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# **The Work of Foodification: An Analysis of Food Gentrification in Turin, Italy**

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# **The Work of Foodification: An Analysis of Food Gentrification in Turin, Italy**

Intersecting culinary and retail geographies, this paper brings to centre stage food in retail gentrification. Theoretically, it suggests that food, together with its spatialities, can produce a “displacement atmosphere” throughout retailscape by enabling privileged consumers to achieve distinction. Empirically, it draws from Porta Palazzo, Turin’s historical neighbourhood and marketplace, where the opening of a branded food hall reveals food’s role in the area’s early-stage retail gentrification. Attending to both the food hall and smaller emerging spatialities, the “work of foodification” is analyzed through three constitutive elements: discourse, materialities, practices. Within the city’s wider geographies and ongoing transformations, the synergy of these elements reveals that the work of foodification is the convert of Porta Palazzo into a device that, first, fixes a displacement atmosphere onto the local retailscape and, then, allows for the gentrification frontier to proceed. The paper responds to calls for re-conceptualizing displacement, contributing to emergent research on marketplaces as gentrification’s frontier spaces.

Keywords: food; retail gentrification; displacement atmosphere; distinction; gentrification frontier; Turin

[Figure 1 near here]

## **Introduction**

Mercato Centrale opened its doors in Turin’s Piazza della Repubblica, generally known along with the wider neighbourhood as Porta Palazzo, on 13 April 2019. It is a food hall structured as an indoor market, dedicated to high-quality, artisanal, and gourmet foodstuff: “a hub for everyone who *loves, lives, and chooses* food”<sup>1</sup>. At the inauguration, hundreds of people lined up to experience “the new belly of Turin”, as the owner and renowned entrepreneur stated<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.mercatocentrale.com/format> (last access: 28/10/2019)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kZhtoFkWE0s> (last access: 25/11/2019).

Along with excited foodies, Turin's Mayor and the Deputy Mayor in charge of commerce, labour and tourism were present too, marking the official approval of the entrepreneurial endeavour by the City. In her talk, the Mayor stressed the necessity to "requalify" Porta Palazzo so as to "give it back to the citizens."

Yet outside, a group of citizens was manifesting against the arrival of "the spaceship", as the residents organization call it to stress its top-down and alien presence. Mercato Centrale has become the "right place" for residents, activists, academics and other citizens to demonstrate against what is perceived as the ongoing gentrification of Porta Palazzo and northern Turin in general. To them, it marks symbolically and materially the direction and essence of Turin's gentrification: *where* to the process will proceed next (i.e. the north), and *how* (i.e. through food). A public discourse about food's gentrifying effects has been present before the brand's arrival. A theatrical project entitled *Foodification: How food ate the city*, a sarcastic story of food and urban transformations, has gained visibility since 2017. The word "foodification", a neologism combining "food" and "gentrification", has by now a widespread use in local debates that criticize the food hype in urban cultures, the gentrifying effects of food consumption, and the role of food-driven entrepreneurial projects, especially referring to the post-industrial, crisis-hit context of Turin. In this article, we align to this critical stance and borrow the word in order to provide a theoretically informed, evidence-based academic account of food gentrification. We refer to foodification as the gentrifying transformation of urban space through distinct food spatialities, throughout which food generates, and gets entangled with, certain discourses, materialities, and practices that eventually produce a displacement atmosphere in the neighbourhood.

Retail geographies have been widely identified as crucial components of urban transformation (Lowe and Wrigley, 2000), with gentrification of urban retailscape being exemplary (Hubbard, 2017). Simultaneously, countless food-related elements, spaces,

identities, movements, and practices shape our cities' culinary geographies (Bell, 2002). Based on evidence from Turin, this article offers an empirical analysis of ongoing, first-stage retail gentrification by bringing food explicitly to the fore. It addresses qualitatively the research gap regarding the role of healthy and gourmet —what we define generally as *distinct*— foodscapes in the generation and acceleration of gentrification (Anguelovski, 2016), suggesting eventually a context-specific contribution to food gentrification research.

Our aim is to track from the beginning of the process how the retailscape of Porta Palazzo, a traditionally mixed and working-class neighbourhood, emblematic for its retail character, changes through emerging spatialities of food consumption, relating simultaneously these changes to both the neighbourhood and the whole city. Indeed, the food gentrification of Porta Palazzo, albeit presented as “requalification”, might function as the discursive-material-practical vehicle for the gentrification frontier to move on and expand its effects throughout the city. To show this, in our analysis we consider simultaneously: (1) a contested food hall that functions, due to its scale and visibility on Piazza della Repubblica, as the flagship of the ongoing gentrification; (2) other emerging spatialities of food consumption in the wider neighbourhood of Porta Palazzo; (3) the city's wider spatial dynamics, such as the adjacent gentrified neighbourhood as well as the area expanding northwards, a working-class area characterized by a high rate of migrant residents, currently undergoing fragmented yet considerable transformations.

In this multiscalar and relational approach, we explore the “work of foodification”. To do so, and recognising food as “a new actor worth of much examination in regards to gentrification processes and dynamics” (Anguelovski, 2015, p. 184), we intersect the concepts of retail gentrification, displacement, food consumption, and distinction. We argue that food-driven transformations in the retailscape might shape what we call a “displacement atmosphere” in the neighbourhood. Precisely, in Porta Palazzo's ongoing early-stage retail

gentrification, specific food spatialities produce an atmosphere of potential displacement pressures because they allow privileged, consumers to achieve distinction within and through commercial space. We draw on Bourdieu's conceptualization of distinction (1984) as a social group's practice of differentiating itself from others by appropriating scarce assets on the basis of economic, cultural, and social capital. Notably, our evidence shows that in Porta Palazzo distinction is favored principally by three food-centred elements: discourses, materialities, and practices. And that the production of food gentrification happens on three interconnected scales: the local marketplace, the square, and the wider neighbourhood; it is through these scales that everyday micro-processes change the local retailscape producing eventually food gentrification, which allows for the city's overall gentrification frontier to proceed.

Evidence stems from field research conducted from June to December 2019. The fieldwork included three in-depth interviews with city officials; three with experts at "Urban Lab", Turin's official urban observatory; one with an expert of the local food market, working for one of the recent big food projects; thirteen with local entrepreneurs in the food sector; and one with representatives of the Porta Palazzo residents' association. The research also included participant observation at events, and discussions with vendors at the open-air market. Albeit focusing on the displacement atmosphere, largely inspired by literatures on displacement pressures, at this research stage we are not considering the emotional and affective aspects of such pressures<sup>3</sup> (Valli, 2015; Elliott-Cooper et al., 2020).

The article proceeds as follows. The next section engages with displacement in gentrification research and develops the concept of "displacement atmosphere" by linking directly "pressures of displacement" to retail space. Then, a literature review on the relation between food and gentrification highlights the pivotal role of distinction. After a brief

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<sup>3</sup> We use "displacement atmosphere" in a metaphorical way; therefore, we do not engage with geographic debates on atmospheres notwithstanding their importance.

introduction to the local context, the work of foodification is presented through an empirical analysis of its three constitutive elements: discourses; materialities; practices. In the discussion we suggest that, through its work and with the marketplace of Porta Palazzo in its epicentre, the ongoing foodification in Turin might become the vehicle for the gentrification frontier to be pushed further in the city.

### **Retail Gentrification, Pressures of Displacement, and Displacement Atmosphere**

Displacement has traditionally been the core element of gentrification, its “most unjust aspect” (Davidson, 2008, p. 2386). In his seminal article, Slater (2006) alerted that the concept of “displacement” has been strikingly decoupled from gentrification research, rendering research less critical. Slater’s thesis provoked responses and calls for re-conceptualising the term. Among others, Shaw (2008) responded by stressing that displacement might not always be direct, and suggested a potential opening-up of the concept following Marcuse’s “exclusionary displacement” (Marcuse, 1985). Paying attention to less direct forms of displacement, Shaw argued, critical perspectives can regain their lost centrality in gentrification research. Ever since, the debate on displacement has been significantly enriched. Importantly, Davidson (2009) has conceptualized displacement as loss of *place*, instead of abstract *space*, since low-income residents and users of a gentrifying area might be deprived in multiple ways of their right to dwell the place and identify themselves with it. People can be displaced, unable to (re)construct place, without actual dislocation (also Davidson & Lees, 2010; Elliott-Cooper et al., 2020).

Empirical research confirms this theoretical approach. The arrival of new, better-off residents in downgraded gentrifying neighbourhoods might provoke the erosion of social networks of long-term residents (Parekh, 2015), while migrant communities might become subject to “everyday displacement” through the prohibitions, appropriations and insecurities induced by gentrification (Stabrowski, 2014). Even in cases of limited displacement, where

emerging spaces of upscale consumption coexist with preexisting marginality, gentrification and redevelopment undermine feelings of inclusion and belonging (Burnett, 2014). Moreover, encounters with privileged incoming residents have affective and emotional impacts on less privileged residents (mainly of ethnic and/or working-class backgrounds) who stay put. Processes of othering and being-othered, and of alienation from one's own place, provoke a "sense of displacement" (Valli, 2015), whilst the combination of physical and psychological changes might be so violent that long-term residents become subject to a violent process of un-homing of their neighbourhood (Elliott-Cooper et al., 2020).

For the purposes of this article, we depart from these approaches to gentrification-induced displacement, which stress the process' variegated forms, in order to emphasize the role of retail space. In these works, retail space is pivotal to nuanced displacement processes, becoming the actual, both material and symbolic, terrain for the variegated forms of displacement to emerge in gentrifying contexts (see Hubbard, 2017). Via exclusionary processes such as "retail displacement" (Sullivan & Shaw, 2011) and "resource displacement" that can "feed back to stimulate other displacement processes" (Davidson, 2008, p. 2399), the new consumption and leisure landscapes of gentrification can generate a "symbolic displacement" for long-term residents and users (Atkinson, 2015; also Shaw & Hagemans, 2015).

To relate this wider, and relatively fragmented, conceptualization of displacement more firmly with retail gentrification, we draw inspiration from Marcuse's (1985) "pressure of displacement", suggesting a novel reading of the possible effects of food gentrification. This is especially true when the latter is in its infancy, restructuring urban space in ways that are novel to the local context, as in our case study. The "pressures of displacement" concept has been recently mobilized by scholars researching alternative and indirect forms of displacement (Stabrowski, 2014; Valli, 2015), but has not yet been directly linked to retail



gentrification, let alone to food gentrification. Therefore, attending to emerging food spatialities, we focus on food gentrification, to highlight how discourses, practices, and materialities might collectively perform not necessarily actual displacement of residents and users but, instead, pressures of displacement that shape what we describe as “displacement atmosphere”. This notion allows us not only to productively encompass the variety of different forms of displacement pressures upon a retailscape, but also to point out that our focus is not actual displacement as in the majority of gentrification researches.

If gentrification is a process of middle-class distinction accomplished through the restructuring of urban space (Bridge, 2001a; 2001b), and if retail and its capital are structural elements in the intensification of gentrification (Mermet, 2017), then retail gentrification is a powerful process of distinction that intensifies and contributes to gentrification overall. We suggest that food is a quintessential ingredient of urban retailscape that, together with the spatialities it generates, works in this direction. In a retailscape undergoing remarkable foodification, such as that of Porta Palazzo, and albeit the lack of evidence regarding direct residential displacement at the present stage, certain forms of food spatialities, which express distinction for privileged consumers, allow for the emergence of an atmosphere pushing for displacement. Discourses, materialities, and practices are its principal ingredients. This attempt to link retail space and food with displacement pressures through “displacement atmosphere” is coherent to recent calls for updated conceptualizations of gentrification-induced displacement (Elliott-Cooper et al., 2020). To show how food can produce such an atmosphere, and to frame theoretically our empirical analysis, the following section locates food and distinction within retail gentrification, and illustrates how food gentrification involves specific spatialities which allow for distinction to be achieved. Relating to forms of privilege and power, and thus injustice and exclusion, these spatialities shape a displacement atmosphere for the less-privileged users and residents.

## **Distinction and Space in/through Food Gentrification**

In their seminal study, Johnston and Baumann (2015) sketch the emergence and diffusion of a widespread food-centred culture during the last decades. The “foodie culture” signifies not only eating per se but, rather, involves wider cultural politics and identity dynamics, concerning environmental sustainability, human and non-human welfare, and labour rights. Nevertheless, there exists a parallel dynamic inherent to the foodie culture, namely distinction: “authentic”, “artisanal”, “ethnic”, “organic”, and “exotic” food works discursively in order to mark status distinction; “In an era where the search for fine food is mainstream passion and lifestyle, new modes of making status distinctions through food are required” (Johnston & Baumann, 2015, p. 13). Overall, food distinction is a privilege that works on two levels: economically, via the value-creation and premium prices achieved through, for instance, quality food schemes (Argüelles et al., 2018); and culturally, via the production of symbolic boundaries based, for instance, on the food-centred idea of “consumer-citizen” (Johnston et al. 2011).

Beyond the discourses it mobilizes, food distinction is achieved through, and is thus in constant dialogue with, space. For example, enacted by restaurant reviews, the foodie discourse might be involved in the gentrification of low-income neighbourhoods by creating symbolic values around food, which allow newcomers to achieve status distinction (Hyde, 2014). Furthermore, with the new, distinctive food consumption occurring mainly in boutique-like eateries (also Hubbard, 2017), the new places relate to gentrifying transformations of retailscape as the “new entrepreneurial” capital replaces smaller retail activities, which serve lower-income residents (Zukin et al., 2009). Enabling “alternative consumption practices that challenge the mainstream institutions of mass consumption” (Zukin, 2008, p. 738), these urban transformations allow middle-class consumers to express their distinction and emphasize (food) taste’s distinctive, and thus exclusionary, power. With

access to such spaces heavily depending on one's economic and cultural capital (Johnston & Szabo, 2011), organic stores maintain and enhance middle-class status and well-being through consumption (Johnston, 2008), while alternative farmer's markets might be predominantly white spaces through the massing of white bodies and a white fetishization of food (Slocum, 2007; Alkon, 2013).

More precisely, we can argue that, besides small fancy eateries, specific spatial typologies of food consumption become exemplary of the ways which food distinction is performed through. These typologies include the, relevant to this article, food markets and food malls. Regarding food markets, Coles and Crang (2011) focus on Borough Market, London, in order to illustrate how ethical food consumption is constructed as alternative, producing distinction for consumers. According to their "topographic" reading, "like all retail spaces [the Market] performs a *distinctive* material semiotic and sensescape" (2011, p. 90, emphasis added). The placement and visibility of foodstuff, the physical qualities and discourses that emphasize the products' origins and artisanal character, the promotional material, the mobilization of senses, and the overall aesthetics, collectively contribute to a staging that first de-fetishizes commodities as products of specific processes and places, and then re-fetishizes them as "alternative" (see also Pottinger, 2013).

Regarding food halls (or food malls), Colombino (2018) provides an analysis of the inherently spatial ways in which Eataly, an international high-quality food hall chain that first opened in Turin in 2007, transforms consumers into gastronomes who do something distinct from shopping. The mall's museum-like spatial organization, which involves an abundance of labels and messages, both inform visitors of the foodstuff's origins and, most importantly, instruct them the ways to make a difference; to the planet, to producers, to themselves — eventually to "conventional" consumers. Informing and instructing are enacted through bodily practices too (also Kern, 2016), such as those of mall attendants who act as food experts, and

the classes and events focused on food preparation and wine tasting. In this discursive and practical-material distinctiveness, together with the visceral experiencing of a constructed “Italianess”, Colombino argues that “one of the commodities that Eataly manufactures and sells is knowledge” (2018, p. 75), underlining that not all social classes can afford this distinct consumption. Indeed, the cost of distinction for anyone who wants to *not simply buy* food or to *not buy simple* food is relevant; and the placing of this distinction cannot happen anywhere.

The relation between these food spatialities and their wider urban settings, and the exclusionary effects of the former upon the latter, call for a specific focus on what recently has been termed “food gentrification” (Anguelovski, 2015; 2016). Precisely, the arrival of a high-end food store in a racially mixed neighbourhood of Boston generates a process of “supermarket greenlining”, that is, the introduction of healthy food discourses and respective retail development in a low-income gentrifying neighbourhood, and the subsequent exclusion of local residents from affordable foodstuff (Anguelovski, 2016). Feelings of alienation and out-of-placeness provoked by the store result in a local movement that opposes the gentrifying effects of the high-end food store, stressing that the experienced exclusion is not just exclusion from affordable food but equally from food as a socio-cultural asset for local communities. This dual exclusion happens principally, yet not exclusively, along class lines; to a member of the opposition coalition, the food store “is a class marker” (Anguelovski, 2015, p. 1223; see also Bridge & Dowling, 2001).

Building on these literatures, we can argue that the spatialities of distinct food consumption are, more generally, markers of (different forms of) privilege, such as economic and cultural capital, race, and ethnicity. If distinction is achieved through cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984), food distinction is achieved through *culinary* cultural capital (Bell, 2002), which is both acquired, reproduced, and demonstrated within and throughout these spatialities. It is this very distinction that, when considered in relation to the wider spatial

context it takes place in, casts exclusionary effects upon urban space resulting in transformations such as food gentrification. Niche eateries, food markets and food halls, in their relatively coherent ways of spatializing food and its consumption as distinct, provide the socio-spatial grammar of food gentrification.

In our account, we rely on this socio-spatial grammar in order to analyze food gentrification dynamics that heavily centre on, whilst simultaneously expand beyond, a food market and a food hall, reaching out to and involving other, smaller and emergent food spaces, such as niche eateries, in diverse geographical scales. As anticipated, the article centres on Turin's biggest and most emblematic marketplace. Locating marketplaces in wider processes of class-based urban restructuring and, specifically, retail gentrification, González (2020) and González and Waley (2013) have signaled their recent re-discovery by the middle classes, which find in marketplaces “an opportunity to display [their] cultural capital” (Hubbard, 2017, p. 186). To engage with this research niche, we mobilize the first analytical lens suggested by González (2020) and thus approach Porta Palazzo's marketplace as a significant frontier space for the ongoing gentrification of central and northern Turin. Food is pivotal to the entire process by changing the local retailscape, and foodification is this spatial mutation through food. As our empirics show, the spatialities of foodification involve discourses, materialities, and practices that, by performing distinction for privileged consumers, produce a displacement atmosphere in and around the marketplace. The work of foodification is to produce this displacement atmosphere and, eventually, activate and push further the gentrification frontier, throughout different geographical scales.

### **Turin and Porta Palazzo**

Turin is a north-western Italian city, with a metropolitan area of around 1,4 million inhabitants. It is one of the Italian cities mostly hit by the economic crisis: the pro-capita debt

is the highest among Italy's major cities and unemployment rate is currently 9,2%.<sup>4</sup> The city's modern identity has been based on the car manufacturing industry: FIAT was founded in Turin in 1899, and for about a century, it has had a leading role in Turin's physical, social, economic and cultural development. Indeed, the city took the typical path of other European one-company towns, with a massive growth of urban peripheries during Fordism, and then significant social struggles in the following phases of deindustrialization (Bagnasco, 1986).

Since the 1980s, economic crisis, together with massive global transformations in the car industry, progressively led to decrease in manufacturing activities and job losses. Local policy makers, intellectuals and think-tanks started reflecting about potential futures for the city. In 1999, the first strategic plan envisioned a city investing in culture, tourism, sustainability and innovation, also by building on assets, cultures and identities which were neglected in the past, because of the city's hegemonic industrial identity (Vanolo, 2015). The same period, a massive EU-funded regeneration program named *The Gate – Living not leaving* implemented a physical upgrading in buildings and public spaces, as well as community-based programs in Porta Palazzo (Governa et al., 2009).

[Figure 2 near here]

Porta Palazzo is located in the north of the city centre and close to touristic sites and considerably more affluent areas (see Figure 2). Historically the neighbourhood has been predominantly a low-income area. After WWII, and mostly during the 1960s, it was the main area where economic migrants from Southern Italy first settled. Since the 1980s, it has been the entry point of migration flows from Africa and Asia. For many years, the area has been stigmatized as dangerous and decaying (Semi, 2008), but the part closer to the city centre,

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<sup>4</sup> www.istat.it (last accessed 28/12/2019).

called Quadrilatero Romano, has been heavily gentrified (Semi, 2004), and has now the image of a cosmopolitan and colourful neighbourhood (Gilli and Ferrari, 2018).

The main square is Piazza della Repubblica, which hosts a 5,000 m<sup>2</sup> open-air market with about 1,000 vendors selling from housewares and electronics to food and clothing (Semi, 2008; Black, 2012). Foodstuff occupies the vast majority of the vending space, whether outdoor or indoor, the latter composed of four built structures located one on each quadrant of the square. On Saturdays, a big flea market and considerable touristic attraction named Balon takes place in the area extending from the square northwards. While the street market is mostly cheap, the flea market, along with many local shops, marks a separation between the part in antiquities and art objects for good spenders and that made up mostly by migrants selling very cheap objects, often retrieved from garbage.

### **The Work of Foodification: Discourse, Materialities, Practices**

The work of foodification unfolds in this central empirical section. Its three subsections demonstrate respectively how a displacement atmosphere is produced within and throughout the retailscape of Porta Palazzo: through discourse, materialities, and practices. It is the entanglement of these three constitutive elements of foodification that create both actual and symbolic space for privileged consumers to achieve distinction through food and the emergent food spatialities.

#### ***Discourse***

Since the City's first attempts to reposition Turin in order to relaunch its lingering socioeconomic fabric, food has been key to branding and development discourses. Reflecting the dominant trend that sees cities shifting from spaces of production to temples of consumption, post-Fordist Turin has tried to embrace a new identity by leveraging on one of the main assets of the still productive sectors of Piedmont region, and by converting it into a

commodity in which consumers can recognise the expression of a distinct status and lifestyle. An entire industry, culture, and especially discourse around local high-quality products, such as wine and chocolate, have therefore been developed over the last two decades.

The first steps were realized during the 1980s with the birth of the Piedmont-based internationally renowned organization Slow Food. Its philosophy is based on the reconceptualization of food once not appreciated because of its cheapness into “good food”, through the re-configuration of its meaning (Vanolo, 2015). The organization laid also the foundations for a rebranding strategy launched by local policymakers eager to associate Turin with a creative city image by attaching a new, not only economic but also cultural, value to local food products and productive sectors previously considered marginal. Slow Food’s role in concretizing the emerging relationship between food and the city is most evident in the case of Terra Madre Salone del Gusto, an international gastronomy exhibition organized by Slow Food, the Piedmont Region and the City of Turin, which celebrates the diversity of food products and promotes a culture of food knowledge and sustainability.

Recently, policymakers have embarked even more explicitly on the mission of converting Turin into the *Capital of taste*, a brand launched in 2018 to promote the city as high-quality food experience destination; this reinforced association with specialty food constructs Turin overall as a distinct place based on specific foodstuff (cf. Lyons, 2005). Moreover, the choice of the word “taste” instead of “food” attaches to food consumption practices a distinct cultural value, which marks a status distinction for the city. Aware of this food distinctiveness, discussing her decision to open a fancy eatery in Porta Palazzo, a new entrepreneur enthusiastically said: “A famous chef once told me: ‘Turin is the only place where people can ask me where the pepper I use precisely comes from!’”.

Accordingly, areas of the city are being transformed into temporary arenas of food experience, and local institutions circulate a discourse on the urban and cultural relevance of



food promoting events that often transform urban public spaces into places for the consumption of regional and specialty products. Such events contribute to tracing a new profile of Turin as an urban destination for foodies, tourists, and, more generally, consumers eager to learn about, and taste, distinct food. The design of this new identity has been specifically searched for by the city's policymakers, who acted in concert with local organizations, think tanks, and entrepreneurs in producing a discourse that connected Turin and food via a double link. On the one hand, Turin is essentially associated to a specific culture of *good* food, exemplified par excellence by the Slow Food organization; on the other, food has been allowing the city to undertake a new path of economic growth, contributing to rescuing the city from the economic crisis.

In 2019, this discursive mechanism started involving Porta Palazzo, which has been re-imagined as the local testbed for a discourse and respective policy explicitly connecting food-driven retail transformations with the neighbourhood's "requalification". This narrative justifies major interventions on the neighbourhood, as evident during the inauguration day of Mercato Centrale, when the Mayor characterized the neighbourhood as "problematic", "degraded", and in need of increased visibility; of "requalification". If disinvestment is typical to gentrification processes (González & Waley, 2013), a discursive disinvestment occurs here, stigmatizing Porta Palazzo: "a periphery in the city centre", as a local real estate agent said. The discursive disinvestment also relates to the building of Mercato Centrale. The food hall is hosted inside Palafuksas, the most recent of the square's four buildings, a shopping centre designed by the archistar Fuksas and formerly dedicated to clothing (and not to food as the other three buildings). Palafuksas represents a failure for the City Authorities due to structural, economic and organizational issues that have never allowed a smooth and profitable functioning of the place. "Palafuksas is a wonderful place but how *sad it was*", the

Mayor stated in front of the cameras; “I believe that my *enthusiasm* is the enthusiasm of a city [...] This place is an *existential periphery* [but also] a place of opportunities”.<sup>5</sup>

Typical to processes of neoliberal urban restructuring, the two overlapping discursive disinvestments —with the one of the building being coherent to, and reinforcing, that of Porta Palazzo— symbolically make room for requalification (Wilson, 2004). According to the Mayor, requalification will be achieved through investments; and investments will be attracted through food, which functions as one of the City’s official pillars for Porta Palazzo’s specifically, and Turin’s generally, relaunching. Notably, Mercato Centrale seems to create the “right place”, and to respond successfully to the dual discursive disinvestment since “the places chosen [for the food halls] —hubs in the urban fabric and often neglected venues— are brought back to life and returned to the city, which can experience and enjoy them fully again”.<sup>6</sup> It is the *quality* food of Mercato Centrale that, by “bringing back to life” the stigmatized Palafuksas, works for the requalification of the entire stigmatized neighbourhood.

A parallel complementary discursive disinvestment and reinvestment takes form outside of Mercato Centrale, involving smaller new bars and eateries of the square. “Here one can consume good quality without being at Gran Madre (an upper-class neighbourhood)”, according to the owner of a bar. Quality food and drinks are constructed as “out of place” in Porta Palazzo relating to another, distant upper-class area of Turin. Quality seems to not have a place in Porta Palazzo and, therefore, what food places, such as a fancy bar, actually do is to create space for this quality to be imported “as if it was elsewhere”. At another new bar on the opposite side of the square, reference to class is made explicit: “quality should be paid for”. Porta Palazzo’s discursive disinvestment as a place not associated with quality food calls thus for its reinvestment through a classed quality.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/chiaraappendinosindaca> - video uploaded on 13/04/2019 (last accessed 28/12/2019).

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.mercatocentrale.com/format> (last accessed 30/12/2019).

Nevertheless, Mercato Centrale is something more than a food hall; it is also a food brand. “It’s like George Clooney [...] once he arrives, everybody goes to meet him”, the owner of one of the square’s historical shops commented on the attention attracted by the food hall’s arrival. In fact, the general discursive mechanism described above, the Mayor’s presence at the inauguration, and the communicative power of the brand, perform combinedly the “flagshipping” of Mercato Centrale for, and in, the food gentrification of Porta Palazzo: discourse legitimizes the arrival of Mercato Centrale, and constructs it as the flagship for the neighbourhood’s retail gentrification. Its presence signals to potential investors specific, favourable transformations (Anguelovski, 2016; Zukin et al., 2009) and functions “due to its dimensions, as an accelerator of already ongoing transformative processes”, according to the interviewed food sector expert. This can be especially effective when a rent gap has apparently started to attract investors to the neighbourhood: “Most of the apartments of the condominium have been bought by Chinese investors. We don’t know what they are planning to do, we have never met them, we just know they bought most of the apartments above”, the owner of a historical store on the square commented.

[Figure 3 near here]

### ***Materialities***

Parallel to the discourses that devalue and revalue urban space, eventually making space for distinction, specific material transformations concretize these very discourses and render food the element par excellence through which distinction can be achieved. As it will be discussed, these transformations involve an aesthetical homogenization of space and a reconstruction of food itself through its surrounding materialities.

The opening of Mercato Centrale coincides with a twofold material displacement in the area. First, the vending stalls that used to occupy the space in front of the food hall’s

entrance have been displaced and, along with them, have been displaced too the material evidences —bodies, products, packages— that embodied precisely the reasons why Porta Palazzo “has to” be regenerated (i.e. poverty, marginality, diversity, informality, disorder). Clashing with the aesthetics of Porta Palazzo, the entrance of Mercato Centrale becomes visually and materially distinct from the surrounding market. Secondly, on October 2019, six months after the opening of Mercato Centrale, the City violently displaced the poorer, informal section of the Balon market, known as Barattolo, and, given the public opposition and immediate mobilization against its displacement in a distant, peripheral location, heavily militarized the area for weeks in order to prevent vendors and solidarities from resettling in situ.

This dual material displacement reinforces the displacement atmosphere and reveals an early-stage aesthetical reconfiguration of Porta Palazzo, sometimes relating to issues of ethnicity, stereotypes about beauty and security, and a perceived “Italianness” of the square. For example, one Italian shop owner shared his expectations for the homogenization of the market’s stalls, as current ones are considered “ugly” and “disordered”, and awaits the replacement of “illegal” non-Italian taxi drivers with “legal” Italian ones, while another complained about the low quality of the Chinese stalls praising their Italian counterparts. Moreover, the displacement of Barattolo, its mostly foreign vendors and their cheap, used and often discarded, objects means the displacement of materialities that represent what is perceived as the neighbourhood’s “dangerous”, “marginal”, and “informal” sides.

Along with the ongoing aesthetical homogenization, a second material transformation takes place inside Mercato Centrale, contributing to the work of foodification. Despite its name (meaning “central market”), Mercato Centrale is not what is considered to be a traditional market, with plain stalls and goods simply on display; instead, its spatial organization and aesthetics materialize the brand (cf. Colombino, 2018) together with

associated meanings and values. The exhibition of machines and other objects of production, the demonstration through screens, and the simulation of aesthetics typical of artisanal production (e.g. wooden, seemingly unprocessed shelves), bring production inside this space of consumption (see Figure 3; above). This virtual re-connection of production with consumption renders the latter distinct from “conventional” forms —just like those taking place on the square. Foodstuff is sold not on stalls, but in *botteghe* (small artisanal shops). Each bottega is dedicated to a specific kind of food, and signs display in big font the products’ names: *la pasta*, *il formaggio*, *la carne* (*the pasta*, *the cheese*, *the meat*). The distinctiveness of foodstuff relates not only to their virtually direct link to production and their provenance — “they seem to hail from the right places!” — the owner of an old nearby pizzeria commented admitting the food hall’s privilege— but also to persons, as below the products’ names appear the names of the producers or chefs, marking the sold “signature” foodstuff as distinct.

All this provides the “material grips” through which the sold foodstuff is attributed with additional qualities, related mainly to knowledge —of its production, provenance, signature— and is marked as authentic (Johnston & Baumann, 2015) and therefore distinct from food sold on the square. Yet, this elaborate attention and aestheticization is not exclusive to Mercato Centrale. Small bars and eateries that are taking over the square’s historical shops contribute materially to status distinction through small but accurate interventions, corresponding not only to the choice of which food and beverage to sell, but also to an attention to material details in the premises and other things offered to customers. For example, to preserve an allure of historicity and authenticity, the walls and floor of a fusion bar have remained purposefully untouched, and the name of the place refers to the fresh pasta shop that was there before. As in the case of Mercato Centrale, the old retail function and idea have been displaced, whereas material traces have been selectively maintained as long as they

allow aesthetically for distinction to be achieved. Furthermore, the display of international journals and newspapers, along with label wines of Spanish and French provenance, construct a cosmopolitan aura. All together, these are the *exhibited* “objects and articulations of good taste” (Bridge, 2001b, p. 92) in the new food spatialities.

At the same time though, and albeit the “fusion” character of the place, it is through a re-constructed “Italianness” that food quality is guaranteed, not discursively, as the previous section showed, but materially: “*We are Italians* and our primal matter comes from Italy”, the owner explained. This material “Italianness”, which guarantees quality, overlaps with a specific “otherness” in the same place: Italian primal matter results in Japanese plates that, coherent to the overall aesthetics, make an “ethnic” space of food consumption that is nevertheless distinct in Porta Palazzo. Surrounded by Chinese, Arab, and African shops and eateries (owned by people identified with the respective groups), the Japanese bar becomes a place where a new, “safe” Other can be experienced through the consumption of a distinct ethnic food. The construction of “Italianness” and the displacement of Barattolo’s, predominantly non-Italian, vendors, manifest an environmental racism that penetrates food and its spatialities (Anguelovski, 2015; Slocum, 2007), and that might significantly contribute to the displacement atmosphere for consumers of colour or/and foreign origins.

Therefore, it is through material elements, relating to food either directly or indirectly, that the work of foodification tends, albeit in fragmented ways at the moment, to aesthetically homogenize the neighbourhood, and to aestheticize food as distinct. Notably, the overall material aestheticization involves also older, less fancy spaces of food consumption. Older shops, often considered to “safeguard” the square’s retailscape and to resist gentrification, are partially adjusting to emerging gentrifying forms of consumption built on distinction. For example, the residents’ association commented that, albeit aesthetically coherent with the adjacent kebab and pizza places of “ethnic” character (thus coherent to the image of a non-

gentrified neighbourhood), the old bakery right behind Mercato Centrale has raised both its prices and advertized quality by proposing niche products that do not fit the clientele and mark something distinct (see Burnett, 2014).

### ***Practices***

Within a changing material environment, transforming practices of food consumption realise the distinctiveness instructed by the discourse, completing in palpable manners the displacement atmosphere in Porta Palazzo. About four years ago, before the opening of Mercato Centrale a typical fish shop of the square, supported by a local bank foundation, turned into a fancy fish bistro now famous all over the city. This small, initial transformation has marked a passage of the neighbourhood's food practices. According to the residents' association, there exists an official political vision "of Porta Palazzo as a market not only of food as primal matter [as it used to be] but, instead, *of processed food and entertainment*, quite before Mercato Centrale arrived." This transformation marked a first displacement of the *passing* practice of buying fresh food to cook at home, and its replacement by the *sedentary* practice of consuming food in situ. Other similar transformations of the local retailscape have taken the same direction; a historical café has become a cocktail bar and eatery, and the old pasta shop a fusion bar and Japanese eatery. While previous functions enabled more transitory practices, consumers now are invited to spend (more) time in the area (see Figure 3; below).

Bodies and embodied practices intra-act with places, becoming crucial ingredients in the construction of landscapes of gentrification (Kern, 2016). The general introduction of sedentary practices in a place that has been traditionally associated with the passing by of consumers provides a stable practical basis for the work of foodification to unfold and for the displacement atmosphere to emerge. This is also due to the introduction of novel consumption

practices per se; for instance, instead of the typical Italian breakfast, the new eateries lay emphasis on brunch, introducing on the square a consumption practice of an elevated social status (Valli, 2015). In their sedentarism, these practices are enhanced with certain elements that render them distinct from “conventional” consumption traditionally characterizing the marketplace. Two specific elements reinforce them further: visuality and knowledge. “Taste is related to other senses too,” the owner of a new eatery explained showing: “from our window you have the *view of the market!* It is a beautiful thing to have while eating or drinking something special!” Ironically, the same image that, to the official discourse, is loaded negatively signifying the need for “requalification”, becomes an aesthetic attribute of sedentary practices that demand the “authenticity” of the market in order to be complete. Through the view, Porta Palazzo’s marketplace gets aestheticized as “authentic,” becoming a “visual attraction” for consumers of certain lifestyles (Zukin, 1998, p. 832). Visuality works vice versa too though, since the new sedentary practices allow for a relatively stable visibility of consuming bodies often marked with a distinct social status, in situ.

Knowledge is the second enhancing element, redefining food consumption not only as the purchase of food but also as the acquisition of knowledge. Mercato Centrale publishes a monthly schedule of events that aim at informing its public about the available foodstuff as well as food-related issues in general. In these events, consumers are “taught” the origins, particularities and production processes of the foodstuff they are about to ingest. Through demonstration and bodily assimilation, clients are explained the transformation of cereals into flour using an installed milling machine with traditional milestones (Figure 3; above). In this blurring of the material, spatial and cultural boundaries between consumption and production (and between imaginaries of tradition, innovation, rurality, handwork and machines), the knowledge that consumers acquire through their bodily involvement transforms them into “food connoisseurs and gourmets” (Colombino, 2018, p. 72). This phenomenon is not



exclusive to Mercato Centrale; “We are here to *educate* people,” the bar tender of the fusion bar said, stressing that in that place the consumption of food and drinks is also a practice of education that renders consumers aware of what they ingest. Similarly, at a new cocktail bar, asking for an espresso involves a responsive performance from the side of the waiter, who explains in detail the different varieties of coffee, their origins and particularities.

Enhanced with visuality and knowledge, and immersed in the changing materialities of the surroundings, these transforming consumption practices reconfigure the very idea of food so that distinction can be achieved and demonstrated. “The conviviality of food is lost, *the focus is food itself*,” the owner of an old pizzeria commented about the ways in which food is consumed, and fetishized, inside Mercato Centrale. The new sedentary practices, by focusing on the distinct qualities of food, shape new consuming subjectivities in Porta Palazzo. Especially via the acquisition of food knowledge, which relates to classed and ethnic privilege (Slocum, 2007; also Alkon, 2013), these subjectivities, in their visible presence, exert pressures of displacement on other subjectivities that might not have the economic and cultural capital to access and appreciate the knowledge inherent to these practices.

Nevertheless, although possessing adequate capital so as to consume in these places, these subjectivities do not form a homogeneous group; small fancy eateries tend to explicitly differentiate themselves from Mercato Centrale, which represents an out-of-place entrepreneurship of bigger dimensions. In the end, what unites these subjectivities is identity:

“The identity discourse is what wins the battle between these new food places in Turin.

Consumers *need to know* in advance *what* they are going to eat *where*,” according to the food expert. If food naturalizes distinction (Johnston & Bauman, 2015), it is these food consumption practices that, within the overall work of foodification, naturalize the food-related identities of subjects that are therefore performed as distinct from the marketplace’s long-term consumers.

## **Discussion: the Foodification of Porta Palazzo and the Gentrification Frontier in Turin**

Retail space is essential to gentrification processes given the “synergistic combination of retail and residential gentrification [that produces] neighbourhoods associated with conspicuous consumption and middle-class rituals of belonging” (Hubbard, 2017, p. 4). This article has provided a theoretical, evidence-based account of the role of food, and the geographies of its consumption, in retail gentrification. From a theoretical point of view, it engages with the critical debate on gentrification-induced displacement to suggest that retail space is the actual terrain where various pressures of displacement may occur, shaping a general “displacement atmosphere”. It then conceptualizes food as a substantial element of urban retailscape, its gentrification, and the therein produced displacement atmosphere. Precisely, in food gentrification and the involved spatialities, a specific form of food consumption allows privileged groups to achieve status distinction. It is the distinction enabled by “authentic”, “artisanal”, “healthy”, “ethical” —eventually *distinct*— food that produces a displacement atmosphere for less-privileged consumers and residents, who might not have access to the required culinary cultural capital (Bell, 2012). The attempted conceptual intersection of retail gentrification and food with displacement pressures literature is a direct response to scholars who have recently highlighted the need for “a clearer understanding of what urban displacement is, and how it can be best conceptualised” (Elliott-Cooper et al., 2020, p. 503).

From an empirical point of view, the article focuses on Turin’s Porta Palazzo, and the arrival of a contested food hall at the heart of Europe’s biggest open-air market. In this specific context of early-stage retail, and especially *food*, gentrification, and attending to the various food spatialities emerging in Porta Palazzo, the article has analyzed the “work of foodification”, which unfolds within retail space through three interrelated elements:

discourses, materialities, and practices. These elements, in various interdependent ways, allow for status distinction to be performed through food and, consequently, for a displacement atmosphere to be produced throughout the local retailscape. Approaching critically the work of foodification in Turin's Porta Palazzo enhances niche research on food gentrification (Anguelovski, 2015; 2016) and contributes empirically to the conceptualization of marketplaces as gentrification's (new) frontier spaces (González, 2020). It is this latter development that this concluding section seeks to complete.

In the overall work of foodification, and despite not being the only ingredient of Porta Palazzo's food gentrification, Mercato Centrale functions as a temporal and spatial catalyst that relates Piazza della Repubblica, and its ongoing transformations, to the wider neighbourhood and entire city. As a temporal catalyst, Mercato Centrale materializes *permanently* in a spatially and symbolically central urban space what the various gastronomic events organized in Turin over the years have been materializing *periodically* so far. Due to the branded food hall's scale and visibility, the consumption of quality, artisanal, and local food is no longer a matter of periodical events but has now an established presence in the city center. As a spatial catalyst, Mercato Centrale mimics the role played by Eataly in another part of the city, albeit with partially different intents. Eataly opened inside Lingotto, the historical former FIAT factory, still the most emblematic site of Turin's industrial past, located in the homonymous peripheral neighbourhood (Colombino & Vanolo, 2017). By spatializing food in certain ways, *Eataly* performed the official vision of passing from being a one-factory town to leveraging on what was broadly identified as the cultural economy, a symbolic passage from production to consumption, with food in the centre of this passage. Twelve years later, Mercato Centrale's arrival in Porta Palazzo marks a meaningful spatial move from the urban periphery into the city centre, performing yet a different transformation: this time not of production into consumption but, instead, of one consumption type into

another. Precisely, the remaking of Palafuksas as Mercato Centrale has (for the moment partially) displaced an “ordinary” mall for the consumption of cheap clothing, and replaced it with a branded food mall for the consumption of distinct food, eventually signalling the transformation of a working-class neighbourhood historically associated with food as primal matter, into a place for distinct food consumption and culture.

The work of foodification legitimizes, and establishes discursively, this change in Porta Palazzo. It then unfolds materially: first through a, general yet fragmented at the moment, homogenization and aestheticization of the environment; and then through various food-related materialities that function as “material grips” for status distinction to be achieved by consumers. These materialities are not inert but, rather, actively involved in practices of food consumption that are novel to Porta Palazzo. The practices of the work of foodification inscribe distinction onto the retailscape as they signify food consumption in new terms, by mobilising knowledge and aestheticisation. In their sedentary nature, and immersed in the materialities of distinction, food consumption practices mark corporeally distinct food identities in the retailscape, especially through their stabilized visibility, becoming thus “the very stuff of the gentrification aesthetic” (Bridge, 2001a, pp. 211-212). Like this, and having already been established discursively, food distinction becomes established also materially and practically in situ, shaping a displacement atmosphere.

To locate the —discursive, material, and practical— work of foodification within the overall gentrification of Turin, that is, to eventually understand contextually the effect of food gentrification, other transformations taking form around Porta Palazzo need to be considered (see Figure 2). As mentioned, Porta Palazzo is right next to the fully gentrified Quadrilatero Romano quarter; indeed, Piazza Filiberto, the quarter’s consumption heart, is one block away. Whereas a few years ago Porta Palazzo seemed to have escaped from this next-door transformation, offering a stark contrast, foodification creates space for such fragmentary

transformations to be finally inserted. “All these new eateries are fruits not of Porta Palazzo but of Piazza Filiberto”, a member of the residents’ association said. Concurrently, a number of transformations take place at the neighbourhood’s north-east. The working-class area of Torino Nord has been recently subject to massive interventions that have already started to show their effects. Besides the opening of higher education institutions (both public and private, such as the University Campus, the IAAD, and the Scuola Holden; see map), which attract high numbers of students populating bars, cafes, and eateries, other major food-related projects have taken place in the area. Combo, a new international hostel/coworking space hosting a fancy restaurant at the ground floor, opened in 2020 on Piazza della Repubblica, while on the other side of the Dora river significant food-related projects have emerged the last years, such as the new Lavazza headquarter, museum and restaurant, and EDIT, a big-scale niche multi-eatery. This situated geographical analysis of foodification reveals that food gentrification is a multiscalar, relational process based on the synergy of mostly “new entrepreneurial” forms of capital —either smaller, such as fusion bars and eateries, or bigger local and national, such as Mercato Centrale and Combo— which oppose mass and corporate consumption by offering small-scale, fine, avant-garde food experiences, although corporate capital is not absent (Lavazza). Furthermore, the recent displacements of Barattolo and the eviction of the squat Asilo Occupato, highlight the alarming directions of the ongoing transformations, with food in their epicentre.

Porta Palazzo’s position within, and its relation to, these emerging urban geographies, matters to the work of foodification, unveiling how the transformation of the neighbourhood serves the project of moving the gentrification frontier forward (González & Waley, 2012). This “forward” is of a specific location and direction: west, the adjacent fully gentrified Quadrilatero Romano; north-east, fragmented interventions with potential gentrifying effects. In this relational positioning, the discourses, materialities, and practices of the work of

foodification convert the market place into a device that, first, fixes displacement pressures onto the local retailscape producing a displacement atmosphere, and, then, allows for the gentrification frontier to proceed towards Torino Nord. As a local real-estate agent said: “the Dora river will become the next frontier”. Wedged in between a fully gentrified neighbourhood and a stigmatized as “problematic” working-class area of ongoing fragmented transformations, the food gentrification of Porta Palazzo signals and enables the movement of the overall, both retail and residential, gentrification frontier towards new directions. Food gentrification is a multi-scalar process that, by transforming the local retailscape, relates between them, and affects, the scales of marketplace, square, and wider neighbourhood.

On October 18, 2019, *Utopian Hours*, a festival for reimagining cities, took place at the Lavazza headquarters, one kilometer north-east of Porta Palazzo. During the keynote discussion, and with the mayor of Turin among the discussants, the organizer, obviously aware of the emerging debates opposing the ongoing transformations in the area, stated: “The battle against gentrification is a battle against cities themselves. [...] Cities change inevitably, and *gentrification is change*”. Along with the work of foodification that functions as a discursive-material-practical vehicle for the gentrification frontier to proceed, an official discourse has apparently started to appropriate the word “gentrification”, legitimizing in unprecedented ways the ongoing urban transformations and the displacement, either as direct outmigration or as an atmosphere that displaces indirectly, of the area’s working classes and migrant communities. “Foodification” as a term might be the response of Turin’s social movements, active citizens, and local critical scholars to respond to this appropriation, and to reveal the power of food to obscure, in the transformations it provokes, the social inequalities and exclusions, obscured by its mundaneness, innocence, and taken-for-grantedness —let alone when it is “ethical”, “local”, “authentic”. For food, not as an abstract matter to be simply ingested but as socio-spatially constructed, can be a key ingredient that does not only

legitimize gentrification processes, but actually reinforces gentrification in ways that are discursive, material, and practical.

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Figures

Figure 1:





Figure 2:



Figure 3:





## **Figure captions**

Figure 1. Above: “EAT HIPSTERS LIKE CHIPSTERS (an Italian chips’ brand)”. Writing on a wall of Porta Palazzo. Below: Partial view of the marketplace from the terrace of Mercato Centrale. Authors’ pictures.

Figure 2. Map of Porta Palazzo and Torino Nord with major points of interest. Authors’ elaboration based on Google maps.

Figure 3. Above: “Grinding together the cereals” demonstration at Mercato Centrale. Below: “The LUNCH”. The menu of a new eatery on Porta Palazzo. Authors’ pictures.