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Perpetually temporary shelter in Trieste

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An old building that has seen displaced people in it many times over many years is being used by the latest group of arrivals, this time from outside Europe.

Since 2014, when refugees started arriving in Trieste, in north-east Italy on the Balkans route, every day between 30 and 100 people have camped in tents and cardboard boxes with makeshift beds inside the building known as Silos. This is a huge structure that is currently private property, mostly abandoned except for a small area occupied by a car park and a coach station, situated in a central area of the city. The buildings are close to the port, only a few metres from the tracks of high-speed trains; indeed this place has long been linked to the transit of goods and of displaced people.

In the Second World War Silos became a place for refugees and displaced persons. In 1943 Jews were gathered here before being loaded onto the train to Auschwitz. Then at the end of the Second World War, after the Treaty of Paris in 1947, many of the displaced Italian refugees were sheltered in Silos as they waited for the construction of refugee camps and some permanent accommodation.

In recent years there was an agreement between the municipality and a private company to convert Silos into a conference and commercial centre but the economic crisis halted the investment and Silos has again become a shelter for the new refugees and asylum seekers. These are young men, on average in their twenties, who arrive along the Balkans route and apply for political asylum or humanitarian protection in Italy. Although this is often not their first choice, many asylum seekers say that they wish to get to Trieste, where “the Italians treat you well and it is easier to enter Europe”.

Taking the pressure off

Trieste is an example of good practice in the management of refugees with its System of Protection for Asylum Seekers and Refugees (SPRAR) that ensures ‘integrated reception’ activities for asylum seekers and holders of

international protection. The SPRAR system has allowed the absorption of 1,000 refugees, housed by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in small facilities such as apartments, abandoned hotels and private homes. This partnership between the police, prefecture, municipality and the major local NGOs has made it possible to avoid assembling too many refugees in large hubs or camps. While asylum seekers and refugees wait for the procedure of recognition to be finalised, they attend professional courses, learn Italian or English and participate in social activities and voluntary work. They cook and live independently, interacting with local people, learning how to live in an Italian setting.

The weak point of this well-organised model of management of asylum seekers is its inability to respond quickly to emergency situations when large numbers of people arrive. So Silos functions as emergency shelter in the case of mass arrivals, as a survival facility for illegal, rejected or irregular migrants and as an informal space of information and socialising. It is a space to take the pressure off, tolerated by the authorities when the incoming flow of refugees suddenly rises sharply.

The advantage Silos offers as a shelter is having a roof and walls, albeit somewhat derelict, offering partial protection from the winter weather. Inside Silos the migrants have built real huts with plywood, enclosed bed spaces using cardboard for walls, kitchens with stoves, toilets without water and even a prayer area. They use water tanks for washing, and sometimes cook; on sunny days they use the large open square to play football and cricket. Within the precarious community of Silos there is a kind of tacit hierarchy of beds, with the best and most protected belonging to the ‘senior’ occupants – those who have been there longest. In the past two years, Silos has also become an informal

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Silos, in Trieste, Italy.

information centre for newly arrived asylum seekers, and a daytime social centre also for refugees hosted in the SPRAR system who still suffer from the loneliness peculiar to and shared by migrants. Silos is at once a central place and one of transit, close to public transport and the port and just a short walk from the soup kitchen, the hospital and the social services of various NGOs. It works as a sort of informal hub – situated in the heart of the city but not overly visible.

Constant interaction with the local community prevents the sense of alarm and perception of invasion that have triggered protests in northern Italy over every new official refugee settlement. Where asylum seekers are confined to an isolated centre in camps or former barracks under militarised supervision, the local residents have expressed much greater fear, as organised settlements are more highly structured and visible. Silos, however, does not disrupt the the city's daily life; police reports indicate no rise in crime rates and the refugees are not too visible, despite the fact that the makeshift camp lies only a few metres

from where commuters arrive into the city. The shelter in Silos occasionally provokes political debate. The police, succumbing to the political mood and media pressure, periodically evict the encamped migrants and destroy the shacks. However, before long the migrants re-appropriate 'their' space, putting back their few belongings.

This perpetually temporary presence seems to be tolerated well by the local residents, maybe partly because of the high walls of the building that protect it and render it invisible. This shelter was not officially established but rather chosen and occupied by the migrants themselves, almost as if they recognised the historical function of Silos. Today, as in the past, it serves as a protective and collective space, and also as a buffer zone between order and disorder, visibility and invisibility, hospitality and rejection.

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