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– PRECARIZED AGEING-IN-*PERIFERIA*: Low-Income Older Adults in a Transforming Neighbourhood

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Abstract

In this article we investigate how intersecting forms of precarity shape the everyday practices of ageing-in-place developed by low-income older adults in Via Milano, a historically segregated yet rapidly transforming neighbourhood in Brescia, northern Italy. We draw on qualitative and ethnographic research to examine how diverse urban changes—both material and symbolic—affect the conditions that make ageing-in-place possible, particularly for those already positioned at the socioeconomic margins. Indeed, low-income older adults' practices of ageing-in-place are undermined by interrelated urban transformations, including the excluding effects of an ambitious regeneration plan and the sense of insecurity they consistently associate with the neighbourhood's growing ethnic diversity. These dynamics make it difficult for them to engage in community life. At the same time, we highlight the emergence of fragile yet vital forms of solidarity—such as practices of mutual aid—that contest the forms of exclusion reinforced by urban regeneration that are affecting low-income older adults. We therefore challenge normative assumptions about older adults' autonomy and reveal how precarization unfolds across spaces, bodies and social relations. Ageing, we argue, must be rethought as a situated and politicized experience shaped by the material and symbolic regeneration of urban areas that has been fostered by neoliberalism.

Introduction

Over the past decades, urban Italy has undergone intense structural ageing (Cappellato *et al*., 2021). A key challenge is how older adults develop practices to live in contexts of their choice—particularly those who are facing existential precarities under neoliberalism. In social gerontology, this process is known as 'ageing-in-place' (AIP), a policy- and planning-oriented body of research examining how socioeconomic and environmental conditions enable older adults to live autonomously and independently (Buffel and Phillipson, 2024). A broader definition frames AIP as 'one's journey to maintain independence in one's *place of residence* as well as to *participate in one's community*' (Rogers *et al*., 2020: 9, emphasis added). While AIP research has advanced in multiple directions, it has largely remained focused on individual health and functional autonomy. Further inquiry is needed into how transforming places-of-ageing (POA) affects older adults' capabilities, including those considered in this article—namely, the ability to participate in community life and to maintain a dignified life (Yarker *et al*., 2024). Specifically, it is necessary to explore how sociospatial changes in POA *precarize* AIP, especially in relation to older adults' capacity for social participation (Buffel and Phillipson, 2024). This is particularly relevant in urban contexts characterized by

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intersecting patterns of segregation, economic precarity, ethnoracial diversity and gentrification, where class, gender, ethnonational belonging, racialization and other exclusionary conditions affect how older adults age-in-place (Yeh, 2022). Historically segregated Italian working-class neighbourhoods, referred to as 'periferie' (peripheries) in the national discourse regardless of their actual location, exemplify such contexts, especially those targeted for urban regeneration (Alioni, 2025). Low-income older adults (LIOA) are relentlessly exposed to the material and symbolic displacing effects of neoliberal regeneration (Buffel and Phillipson, 2024), as their limited resources constrain their capability to develop consistent AIP practices (Yarker *et al*., 2024).

In this article we explore these dynamics in Via Milano, a regenerating yet economically deprived and ethnically diverse neighbourhood in Brescia, northern Italy. We examine how LIOA's AIP practices *and* community participation have been made *precarious* in a stigmatized POA undergoing radical transformation. We focus on intertwined dynamics of urban change to reveal everyday strategies and collective responses that illustrate how older adults' capabilities are activated, constrained and reconfigured—both through their own actions and by broader societal processes. Furthermore, we highlight how neoliberal regeneration reconfigures not only the material fabric of neighbourhoods but also the conditions under which AIP becomes (un)feasible for those with limited resources—particularly through the continual renegotiation of their positioning within everyday living environments. These conditions are analytically significant, as they reveal how the unequal distribution of risks, resources and social infrastructures takes shape in stigmatized neighbourhoods, where the capacity of LIOA to age-in-place is most severely challenged (Buffel and Phillipson, 2024).

Ageing-in-(marginalized)-places and (marginalized) places-of-ageing

Earlier AIP debates focused on older adults' ability to remain in domestic environments, but the scope has since expanded to include diverse sociopolitical drivers of AIP precarization, such as urban governance and planning (Zhang *et al*., 2021; Buffel and Phillipson, 2024). AIP is increasingly understood as a *process* shaped by the interplay between key capabilities enabled by the environment and individual features (Bigonnesse and Chaudhury, 2022). As ageing is dynamic, change does not *inherently* harm AIP (Rogers *et al*., 2020). However, scholars have also questioned whether AIP *always* constitutes a 'positive' experience—particularly when it unfolds in contexts marked by deprivation, gentrification or other conditions that undermine older adults' wellbeing (Bigonnesse and Chaudhury, 2022). These theoretical developments challenge individualistic and stereotyped understandings of ageing in transforming cities and stress the need to examine how changing POA affect AIP (Weil, 2023; Buffel and Phillipson, 2024). Moreover, how AIP is framed in research and policy directly shapes age-friendly governance (Forsyth and Molinsky, 2021). Finally, Rogers *et al*. (2020) highlight the importance of clarifying both the notion of POA and 'participation in urban life', particularly in relation to LIOA's 'elective belonging' (Phillipson, 2007) and ability to 'stay put' (De Jong *et al*., 2022).

AIP research has long treated place as 'static' and 'abstract' (Lewis and Buffel, 2020). In response, Yarker *et al*. (2024) reconceptualize POA along two dimensions: the 'relational', which sees place as a dynamic network of interactions and flows of capital, objects and people, and the 'territorial', which focuses on how place is defined and experienced through intersectional social positioning. This framework highlights how practices, inequalities and governance shape both AIP and POA, showing how urban transformations may offer uneven support for ageing and generate processes of exclusion (Yeh, 2022). It also demonstrates how marginalization precarizes AIP—especially when POA transformations result in material and/or symbolic displacement (Buffel and Phillipson, 2024) or in conditions of being 'stuck in place' (Smith *et al*., 2018). Furthermore, our focus on POA stems from the need to move beyond the *bio-medicalized* lens found in ageing research (Lopez-Otin *et al*., 2013), which typically frames ageing

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around individual health and personal responsibility for prevention (Fletcher, 2020)—to the point of defining ageing *itself* as the very process through which the symptoms of the 'disease of age' emerge (Fletcher, 2023: 10). While crucial, bio-medicalized approaches overlook broader structural forces and power relations shaping both ageing and AIP. These forces do not contradict individual factors such as health conditions, but actively interact with them. Our focus on POA allows us to explore how transforming urban environments mediate ageing processes, uncovering the spatial and political terrains through which ageing unfolds as a sociomaterial process structured by systemic *precarity*, power relations and unequal access to places (Buffel and Phillipson, 2024).

Governance and planning play a key role in AIP, influencing whether urban transformations promote inclusion or reinforce marginalization and precarity (Burns *et al*., 2012; Zhang *et al*., 2021). Here we draw on Butler's (2004) definition of *precarity* as the unequal distribution of vulnerability and harm, sustained by structural power relations. Precarity is not an individual condition, but rather a sociospatial arrangement shaped by intersecting regimes of governance, stigma and material deprivation. Despite growing research on these themes (see, e.g. Torres, 2020; Bigonnesse and Chaudhury, 2022; Santos *et al*., 2024), gaps remain in understanding how precarization affects LIOA's practices in regenerating areas (Lewis *et al*., 2022) and how they adapt to (Weil *et al*., 2024) or withdraw from (Buffel and Phillipson, 2019) transforming contexts. Furthermore, research remains fragmented on symbolic displacement (Phillipson, 2007), place alienation (Diaz-Parra and Jover, 2023) and gentrification-induced isolation (Torres, 2020). Italy, in particular, remains underexplored despite showing among the EU's highest shares of older urban residents.[1] Moreover, national research on these themes tends to uncritically adopt the 'age-friendly cities' model, focusing almost exclusively on defining indicators of 'friendliness' to promote individualized forms of active ageing (see, e.g. Bertani *et al*., 2025). This perspective overlooks the systemic forces that produce persistently exclusionary urban processes beyond issues of spatial accessibility to essential services, including the power relations that render AIP *precarious* for socioeconomically vulnerable populations.

An urgent issue concerns how LIOA perceive, relate to and respond to transforming POA, especially as urban changes intersect with shifts in local socioeconomic composition (Buffel and Phillipson, 2024). As McFarland *et al*. (2023) note, LIOA's reproduction of stigmatizing discourses may reflect growing precarity—an attempt to reassert control over changing environments and make sense of exclusion by reclaiming a sense of 'place'. In this article we build on these insights, exploring how AIP operates as a strategy to negotiate both material and symbolic precarity in a large neighbourhood in Brescia that is marked by rapid, contradictory and seemingly *uncontrollable* transformations (De Jong *et al*., 2022). We articulate precarity along two interrelated dimensions, both rooted in the social and ethnoracial *stigma* historically associated with the neighbourhood under study. First, we examine how the regeneration of Via Milano is driven by classificatory logics that reinforce territorial stigma—portraying the area as decayed or unsafe—to justify gentrifying interventions (Alioni, 2025) that largely overlook LIOA's concrete needs. Precarity thus emerges from top-down regeneration agendas that marginalize rather than empower LIOA. Secondly, we explore how the stigma 'seeps' into residents' perceptions and narratives, destabilizing their relationship with Via Milano as a meaningful and reliable POA. This 'internalized' stigma affects the lived experience of AIP by reinforcing social fragmentation, weakening community ties and intensifying isolation and symbolic displacement. As a result, LIOA's wellbeing is threatened not only by economic constraints but also by the symbolic and material erosion of supportive urban environments (Buffel and Phillipson, 2024).

1 See the 2024 Annual Report of the Italian National Institute of Statistics, https://www.istat.it/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Rapporto-Annuale-2024.pdf (accessed 16 February 2026).

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Methodology

In this article we present preliminary findings from the Independentaging project,[2] an ongoing, multidisciplinary study combining ethnographic fieldwork on AIP in Via Milano, Brescia, with a Foucauldian-inspired policy analysis of planning documents at the local and national levels.

Between February 2024 and March 2025, our research unit analysed the regeneration project targeting Via Milano—initiated in 2017—in conjunction with national and local redevelopment policies, with the aim of examining their underlying logics, representations and objectives. Simultaneously, we conducted 40 interviews with residents aged 60+. These were complemented by ethnographic observations undertaken through situated and contingent engagements with the field—occasions that offered an in-depth understanding of social interactions as they unfolded across multiple community settings and during public events organized by both institutional and informal actors, providing valuable insights into the neighbourhood's life.

Each interview participant took part in a single semi-structured interview exploring AIP across different scales—home, building, block, neighbourhood, city, digital space. We employed dialogical techniques (Lamendola, 2009) to foster reflexive, narrative-based responses, using questions designed to elicit situated stories and lived experiences rather than abstract reflections. The conversations unfolded through open prompts[3] that invited participants to narrate practices and experiences, including their everyday life in the neighbourhood, mobility practices and the places they feel connected to—among other themes. Since no sensitive information was collected, only informed consent was required in line with our university's ethical guidelines. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and thematically coded. Participants were selected based on age (60+) and residence. Interviews lasted 50 to 70 minutes and were conducted in participants' homes or at a social cooperative involved in the Independentaging project. Recruitment followed three channels: a list of interested residents from Congrega Apostolica—a Catholic organization providing subsidized housing in Porta Milano, snowball sampling facilitated by diverse gatekeepers, and local cooperatives supporting older adults. This yielded a diverse sample in terms of class, migration history, citizenship, gender, age, health and place of residence, with participants ranging in age from 60 to 92 years. Rather than seeking statistical representativeness, in our study we sought to explore diverse practices of urban ageing through situated narratives that reflect the often contradictory and complex realities of life in a rapidly changing neighbourhood.

The themes we discuss in the following sections emerged inductively from the interviews. They were selected because they meaningfully illustrate how different forms of precarization shape AIP experiences and reveal the broader challenges LIOA face in their urban lives. While we focus on a subset of interviews that are most illustrative of these dynamics, a different selection would not have altered our interpretations. The patterns we identified were not isolated but recurred—albeit in different forms—across the broader set of narratives we collected through our fieldwork.

As defining 'older adults' involves methodological complexities (Berglund *et al.*, 2022), we adopted the Italian National Institute of Statistics' 60+ threshold for inclusion in the qualitative sample. As income is considered to be sensitive information, LIOA were identified in two ways. In the case of those living in public or social housing,

2 The full title of the project is 'Independentaging—The Right to Independent Living as a New Frontier of Justice: Older People, Urban Spaces and the Law'. The project is coordinated by researchers from the University of Ferrara, with the University of Brescia as a partner. The authors of this article are members of the research unit based at the University of Brescia; see https://www.unife.it/it/ricerca/progetti/naz_internaz/law/nazionali/independentaging (accessed 20 February 2026).

3 We followed the dialogical interview techniques of Lamendola (2009), so questions took the form of open invitations such as the following: 'Tell us how you came to live in the neighbourhood' and 'Tell us how you began spending time in that particular place'.

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TABLE 1 List of interviewees quoted in the article

ID	Name (pseudonym)	Gender (identity)	Age	Citizenship	Partnered	Dwelling	District	Years in the neighbourhood	Biking	Occupation (retired)
1	Lorenza	F	69	Italian	Widow	Owner	Fiumicello	20–30	Frequently	School teacher (ret.)
2	Mario	M	77	Italian	Yes	Owner	Primo Maggio	>30	Frequently	Carpenter (ret.)
3	Flora	F	73	Italian	No	Social housing	Porta Milano	10–20	No longer	Janitor (ret.)
4	Elena	F	87	Italian	Widow	Social housing	Porta Milano	10–20	Never	Housewife (ret.)
5	Maria	F	71	Italian	Yes	Social housing	Porta Milano	<10	Never	Housewife (ret.)
6	Concetta	F	73	Italian	Yes	Social housing	Porta Milano	>30	Frequently	Housekeeper (ret.)
7	Nando	M	74	Italian	Yes	Social housing	Porta Milano	>30	Seldom	Factory worker (ret.)
8	Gianni	M	79	Italian	Widower	Social housing	Porta Milano	<10	Never	Sales agent (ret.)
9	Sara	F	73	Italian	Yes	Owner	Primo Maggio	>30	Frequently	Police officer (ret.)
10	Stefania	F	77	Italian	Widow	Social housing	Porta Milano	10–20	No longer	Secretary (ret.)
11	Fatima	F	61	Italian/ Moroccan	Widow	Renter	Fiumicello	10–20	Never	Caregiver
12	Nino	M	72	Italian	Yes	Renter	Fiumicello	>30	Never	Carpenter (ret.)
13	Riccardo	M	74	Italian	Yes	Social housing	Porta Milano	10–20	Frequently	Factory worker (ret.)
14	Natalia	F	67	Ukrainian	Yes	Renter	Fiumicello	10–20	Never	Housekeeper
15	Octavio	M	80	Cuban/ Spanish	Widower	Public housing	Fiumicello	<10	Never	Factory worker (ret.)
16	Najla	F	67	Tunisian	Yes	Renter	Primo Maggio	<10	Never	Housewife

their eligibility for such schemes indicates incomes up to the regional relative poverty line. For other participants we relied on (previous) occupations and their associated pension/salary brackets as proxies for income, enabling us to capture economic disadvantage without requiring formal income disclosure (see Table 1).

In this article we focus on LIOA because socioeconomic status clearly emerged as a central factor shaping AIP practices. Our interviews show that POA transformations are significantly more intense for LIOA, while better-off residents have broader adaptive strategies that enable them to maintain a higher quality of life despite those changes—a finding consistent with other studies (see, e.g. Gibson *et al.*, 2024). Furthermore, our goal is not to compare different social groups. Rather, we focus on LIOA because we are interested in those who have limited resources to adequately respond to the profound changes triggered by neighbourhood regeneration and other processes. Our focus on LIOA thus allows us to examine how urban transformations intensify precarity and constraint for those already marginalized within the city's socioeconomic life.

Regenerating Brescia: remaking the 'Capital of Rebar' and its (de)industrial *periferia*

Brescia is a northern Italian city of 200,000 residents that emerged as a significant manufacturing hub in the twentieth century. Its expansive steel industry earned it the nickname 'Capital of Rebar'. From the 1980s until the 2000s, rapid deindustrialization reshaped the city's sociodemographic structure, its population declining from 211,000 in 1971 to 187,000 in 2001. Nevertheless, Brescia remains a wealthy city seeking to reposition itself in an increasingly competitive regional context. Today, both Brescia and Via Milano are shaped by intersecting dynamics that extend beyond economic

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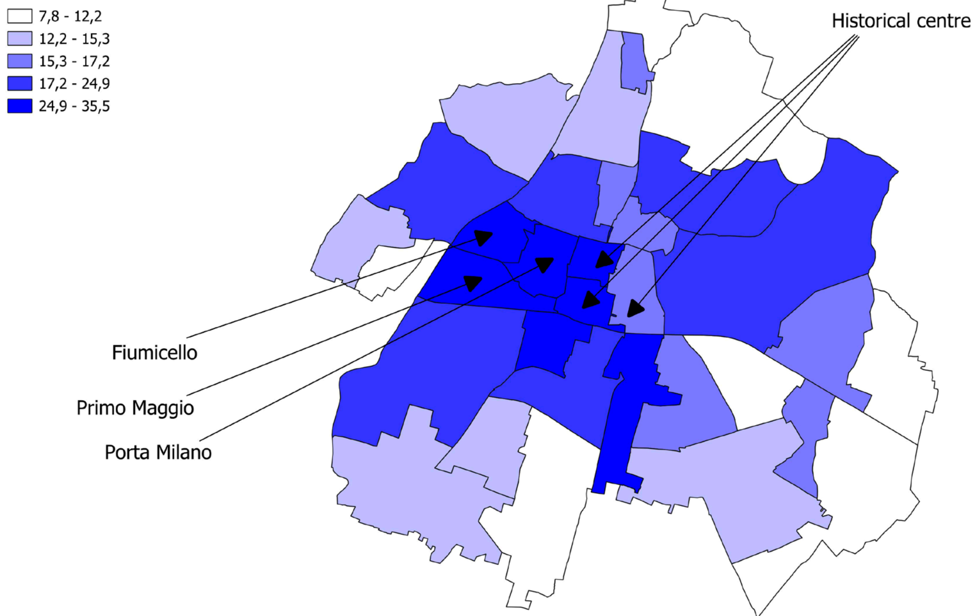

FIGURE 1 Map showing the percentage of non-citizen residents in relation to each district's population (*source:* authors' analysis of municipal data updated as of 31 December 2024)

restructuring alone. In this section we outline the complex transformations affecting the city, where multiple forces collide, overlap and intensify each other.

International in-migration has played a central role in reshaping Brescia's population. Between 1991 and 2024, the share of residents without Italian citizenship rose from 1,000 (0.6%) to approximately 40,000 (19.2%).[4] Foreign nationals are unevenly distributed across the city, and they have largely settled through ethnic networks, migrant reception centres and the public housing system (Arbaci, 2019; Colombo and Santagati, 2024). Around 60% of the city's foreign-born residents live in a few (largely 'deprived') neighbourhoods—areas that are underserved by public transport (see Figure 1) and, moreover, marked by substandard housing and environmental degradation. These areas largely overlap with the geographies of territorial stigmatization (Wacquant *et al*., 2014) historically affecting Brescia's working class, Via Milano representing the most significant example (Alioni, 2025). Studies on local and national labour markets reveal that non-Italian residents are consistently overrepresented in precarious, low-paid economic sectors offering little opportunities for upward mobility (Colombo and Santagati, 2024).

Via Milano is a large neighbourhood bordering the western edge of Brescia's historic centre (see Figure 2). Once the city's quintessential working-class area, it was characterized by large-scale public housing and major industrial plants. From the 1980s to the 2000s, most factories were decommissioned, leaving 40 hectares of polluted brownfields (Ruzzenenti, 2021). Its main artery (Via Milano, from which the

4 Data presented in this paragraph have all been extracted from data sets released by the Municipality of Brescia, updated as at 31 December 2024, which we consulted between January and March 2025. These are available at https://dati.comune.brescia.it/dataset/ (accessed 20 February 2026).

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FIGURE 2 Satellite view of the neighbourhoods of Brescia that are affected by the regeneration project (*source:* authors' analysis based on Google Earth)

area takes its name) extends for 2.5 kilometres westwards towards the Mella River. The neighbourhood comprises three districts—Porta Milano, Fiumicello and Primo Maggio—with approximately 16,000 residents in total. Of these, 35% are non-Italian citizens, 21% are 65+ and the median income is EUR 22,281—10% below the city's average. Since the 1990s, the demographic profile has shifted sharply. Non-Italian residents in the area rose from 3.7% in 1993 to 32% in 2024. In Porta Milano, their percentage increased from 12.5% (2004) to 27% (2024), in Primo Maggio this figure went up from 15% to 32%, and in Fiumicello from 20% to 36%. Whereas migrants once came mostly from Albania, Romania and Morocco, today the largest groups are Indian (33%) and Pakistani people (27%).

Brescia is undergoing significant demographic ageing: as of 2024, residents aged 65+ represent 24.8% of the population (see Figure 3). While this figure is lower than in other deindustrialized Italian cities, the relatively younger age of migrant communities has helped mitigate structural ageing, as 82% of non-citizen residents are under 49 (Colombo and Santagati, 2024). Nonetheless, long-term non-citizen residents are now ageing too (5.6% are aged 65+), posing novel challenges for the local welfare system. In response, the city has begun experimenting with innovative housing schemes to support socioeconomically vulnerable older residents.[5] These include semi-public nursing homes and age-dedicated residential buildings offering integrated social and healthcare services through non-profit providers. Yet, most of these facilities are located in the city's outer districts—often in marginal locations even within those areas—raising concerns about emerging forms of 're-institutionalization' (Tarantino, 2024) and 'micro-segregation' (Ewen *et al*., 2014).

Since the 1980s, public and private investments have been aimed at boosting Brescia's competitiveness through large-scale infrastructure projects, residential and commercial developments, and the regeneration of working-class districts. Key interventions include the financial district Brescia Due (1988–2004) and the city's inaugural subway line (2013), which has become the backbone of urban redevelopment

5 The Municipal Social Services Plan is available at https://www.comune.brescia.it/aree-tematiche/servizi-alla-persona-e-famiglie/piano-di-zona-2025-2027 (accessed 16 February 2026).

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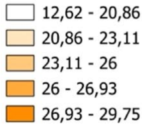
Share of Residents aged 65 or older (2024)



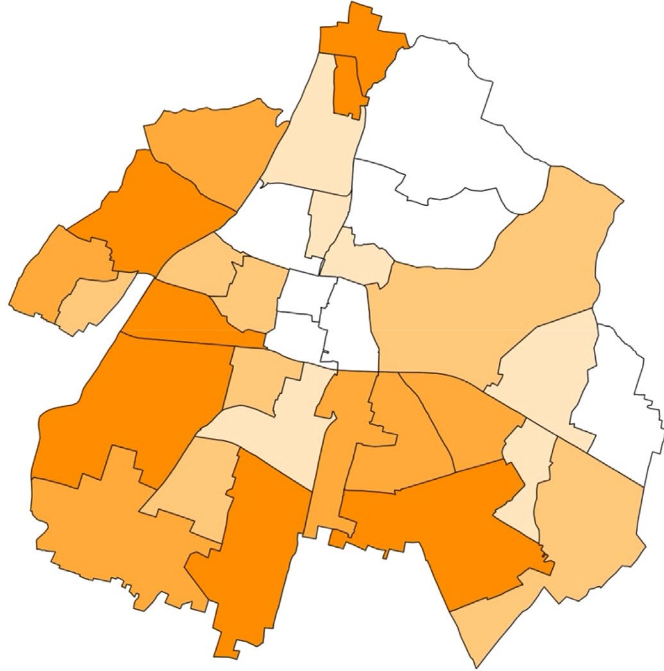


FIGURE 3 Map showing the percentage of residents aged 65+ in relation to each district's population (*source:* authors' analysis of municipal data, updated as at 31 December 2024)

over the past decade. Recently, Brescia has pursued two strategic directions. On the one hand, the Municipality is investing in cultural rebranding—museums, exhibitions, archaeological sites and festivals—to reposition itself within Italy's competitive tourism industry. On the other, it has launched initiatives to improve environmental conditions in a city long affected by industrial pollution, while advancing citywide adaptation strategies. However, these efforts are closely tied to rebranding goals that are aimed at attracting residents and investors (Alioni and Badiani, 2024), while only marginally addressing the socio-environmental challenges of deprived and contaminated neighbourhoods (Ruzzenenti, 2021).

Municipal interventions in working-class neighbourhoods have largely been driven by national funding schemes for urban regeneration, such as Contratti di Quartiere (2000–2006) and, more recently, in 2015 and 2016, respectively, Bando Aree Degradate (BAD)[6] and Bando Periferie (BP).[7] In contemporary Italian urban discourse, peripheries are not only narrated as marginalized spaces, but also as strategic sites to repositioning Italy within global capital flows (Conte and Fiore, 2024). Over the past decades, regeneration policies have consistently targeted 'decaying' urban areas (Carpini, 2022). BAD and BP have introduced legally binding definitions of 'periphery', earmarking specific areas for regeneration nationwide (Alioni, 2025). BAD required

6 The full text of the BAD (Bando Aree Degradate) Decaying Areas Call for Proposals (2015) is available at https://www.pariopportunita.gov.it/media/2093/dpcm-15-ottobre-2015.pdf (accessed 16 February 2026) (available in Italian only).

7 The full text of the BP (Bando Periferie) Peripheries Call for Proposals (2016) is available at https://www.governo.it/sites/governo.it/files/Bando_periferie_urbane_testo.pdf (accessed 16 February 2026) (available in Italian only).

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municipalities to select areas based on indicators of interrelated 'social decay' and 'environmental degradation' (BAD: 2015, 10–11), while BP defined target sites as 'decaying peripheries' marked by 'socio-economic marginalization, urban degradation, and lack of services' (BP, 2016: 9). Brescia secured EUR 2 million through BAD to build a study hall and a medical centre at the site of a former gas station—later converted into an ethnic restaurant—and an abandoned building at 140 Via Milano.[8] The intervention's goal was to improve urban quality and expand socio-educational services by redeveloping this 'decaying site'. Through BP, the Municipality secured an additional EUR 18 million for Oltre la Strada (Beyond the Street, or OLS), a comprehensive plan for the sociospatial regeneration of the neighbourhood's main artery, focusing on targeted interventions along the street, in particular in industrial brownfields. Although most of the planned interventions have been completed, Via Milano remains characterized by a mix of commercial and production spaces (many of the latter still in disuse) and modest-quality residential buildings with shops at street level. A growing number of these businesses are run by entrepreneurs from the neighbourhood's diverse communities. To improve accessibility to these commercial activities, the Municipality has widened sidewalks, added bike lanes, removed on-street parking and rerouted traffic to a parallel street leading to the Western Freeway. OLS has also resulted in the construction of a theatre, a skate park, a library and the aforementioned study hall. These interventions align closely with BP's objectives of enhancing 'urban decorum', combating 'urban decay', improving infrastructure, expanding services and promoting public–private models of urban welfare (BP, 2016: 9–10). OLS's explicit goal is to attract 'new' young residents and integrate them into the neighbourhood's fabric.[9] By contrast, older residents are positioned as 'passive' beneficiaries of the regeneration process and the expected improvement in the neighbourhood's 'security' (Alioni and Badiani, 2024). This highlights how the Municipality is pursuing an explicit politics of 'social mix'—a classed and racialized narrative that frames public investment in deprived areas as a strategy to attract 'different' residents by transforming the space itself (Alioni, 2025). The dual objective of social mix is to reduce social exclusion by deconcentrating poverty and 'de-ghettoizing'[10] marginality, while simultaneously enhancing the area's financial attractiveness to investors and new residents (Badiani, 2025).

Italian scholarship has examined the stigmatizing effects of public interventions framed around notions of decay (Pavoni and D'Alba, 2024) and decorum (Tulumello and Bertoni, 2019). In this article we build on such critical perspectives to question the underlying logic of institutional approaches to regeneration—specifically, how these interventions reinforce social boundaries and fragmentation (Merrill, 2018) to deepen divisions among groups inhabiting contemporary peripheries (Carpini, 2022). While regeneration materially transforms urban spaces, it also reconfigures social hierarchies by repositioning subjectivities inside or outside the neighbourhood's regenerated social space (Paton, 2016). These fractures are most evident along racial lines, which are assuming new urban forms in Italy (Merrill, 2018). Racialized processes emerge through tensions between elective belonging claimed by the dominant, *positively* racialized white Italian community and the *negatively* racialized groups living in deprived areas (Mellino, 2012). As Alioni (2025) shows, stigmatizing narratives about

8 See the project presentation available at https://www.comune.brescia.it/sites/default/files/imported/news/2020/dicembre/Documents/Consultorio%20via%20Milano%20140%20-%20Slide.pdf (accessed 16 February 2026).

9 See information on the completed project at https://www.comune.brescia.it/aree-tematiche/urban-center/oltre-la-strada/oltre-la-strada-introduzione (accessed 16 February 2026).

10 As stated in a project aimed at redeveloping a large public housing complex on the Via Milano, the Municipality views 'social mix' as a necessary strategy to '[overcome] ghettoization and vulnerabilities of a homogeneous, self-contained system', in Comune di Brescia (2021) Progetto INNESTI: Nuovi Modelli Dell'abitare per la Costruzione della Comunità Collaborativa di Case del Sole. Relazione Tecnico-Illustrativa Generale—Allegato A [INNESTI Project: New Housing Models for the Construction of the Collaborative Community of Case del Sole. General Technical-Illustrative Report—Annexure A]. This document is no longer accessible online, but a copy is filed in the researchers' archive.

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multiethnic coexistence are mobilized to justify redevelopment in working-class areas, as gentrification is framed as a moral and 'civilizing' imperative. Such discourses not only reinforce racialized hierarchies, but also redefine the terms of inclusion–exclusion in urban space. These dynamics contribute directly to precarized AIP (McFarland *et al*., 2023), as LIOA must navigate urban change while facing mounting and multi-faceted barriers to remaining in their POA. Indeed, regeneration-induced gentrification, discursively presented as a solution to the 'pathologized' conditions of marginalized neighbourhoods (Wacquant *et al*., 2014; Paton, 2016), undermines LIOA's social capital and erodes their capability to participate in community life while staying put in their POA (Torres, 2020; Buffel and Phillipson, 2024).

Precarizing ageing-in-*periferia:* regenerated public spaces, multiethnic coexistence, class solidarity

Our analysis—based on policy documents, interviews and ethnographic fieldwork—focuses on the specific dynamics that make LIOA's AIP practices precarious. Over the past decades, the area has undergone layered transformations: deindustrialization and the abandonment of working-class residents in the 1990s were followed by the settlement of diverse ethnic communities. More recently, regeneration processes have reshaped everyday life and social relations within this urban 'pluriverse', reinforcing stigmatizing narratives about the neighbourhood's present and future (Carpini, 2022). A key dimension of this transformation is the role of public interventions that have the explicit aim of driving socioeconomic revitalization by attracting private investments into this vast and complex neighbourhood.

In this article we examine three key dynamics that precarize LIOA's capability to age-in-place in Via Milano. First, we analyse the relationships with—and within—public spaces as they are reshaped by regeneration. Secondly, we explore interactions among different subjectivities in the neighbourhood's physical and social spaces, focusing on processes of spatial racialization and racialization of spatial practices (Alioni, 2025) and on their effects on LIOA's practices and perceptions—particularly in terms of competition over and negotiation of space with Othered subjectivities (McFarland *et al*., 2023). Thirdly, we consider how practices grounded in class solidarity emerge in response to structural precarity to challenge contradictions embedded in the municipal regeneration project. Specifically, the case of Dispensa—a solidarity initiative promoted by a neighbourhood-based political collective—offers a key vantage point: it is an interstitial, intersectional site attended by subjects with diverse positionalities in terms of gender, age, migratory background and citizenship status. Dispensa exemplifies how legal and socioeconomic marginalization intersect in urban life, while also fostering solidaristic forms of community making beyond institutional frameworks. Its analytical relevance lies in its role as a grassroots infrastructure that both exposes and responds to the challenges produced by neighbourhood change. During our fieldwork, Dispensa emerged as a relevant site for observing how severely marginalized subjects navigate precarity, sustain social ties and struggle to meet basic needs in a neighbourhood marked by uneven access to space and resources.

At its core, the issue is that the neighbourhood is not merely a physical space. Yet the municipal approach assumes that social change in this long-marginalized area can be achieved primarily through *spatial* regeneration (Alioni and Badiani, 2024). Nonetheless, Via Milano emerges as a contested arena where identities, belonging and power relations are constantly negotiated through encounters among diverse subjectivities (Buffel and Phillipson, 2024). These interactions—and the perceptions they generate—shape how individuals position themselves within the social and material space of the neighbourhood. If regeneration is promoted as a project of coexistence grounded in stigmatizing notions such as 'social mixing' and 'decorum', it also fosters subject-making procedures through material and symbolic competition

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over urban spaces (McFarland *et al*., 2023). These processes unfold in daily frictions and negotiations, making visible the precarity of LIOA's AIP strategies. These dynamics often force an unsupported renegotiation of LIOA's bodily presence and sense of belonging in spaces that no longer feel familiar and reliable. As the neighbourhood changes, they may struggle to see themselves reflected in it, which could lead to withdrawal from social life or the adoption of more demanding routines to avoid places and people that are perceived as disorienting. From this perspective, everyday practices offer a critical lens for examining the role of POA, their transformations and the power relations that structure them—ultimately shaping whether different subjectivities can develop capabilities to lead dignified lives in places best suited to their needs (Bigonnesse and Chaudhury, 2022).

– (Regenerated) public spaces for (regenerated) interactions

The Municipality's explicit goal is to transform the neighbourhood's artery from an unwelcoming 'circulation space' dominated by cars into a vibrant 'neighbourhood street'[11] that encourages interaction and feels inviting. These interventions reflect broader efforts to reduce congestion, promote active mobilities and convert brownfields and abandoned buildings into spaces designed to encourage social interaction. These new facilities are complemented by the redevelopment of adjacent areas, including small plazas intended to foster community connections. New bike lanes and refurbished sidewalks are likewise designed to bring bodies physically and socially 'closer' to the Via Milano (Alioni, 2025). Yet LIOA experience these changes in contradictory ways. Although the Municipality frames them as a strategy to make the Via Milano a 'more inclusive space', many interviewees described them as reinforcing exclusion and unwelcomeness.

One clear example is the relationship of LIOA to the new bike lanes. The infrastructure is divided into two segments. From the city centre to the intersection dividing Porta Milano and Fiumicello, the lanes consist of white lines painted on the street—they are 'wedged' between the driving lane and parking spots along the street. Beyond that point, towards the Mella River, the bike lanes become separated from traffic and integrated into the sidewalk. Though marked in different colours, cycling and pedestrian zones coexist within the same material space (see Figure 4).

According to the Municipality, expanding active mobility-related infrastructures will reshape how the Via Milano neighbourhood is conceived and experienced, improving its appearance, liveability and safety. At the same time, making the area more bike-friendly is framed as an environmental strategy enhancing its attractiveness for new residents. Nonetheless, the material configuration of the bike lanes generates dynamics of exclusion for LIOA currently living in the neighbourhood. Whether such infrastructures truly function as 'places of encounter' ultimately depends on what one might encounter there. As Lorenza (interviewee 1) explains:

> The bike lanes along the Via Milano are constantly interrupted by gates, driveways and bus stops, forcing you to stay alert for cars pulling out. Pedestrians often walk or stand in your space, and cyclists going the wrong way make it even more frustrating—it's a dangerous bike lane!

For Lorenza, cycling along those bike lanes means navigating a dangerous and chaotic environment, exposing herself to various risks and unpleasant 'encounters' with other elements that are moving through—or lingering within—that infrastructured space in disorderly ways. The material features of the bike lanes underscore a core contradiction: while their redesign should promote safe cycling, in practice they foster conflict and

11 See page 1 of https://www.comune.brescia.it/sites/default/files/imported/servizi/urbancenter/oltrelastrada/Documents/170911_UC_AT_080-il%20bando%20periferie.pdf (accessed 16 February 2026).

FIGURE 4 Bike lanes along the Via Milano. *Left*: Section of bike lanes heading towards the city centre; *Right*: Section of bike lanes leading from the Mella River to the intersection between Fiumicello and Porta Milano (photos by Marco Alioni, 16 April 2025)

unpredictability, undermining their intended purpose. This perception of 'insecurity' significantly undermines the bike lanes' potential to foster interaction. Lorenza—like other interviewees—avoids these lanes altogether, instead choosing alternative routes through quieter streets, which, despite lacking any cycling infrastructure, are perceived as less risky in terms of interactions with cars or pedestrians. As Mario (interviewee 2) also notes, these issues extend to pedestrians as well:

> Putting bike lanes next to the sidewalks creates problems even when you're a pedestrian. Cyclists bike everywhere, and now there are also electric scooters speeding by—I'm always afraid of getting hit!

The issue of insecurity is closely intertwined with the broader goal of bringing residents' bodies into 'closer' proximity with the Via Milano. As Flora (interviewee 3) explains:

> I no longer ride my bike because I'm afraid of falling—I got old and scared of getting hurt. But honestly, I don't like cycling or walking around Via Milano, even with those new bike lanes; the neighbourhood feels dangerous, and I no longer have the reflexes to react quickly to threats!

For Flora, the bike lanes cannot serve as inclusive spaces for interaction because using them entails a double vulnerability. First, the ageing of her body translates into a fear of injury—cycling is a physically exposed form of mobility that makes her feel unsafe. Secondly, cycling and walking also mean entering a space that is socially perceived as dangerous. This perceived danger stems from a diminished sense of being able to react to the demands of the neighbourhood's environments. While the Municipality

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FIGURE 5 Gate installed at the entrance to one of the renovated courtyards in Congrega Apostolica's residential buildings in Porta Milano (photo by Marco Alioni, July 2025)

addresses the latter through infrastructural strategies meant to enhance 'perceived security', it treats the former with a one-size-fits-all approach, assuming that implementing cycling infrastructure or widening sidewalks alone will foster inclusion (Badiani, 2025). This reflects a broader regenerative logic in which improving the neighbourhood's material fabric is presumed to automatically generate social inclusion—without engaging with the structural inequalities that shape access to such infrastructure. In the case of bike lanes, this means disregarding the economic, physical, social and cultural barriers that prevent specific subjectivities—such as older adults—from cycling. Assuming that *all* residents can equally benefit from biking infrastructure risks reinforcing, rather than challenging, existing patterns of exclusion and unequal social participation—especially among LIOA with limited access to alternative mobility opportunities.

Another interesting dynamic concerns the renovation of residential buildings in Porta Milano owned by Congrega Apostolica. Congrega, acting as a private partner of the Municipality, has allocated substantial funds to the refurbishing of its properties, including the internal courtyards (see Figure 5).

Since the early twentieth century, Congrega's buildings have housed hundreds of working-class families, including several interviewees who have lived there for decades. Long-term residents recall the collective efforts of these families to make the buildings as welcoming as possible. As Elena (interviewee 4) remembers:

> When I arrived in 1957, all of us working-class families worked together to paint the facades and clean the courtyard. We pooled our money to buy paint and tools.

Similar accounts emerged in other interviews with long-term residents. Over the past three decades, the tenant population has changed significantly. While until the 1990s

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most residents were young working-class families employed in local factories, today the population is highly diverse. It includes both 'native' and 'migrant' families, LIOA living alone or as couples, people with disabilities and others supported by the charity's activities. In response to growing conflicts and residents' demands for greater security, Congrega installed gates on all its courtyards—previously open to the outside—and funded their renovation. How residents now engage with these shared spaces is deeply shaped by their sense of still belonging to a 'residential community' that is undergoing significant transformation. While Elena fondly recalls many moments of collective effort in the past, she notes that demographic changes have led her to withdraw from daily interactions—especially after a dispute with a 'foreign neighbour'. She explains:

> We used to be outside all the time; we were a close-knit community. I'm the only one left from that generation. I still keep in touch with some neighbours, but I have no interest in meeting the people living in these buildings!

Elena's withdrawal reflects a shift in her sense of belonging: she still feels attached to the community that once existed but views current residents as mere 'neighbours'.

While the gates have made the courtyard more welcoming for some, they also symbolize broader changes—both within the internal community and its relationship with the surrounding neighbourhood. As Maria (interviewee 5) recalls:

> The courtyard used to be open, and I always had to clean up empty bottles and cigarette butts left by outsiders. Now it's cleaner and nicer, and it's used by the residents.

However, the installation of gates has effectively redirected security concerns towards the current, diverse population. Indeed, as Concetta (interviewee 6) claims:

> We used to be like a big family; kids used to play in the courtyard; adults were there to chat. Now the police always show up because there's always something bad going on with all those foreigners living here!

While the positive memories of long-term residents focus on how different generations once shared the courtyard *together*, the current activities of children—mostly of foreign origin—have become a source of tensions. As Nando (interviewee 7)—another long-term resident—remarks:

> I've parked my car in the yard for 40 years, but now all these 'extra-EU'[12] kids play there. Honestly, I pay 10 euros a month for the parking fee, but I'm actually paying to have my car wrecked!

For others, the courtyard remains an important space for informal social interaction. Gianni (interviewee 8) states:

> There's always those ladies in the courtyard. Sometimes I stop by and chat with them. I like to spend time there; it makes me feel good.

The courtyard operates simultaneously as a space of encounter and a site of conflict, where social relations are continuously negotiated. Although the gates have restored

12 In the interview, Nando used the term 'extra-comunitario'. Originally a neutral adjective referring to people born outside the European Union, it has become a discriminatory term—though still widely used in media narratives—to refer to non-European communities.

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order to a space that had come to feel neglected and unsettling, the question of who is entitled to share the courtyard remains unresolved. For long-term residents, the 'erosion' of a once close-knit community has transformed the courtyard from a vibrant site for sociability into a space to avoid—no longer a place of belonging, but a reminder of how the neighbourhood's social fabric has changed—in ways that symbolically exclude those who once experienced it as an expression of a cohesive community. In practice, for some, it remains a familiar, accessible setting that supports interaction and reinforces belonging. For others, it evokes the (perceived) loss of a shared past, embodying the shifts that have redefined the neighbourhood. The choice to prioritize 'security' has done little to influence how the courtyard is used by residents: children still play there, their parents chat, other residents gather. Yet for some LIOA, the very presence of those who inhabit the courtyard undermines its potential to foster connection and, simultaneously, reinforces a sense of estrangement. In this shifting context, some LIOA find it increasingly difficult to (re)forge the kind of social ties they once experienced in their immediate surroundings. Indeed, these tensions reflect not only diverging uses of the courtyard but also contrasting temporalities of belonging. The nostalgia expressed by long-term residents for a 'close-knit' community reconstructs an image of cohesion rooted in social and cultural homogeneity—when living in the same buildings coincided with sharing similar class positions, habits and values. This imagined continuity between place, identity and moral order gives coherence to memory, yet it also conceals the conditions that once made such familiarity possible. The contradiction lies in the shifting ground of belonging: today, residents remain largely working-class, yet the erosion of the industrial milieu that once linked shared experiences of both home and workplace has dislodged the symbolic anchors of past collective identities. Within this altered landscape, the growing diversity of the tenant population hinders the emergence of new forms of cohesion—not because of difference itself, but because of the specific politics of memory that have taken hold. Here, nostalgia operates as a contradictory affect: by constructing a past world of collective belonging and mutual recognition, it simultaneously reactivates an imaginary of sameness against which the present is measured (Alioni, 2025). As a result, today's heterogeneity appears as *unsettlement*, and difference becomes a sign of *disruption* (Stolcke, 2021). Nostalgia thus works as a way of reordering the present—preserving the moral language of a vanishing sense of belonging while excluding those who cannot fit within its symbolic boundaries.

– Multiethnic coexistence

The rapid growth of migrant communities in the neighbourhood has increased their 'visibility'. In recent years, they have opened numerous businesses—butcheries, restaurants and shops—alongside several places of worship, including a Sikh temple, a mosque and non-Catholic churches.

Multiethnic coexistence plays a crucial role in shaping how interviewees perceive Via Milano's liveability. Two dynamics are particularly significant. First, the racialization of space (Merrill, 2018), whereby place-values are assigned to spaces based on the racialized group associated with them, generating tensions between differently racialized spaces (Mellino, 2012) and feelings of spatial alienation. Secondly, racialized practices: LIOA interpret how public spaces are used through racially structured lenses (Merrill, 2018), even when such uses reflect the exploitation of legally precarious subjectivities. As previous work on Via Milano shows (see Alioni, 2025), racial dynamics are not merely perceptual—they are embedded in the material-discursive structures of local regeneration. Urban redevelopment increasingly depends on stigmatizing representations of racialized groups, framing them as 'problems' to be contained or displaced. In this context, racialization becomes a core mechanism in the (re)production of urban hierarchies, legitimizing the material and political logics of gentrification (Paton, 2016).

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The case of the Sikh temple is particularly illustrative of the racialization of spaces. Brescia hosts one of the largest Sikh communities in Italy, whose members are largely employed in its agro-industrial sector. Located in a former warehouse just off the Via Milano, the temple serves as a major religious and cultural centre, drawing worshippers from across the region (Molli and Ambrosini, 2021). Sara (interviewee 9), who lives in a building near the temple, complains that many Sikh families have moved in. She describes cultural differences as an obstacle to peaceful cohabitation and frames these tensions in terms of the declining value of her apartment (Alioni, 2025):

> There are a lot of Sikhs because their temple is nearby, but they don't pay the common bills and they don't understand the concept of coexistence. That's just how it is. And with that mindset, *my* property loses value—but why should they care?

The temple stands near the city's monumental Catholic cemetery, directly facing its secondary entrance—the only one with adjacent parking. For practical reasons, many temple goers use these parking spaces, a seemingly mundane issue that nonetheless emerged repeatedly in interviews as a source of conflict. As Concetta (interviewee 6) put it:

> There are all these Indians who always take up the cemetery parking spots, but where's their respect for us? I always have to argue to park when I wish to leave a flower on my mum's grave! And I see so many other older people who have to walk far to get into the cemetery because *they* want to pray!

The shared use of space by communities tied to differently racialized spaces—either associated with *negatively* racialized sites (the temple) or *positively* racialized ones (the cemetery)—gives rise to conflicts rooted in 'spatial alienation', as members of the dominant group perceive the neighbourhood to being 'taken over' by racialized Others (Alioni, 2025). The physical proximity of these spaces becomes a site of tension where cultural differences are mobilized to draw symbolic boundaries (Stolcke, 2021). Within such narratives, racialized presence is framed as an *intrusion*, as Othered subjects are perceived to illegitimately inhabit spaces imagined as rightfully one's own. This perception undermines the sense of belonging that 'positively' racialized LIOA attach to places they regard as integral to 'their' community. A similar logic applies to the perceptions of local shops run by racialized entrepreneurs. Although regional data show that Brescia's neighbourhoods are experiencing 'commercial desertification' owing to growing suburban malls, many LIOA do not view the presence of small migrant-owned businesses in a favourable light. As Stefania (interviewee 10) explains:

> I don't go to *their* shops; they don't sell anything for me. I don't find anything useful or meaningful in those foreigners' shops.

This sentiment is echoed by Flora (interviewee 3), who says:

> Now, all the shops around here are 'theirs', lined up one after the other. There's nothing left for us anymore. Why would I even bother walking into those shops when there's nothing left for us?

However, this sentiment can be negotiated based on personal experiences. For instance, Fatima (interviewee 11) explains:

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> Supermarkets are too expensive, but here we have Egyptian, Pakistani and Indian shops—I always shop there. I go to the Pakistani butchers because they have affordable halal meat!

Unlike Stefania and Flora, who interpret the presence of shops run by ethnic communities through an oppositional 'us' vs. 'them' logic, Fatima sees the accessibility of affordable food and halal meat as a vital resource—one that enables her to meet her needs despite limited financial means. While other interviewees tend to lump all 'foreigners' into a single, undifferentiated category, Fatima distinguishes among different communities. In the quotation, she acknowledges the prominent role of the Pakistani community in the halal sector, recognizing its distinct contribution to the neighbourhood's life. Although all interviewees of foreign origin shared Fatima's appreciation, most LIOA who are long-term residents of Italian origin echoed narratives that consistently Othered—and conflated—the neighbourhood's highly diverse communities.

In terms of racialized practices, complaints often focused on the visible behaviours of different communities in public spaces, which many LIOA associate with feelings of insecurity, disorder and unease. One recurring theme is the perception of small groups of people 'waiting' along the Via Milano, especially in the early morning and late evening hours. As Nino (interviewee 12) explains:

> For me, the problem isn't that there are foreigners in the neighbourhood—it's that you often see them in large groups! They're always walking around the neighbourhood, especially in the morning and evening. They're everywhere and there are so many of them, all together—it's their numbers that scare me!

This quote clearly illustrates that the presence of 'groups' of racialized individuals in public spaces contributes to the drawing of symbolic boundaries between different groups. However, many of these gatherings consist of workers entangled in the exploitative system of caporalato—the illegal labour brokerage that underpins Italy's agro-industrial economy (Peragine, 2025). Ethnographic data show that each day, dozens of people wait at informal pickup points along the Via Milano to be collected by illegal brokers (called caporali), who shuttle them to agricultural worksites scattered across the province (Badiani *et al.*, 2021). These scenes, however, become focal points of racialization. Public spaces turn into sites where racialized bodies are perceived as threatening—interpretations that not only erase the exploitative conditions these subjects endure but also undermine potential forms of class solidarity (Alioni, 2025). In LIOA, who are themselves navigating precarious ageing and economic marginality, these encounters often generate unease. Racialized presence is not seen as a meaningful interaction, but rather as the omnipresent inevitability of encounter—an unavoidable and undesirable condition of coexistence in the same public space. Furthermore, this perception shapes everyday behaviours and practices. For instance, several interviewees reported avoiding the neighbourhood's bus lines because they associate them primarily with racialized users. As Flora (interviewee 3) put it:

> You find all sorts of people on the buses, certain types you'd better steer clear of. That's why I walk as much as possible—because otherwise I'd be bound to run into them, and I have no desire to deal with that!

Stefania (interviewee 10) shares a similar view:

> I don't take the bus that passes nearby because it's the one that travels through along the Via Milano, and it's always full of 'extra-EU' people who are rude and arrogant. And if I really have to take it, I always put on a mask—just like during Covid!

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Riccardo (interviewee 13) also notes that withdrawal can take on bodily forms, manifesting as a reluctance to move through the neighbourhood or come into physical proximity with those one might encounter:

> Sometimes, if you're out and you run into someone, you have to lower your eyes and pretend not to see them. Because if you accidentally make eye contact, they might lay hands on you—you never know how they'll react.

These accounts show how LIOA use their bodies to express distance and alienation from their racialized POA. Such embodied practices emerge through encounters with Other(ed) subjectivities woven into the fabric of everyday life. For Stefania, the face mask—'just like during Covid'—acts as a distancing device—a physical and social barrier that keeps the flow of bodies moving through the *periferia* at bay. It establishes a sociomaterial threshold of personal security.[13] This gesture of self-protection is not merely defensive; it materializes her precarious position within a transforming environment that deeply unsettles her.

For Riccardo, it is the act of looking away that performs a similar form of withdrawal—a gesture of 'preventive inattention',[14] a deliberate, almost scripted disengagement from the *periferia* as a way of constructing a personal sense of safety. Yet, as Flora's experience illustrates, these strategies come at a cost. They compel LIOA to adopt alternative practices that are not necessarily the most effective in meeting their needs. Flora prefers to walk as much as possible to avoid taking the bus. However, this choice is only viable under specific enabling conditions—such as having both the physical capacity to walk long distances and access to continuous, safe sidewalks (Bigonnesse and Chaudhury, 2022).

– Dispensa Alimentare

Dispensa Alimentare ('Food Distribution') is a grassroots solidarity initiative organized by AVM59, a left-wing collective based in Via Milano. Among various political practices, since 2020 AVM59 has been distributing food and essential goods to residents facing economic hardships. During Dispensa's operating hours, EMERGENCY[15] also offers assistance to those excluded from healthcare access. Such exclusion is particularly acute for racialized residents, including older adults. Dispensa enhances—albeit precariously—the capabilities of AIP among those situated at the intersection of multiple discriminations.

AVM59 distributes one hundred food parcels weekly. Recipients are largely low-income families of foreign origin, often those who have young children or care for older adults. Many experience severe health issues and struggle to access urgent care owing to rising costs, long waiting lists and bureaucratic barriers—outcomes of the aggressive privatization of Lombardy's healthcare system (Sasso, 2023). As there is no significant welfare programme dedicated to food provision,[16] initiatives such as Dispensa fill critical gaps. What makes the collective and its initiatives distinctive is the social infrastructure it generates. AVM59 includes both political activists from the neighbourhood and individuals who approached Dispensa for support and then became active

13 We acknowledge that this interpretation has been inspired by valuable conversations with Professor Eva Giloi of Rutgers University, Newark, and her outstanding research project 'Newark Rhythms', available at https://newarkrhythms.org/ (accessed 16 February 2026).

14 The reference is to the sociological concept of 'civil inattention', introduced by Erving Goffman in his 1963 book *Behavior in Public Places*.

15 EMERGENCY is a well-known international NGO founded by the Italian humanitarian aid worker Gino Strada.

16 At the national level, there is a scheme that provides a one-time payment of EUR 500 to households with an annual income below EUR 15,000 that do not receive other public benefits (i.e. an unemployment subsidy). The measure is specifically intended to support the purchase of food and basic household goods. Other minor forms of assistance are available for families within the same income bracket, but these initiatives are not consistently implemented across the entire country, and the amounts provided are very limited (around EUR 40 per month).

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participants—fuelling inter-ethnic, class-based mutualism. While the group's activism is focused exclusively on Via Milano, it is widely recognized as a politically innovative force in Brescia, particularly for its consistent efforts to cultivate intergenerational and inter-ethnic practices of community making and rights claiming in a stigmatized and marginalized neighbourhood.

Various interviewees indicated that Dispensa operates as a vital social infrastructure that allows them to endure the economic precarity they face—a 'radical lifeline' (Boano and Bianchetti, 2022) sustaining life amid conditions of profound marginalization. As Natalia (interviewee 14) explains:

> I have to come [to Dispensa] every time I can. I have serious difficulty walking and can't get a hospital appointment, which means I can't get a job. I need money because my husband is disabled and unable to work. We have to save as much as possible, and here I can get free food that allows us to make it.

In Natalia's case, Dispensa provides access to food she would otherwise be unable to afford. Her condition of extreme poverty is directly linked to her and her husband's inability to work owing to serious health issues that make them unfit for employment. Natalia, who suffers from severe leg pain and is barely able to walk, reaches Dispensa and other places with great difficulty. She relies on walls, trash bins and any available street furniture for support. Yet, as she explains:

> My son is fighting back home, and my daughter lives as a refugee in Sweden. My husband and I are alone. Since I can walk a little, I come here to get what we need. It's the only thing I can do.

The absence of immediate social ties forces the couple to rely on Dispensa as a vital infrastructure. However, this reliance is shaped by broader conditions of precarity, both socioeconomic and health-related, that are rooted in systemic dynamics. Chief among these is the inability to establish stable, reliable access to public healthcare services. While AVM59's activism offers partial relief, the couple's economic hardship is a direct consequence of extreme precarity driven by the privatization of welfare and the lack of institutional support.

Another theme that emerged from our interviews concerns how engaging with Dispensa offers support beyond immediate food provision. Octavio (interviewee 15), a man of Latin American origin who has lived in Italy for decades, is one such case. His son lives in Cuba, the family's country of origin, and his stepdaughter resides in Brescia. Octavio must walk with a wheeled oxygen tank. He receives a minimal social pension and was assigned to public housing in Fiumicello owing to his medical conditions. His stepdaughter later enrolled him in a para-municipal service that provides weekly assistance with household tasks. On this, Octavio reflects:

> Even though it's difficult for me, I come to pick up my parcel on my own. I walk slowly, but I can still manage somehow. My daughter already helps me with so many things, so I prefer to do this by myself.

While Octavio appreciates his stepdaughter's care, he prefers to manage food-related needs on his own. He explains that Dispensa helps 'take some weight off [his] step-daughter's shoulders', easing her responsibilities and giving him a sense of comfort and relative independence despite his economic precarity and fragile health. In this way, Dispensa supports a range of needs, allowing him to maintain a degree of autonomy despite his difficulties in moving around. Additionally, his regular presence at Dispensa helps sustain connections with AVM59 that:

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> helped me with issues in my building, as utilities are very expensive, and sometimes unaffordable, which puts me at risk of losing electricity or running water.

The need to collect his parcel intersects with broader necessities tied to his economic precarity, including housing instability and energy insecurity—conditions worsened by rising energy costs in Italy. Octavio's relationships with the activists of AVM59 allow him to cultivate a social infrastructure that not only addresses his immediate needs but also helps build solidaristic alliances capable of mitigating the most acute effects of his economic precarity and deteriorating health.

A third dynamic concerns how Dispensa helps mitigate the effects of precarity directly linked to—and exacerbated by—the restrictive Italian migration policies. Najla's case illustrates this clearly. Najla (interviewee 16) lives with her husband and their daughter, who attends evening school but is unemployed. Her other two children reside between France and Tunisia. A few years ago, her husband suffered a serious work-related accident that left him with limited mobility, yet he received no compensation. Then Najla was diagnosed with a serious disease, which causes her chronic pain. Legally, her husband has been naturalized, while Najla holds a residence permit. To qualify for a small social pension—which would supplement her husband's minimal disability subsidy—she needs documents from the Tunisian government to prove her eligibility. However, those documents must be collected in person in Tunisia, and she cannot afford the costs:

> The only thing I could do would be going to Tunisia and getting those documents—only then could I receive the pension in Italy. But I simply can't afford the trip.

Dispensa allows Najla to navigate the severe constraints resulting from her exclusion from welfare benefits. These limitations stem directly from restrictive Italian regulations, which deny her access to subsidies that—like her husband—she would be entitled to if she held Italian citizenship. As a non-citizen holding a residence permit, Najla must provide additional documentation to prove her socioeconomic deprivation. Yet she and her husband face escalating existential precarity:

> We've reached the point where we just can't afford utilities anymore. On top of that, they raised our rent again—they want 500 euros a month now, which is basically my husband's entire pension.

These three dynamics show how Dispensa fosters neighbourhood practices that, though themselves precarious, actively disrupt the forces driving precarization—extreme deprivation, racialization, welfare privatization and social fragmentation. In doing so, Dispensa reconfigures food distribution as a practice of reclaiming and re-socializing urban life through community making, class solidarity and inter-ethnic alliances. From this perspective, the dynamics mobilized through Dispensa directly challenge the exclusionary logics reinforced by dominant narratives of 'urban security' and regeneration of peripheral areas (Alioni, 2025). Dispensa thus emerges as a vital social infrastructure—subverting, albeit at an intimate and microscopic scale—normative definitions of community and participation embedded in urban redevelopment agendas. Its significance lies precisely in its divergence from those norms: it operates as a radical lifeline—an inclusive site and practice of mutual aid that resists the diverse forms of exclusion facilitated by dominant policies and everyday social relations alike.

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Conclusions

In this article we explored how the intersection of urban transformation and social marginalization precarizes AIP practices among LIOA in Via Milano. As the neighbourhood continues to undergo seemingly uncontrollable change, LIOA increasingly face conditions that destabilize their capacity to live in their POA while sustaining meaningful forms of social participation. What emerges is a form of layered precarity, where the capability to AIP is undermined by material constraints but also by symbolic, relational and political dynamics that are deeply embedded in place. At the heart of this process lies a powerful neighbourhood stigma—a socially and institutionally reproduced narrative of decay and deprivation that articulates across economic and racialized lines. Stigma acts as a structuring force, legitimizing forms of exclusion and justifying interventions that often disregard, and at times actively marginalize, long-standing residents (Alioni, 2025). Through the lenses of 'decorum', security and regeneration, older adults become subject to symbolic displacement via the erosion of physical, symbolic and relational anchors that enable them to stay put. What emerges is that Via Milano is stigmatized from the outside, but this stigma is also materially and discursively reproduced in ways that profoundly reshape older adults' relations with their POA. This interplay—between the capability to *inhabit* urban space and the normative frameworks defining whose presence is legitimate—produces precarious forms of AIP. It is at this intersection that the spatial, symbolic and relational conditions for AIP are most acutely made precarious.

Our findings demonstrate that AIP is necessarily a fragile and dynamic process, contingent on multiple and intersecting factors: the material organization of urban space; the symbolic meanings attached to place; the social infrastructures that sustain relational life. When these dimensions are disrupted, altered or alienated, AIP becomes not a stable right but a contested achievement, dependent on the capability of LIOA to mobilize enough resources to adapt to deep urban transformations. Yet, as Dispensa illustrates, grassroots responses can carve out counterspaces of care and community making. These alternative infrastructures offer not only material relief but also the possibility for a different politics of ageing—one that recognizes and values the multiple challenges that LIOA face owing to systemic conditions of marginalization, isolation and discrimination.

Ultimately, in this article we challenge unproblematized accounts of AIP by revealing how neoliberal regeneration and racialized stigmatization produce fragile and exclusionary environments for older adults, especially those with limited means. In Via Milano, the ability of LIOA to age-in-place is less a matter of empowered choice than of navigating constrained existential conditions under progressive precarization. The central tension is no longer simply about remaining in place while ageing, but about retaining the capability to participate in that place meaningfully—a capacity increasingly eroded by the effects of logics, narratives and representations mobilized by the very forces claiming to improve urban life.

Data availability statement

Research data are not shared.

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