Care Building(s). Ambivalence and ambiguity in post-welfare urban austerity

Federica Gatta, Maria Grazia Montesano *

This article examines the impact of urban austerity on public real estate management and citizen action. Drawing on the notions of ambivalence and ambiguity, it argues that post-welfare urban austerity produces hybrid arrangements in which citizens, associations and public institutions co-manage spaces and services. These practices simultaneously sustain neoliberal governance and generate infrastructures of care. Based on comparative research in French and Italian cities, the article argues that public buildings constitute a crucial arena in which the material, political, and moral dimensions of post-welfare urbanism are negotiated.
Keywords: urban austerity, public asset management, post-welfare, ambivalence, ambiguity, care infrastructure

Ambivalence and ambiguity of austerity

This special issue wishes to contribute to the debate on urban austerity by focusing on public heritage and citizens' collective action. It examines the relationship between the management of public buildings by associations, informal groups of citizens and social movements, and urban policies for the valorisation of public real estate. In an era of urban austerity, our argument is that such valorisation processes can be regarded as a method of compensating for the reduction in public services. Meanwhile, civic management of public buildings can generate alternatives to alienation and activities of common interest. Recognising this tension, our primary objective is to transcend the dichotomous perspectives of top-down versus bottom-up forms of urban collective action. While acknowledging existing analyses of the impact

of neoliberal ideology on cities (Harvey, 2012), we aim to shed light on issues that this theoretical framework does not always address.

Indeed, scholars have underlined two main limits to the theories on neoliberal cities, concerning the policy and the political levels. From the point of view of policies, the mainstream theories on neoliberalism are contested for not allowing us to understand cities' specific trajectories as they are focused on the understanding of global processes (Le Galès, Robinson, 2023). Neoliberalism is understood not as one factor among others in the production of cities, but as a self-explanatory phenomenon that leads to the use of universalising categories, such as those of gentrification and privatisation of urban spaces, leaving little room for the analysis of more hybrid and ambivalent local socio-spatial processes. From the point of view of politics, what is criticised is the difficulty of thinking about possible alternatives to neoliberalism because actors are considered uniquely through their economic rationale (Griffit, Uitermark, 2025). Collective agency and resistance can then be thought only in terms of complete opposition to this rationale, otherwise it will always be interpreted as co-opted by the new spirit of capitalism (Boltanski, Chiapello, 1999).

One is not denying here the absence of sociospatial dynamics related to the development of neoliberal capitalism with its consequences; rather, one is adopting a perspective that - based on field research - is able to show the non-unidirectional and universalising nature of these processes. More generally, it seems hard to find an equilibrium between relativism and structuralism when talking about power relations in the market economy, as David Graeber underlines, talking about the work of Marcel Mauss on gift economy:

Each approach has its dangers if taken too far. If one takes up the Maussian project with too much uncritical enthusiasm, one ends up with a naive relativism utterly blind to power. But if one is too rigorous and single-minded about one's critical project, one can easily slip into a view of social reality so cynical, of a world so utterly creased with power and domination, that it becomes impossible to imagine how anything could really change. (Graeber, 2001: xiii)

Talking about processes of social change also means considering the spatially situated and historically determined differences and shifts between alternative and co-opting devices:

Reading for difference is an attempt to reach beyond a potentially reductive framing of community action and bears witness to other practices where, and if, they emerge (Gibson-Graham 2006). In doing so, the multiple and ambivalent possibilities of these spaces can be explored. (Turnbull, 2022: 2-3)

2

We propose to think about difference and change through the perspective of the concepts of ambiguity and ambivalence as a way of, at the same time, accepting the undecidability of some social situations, and to give new keys of analysis to situations that escape a rigid and single-minded critique. According to Zielyk (1966), we can conceptually distinguish ambiguity and ambivalence in social relations. If ambiguity is related to «absence of firm institutional definitions of relational norms» (ivi, 58), ambivalence «refers to situations in which the actors' perception and valuation of a social object contains conflicting elements» (*ibid.*).

Ambiguity is a structural lack of knowledge related to social identities, social systems or relational situations. It produces a form of undecidability linked to missing information or consensus among actors, which implies hesitation and doubt but also improvisation and fear (Alimardanian, 2024). Ambiguity is related to procedures, agreements and social contracts in general. Within the neoliberal context, it can be produced by the constant and rapid change of social and institutional frames due to the necessity to support the evolution of the market economy. Nevertheless, ambiguity is also a necessary element of human relations, which opens possibilities for change and transformation:

Ambiguity is found squarely within none of the above but is the vital force of constructing and deconstructing worlds, creating and destroying existence, and composing and decomposing realities, or truths. By its nature, ambiguity creates a field of openness, timelessness and plasticity in which the dynamics across knowledge and experience, certainty and uncertainty, and ontology and non-ontology emerges. (Alimardanian, 2024: 28-29)

Always following Zielyk (1966), ambivalence is the result of interactions that are related to conflicting valuations; it creates a suspension of judgement because something is not as clear as usual. Rather than the lack of knowledge, which is at the basis of ambiguity, ambivalence creates hesitation around the social values and the way in which they have to be interpreted. It is more about the moral evaluation of a situation than about the ethics of the action. The austerity context produces constant moral obligations related to saving money, being sober, accepting limits and constraints. Actors are captured in the ambivalence of values that are at the same time necessary to live together within a fragile world, but also endorse the logic of debt that benefits globalised finance. Nevertheless, to play within these moral ambivalences sometimes allows silent counter-powers to emerge. As stated by Neil

Turnbull in his research about assets management during austerity in the UK and in reference to the political critique:

I agree that ambivalence is about "not resolving tensions between affirmation and negativity" (Ruez, Cockayne, 2021), where can acknowledge the undecidability in the worlds we research (Kern, McLean, 2017), my approach nonetheless allows, tentatively, for more affirmative practices to emerge beyond such messiness as acts that could be fostered and encouraged to grow. (Turnbull, 2022: 51-52)

Being interested in the ambiguity and ambivalences of austerity is a way to look closer at reality and to observe carefully the gaps, is a way of «engaging with opacity and enigma and dealing with a potential that none or all possibilities, contingencies or interpretations can be true or validated, even contradicting ones» (Alimardanian, 2024: 25). Following Fairbanks (2009), questions regarding the post-welfare era pertain to the way politics is conducted, the facilitation of welfare restructuring through value systems, aspirations and volitions, the presuppositions of autonomy, freedom, choice and responsibility in contemporary policy formulation, and the role of urban citizens in the new urban order. This approach necessitates a consideration of the interrelationships between the formal and informal apparatuses of the welfare state, the technologies that facilitate its restructuring, and the resulting effects, meanings, experiences and subjectivities.

Our proposal in this special issue is to embrace this epistemological perspective. We will do this by empirical research on French and Italian cities in which new policies and urban geographies are designed in the context of austerity in relation to the management of public buildings. The papers presented in this special issue are related to collective research[1] that questions empirically the emergence of urban policies for the collaborative management of disused and underused public-owned buildings, encouraging different actors to join forces to propose projects that address the issue of accessibility and develop activities of public interest. France and Italy provide two appropriate contexts for observing this phenomenon. While their models of territorial

governance and their relationship with the narrative of austerity may differ, some territories in both countries have significant public real estate and adopt similar approaches to their valorisation (Gatta, Montesano, 2024).

This introduction aims to provide a general framework which discusses the use of literature on austerity and post-welfare and describes the context of valorisation policies in European cities. Finally, we will present the contributions, explaining how they engage with the themes of ambiguity and ambivalence.

1. Austerity urbanism, post-welfare policies and care infrastructures

The notions of ambivalence and ambiguity are fertile theoretical concepts for examining the physical, political and social transformations of cities together. These concepts provide relevant analytical frameworks for examining the transformation of public buildings in contemporary Western cities, highlighting the materiality and value chain inherent in the neoliberalisation of urban spaces. Analysing the management of public buildings through the lens of physical, political and social ambivalence enables dialogue between literature on the effects of neoliberalism on public real estate and studies that question the impact of public policies cutbacks on cities.

The economic policy measures introduced after 2008 have become typical elements within the broader trend of neoliberal public governance. In response to budget reductions imposed by central governments, local public authorities have turned to their real estate assets as a source of revenue. To this end, they have implemented strategies such as large-scale asset alienation plans. There is a large body of international research that has highlighted the permanent and progressive nature of urban austerity; it addresses four key issues. The first concerns the growing scale and diversification of urban privatisation and marketisation, driven by policies aimed at cutting public expenditure (Peck, 2012; Piganiol, 2022). The second issue involves a critical examination of whether local governments can continue to pursue redistributive goals through various initiatives (Mouton *et al.*, 2023). Thirdly, scholars emphasise that the mitigation of austerity increasingly depends on the "co-production" of public services, which leverages the ability of civil society to foster social innovation (Pestoff, 2017; Russell *et al.*, 2023). Finally, several studies have explored how the often-overlooked spaces of austerity can serve as fertile ground for alternative forms of public action (Tonkiss, 2021). The austerity literature has sparked debate around how municipalities leverage their real estate assets to "do more with less" (Mouton *et al.*, 2023). Increas-

ing attention is being paid to the processes of transforming and managing public properties, particularly through the lens of "new public management" (Pollitt, Bouckaert, 2017). This approach involves the adoption of private-sector-inspired, results-driven tools, logics, and procedures within the public sector. Abandoned military sites and disused railway infrastructures have become key case studies in this context (Artioli, 2016; Adisson, 2015; Adisson, Artioli, 2019; Camerin, Gastaldi, 2018). Traditionally, public management of these assets has focused on redevelopment projects aimed at maximising exchange value in order to attract private investment. However, such strategies often encounter significant limitations due to the constrained capacity of local governments (Adisson, Artioli, 2019).

However, the impact of austerity measures extends beyond widespread property sales. Since 2010, public real estate management has entered a phase of experimentation, marked by efforts to engage civil society in the participatory use and management of vacant or underutilised properties (Gatta, Montesano, 2024). These experiments are based on valorisation processes, which are mechanisms aimed at increasing the value of assets without selling them, and mainly concern buildings that were not attractive on the market. The findings of our study on valorisation policies have exposed the ambivalent nature of austerity urbanism, marked by the co-existence of divergent value systems. These systems encompass a range of perspectives, including those of an economic nature and centred on "savings", as well as those aligned with social value and ecological frugality. Moreover, valorisation policies create ambiguity by producing a lack of clarity in the procedures. Valorisation processes are not displayed in clearly visible urban strategies, but are scattered across heterogeneous measures, often associated with calls for projects combining different types of political objectives.

Public building management is tied to broader transformations in social policies and public services. While the Keynesian city of the 1960s-70s relied on strong state intervention in housing, welfare, and infrastructure, from the late 1970s, cities came to be governed as spaces of competition and entrepreneurship rather than redistribution (Harvey, 1989; Zukin, 1995). This post-welfare era reflects not a withdrawal but a restructuring of governance, marked by the neoliberal dismantling of the welfare state as an eminently urban process radically shaping city life, albeit in incomplete and uneven ways (Fairbanks, 2009). The post-welfare city thus becomes the primary locus of neoliberal restructuring, a space in which urban marketing and global competition between cities are promoted. Peck and Tickell (2017) emphasise the manner in which urban neoliberalism has undergone two discrete phases: a "roll-back" phase, characterised by disinvestment from the welfare state, and

a "roll-out" phase, marked by the introduction of novel forms of intervention, frequently of a disciplinary nature, such as workfare. However, it is crucial to stress that this transformation was neither total nor uniform. Several authors, including Larner (2003), McGuirk and Dowling (2009), and Hodkinson (2011), have drawn attention to the hybrid, fragmented and precarious nature of urban neoliberalism. This is regarded as an uneven constellation of projects rather than a compact totality.

As with the absence of a single, unadulterated version of neoliberalism, the ambivalence between the Keynesian welfare city and the so-called neoliberal post-welfare city is also notable (DeVerteuil, 2015). The post-welfare city contains remnants of Keynesianism, simultaneously eliminating the taken-for-granted nature of welfare and the role of the state in its provision. Fairbanks (2009) pointed out that previous welfare arrangements, including Keynesian welfare, served as the basis for current voluntary practices and third sector geographies. However, these remnants are little known and their persistence in the field is rarely studied. Thus, the main focus on the "resilience of residuals" in DeVertuil's (2015) study counteracts the thesis of the clear break implicit in the term post-welfare.

In the neoliberal context, volunteering[2] has assumed a central role in the restructuring of welfare, serving as a compensatory mechanism in post-welfare cities. The implementation of austerity policies and the gradual outsourcing of services have resulted in a transfer of responsibility for care to civil society, leading to the mobilisation of voluntary, free and often unacknowledged forms of labour. As was discussed by Downling (2021) demonstrated in the UK context, this "care fix" produces a temporary solution to the care crisis, based on the intensification of unpaid care work carried out mainly by women, which ensures the resilience of the system without challenging the underlying neoliberal logics. Indeed, associations have evolved beyond their traditional role as mere articulate advocates for public action, attaining the status of providers of public services, especially in popular neighbourhoods. This assumption of public service missions by associations has been accompanied by the logic of competition and project-based contracts (Cottin-Marx, 2019). Research on workfare has demonstrated that

---

[2] We will use three different terms to talk about civic action: volunteering, associations and community. The three have different meanings belonging to national, local and political contexts. In this text, we choose to use volunteering in order to underline the dimension of the unpaid activities that are carried out indiscriminately by the third sector, associations, cooperatives and charitable organisations. The word association will be used to underline a form of organisation of non-profit civic action. Community is used to underline the dimension of the mutual recognition of a common interest or a common identity.

austerity policies increasingly rely on unpaid work carried out by citizens, whether they are volunteers or not (Krinsky, Simonet, 2017). Feminist literature has also highlighted how unpaid or voluntary labour redefines the boundaries between production and reproduction, thereby making visible forms of care work that have long been invisible (Fraser, 2017). As demonstrated in other studies, austerity and its effects on welfare policies have necessitated an increase in unpaid reproductive labour, performed mainly by women, to compensate for the reduction in public services (Dowling, 2016). In this context, the role of volunteering in the post-welfare state is intrinsically ambivalent as it can be considered an integral part of neoliberal governance, serving as a mechanism to ensure the delivery of fundamental services through civic participation and unpaid work, but also a source of social innovation and mutualism. This oscillation between austerity adaptation mechanisms and resistance practices is also evident in the ambiguous institutional frames which are designed both to sustain and to control citizens' collective action.

We suggest that the issues of public buildings' valorisation and of post-welfare volunteering can be productively synthesised by the notion of care infrastructure, which has recently emerged as an area of growing interest in social research. The care infrastructure can be understood as a combination of physical resources and social relationships that enable individuals to support both their own well-being and that of their dependents (Binet *et al.*, 2022). This definition highlights how underfunded or informal forms of assistance sustain, from below, an infrastructure of essential care. These processes have highlighted the centrality of care as a fundamental dimension of sustaining collective life, demonstrating the importance of recognising social reproduction as social infrastructure (Hall, 2020). The debate on alternative care infrastructures has emphasised the unequal distribution of physical and political structures enabling social reproduction and their maintenance, in line with the paradigm of the ethics of care (Alam, Houston, 2020). The paradigm of shadow care infrastructures, on the other hand, allows us to explore the boundaries between formal and informal care institutions, highlighting the interdependencies and connections that characterise them (Power *et al*., 2022; Montesano, Cingolani, Caselli, 2025). Such services, carried mainly by civil society, appear as a fragmented and heterogeneous network of material and social resources, marked by complex relations with public institutions. They embed strong forms of ambivalence and ambiguity as they are not related to stable systems of values or clear institutional frames. The debate about the transformative potential of care practices, on the one hand, and the risk of reinforcing an austerity approach to public service substitution, on the

other, is becoming increasingly relevant (Fitz, Krasny, 2019; Davis, 2022; Gabauer *et al*., 2022; Power, Hall, 2017). This special issue extends these studies by focusing on the spatial dimension of the role of volunteerism and civic action in the post-welfare urban context, especially in relation to participatory management of public property, seeking to show the reflections and contradictions that these processes open up, more than to show ideological and universalising positions. We focus on public buildings as physical spaces whose openness and availability can enable the development of free-access activities - both public and private - aimed at the most vulnerable members of society. We argue that adopting the lens of space is precisely what makes it possible to reveal the ambivalences and ambiguities of care infrastructures in post-welfare contexts.

2. Valorisation policies in European cities

Our spatial approach is related to the management of public buildings as a way to question the production of public services and the relationship between the state and citizens. Furthermore, we are interested in exploring the material constraints and the role of inanimate elements in these social and political processes. Our research has the ambition to outline a first European portrait[3] of public building valorisation policies involving citizens in the management of public assets. We observed that, within the large frame explored in the precedent paragraph, there are different possible approaches to valorisation belonging to States, cities, historical and political contexts. Valorisation is understood as a process that does not involve selling, but rather aims to increase the value of assets (Gatta, Montesano, 2024). It involves various types of partnerships, particularly subcontracting the management of public goods to economic players, associations, and citizens' groups. According to local institutional actors, these processes not only aim to limit public spending and improve the profitability of assets, but also to promote the economic, social and cultural development of territories (*ibid.*). We have been interested in those processes because they give a different vision of austerity urbanism (Peck, 2012). Instead of just contracting public services or privatising assets, valorisation tries to find the balance between the economic and the social values, albeit in an ambiguous and ambivalent manner.

---

[3] Our main fieldworks in France (Grenoble and Saint-Etienne) and Italy (Bologna and Turin) have been completed by some short immersions in other European contexts such as Barcelona in Spain and Cardiff in the United Kingdom.

These valorisation processes can take the form of either structured policies or simple temporary measures. The national levels can determine cultural differences, especially in the relationship between the state and the citizens or communities, which implies different forms of partnership. Nevertheless, they are all rooted in the successive neoliberal reforms and in the growing budgetary constraints that local institutions have undergone and in the different approaches that national states have towards austerity. For example, in Italy:

the big breakthrough of the use [...] of real estate for associations came in the 1990s... in the early 1990s. A famous financial law had come out, Law 537 of '93, which had indicated to municipalities - provided for municipalities - the obligation to rent, to grant real estate at market rents. [...] The following year, the '95, budget opened by saying that the previous provision, i.e. obliging municipalities to rent at market rents, was confirmed except for "social cases". [...] Social cases in the sense, not just social, for social services, cultural etc. As a public function. And there, in my opinion, the system developed. (City technician, Property sector, City of Turin, October 2024)

At the very local level, the historical tradition of cities exerts a significant influence on their approach to valorisation policies. Cities with a strong industrial past that have undergone significant deindustrialisation processes are more likely to possess a substantial real estate stock. This is often due to the necessity for city councils to acquire disused industrial sites, as evidenced by the case of Fiat's properties in Turin, Italy. This industrial working-class past can also imply a strong involvement of the civil society, which is available to take over the production of local public services in public buildings. Moreover, a municipalist tradition oriented to citizens' participation is also the vehicle of a willingness to replace privatisation processes with participatory policies that are aimed at co-constructing spaces of collective interest, as is the case in Bologna in Italy and Grenoble in France.

The differences between these contexts remain challenging to comprehend, primarily due to the emergence and experimental nature of these valorisation policies, which have only come to the fore in the past decade. It was observed that a divergence in the approach to the issues of austerity, the management of public buildings, and the preservation of local services could be identified between cities. In the following sections, we present the three approaches that we believe clarify how valorisation devices and policies can be arranged in different contexts. The first of these approaches prioritises the renovation of buildings at the forefront. The second focuses on the manner in which valorisation enables the reconfiguration of relations between municipalities and civil society. The third combines valorisation with the alternative production of public services. These three approaches contribute to the crea-

tion of a care infrastructure in which communities maintain public buildings and provide care services under the agreement and supervision of municipal institutions.

2.1 How to renovate buildings

In an era of fiscal constraints and an increased emphasis on sufficiency, municipalities with heritage buildings in a poor state of repair are adopting experimental approaches to alleviate the financial burden of renovating and maintaining their real estate. Alienation - understood as the sale of buildings - would often be the best option, but not all cities have the possibility (or the political will) to attract private developers who can handle heavy transformations involving highly profitable products. Moreover, our survey shows that municipalities have already sold their "family jewels" - the way some municipal technicians interviewed referred to heritage assets of historic-artistic value - and are now looking for different solutions, sometimes because what remains is not attractive to the market. Another option is to create the conditions for local actors to join forces through public calls. As documented, in recent years, especially in Italy (Livi *et al*., 2023), there has been a notable increase in the number of public calls for both long-term and temporary projects, inviting private and civic actors to buy or manage land and public buildings that have been abandoned or are underused. These municipalities are above all concerned by the risk of leaving the buildings empty. From this point of view, the discourse on the risks of emptiness is ambivalent: between the desire to adapt public buildings to contemporary uses and lifestyles and to keep them accessible to citizens, but also to ensure that the economic value of this heritage is not lost and to avoid illegal squatting. Public calls are the solution to find actors that can occupy and take care of buildings and also invest in expensive renovations. Even if the criteria of social utility are put forward, the economic solidity of the players in this case becomes very important, giving priority to activities which have an economic return. Planned link between calls for projects and the needs of neighbourhoods, or even urban transformation strategies, is also rarely established. Moreover, these processes fall outside the rules of civic consultation and participation.

The uses and consequences of these calls will be illustrated by different contributions to this special issue. In Grenoble, the competitive call *Gren' de Projets* is presented as one of the different valorisation policies that the municipality is experimenting with the main objective to renovate its heritage,

but leaving aside a more strategic vision. In the city of Bologna, the noncompetitive calls like *Laboratorio Spazi* are analysed as an experimental valorisation policy that has tried to improve the use of civic participation for assigning spaces to local associations. For the city of Turin, it will be shown how a competitive call *Co-City* financed by European funds has given the possibility to enlarge the use of the urban commons' regulation.

2.2 How to standardise relations with associations

The imperative to reduce the costs of maintenance can also constitute, for local authorities, the opportunity to change the rules of their relations with local communities. Experiments are introduced to improve transparency (and new constraints) in the contracts with associations that already occupy a large part of the public real estate. As presented by our interviewees, the aim is to move away from political clientelism and restore fairness to the way in which associations are treated by establishing a framework that empowers municipalities to regulate these relationships. This allows, for example, to uniformise the duration of occupation contracts and the fees that have to be paid. On another side, the contracts can be used to give new responsibilities to associations, including new burdens in the care of buildings (i.e. paying bills and doing small repairs). There can also be an injunction to share space and achieve greater flexibility of uses. Municipalities start to have a closer look at when and how long spaces are used in order to propose sharing options, which is also presented as a way of saving energy. Procedures can nevertheless be ambiguous for these associations that do not share the same big picture as the municipal services. Moreover, the fact of sharing a space requires a certain form of collaborative management, which is not suitable for all types of associations. Most of the time, this requires paying someone for opening and closing spaces, for example, but most of the associations have very small resources and rely on volunteering. From the point of view of municipalities, optimising the use of spaces is related to the knowledge, the mapping and the inventory of municipal assets. Many municipalities still do not know exactly what they possess, sometimes because this information is spread over different departments, sectors or neighbourhood town halls. Cities have to invest resources in setting up comprehensive inventories and this is not always the case. Moreover, these buildings' surveys can take a very long time in cities that own many square meters.

This issue will be highlighted by the case of Grenoble, where the authors will stress the importance of the knowledge of the real estate stock in order to

12

improve the consciousness on the spatial and social value of the network of citizen engagement that it hosts. A similar situation was observed in Bologna, where a comprehensive mapping is lacking despite the implementation of a series of heterogeneous heritage valorisation initiatives in conjunction with repressive measures against occupation and self-managed experiences that did not fall within the scope of participation.

2.3 How to produce public services

Related to the standardisation of the relations between municipalities and associations, a further key element is that austerity-driven public real estate management can be used as an asset for the production of public services. Although in different ways, the policies that we have observed at the European level are linked by the willingness to valorise the buildings which are not already used for official public services, making them available for social initiatives of mutualism, self-organisation or outright public service production. In the context of urban austerity, forms of public real estate valorisation seek to legitimise specific social experiences. At the same time, it turns «volunteer led organizations as one competitor in a market for the delivery of public services» (Nichols *et al.*, 2020: 1159). Some cities like Barcelona promote "civic management" as a way to recognise the public service produced by communities (Pera, Bussu, 2022). In the United Kingdom, assets and existing public facilities like libraries and youth centres can be transferred to communities when the local authority can no longer afford to maintain them (Turnbull, 2023). The political significance of these policies is highly ambivalent. It relies both on the idea of promoting bottom-up initiatives, especially when they are rooted in popular districts, and on a more or less disguised form of public service delegation. These approaches can lead to new forms of contractualisation between city councils and citizens that recognise civil society as a partner in public action, but also commit the community to this partnership. However, it is difficult for local authorities to engage in horizontal, partnership-based dialogue with groups. Recognising the role of public service providers for associations could lead to institutional disengagement and does not guarantee unconditional access to resources.

The Italian and French cities that are explored in this special issue do not appear to be taking this approach directly. Nevertheless, the articles will discuss how the processes of valorisation are questioning the relation between public services and citizens' actions. For the case of Grenoble, this will be highlighted through the analysis of the spatial distribution of the public assets

and their uses. In the text on Bologna, it is shown how various actors interpret the concept of valorisation in different manner and civic involvement in the management of public spaces emerges as an ambivalent device: a response to social needs, but also an instrument of valorisation in a neoliberal key. The text on Turin, through an in-depth case study, will discuss the partnership relationship between the city and an association, which leads to ambivalence between the different representations of the role of the urban commons.

3. Presentation of the special issue

Starting from the theoretical framework and empirical observations outlined above, this monographic issue investigates how urban austerity reshapes the governance, uses, and meanings of public real estate in three European cities, i.e. Grenoble, Bologna and Turin. The four articles collected here adopt diverse methodological and analytical lenses - from policy analysis to ethnography - to interrogate the ambivalent role of austerity policies, civic participation and assets management in contemporary processes of urban transformation.

Two of the contributions are primarily concerned with the evolving landscape of urban policies. The article on Bologna - written by Maurizio Bergamaschi and Maria Grazia Montesano - examines how collaborative management of public real estate has emerged around the reuse of public buildings, particularly in the aftermath of the economic crisis and under the pressure of administrative rationalisation and European funding schemes. The analysis reconstructs the local trajectory of property policy and highlights how the civic management of residual public assets becomes both a response to urgent social needs and a vector for neoliberal valorisation. The notion of "valuing what's left" captures the productive tension between divergent logics in which the actors conceive the opening up of residual heritage to social use and its valorisation.

Similarly, the article on Grenoble - written by Federica Gatta, Cécile Léonardi and Inès Ramirez-Cobo - investigates recent municipal strategies aimed at optimising underused public real estate through participatory mechanisms that seek to avoid privatisation. The case reveals how these policies increasingly rely on the organisational capacity of civic actors to maintain and animate spaces formerly managed by public institutions. Alongside urban policies, the article identifies a larger "infrastructure of care" embedded in the municipal real estate stock, an arrangement that supports the continuity of proximity-based public services.

14

A third contribution - written by Emanuela Saporito and Ianira Vassallo - focuses on the city of Turin. Here, the analysis explores how commons-oriented policies such as Co-City intersect with local welfare transformations in a post-industrial context. The article sheds light on the ambiguities that characterise co-management models. These include the tension between publicly funded renovation and limited public access, the asymmetrical nature of "collaboration pacts" that stop short of true partnerships.

The final contribution - written by Alessia de Biase and Carolina Mudan Marelli - adopts a theoretical and anthropological approach to the notion of valorisation in the urban context. The article unpacks its multiple and situated meanings, showing how actors mobilise different registers - economic, moral, political - to build "simple" solutions to crises by identifying new values. The article interrogates how these values and valorisation processes are associated with the use of "magical" words that allow the construction of collective mystical beliefs.

Conclusions

The contributions collated in this special issue demonstrate how the concepts of ambiguity and ambivalence enable the redefinition of the debate on urban austerity, thereby shifting the focus from linear narratives of neoliberal domination to the contingent, situated and frequently contradictory dynamics that develop around the management of public real estate assets. The concept of ambiguity, comprehended as a state of indecisiveness associated with unstable regulations, incomplete data and evolving institutional frameworks, facilitates the comprehension of how austerity-driven reforms engender uncertain domains for experimentation in the governance of public assets. The concept of ambivalence, in turn, sheds light on the manner in which civic actors and institutions navigate conflicting moral, political and economic assessments, while simultaneously unveiling the constraints and generative potential inherent in their practices. Both concepts allow the understanding of the emergence of care infrastructures as physical and social networks allowing to support collective well-being resulting from austerity urbanism and post-welfare policies.

In the contributions included in this issue, ambiguity and ambivalence are not only referred to as theoretical categories, but are also used as interpretative lenses in the analysis of empirical cases. The Bologna study demonstrates how ambiguity emerges from overlapping and sometimes contradictory frameworks, while ambivalence manifests itself in the dual interpretation

15

of civic management as both social innovation and as adaptation to austerity. The article on Grenoble highlights how ambiguous institutional arrangements can create opportunities for daily care within the municipal heritage, and how assessments of local services that are ambivalent can support a fragile care infrastructure. The Turin case study illuminates the inherent ambivalence in policies oriented towards common goods, wherein collaboration is simultaneously encouraged and constrained. The theoretical reflection on valorisation demonstrates that ambiguity and ambivalence are inherent to the construction of "value" during periods of crisis, emphasising the profound and magical meanings that words can assume.

When considered as a whole, these contributions provide two primary perspectives. Firstly, it is demonstrated that ambiguity and ambivalence should not be regarded as impediments to be surmounted; rather, they should be considered conducive conditions that facilitate a more nuanced analytical comprehension of the consequences of urban austerity and the rise of care infrastructures. In the context of the post-welfare city, the coexistence of neoliberal logics and care practices is characterised not by opposition, but by intrinsic interconnectedness. Secondly, it is argued that the management of public buildings can be considered a privileged observatory for understanding the material, political and moral stakes of the post-welfare city, where the boundaries between public, private and common are constantly being redefined. The present special issue proposes an interpretative framework that recognises the limits and possibilities of contemporary urban transformations, thus advancing the debate on austerity and care beyond dichotomous readings of domination and resistance to show how the two notions are intrinsically connected in post-welfare cities.

Bibliographic references

Addison F. (2015). *De l'aménagement du territoire au réaménagement des terrains de l'État. Politiques et projets de reconversion urbaine du domaine ferroviaire en France et en Italie*. PhD thesis, Politecnico di Milano and University of Paris-Est.

Adisson F., Artioli F. (2019). Four Types of Urban Austerity: Public Land Privatisations in French and Italian Cities. *Urban Studies*, 57(1): 72-92. doi: 10.1177/0042098019827517.

Alam A., Houston D. (2020). Rethinking care as alternate infrastructure. *Cities*, 100: 102662. doi: 10.1016/j.cities.2020.102662.

Alimardanian M. (2024). Ontology and its double: on the nature of ambiguity and lived experience. In Alimardanian M., Heffernan T. (eds.). *The anthropology of ambiguity*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Artioli F. (2016). When Administrative Reforms Produce Territorial Differentiation: How Market-oriented Policies Transform Military Brownfield Reconversion in France (1989-

2012). *Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy*, 34(8): 1759-1775. doi: 10.1177/0263774x16642227.

Binet A., Houston-Read R., Gavin V., Baty C., Abreu D., Genty J., Tulloch A., Reid A., Arcaya M. (2022). The Urban Infrastructure of Care. *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 89(3): 282-294. doi: 10.1080/01944363.2022.2099955.

Boltanski L., Chiapello È. (1999). *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme*. Paris: Gallimard.

Camerin F., Gastaldi F. (2018). Il ruolo dei fondi di investimento immobiliare nella riconversione del patrimonio immobiliare pubblico in Italia. Working papers. *Urban@it*, 2.

Cottin-Marx S. (2019). *Sociologie du monde associatif*. Paris: la Découverte.

Davis J. (2022). *The caring city: Ethics of urban design*. Bristol: Policy Press.

DeVerteuil J. (2016). *Resilience in the post-welfare inner city*. Bristol: Policy Press.

Dowling E. (2016). Valorised but not valued? Affective remuneration, social reproduction and feminist politics beyond the crisis. *British Politics*, 11: 452-468. doi: 10.1057/s41293-016-0036-2.

Fairbanks R.P. (2009). *How it works: Recovering citizens in post-welfare Philadelphia*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Fitz A., Krasny E., Wien A. (eds.). (2019). *Critical care: Architecture and urbanism for a broken planet*. Chicago: MIT Press.

Fraser N. (2017). *La fine della cura. Le contraddizioni sociali del capitalismo contemporaneo*. Milano: Mimesis.

Gabauer A., Knierbein S., Cohen N., Lebuhn H., Trogal K., Viderman T., Haas T. (2022). *Care and the city: encounters with urban studies*. Milton Park: Taylor & Francis.

Gatta F., Montesano M.G. (2024). Experimenting with austerity urbanism through public asset management. The case of Grenoble and Bologna. *Métropoles*, 35. doi: 10.4000/13et0.

Graeber D. (2001). *Toward an anthropological theory of value: The false coin of our own dreams*. New York: Springer.

Griffith E.J., Uitermark J. (2025). 'I Learned To Make a Lot More Space in Myself For Other People': Examining the Negotiation of Hegemonic and Alternative Values in the Urban Commons. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 49(4): 912-928. doi: 10.1111/1468-2427.13332.

Hall S.M. (2020). Social reproduction as social infrastructure. *Soundings*, 76: 82-94. doi: 10.3898/soun.76.06.2020.

Harvey D. (1989). From Managerialism to Entrepreneurialism: The Transformation in Urban Governance in Late Capitalism. *Geografiska Annaler. Series B, Human Geography*, 71(1): 3-17. doi: 10.2307/490503.

Harvey D. (2012). *Rebel cities: From the right to the city to the urban revolution*. New York: Verso books.

Krinsky J., Simonet M. (2017). *Who Cleans the Park? Public Work and Urban Governance in New York City*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Larner W. (2003). Neoliberalism?. *Environment and planning D: society and space*, 21(5): 509-512. doi: 10.1068/d2105ed.

Le Galès P., Robinson J. (2023). Introduction: Comparative global urban studies in the making: Welcome to the world of imperfect and innovative urban comparisons. In Le Galès P., Robinson J. (eds.). *The Routledge Handbook of Comparative Global Urban Studies*. New York: Routledge.

Livi T. et *al*. (2023). *Spazi di comunità. Ricerca valutativa sulle pratiche di riuso di spazi dismessi a fini collettivi, Nucleo di Valutazione e Analisi per la Programmazione (NUVAP)*. Roma: Dipartimento per le Politiche di Coesione della Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri.

McGuirk P., Dowling R. (2009). Neoliberal privatisation? Remapping the public and the private in Sydney's masterplanned residential estates. *Political geography*, 28(3): 174-185. doi: /10.1016/j.polgeo.2009.05.004.

Montesano M., Cingolani T., Caselli S. (2025). Infrastrutture ibride della cura: l'esperienza del Laboratorio di Salute Popolare di Bologna. *Autonomie locali e servizi sociali*, 1: 91-105. doi: 10.1447/117547.

Mouton M., Guelton S., Poinsot P. (2023). Leveraging Land-Value Capture in Contexts of Urban Austerity: Evidence from the Grand Paris Express (France). *European Planning Studies*, 32(1): 45-48. doi: 10.1080/09654313.2023.2240843.

Nichols G., Findlay-King L., Forbes D. (2020). The Community Asset Transfer of Leisure Facilities in the UK: A Review and Research Agenda. *Voluntas,* 3: 1159-1172. doi: 10.1007/s11266-020-00263-0.

Oevermann H., Polyák L., Szemzö H., Mieg H.A. (eds.). (2023). *Open Heritage. Community-driven adaptive reuse in Europe : best practices*. Basel: Birkhauser.

Peck J. (2012). Austerity Urbanism. *City,* 16(6): 626-655. doi: 10.1080/13604813.2012.734071.

Peck J., Tickell A. (2008). Neoliberalizing space. In Martin R. (ed.). *Economy*. Milton Park: Routledge.

Pera M., Bussu S. (2024). Towards Democratisation of Public Administration: Public-Commons Partnerships in Barcelona. *International Journal of the Commons*, 18(1): 164-176. doi: /10.5334/ijc.1385.

Pestoff V.A. (2017). The Social and Political Dimensions of Co-operative Enterprises. In Michie J., Blasi J.R., Borzaga C. (eds.). *The Oxford Handbook of Mutual, Co-Operative, and Co-Owned Business*. Oxford: Oxford Handbooks.

Piganiol M. (2022). The Contested Commodification of State-Owned Land. *French Politics*, 20: 226-243. doi: 10.1057/s41253-022-00172-2.

Pollitt C., Bouckaert G. (2017). *Public management reform*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Power A., Hall E. (2018). Placing care in times of austerity. *Social & Cultural Geography*, 19(3): 303-313. doi: 10.1080/14649365.2017.1327612.

Russell B., Milburn K., Heron K. (2023). Strategies for a new municipalism: Public-common partnerships against the new enclosures. *Urban Studies*, 60(11): 2133-2157. doi: 10.1177/00420980221094700.

Subirats J. (2016). *El poder de lo próximo: las virtudes del municipalismo*. Madrid: Catarata.

Tonkiss F. (2013). Austerity Urbanism and the Makeshift City. *City*, 17(3): 312-324. doi: 10.1080/13604813.2013.795332.

Turnbull N. (2022). *Community action in austerity: The case of Community Asset Transfer*. PhD Thesis, Cardiff University.

Turnbull N. (2023). Austerity's afterlives? The case of community asset transfer in the UK. *Geographical Journal*, 00: 1-10. doi: 10.1111/geoj.12513.

Zielyk I.V. (1966). On Ambiguity and Ambivalence. *Pacific Sociological Review*, 9(1): 57-64. doi: 10.2307/1388307.

Zukin S. (1995). *The cultures of the city*. Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell.