Chapter 6
Planning Strategies, Vulnerabilities, and the Right of Older Adults to Self-Determination: Reflections from Brescia (Northern Italy)

Marco Alioni and Barbara Badiani

Abstract The chapter develops critical reflections on the relationships between urban planning strategies, urban regeneration, and the vulnerabilities of older adults living in Brescia, a mid-sized northern Italian city. Specifically, it focuses on the dynamics through which local planning logics either support or undermine the right of older adults to autonomously participate in the life of the city. It examines how the definitions of "vulnerable subject" emerging from key planning tools (in) directly create conditions that can be described as "planning-induced dependency" and heightened vulnerability for marginalized residents, including older adults. Drawing on feminist debates in sociology, planning theory, and political philosophy, the chapter critically analyzes urban policies implemented in the city over the past two decades and their effects on ensuring—or hindering—the right of older adults to live dignified and self-determined lives. It also challenges hegemonic definitions of "independence" and "vulnerability" that emerge from the plans and documents orienting local urban governance. By developing critical discussions around the "right to self-determination," the chapter introduces a developing interpretative framework aimed at comprehensively understanding the contradictions and effects of specific planning logics on the capabilities for self-determination of radically plural subjectivities living in the contemporary city.

Keywords Urban aging · Urban regeneration · Right to the city · Vulnerability · Socio-spatial justice

M. Alioni (✉) · B. Badiani
Dipartimento di Ingegneria Civile, Architettura, Territorio, Ambiente e Matematica (DICATAM), University of Brescia, Brescia, Italy
e-mail: marco.alioni@unibs.it

B. Badiani
e-mail: barbara.badiani@unibs.it

© The Author(s) 2026

M. Džunić et al. (eds.), *Advancing Urban and Local Governance in Western and Transition Europe*, Local and Urban Governance,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-04265-1_6

6.1 Introduction

Together with international migration, structural aging has become one of the most salient demographic features of Western urbanized societies (Pani-Harrenan et al. 2021). Since the late 1990s, the aspiration to render cities more *age-friendly* has become a recurring theme in international policy-making and urban planning (WHO 2007; Joy 2020; European Commission 2023; Buffel and Phillipson 2024). Several factors underpin this trend, including policymakers' increased awareness of the necessity to enhance "active participation" (Pani-Harreman et al., 2021) and "active aging" (Cappellato et al. 2021) of older adults residing in urban areas (Buffel and Phillipson 2024). There is also a renewed emphasis on the role of material and socio-political environments in supporting older adults' well-being (Joy 2018). This convergence of academic research, planning models, and political initiatives underscores a dual condition inherent in the relationships between aging and urbanization (Gilroy 2021). On one hand, aging poses significant socioeconomic challenges in the context of neoliberal austerity and regeneration-led gentrification (Mackenzie et al. 2013; Paton 2016; Greenfield and Buffell 2022). On the other, the "urban scale" represents the most appropriate arena to develop nuanced understandings of structural aging (van Hoof and Marston 2021; Cappellato et al. 2021; Buffel and Phillipson 2024). A central concern in critical gerontology revolves around how policy-making and planning practices materialize "aging subjects" in relation to transforming environments (Hochstenbach and Boterman 2018).

This contribution is based on an on-going research project (*INDEPENDENT-AGE*), involving four different Italian universities (Universities of Ferrara, Brescia, Salerno, and Salento). The research is financed by the Italian government (PRIN-PNRR funds) for a total duration of 2 years (2023–2025).[1] INDEPENDENT-AGE is a research project aimed at promoting social inclusion and the capability of older adults to lead independent and self-determined lives. This is framed as a crucial issue of justice (Giolo et al. 2021), arising from the gradual collapse of European welfare systems and the rise of neoliberal austerity (Hemerijck and Matsaganis 2024). The project involves four research units composed of legal and political philosophers, sociologists, and planners. Together, they examine, from different yet integrated perspectives, the conditions that support the rights to "independent living" and aging in place (Buffel and Phillipson 2024), ensuring the capability to live a dignified life (Nussbaum 2007) while avoiding processes of re-institutionalization (Tarantino 2024).

This contribution builds on multidisciplinary reflections on these topics, specifically drawing from the fields of urban planning and critical urban sociology. Currently (Fall 2024), the analysis is in its operational stages, and this chapter discusses several key issues that have emerged during the first nine months of field research. This chapter addresses the following questions: in the concrete reality of daily life in rapidly changing urban areas of Brescia, what practices do older adults develop

[1] Funded by European Union-Next Generation EU, Mission 4 Component C2 Investment 1.1, CUP P20228MERB.

to exercise self-determination? What factors support or undermine their ability to do so? It examines how local planning practices, logics, and instruments shape the subjectivity of "older adults" in a specific context. Additionally, it investigates the effects of these processes of definition and categorization on the ability of older adults to lead independent lives. In other words, the chapter focuses on the complex conditions that either enhance or hinder the capability of older adults to exercise autonomy and self-determination from multiple perspectives. The case study is a neighborhood undergoing a large-scale urban regeneration process in Brescia, a mid-sized city in Northern Italy. Ethnographic research is argued to provide a lens for observing the interplay of vulnerability, autonomy, induced dependency, and interdependence affecting older adults at a micro-scale. These dynamics are then connected to the broader processes of urban transformation shaped by the city administration's political trajectory over the past two decades.

The contribution examines how plans and projects implemented by local authorities reflect their efforts to address the needs of older adults, as well as the actual conditions that enable older adults to cultivate their own practices of self-determination. For this reason, the chapter examines three major planning instruments implemented in Brescia: the Masterplan (*PGT*, adopted in 2016), the Sustainable Urban Mobility Plan (*PUMS*, Comune di Brescia - CdB 2018), and the urban regeneration project initiated in 2017, which targets three large, predominantly working-class, and ethnically diverse neighborhoods in the city. The chapter integrates the analysis of these documents with insights from interviews conducted with local decision-makers, public officials, and managers from various municipal departments, as well as a member of the Neighborhood Council of Fiumicello. Other interviews included a manager from the Regional Agency of Public Housing (*ALER*) and representatives from *Congrega Apostolica*—a prominent Catholic charity—both of which oversee significant numbers of public or "social" housing units within the studied area. Findings from the policy analysis and interviews relevant to the discussed issues will be presented in Sect. 6.3. In addition, by presenting a preliminary analysis of interviews conducted with people aged 65 or more residing in the neighborhood, we propose a critical framework for examining the entrenched conditions of "planning-induced dependency" and "vulnerability" (in)directly perpetuated by hegemonic narratives of older adults' "independence," along with their materialized socio-spatial impacts in the considered context. It argues that emphasizing "self-determination" and "interdependency" provides a valuable perspective for identifying the factors that either support or hinder older adults in autonomously aging in place, thereby helping to prevent processes of "forced institutionalization" (Tarantino 2024). Specifically, the contribution highlights the roles of localities, mobilities, and personal social networks in fostering practices of self-recognition, identity-making, and access to vital resources—conditions that consistently reinforce the capability for self-determination (Gardner 2011; Butler 2016; Nussbaum 2007; Buffel and Phillipson 2024). This contribution presents critical reflections emerging from research activities conducted by the University of Brescia's Research Unit during the first nine months of fieldwork. The aim is to verify—as Giolo (2018) suggests—whether the category of "vulnerable subject" informed by the neoliberal vision underpinning

planning decisions of local authorities refers exclusively to individuals perceived as "ontologically weak." As discussed below, this vision deeply permeates the planning tools adopted by Municipality, and it clearly emerged from the in-depth interviews conducted with institutional actors. However, those assumptions are seen as problematic, as they risk shaping urban environments that consistently perpetuate conditions of exclusion for older adults rather than addressing them. Additionally, through ethnographic analysis, the chapter preliminarily identifies various factors that shape older adults' decisions about how, where, and with whom to live, as well as the duration for which they believe such choices can reasonably be maintained. In other words, it discusses the degree to which self-determination is realistically attainable in a city inherently characterized by a highly hierarchical urban system (Alioni 2024).

The chapter is organized as follows. The next section offers a review of the literature related to the main themes under investigation. This is followed by an overview of the research design and the case study, with particular attention to the elements most relevant to the analysis. We then introduce the theoretical framework developed through our research projects, which serves as the basis for discussing the findings, illustrated by two specific cases. The final section reflects on the research questions guiding the chapter, in light of the insights that emerge from the analysis.

6.2 Literature Review

Within long-standing planning and policy-making practices in Italy and Western Europe, the relationships between various experiences of age, aging, and urban environments are framed through categories such as "vulnerability," "dependency," "frailty," and "weakness" (Cappellato et al. 2021; Buffel and Phillipson 2024). Widespread planning practices have constructed these categories as "ontological features" of specific subjectivities, differentiating them from the "paradigmatic subject" of an autonomous and rational individual actor (Mackenzie et al. 2013; Giolo et al. 2018; Fineman 2020)—that is, what John Rawls defined as "free, equal, and independent" social contractors (Rawls 1980; Nussbaum 2007). However, liberal conceptualizations of "vulnerability" largely fail to recognize both the intrinsic *relational*, *processual*, and *contextual* essence of urban aging (Buffel et al. 2024), as well as the more "territorialized" dimensions of aging, that is, recognizing that urban environments through which human life unfolds are "dynamic, symbolic, temporal, and cultural constructs" (Yeh 2022, 103). Policy-making and planning are often featured by normative understandings of the multi-dimensional relationships between built environments with individual and collective well-being (Mouratidis 2020; Joy 2020; Cappellato et al. 2021). This is especially impactful for "non-paradigmatic subjectivities," namely, subjects that are intensely exposed to conditions of "vulnerability" and "dependency" (Morondo 2018), such as older adults, children, or people with

disabilities (Bernardini 2018; Giolo 2021). However, "vulnerability" can be generally defined as the exposure to either physical or psychological harm, injury, violence, or death (Re 2018).

Feminist debates on these issues revolve around meanings, features, and causes of "vulnerability" (Butler 2009; Mackenzie et al. 2013; Casalini 2018; Fineman 2020), "dependency" (Kittay 2018; Re 2018; Kern 2020), and the specific consequences of these conditions in terms of justice, social obligations, and capabilities in urban contexts (Nussbaum 2007; Mackenzie et al. 2013; Buffel and Phillipson 2024). Butler argues that "vulnerability" is an ontological feature of humanness and corporalities (Butler 2009). Human life is inherently "precarious" and, consequently, individual and collective "flourishing" relies on social, political, economic, and environmental conditions of interdependence. *Precariousness* and *precarity* are constitutive conditions of the human experience (Butler 2009, 31). On one hand, describing a life as *precarious* entails recognizing the *condition of precariousness* as a fundamental aspect of one's experience. On the other, *precarity* denotes the political circumstances wherein specific populations endure the breakdown of social and economic networks of support resulting in disparate vulnerability to harm or violence. While *precariousness* is an ontological feature of humanness, *precarity* is the outcome of political processes of "differential distribution of exposure and dependency" (Butler 2009, 23), where urban planning, regeneration, and gentrification play a central role in the neoliberal West (Buffel and Phillipson 2024).

Urban governance is crucial for ensuring high quality of life and protecting older adults—intended as "exposed" and "pathogenically" vulnerable subjects (Mackenzie et al. 2013)—although internally diversified and featured in terms of class, race, gender, and other structures of inequality. Nevertheless, the intense exposure to precarity widely experienced by older adults should coincide neither with "abnormality" (Morondo 2018) nor with their "victimization" (Buffel and Phillipson 2019). Rather, it entails acknowledging that older adults are *systematically dependent* on the characteristics of their environments, given the specific "time-spaces" that vulnerable subjectivities develop through the later stages of life-courses (Branningan 2021).

6.3 Methodology

Brescia is a historically industrial city with 200,000 residents in Lombardy. Around a quarter of the population (24.8%, or 50,000 individuals) is aged 65 or more. Additionally, it shows one among the highest share of "foreigners" in the total population in the country (19.2%, or 40,000 people, in 2023). Although Brescia is a mid-sized city, needs and attitudes proliferate and are highly divergent—when not in conflict (Alioni 2023). This condition seems particularly acute in the neighborhoods located to the West of the historic center (Fig. 6.1), traditionally inhabited by the industrial working-class. Today, these areas are also home to a significant migrant population. Indeed, in the considered neighborhoods the share of residents without Italian citizenship oscillates between 30–35%—the Municipality does not collect data on the

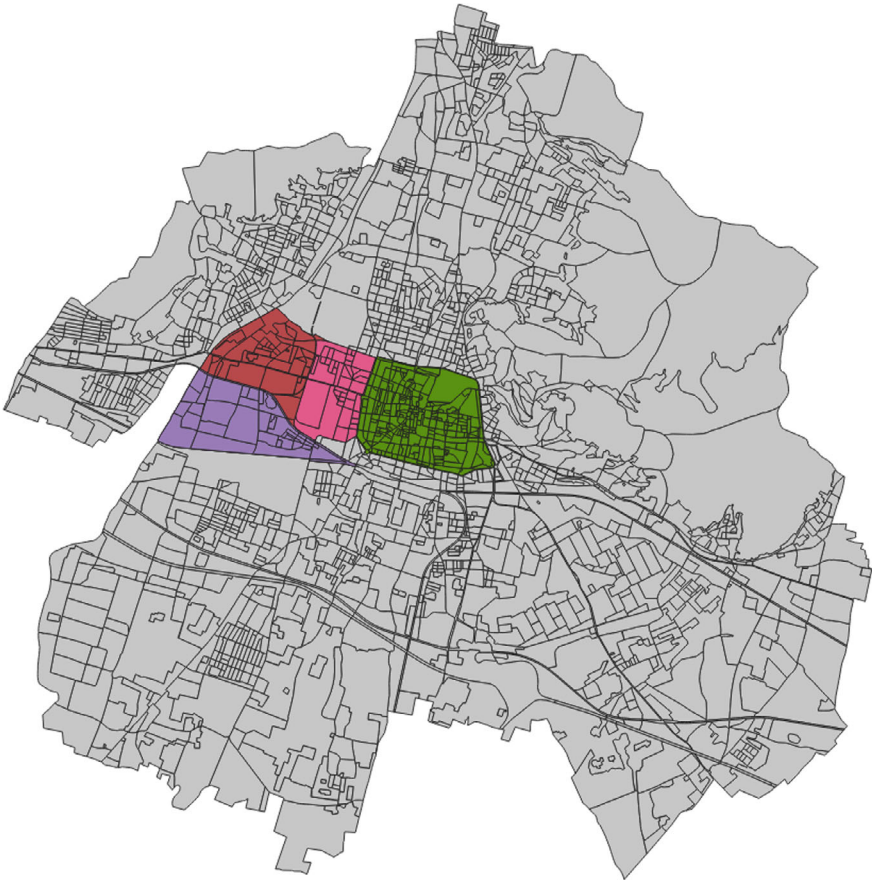

Fig. 6.1 Map of the neighborhood considered in the text. The pink area represents Porta Milano, the red area Fiumicello, and the purple area Primo Maggio. The green area indicates the historic center. Authors' elaboration of the 2021 Census Tract Map provided by the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT), freely available for download at this link: https://www.istat.it/notizia/basi-territoriali-e-variabili-censuarie/

rates of naturalization. While considering the share of residents aged 65 or more on the total population across the city's areas, those neighborhoods show shares that are lower than the city's average (24,7%)—Fiumicello 18,6%, Primo Maggio 20,5%, Porta Milano 22.9%. However, this condition is directly connected to both the relatively young age of "foreign residents",[2] as well as to the rapid transformations involving the area due to the regenerative interventions carried out by the Municipality (Figs. 6.2 and 6.3).

[2] At the city level, there are slightly more than 4,000 residents aged 54 or more who are not Italian citizens.

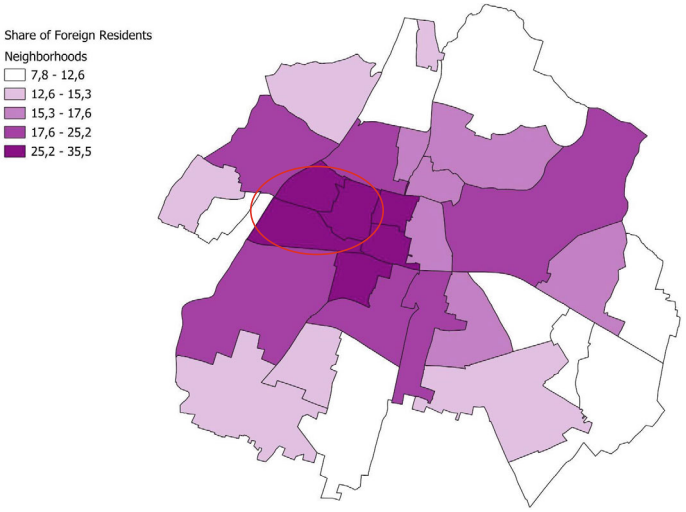

Fig. 6.2 Share of "foreign" residents in the population of each neighborhood Authors' elaboration on data collected by the Municipality of Brescia—December 31, 2023

Fig. 6.3 Share of residents aged 65 or more by neighborhood Authors' elaboration on data collected by the Municipality of Brescia—December 31, 2023

Since 2018, these neighborhoods have been the target of an urban regeneration project called *Oltre La Strada* (OLS)—which translates to "*Beyond the Street.*" OLS involves Via Milano, a major artery, and three districts located to its Northwest, East, and South, respectively, Fiumicello, Porta Milano, and Primo Maggio. The financial capacity of the partnership that funded OLS—comprising the national government,

the Municipality, private investors, and non-profit organizations—makes the scale of this project "exceptional" compared to many other planning initiatives carried out by the administration. Nevertheless, OLS is coherently integrated to the political agenda guiding the city's development from the early 1990s to the present (Alioni 2021).

The planning strategies outlined in the Masterplan are grounded in a comprehensive municipal study exploring the city's main demographic dynamics. These are considered as the "reference framework" to plan a city in order to address the needs of those either living and/or working in Brescia. The resident population is quantitatively analyzed and categorized by age group, citizenship status (defined as either *Italian citizen* or *foreign national*), gender, and neighborhood distribution.

In this context, the Municipality acknowledges that Brescia has faced a significant challenge over the past three decades due to the combined and interconnected pressures of two main dynamics. On one hand, it is experiencing the effects of a shrinking active resident population, driven by concurrent processes of economic restructuring in a largely deindustrialized city and major shifts in national and continental economic conjuncture. On the other hand, structural aging and negative demographic trends are posing serious challenges in the provision of essential welfare services at the city level, a process further exacerbated by the effects of austerity and budget cuts on the National Health Service (SSN) and on social services aimed at alleviating marginalization, isolation, and "systemic dependency" (Tarantino 2024). According to the Municipality, both dynamics are causally linked to Brescia's declining appeal and the deteriorating quality of urban life, particularly in its peripheral areas.

In the PGT, *attractiveness* and *urban quality* are the cornerstones of the vision of the local administration. On one hand, the aim is to attract to Brescia young and dynamic citizens by offering them opportunities to establish creative and economically significant activities. On the other, the focus is on a "user-base made up of […] vulnerable groups: the elderly, young but precarious workers, immigrants, divorced individuals struggling to find stable living conditions, people with disabilities or chronic illness, and those who suddenly and unexpectedly find themselves in situations of poverty" (CdB 2016, 13–14), for whom *social housing* units and projects to improve access to crucial services are planned (CdB 2018). This is an attempt to include paradigmatic *and* non-paradigmatic subjects through a politics of (unproblematized) "social mixing" (Annunziata et al. 2021). Additionally, the Municipality highlights that material interventions to address these issues should focus on neighborhoods where vulnerable groups concentrate the most, especially in those areas where migrant residents represent conspicuous shares of the population (CdB 2016).

The PUMS too explicitly highlights the need to pay attention to vulnerable subjects' needs in mobility planning. Older adults are explicitly mentioned while considering risks associated with private motorized mobility, and when evaluating modal choices, as they systematically prefer cars over public transport or bicycles due to various reasons. Nevertheless, in the PUMS, the section analyzing mobility demand in Brescia only focuses on "systematic commuting" of students and workers, considered as the dominant type of trips undertaken through the city. In other words, the operations of planning investments toward making transportation more "efficient" are only informed by analysis of the needs of *only* those who can be defined

as *paradigmatic users,* that is, people who travel across Brescia for "productive" reasons, and *only* for those reasons. In this regard, urban and mobility planning strategies in Brescia reveal a dichotomous, or more precisely *dichotomizing*, logic when it comes to the specific subjectivities constructed through these plans.

By analyzing the *universalizing* concept of urban accessibility emerging from both the PGT and the PUMS, older adults are conceptually constructed as simultaneously "strong" and "weak" users. In the former case, older adults are generally considered as "strong" due to the growth of their demographic weight on the resident population. As some municipal managers noted in interviews, their "strength" is related to the fact that, as a significant share of "customers" of public urban services, their practices (in)directly influence decision-making, sometimes forcing public officials to make "inefficient" choices from an economic standpoint. For instance, many older adults living in neighborhoods served by the subway continue to use "traditional" bus lines that run parallel to the city's core transit system. Indeed, Alioni (2024) argues that this preference may stem from the broader spatial coverage of a flexible bus system, especially in the sections of those neighborhoods located farther from the subway line.

The Municipality of Brescia is attempting to balance the need for efficient management of the urban system with efforts to make it as accessible as possible to those typically excluded from planning processes (Tiboni et al. 2018). However, governing Brescia also presents several challenges. Notably, the urban system is organized around key "functions" (two major hospitals, two university campuses, and the financial district, among others) concentrated along the "strong axis" of the subway line, inaugurated in 2013 and running from North to Southeast. At the moment, there are various efforts to expand the system's spatial accessibility through the reorganization of bus services to make them converge onto the subway line (Alioni 2024). However, the Municipality is constrained by the need to maintain a mobility network that is entirely subordinated to the economic logic of its main infrastructure, in order to avoid severe public debt (CdB 2018). This material, economic, and socio-spatial rigidity highlights that the Municipality's inability to fully reconcile economic efficiency with accessibility remains a core issue. As a result, the approaches that permeate many recent initiatives suggests that accessibility, sustainability, and urban quality are increasingly becoming empty concepts, filled with self-evident definitions that fail to capture the various forms of exclusion, dependency, and marginalization produced—whether directly or indirectly—by the logics orienting Brescia's urban planning (Alioni 2023).

In terms of older adults' "weakness", this condition is structured across three dimensions. First, they are "general weak users" when they move around the city by any non-motorized means. According to the National Traffic Code, any individual walking or cycling on the street is to be considered as a "weak road user." This "universalized" understanding of "weakness" has been "directly incorporated" into Brescia's PUMS, as argued by a manager of the local Mobility Department. Second, older adults are generally seen as having reduced capabilities for autonomous movement and self-determination—being directly associated with "people with disabilities" in the Masterplan and PUMS. Therefore, they are expected to rely on motorized

means more systematically than other groups. Third, and consequently, older adults are a sort of "nuance" of a "generic weak user" for whom "universalized" planning strategies are designed in the city, aimed at enabling access to the urban system for *any* subject. However, this approach flattens any differences not only among subjectivities in terms of age and/or (dis)ability, but also obscures other social (economic status, gender, ethnicity, legal status) and spatial (socioeconomic segregation and different geographic accessibility to transit modes) differentiations. Additionally, the conception of "active mobility" as inherently "sustainable" and therefore immediately "universal" is a particularly emblematic case of these dynamics (see Alioni 2023). Indeed, interventions designed to guarantee immediate accessibility to the urban system are primarily *architectural*, that is, through interventions almost exclusively focused on identifying and removing architectural barriers. However, while necessary, these measures prove inadequate in addressing issues of (in)accessibility and exclusion that arise along the aforementioned conditions of socio-spatial inequality featuring the contemporary city, which extend well beyond issues of physical access to urban opportunities and services as well.

In the specific case of OLS, significant emphasis is placed on the architectural quality of the interventions, aiming to catalyze forms of redevelopment and regeneration. However, technical and design solutions developed by the Municipality to achieve these objectives are not politically neutral (Alioni 2023). For example, the regeneration project[3] considers as crucial the redefinition of the roadway by creating bike lanes and wide sidewalks in Via Milano. The logic is that a safer space for biking and walking would create an environment conducive to interaction and socialization. However, as various interviews have revealed (Alioni 2023), cycling and walking along Via Milano remain problematic. This is primarily because the architectural solutions implemented by the Municipality have reinforced the perception of the neighborhood as a low-quality urban area, if not outright dangerous. On one hand, wider and clearly designated sidewalks and bike lanes meet safety criteria for the "vulnerable user" identified by the PUMS. On the other hand, the physical features of the new infrastructure have intensified conflicts between pedestrians, cyclists, drivers, and e-scooter users (Alioni 2023). Our interviews reveal that these conflicts have prompted many older adults to opt more convoluted yet safer alternative routes. Furthermore, in rapidly transforming areas like these neighborhoods, the strategies needed to comprehensively address the complex needs of older adults are in conflict with the Municipality's plans to attract a (still imagined) younger and more dynamic 'new resident' to the area. Indeed, architecturally impressive and financially expensive "solutions" to concentrated marginalization—such as the Borsoni Theater and a reading room, both recently built on Via Milano—are systematically favored over consistent investments in social services.[4]

[3] https://www.comune.brescia.it/aree-tematiche/urban-center/oltre-la-strada.

[4] As evidence of this dynamic, together with the national government and private stakeholders, the Municipality invested €45 M for the regeneration of via Milano and surrounding neighborhoods. Among those funds, only €2 M were allocated to cover the costs of sociocultural activities with actual residents, and only for the period 2018-2021.

6.4 Results

Between June and August 2024, the first twelve interviews were conducted with residents aged 65 or more from the neighborhoods targeted by OLS. Among the interviewees, only two live in apartments they own, while the others reside in apartments owned by Congrega. As of September 2024, we managed to involve only one individual with a migrant background. Nevertheless, additional interviews with residents of ALER's apartments, homeowners, and renters are currently being arranged (Table 6.1).

Within our preliminary sample, homeowners had broader economic opportunities compared to those living in Congrega's. The latter, while not "poor" or "indigent," are surely members of the working-class, affected by the increase in the cost of living and the lack of adjustment of incomes afflicting Italy since the Great Recession (Paiella 2023).

Semi-structured interviews with the residents explore daily practices, urban conditions, and social relationships that the literature of critical gerontology has identified as potential causes of "dependency" on social networks and/or institutions, or threats to "self-determination" (Cappellato et al. 2021; Buffel and Phillipson 2024). These include socioeconomic statuses; physical and/or mental health; personal skills; self-perceived vulnerability; perceived personal and social safety in their daily environments; socio-spatial access to mobility opportunities; personal capacities to move around the city; residing in gentrifying neighborhoods. Interviews contribute to identify what we define as *time-spaces of urban self-determination.* The term defines the social, economic, physical, environmental, political, and personal features that regulate modes and practices of daily life for "vulnerable" individuals, which are

Table 6.1 List of the interviewees updated at September 2024, including age, gender, neighborhood of residence, citizenship, and their ownership status regarding the apartment they live in (owner, renter, social housing, public housing)

	Code	Age	Gender	Neighborhood	Citizenship(s)	Owner/Renter/SH/PH
C. C	#1	73	F	Porta Milano	Italian	S.H
N. C	#2	74	M	Porta Milano	Italian	S.H
M. N	#3	71	M	Porta Milano	Italian	Owner
S. N	#4	69	F	Porta Milano	Italian	Owner
E. F	#5	87	F	Porta Milano	Italian	S.H
F. T	#6	73	F	Porta Milano	Italian	S.H
G. C	#7	73	F	Porta Milano	Italian	S.H
R. M	#8	75	M	Porta Milano	Italian	S.H
C. M	#9	71	F	Porta Milano	Italian	S.H
S. V	#10	78	F	Porta Milano	Italian	S.H
M. R	#11	70	F	Porta Milano	Italian	S.H
G. U	#12	66	M	Porta Milano	Italian	S.H

socio-spatially structured through self-determined choices but mediated by variegated conditions of "pathogenic" (McKenzie et al. 2013) and "planning-induced" dependency. In simpler words, these time-spaces are shaped by both the daily practices of older adults within the material and socioeconomic context of the city, as well as variegated conditions that foster the development of their capabilities of self-determination. Consistent with this conceptualization, the issues explored through our interviews pertain to topics such as the presence of architectural barriers, perceived safety when using infrastructures like bike lanes, sidewalks, and roads, the possibility of residing in affordable housing, access to territorial (e.g., hospitals) and digital services, the availability of affordable supermarkets or other retail facilities, the adequacy and reach of the public transport system, among several others. Additionally, interviews investigated these issues through six *urban scales*: the *home*, the *building*, the *block*, the *neighborhood*, the *city*, and the *digital space*. The latter is intended as a *spatial mediator* (i.e., the digital delivery of medical prescriptions) as well as a *spatial sphere on its own* (in the case of widely digitized services, such as online banking).

6.5 Discussion

To better qualify the *time-spaces of self-determination* developed by different individuals, we created a chart outlining both the intensity and the factors contributing to specific conditions of either "dependency" or "autonomy" experienced by participants in their daily lives. As an example, we present the chart based on the interview with F. T. (Fig. 6.4; Interview #6). It will be used to discuss the interpretative potentials of our approach, which is still under construction.

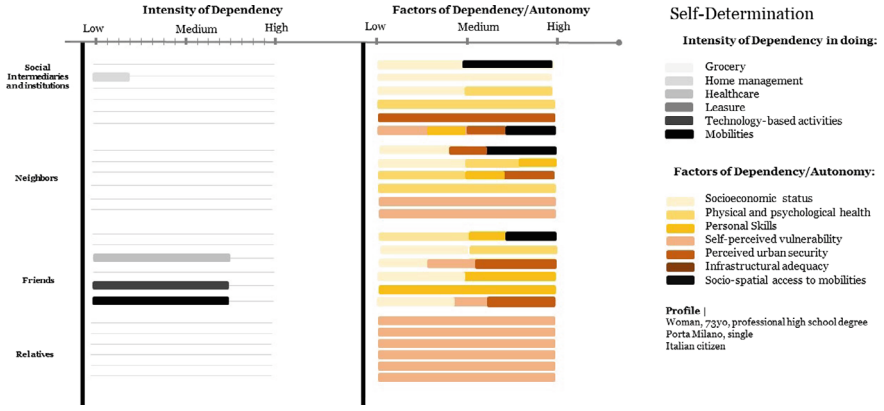

Fig. 6.4 F. T. | 73 |woman | Italian | Porta Milano | Social Housing |

In the chart, indicators remain nominal, and quantitative ones are still being defined. The different "degrees of self-determination" and "dependency" were constructed through both the comparison between the interviews and our interpretive framework, as well as between interviews themselves.

In the far-left column, the main nodes of interviewees' social networks are listed. These include *relatives*, *friends*, *neighbors*, and *social intermediaries* (i.e., Congrega's and ALER's managers, or third-sector entities working in the considered neighborhoods), and *institutions* (**e.g.,** municipal social services).

The left column shows the "intensity of dependency" in carrying out specific activities or accessing urban services that are essential to participants' lives. It reflects varying levels of either dependency or self-determination for everyday tasks such as *grocery shopping, home management, accessing healthcare services, leisure activities, accessing technology-based services,* and *navigating the city*. Each line represents the degree of dependency/self-determination in completing those specific tasks, based on individuals and/or institutions the interviewees reported relying on. When lines are thin, it indicates that interviewees can largely determine by themselves how to complete those tasks. It is important to note that dependency and self-determination should not be understood as opposing conditions. Rather, they are more accurately interpreted as extremes of a complex continuum, mediated by everyday practices and shaped by multiple socioeconomic, spatial, and political factors that characterize urban life as it unfolds within the considered context.

The right-hand column highlights specific factors that lead to actual conditions of dependency or autonomy identified on the left. These factors include *socioeconomic status, physical/mental health, personal skills of interaction with urban environments* (i.e., using electronic devices, having a driving license, or walking/biking comfortably), *self-perceived physical and psychological vulnerability, perceived safety of urban environments* (in terms of material and social features), *the adequacy of urban infrastructures* (i.e., the presence of well-maintained bike lanes), and *socio-spatial accessibility to mobility opportunities* (intended *only* as owning a car and/or living in proximity to bus stops). Although various interviews revealed some "psychological" reasons accounting for (the lack of) dependency on given social nodes (e.g., strained family relationships), the chart only indicates factors influenced by the socio-material conditions of the considered context. The only "psychological" dimensions included are indeed *self-perceived vulnerability* and *perceived safety*, as they play a key role in determining how interviewees configure their own conditions of self-determination and/or dependency in relation to their living environments. Several interviews also reveal that self-perceptions of feeling "vulnerable," "autonomous," or "safe" are largely influenced by the socio-material features of urban environments, and the specific relationships individuals establish with those spaces (Alioni 2023).

The two columns should be considered together. Dependency and self-determination, defined as ever-evolving tensions, cannot be as fixed, dichotomously categories. Indeed, the identified factors do not, *in* and *by* themselves, directly produce conditions of either dependency or self-determination. Their effects are intimately shaped by the specific conditions in which different individuals find themselves, which in turn mediate the impact of both external and internal factors. One's

socioeconomic status or self-perceived vulnerability may lead to certain forms of dependency on social networks. However, under different existential conditions, these same factors might foster the opposite outcome, empowering individuals to develop largely self-determined practices. This is why we keep a single column with the same color scale to represent either dependency or self-determination. Nevertheless, to fully understand the significance of the right-hand column, it must be considered in relation to the left-hand one. Where the latter indicates "dependency" (marked line) or "self-determination" (thin line), the former shows the predominant factors fostering those conditions.

F.T.: Time-Spaces of Self-Determination

F. T. is a 73yo woman born in a small town near Brescia. Since 2011, she has resided in a Congrega's apartment in Porta Milano. F. lives alone, has never been married, and has no children. She has no strong connection with her family members, but she has close friends with whom she maintains daily contact. F. is retired but she's not particularly active, as she does not take part in any organized activity or group. Indeed, she enjoys spending time by herself. F. is in relatively good health, but she feels insecure using her bicycle; she is afraid of falling, and her perception of the safety of bike lanes across the neighborhood and the city also deters her from biking. She has very negative perceptions of the neighborhood where she lives, constantly fearing that someone might harm or rob her. F. owns an old car but only uses it for grocery shopping, as she has vision problems and does not feel confident driving it outside of morning hours or along routes she doesn't know well. For these reasons, F. heavily relies on her network of friends, asking for rides to places beyond her immediate vicinity. She enjoys taking long walks, but she only strolls along streets she knows well, that are frequented by others, and during daylight hours only. F. is not poor, and the rent she pays for her social housing apartment is proportionate to her relatively low pension. However, F. is very mindful of her spending. Finally, F. has some difficulty using electronic devices, but she is able to perform basic operations with her smartphone.

The analysis of our interviews allows for a discussion on how the factors identified in the chart contribute in maintaining existential conditions conducive to practices of self-determination or, conversely, to produce variegated forms of dependency. Due to space limitations, however, we focus only on the most relevant aspects.

Particular attention is given to those conditions shaped by specific planning decisions made in response to what is assumed to be the needs of an ontologically vulnerable subject, as revealed through the analysis of local planning documents. These conditions are examined in relation to intersecting socioeconomic status, health, and other contextual factors, including access to resources, systemic inequalities, and the cumulative impact of planning strategies that materially *and* socially shape opportunities and constraints in everyday life. Our interpretive framework aims at discussing how apparently neutral planning strategies eventually exacerbate socioeconomic disparities, largely failing to address complex needs of specific subjectivities that lie beyond "stereotypical" representations. In this sense, exploring older adults' daily experiences allows us to observe how impactful planning strategies are in hindering their capabilities to live self-determined lives. The objective is to assess the extent to

which individuals can maintain self-determination related to crucial aspects of daily life, such as mobility opportunities, affordable housing, access to essential services, participation in social networks, and the ability to age-in-place despite regeneration-led gentrifying pressures. This focus underscores the interplay between personal experience and broader urban transformations, offering a nuanced understanding of how planning strategies can either enable or hinder equitable outcomes. For these reasons, semi-structured interviews offer nuanced understandings of the roles played by planning strategies in these dynamics.

F. clearly belongs to the working-class, now living on her pension after spending her entire career in low-paying, low-skilled jobs. Because of this, F. seldom shops at the small but expensive store adjacent to her residence due to economic constraints, and she is compelled to visit the large supermarket 600 m away from her home. However, since this chain is high-end and particularly expensive too, F. spends a considerable amount of time searching the shelves for generic brands or discounted items. Although there are three different discount stores within a 5 min-drive distance from home, she does not like shopping there because she feels uncomfortable, finding them somewhat "unsanitary." From this perspective, F. owns an old car that she utilizes solely for grocery shopping. However, should her car cease to work, she would lack the financial means to cover substantial repair costs or purchase a new vehicle. Her socioeconomic status highlights the central role of "precarious automobility" (Urry 2004) in shaping varying levels of pathogenic vulnerability (McKenzie et al. 2013) that influence her capacity for self-determination. Indeed, F. views her autonomy as largely dependent on the 'health' of her vehicle, which allows her to navigate the social and spatial landscape to access shopping opportunities beyond the limitations of her immediate surroundings.

In 2011, F. did not have the option to choose the unfurnished apartment on the 5th floor that was assigned to her by Congrega. This meant she had to adapt her preferences to the structural features of the unit and the building. However, at the moment she has no need related to specific physical issues, and though she finds taking the stairs somewhat challenging, the apartment is directly served by an elevator. If structural modifications to the apartment become necessary in the future due to aging-related needs, she will need to negotiate these changes with Congrega's managers. However, they might opt to relocate her to an apartment already equipped for such needs—for instance, with specifically designed toilets and showers for those with limited physical mobility. Additionally, the costs related to the move would, at least partially, fall on the tenant, and there is no guarantee that the furniture and belongings she acquired for her current apartment would suit the one potentially assigned to her in the future.

At the city level, the discussion regarding socio-spatial accessibility to healthcare services is perhaps one of the most intriguing. It is necessary to provide some context: in Brescia, there are four major hospitals and healthcare facilities. Three of them are served by dedicated subway stops, while the other by a bus line which also stops a few hundred meters away from F.'s home. Since 2012, the regional healthcare system has largely digitized the procedure for booking general and specialist visits and for retrieving test results. Furthermore, due to the pandemic crisis in 2020–2021, most

doctors working in the city now regularly provide digital prescriptions for routine medications and visit patients only by appointment. In these respects, F. is capable of performing basic tasks with her smartphone, especially in the healthcare sphere. She can download prescriptions emailed by her doctor on her phone and forward them via WhatsApp or email to her pharmacist, who occasionally also offers home delivery services. Additionally, her pharmacist sometimes assists F. in booking specialist appointments through the digital platform of Regione Lombardia. However, while F. has acquired digital skills that enable her to access healthcare services autonomously, the same cannot be said for her *physical* access to services with specific territorial dimensions. As mentioned, F. is uncomfortable driving outside of her neighborhood and is "terrified" by the idea of biking in the city. In this sense, it is interesting to note that bike lanes are a recent innovation in the city, which does not have a strong cycling culture, but those infrastructures are fastly fostering changes in the city residents' habits of mobilities (CdB 2018; Alioni 2023). F. also complains about the high costs of parking and its limited availability across the city—two other factors that discourage her from driving to the hospitals. F.'s fear of her neighborhood also extends to the bus lines that serve the area. Because she does not feel confident to move around the neighborhood alone during less busy hours, F. heavily depends on a few friends who often give her rides to the public hospital on their way to work. However, she frequently finds herself spending a lot of time waiting for her appointments, having arrived at the hospital much earlier than necessary. After her visits, F. usually walks home alone—about 3.5 km—taking her "usual routes" that allow her to stroll around parts of the city she particularly likes. This route, however, only consists of major roads, so she does not feel unsafe due to potential pickpocketers or other threats. This feeling is quite recent; in past years, F. always moved around alone because she felt capable of reacting promptly to any challenging situations. Today, however, she no longer feels she possesses that physical and psychological "quickness," which makes her feel especially vulnerable, like a vulnerable "prey" to ill-intentioned individuals:

> "After 70, you feel more fragile, more vulnerable. When you go out, you have to be much more careful because if someone pushes me now, or punches me—you know, if I had been punched at 65, I would've reacted, maybe with a kick or hitting back with my bag—but at 73 and a half, well…you know what I mean."

As revealed in her interview, F. expresses a strong desire to make her own choices without depending on "anyone" or "anything". Moreover, she is happy with her current life: she views the significant time she spends alone as a mark of having gained "personal freedom," and she has a social circle that, while not particularly large, provides her with deep friendships and support. Additionally, both her pension and "secure" housing shield her from the growing existential precarity increasingly affecting the city's working-class.

Despite her self-described "independence" and "freedom," a deeper analysis of her interview reveals several obstacles that significantly limit her actual level of self-determination. Indeed, the constraints of her relatively low socioeconomic status are intertwined with the broader urban conditions observable in Brescia. For instance, and as previously mentioned, F. acknowledges her reliance on her car, which allows her to

move beyond the economic inaccessibility of the expensive stores in her immediate area. Once her car eventually breaks down or her physical conditions would make her unable to drive, one of the main pillars of her "autonomy" and "independence" will disappear, increasing her reliance on her non-familial social network. This issue goes beyond just a fear of taking buses or riding a bike—it represents a clear limitation tied to the city's urban system, which is not designed to meet the needs of short intra-neighborhood trips for individuals with very limited ranges of choice, not only in terms of mobility but also in the growing mismatch between the purchasing power of real wages and pensions and the rising (un)affordability of essential urban services, such as grocery stores and pharmacies. If this hypothetical yet clearly plausible situation were to reality, the barriers to her self-determined choices would undoubtedly grow thicker than they currently seem, illustrating that her dependence on others—whether individuals, intermediaries, or institutions—could increase exponentially in the foreseeable future.

6.6 Conclusions

Our interpretive framework seems to have interpretive potential for understanding the conditions of dependency and self-determination experienced by older adults, as well as the factors influencing these dynamics, though it remains in its early stages. It challenges a simplistic binary view, instead highlighting the complexities and contradictions that shape conditions of dependency and self-determination. The framework captures the interplay of existential and everyday processes, built environments, infrastructures, and the perceptions arising from individuals' interactions with their surroundings, all of which influence practices that enable older adults in rapidly changing neighborhoods to maintain dignity and self-determination.

Our preliminary analysis suggests that Brescia's politics of urban government is based on a stereotypical and superficial understanding of the multiple urban experiences of "vulnerable subjects" in general, and older adults in particular. The strategies that are materially articulated within and through the city's urban space follow a demand–supply logic for essential urban services, which reduces the "right to self-determination," both individual and collective, to a quantifiable issue measured in terms of economic efficiency, service status, and spatial accessibility to key facilities spread across the city. Furthermore, Brescia's Masterplan and the PUMS reveal a "paradigmatic" definition of the subject who lives and moves through the city. Through this approach, however, the Municipality translates variegated "interests" and "needs" of vulnerable subjects into the necessity to *supply* universialized services to generically quantitative *demands*—i.e., through the quantification and qualification of housing needs or the physical (in)accessibility of public services. Indeed, the socio-demographic "plurality" featuring Brescia is qualified in such a way as to frame it as an issue of *demand for* and *supply of* territorial services, emerging from the categorizing logics developed by the Municipality itself. As a result, urban governance primarily focuses on planning the provision of complex urban services

and investment opportunities for a population largely viewed as "customers." This population is consequently internally divided along "nuanced" lines of needs that deviate, to varying degrees, from a "standardized" stakeholder, who is assumed to be the *paradigmatic* user of the city's urban system.

AuthorContribution Attributions Marco Alioni has authored all the Sections of the chapter. Barbara Badiani has co-authored the following Sections: "*Brescia: Plans, Visions, Subjectivities*"; "*Conditions and factors of self-determination: A preliminary framework*".

References

Alioni M (2021) Essere (in)appropriate. Rigenerazione delle periferie e forme intrusive di violenza urbana. Lo Squaderno 59:53–57

Alioni M (2024) The axial city: disjunctioning radical pluralities from an urban galaxy. J Urbanism. https://doi.org/10.1080/17549175.2024.2416104

Alioni M (2023) Displacing routes through (dis)placing places: infrastructuring active mobility and the regeneration of via Milano, Brescia (Northern Italy). Scienze Regionali. https://doi.org/10.14650/107319

Annunziata S, Lees L, Rivas-Alonso C (2021) Segregation, social mix, and gentrification. Nexuses. In: Orum A, Ruiz-Tagle J, Viccari S (eds) The companion to urban and regional studies. Wiley, pp 233–244

Bernardini M (2018) Disabilità, vulnerabilità e diritti (umani). Tra conflitti e (nuove) opportunità. In: Giolo O, Bernardini M, Casalini B, Re L (eds) Vulnerabilità: etica, politica, diritto. Methexis, pp 211–225

Brannigan M (2021) Dispossessed, without place and face. The plight of elders. Working Older People 25(3):265–271

Buffel T, Phillipson C (2024) Ageing in place in urban environments: Critical perspectives. Taylor and Francis

Buffel T, Doran P, Yarker S (2024) Aging in the urban context. In: Cutchin M, Rowles G (eds) Handbook on Aging and Place. Elgar, pp 259–276

Buffel T, Phillipson C (2019) Ageing in a gentrifying neighbourhood: experiences of community change in later life. Sociology 53(6):987–1004

Butler J (2009) Frames of War: When is life grievable? Verso

Butler J (2016) Vulnerability in Resistance. Duke University Press

Cappellato V, Gardella Tedeschi B, Mercuri E (2021) Anziani: Diritti, bisogni, prospettive. Un'indagine giuridica e sociologica. Il Mulino

Casalini B (2018) Le teorie femministe contemporanee, dal paradigma della sovranità al paradigma della vulnerabilità. In: Giolo O, Bernardini M, Casalini B, Re L (eds) Vulnerabilità: etica, politica, diritto. Methexis, pp 27–48

Cole A (2018) All of us are vulnerable, but some are more vulnerable than others: the political ambiguity of vulnerability studies. In: Ferrarese E (ed) The Politics of Vulnerability. Routledge, pp 110–128

Comune di Brescia (2016) Piano di Governo del Territorio. https://www.comune.brescia.it/aree-tematiche/urbanistica/piano-di-governo-del-territorio/pgt-vigente

Comune di Brescia (2018) Piano Urbano della Mobilità Sostenibile. https://www.comune.brescia.it/aree-tematiche/mobilita-e-trasporti/documenti-di-pianificazione/piano-urbano-mobilita-sostenibile

European Commission (2023) Final report summary—AGE-FRIENDLY (promoting active ageing: developing age-friendly cities). Research Report available at: https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/330354/reporting/fr

Fineman MA (2010) The vulnerable subject and the responsive state. Emory Law J 60(2):251–275
Fineman MA (2020) Reasoning from the body: universal vulnerability and social justice. In: Dietz C, Travis M, Thomson M (eds) A jurisprudence of the body. Springer, pp 17–34
Gardner PJ (2011) Natural neighborhood networks—important social networks in the lives of older adults aging in place. J Aging Stud 25(3):263–271
Gilroy R (2021) Planning for an aging society. Haugthon
Giolo O, Bernardini M (eds) (2021) Abitare i diritti. Per una critica del rapporto tra giustizia e spazi urbani. Pacini
Giolo O, Bernardini M, Casalini B, Re L (eds) (2018) Vulnerabilità: etica, politica, diritto. Methexis
Giolo O (2018) La vulnerabilità e la forza: un binomio antico da ritematizzare. In: Giolo O, Bernardini M, Casalini B, Re L (eds) Vulnerabilità: etica, politica, diritto. Methexis, pp 341–352
Greenfield E, Buffel T (2022) Age-friendly cities and communities: research to strengthen policy and practice. J Aging Soc Policy 34(2):161–174
Hemerijck A, Matsaganis M (2024) Who's afraid of the welfare state now? Oxford University Press
Hochstenbach C, Boterman W (2018) Age, life course and generations in gentrification processes. In: Lees L, Phillips M (eds) Handbook of gentrification studies. Elgar, pp 170–185
Joy M (2018) Problematizing the age friendly cities and communities program in Toronto. J Aging Stud 47:49–56
Joy M (2020) The right to an age-friendly city: redistribution, recognition, and senior citizen rights in urban spaces. McGill-Queen's Press
Kern L (2021) Feminist city: claiming space in a man-made world. Verso
Kittay E (2018) Dipendenza. In: Giolo O, Bernardini M, Casalini B, Re L (eds) Vulnerabilità: etica, politica, diritto. Methexis, pp 201–210
McKenzie C, Rogers W, Dodds S (eds) (2013) Vulnerability: new essays in ethics and feminist philosophy. Oxford University Press
Morondo D (2018) Un nuovo paradigma per l'eguaglianza? La vulnerabilità tra condizione umana e mancanza di protezione. In: Giolo O, Bernardini M, Casalini B, Re L (eds) Vulnerabilità: etica, politica, diritto. Methexis, pp 179–200
Mouratidis K (2021) Urban planning and quality of life: a review of pathways linking the built environment to subjective well-being. Cities 115:103229
Nussbaum M (2007) Capabilities as fundamental entitlements: sen and social justice. In: Kaufman A (ed) Capabilities equality. Routledge, pp 54–80
Paiella M (2023) Pensioni. In: Corsaletti M, Dachille G, Dalla Zuanna A, Orrù N, Paiella M, Pieroni D, Viviano E, Ricci V (eds) XXII Rapporto Annuale INPS—2023. Istituto Nazionale di Previdenza Sociale, pp 139–212
Pani-Harreman K, Bours G, Zander I, Kempen G, van Duren J (2021) Definitions, key themes and aspects of 'ageing in place': a scoping review. Ageing Soc 41(9):2026–2059
Paton K (2016) Gentrification: a working-class perspective. Routledge
Rawls J (1980) A theory of justice. Belknap
Re L (2018) La vulnerabilità fra etica, politica e diritto. In: Giolo O, Bernardini M, Casalini B, Re L (eds) Vulnerabilità: etica, politica, diritto. Methexis, pp 7–26
Saraceno C (2013) Il Welfare. Modelli e dilemmi della cittadinanza sociale. Il Mulino
Tarantino C (2024) Il soggiorno obbligato: la disabilità fra dispositivi di incapacitazione e strategie di emancipazione. Il Mulino
Tiboni M, Ribolla G, Rossetti S, Treccani L (2020) Beyond the street: an urban regeneration project for the Porta Milano district in Brescia. In: Pezzagno M, Tira M (eds) Town and infrastructure planning for safety and urban quality. Routledge, pp 77–86
Urry J (2004) The 'system' of automobility. Theory Cult Soc 21(4):25–39
van Hoof J, Marston HR (2021) Age-friendly cities and communities: state of the art and future perspectives. Int J Environ Res Public Health 18(4):1644–1659
WHO (2007) Global age-friendly cities: a guide. Research Report available at: https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789241547307

Yeh J (2022) Age-friendly for whom? An aperture to the lived experiences of older San Franciscans. Gerontologist 62(1):100–109

Marco Alioni (corresponding author) is a Research Fellow in Urban Sociology in the Department of Civil, Environmental, Architectural Engineering and Mathematics (DICATAM) at the University of Brescia (Brescia, Italy). His research focuses on infrastructural politics and politics of urban mobilities, particularly in Western Europe and the United States. Marco has contributed to several research initiatives, including *INDEPENDENT-AGE* (Universities of Ferrara, Brescia, Salerno, and Salento), *Lifelines* (Politecnico di Torino, University College London), and *Newark Rhythms/ Urban Thresholds Working Group* (Rutgers University, Newark, NJ).

Barbara Badiani (co-author) is Associate Professor of Urban Planning in the Department of Civil, Environmental, Architectural Engineering and Mathematics (DICATAM) at the University of Brescia (Brescia, Italy). Her research specializes in urban planning and mobility and the spatial qualities of urban environments, with a particular focus on the conditions affecting vulnerable populations. Specifically, her work critically examines how spatial planning shape the lived experiences of marginalized groups in contemporary urban contexts. Over the last few years, Barbara has coordinated several major research projects, including *INDEPENDENT-AGE* (PRIN-PNRR, 2023–2025), *PREVENT* (Fondazione Cariplo 2023), and *Valli Resilienti* (*ATTIVAREE* Program, Fondazione Cariplo 2019).

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.