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Marcelo Zarate

Micro spaces of proximity. A reading of the historical centre of Florence between academic research and social participation¹.

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Abstract

The spread of the COVID-19 virus has clearly demonstrated how the transformation of historical cities into assets for the exclusive consumption of tourism has been a disastrous political choice, in both economic and social terms.

In Italy, the public administrations of art cities have consolidated town planning and social policies aimed at gradually encouraging residents to move way in order to accommodate the tourists.

In the historical centre of Florence prestigious building complexes with their gardens, courtyards and loggias have been sold and transformed into accommodation; other times, spaces that have been open to the public for centuries have been unduly taken away from citizens and silently turned over for private use by restaurants, shops and hotels. In particular, the privatisation of open spaces, whose importance for the physical, psychological and social well-being of people became clear during the most difficult periods of the epidemic, has highlighted the role that these places could play as part of an overall rethinking of living that takes into account the complex social changes occurring in our cities, including those triggered by the current pandemic. The research proposed, which is currently underway, starts with these critical assumptions and includes an interdisciplinary reading of the historical centre of Florence in which the perspective of the landscape and the lens of the in-between realms overlap. It aims to identify a possible network of 'micro spaces of proximity' that are open, immersed in greenery, widespread and safe from a health perspective, through which to renew the residents' sense of belonging to the places and improve the quality of life of citizens in an inclusive vision that welcomes differences and minorities.

The historical centre of Florence, a UNESCO heritage site, is in fact a fascinating interlocking of open and built-up spaces that reflects the sedimentation of time.

In particular, the system of open spaces is highly varied and, between nature and artifice, monumentality and everyday life, defines the historically 'bifacial' character of the city.

Their potential as activators and condensers of inclusive social practices emerges in particular from the analysis of two case studies deemed paradigmatic: the Giardino di Palazzo Santarelli and the Giardino di Borgo Allegri. Over the last twenty years, through the active participation of the inhabitants organised into associations, these two spaces have become places of social solidarity. In particular, the analysis examined the existence of a possible link between the form of the urban space and social practices. This revealed a close relationship between the activation of spontaneous practices of social inclusion and the morphology of the urban space that accommodates them.

Keyword: public space, florentine architecture, landscape, COVID 19, cultural heritage

1. Does proximity exist in the intertwining of the open spaces of the historic city?

Cities, where most of the world's population lives, were one of the places most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and have often been considered one of the main causes of the spread of the virus. In actual fact, the situation is highly complex and the main causes seem to involve other mechanisms at global level, such the interference of processes involving the marked anthropization and artificialization of natural habitats (Weller, Hoch, Huang, 2017): the city in itself "is blameless", writes Michael Grove (Grove, 2020), given that the spread of the virus has in fact occurred not so much in compact cities but rather in areas with overcrowding, inequality and poverty, irrespective of their position. Moreover, atmospheric pollution combined with particular weather conditions seems to have played an important role (Dragone, Licciardi, Grasso, Del Gaudio, Chanussot, 2021).

The effects of the pandemic however have reawakened a series of considerations about public urban space, which almost seemed to have diminished in the population. They include the inhabitants' rediscovery of the sense of proximity and daily life. All types of open spaces within our reach, whatever their nature, from the yard of an apartment building to a courtyard, a clearing, a square or a garden, attracted attention in this period, becoming an opportunity and a sought-after place of high value for one's well-being. From a space to a place capable of creating new opportunities for social relations, sharing and being able to breathe in the open air, leaving behind the walls of the home which had by then become oppressive: a new meaning of living and of urban living which allows us to rethink the city and improve places for living as well as set in motion a possible green revolution (Morelli, 2021).

During lockdown, cities, as crowded as they were on the inside given that everyone was at home, became empty as the public open space completely lost its role as a scenic space where people conduct their daily lives.

In particular, cities of art, which have been subjected to tourist commodification for some time now, without their masses of visitors, revealed their full beauty and the purity of their architecture to the 'elected' few (see for example Pistone, 2021; Giraudeau, Verdiani 2021), but at the same time also all the sadness and social and cultural poverty of a mono-functional industry: a defenceless 'still life', which revealed loneliness and loss of meaning (Saša Dobričić, Matteo Acri, 2021).

The question is, therefore, how many and which roles can an open space play within an urban context?

The city is made up of relationships between solids and voids, buildings and open spaces, public and private, but to an even greater extent the city, including its physical form, is the expression of a precise way of living (Gehl, 2017). The city is therefore a fascinating palimpsest, a continuous process of rewriting, in which new ways of living fit into historical, consolidated and recognisable urban structures: it represents stability, but also ongoing transformation therefore, in which those identities and the historical solidity which is an essential requirement of human beings must also be safeguarded. Bellmunt also reminds us that the city is "a million things" (Bellmunt, 2021) but individuality is certainly not one of them, rather the concept of relationship and a sense of community, coexistence and sharing, including all the associated difficulties: in fact the urban public open space can become a place of exchange and confrontation/protected encounter, where prejudices and cultural distances can be overcome.

So when urban planning considers starting processes to redevelop and revitalise the city, the anticipated metamorphoses should not be sudden, invasive or aseptic as they break down relationships that have been established over time thereby creating a sense of loss and disorientation and of not belonging to places. Urban planning and design require "time, sensitivity and nuances" (Bellmunt, 2021), that is slow movements, mild, reversible interventions and experimentation, so that they can be participated in, checked, accepted and tested by the inhabitants, then also paving the way for new more structured visions and ways of living that are more responsible and sustainable in a shared, adaptive and proactive vision.

Returning to the city of art in Italy, the public administrations of cities of art have for a long time consolidated their urban and social policies resulting in the gradual distancing of the inhabitants in favour of welcoming tourists, in particular in the so-called mega resorts for luxury tourism.

In the historical centre of Florence, for example, prestigious building complexes with their gardens, courtyards and loggias have been sold and transformed into accommodation; other times, open spaces that have been used by the public for centuries have been unduly taken away from citizens and silently turned over for private use by restaurants, shops and hotels. In particular, the privatisation of open spaces, whose importance for people's physical, psychological and social well-being became clear during the most difficult periods of the epidemic, has highlighted the role that these places could play as part of an overall rethinking of living. Permanent residence is currently too rare in the historical centre of Florence, which should instead take into account the complex social, cultural and environmental changes taking place in our cities, including those triggered by the current pandemic.

The research proposed, which is currently underway, starts with these critical assumptions and includes an interdisciplinary reading of the historical centre of Florence in which the perspective of the landscape and the lens of the in-between realms overlap. The aim is therefore to identify a possible network of 'micro spaces of proximity' that are open, immersed in greenery, widespread and safe from a health perspective, but also to understand what requirements these single spaces should have in order to be welcoming and inclusive from a transgenerational and multicultural perspective, at the same time maintaining respect for and the historical identity of the place. What emerges immediately is that this latter point, in actual fact, rather than being seen as a difficulty should be viewed as an asset: the Florentine urban open space is in fact a space full of historical stratifications and very often its shape, whether regular or irregular, is always highly recognisable, attuned to any 'human eye' (Gehl 2017), in terms of size and relationships.



Giardino Santarelli (©Francesca Privitera)

1.2. The nature of open spaces in Florence's historic centre

Florence's historic centre (UNESCO Heritage) has been identified as the area generally defined as 'inside the boulevards,' and those boulevards mark the signs of the last city walls. This charming layered landscape is undoubtedly the result of history; Florence's historical centre is evidence of a collection of historical periods, contributing to the creation of a single set of open spaces that are highly recognizable.

In its different phases, Florence was Roman, Medieval, Carolingian and Arnolfian, and the town of the Medici, Brunelleschi, and the Lorraines. For a brief period, Florence was the capital of Italy, later undergoing demolition at the end of the 19th century, and finally it was wounded during the Second World War. Today, the city bears the marks not only of all these important historical events, but also of the daily lives of the people who lived there.

For this reason, minor architecture and monumental architecture form an organic whole, consisting of several parts each diversified from the others. This juxtaposition makes the Florentine urban landscape unique and simultaneously enters into dialogue with the surrounding hills, which provide a perfect harmonious backdrop.

As mentioned, the city is currently under intense tourism pressure which produces contradictions between immobility and erosion, and induces in inhabitants the impression of being ousted from their city. Thus, Florence is presently crystallized in its tourist image which has radically changed its meaning and degenerated to a mere commercial product rather than a place of cultural heritage and daily life.

Therefore, practical solutions are needed to create an appropriate balance between these tensions in order to protect both the inhabitants and tourists.

Touristic interest in the city is not a recent phenomenon. In fact, Florence has been a destination for travellers for centuries. A milestone of the Grand Tour, in the 19th century one-third of the Florentine population consisted of foreigners. The majority of them came from Great Britain and went on to form the Anglo-Florentine cultured community, with the British ultimately making Florence the artistic capital of the world. At present, however, tourism has changed; visitors make brief stops and sometimes their curiosity is approximate and superficial. Such behaviour leads to tourists being viewed either as the cause of the city's evil or an economic opportunity to be exploited. This type of schizophrenia naturally has an impact on the urban landscape, which remains suspended between immobility, erosion, monumentality and everyday life.

In an overall project of the city that considers the role of the historical centre not as a museum and mere container to preserve but as a place of life ready to welcome people, the open space can offer an interesting starting point to support a regeneration project. This open space should provide shared spaces where inhabitants and tourists can meet. But it is not enough to develop some green areas, provide benches or introduce artistic installations in a random and improvised manner.

The historical centre of Florence is a handsome interlocking of empty and full spaces. Many open spaces are private, but many others are also public. Sometimes open spaces are designed, and in other cases they are the indirect result of settlement processes. They can be intimate or representative spaces, vary in shape and size, and come in the form of squares, streets, bridges, widenings, alleys and lanes, loggias, cloisters, courts and courtyards, small corners with greenery, gardens and more. All of this variety helps to create the richness of the Florentine urban landscape. In fact, Florence has a strong and recognizable identity that has been described many times by artists, writers, poets and intellectuals. However, Florence is not easily defined in a few words, particularly if we consider that its urban morphology has undergone many changes, contractions, expansions and rewriting, from demolition to construction, over the centuries.

However, certain decisive issues regarding its identity can be identified, such as the Arno River, which is the matrix of the Florentine urban landscape, and the bifacial or two-faced character of the city between open and public spaces, nature and artifices, and stones and greenery. Walking along the stone pavement of the streets and squares, gardens and intimate green spaces can be glimpsed through the iron gates and entrance halls, the crowns of trees can be seen emerging above the

buildings, climbing plants can be observed scaling the fenced walls, and one can smell the flowers and plants of the preserved gardens inside the blocks.

This variety, diversity, complexity and richness provides us with nature, culture, art, identity, history and more. If recognized and valued, it can offer a new beginning for a regeneration project for an inclusive city, as well as the examples we are going to see.



2. Giardino di Borgo Allegri (©Emanula Morelli)

2. Three 'rooms' for the historical centre

Methodological approach. As we have noted, the historical centre of Florence contains a multitude of green areas that could, if made freely accessible to citizens, represent a potential system of connected and branched spaces, as necessary as sap for life and the physical and psychological well-being of the city's inhabitants.

The specific nature of the Florentine historical centre, with its green soul enclosed within the city of stone, had already stimulated the imagination of the architect Giovanni Michelucci who in 1966, when the flooded Amo had submerged the Florentine historical centre causing inestimable damage, suggested seizing the dramatic occasion to radically rethink the system of public spaces of the city within the walls.

Michelucci had planned to open up and provide access to the open spaces within the city, courtyards and gardens, by «overturning it as if it were a glove» (Michelucci, 1981) thereby creating a sequence of connected pedestrian spaces that would have seamlessly allowed the city's inhabitants to cross the whole of the historical centre from one bank of the river to another staying away from the city's vehicle traffic.

Michelucci's futuristic idea was never to come to fruition, but the current events have revealed the far-sightedness of that urban vision which would have allowed the inhabitants of the quarters of the historical centre to enjoy spaces close to their homes that were green, airy and healthy from a health perspective, in which to establish a salvific relationship with nature even in the darkest days of the COVID-19 pandemic.

At this point, however, a fundamental question emerges, namely if in order to create a network of proximity that is not only physical but also 'human' would it be enough, assuming that it is possible, to open up the doors and gates of these historical gardens to the citizens.

In other words, we must ask whether it is enough for an area to be open and green for virtuous practices of sharing and social inclusion to be established and for shared habits to be founded in the community that frequents it, or if instead particular typological and topological features and specific conditions linked to social and anthropological aspects are necessary.

In other words, we need to understand if it is possible to hypothesise an osmotic relationship between the morphology of the space and social practices, if there is a form of space that supports encounters and dialogue, and if there is, what characteristics does it have and what relationships does it establish with the city and with its inhabitants.

To answer this question, the research wove together the threads that bind space and social practices in three green areas of the historical centre which stand out from the other public spaces of the city due to the fact that they have become points of reference for citizens over time; Giardino di Borgo Allegri (imm. 2), Giardino Santarelli (imm. 1;3) and Giardino degli Orti Dipinti (imm. 4).

A comparison of these three gardens in fact revealed some common architectural and spatial attributes, such as the size and characteristics of their edges and entrance; urban attributes, such as the relationship with the services in the surrounding neighbourhood; and social attributes, such as the process that led to the acquisition of these areas for public use and how they are managed. This is how the morphology of what we will define as the 'space of human proximity' emerged in the intersection between architectural, urban and social aspects.

Recognition of these characteristics becomes important in guiding the identification of other open spaces useful to define a network of micro spaces of proximity extended to the entire historical centre.

A comparison of three gardens. The architectural and urban history that led to the current layout of these three areas is very different and originated at different times. At present, on the contrary, they share histories of social participation and sharing.

The oldest is Giardino di Borgo Allegri, situated in the Santa Croce quarter, on the right bank of the River Amo. Its layout dates back to the presence of vast vegetable garden in this area in the mid-1300s belonging to a Poor Clares monastery. Its public use dates back to the second post-war period. After a period of abandonment and then closure, its renewed opening in recent years is down to the commitment of a group of citizens residing in the neighbourhood and belonging to an association that asked the public administration if it could manage it.

Giardino Santarelli is in the San Frediano quarter, in the area of the city to the left of the Amo River. The garden originally completed the prestigious nineteenth-century residence of the Florentine sculptor Emilio Santarelli (1801-1886). The area was allocated for public use between 1954 and 1957 after the owners donated it to the Municipality of Florence, with the provision that it be used exclusively for the citizens. The public administration's attempted sale of the entire complex in 2008 with the consequent privatisation led to a number of street demonstrations during which the residents of the neighbourhood claimed the historical complex had been used by the public for centuries and finally managed to have a significant part of the garden excluded from the sale and returned to its original purpose.

Lastly, the Giardino degli Orti Dipinti, which is also located in the Santa Croce quarter. It occupies the ground of a disused athletics track belonging to a school for young people with disabilities. The area was allocated for public use in 2013 at the request of a private citizen who asked the Municipality of Florence if it could be used under concession to open a Community Garden. In addition to volunteers and citizens who so request, some students from the neighbouring institution

who help with the daily work of taking care of the vegetable gardens are involved in the management of the space.

These spaces are therefore public not so much because of a policy decision that uses urban planning tools to establish in advance which places should be designated as areas where people can meet, but due to the wish of citizens who lay claim to them and ask the public administration if they can be used, and who are personally involved in both their daily management, ensuring that they are opened and closed, and in the organisation of activities that foster the creation of opportunities for inclusion and sharing among the people that frequent them.

Over the years these spaces have become important places to strengthen ties in the heterogeneous population currently living in the Santa Croce and San Frediano quarters.

Historically they were the poorest quarters of the historical centre, and they are now undergoing rapid social change. Families that were historically resident in the quarter for generations still live here together with others from different geographic origins, some having immigrated recently and others a long time ago.

At the same time these quarters are subject to gentrification and strained by the siege of tourist speculation that tends to steal places and spaces from the inhabitants of the historical centre, as in the case of Giardino Santarelli.

These green and enclosed spaces create the conditions for people to meet, who would otherwise be unlikely to come into contact with each other.

These virtuous practices of social proximity arise not only due to the presence of well organised associations in the area, but also the particular position of these gardens in the quarter - in the immediate vicinity, in fact, there are educational facilities such as schools, nursery schools and play rooms which are key services for the creation of habits shared by families and for fostering a sense of belonging to a single community – and in addition their intrinsic typological characteristics, in the conviction that the constructed space guides human behaviour in a decisive way and that actions only acquire meaning in relation to specific places (Christian Norberg-Schulz, 1975).

Measure, margin, entrance. In particular, some of their physical characteristics seem to play a significant role in transforming these green areas into real places of living, differentiating them from other public spaces of the city: the 'human scale'; irregular geometry which means intimate and sheltered areas can be found within them; the characteristics of the margin that delimits the perimeter, closed but not uniform, distant and visible at the same time, made up of a variety of building façades, walls, gates, tall hedges, and finally the characteristic of the entrance which is through a single opening in a line of buildings through which the extent and life of the garden, which appears protected and welcoming, can only partially be glimpsed.

The main physical characteristic shared by these places is that they are delimited by clearly identifiable physical boundaries which, just like in an internal space, produce a highly imaginable place. The fundamental aspect of these places thereby clearly emerges: being suspended between the 'external' and the 'internal'.

Their spatial margins are not uniform but rather made up of a multitude of architectural episodes: walls and gates often softened by climbing plants and tall hedges; the façades of the surrounding houses, some belonging to the medieval urban fabric of the historical centre and others built more recently; the city's monuments, as in the case of Giardino Santarelli, one side of which is closed off by the impressive apse of the fifteenth-century Church of Santa Maria del Carmine.

These structures sometimes directly border part of the green area, and other times instead they extend outside of its border beyond a wall, a hedge, a gate, or they can be seen among the branches of tall trees, witnesses of the centuries-old history of these places.

In any case they interact directly with the space inside the garden becoming part of its overall image. The margins, therefore, establish a relationship with the space of the garden similar to that established between the space of a square and the urban façades.

In fact, the space of these gardens, just like that of a square, condenses into an overall image, namely the image one gets of the city by walking along the streets of the neighbourhood, just as the



Giardino Santarelli (©Francesca Privitera)

comer of a room condenses the intimacy of the room (Bechelard, 1975), thereby constituting the real 'room of the city'.

At the same time the structures that delimit the perimeter of these green areas delimit the margins of a real enclosure, physical and symbolic, that therefore triggers a series of dual relationships between 'outside' and 'inside': small-vast, domestic-urban, differentiated-mixed, inclusive-dispersive, safe-dangerous, controlled-free.

In the specific case of these three gardens, however, the relationships are not absolute: the space is not completely introverted, it is rather a space of movement, transition, and negotiation.

In fact, as we have seen, the margins do not absolutely exclude the relationship with the city and its life, rather it can be seen and felt, but its presence is softened and therefore safe because it is mediated by the presence of the fence which fulfils its primordial architectural function: to ensure physical and mental protection.

These places, therefore, despite being fenced and enclosed, are not isolated, on the contrary, they are 'between' things, they are intermediate spaces and as such they act as true thresholds.

They represent the key to the transition and connection between areas with different vocations, the external urban and public one, and the internal community and domestic one, actually constituting the spatial condition for encounters and dialogue between areas of a different order.

So they are those precious spaces of transition between different physical and symbolic conditions increasingly found in architecture and in the contemporary city, but which in the past were fundamental places of reception and unconditional hospitality for those in transit, such as the loggias and cloisters of convents and hospitals that offered protection and shelter under their roofs and between their walls to travellers, pilgrims and those in need.

People stop, rest and meet up in these gardens, and each individual becomes part of a «shared world» (Arendt, in Iovino, 2001), unlike what happens in the streets and nowadays often also in the squares of the city where people absent-mindedly cross paths with one another.

They are therefore real 'collective' spaces more than 'public' ones, that is places where people gather not so much due to a policy decision but rather a choice made by the people who are driven by the desire to meet up.

Here, as in the ancient squares, the constructed form demonstrates the meaning of spending time together: the physical and human spaces are united by an indissoluble bond that makes these places real «contact spaces» (Choay, 2004), that is spaces of daily exchange.

Their size, which could be defined as 'human scale', facilitates physical proximity between people constituting the premise for the activation of 'human' proximity as well.

The act of bringing people closer together is fostered by the sense of safety that these places instill in those that frequent them, not only as we have seen because they are fenced, but also due to the presence of a single entrance that symbolically functions as a real entrance gate into a private space. In fact, for those who walk along the narrow, stony streets of the historical centre, these places are almost invisible. Hidden between the alleys, they can only be glimpsed through the entrance gates and for the crowns of their trees that rise up well beyond the architecture that encloses them.

Once the thresholds have been crossed the space opens up and is airy, green, filled with voices and movement, and isolated, but at the same time profoundly rooted in the city.

The entrance, like that of a home or a room, means that they are really controlled and controllable, and this makes them privileged places where children can play safely after school in the gardens of Borgo Allegri and Santarelli, just as they would in their backyard, and places for caring for plants and the vegetable garden in the Orti Dipinti garden, as well as for special occasions and family gettogethers like children's birthdays. They are often shared and open to the participation of the young guests of the garden, becoming impromptu opportunities for exchange also between adults who find themselves sharing moments of other people's domestic intimacy.

In fact, the key figures of these first approaches are often women and children. For the most part they are the most frequent visitors of the Borgo Allegri and Santarelli gardens: mothers who have always lived in the neighbourhood, others who recently immigrated in search of a meeting space in the more general context of establishing roots in a place 'other' than where they came from, and lastly children who attend the nearby schools where they make their first friendships through daily life at school.

The children's role in this case is essential in establishing an approach between adults who in other contexts would have been unlikely to notice each other: here, on the contrary, they take an initial fundamental step by acknowledging each other's existence.

In fact, dialogue and exchange between these woman is usually down to the relationships that their children establish through playing with their peers. Children also act as true linguistic mediators, and at times also cultural, helping to overcome mistrust and prejudice among adults.

However, it would be highly reductive to think that the sense of safety that these places instill in those who frequent them can be attributed solely to the control of the entrances and their objective status as a fenced-in place.

These gardens, in fact, protected from the mixed-use of the real public space, that of the streets and squares, have an intrinsic and clear 'internal' and 'domestic' vocation – despite actually being 'external' and 'urban' – dictated as much by their use as their formal structure.

They are not perceived as dynamic places of transit or undifferentiated encounters, like the contemporary streets and squares, despite being open and public, but rather as static places where you can stop and rest, and where specific activities are carried out, as in a real interior space.

The 'internal' vocation of these urban spaces is therefore the result of an intertwining of architectural form and human activities.

Here, in fact, we find the characteristics of an internal space to be used for education and socialization combined with an external one intended for «various relationships» (Frampton 1979).



4. Giardino degli Orti Dipinti (©Emanula Morelli)

Conclusions

The reading of the Florentine historical centre has highlighted how Florence is on the one hand a public but austere city, almost severe, characterised by the façades of stone buildings facing onto streets and squares also clad with stone paving, and on the other an intimate city, enclosed within the buildings, which sometimes take on the appearance of a villa (Rinaldi, 1997) thanks to the presence of airy windows, terraces, loggias, courtyards and gardens, where plants infiltrate the architecture and create a secret, domestic space, abundant with nature. A system replete with gardens, small vegetable gardens and courtyards which was once ideally connected with the countryside and nearby hills. Each of these spaces has its own history and exclusive character. Varying in terms of shape and size, the open spaces are sometimes mutilated, residual or fragmented, a reminder of green architectures that were once magnificent and complex, but still transmit their full value today. Due to their morphological and spatial characteristics, many of them can identify as what we have called spaces of physical and 'human' proximity.

This distinctive feature lies in the main characteristic they share, namely their hybrid identity caught between their internal and external character, between the architectural and urban scale, between private garden and public square, between collective space and domestic space.

It is this 'suspended' nature of theirs, between different tangible and intangible conditions, that makes them the real 'rooms of the city'.

They find themselves between spaces with different vocations which in fact makes them real thresholds, and as such they represent the key to the transition and connection between each other, actually constituting the spatial condition for encounters and dialogue between areas of a different order. In summary, it is a matter of recovering the natural vocation that intermediate spaces have for becoming spaces of mediation and negotiation, where virtuous practices of human and social proximity can be established, developed and then consolidated.

Lastly, these green, enclosed spaces saved from privatisation and instead intended for collective use could prefigure the space of a future society in which people's physical and psychological well-being becomes central (imm. 5).



Micro space of proximity (©Kirsten Hills)

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¹ The drafting of the paper was shared by the authors. However, for the purposes of individual attributions, it is specified that paragraph 1-1.2 is to be attributed to Emanuela Morelli, paragraph 2 to Francesca Privitera, the Conclusions to both authors.