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Arrival Infrastructuring at a Southern European Gate: Public Action and Spaces in Palermo, Italy

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Abstract

This article investigates how the interplay of different actors has shaped the arrival of newcomers in the city of Palermo in Southern Italy. The recent debate on arrival infrastructures is currently developing in Central Europe, where arrival has been experienced as part of a reception crisis starting in 2015. Within this framework, Southern European contexts represent interesting fields of observation, both for the way arrivals are deployed and for the type of public action that has been mobilized. Here, arrivals are often linked to further departures; infrastructuring processes involve a wide range of in/formal actors, which can be inscribed into a Southern (European) definition of public action. Stemming from two research projects in urban studies, the article unpacks how different actors channeled newcomers' arrivals between 2015 and 2020. Methodologically, the work builds on qualitative methods and fieldwork, as well as on documents and discourse analysis. It highlights the interplay of a robust pro-hospitality political discourse, a broad—and partly informal—public action around it, everyday infrastructuring practices, and how they spatialized into diverse arrival spaces. In Palermo, public action takes roots in a specific urban historical trajectory of the city, through actions and spaces that lie between formality and informality and that often also reveal resourceful aspects.

Keywords

arrival infrastructures; informality; public action; Southern Europe

1. Introduction

This article investigates the arrival infrastructuring work developed in the city of Palermo between 2015 and 2020, particularly focusing on the in/formal assemblage of actors, practices, and spaces involved. Starting from the so-called asylum crisis in 2015, Europe has witnessed a growing interest in the public and academic debate on arrival and arrival infrastructures (Meeus et al., 2019). Arrival has been increasingly described as a process and its emplacement in the city has been investigated out of the conventional understanding of "arrival neighborhood" (Hans et al., 2019). More recently, research shed light on the range of actors and spaces involved in the infrastructuring work, claiming the need to discuss a nuanced understanding of in/formality, beyond polarizations and within both the private and public sphere. With the aim to contribute to this debate, which has developed from Central and Northern European contexts, this article explores a Southern European city: Palermo, in Italy. Southern European countries found themselves at the threshold between European destination areas and Mediterranean departure territories, experiencing extremely fragmented temporalities and circular mobilities (Bovo, 2024b; Fontanari, 2019). This threshold condition concerns also the resources and dynamics that have been mobilized to address arrival. While being part of the European reception system, these countries are characterized by Mediterranean welfare structures and public action (Arbaci, 2019), that framed the way arrivals were addressed. Palermo is a European city with southern traits, and it has been a gate and a base point for recent Mediterranean migration trajectories (Bassi, 2015a). After a significant drop in arrivals by sea in 2012 and 2013, 2014 saw a new increase: 120,238 migrants were intercepted at Sicily's maritime borders (Italian Ministry of Interiors, 2014). These arrivals concerned people who were mostly fleeing their country of origin; some saw Palermo as a stopover, a city on the border of Europe, while others already saw it as a city of destination. Thus, arrival processes in Palermo describe very clearly the stretched space and time between travel and settlement, whose duration cannot be defined a priori and depends on external factors (e.g., changing regulations) and individual migratory projects (De Gourcy, 2013). These processes produced new demands for services, housing, and space and triggered the emergence of many forms of infrastructuring work, developed by a variety of actors and often exceeding the national reception system. In the article, "reception" (*accoglienza*) is used as a category of public action (Ambrosini & Campomori, 2020), while "hospitality" (*ospitalità*) is used as a political register and discourse shared by actors involved in welcoming migrants (Pulcini, 2019).

By investigating infrastructuring actors and spaces between 2015 and 2020, we show that in/formality has very blurred lines and shall be found in the *practices* of arrival infrastructuring, rather than attributed to specific settings or actors (being them private or public): Rarely actors or spaces are *forever* or *only* informal or formal. The way in/formal practices infrastructure arrivals reveals their resourcefulness and criticalities: on the one hand the capacity to "adapt" to changing and uncategorized needs, on the other some risks—first of all that of substitution of the public hand. In this sense, we argue that Palermo, as a Southern European context, not only enriches the knowledge on arrival infrastructures but also broadens the definition of in/formality, as a continuum of practices within given urban settings, and triggers a reflection on the need to stay with this in/formality and its ambiguity. After this introduction, the article describes our positioning within three fields of literature, and it presents the context of Palermo, focusing on the historical determinants and the hospitality turn that characterized its public action and that are crucial to understand infrastructuring work today. Then, we introduce the research questions and methodology, followed by a description of three examples of arrival infrastructures. The in/formality of these practices and their role for newcomers are addressed in the discussion, followed by some concluding remarks.

2. Arrival Infrastructuring Work in a Southern Perspective: Theoretical Framework

This article grounds on and aims at contributing to the current debate on arrival processes and infrastructures; however, it draws terminology and concepts from two further fields of literature: the debate on informality and that on Southern European contexts. In the framework of the recent reception crisis in Europe and in line with the increasing non-linearity of migration pathways across the Mediterranean (Babels, 2018), a growing body of literature has critically analyzed arrival processes. Recent conceptualizations of arrivals as processes (Meeus et al., 2019), and as "landings" (Bovo, 2024b) aim at enhancing the importance of the space and time between the travel and settlement, both for newcomers—especially when forcibly displaced—and local actors (municipalities, local associations, or settled inhabitants, being them native or immigrant). No longer necessarily linked to further settlement, arrivals encompass a temporal, territorial, and subjective complexity (Fontanari, 2019; Meeus et al., 2019; Tarrius, 1993). In this framework, scholars conceptualize the notion of arrival infrastructures, intended as all those parts of the city with which newcomers get entangled upon arrival (Felder et al., 2019; Hanhörster & Wessendorf, 2020; Meeus et al., 2019). In this regard, relevant contributions were made to the *Urban Planning* thematic issue Urban Arrival Spaces: Social Co-Existence in Times of Changing Mobilities and Local Diversity edited by Yvonne Franz and Heike Hanhörster (Franz & Hanhörster, 2020). The infrastructural perspective underlines the value and resourcefulness (Graham & McFarlane, 2015; Saunders, 2011; Schillebeeckx et al., 2019) of these parts of the city both to newcomers and the urban environment more generally. Arrival infrastructures are described as the "result of socio-material practices of a variety of actors, architects and planners, state employees, citizens, civil society organizations, newcomers and more established migrants" (Meeus et al., 2020, p. 14). In this sense, they range from robust material spaces to immaterial support networks and coalitions (Bovo, 2020): public libraries, cafes, public spaces, helpdesks, and housing services (El-Kayed & Keskinkılıc, 2023; Gardesse & Lelévrier, 2020; Wessendorf, 2022). Grounding on this definition, scholars have recently started using the term "arrival infrastructuring work" (Meeus et al., 2020), which shifts the focus from static networks or spaces to fluid practices of infrastructuring. The acknowledgment of the resourcefulness and embeddedness of arrival infrastructures in local contexts will be core points for this work. The arrival infrastructuring perspective will prove an effective lens to focus on practices, rather than statically on actors and spaces, while outlining the features of in/formality.

Many works, in fact, have started highlighting the in/formal character of infrastructuring work, which is often described as happening within more and less formalized networks of actors, practices, and settings. The debate on informality (Kudva, 2009; Roy & AlSayyad, 2004) represents a meaningful reference for this article. Nowadays in the literature, the notion of informality is not only related to the so-called "Global South," but it is also discussed in the "Northern" contexts (McFarlane & Waibel, 2012; Mukhija & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2014) of the Mediterranean and Europe (Alfaro d'Alençon et al., 2018; Chiodelli & Gentili, 2021; Chiodelli & Tzfadia, 2016), where the myth of Northern formality has been increasingly challenged (Jaffe & Koster, 2019). Informality has been used as a framework to discuss forced migration (Darling, 2016), arrival processes, and infrastructures, as well as to reflect upon the need for planning to engage with these issues. In fact, informality runs through as much as it impacts migratory projects and trajectories (Darling, 2016; Mudu & Chattopadhyay, 2016). Within the debate on post-2015 migration movements and arrivals in Europe, Agier et al. (2018) studied experiences of reception put in place at the border between France and the UK, from the so-called "jungle" of Calais to more formalized wooden temporary settlements set up by the municipality of Grande Synthe. While infrastructuring work was happening on the ground carried out by

migrants and local municipalities, Agier et al. (2018) highlighted the difficulty for the public debate and national political discourse to face the emergence of camps in Europe, commonly related to an idea of informality. Cremaschi et al. (2020) used the informality framework to describe DIY arrival infrastructures emerging in Central Italy. In the context of Beirut, Fawaz (2017) described the role of informal support action upon the arrival of Syrian refugees in 2015. We assume this debate as a background, particularly by embracing the description of in/formality as a continuum, its understanding beyond the formal vs informal binary as suggested in the editorial of this thematic issue. We share the need for a better "understanding of governance frameworks that include the range of actors that would normally be associated with so-called informality" (Alfaro d'Alençon et al., 2018).

Finally, our article bases itself on the broader study field of Mediterranean and Southern European contexts (Dines, 2016; Maloutas, 2018; Tulumello, 2022; Vittoria, 2023). We find particularly fruitful the contribution of Cassano (2007) about "Southern thought" (*pensiero meridiano*). Grounding on the literature that outlines Mediterranean historical and cultural traits (Braudel, 2008; Morin, 1999), Cassano argues that Southern thought encompasses the need/capacity to "stay with" contrasting thoughts and uncertainty and to exercise a complex and multiple gaze. Historically, the Mediterranean has been an "in-between" subject, and a challenge towards a plural way of thinking. Along these lines and within the planning field, it is also useful to recall more recent contributions that underline the peculiarities of Southern (and Mediterranean) European countries (Arbaci, 2019; Cremaschi & Lieto, 2020; Tulumello, 2022; Vittoria, 2023). These contributions are essential references for the analysis of the context of Palermo, the development of its public action in the last decades, and more recent infrastructuring practices. Additionally, they introduce the suggestion that such Southern contexts also represent an opportunity to question existing governing categories and outline new ones (Cremaschi & Lieto, 2020).

The three mentioned fields of literature are starting points to deal with the context of Palermo and the local infrastructuring practices, while envisioning new ways of framing in/formality in arrival infrastructures. The above-mentioned contributions help define three core points of this work: first, an approach that looks at arrival infrastructuring as an interplay between actors, spaces, and practices and sees some degrees of resourcefulness in them. Second, an understanding of in/formality beyond a dichotomous definition of formal vs informal. Third, an effort of contextualization of in/formal arrival infrastructuring practices in the Southern European framework. Here, indeed, informality is often not an "anomaly" and can structurally affect the governance of urban space (on illegal practices see Chiodelli & Gentili, 2021).

3. Public Action in Palermo: Historical Determinants and the Hospitality Turn

Palermo is the fifth Italian city in number of inhabitants and the largest in Sicily; it has been historically a crossroad of mobility trajectories, of goods, people, and information, and it has lately become an arrival and departure place for people across the so-called "central Mediterranean route." To better understand the particular and critical aspect of in/formality in Palermo, it is necessary to give some historical and geopolitical context. Several studies question the way local policies are trying to fit into a big-metropolis-oriented model and be competitive in the global market, whatever their size and peculiarities are (Castells, 2000; Conti & Spriano, 1990; Harvey, 2006; Sassen, 1991). In this perspective, Palermo could be seen as a "globalizing city" (Soderstrom, 2009), and as a city "in the South of the North" (Bully, 2021): Its public action is characterized by a historical fragility/instability of economic, demographic, and political

structures. Palermo has "metropolized" later than other Italian and European cities and has a particular relation to migration compared to other Italian cities (Cremaschi et al., 2020; De Filippo et al., 2013; Fioretti, 2011, 2013). Historically, Palermo has been a place of exchange and emigration more than of immigration (Colucci, 2018; Schmoll et al., 2015; Tornesi, 2001): After some first arrivals in the 1980s, since the 1990s it has registered a stable presence of foreign population, increasing in the 2000s. In 2019, foreign residents represented 3.9 percent of the entire population, among the lowest in Italian capital cities, and came from 130 different countries of origin. As in other Italian contexts, spatial segregation between natives and foreign groups has been low and moderate, despite the high level of urban inequalities and residential marginalization (Arbaci, 2019; Briata, 2014).

From 1945 to the 1990s, Palermo was characterized by the preponderance of the Mafia system, the tense relations with the state, and a weak institutional link with foreign countries (Lentini, 2011). These phenomena have greatly weakened the city demographically and have slowed down its economic development and relations with other cities, at a national and international level. This led to the emergence of opposition civil society movements, and to the creation of a multitude of associations, initially linked to religious structures, and later to political parties or social movements. It started with the so-called "Palermitan Spring" in the 1980s, which laid the foundations for the renewal of the city (Lentini, 2011). In 1985, Leoluca Orlando, the leader of a list of five parties, was elected mayor. His program was inspired by the movement Città per l'Uomo and launched the challenge of reappropriating the city against the Mafia. He then affirmed the will to develop the cultural and heritage capital of the city and to revive the historical center in a new light. This mandate made it possible to renew the links between local politics, local associations, and also left-wing militancy. The link between local public action and associations, religious and non-religious, will remain one of the hallmarks of Palermo, not only with regard to the anti-Mafia, but gradually also with regard to hospitality (Bully, 2021). Indeed, after three terms, two between 1993 and 2000, Leoluca Orlando returned in 2012 for two consecutive terms, during the so-called "European migration crisis." In the last decade, Palermo has become one of the main points of arrival in Europe for migrants from the African continent. Starting from 2015, as in the rest of the region, the city has witnessed an increasing number of sea arrivals. Between 2015 and 2017, Palermo and the western coast of Sicily witnessed around 1,000 disembarkations every 10 days (Bovo, 2024b).

Until 2015 the city council's position regarding hospitality was embodied in the so-called Consulta Delle Culture (City Council Deliberation No. 49 of 15 May 2013) and then focused on the people from the so-called first- or second-generation immigrants. From 2015 onwards, and particularly during the term following the 2017 re-election, the migration question became one of the central elements of Leoluca Orlando's policy, as there was an urgency to host newcomers mostly arriving by makeshift boats. The multicultural narrative and the change in the city's image, which had been the focus of the previous political terms—particularly with regard to urban and heritage aspects—now justified a pro-reception stance. This statement was built in opposition to restrictive European and national directives regarding migration. The link between the historical multicultural narrative and the hospitality model became very specific to Palermo's local policies. In line with this hospitality turn, on March 20, 2015, the City Council, under the mandate of Leoluca Orlando, approved the "Palermo Charter," a document that promoted international human mobility and a modification of the law on citizenship to promote an urban citizenship (Di Cesare, 2017). It would be acquired through residence, i.e., registration with the civil registry office (*anagrafe*), without depending on a residence permit issued by the decentralized state—the prefectures. This statement

called into question the nation-state, its borders, and its systems of belonging, all the more so as Sicily and Palermo were major arrival points (in Italy and Europe) of makeshift boats between 2015 and 2017. The municipality's approach of opposing the national government and the European authorities in charge of migration continued to grow during Leoluca Orlando's term in office, and then peaked in 2018 with the strong opposition to the measures of the immigration decree-law promoted by Giuseppe Conte and the interior minister, Matteo Salvini, in October 2019. By doing so, Palermo took a path shared by a growing number of cities worldwide, mainly located in the Global North, that engaged in the formulation of migration and citizenship policies in support of migrant populations (Ataç et al., 2021; Kaufmann, 2019). The clearest example of this is the "sanctuary cities" movement, undertaken by large cities such as Barcelona and Los Angeles, which declared themselves cities of refuge (Oomen, 2019) for displaced people, claiming their role within the national framework.

In Palermo, however, the political project of "local citizenship" and municipalist demands kept being fragilized by a lack of local services and infrastructures; in a context where public institutions fail to provide services, the third sector tries to cover the ground. The third sector includes associations, mutual societies, and cooperatives, and is itself made up of different players, with different interests in the hospitality field and relationships with the municipality. Part of Palermo's third sector, that of the historical center and the Albergheria/Ballarò district, works and collaborates as a network. Despite their different interests and positions, when it came to opposing national or European policies regarding migration, these players found themselves on the same side of the "battlefield" of governance, and all advocated a pro-reception vision. These different actors then reinforced the double-head public action dynamics born during the times of anti-Mafia movements. This particularity regarding local action in Palermo leads to a reconsideration of delegation (Campomori, 2019; Crosta, 2010) as a means of self-organization by local actors on common political themes—anti-Mafia, hospitality—in a constrained context and with a common perspective of opposition to the state. Also in the hospitality field, as it happened in the anti-Mafia movements, we witness a double-headed public action: being developed both by public institutions and third sector actors—who are only partially funded and contractualized by the first (Camus, 2014). Such a two-fold nature of public action sheds new light on delegation mechanisms (Campomori, 2019) as discussed in a part of multi-level-governance theories (Caponio & Borket, 2010; Scholten, 2014; Zapata-Barrero et al., 2017). In Palermo, in fact, there is a prevailing horizontal governance where a large part of public services is delegated to third sector actors and where tensions between the two coexist with alliances—especially around specific topics. Finally, since 2015, the third sector in Palermo experienced yet another shift in its composition. What emerged from our fieldwork is that many newcomers who had activist experience in their countries of origin redeployed them within local associations in Palermo, focusing their political demands around human rights and particularly reception issues. In some cases, the commitment within Palermo's arrival infrastructures network has been a driver of professional careers in the third sector of reception or solidarity. And often, arrival infrastructuring work was performed more by recent newcomer groups than by "oldcomers" (Bovo, 2024a).

In a general perspective, Palermo's historically tense context in terms of demographics, economics, and politics has slowed down its development at different levels. Nevertheless, this context and its shortcomings led to the emergence of movements and initiatives that subsequently served Palermo's particular model of hospitality. Palermo's public action, within a pro-hospitality public discourse, can be described as an assemblage where formalized action by public bodies and larger associations formally managing reception

facilities coexist with less formalized constellations of associations engaged in infrastructuring work. The third sector, initially opposed to the municipality during the Palermo Spring period, became with the hospitality turn part of the "public hand." This assemblage is what in Palermo shall be addressed as "public" action and is structurally shaping local infrastructuring work.

4. Research Questions and Methodology in Palermo

This work revolves around two main research questions:

1. What actors, spaces, and practices are involved in infrastructuring arrival in Palermo? What are the features and traits of in/formality (if any)?

2. How does in/formality affect the way arrival is supported and channeled? What are the critical and resourceful aspects of it?

Methodologically, the article stems from two research projects in the field of urban studies, urban planning, and policies, with a clear spatial perspective; arrival infrastructuring work is always emplaced at the interplay between people, places, and practices (Briata & Postiglione, 2023; Stender et al., 2023). Our methodology was based on semi-structured interview grids, fed by a detailed knowledge of the context maintained by participant observation within a wide range of local structures, such as local helpdesks, health clinics, and public offices. The in/formal traits of the research context and the ethics of participant observation led us to anonymize the interviews, even though prior agreement to transcription had been sought from the various stakeholders. Where names are given, they are pseudonymized. Interviews (39 held between 2018 and 2020 + 52 held between 2020 and 2021) addressed politicians and local policymakers, public servants, third-sector operators, private service providers, and people with a migrant background. The latter happened to be mainly adult men considered "non-vulnerable" by public policies and excluded by reception facilities, when not holding a temporary permit. Their presence is not recorded in the statistics about the resident population but has been critical in Palermo's political trajectory. Our interviewees' countries of origin were mainly situated in West Africa (Senegal, Gambia, Guinea, Ivory Coast) and to a lesser extent in North Africa (Morocco, Tunisia) and in the Middle East (Egypt, Iraq). By interacting with this group of people, we were able to access a wide range of migratory, administrative, residential, and occupational situations that show the importance of mobilizing resources in a structurally unequal system (Bourdieu, 1982).

In Palermo, our fieldwork started from the historical center, in the area of Ballarò, and extended to other urban neighborhoods. Ballarò has the traits of an arrival neighborhood (Bovo, 2024a) and is where different migration trajectories intersect—ranging from long-term settlements to recent arrivals. Ballarò also concentrates militant associations often involved in arrival infrastructuring work, who have decided to invest in the historical center from the 2000s (Soderstrom, 2009). Through regular fieldwork activities in the historical center, we had the occasion to analyze a certain type of third sector actors and practices, sharing a militant approach to migrant hospitality. These actors are different in terms of discourses and practices from the model of the cooperatives managing reception centers. While the cooperatives respond to calls for tender for public contracts delegating part of the state's public action (Bassi, 2015b), the militant third sector is mostly financed by subsidies from European, NGO research-action or integration-based projects. Moreover, the managing cooperatives cater to the categories defined by government bodies as priorities, while the militant third sector overcome such

categories. The volunteers and mediators we met, mentioned in Section 5, are mostly Italian men and women, working on a voluntary basis or sometimes paid as part of their associations' funded projects. To understand the infrastructuring work of these and other actors in Palermo, the next section outlines three stories showing a diverse landscape of arrival infrastructuring.

5. Three Stories of Arrival Infrastructuring Work: People, Places, and Practices Adjusting to Landing Needs

To unpack the kind of work that has emerged in Palermo since 2015, its variety, and its role for newcomers, we will focus on three arrival infrastructures. Among others, these three infrastructures cover different life domains and are characterized by different degrees of in/formality: a dorm informally managed by a priest, a public health clinic, and a third-sector helpdesk. In the stories, we will unpack what is in/formal in each case and how this impacts the infrastructuring work.

5.1. Missione Speranza e Carità: Where a "Low Wall" Enables Non-Linear Mobilities

In 1991, a lay missioner founded the Missione, a religious community that progressively acquired and managed a series of dormitories for homeless people in Palermo. Biagio Conte, the missioner, became a well-known figure in the public debate both for his claims for the need of spaces for the homeless and for the dimension that the Missione gained in its 30 years of life. In 2020, its dorms provided more than 1,000 beds, in the face of the 200 beds offered by public dormitories (Bovo, 2024b). Public institutional actors acknowledged this role although without a formalized mandate; as a social worker argued, "They manage to do things that the municipality does not…without these structures, people would simply live in the street" (social worker, 20.07.2020), and Biagio Conte used to have a strong influence even in the public action: "If he fasts everything keeps still, you can't move a step" (social worker, 20.07.2020). The Missione is however also a very controversial reality: They offer an extensive supply, which however lacks the quality standards that are sought in public structures. The facilities of the Missione are often described as mere "containers" or "no more than parking lots," as reported by hosts and volunteers in other associations (mediator, 14.07.2020; social worker, 20.07.2020).

Despite such a controversial nature, the Missione represented a key infrastructure for arriving migrants, who often ended up spending their nights there. Interestingly, many preferred to do so, rather than applying to enter public dormitories due to the easier access and exit procedures. Public dorms, in fact, require holding interviews and a maximum period of stay, in the perspective of supporting people's path towards autonomy. However, as seen, migrants' mobility is often not linear: Some people might need to spend only a few nights in Palermo before traveling north and cannot follow the public dorms' procedure, while others may not know for how long they are going to stay in the same place. An illustrative example is that of agricultural workers, holding or not temporary permits, who spend the crop seasons in different places, returning to Palermo only during winter and until they are called back for a new job. In these cases, not only is it important to easily access dorms but also to be able to exit freely—and return. This is possible only when access and exit procedures are very loose; at the Missione, it was a common practice to simply go to the entrance and ask to enter the dorm. A mediator stated, "You know how it works there? The border wall is low, and people simply jump in and out of the dormitories" (mediator, 14.07.2020).

In this case, in/formality largely shapes the whole arrival infrastructure, its space, practices, and managing actors; this example embodies a characteristic element of the arrival infrastructuring work in Palermo, which is the coexistence of formal and informal hosting services. As seen, despite not explicitly counting on the Missione bed offer, municipal staff are aware of the crucial role it plays in hosting migrant and homeless populations, in some way accounting for it within the local public action for newcomers. In this case, the informal management of the Missione dorms led to a controversial situation. On the one hand, it allowed for a greater accessibility than formally managed structures; on the other hand, it provided poor and often problematic living standards. In/formality in this case leads to a problematic trade-off between accessibility and quality of the arrival infrastructure.

5.2. Arci Porco Rosso: An "Open Harbor" on a Ground Floor of Ballarò

The Arci Porco Rosso is a third sector association, affiliated with the Arci network, a national cultural and social association. Among other activities, the Arci Porco Rosso holds a weekly Sans Papiers helpdesk: a service addressing undocumented migrants and often also local residents. Occasionally, drawing from European and national funds, they have managed to hire paid coworkers; the volunteers, who have changed over the years, in 2020 included a municipal councilor, social workers, interpreters and mediators, and researchers, in a mix of migrant and local activists. They collaborate with local associations in regards to legal assistance, job search, and language assistance, sharing competences and help. The Arci Porco Rosso started with four friends, who happened to be back in Palermo and to be temporarily unemployed. One day in 2015, one of them, already part of the Arci network and responsible for migration issues, got a call: A group of 10–15 Gambian young men received a rejection order and were in Palermo with no place to go. Grounding on the network of associations and actors in Ballarò, they managed to sort out the situation (volunteer, 20.07.2020). Starting from this unexpected experience of support, the Arci Porco Rosso was founded on the ground floor of Piazza Casa Professa, in Ballarò, as a space of open encounter and support.

The infrastructuring work of the Arci mainly regards bridging people to existing services and networks: from translation of papers received by public offices, preparation of interviews, navigation through administrative procedures, until accompaniment to public offices. The Arci Porco Rosso also provides access to networks and social capital that would be hardly accessible to newcomers. Often people passing there are put in contact with other associations in Italy and Europe: This is the case of Ibrahim, who thanks to the Arci Porco Rosso managed to get in contact with the association El Mamba 13 once he arrived in Marseille, France (Ibrahim, 12.05.2020). The effectiveness of this helpdesk and its peculiarity lies in its openness and embeddedness in the context. Its rootedness in the historical neighborhood of Ballarò is a key aspect: On the one hand, it allows to grasp changing needs and profiles, and on the other hand, it allows to bridge them to existing resources. A representative situation happened during the Covid-19 pandemic, when the Arci was able within a short time span to grasp the changing needs of its users and to adjust accordingly. In the first lockdown, the helpdesk closed and volunteers tried to keep in contact with users. There emerged the need for basic material support and the space of the Arci became a warehouse for food distribution. When the municipality opened an online platform to request public support, the Arci started helping people making the requests and highlighted how the requirements—among them the municipal registration—were excluding those groups that were most in need. Interestingly, this information was received and addressed by municipal staff (volunteer, 01.10.2020), that tried to change requirements to increase accessibility for a larger target.

The case of the Arci Porco Rosso cannot be framed as only informal; its staff has a formalized and explicit relationship with the municipality, and the Arci itself is a formal national institution. In this framework, however, informality lies in smaller elements: The way relationships are built ranges from formal to informal, as in the story of its foundation; plus, the organization of the space and the management of the helpdesk leave space for informal encounters and support actions that are not always framed by written rules. This nuanced in/formality allows the Arci to adhere profoundly to the needs of newcomers and landing migrants; their infrastructuring work changes with changing subjectivities (Meeus et al., 2019). In/formality allows the management of situations with flexibility and the continuous (re)definition of the boundaries of action. This is clear in the management of the Arci ground floor space, which feels like a continuation of the public square in front of it, where people come and go from two doors, and where square tables are continuously rearranged to host individual and group meetings, so that it is hard to distinguish who is a "user" and who are the volunteers. When asked about the reason for the "success" of the Arci, one of its founders answered, "I think because it's an open-access space in a square, it's a little harbor ashore; the level of informality works very much" (Bovo, 2024b). This kind of infrastructuring work also hides a risk, which many volunteers underline: the risk of substituting public institutions in infrastructuring arrival—a critical issue largely debated in the social innovation literature studying initiatives able to respond to those needs that remain unanswered by the state.

5.3. Public Health Clinic: Opening Hours and Immediate Answers

Healthcare services for migrants, sometimes undocumented who cannot be assigned an ID number or a general practitioner, are often offered by the private and third sector (among which many charities) in Italy (Vittoria, 2023). Interestingly, thanks to a strong advocacy effort (doctor, 10.07.2020), Sicily is one of those regions where such services passed, between the 1980s and today, from the private and charity sphere, with ambulatories in churches or volunteering associations, to the public sphere in Provincial Health Agencies and territorial Operative Units that are generalistic and specialized in immigrant populations—both long-term and temporary city users, documented and undocumented. The access is direct and open to everybody, no reservation or booking is needed. One of the most relevant infrastructures in Palermo is one of the two public clinics working under the Operative Unit for the Promotion of Immigrant Health. The idea of this service is to offer regular care services and be, at the same time, specialized in patients with a migration background—as the street sign of the clinic, translated into six languages, shows. As a cultural mediator (15.07.2020) explains: "For a newcomer it is crucial, because it makes you feel safe."

To this aim, the clinic has adopted progressive measures and initiatives to effectively respond to the needs of the different profiles of migrants living in Palermo; these measures also explain why the infrastructuring work happening in the clinic is so relevant. First, the clinic (and the Operative Unit more in general) gathers in the same space various competencies: namely two doctors, a pediatrician, a nurse, and a social worker, with the collaboration of a gynecologist, psychologists, social-worker trainees, and cultural mediators. This allows a more comprehensive reading of people's needs, as well as communication support. Second, the doctor and the social worker decided to change the opening hours to better fit the working time of migrants. Third, the clinic provides a very crucial service: it issues the code for Temporarily Present Foreigners (*Stranieri Temporaneamente Presenti*; STP). The STP code is a national code, formally part of the healthcare national system, that gives access to essential and urgent care to people without a valid residence permit, who cannot sign in to the national health system, nor be assigned to a general practitioner. Despite this code

being formally available in the national system, not all public clinics provide this service; its relevance is well explained by a doctor of a hospital facility providing the same service:

> The point is that many cannot plan their departure, and this stresses the system….What characterizes the clinic Aiuto Materno and mine is the release mode of the STP code: We issue them on sight. To migrants who are not in a reception center, you can't say "Come back in eight days," so we do it right away and then start the procedure. Everything has to be done right away. (doctor, 29.07.2020)

Interestingly, the same clinics also provide patients with a personal medical history notebook, with all data gathered from medical screenings. The aim is to provide them with information that could be useful elsewhere along migration trajectories, acknowledging their right to movement (Bovo, 2024b).

The infrastructuring work of this clinic is framed in an entirely formalized and public setting, managed at a regional level in Italy. The doctor and social worker are public servants, and the tools (including the STP code) are also formal tools of the health system. In this case, informality concerns rather the way individuals navigate a formal setting: the way opening times are stretched beyond "traditional" working hours, the way the service and the space are organized, and the choice to use the STP code. What is at stake here is the "discretionary power" (Lieto, 2022) of individual actors who informally move within a given regulatory framework, without really acting against the rules but rather stretching them. Once again, this allows service providers to better adapt to migratory trajectories. In this case, the risk is that of linking such capacity of adaptation to the individual agency of single actors and not to the system as a whole.

6. Resourcefulness and Criticalities of In/Formal Practices

In the context of a large public action, as described in Section 3, the three examples help us address the question of what "in/formal" in arrival infrastructuring work is and why this in/formality is important for infrastructuring arrivals. In Palermo, informality is sometimes prevalent over formality (Chiodelli, 2019): We saw a private dorm whose space, actors, and practices are largely informal, a third sector helpdesk where informality rather pertains to organizational settings and habits, and a public health clinic where informality is linked to the discretionary power of public servants. The definition of in/formality emerging from these examples needs to be context-based and flexible: Actors and settings are rarely "always" or "only" informal (or formal). In this sense, we argue that practices should be the primary focus when considering in/formality, and we propose applying the in/formality framework to practices—or to infrastructuring work—rather than to the infrastructures themselves. This allows us to grasp a whole range of in/formal dimensions, comprising informal infrastructuring work happening in informal settings, informal habits and organizational arrangements, *and* informal individual and punctual actions taken in formal settings. Importantly, this definition broadens the concept of in/formality as it relates to the public or private nature of infrastructures, used by some contributions on arrival infrastructures (Hans, 2023; Schrooten & Meeus, 2019) and it overturns the idea that informal arrangements are exceptions to the formal ones.

The three examples contribute to understanding why in/formality is relevant in arrival infrastructuring work, but also clarify that its resourcefulness goes hand in hand with some criticalities. The resourcefulness of informal practices for arrival infrastructuring generally lies in the capacity of these practices to "adhere" and "adapt" to the specific needs of landing migrants. The cross-ability (and not only accessibility) of the

Missione dorms, the continuous presence, openness, and horizontal management of the Arci Porco Rosso, and the opening hours or STP code service in the clinics are all examples of this adaptability. What is particularly resourceful is the ability of such in/formal infrastructuring practices to move beyond—and stretch—binary categories of temporality, subjectivity, and mobility through which migration processes and urban context are governed in Europe. Agricultural workers can access a dorm, *despite* the fact they won't stay for a long time; newcomers can use the Arci Porco Rosso helpdesk, *despite* their status (at that moment); through the STP code, migrants can access immediate basic healthcare, *despite* the fact they might be leaving Palermo in the short term. Criticalities, on the other hand, are of diverse types: The case of the Missione dorm enhances a trade-off between access and quality of resources, the infrastructuring work of the Arci Porco Rosso faces the risk of substituting state-infrastructuring action, and the discretionary work of the health clinic links to direct adaptability to individuals rather than to the whole system. Interestingly, all these criticalities relate to the lack of, or problematic relationship between, infrastructuring work and public provision of infrastructures, and can be understood only if framed within the peculiar context of Palermo.

7. Concluding Remarks

This contribution outlines how infrastructuring work was deployed in the city of Palermo, between 2015 and 2020, during a moment of intense arrivals in the city; it suggests that to grasp the nature and role played by different actors, we shall assume a broad definition of "public" action, rooted in the specific context of Palermo. A long gaze at the history of the city helps to unpack this definition: On one hand, the retreat or absence of the public sector has created space for the third sector, which now plays a key role in service provision. However, this shift often carries the risk of substitution, a dynamic that remains critical and generates tensions. On the other hand, public and third-sector actors often work hand in hand, especially around certain policy fields—among which that of hospitality. This twofold nature of the public action represents a key feature of this city, where we examined three arrival infrastructures, operating within different life domains and showcasing various aspects of in/formality. From the three examples, we argued that in/formality shall be attributed to practices, rather than to spaces or actors: In/formal practices can happen for limited time periods, within formal and informal settings. We also argued that in/formality is resourceful because it makes arrival infrastructuring more "adaptive" to arrival needs, often challenging prevailing binary approaches towards it. Such resourcefulness should always be observed together with the related criticalities, that often attain the relationship with what is formal and (mainly) public.

The definition of in/formality we outlined and its ambiguous role in infrastructuring arrival are linked to the specific context of Palermo and can be more clearly grasped if framed within its position, as a city at the threshold between North and South, as a city "in the South of the North." This peculiar position has supported two kinds of trajectories: first, the trajectory of the city of Palermo on a national and international horizon. As seen, the alliance of the public political discourse, public institutions, and local associations around hospitality allowed Palermo to take a distance from the prevailing Mafia-related narrative and to describe itself internationally as a welcoming city. Second, the presence of many and diverse in/formal practices, common to many Mediterranean cities, support the trajectories of individuals who land in the city. The peculiarity of a local urban context in Southern Europe is therefore to infrastructure arrivals and migration trajectories beyond binary categories, in their plural temporality, subjectivity, and mobility. In this sense, therefore, Palermo, as a Southern European and Mediterranean context, embodies a precious opportunity for research and understanding of the three debates on arrival infrastructuring work,

in/formality, and "Southern thought." In Palermo, the in/formal character of arrival infrastructuring work challenges conventional frameworks and approaches, inviting us to "stay with" the ambiguity inherent in these processes, a characteristic of Mediterranean and Southern perspectives.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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