

Urban Research in Comics Form: Exploring Spaces, Agency and Narrative Maps in Italian Marginalized Neighbourhoods

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Abstract

This paper reflects on the limits and potentialities of “comics-based research” (Kuttner et al., 2020) in marginalised urban contexts, through the interdisciplinary and collaborative perspective of an urban sociologist and a cultural geographer-cartoonist. The analysis starts from the empirical example of the comic book anthology *Quartieri. Viaggio al Centro delle Periferie Italiane*, which is devoted to five “peripheral” neighbourhoods in Italy and was realised through collaboration between researchers and cartoonists. The paper focuses on the way in which research activities and spatial analyses were influenced by the narrative and stylistic choices dictated by the “spatial grammar” of comics. Through reading the short comics story about the Arcella neighbourhood in Padua, we reflect on how comics allowed us to explore the role of everyday life spaces and of different spatial agencies and spatial structures in the area. Focusing on the role of maps in the narration, the paper further aims to make some relations between graphic and narrative choices in the story and spatial analysis visible. *Quartieri* is an empirical example that helps us to move beyond the idea of using comics to merely disseminate academic knowledge differently. Despite their prolific accessibility, indeed, comics seem to help us engaging differently with the contemporary debates around the spatial, material and affective turn.

Keywords: Comics-Based Research; Ethnography; Reflexivity; Maps; Space; Agency.

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1 Introduction.¹ Engaging with “Comics-Based Research” in the Social Sciences

For some time it has been clear that comics can no longer be understood as a simple cultural genre aimed principally at children (Taussig, 2011). Comics are now considered as a form through which complex and dense messages can be expressed on important themes. The “cultural legitimacy” of comics (Beaty, 2012) took off with the success of graphic novels,² a label that has become more common precisely in order to identify “serious” narratives in comics form that are in some ways “literary” and founded on in depth historical research. A well-known example is *Maus* by Art Spiegelman (1996), which has become one of the most discussed contemporary texts on the Holocaust, particularly in relation to the ethics of testimony, to the extent that in 1992 it became the first and only comic to win the Pulitzer Prize. Many other examples of successful graphic novels are, for instance, the graphic journalism books of Guy Delisle and Joe Sacco, Mariane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* (2000), Chris Ware’s *Jimmy Corrigan* (2001), Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home* (2006), Eddie Campbell and Alan Moore’s *From Hell* (1999) and Rutu Modan’s *Exit Wounds* (2007), to name but a few.

The gradually increasing awareness of this cultural legitimacy means that even academia has begun to show interest in comics. In the last twenty years we have witnessed an increasing proliferation of academic experiments that use comics as a means of representation. These experiences are extremely different from each other both in terms of their origins in different academic disciplines and in their epistemological and stylistic approach. They are highly fragmented but nevertheless are together beginning, more or less consciously, to delineate a field of emergent practices. Called by Kuttner et al. (2017, 2020) “comics-based research (CBR)”, this field is gradually taking shape through informal meetings, formal seminars (for example the *Comics Forum* <https://comicsforum.org>, founded by Ian Hague, 2014), monographic issues of “traditional” journals and the creation of monographic interdisciplinary journals such as *Sequentials* (<https://www.sequentialsjournal.net>), which includes only comics-based research.

The most significant contribution to CBR is probably made by anthropologists, who have created a subfield called “graphic anthropology”. Within this subfield we should mention the book series *ethnoGRAPHIC* published by University of Toronto Press, which includes books as *Lissa* (Hamdy & Nye, 2017) and *King of Bangkok* (Sopranzetti et al., 2021). It is thus no surprise that there is talk of a “graphic boom” in anthropology (Tondeur, 2018). Interest in comics in the field of sociology is more recent, with the most interesting signs arriving largely from the Francophone world (Montaigne et al., 2013; Ravalet et al., 2014; Nocerino, 2016; Pinçon-Charlot et al., 2017), in particular thanks to *Sociorama* by Casterman that brings together sociologists and comic book artists to collaborate in creating functional narratives that are profoundly anchored in research fieldwork, as well as the blog, *Emile, on bande?*, which promotes the diffusion of different types of sociological writing in comics form. Academic experiments using comics are also starting to emerge in many other disciplinary fields, from history (Jablonka, 2014; Lewis et al., 2013; Mizuki & Davisson, 2013) and philosophy (Evans, 2016) to medicine, for which even a *Graphic Medicine Manifesto* and a book series dedicated to graphic medicine (Penn State Press) have been produced. In geography after a first Manifesto

1. Given the fact that the present paper is the result of a collaborative writing process, paragraphs should be ascribed as follows: Adriano Cancellieri sections 3.1, 3.2, and 4; Giada Peterle sections 2.1, 2.2 and 3.3 and together section 1.
2. The term “graphic novel” is mainly an exonym, coined by publishers and the mass media rather than by cartoonists themselves.

about “comic book geographies” (Dittmer, 2010 & 2014) research on “graphic geography” is developing fast (Bertoncin et al., 2020), with new experimentations that are using comics to “think visually” (Fall, 2021) and “as a research practice” (Peterle, 2021a).

Our contribution to urban research in comics form starts precisely from these important changes in the perception and production of comics within (and beyond) academic boundaries. *Quartieri. Viaggio al Centro delle Periferie Italiane* is a comic book anthology published by BeccoGiallo (2019) that is part of this emergent field of academic work that uses comics as a means of expression. *Quartieri* is made up of five short comics stories about five neighbourhoods in five Italian cities that are spread across the length of the country from North to South. These are Tor Bella Monaca in Rome, Bolognina in Bologna, San Siro in Milan, ZEN in Palermo, and Arcella in Padua. Our collective work is composed of five different research, narratives, and graphic styles, and starts from a deeply interdisciplinary perspective and a collaboration between cartoonists and researchers from different Italian Universities. From a curatorial point of view, the project was built on the convergence between our different disciplinary perspectives and research paths, as much as on our cross-disciplinary research practices. Adriano Cancellieri is an urban sociologist at the IUAV University in Venice, working on qualitative research methods together with urbanists and architects, and coordinates the innovative and interdisciplinary post-degree Master Course *U-Rise* in Urban Regeneration and Social Innovation. The project of the comic book anthology benefitted from his experience in telling urban social contexts through ethnographic methods, from his knowledge of the Arcella neighbourhood, and, more generally, from his previous work on contemporary urban phenomena such as urban regeneration, segregation and migration (Cancellieri 2013 & 2017; Cancellieri & Ostanel, 2015; Cancellieri & Scandurra, 2012; Saint-Blancat & Cancellieri, 2014). The project also benefited from Giada Peterle’s previous research on comics and her work as an illustrator and comics author (Peterle 2015, 2017, 2019 & 2021b). As a cultural geographer and a lecturer in Literary Geography at the University of Padua, she works on the contaminations between creative and narrative methods, art-based practices and academic research. In particular, her book *Comics as a Research Practice: Drawing Narrative Geographies beyond the Frame* (2021a) focuses on the idea of comics as both objects of analysis and a practice of research from the internal perspective of a researcher-cartoonist.

The encounter between these two interdisciplinary perspectives on urban space was at the basis of the experimental and collaborative project of the comic book anthology, which this paper reflects upon. In particular in the second section, *Assembling “Quartieri”: A Polyphonic Travel across Marginalized Neighbourhoods in Italy*, we retrace the different phases of the project of the comic book anthology and propose an interpretation of the verbo-visual result as an urban assemblage (McFarlane & Anderson, 2011; McFarlane, 2011). For, despite the differences in their style and content, the disparate comics stories in the collection compose a unique polyphonic mosaic that helps us to interpret marginalised urban contexts in Italy. In the third section, *Affordances and Challenges of EthnoGraphic Research: Spaces, Agency and Narrative Maps from Arcella, Padua*, we propose a closer reflection on the potentialities and limits of comics-based research, through recalling our experience of composing a comics story about the Arcella neighbourhood in Padua. This section also represents a first attempt to bring our different disciplinary perspectives on the experience of conducting comics-based research together in a shared conversation: whereas, in sections 3.2, Adriano Cancellieri focuses on how key-concepts in urban sociology, like everyday life spaces and agency, are discussed and represented in the comics pages, in section 3.3, Giada Peterle reflects on the narrative role of maps in the process of transposing ethnographic fieldwork into a comics story, from the

double perspective of a geographer-cartoonist. Given that in this case one of the researchers was also the cartoonist, we present the ways in which our research endeavour was constantly influenced by the narrative and stylistic choices dictated by the “spatial grammar” of comics (Groensteen, 2007), with research activities proceeding in parallel with the composition of the comics story. The exchange between spatial research and comics is further represented in the paper through the constant presence of images and pages from the comic book anthology, in order to provide readers with a visual environment that resembles the verbo-visual assemblage experienced when reading *Quartieri*. In the conclusions we propose moving beyond the idea that comics are simply a valuable way of dissemination to translate research into a more accessible form. Thanks to their peculiar spatial grammar and hybrid verbo-visual form, comics contribute to the narrativisation of ethnographic fieldwork, permitting the co-existence of the spatial contexts and of both the interviewees’ and researchers’ bodies and voices in the same page. Through this predisposition to the phenomenological exploration of social and cultural life in urban contexts, comics seems to contribute in a very promising way to contemporary debates on assemblage thinking, agency and the spatial, affective and material turn.

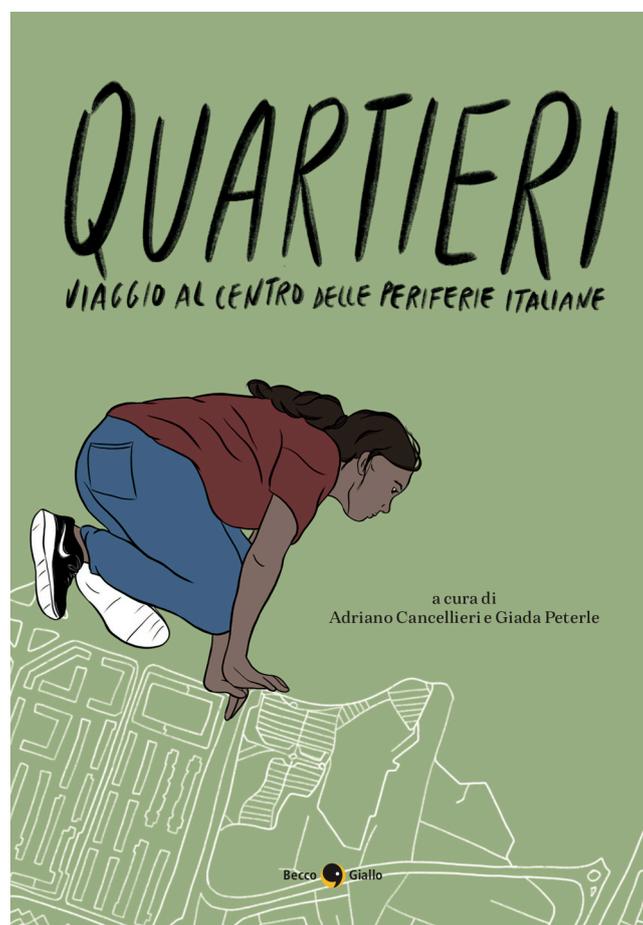


Figure 1: The front cover of *Quartieri*, with a young woman practicing parkour on a cartographic mosaic composed of the five maps of the neighbourhoods presented in the comic book anthology. Illustration: Giada Peterle, in *Quartieri*, BeccoGiallo, 2019

2 Assembling “*Quartieri*”: A Polyphonic Travel across Marginalized Neighbourhoods in Italy

2.1 Sketching Urban Ethnographies: The Co-Creation of a Comic Book Anthology through Research-Art Collaborations

As curators, since the beginning we were involved in a dialogical exchange with our publishing house, BeccoGiallo, which guided our editorial choices and influenced also our decisions about how to organise the comics-based research project. We decided that each of the five comics stories had to somehow replicate our effort to let an academic researcher/a group of researchers collaborate with a comics author activating urban research-art collaborations (Foster & Lorimer, 2007). To compose the group of authors, and decide the cities to include in the collection, we started from the interdisciplinary network *Tracce Urbane*, involving researchers from different disciplinary backgrounds, like urban sociology, anthropology, urban planning, architecture, and geography. We were the only researcher duo that included, from the very beginning, one member that was also a comic author herself; in all other cases, comics authors were invited to join the group and collaborate with the members of *Tracce Urbane*. Their names were mainly suggested by our publishing house in collaboration with the online graphic journalism magazine *Stormi*.

Among the different research groups, we all shared a common ethnographic toolkit (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; O'Reilly, 2012), as we were all used to engage with urban spatial contexts through both observing and participating in bottom-up processes of place-making, to conduct interviews with individuals and groups and, most importantly, we were all open to experiment with new ways of writing ethnographic research. The encounter between the already mentioned “graphic boom” (Tondeur, 2018) in the social sciences and our experience with ethnographic methods made this experimentation with “ethnoGraphics” particularly intriguing, in the sense that as urban researchers we were all keen to explore the potentialities of presenting and conducting our ethnographies through a dialogue with the comics language. Our interest was in the opportunity to present ethnographic research outside academic boundaries, thanks to the more accessible format of the comic book anthology; to make use of the hybrid verbo-visual language of comics to bring readers “into the field”, making research processes visible; to both conduct and represent research differently, permitting our interviewees to enter (visually) the page through their bodies, thus, allowing readers for a deeper empathic engagement.

Despite these common starting points, each chapter was “ethnographically” realised in a very original manner from both a processual and stylistic perspective. To facilitate the dialogue between researchers and cartoonists, preferably both the researcher and the comic’s author should have a personal connection with the selected peripheral area, which means an extensive history of research on the neighbourhood, in the case of the researchers, and a previous experience of creative interventions in the neighbourhood, in the case of the comics authors. As curators, we did not witness the process of realisation of the single stories and, thus, we are not able to discuss how single groups organised the collaboration between researchers and cartoonists: in some cases, couples worked through a remote collaboration and exchange, while other times, researchers asked cartoonists to take active part in the research activities conducted in the neighbourhood. What we know from our experience, is that bringing cartoonists into the research process means not simply to share results, analyses and collected data, but also to conduct research differently: making ethnoGraphic choices means to consider what to tell

or discard and to find a balance between what is represented either visually or textually in the comics page. This was the most challenging aspect of researchers-cartoonists collaboration. As we will further explain in the third section of this paper, in our case, making choices about the graphic appearance and narrative structure of the comics story meant to change the way in which we conducted our ethnographic research in the Arcella neighbourhood: beyond collecting both visual and verbal materials during fieldwork and interviews, from the very beginning we had to discuss what “voices” to collect according to what characters we wanted to include in the story. In our case, we both shared a common interest in everyday urban spaces and wanted to experiment with ethnoGraphic research to valorise unheard voices from the neighbourhood: when choosing interviewees, thus, we were also thinking of their capacity to speak to a broader, not necessarily specialist audience.

Some cartoonists involved in the composition of *Quartieri* were researchers themselves, and this helped to deepen the above-mentioned dialogue. Beyond Giada Peterle, this was the case also of Giuseppe Lo Bocchiaro, who holds a PhD in Regional and Urban Planning, and drew the chapter on Palermo in collaboration with anthropologist Ferdinando Fava (University of Padua). Fava is member of the Laboratoire Architecture Anthropologie dell’Ecole Nationale Supérieure d’Architecture de Paris-la-Villettes and his long-lasting researches on the “anthropologies of exclusion” (Fava, 2008) in the ZEN neighbourhood have easily met Lo Bocchiaro’s personal attention towards a city, Palermo, where he lives and works, and that was already at the centre of both his researches and comics production (Lo Bocchiaro & Tulumello, 2014). Lo Bocchiaro’s graphic choices are deeply influenced by his double perspective: for example, as shown in Figure 2, the idea of including different visual materials, from illustrations and cartoons to urban plans and photographs, mirrors the double view of an urban planner who is also a cartoonist. The effect is a collage of different visual styles that recalls the process of collecting different voices and research data during ethnoGraphic fieldwork. In Rome, the comics story was based on the research conducted by the LabSU-Laboratorio di Studi Urbani Territori dell’Abitare in the Tor Bella Monaca neighbourhood: Carlo Cellamare and Francesco Montillo worked with comics author Alekos Reize, providing him with access to the intimate stories of social marginalisation and resistance of many inhabitants in the area (Cellamare & Montillo, 2020) (see Figure 5). In Bologna, anthropologist Giuseppe Scandurra collaborated with Mattia Moro on the area of the so-called “Bolognina” (Scandurra, 2017): their story about everyday life in the neighbourhood is set in a small playground, showing the problematic co-presence of old and new inhabitants (see Figure 3). Finally, in Milan, comics author Elena Mistrello joined the research-action activities of Mapping San Siro, an interdisciplinary group coordinated by Francesca Cognetti in collaboration with Paolo Grassi and Elena Maranghi: Mistrello based the comics story on the encounters she made during fieldwork with the thick network of associations and local actors operating in the area (Cognetti, 2013; Cognetti & Fava, 2019).

Quartieri proposes an encounter between interdisciplinary urban research and artistic languages. As curators, we tried to promote a dialogical reflection between cartoonists and researchers, avoiding the mere “transposition” of academic content into another format. As academics we were asked to adapt our way of thinking to the new medium, translating verbal thoughts and discourses into verbo-visual imaginations. Even though our long interviews had to be cut, because of the smaller space provided to texts by the comics format, nevertheless we were all surprised by the amount of spatial information that finds a new centrality in the comics page, thanks to the use of images. Comics ask to find a balance between textual and visual elements, enhancing non-verbal parts of ethnographic research that are, otherwise, often left over. For example, details about facial expressions, bodily movements and spatial contexts find a new



Figure 2: The assemblage of different graphic solutions (from maps to illustrations and photographs) helps to represent a plurivocal perspective on the ZEN neighbourhood, in Palermo. Illustration: Giuseppe Lo Bocchiaro, in *Quartieri*, BeccoGiallo, 2019

visibility in comics, giving researchers the opportunity to present other parts of fieldwork activities and experiences through ethnoGraphic representations. Comics ask to organise thoughts through the organisation of (narrative) space. Indeed, whereas each group had more or less twenty pages at its disposal, we had to face other limits imposed by the comics language, such as the limited space of the page, which constitutes a spatial, physical and narrative unit. As we will see in the third section, devoted to Arcella, for example, we often used the single-page-unit: moving from one page to the other, the story changes setting and gives voice to a different interviewee. These limits did not represent limitations, still they asked researchers to consider carefully what to maintain or discard, when interviews that lasted hours had to be “confined” within the limits of a single page. Furthermore, comics rely not just on the alternation between texts and images but also between representational and non-representational features (Dittmer, 2010, p. 228). Thus, part of the ethnographic research needs to be left out from the comics representation: these choices about what to include or discard become a fundamental part of the ethnoGraphic research process. Since there is a lot happening between the panels, in the apparent void and white space of the gutters, comics ask for an active engagement of the reader, who recomposes what happens between the panels: they are affectively and emotionally engaged by the comics story that asks them to create connections, imagine what happens between the panels, and find a sense for the narration to proceed (*ibidem*).

During ethnoGraphic fieldwork, the process of co-creating comics became a process of analysis (Kuttner et al., 2020, p. 5) that asked to collaborate and find a shared vision on the neighbourhood, and what is more important to tell about it, between researchers and cartoonists. As we will further see in the next sections, the hybrid language of comics made of interactions of words and images (*ibidem*, p. 7) questions the usual hierarchies between words and images

in academic research, permits the juxtaposition of contradictory visions and the coexistence of different narratives in the page.

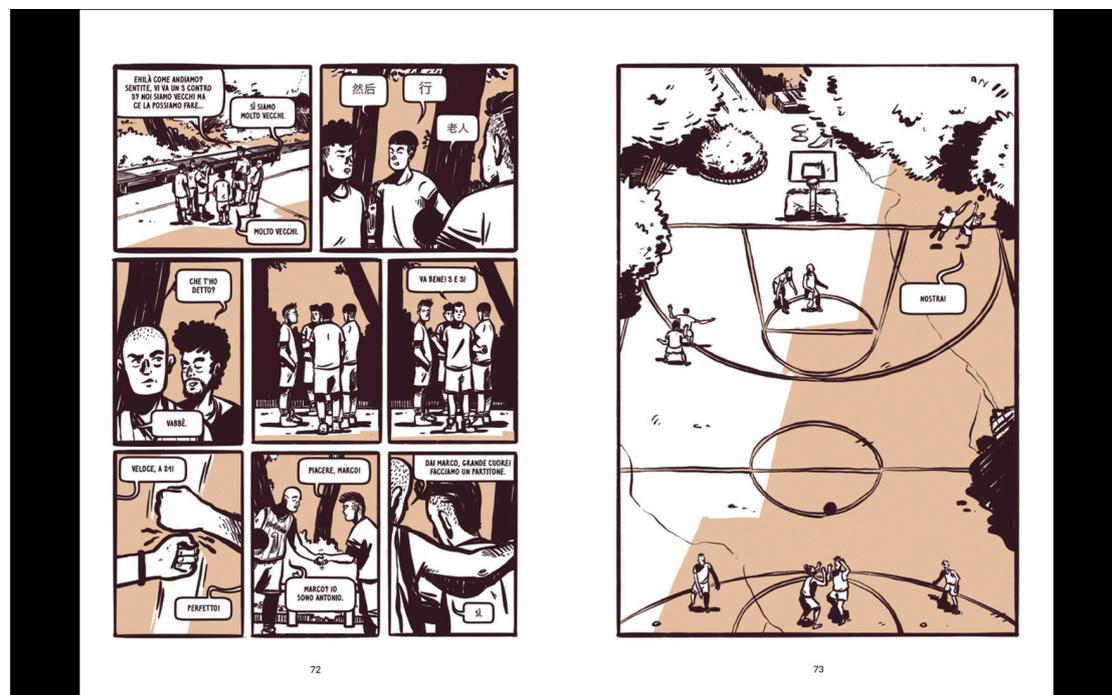


Figure 3: Old and new inhabitants meet around a small basketball playground in the Bolognina, Bologna. Illustration: Mattia Moro, in *Quartieri*, BeccoGiallo, 2019

2.2 Thinking “Neighbourhoods” through Comics: Urban Assemblages of Bottom-Up Stories

The anthology proposes to read from a bottom-up perspective some of the most well-known Italian neighborhoods in Palermo, Milan, Rome, Bologna and Padua: we started from the idea that these neighbourhoods are often stigmatized, especially in the media, yet only rarely listened to and represented in their everyday rhythms. In fact, these areas are often represented from the “outside” and from a top-down perspective. These five urban areas have some common traits: too often marginalised by the representation in the media, by the lack of services and infrastructures, by the lack of interest or apathy of Italian institutions, these neighbourhoods are often relational and hyperconnected spaces, at the centre of transnational networks. Starting from these common aspects, each chapter of *Quartieri* deepens autonomously some specificities of the different urban contexts involved: the working-class past of the Bolognina; the borders separating the wealthy and the more popular part of the city in San Siro; the stigmatisation process suffered by the inhabitants of the ZEN; the new raising proud of those living in Arcella; and the contradictions ingrained in the modes of living and working in Tor Bella Monaca, with inhabitants’ lives suspended between black economy and mutualism. Reading the collection as a whole and not as a set of separated units, as an assemblage and not a juxtaposition of disparate narratives about different cities, permits to trace some red threads connecting areas that are otherwise historically and geographically distant from each other. Thinking with assemblage (McFarlane & Anderson, 2011), the editorial project of a “collection of stories”, thus, turned into a specific research endeavour, made of voices and stories assembled to create unpredicted

urban visions: if cities themselves can be interpreted as spaces constantly assembling, disassembling, and reassembling, then the form of the comic book anthology somehow replicates the “play between stability and change, order and disruption” that characterises both urban spaces and assemblage thinking, as a mode of understanding cities (*ibidem*, p. 162). Thus, readers of the comic book anthology can focus on single chapters as auto-conclusive units but they can also read the collection as an organic whole, where single chapters inform each other, creating a multifaceted vision of “marginalised” urban areas and subjects. The form of the collection of stories replicates the composition of the book as an output of a multidisciplinary, plurivocal and collective research endeavour.

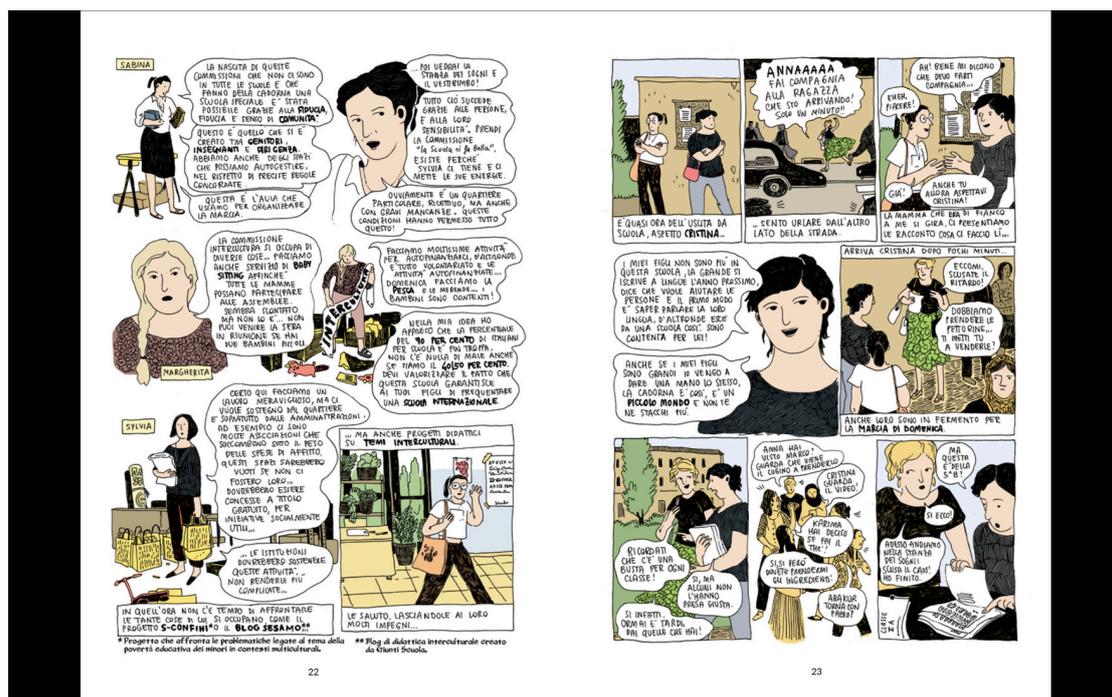


Figure 4: Female voices meet around the “Dolci” school in San Siro, Milan. Illustration: Elena Mistrello, in *Quartieri*, BeccoGiallo, 2019

Quartieri uses disparate narrative structures, graphic styles and voices to provide readers with a multifaceted comics representation of Italian marginalised neighbourhoods. The anthology can be read as both an assemblage and a research travel across Italy. The journey starts with a story based in San Siro, Milan, that is built around the multicultural spatial node of a primary school and the thick network of associations that have been growing around it in the last decade. Thanks to the work of many people, especially women, mothers, teachers, members of the associations working in the area, the school represents a space of encounter and inclusion and a laboratory for the construction of an open society in the future. As shown in Figure 4, cartoonist Elena Mistrello was able to represent the high number of people she met during ethnographic research through a dense graphic style, with many balloons and portraits packed in the same page: in this way, the outlook of the page visually reproduces the richness of actors and networks operating in the arena, and the plurivocal ethnographic experience the cartoonist went through having access to the researchers’ network. Moving east, in the second chapter the reader of the comic book anthology enters the Arcella neighbourhood, in the city of Padua, on which we will come back in the third section of the paper. The journey continues with a stop

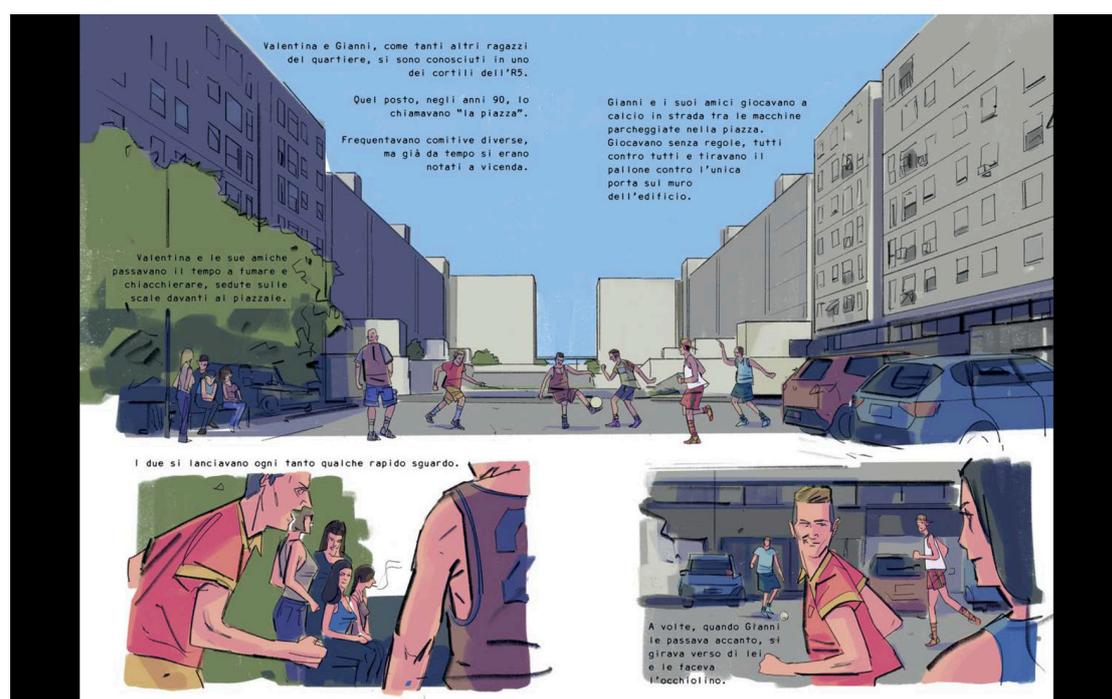


Figure 5: Intimate stories of everyday life in Tor Bella Monaca, Rome. Illustration: Alekos Reize, in *Quartieri*, BeccoGiallo, 2019

in Bolognina, a neighbourhood in Bologna. Here, as shown in Figure 2, a banal playground gives the opportunity to stage a transgenerational encounter between the elders, representatives of the historical residents in the area, and the new inhabitants: the basketball pitch is a place where memories of a working-class past and hopes for a new identity in the neighbourhood co-exist, without coming to a dialogue. Thanks to its recurring presence in the comics, the basketball playground is a protagonist of the ethnoGraphic narration, rather than a mere setting for the story to be told. Moving south, the third chapter enters the metropolis of Rome and the stigmatised area of Tor Bella Monaca: as shown in Figure 5, the iconic architecture of its grey buildings represent a visual thread and permit readers to grasp the spatial atmosphere of the neighbourhood. The story focuses here on a single character, Valentina: a young mother, whose intimate and personal experience resonates with many other stories of marginalisation but also of social solidarity in the area. These contradictions are also part of the area described in the last chapter of the comic book anthology, where the journey ends: the ZEN in Palermo. Here the many voices of inhabitants and local associations are juxtaposed through disparate graphic styles and a collage of photographs, cartographic projections and drawings (see Figure 3). These plural visions help readers imagining these peripheral neighbourhoods through a polyphonic and multifaceted lens that moves beyond stigmatised and stereotyped narratives. If McFarlane and Swanton, among others, have already proposed “a discussion of what assemblage thinking might offer critical urbanism” and its praxis (McFarlane, 2011; Swanton, 2011a, 2011b & 2011c), we suggest our comic book anthology could be used to explore what comics could offer to critical urban studies. The process of “associative meaning-making” that is typical of comics is further enhanced by the form of the collection (Kuttner et al., 2020, p. 11), which resembles urban assemblages of disparate elements whose connections makes new understandings possible. The comic book anthology, like an urban assemblage, asks readers to

recompose their peripheral geographies, to construct their connections and build their verbo-visual associations.

3 Affordances and Challenges of EthnoGraphic Research: Spaces, Agency and Narrative Maps from Arcella, Padua

3.1 The Case Study: Arcella, Padua

Quartieri was not simply an attempt to differently represent five Italian urban peripheries. It was also an experiment aimed at reflecting upon what changes when you decide to use comics to do research work. Indeed, in *Quartieri* the comics form was not only used for representation but was “part of the data generation process” as Kuttner *et al.* put it (2020). The creation of the comic was thus an integral part of the research process. In this section Adriano Cancellieri intends to reflect upon and explore “the resources and opportunities that the form [of comics] affords researchers” (Kuttner *et al.*, 2020). We do this by reflecting on our own experience of composing the chapter *Arcella* of the comic book anthology: thus, the following paragraphs represent an attempt to partially reproduce our unfolding conversation about “the doing of comics as a research practice” (Peterle, 2021a), and an interdisciplinary dialogue between an urban sociologist and a cultural geographer engaged in urban research. The fact that Giada Peterle is both a geographer and cartoonist further permits us to deepen the narrative, stylistic and verbo-visual choices that were made in order to present ethnographic research in comics form.

The Arcella neighbourhood³ in Padua has a population of more than 40,000 and can be found in the area immediately behind the city’s main train station. It is a mixed, residential and working-class neighbourhood, with many schools, children and young people, but also with a lot of older people who live on their own. It is Padua’s most multiethnic neighbourhood, in which almost a third of the city’s immigrant population lives. It is therefore an “arrival neighbourhood” (Saunders, 2010; Cremaschi *et al.*, 2020), in which people from all over the world, principally from Romania, Moldova, China and Nigeria, but also from Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, choose to disembark in order to start a new life or to move on again, shortly afterwards. For this reason, Arcella is a stigmatized area, with low house prices despite its proximity to the centre and its good connections (particularly thanks to the tram). Arcella is considered an urban periphery, marginal to the city, not only due to its spatial separation but also due to the mental geographies of the city’s residents, who sometimes define it “a bit scary”, seeing it as run-down, dangerous and “invaded” by foreigners. Yet, for those who actually live there, Arcella is a neighbourhood of local shops that shut down, reopen, and become more international while maintaining their small size and the sense of being a neighbourhood. In recent years Arcella has also become a neighbourhood of social activism, in which social organisations, cooperatives and informal groups constantly organize events, set up cultural initiatives and come up with new projects for the area. Arcella is a dense neighbourhood marked by profound differences and extreme inequalities, characterized by its wealth of daily opportunities for encounters and micro-conflicts.

3. The area generally known as “Arcella” is officially called “Quartiere 2 Nord” (2 North Neighbourhood) and includes the territorial sub-areas of Arcella, San Bellino, San Carlo and Pontevigodarzere.



Figure 6: Performing the map, walking in the neighbourhood. Illustration: Giada Peterle, in *Quartieri*, BeccoGiallo, 2019

3.2 Comics and Material and Symbolic Spaces: Or Comics as Spatial Stories

One of the objectives of *Quartieri* was to move from a traditional representation “from above and outside” to one “from below and within”, that is to a greater attention to the social processes that operate in daily life with all of its structural difficulties as well as its particular possibilities and resources. The comics form was revealed to be particularly suitable for this task, due to its predisposition to contribute to the phenomenological exploration of social and cultural life.

As shown above in figure 5, in the stories of the neighbourhood’s inhabitants that are told in *Quartieri* we discover the harshness of some of the structural conditions within which they live. They suffer greater than average discrimination both in the housing and job market and in social life, due to their ethnic origins and their socio-economic conditions. But at the same time we discover the everyday elements of their lives, their dreams and needs, difficulties linked to work and family, disorientation, fears and uncertainties, but also their continual search for everyday pleasures.

In the figures 7 and 8 we see a part of the Arcella neighbourhood, continuously stigmatized by local newspapers, in which there are many dismissed buildings used by migrants’ associations, churches and businesses. The comic’s form allows us to well represent the harsh urban context but also the interstitial and corporeal agency of the neighborhood’s inhabitants who organize a street dinner involving hundreds inhabitants and artistic and intercultural events in order to collectively use public spaces and countering stigmatization processes and securitization policies.

In *Quartieri* we find many attempts by social organisations and residents to mobilise energy from below, sometimes in spontaneous and informal ways, in order to create spaces for encounters and mutual aid that have a huge impact on the daily life of the neighbourhood. As Julieta Fall points out (2014), “comics can depict and make visible the vulnerability of individuals, focusing on their agency and autonomy beyond their status of victims, and can move beyond simply taking note of their precariousness to provide instead a political basis for critical outrage grounded in empathy” (pp. 105–106).

The agency that emerges is a contextual and corporeal agency that, on the one hand, eliminates the separation between the active subject and the passive object (Stoller, 1989), and on the other hand gives radical centrality to the material and spatial aspects of the world and of social action. The comics form invites the researcher to continuously reflect on the material dimension of the terrain in question: when composing the pages of the comic, the author must make explicit, above all to themselves, a wealth of information about the places, objects and people that they are studying, as well as the details of their interactions. This means that the comics form favours a recreation and understanding of the three-dimensional character, spatiality and materiality of social relations. The information that emerges from the research turns into real “spatial stories” within the comic (de Certeau, 1988), which require a “spatio-centric” or “spatio-centered” reading in order to be understood (Westphal, 2011).

The story of the Arcella neighbourhood was told through its spaces, which ended up in a plural map made up of spaces linked to people’s sense of identity, local shops, meeting places and contested and potential spaces (meaning spaces that are still being planned). It was the language of the comic that influenced the mode with which the research was conducted, determining the movements in real space according to that which would then become the narrative, geographical and temporal movements on the space of the page. Thus, the comic influenced the heuristic ability to understand urban spaces and the relationship between actors and spaces.

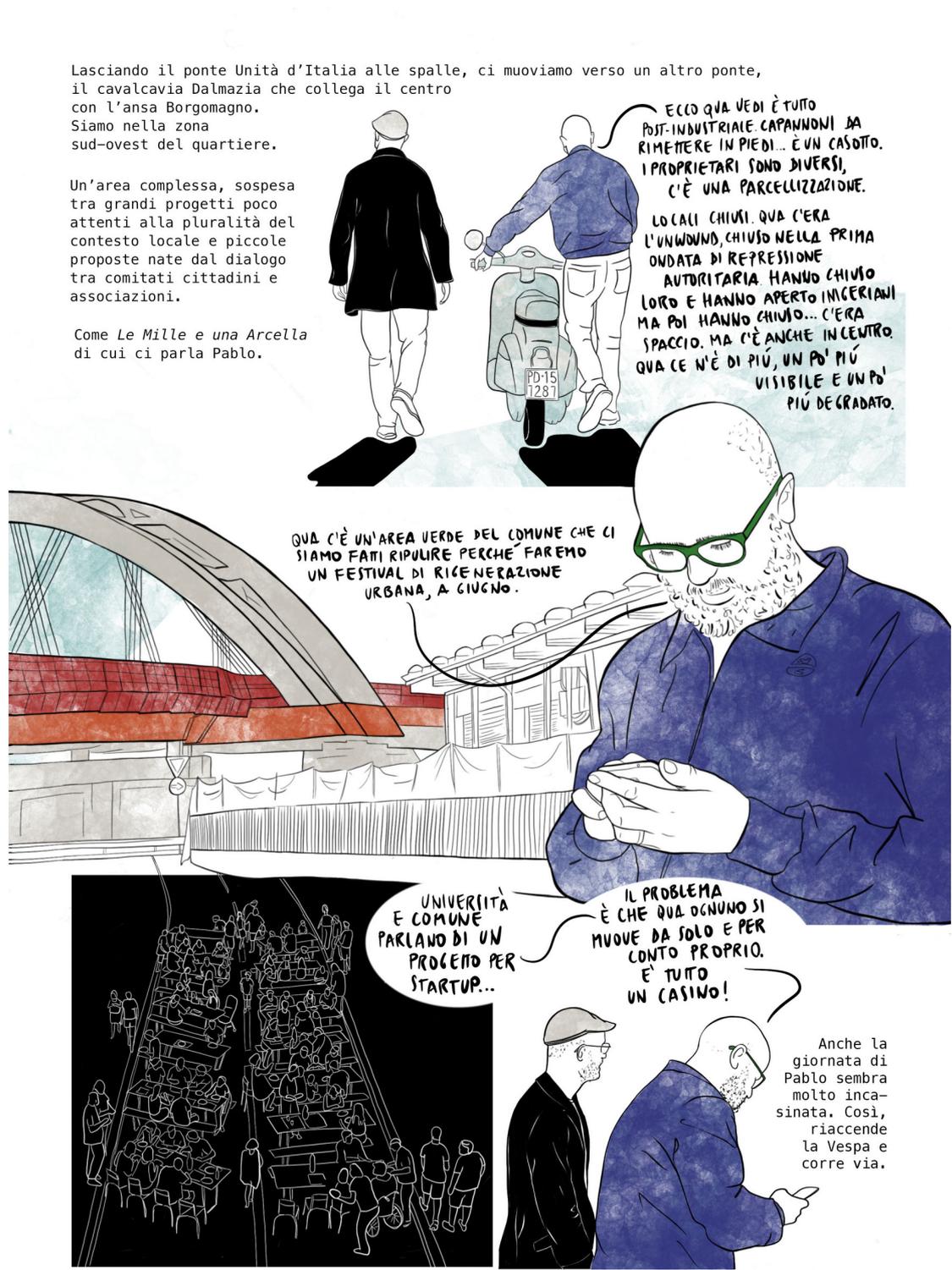


Figure 7: Stigmatized spaces and citizens' activism in the neighbourhood. Illustration: Giada Peterle, in *Quartieri*, BeccoGiallo, 2019



Figure 8: Stigmatized spaces and citizens' activism in the neighbourhood. Illustration: Giada Peterle, in *Quartieri*, BeccoGiallo, 2019

Furthermore, the comic with its bilinguistic structure, bringing together textual and visual elements, appears particularly suitable for recreating the forms of daily life (Bezemer & Jewitt, 2010), which involve the continuous mental co-presence of words and images. On this subject, McCloud (1993) talks of the words and pictures of daily life as “partners in a dance” which “take turns leading” and supporting one another’s strengths (p. 156). For example, in figure 9, we see the authors to conduct an interview while walking through the neighbourhood in search of the most significant places for the interviewees. The strip shows one of these places, a bridge that unites and divides the neighbourhood with the rest of the city, intertwined with the bodies of the authors and the interviewees, the dialogues in Bangla and Italian and the words of a rap song, cited by the interviewee because just composed on that bridge.

The alternation of pictures with extracts of interviews almost photographically recreated the precise moments and places, gestures, bodies and colours that characterized the fieldwork research, being, in a certain sense, a faithful visual and textual documentation of the work. However, the composition of the comics story was not simply a matter of providing a documentary photograph of what had been done, but of allowing new connections to emerge, putting the emphasis on apparently secondary aspects, taking us to new places in the neighbourhood and encouraging us to rethink our own map of Arcella: the bridges, the walls and the intersections assumed a symbolic value in the story which went beyond their mere geographic coordinates to make room for memories, feelings, encounters and conflicts, and for the everyday practices in the neighbourhood.

The bilingualism of the comic therefore challenges the traditional dominance of the word which characterises the academic world. Its capacity to stimulate emotional and imaginative elements reinforces the understanding of and empathy for the research objects (Leavy, 2019) and makes some dialectics that are intrinsic to the process of research and analysis much more efficient and communicable. Through “the complex arena of word-picture interaction” one can simultaneously juxtapose “data and analysis, theory and practice, the concrete and the subjective, or the official story and the counterstory” (Kuttner et al., 2020, p. 7).

Beyond the apparent reduction and simplification, comics give importance to small everyday details and stories, allow for readers’ empathy through recognition (Fall, 2021), make complex dynamics and contents understandable, and shareable through their accessible hybrid form. That “they are also beautiful, aesthetically pleasing objects makes them all the more potent” (Fall, 2014, p. 106).

Nevertheless, it is not only the agency of the neighbourhood’s inhabitants that is easier to represent in the comics form. In *Quartieri/Arcella* the agency of the researchers is very clear, for they have taken the step of also integrating themselves into their work as characters, thus putting their own subjectivity as researchers under the reader’s lens. The subjectivity of the researcher is made yet more evident by the structure of the comic and its interlocking frames, which allow even the reader to see the work that is behind the representation, in the framing of the images and the editing and staging of the action (Nocerino, 2016). This is more obvious than in other visual media such as photography and video, where the “realistic” dimension of the object can lead the audience to forget the constant process of construction (Becker, 2007).

3.3 Comics and Urban Maps: Or Comics as Narrative and Emergent Mappings

Cartographic practices represent an expanding field of experimentation in the social sciences: after the spatial turn, indeed, *maps* and *mappings* have been variously explored to respond to the increasing need to visualise spatial phenomena. On the one hand, maps are increasingly

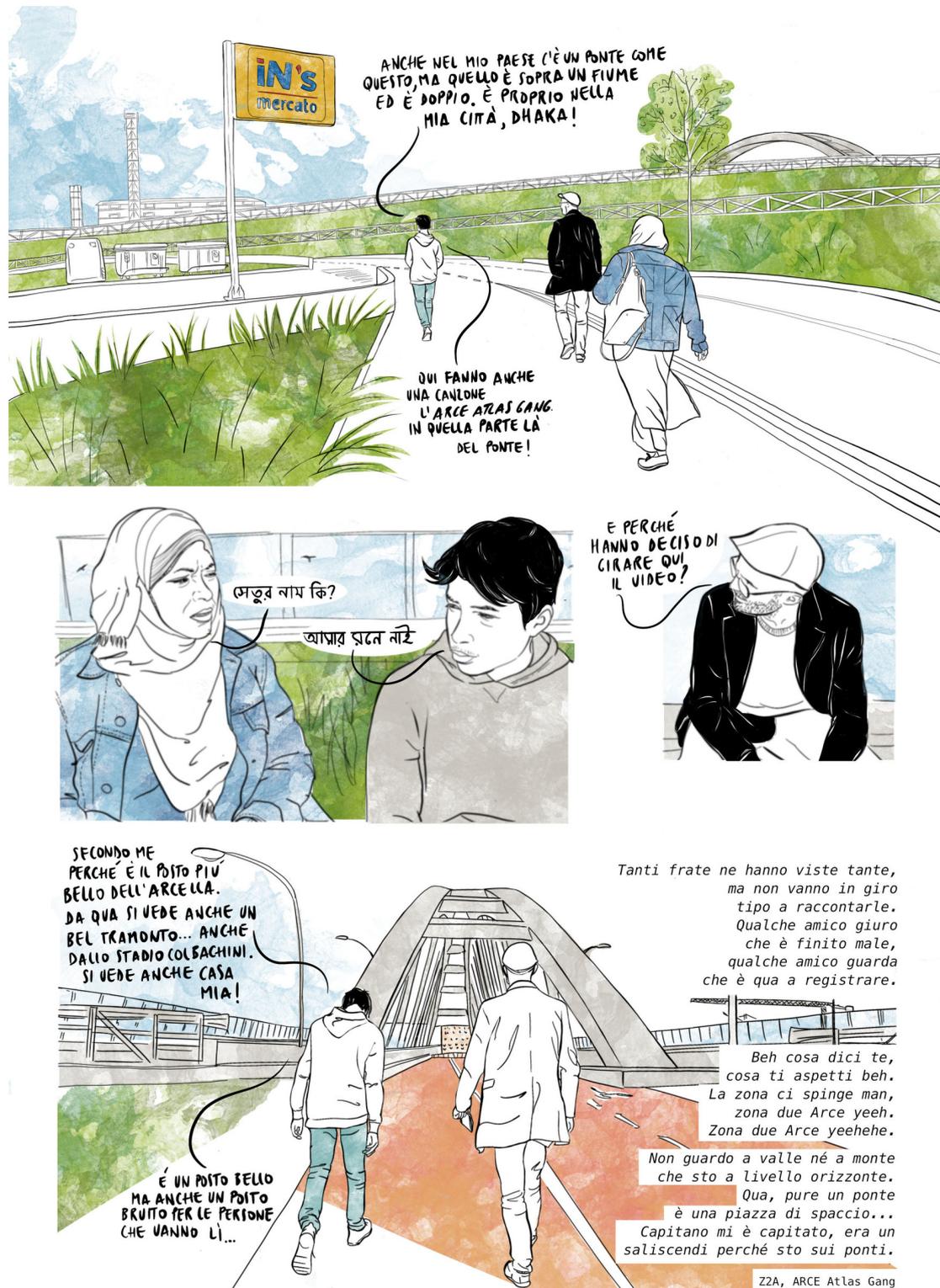


Figure 9: Walking with key-informants through everyday life spaces in the neighbourhood. Illustration: Giada Peterle, in *Quartieri*, BeccoGiallo, 2019

used in ethnographic research, often combined with other mixed methods, to represent both qualitative information and quantitative data, to engage local communities through participatory mapping processes, and to incorporate multiple stories into a GIS database, for example (McKinnon, 2011, pp. 458–461). On the other hand, maps and mapping practices have been at the centre of ethnographic and *auto*-ethnographic research, aimed at exploring map-making and map-using processes in different contexts and from processual, intimate and social, embodied perspectives (Boria & Rossetto, 2017, pp. 33–36). As Chris Perkins observes, “an ethnographic approach reorientates theory so that mapping becomes a social activity, rather than an individual response”; in fact, he continues, “recent ethnographic approaches have investigated everyday social experiences of places and the role that mapping practices play in identity and knowledge construction” (2004, p. 386). Whereas, thus, maps have been themselves at the centre of narrative and non-representational ethnographies (Gubrium & Holstein, 2008; Vannini, 2015), our aim was to engage with maps as a storytelling device, during ethnographic research, and as narrative triggers, during the ethnographic practice of drawing urban comics. We wanted to explore the narrative potential of maps to conduct and represent ethnographic fieldwork: indeed, during fieldwork, we explored new urban centralities according to informants’ stories, both adding their points of interest on our mental map and drawing them in the comics story. This way, our ethnographic research soon became a cartographic process (Peterle, 2021a, pp. 70–81) of narrative mapping in comics form (Caquard, 2013; Caquard & Cartwright, 2014), in which different spaces were gradually re-signified through the intimate stories we were told and then drawn on paper. Not by chance, then, these two different phases in our ethnographic fieldwork are represented through two full-page maps in the comics story: Figure 6, indeed, shows the initial part of our ethnographic research, conducted by walking with interviewees across the neighbourhood, and shows our legs on the maps of Arcella; Figure 10, on the contrary, is a new vision of the same map, now valued of symbolic meaning through the graphic metaphor of the heart.

As Caquard and Cartwright assume, in narratives maps are often “used to ground the story in real places, to help the audience follow the plot and to play metaphorical and aesthetic role” (2014, p. 101). In our case, the presence of the map as a recurring visual metaphor in the story plays a double function: it helps readers to orientate themselves through both narrative (the comics story) and real space (the neighbourhood); it represents the idea of an ongoing process of research through an emerging mapping process, constantly enriched by new encounters. We know that “the potential of maps to both decipher and tell stories is virtually unlimited” (Caquard & Cartwright, 2014, p. 101). Here, we argue this is particularly intriguing when map-stories meet the spatial grammar of comics and maps are used in CBR. Through a “comic book cartographies” or “carto-centred” perspective, it is possible to activate an exchange between the map-like traits of comics and the comics-like features of maps (Peterle, 2017). For example, the choices the author-researcher has to make about what to include or discard from the comics story resemble the decisions of the cartographer about representational and non-representational elements in the map (Peterle, 2017 & 2019). Furthermore, in comics maps can serve a locative function, grounding the action in a specific location and deepening the realistic dimension of the story, and support the narrative process, serving as narrative structures and spatial metaphors (Caquard & Cartwright, 2014, p. 104). In the short comics story on the Arcella neighbourhood, we attempted to explore some of these narrative potentials of the combination of comics and maps: indeed, we used a map as the non-human narrator of our story and cartographic elements as visual rhymes that recur throughout the comics story. As shown in Figure 6, our positionality in the neighbourhood is represented by the superimposition of

our feet on the map: a graphic presence of our physical presence in the area.

Since the beginning, our wish was to allow the neighbourhood and its inhabitants to speak for themselves, and to imagine ourselves as facilitators rather than as omniscient narrative voices. For this reason, we appear as two of the many protagonists of the narrative, while the story is told by an external, non-human and almost impossible narrative voice (Rossetto, 2019): the voice of a map of the neighbourhood that speaks in first person (as shown in Figures 8 and 9). As Tania Rossetto observes, it-narrators are “both identical and distinct” from humans (p. 73), stimulating at the same time a sense of empathy and distancing. In our story, the map-narrator is a fictional expedient to move beyond the human-centred perspective of the researcher: the map permits readers to see researchers’ positionality during fieldwork and avoid to uncritically embrace their point of view on the neighbourhood. Through the fictional lens of the it-narrator readers access a critical consciousness about how research takes place: as in Figure 6, in the comics story readers follow our steps while both the research process and the map are unfolding.

As Fall observes, comics have made reflexivity part of their essence and narrative language (2021, p. 24): given the fact that “standpoint matters” when both presenting and conducting research, comics provide us with opportunities to narrate everyday lives, represent embodied proximity but also disembodied detachment (p. 25). Bringing “the gaze back to the level of experience” comics question the view from nowhere, helping researchers in representing contradictions and readers in building their critical awareness (pp. 29–30): in the story, following our steps across the neighbourhood, the comics-map embraces a horizontal perspective and a street-view instead of a zenithal vision from above.

In *Arcella*, we decided to build a narration in which researchers’ voices are just two of the many voices that can be heard: through structural narrative choices, comics help us to question some taken for granted ideas about who is allowed to tell stories about neighbourhoods (human or non-human inhabitants?) or to circulate them (inhabitants, researchers, spatial objects or even buildings themselves?). What emerges from this representation is a map that explicitly declares its provisory and fragmentary but also affective dimension. This is made explicit in Figure 10, namely the final page of the comics story, where the map of Arcella resembles the shape of a heart. This visual transfiguration metaphorically mirrors the affective relation with the neighbourhood that we built during the research process and that emerged also from the inhabitants’ stories that we collected. This visual metaphor also responds to Fall’s suggestion to construct counter geopolitics through making “empathetic geographies” visible through comics (2021, p. 31). The comics page makes affective and emotional spatial relations representable and readable (Clough & Halley, 2007; Lemmings & Brooks, 2014), bringing them at the centre of the story and, thus, of the research.

Sympathetic urban visions emerge through comics assemblages. In fact, the presence of the map at the beginning and the end of the comics story is meant to help readers to imagine the research path like a highly affective mapping process. Our map of the neighbourhood includes both everyday life spaces and key actors, whose agency is at the centre of processes of change in the neighbourhood. At the same time, by reading the comics story, readers themselves are asked to draw their own urban maps: following the process by which the neighbourhood was explored and the story composed, the comic form invites readers to take an active role in the composition of a plural urban map. As Dittmer affirms, “the visual semiotics of comics attempt to burden the comics with sense and meaning, but the situated consumption of comics is a unique event” realised by each reader in a different way (2010, p. 228): through this emergent cartographic projection of Arcella, thus, we aimed to engage readers both affectively and

emotionally, asking them to create links, fill in the non-representational gaps between the panels, and even find missing points of interest that need to be added on the map. Therefore, the comics story suggests an intimate journey that hopes to stimulate readers' own narratives to emerge and intimate cartographies to merge with the ones represented on the comics page. Indeed, at the beginning of our comic the cartographic projection of Arcella is incomplete, only drafted: that map remains mute until it is loaded with stories, voices, meanings, and emotions coming from the different encounters we made along the research route: our incomplete map is open to other stories to be told and "visual alternatives" to be presented (Fall, 2021, p. 32).

4 Conclusion: Comics beyond Dissemination

Usually, the academic comic is understood as a tool that allows for the more effective dissemination of knowledge, finding a wider audience than that traditionally reached by university research (Sousanis, 2016; Getz & Clarke, 2016). The comic's huge potential for involvement and dissemination was confirmed by our experience with *Quartieri*. It helped us to escape some structures (both formal and linguistic) and to tell stories in a different way, directing them at a wider public, which is not necessarily expert and is potentially transgenerational. From this point of view *Quartieri* is fully part of the recent attempts by the social sciences to assume a more public role (see for example the recent reflections on "public sociology" and the debate on the "Third Mission of the University" (Burawoy, 2005; Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020; Shore & McLauchlan, 2012).

However, *Quartieri* also brought to light how comics are a research tool able to go far beyond simple, albeit fundamental, dissemination. The experiment showed that comics are fully integrated in some of the most significant theoretical debates on spatial, material and affective turn and on methodological ones on qualitative methods applied to urban studies. One of the fundamental characteristics of the comics form is that it gives centrality to the fact that subjects are always what Merleau-Ponty (1968) would call "body-subjects", that they are constitutively part of the "flesh of the world" (p. 123). The constant immersion of our own bodies in material spaces implies that subjects are also "sensible-sentients" (*ibidem*, p. 116), who are strongly influenced by emotional and affective forces. In recent decades the "affective turn" (Clough & Halley, 2007) and the "emotional turn" (Lemmings & Brooks, 2014) revealed that a fundamental element in human processuality are emotional and affective flows, which are always in dialectic, tension and resistance, flowing between bodies through mechanisms of circulation, transmission and contagion (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980; Amin & Thrift, 2002; Latour, 2005). Emotions are intensities that influence action, revealing what a situation offers us in terms of potential actions, and are thus strongly linked to our engagement with the world (and consequently also to possibilities for social change). These affective atmospheres are not inert and apolitical contexts given once and for all, but force fields that can from time to time be reconstructed through atmospheric practices and above all through the continual process of affective attunement between atmospheres and bodies and between bodies and atmospheres (Massumi, 2015; Bille & Simonsen, 2019).

The comic allows us to understand and better represent this radical intersubjectivity of the experiences of daily life, which forces us to give up abstractness and determinisms in order to see human action as an (embodied) practice which is socially and politically situated (Simonsen & Koefoed, 2020). The comic should not therefore be superficially dismissed as an extra-academic genre but should be understood in all its potential and take its place in the

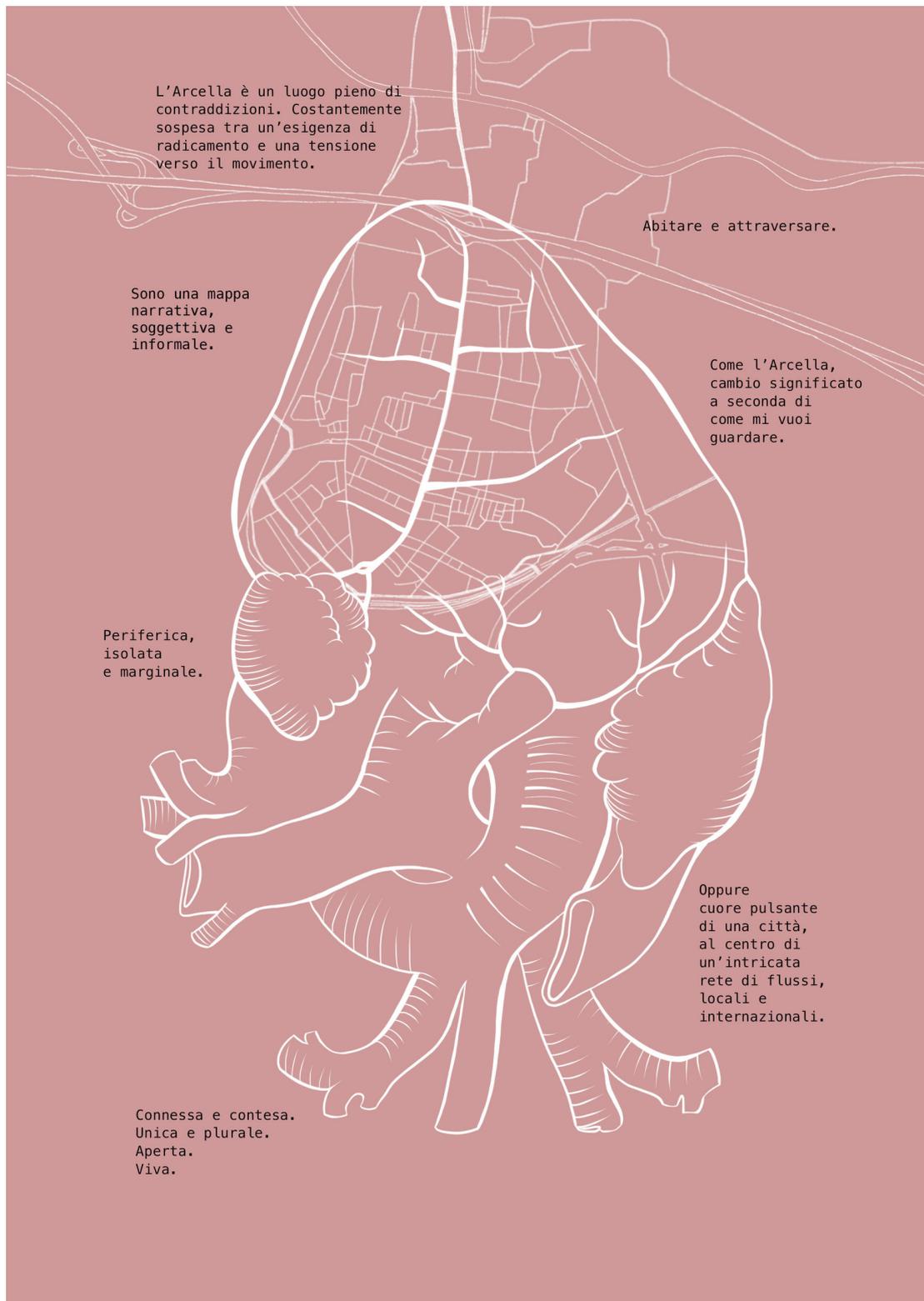


Figure 10: Affective relations change the map of the neighbourhood into the symbolic image of a heart. Illustration: Giada Peterle, in *Quartieri*, BeccoGiallo 2019

toolbox of the social scientist. This is a tool with its own *affordances*,⁴ but also obviously with limits. We should thus avoid any superficial or acritical enthusiasm which sees the use of the comic as unproblematic. For example, the fact that the comic is able to represent “the lives of others”, giving more visibility to research subjects and generating more empathy with their stories, also raises important ethical reflections about its outcomes in relation to the “form that research products will take and the contexts in which it will be disseminated” (Kuttner et al., 2020, p. 14). A field of practices that is aiming to establish itself such as that of CBR, “must also include a healthy dialogue about ethics, a topic barely touched on in the CBR literature so far” (*ibidem*).

The field of comics, therefore, requires many more experiments and, even more so, increased reflection on those experiments, with opportunities for comparison and exchange between those who use this tool and/or reflect on it. We therefore await new contributions within this field, aware that one of the strengths of the “comics gaze” is that it forces us to keep our eyes rooted on the ground and helps us to understand the Deleuzian concept of “becoming in the world” (Whitehead, 1929; Dovey, 2010; Ingold & Palsson, 2013), which is the way in which phenomena are concretely lived by subjects in the situations and spatial-temporal contexts of daily life (Loon, 2017) and that “things” are concretely done.

4. The word “affordance”, used in a variety of fields, in particular in environmental psychology and interaction design, (Maier et al., 2009) was coined by James J. Gibson (1979) to mean when a specific relation (in this case the one between urban research and “comics form”) encourages and provides the opportunity for a specific action. Using Gibson’s words: “The affordances of the environment are what it offers the animal, what it provides or furnishes, either for good or ill. The verb to afford is found in the dictionary, but the noun affordance is not. I have made it up. I mean by it something that refers to both the environment and the animal in a way that no existing term does. It implies the complementarity of the animal and the environment” (p. 127).



Figure 11: The first public presentation of *Quartieri* took place in a small bookshop in Arcella called Limerick, a place that over the years has become a symbol of the counter-narratives of the neighbourhood.

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