic way, appropriate action is possible). Within different perspectives, there is overlap: e.g., the third one may prevail and relate to the first one, to enable institutional recognition, or the second one, to develop synergies and 'ensure' responsibility. Similarly, the former may support the latter to demarcate a new agenda. In my view, no repertoire privileges specific thresholds *per se*, but constitutes a different regime of justification: within the primary 'cultural' function can be included an extensive range of actions, just as the demand for a strategic vision can be centered on the multiplication of professionalism and functions within the institution.

As mentioned, the specific arrangement of symbolic boundaries results from the mobilization and negotiation of multiple elements. I have summarized two of them so far. The first is the problem of the 'boundary' as an act of meaning construction conducted by 'listening' to the territory. The symbolic boundary appears blurred in practice but polarized in the politics of space production, and it is displayed through binary-type distinctions between the 'proper' and the 'improper.' The second is the possibility of questioning these boundaries on the very basis of the act of 'listening,' and bringing into play diverse expertise and collaborations through forms of co-design and partnerships.

The negotiation of new boundaries can be based on binary distinctions. The most relevant seems to be the 'civil' one, that is, oriented to the values of inclusion and justice (Alexander 2007). It also peculiarly interrogates the dimension of collaboration and the role of different publics as stakeholders.

'Cultural' in what sense? Libraries as 'subjectifiers'

I have largely discussed 'extensive' perspectives on culture and sociality. Below, I consider a 'narrower' type of narrative than the model of the *Piazza*, to enhance the complexity of some representations beyond the social/cultural idealtypical division, and identify a possible convergence. I intend this direction not as a forced synthesis of arguments nor as a prevailing and coherent discourse. Indeed, it offer the opportunity to observe how the association of various discourses and practices within an organizational system produces articulated constructions of meaning, which develop around the critical elements that I am underlining. First and foremost, the idea of the library as an 'enabling' infrastructure, as emerged in the previous sections.

Well, in my opinion, they are first of all places, as I said before, to access knowledge, and look, it's a lot! That is not a limitation. On the contrary, by saying that they are places of access to knowledge, I am saying that, in my opinion, they are places of, how to say, extraordinary importance for the *construction of citizenship* in the full sense of this term; it is their main mission. So how to say it is true and it is not true that they have a social function: they have it, but they have this social function in a special way [...] However, libraries are free places [...] they don't ask you for anything, they don't ask you to do anything or pay anything, if little, and so they have a specialty that should be preserved and that naturally attracts the very weaker social groups... precisely the elderly, children, doesn't it? So, I have always experienced them that way. I have always interpreted them as a place that has access to knowledge as its fundamental mission. But because of the characteristics of the service they offer, they are *safe havens*, places of comfort also in favor of creating citizenship.

...the fact that it is a meeting place is *a secondary effect* of the fact that it is a place of access to culture. And this, for me, is very important to point out because, in the face of this thinking of libraries as a meeting place [...], there is a tendency to build places that actually don't define themselves as libraries but places where you can meet and hoping that then the whole discourse of the library, of access to culture will come afterward. And this, in my opinion, greatly diminishes the role of libraries. Now, to tell a joke that a colleague of mine often makes.... there was this book by Antonella Agnoli called the *Knowledge Piazzas*, 'here we always hope that they are more *knowledge* than *piazzas*, because we already have the *piazza* out there.' [...] In my opinion, *libraries are not meeting places*. Libraries are places of access to various kinds of literacy, places of access to culture, and that's what they are. Everything about culture brings with it secondary effects, though. And one of the secondary effects is that you are in a space that offers you... that offers you tools and resources that you can experience, with others, though. And I think that's a big part of the value of good libraries [...] There have been those who have defined the library as a 'third space' such as the barbershop or the coffee shop. Here, I think *it is even more* precisely because it is a public space; it is a space where you are with other people and where you share a common good, a common good inherent in culture and knowledge. And I think this is a value, a very important value. Also because the library makes it possible to *represent yourself* as someone who has access to culture.

As discussed in Part I, the idea of the library as a cultural *common* and the library as a *Piazza* are different but not antithetical: one of the fundamental theses of the latter is that libraries are 'piazzas' because they are places where all are welcomed as equals. On the other hand, the spatial metaphor and the emphasis on sociality are challenged here, and redefined in

terms of ‘sharing common goods’ and a ‘common socialization to culture’ as a means of inclusion. The elements of co-presence and conviviality emerge as a secondary effect of the access to a common cultural good and propaedeutic to its valorization as part of citizens’ ‘self-representation.’

Such a ‘self-representation’ has a thick meaning and recall the ambivalent role of culture as a means of emancipation and inclusion. Echoing a somewhat pedagogical-paternalistic view of culture, it could interpret the idea of solidarity in civil society as assimilation (1.2). However, these respondents reject an elitist idea of knowledge: “knowledge-culture is also a very, very ‘pop thing’ here... yes, it’s a lot, precisely it’s in it hip pop, it’s in singing, it’s in movies, it’s in video gaming.” In the shared spaces of the library, I saw new citizens studying Italian language and asking local students for help, and homeless people taking their places among readers and visitors. For some, a magazine in their hands or a book next to their lying body are necessary, daily strategies to counter stigma or to justify their behavior in public spaces. Nonetheless, they may allow for human connection and the possibility of feeling entitled to belong to the common space and community. In other cases, reading and learning can bring different people together, enrich their perspectives, and rearticulate their subjectivity. In the words of one respondent:

Our goal is to help make sure that citizens are at least informed or educated people [...] Moving independently. Finding truthful news and not just relying on the first hoax that pops up for you by browsing Facebook or whatever social network you have. [...] For me, that’s the real frontier that needs to be addressed, broken down, and crossed; it’s really that of... *making people autonomous* so that they have precisely the ability to find any kind of information that allows them to make informed decisions ... of any kind, even ‘I’m going to become a vegetarian rather than a vegan,’ but, in short, making decisions in absolute autonomy.

The argument developed in this section does not capture all facets of the library as a cultural phenomenon. Here, I suggest developing a new perspective on the topic of the publics and the debate of the library as an infrastructure for civic life. The idea of the library as heterotopia can show how the recognition of ‘the normal and the abnormal,’ of what is perceived as ‘needy or unnecessary,’ emerges from a precise historical and empirical process. Or, in other words, how they result from a complex network of *signifiers* and *subjectifiers* that associate the educational and recreational functions of places like the library with particular social groups and values.

Recalling the link between practices of use, imaginaries, and social norms, we can recalibrate the focus on the connection between library function, social change, and cultural reproduction. Thus, a second clarification follows from this first one: it is crucial to continue to question the link between the identification of needs and power relations. If we add this

leverage to the understanding of the library, it raises a direction that is anything but neutral in what I have called, following Zukin and others, the ‘ambivalence of the public.’ It is then necessary to return to that distinction between ‘suspension’ as a *restorative act* or as a *critical potential*, discussed in the previous paragraph. Otherwise, the library as heterotopia is not a civic space open to counter-action (*cf.* Part I) but only a conservative expression of the ambivalence of contemporary democracy.

The critical potential highlighted by some scholars is perhaps to be found in the more generative meaning of heterotopia, which in these chapters, I have attempted to sketch through the concept of *redesign*, or *re-chaining*, of the ‘internal’ and ‘external’ articulations of the library actor-network, capable of acting on the public regime of intervisibility.

Conclusion: What lessons about library *sociality*?

The aim of understanding which forms of sociality the library can generate remains open and has received further insights. In particular, the divergence between in-group bonds (friendship networks, associations, ...) and inter-group bonds seems to have been stressed. Regarding the former, the library spaces seem to offer primarily resources for aggregation and, to some extent, opportunities for coordinated projects aimed at portions of the community. As for the latter, a further operational hypothesis emerged since the beginning: although the construction of ‘weak’ and ‘strong’ relations as a resource to shape cultural boundaries is not to be excluded, it seems fruitful to deepen the idea of a “low intensive” civil encounter. In other words, it seems helpful to examine the interpretative keys of “civil inattention” and “civility” (Anderson 2012; Goffman 2008) to understand how libraries can socialize to diversity as a neutral place of coexistence (Audunson et al. 2007; Bergamaschi and Castrignanò 2013). Clearly, limitations and exceptional times have partly affected the possibility of deepening this dimension. However, data from early observations and interviews provided some examples.

Moreover, I presented some services that Bologna libraries offer to citizens, focusing on specific groups. During lockdown periods, citizen support was compromised, and some social categories suffered the most. The exceptional situation emphasized existing fragilities in libraries but also the importance they play along with other cultural, social, and health services, and the need for new investments and strategies.

In the second part of this chapter, I analyzed some of the processes of definition and redefinition underlying significant symbolic boundaries in the field, and how they may relate to the idea of the library as a regulatory agent of the civic sphere. Recalling some of the elements discussed earlier on the new Library Sector and delving into some discourses, I

have shown how it is possible to trace meaning construction and how the latter combine with the politics of space production. Moving from some examples, I drew specific observations about the case, which integrate with ongoing urban dynamics and other themes that have been made *explicit* during the pandemic and the redesign of the governance.

In the chapter, I proposed to approach some library experiences through the lens of the ‘heterotopia of crisis’ to explore the idea of the library as a counter-place in relation to specific conditions of individuals and the society. We can observe the idea of reparation as a ‘correction’ of asymmetries in the social order, but also the idea of the deviant individual. The latter introduces a conditionality concerning recognition in society and represents the more prescriptive character of forms of heterotopia such as the library, rooted in the role of an order-oriented ‘power-knowledge’. From this point of view, the *transitional crisis/radical deviance* duality emerges in the ambivalence that characterize the public domain – and that of the library in particular – through the binary distinctions of the ‘proper’ and the ‘improper,’ the ‘decent’ and the ‘indecorous.’

However, there is no direct overlapping between these oppositions and the binary ‘civil’/‘uncivil’ distinction, as is the case with the ‘problem patron’ or the ‘uncivil citizen.’ In other words, what or who is placed in visibility in the public may or may not draw the boundaries of the civil society in an inclusive way. On the one hand, the library, especially in its paternalistic-ideological incarnation, can indeed participate in a definition of the civil in hegemonic terms. In other words, as a mediating agent of the principles of the Civil Sphere, the library can perpetuate an ideal of access to knowledge as a ‘civilizing’ condition (the ‘educated’ citizen). As I have discussed on several occasions, this has been particularly the case in the past; however, it regularly emerges as an expression of any symbolic arrangement within asymmetries of power (for example, in the complex landscape of the cosmopolitan city). The project of the civil sphere of justice is, indeed, continually in the making. On the other hand, the other side of ‘ambivalence of the public’ leads us back to the ‘critical’ nature of heterotopia, which addresses society and its possible asymmetries. In this case, the normative referring to the individual is particularly foggy but also *fluid*. Thus, the call for structural reparation may emerge in terms of ‘civil’ critique, reading crisis and differences as violations of solidarity and justice.

To understand this dual process, we should consider how the library produces such a counter-space. Let us consider the two main movements: the suspension of space-time and the reparation act. Moreover, let us momentarily keep aside those exclusive, contradictory, porous aspects I have already emphasized, leaving them ‘explicit.’ Similar to other spaces, which we have referred to as ‘civic’ or social infrastructure, library *thirdness* offers conditions of conviviality, sociality, and co-presence. Unlike other spaces (in its peculiarity), the library

common gives access to ‘other’ spaces and ‘other’ times through documentary forms. Based on the experiences analyzed, it seems that this first set primarily refers to the first moment of heterotopia: that is, the accumulation of experiences as texts.

In the case of ‘sociality’ as a form of interaction, the critical moment *may* emerge if exposure to otherness generates reflection, ‘folk ethnography,’ or ‘critical discussion’ (in the ways outlined in the chapter). In this case, since society is represented and reproduced outside the flow of normality, it is susceptible to interrogation. However, the critical potential is normally assigned to the ‘documentary’ facet of the library as heterotopia, as it represents the founding and constitutive core of the library as the contemporary institution of knowledge order. This perspective typically privileges individual actions such as reading and learning, or social encounters oriented toward discussion, intergenerational exchange, and skills development. On the other hand, the idea of the social library as a meeting place has emerged over time precisely as a counter-balance to critical or disregarded aspects of the former: it is a demand for ‘publicness’ understood as ‘diversity’ (*cf.* 1.2), it is a demand for a space of recognition elsewhere progressively denied. As I have shown, precisely ‘solidaristic’ judgments support ‘extensive’ readings of the library’s scope toward a sociality *tout court*. Enriched with ‘critical’ potential, the traditional ‘cultural-documentary’ facet can envisage the extension of libraries on the front of structural inequality and cultural welfare strategies. The emphasis is thus on the value of knowledge as an ‘enabling’ process, understood as political intervention.

Much of the controversy over the idea of the library’s ‘mission’ and the ‘social library’ stems from the fact that both the ambition to ‘sociality’ and the ambition to ‘culture’ are primarily fueled by principles of justice. However, following Alexander, sometimes they arise from ‘non-civil’ principles (two examples are audience development as an economic driver and the creation of ‘attractive’, but potentially exclusive, cultural scenes). Returning to the act of reparation of the heterotopia as a *civil repair*, the critical potential of the library supports the idea of a re-articulation of the regimes of intervisibility. Libraries can contribute to making social texts *visible* and re-design asymmetrical regimes to shape a new collective life. In conclusion, this thesis identifies an idea of social infrastructure in a new way, to which I give the temporary name of *civil rechainning*.



Salaborsa and its covered square

Salaborsa LAB "Roberto Ruffilli", opening event





Past and present meet in Salaborsa

Stories and representations at Lame "Cesare Malservigi" library





Luigi Spina library and its surroundings, Pilastro

Corticella "open book", library and civic center



Conclusion

A library *way* to the city?

This research has addressed the public library as a form of social infrastructure, contributing to the study of situated conditions that foster civil life and social inclusion. The project has focused on Bologna's Library and Cultural Welfare Sector through a qualitative study conducted between 2019 and 2022. This final section summarizes the work and offers overall considerations, drawing from the multifaceted analysis offered in the previous section. First, I will briefly recall the project's rationale, giving space for some concluding theoretical and methodological reflections. Finally, I recall the main contributions that emerged through the threads of the third section, attempting to depict a comprehensive picture of a 'library way of association.'

Summary

In the first part of the text, I presented emerging questions in light of state of the art. I discussed some critical points related to the concepts of 'public library' and 'social library' and pointed out some directions of inquiry relevant to the social sciences. This study joins the rare sociological contributions on this subject and offers an empirical contribution to the field of library science which, over the years, has promoted an interdisciplinary gaze and called for appropriate studies. Combining the languages of librarianship and sociology, the early chapters have outlined the most significant problems. The two first contributions I have offered are the consideration of library 'publicness' through the lens of the regimes of association and a way to address the social relevance of the library beyond its democratic ideal or a strict denotation of the 'social' library as a meeting space. The first argument is that the library's public domain emerges as a system of relationships spatially sedimented and

symbolically oriented to the values of civil solidarity. The ‘intellectual space’ of libraries, in the form of heterotopia, maintains an ambivalent nature in the demarcation of the ‘common’ through forms of mediation and accessibility but provides critical potential as a ‘civil agent.’ On the matter of the library and the ‘social,’ I have supported the adoption of library ‘thirdness’ as a sensitizing concept as long as we delve into the forms of interaction and recognition involved in the underlying idea of ‘neutrality’ of such spaces. I have thus discussed current perspectives and pointed out a set of elements that deserve researchers’ attention. I have marked the risk of interpreting the social nature of spaces such as libraries based on assumed practices or ideals. Both arguments converge on the possibility of making sense of ‘what happens’ in the public library through the dense observation of social experience, holding together materiality and relations but also the semi-autonomous role of relevant landscapes of meaning. In the course of the research, through the normal adaptation to the field and the occurrence of exceptional conditions, this sociological gaze was attenuated on the micro-sociological level and enriched with the language of ‘explicitation’ and articulation. This shift was nonetheless consistent with the premise of the study, which can be framed in the proposal to bring together the main theoretical views with an actor-network sensibility to capture, in a new way, what the social character of public libraries is.

Part II has discussed the research design and presented a narrative account of the fieldwork. The situated character of the research represented another pivotal element in its design, guiding the choices through fieldwork and subsequent elaborations. The project evolved following certain operational delimitations and attempting to sketch its conditional plausibility; from this, it is possible to highlight what the present contribution consists of and what it does not offer instead. First, this research does not provide an in-depth study of users, an analysis of needs, or an assessment of the ‘performance’ of specific libraries according to librarianship standards. The analyses address the variety of practices that exist in the context but do not provide a comprehensive overview of the vast cultural opportunities in the city. Fieldwork has offered knowledge about social relations and the relationship with the territory but does not offer a precise analysis of communities or an analysis of social capital. The focus on social vulnerability as an exploratory key was valuable and consistent with the premises, but – given the conditions – this work does not constitute a study of social marginality. Through prolonged fieldwork and attention to relationships, the research offers a glimpse into organizational dynamics and meaningful representations of meaning. Conditions of exceptionality and transformation are interrogated in a substantive way, offering novel reflections. The significance of the research is mainly expressed in the description of connections and modes of association sedimented over time between places, subjects, and policies in the context of an eloquent case.

The emergence of key themes related to the case study and data analysis guided Part III's structure. The last section was not directly derived from the theoretical framework but developed coherently to answer research questions. Chapter 5 offered a bridge between the parts of the overall structure, relating the research questions to the scenario of Italian libraries and the peculiarities of Bologna's civic libraries, and introducing some relevant dimensions to develop their exploration. On the one hand, the use of the library risks remaining a marginal practice due to low attitudes toward reading, lifelong learning, and other cultural and recreational activities. On the other hand, the role of libraries in promoting these practices within cultural welfare faces substantial territorial inequalities, a severe lack of investment, and poor policy assessment and evaluation. Among the most relevant issues to date, I highlighted the role of the library in an integrated idea of well-being, the topic of citizen involvement throughout life, and the strategic importance of outstanding cases in a fragmented and data-deficient scenario. Concerning Bologna, I have given particular interest to historical specificities and the connections between the present network of municipal libraries and the new faces of urban 'imagination' and planning. Current phenomena are marked by tension between the city's 'historical' and 'intended' polycentrism and new trends that risk stifling the proactive potential of Bologna civil life. Proximity and participation risk being drained of meaning to the benefit of forms of peripheralization. The emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic and the organizational transformation of municipal libraries has further required a critical observation of crucial actors – such as libraries, universities, municipality, and the Foundation for Urban Innovation – and how they act as co-producers of ongoing processes but also as important critical forces.

Chapter 6 focused on the relationship between libraries and change, focusing on the most recent and contingent events: the organizational transformation process of the Library and Cultural Welfare Sector and the pandemic crisis. The two processes temporarily overlapped and interpellated a number of latent and emerging dimensions of the relationship between libraries and society. Comparing each other beyond exceptionality, they provide insights into the behavior of libraries in the face of rapid transformations and question critical aspects of the library as a form of social infrastructure: the relationship with the digital, the meanings of interaction in library spaces, the role of expertise, and the role of the library in the urban scenario. From the concept of 'explicitation,' reinterpreted from a sociological perspective, I suggested a theory of organization consistent with the arguments of Part I. By approaching a system as a stabilized set of associations in which latent meanings and phenomena can be redefined, it is possible to observe its compositions, its internal relations, its immune strategies, its attempts to redesign its own 'atmosphere.' Some of these processes have contributed to exploring the library as a social object in a novel way.

In chapter 7, I delved into the central theme of the ‘social’ library, in the complex connotation presented in Chapter 2, and outlined how forms of sociality are understood and performed in Bologna’s civic libraries. Through some accounts and vignettes, I confirmed previous observations on relationships in public and provided further notes. I also investigated the library’s role as infrastructure during the Covid-19 pandemic and discussed some forms of symbolic distinction related to the public library and their implications in terms of the civic sphere of solidarity.

Notes on the sociological imagination

Textualization usually requires selecting and arranging for consistency and clarity by favoring those elements that are more directly contested, used, or supported by the investigation. One of the advantages of extensive accounts, such as those derived from ethnographies, is the possibility of leaving more explicit the possible gaps between starting framework and the final account. This opportunity is particularly offered by doctoral research. As I have discussed, my qualitative study was not intended to linearly confirm current (rather varied) hypotheses; nevertheless, it was theoretically oriented. Therefore, the first part of the paper neither premised a rigid set of hypotheses nor a mere reconstruction of the grounded theories or selected perspectives based on the fieldwork. I left the obligation of showing selections and adaptations to research design (Part II) and analytical reflections (Part III). While having to commit to a certain level of clarity and parsimony, the explication of a broad starting framework (also composed of unexplored, under-valued or denied paths) ensures, within the logic of an analogical argumentation (Part II), the full appreciation of the case study in relation to the phenomenon, thus its area of plausibility.

While academic careers and the market of scientific publication risk narrowing the field for temporally extended and textually dense investigations, the analysis of readjustments and problematic aspects risks being muted by performative pressures. The formative character of doctoral research provides a more significant opportunity to appreciate the cognitive value of error and the unexpected.⁶⁶ Since it should be assumed, given appropriate goals and strategies, that any research design encounters obstacles, the appreciation of a study has wider leverage than the results themselves. In this sense, the recalibration of themes and findings during fieldwork and textualization can broaden the leverage of research, relying on unexpected outcomes and misjudgments.

⁶⁶ Whether this is more or less the case in the hard sciences, or in the social sciences, or in the humanities, and what the possible reasons are, are questions I cannot develop here, but interesting to recall.

Qualitative methods, particularly sensitive to the dialogic character of research phases, manifest a position of advantage. Not surprisingly, the most established field for valorizing the ‘process’ remains the methodological one, starting with the theme of reflexivity and argumentative responsibility within research processes. The possible extension of these evaluations from reflexive analysis to more substantive consideration of research outcomes remains relevant. For this reason, I recall some of the themes of Part II within this conclusion. Qualitative research consists indeed of “a symphony in four movements” (Cardano 2020:100-1): from planning to reconstruction, my complex ‘journey’ presented a variety of opportunities to appreciate the conditional character of research. The language of explicitation, applied to fieldwork, can unveil fundamental aspects of sociological imagination under exceptional conditions.

“*So, what did you find out?*” At some point in the last months of my stay, these words began to present themselves. Whether asked by a research participant, a researcher, or a friend, the question was both challenging and thought-provoking: indeed, at the end of my journey, what had I *discovered*? After two exceptional years, which challenged the research, its subjects, and the condition of researchers and method, the answer could not be formulated simply considering the original questions or new ones. While I elaborated on the concepts of association and explicitation, and many of us observed the emergence of old and new paradigms, I felt it necessary to take up the very idea of sociological ‘discovery.’ To avoid getting lost in a broad debate, my point of reference is, once again, the specific problem of the ‘social’ character of the library. Hopefully, it will also be my point of arrival.

Research always necessitates the consideration of scales, a continuous redefinition of boundaries (of the canvas), and associative ties (within and without the canvas). My fieldwork has been partly raised from micro-interaction to connections on the urban plane. However, the gaze has not shifted: the analysis has anchored itself in micro-observations, particular subjects, situated repertoires, and specific associations between entities. The exceptional nature of the moment made it difficult to maintain relationships, and continued to interrogate the boundaries and directions of the field. It thus called for a greater exercise in widening the gaze and the sensitivity to the margins: in other words, it stimulated more forcefully the need for a sociological sensibility for the less solid and obvious relationships among sites, actors, groups, and narratives capable of revealing the diverse material and cultural geographies that shape libraries. I believe that the research has contributed to such an account, although I do not presume to have captured all relevant connections or presented their role in their entirety. The force of certain events and the relevance of ongoing phenomena have certainly challenged the sociological gaze and still invite future consideration.

The city *librarial-ly*

To better understand my contribution, I return to what I proposed in Chapters 6 and 7 and the idea of sociological description in the footsteps of the provocative proposals by Latour and Sloterdijk. The polyhedral description I summarized above has attempted to ‘unfold’ the complexity of the library by recognizing horizontal and vertical relationships and placing them on a flattened landscape, portraying an *oligopticon* (Latour 2005). In other words, the strategy proposed in Part I allowed to “make visible what was before only present virtually” through the connections between spaces, actants, signifiers, and signified in order to unfold the library and outline it as a complex and ‘attached’ entity.

In earlier times, competence was a rather mysterious affair that remained hard to trace; for this reason, you had to order it, so to speak, in bulk. As soon as competence can be counted in bauds and bytes along modems and routers, as soon as it can be peeled back layer after layer, it opens itself to fieldwork. (id, p. 207)

As discussed in Ch. 1, the meanings of the public library as a common are produced between a *here-and-now* of living and an *elsewhere-and-at-other-times* in acts of “inscription and projection” in associative form. My account has presented the primary mediators and subjectifiers that produce the library as a place, pointing out how they also produce, reproduce or contest power asymmetries. Furthermore, this work has attempted to realize the “positive movements” necessary to sociology once we deconstruct and portray the different associations constituting social phenomena (Latour 2010:6). To move from a ‘thick’ description to critical leverage, I have suggested that libraries provide the ability to act on the very modes of association that constitute certain regimes of visibility. In a flattened view of the public domain, the library is ‘social’ as an actor-network capable of stabilizing a particular regime of association: a *library way* of association. I am persuaded that this thesis has shown the potential to translate the theme of the library as a form of social infrastructure into this sociological language. I also hope it has begun to highlight the specific “forms” and “colors” of the library regimes of association, that is, how it can offer peculiar ‘conditions of mutual visibility’ through time and space.

As part of the library actor-network, the subjects who express themselves *within* it contribute to changing its ‘connectors,’ the sensibilities and ways in which things and words are associated, and changed regimes of visibility. The fact that the library mode of association may change depending on the historical and situated position of various connectors may appear as a relativist reading of the library as a civic institution. However, as I have widely discussed, it is an actual condition of democratic life. Indeed, while the civil sphere ideal is

driven by solidarity and inclusion, its empirical articulations (“the *discourse* of civil society”) are often binary, selective, and embedded in power relations (Alexander 2007). However, the unfolding of boundary-making processes highlights a second movement:

The creation and maintenance of inequality and the struggle against it are fundamentally involved in meaning-construction, for both good and for ill. [...] If meaning has relative autonomy from structures of political and economic force, then culture structures can contest their dominating power. (Alexander 2007:25)⁶⁷

From this perspective, change in public libraries can be conceived not only as organizational redesign, as the re-chaining of its connectors, but as ‘generative’ re-chaining. Through the renegotiation of symbolic boundaries in relation to social ones, the library can lead to that critical rearticulation that I have discussed concerning the idea of heterotopia. Such a form of repair consists of actual discourses, objects, and people with observable gatekeeping and sense-making capacities.

In the experience of the subjects who express themselves *through it*, the users, the library can thus become a crucial *subjectifier*. In the previous chapters, I have described how the library does not act as a mere functional institution of society but emerges as a possible ‘enabling’ space-time. Thus, given we keep attention to the ‘ambivalence’ of the public and its socio-political connectors, the library way of association – call it the ‘social’ facet of the library – shapes a cultural counter-site for achieving justice. Through exploring libraries in Bologna, this research has illustrated multifaceted examples of this phenomenon.

The library, which to date is still being questioned as a ‘platform’ or ‘infrastructure,’ can preserve its metaphors by imagining itself as a network of human and documentary actants that enacts a specific mode of association. This has excellent potential to de-fragmenting the ambivalent position of libraries themselves, enable individuals to consciously explore their attachments, and achieve the inter-visibility regime that I have called *civil re-chaining*.

⁶⁷ Cf. Latour (2005:250-51): “If what is to be assembled is not first opened up, de-fragmented, and inspected, it cannot be reassembled again. [...] It’s only if forces are made of smaller ties, whose resistance can be tested one by one, that you might have a chance to modify a given state of affairs. To put it bluntly: if there is a society, *then no politics is possible*.”



ONE LAST WALK-TROUGH

(From Scandellara to Pilastro, 06/21)

Today I have joined the “urban trekking” initiative between the Scandellara Library and the Luigi Spina Library. The walk was presented on social networks as an opportunity to “celebrate summer and the return to freedom of movement,” with the participation of a guide of Trekking Italia who will lead us “across parks and green areas” and “tell stories and anecdotes.” The Reading Pact of Bologna also promoted it on Instagram: “regaining possession of the spaces of the city, starting and arriving in places of reading and democracy such as libraries seems to us a beautiful sign of reopening, a beautiful opportunity for meeting and knowledge. It seemed to us an excellent opportunity to reconnect with the two coordinators and to take part in a particular activity rich in informal interactions within and outside library boundaries [...]

As I come, I see that the comings and goings in the park of Scandellara have also restarted, but – as I will soon see – the library is almost silent, except for a young boy in the company of a reader, maybe his mother, and about a dozen students between the ages of 16 and 22 studying in small groups in the study room. Outside, however, many families and children are playing in the park behind the library, a green area stretching from the street the building overlooks toward the fields. As I glance at the area, I catch a glimpse of the librarian outside the entrance talking with three older people: a couple and a lady, who’s shortly introduced as our gentle guide for the afternoon. Soon a second librarian joins, beginning to mark the names on a sheet. I join by introducing myself: they are so happy that “a young man” is there, and we begin to introduce ourselves, mainly talking about the unsettled weather and possible plans. Soon, about ten other people approach, between jokes and suggestions about the impending rain and the possibility of abandoning or changing the route. But all share the desire not to give up the opportunity to walk and be together [...] So the floor is given to our guide – soon equipped with a microphone for recording – and we finally decide to tempt fate (the sky is opening up, but it thunders) and proceed with the “long visit.” In the beginning, we are about a dozen participants, plus the documentary team.

Most of those present today are quite mature and, along the way, most of them exchanging some experiences of the last months and, especially, of the current vaccination campaign. One walker asks many participants what vaccine they have had, how they are doing, and what the experience of relatives has been like, expressing confidence in the “AstraZeneca issue” and seeing with confidence the campaign’s advancement. Some tell of the joy of seeing their children vaccinated, even the younger ones who were able to take advantage of “open days” or other opportunities to anticipate vaccination and, thus, being able to come back together. All along the way, exchanges on the most varied topics arise and break off; some join friends, others offer a few words to new faces, often looking for some common passion or, as in the case of a lady from Bologna who recently moved to the area, commenting on some places in the periphery. For me, like many, this is an opportunity to discover a city that has remained partly hidden these months amidst very intense scents and a constantly changing urban environment.

[...] We first cross the park behind the library, and our guide approaches me as the group follows her, each at their own pace. The amiable and talkative lady tells me that she has been informed that I am a graduate or doctoral student: she asks me where I am from and some details about my work. She is surprised that I live at Pescarola, saying that it is another area of Bologna with vast green areas, and says she is very interested in the issue of more marginal districts and the enhancement of places

“of sociality and aggregation.” Our guide thinks this activity [urban trekking] is beautiful and can show the potential of the periphery and the centrality of places like the library. Then we are interrupted by a girl from the documentary team, listening to us through the microphone. But the topic will often return in some of his short presentations, or “library *aperi-trekking*,” as she will call the brief descriptions of the places we will pass through [...]

She begins as early as the end of the first park, in fact, to tell us briefly about the relationship between suburban areas, their almost total planning (sometimes more, sometimes less) linked to the various waves of migration, and the “agricultural wedges,” the green areas that become part of the urban fabric, as part of the gradual abandonment of farmland or acquisitions by the municipality, often to make multipurpose gardens. One of the processes included in this report, she tells us, is the Wooded Belt, the project aimed at surrounding the city with a cordon of green areas. Only implemented to a small extent, some of the transformations have also been carried out through the intervention of many associations. They take an interest in the peripheral areas, or individual green areas, often opposing parking lot projects or construction areas or contributing to project design [...]. One of these areas is, for example, the Parco San Donnino: here, a lady from the group tells of being a member of the *Fascia Boscata – Parco San Donnino Association*, thus integrating her story [...] among fields of sunflowers and wheat, and a few cottages, our guide tells of the original structure of the Bolognese countryside and the restoration of many clusters of houses with barns.

We arrive at a narrow island of land sandwiched between a fork in the railway line. Here we are introduced to what our guide humorously calls the “*borghetto casa e bottega*,” a nucleus of old railway workers’ houses, a small group of buildings, and the Guicciardini Garden.

One of those present – a former railroader – shares a few words, saying he had never heard of these structures before joining “*Diamoci una mossa*” a few years ago. This group (about a third of those present today) began some time ago as a walk-together activity among users of the Scandellara library. One of its members curiously and enthusiastically exchanges words and advice with our guide (they now discover new routes, etc.) and tells us how they have missed the habit of meeting together during this last year and a half of the pandemic. Today is the first opportunity to meet again, but one part of the group is still worried and prefers to wait until the end of summer.

Having passed through the “railroaders’ village’ and, shortly after, San Donnino Park, we find ourselves in an attractive residential area before turning eastward onto Via S. Donato, an important way for the area, which then connects with the historic Pilastro area, our final destination, and the northern commercial area and FICO Eataly World. In the old San Donnino area, among many private cottages, we visit the small nucleus of the Village for Young Spouses (technically, *Villaggio per Case Minime*) [...] Salaborsa’s Chronology of Bologna describes them as 41 small buildings, at most two-story, with 74 apartments with a planned kindergarten for 100 children and a large green area. The project was suggested by Cardinal Lercaro: “Given the great housing problem, he thought of having a series of apartments built for young married couples, at low prices and with great facilities for purchase.” Reminding us of its history and making us appreciate the tidy garden and a commemorative column, our guide reminds us of the generative ‘competition’ between these Catholic projects, the workers’ movements, and the experience of the People’s Houses.

Ahead, in front of the church of San Donnino, the guide tell us about the ancient course of the Savena River and its several traces in the toponymies of these areas, even though the river is located further east today [...]. Here, Spina library coordinator takes advantage of the occasion to share specialized knowledge and reading advice: in fact, she tells us about the particular figure of the Saint, whose tradition reminds her of some traits of pre-Christian European shamanism, particularly Finno-Ugric one [...]. The occasion opens another opportunity for exchange between the librarian, a member of the local reading group, and me (they recently participated in a documentary by the Pilastro neighborhood TV). This year’s programming focused on Finno-Ugric authors, embraced with surprise and interest by the members of ‘*Il Pilastro della mente*,’ as the group is called. Only two weeks ago – they tell me – they had the first hybrid meeting together. On a couple of occasions along the way, they share with me the group experience, the pleasure of having continued online these months, and the difficulty. They chat about options for the next year; they are thinking about a program focused on books set in Italian cities... and related travels to satisfy “the great desire to travel again” [they succeed!].

[...] Crossing over to the other side of the highway, we reach the historic area of Pilastro, flanking a section of the large *Bosco del Pilastro*, amid scents and parrots that have found a new home here, and

then turning in the direction of the Bologna Urban Farm, an educational farm led by some cooperatives and associations: *Circolo La Fattoria*, *Labù*, *La Formica* and *Arci Bologna*. We also met the twin “social project” pizzeria *Porta Pazienza*, which promotes the employment of protected categories, the fight against mafias, social solidarity, and ethical consumption. All around appear the imposing social housing buildings that have characterized this area. We begin to approach them as our guide briefly reminds us of their history and escorts us to the central green heart: Pier Paolo Pasolini Park. Here, the guide invites us to walk along the straight avenue of poplars that host a sculptural composition by Nicola Zamboni: a group of about 200 human-sized figures created between 1974 and 1984 that converge, gradually assuming sharper semblances, to a theatrical arena.

On the way, we pass a man asleep on a bench, along with some bottles, and, shortly after, a large tent where the person has arranged his belongings. Continuing alongside, I catch some of the reactions, polite and relatively quiet: one person hints at a vague ‘complexity’ related to the relationship in public spaces, speaking of difficulties and dirt (“you know, it’s always difficult in these places, especially with certain uncomfortable situations”), someone else expresses a kind of irony, maybe to tone down the moment. (Listening and observing, I think of an ‘extended’ and ‘triangular’ civic inattention, with a neutral stance between comment and non-conflict, and an attempt to frame the scene together, maybe showing they ‘recognize.’ I wonder, after all... after this exploration of the marginal and the interstice, how can we silently stand in front of the one who makes it home?).

Arriving on the opposite side of the long “comma” made up of the social housing buildings, we soon arrive in front of the central, colorful, historic Luigi Spina Library – the *Casa Rossa* – and the *Casa Gialla*, which will soon be part of the library again, following its renovation. The librarian tells me that a participatory process will soon be coordinated by Foundation for Urban Innovation to co-design the purpose of the building, designated to new cultural activities. We arrive on the forecourt, and the librarian guides us to the main entrance, describing the library and its history. She greets and introduces us to a young girl (“one of our most loyal users”). Inside, water and bananas await us for brief refreshments after the long walk, and about half of those present join the librarian for a guided tour [...] Finally, we are handed a short questionnaire [...] she jokes about the feedback she will carefully analyze, waving me a sheet with a big smile drawn on it and few words: “everything’s beautiful!” [...] Then, people start to leave very warmly; some arrange to share cars.

But history demands its share, and the documentary team asks to film the arrival on the library forecourt all over again: “Pretend you are really walking.” We all joke and laugh and go back to simulate the scene; but our kind guide and almost half the group have already left. An imperfect, ambivalent performance: some have repositioned themselves, and others have been lost along the way. Thus, the enchanting game of mirrors offered by the walk is complete. We retrace our steps, to move on.

Appendix

nota

- La seguente traccia è un riferimento base adattato ai diversi appuntamenti (prevalentemente nel caso di interviste pianificate)
- La traccia è 'fluida' e non viene letta, ma rappresenta un riferimento scritto.
- Le, pur non avendo approccio propriamente narrativo e dialogico, seguono uno stile d'interazione mirato a facilitare l'esplorazione. Scopo della traccia è perciò predisporre a un accordo prettamente non informativo e a bassa direttività, facilitando la mia consapevolezza sulle mosse comunicative e possibili tipizzazioni introdotte sui temi di riferimento. Domande cornice aprono la narrazione agevolando l'emersione di aspetti rilevanti.⁶⁸
- L'ordine delle sezioni/cornici, solo indicativo, introduce gradualmente maggior richiesta valutativa. Inoltre, le prime agevolano racconti rilevanti anche in caso di interruzione o intervista troppo lunga.
- L'intervista è accompagnata da note di campo e seguita da una scheda riassuntiva.

INTRODUZIONE E ACCORDO COMUNICATIVO

...Prima di tutto, grazie ancora della disponibilità. Come le ho anticipato, oggi le chiedo gentilmente di raccontarmi le sue esperienze e le sue opinioni riguardo alcuni temi relativi alle biblioteche pubbliche [in particolare a Bologna]: fra tutti, la funzione sociale delle biblioteche e le prospettive future di questi spazi...

- *Come dicevamo, registrerò la conversazione, in modo da tenere bene nota di ciò che ci diremo.*
[Prevedere consenso scritto ove necessario e considerare il registratore come un normale strumento, per compensare l'incapacità di prendere appunti su tutto e dare adeguatamente attenzione a ciò che viene detto]
- *Ci tengo ad aggiungere che si tratta di una chiacchierata piuttosto aperta, con alcune domande prettamente orientate a suggerire [ogni tanto e se sarà necessario] qualche aspetto sul quale vorrei concentrare la nostra attenzione [ma sarà soprattutto lei a guidarmi] ...*

[Quello che mi piacerebbe conoscere sono le sue esperienze e opinioni, nel modo più completo possibile. Per questo la invito a non preoccuparsi di ciò che può apparire non importante, ma di affrontare anche i dettagli, se lo desidera. Inoltre, non ci sono cose giuste o sbagliate... Quanto più mi aiuterà a conoscere le sue esperienze nello specifico, piuttosto che in generale, come sono 'di solito' tanto più mi sarà di aiuto]

Allora, se è d'accordo, possiamo cominciare...

CORNICE A. SUL NARRATORE (1)

- Accompagna a una narrazione ampia (accompagnare al particolare)
- Impiego/relazione con biblioteca, aspetti che non conosco o non do per assodati
- Primi possibili racconti volontari

⁶⁸ Riferimento principale per l'approccio è S. La Mendola. 2009. *Centrato e aperto*. Torino: Utet.

D.a (cornice) Prima di entrare di parlare delle biblioteche e delle persone che le vivono, vorrei seguirla al meglio nella sua prospettiva, a partire dal suo rapporto con questo mondo...
... vorrei che mi parlasse di com'è entrato in contatto [la prima volta] con le biblioteche pubbliche [bolognesi]

Aspetti/Possibili chiavi:

D.a.1. ...a un certo punto è divenuto... [riferimento alla relazione attuale]

D.a.2. Mi racconterebbe di più su... [lo spazio/ le sue mansioni] ...?

CORNICE B. PROSPETTIVE (1): LA SITUAZIONE DI FRONTE ALLA CRISI SANITARIA

- Apre narrazione su chiusura biblioteche (tema 'caldo')
- Apre narrazione su azioni compiute e opinioni
- Apre narrazione su prospettive future (servizio e spazi)
- Possibili racconti volontari sugli altri temi (riferimento di base su ruolo e pubblici)

D.b (cornice) Ora vorrei spostarmi su uno dei temi cui le ho accennato, partendo proprio da questi ultimi mesi...

... a un certo punto l'accesso e l'uso degli spazi pubblici è apparso problematico e si è poi decisa la chiusura...
[mi racconterebbe di quando sono emersi questi aspetti?]

Aspetti/Possibili chiavi:

D.b.1. Mi racconterebbe delle settimane precedente la chiusura totale [?]

D.b.2. Mi racconterebbe di più su... [aspetti rilevanti di iniziative adottate/ opinioni espresse] ...?

D.b.3. Mi descriverebbe cos'è rimasto uguale e cos'è cambiato per... [riferimento attività] ...?

D.b.4. E rispetto al pubblico/ ai pubblici... [mi racconterebbe del rapporto con i cittadini-utenti?]

CORNICE C. PROSPETTIVE (2): IL RUOLO DELLA BIBLIOTECA

- Apre su 'cos'era' la biblioteca pubblica [mantenere narrativa]
- Apre su 'cosa sarà' lo spazio della biblioteca pubblica [prima direzione proiettiva-valutativa]
- Accoglie prime definizioni/ etichette relative a funzione sociale, culturale, informativa

D.c.I (cornice) Facendo un passo indietro e pensando alla biblioteca prima di febbraio 2020 – i suoi spazi, chi li viveva, e chi no – vorrei chiederle che tipo di luogo era/ è la biblioteca... [?]

D.c.II (cornice) Passando a una domanda un po' differente... prima di questi mesi, secondo lei c'era qualcosa che stava già cambiando nel mondo delle biblioteche?

D.c.III (cornice) Tornando agli avvenimenti più recenti... c'è chi pensa che ora spazi come la biblioteca cambieranno, mentre per altri lentamente riprenderanno il loro corso... [secondo lei?]

CORNICE D. BIBLIOTECA SOCIALE E ALTRI MODELLI

- Introduce aspetti valutativi/ tipizzanti (visione su confini e significati del concetto)
- Impiego/ relazione con biblioteca, aspetti che non conosco o non do per assodati
- Possibili racconti volontari sugli altri temi (futuro, pubblici)

D.d.I (cornice): Soffermandoci su [/ riprendendo] il tema del ruolo delle biblioteche pubbliche... una delle idee citate è quella di 'biblioteca sociale' o 'funzione sociale della biblioteca' ... [secondo lei?]

D.d.II (cornice): Rimanendo su questo tema... per alcuni c'è una funzione più culturale e informativa della biblioteca, che sarebbe prossima a quella 'sociale' mentre per altri sarebbe ben distinta, o da distinguere [secondo lei?]

D.d.III (cornice): C'è poi il ruolo del digitale... [mi parlerebbe del rapporto fra biblioteca e digitale?]

CORNICE E. PUBBLICI

- Introduce aspetti valutativi/tipizzanti (visione su confini e composizione del pubblico)
- Impiego/relazione con biblioteca, aspetti che non conosco o non do per assodati
- Possibili racconti su altri temi (vulnerabilità, digitale, 'usi problematizzati')

D.e.I (cornice): *Come molti altri spazi, anche le biblioteche hanno pubblici più o meno consolidati, e altri che rimangono potenziali, o poco raggiunti... [secondo lei a chi si rivolge la biblioteca pubblica?]*

D.e.II (cornice): *Per quanto riguarda i pubblici (effettivi e potenziali) nel prossimo futuro di questi spazi... secondo lei ci saranno cambiamenti? [cambieranno gli utenti?]*

D.e.II (cornice): *Parlando di molteplicità di usi e utenti... secondo lei ci sono attività che possono essere dette 'non proprie' o 'estrane' agli spazi della biblioteca?*

SPAZIO PONTE. RICHIAMO TEMI, O SUL NARRATORE (2)

- Richiamo aspetti specifici
- Possibili informazioni specifiche d'interesse (intervistato poco conosciuto)

X1. *Prima di concludere, mi piacerebbe tornare su...*

X2. *Prima di concludere, vorrei farle un'ultima domanda un po' differente... mi racconterebbe un po' più di lei [eventuali informazioni socio-anagrafiche]*

CONGEDO

- Riconosce disponibilità e importanza
- Raccoglie disponibilità per futuri incontri

Ca. *Giungendo a conclusione del nostro incontro, vorrebbe aggiungere qualcosa relativamente a qualche aspetto della biblioteca, o della sua attività, a cui non abbiamo fatto cenno?*

Cb. *La ringrazio molto per ciò che mi ha raccontato oggi, sollevando molti aspetti interessanti. Qualora sentissi l'interesse di approfondire alcuni di questi aspetti o di aggiornarci su alcuni temi in futuro, tra un po' di tempo, crede che sarebbe possibile risentirci?*

...Qualora sentisse lei il desiderio di aggiungere o chiedere qualcosa, non esiti a contattarmi.

Allora direi che abbiamo concluso: la ringrazio ancora molto per la disponibilità...

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