Article

The Spaces of Social Services as Social Infrastructure: Insights From a Policy-Innovation Project in Milan

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Abstract

The spatial organisation of social services has long been residual for both urban planning and social welfare policies in Italian cities. This often results in randomly chosen locations and poor design arrangements, which ignore the role that space might play in fostering social life and inclusion. The scarce relevance given to the topic both in research and implementation is connected to the historical evolution of social services in the country and the scant resources devoted to their provision. Basing itself on the debate on welfare spaces and social infrastructures and drawing on a collaborative-research experience within an experimental policy-innovation project developed in Milan, this article tackles the role of space in social services provision following three directions. Firstly, it analyses how, at the urban level, welfare innovations and the interplay between urban planning and welfare policies might contribute to reshaping the traditional physical structures of social services and their map to favour more inclusive patterns of access to local welfare. Secondly, it investigates the role of social services as social infrastructures in increasing accessibility, reducing stigmatisation, and interpreting in a more inclusive way the complex public-private partnerships that allow welfare implementation nowadays. Finally, it discusses how, in the face of contemporary trends in the activation of welfare spaces, traditional urban planning tools are challenged in monitoring their increasingly dynamic distribution in the city. This highlights the need to develop innovative urban planning strategies and tools to effectively support decision-making and design.

Keywords

local welfare; Milan; services localisation; social infrastructures; social services; spaces for welfare; territorialisation; welfare services; WeMi

1. Introduction

Economic restructuring processes, increasing flexibilisation of labour markets, socio-demographic changes, and the crises of national welfare systems have notoriously eroded traditional social protection and exacerbated traits of social fragility in many European countries in the past decades. The profiles of individuals and households in need of support have increased and diversified, well beyond the typical poor and multi-problematic social assistance recipients. Against this backdrop, local governments have been facing, for long years now, the urgency to reorganise welfare measures in order to provide more effective and appropriate answers to social needs while dealing with decreasing resources. In fact, in the frame of "subsidiarisation" (Kazepov, 2010), since the 1980s, welfare regulation and financing have increasingly been a competence of sub-national institutional levels,

and its provision is growingly carried out by non-public actors within a variety of multi-level governance patterns (Ascoli & Ranci, 2003; Bifulco & Vitale, 2006) and new "statutory spaces of planning" (Haughton et al., 2009). The Great Global Recession started in 2008, and the related austerity measures affected welfare services provision and their organisation at the local level. Processes of social innovation (Oosterlynck et al., 2013), as well as of policy innovation were introduced, intensifying the implementation of networked forms of governance and hybrid forms of provision (Davies & Blanco, 2017) in the attempt to cope with more widespread and diversified needs through scanter resources. The changing profiles of both social needs and people in need brought firmly to the floor the necessity to rethink the contents of welfare support, but also the way citizens access it, questioning issues of threshold, proximity, visibility, and the quality of spaces that, for a long time, had been neglected both by policymakers and by scholars. This renovated attention towards the accessibility and design of premises where citizens get access to welfare can be grounded on the debate on social infrastructures, i.e., "the networks of spaces, facilities, institutions and groups that create affordances for social connections" (Latham & Layton, 2019, p. 3), regardless of age, race, gender, or income. The fact that places where social services are provided matter in terms of developing and maintaining social bonds could indeed seem axiomatic, but it is rarely investigated and discussed. Drawing on what we learned from our involvement, first as project partners and later as scientific consultants, in an innovative case of reorganisation of access to social services—the WeMi programme in the City of Milan, Italy—this contribution discusses the role and the potential of social services as part of the "social infrastructures" of the city (Klinenberg, 2018) and questions the reasons and implications of the neglect of both urban planning and welfare policies over the spatial qualities of social services. In particular, the article aims at answering the following questions:

1. What are the contemporary challenges for local Italian administrations in planning the spaces of social services?
2. Which actors take part in the current provision of social services and how do their presence and their interrelations affect the spatial configurations of such spaces?
3. How may design strategies contribute to increasing accessibility and social inclusion?

The article is organised as follows: The next section explores different theoretical perspectives on the spatial features of social welfare services from a multidisciplinary perspective. Section 3 sets the context and presents the recent innovations of the local welfare system in Milan. Section 4 describes the research actions and methods on which the article draws. Section 5 further delves into the spatial configurations of the WeMi

spaces. The last section discusses the project's innovative features against the theoretical overlook and points to different research paths.

2. Understanding the Changing Patterns and Meanings of the Distribution of Spaces for Welfare

Analysing the relationship between welfare services and space requires assuming different disciplinary viewpoints. Studies on welfare services in urban areas have mainly focused on specific programs and contexts, particularly in deprived neighbourhoods (Moulaert et al., 2012, p. 16). Many scholars have explored the spatialisation of poverty and social exclusion dynamics with specific reference to unfair planning policies/programmes or unequal redistributive welfare measures (Cassiers & Kesteloot, 2012; Musterd & Ostendorf, 2013). More recent contributions have also investigated the relationships between the territorial distribution of poverty and social exclusion, the existing panorama of welfare services, and the rise of post-crisis social innovation initiatives (Blanco et al., 2016). Within these neighbourhood-based analyses, there is minimal investigation dedicated to the physical features of the concrete spaces in which welfare services are provided and how these may affect user-provider relationships. Created in the past century as the "material infrastructures for welfare provision and representations of the nation-state powers" (Cochrane, 2003), many of these structures have gone through major reconfigurations over the past decades, following the transformation of national welfare systems. In the Italian urban planning academic debate, this perspective has been introduced by Secchi's (2005) pivotal analysis of the morphological changes of 20th-century cities and, more specifically, of the "material dimension of welfare provision." Secchi's definition of welfare spaces includes a broad spectrum of urban facilities ranging from collective meeting places to parking lots and churches. Scholars who worked around this approach based their argumentation on the notion of urban welfare, intended as the right to a planned city (Caldarice, 2018, pp. 2–3; Renzoni, 2018). This term embraces all the urban facilities that guarantee the citizens' well-being and considers them products of the welfare state. Within this theoretical stream, Tosi and Munarin (2009) used the term *welfare spaces* with a comprehensive reference to those services and infrastructures that shape people's lives in cities, referring, among others, to green areas, parks, and open spaces. While recognising the comprehensiveness of this debate, our interest mainly focuses on the spatial features of *social services*, i.e., the facilities through which in-kind or in-cash social assistance interventions that help households and individuals cope with different forms of vulnerability are organised and delivered (United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, 2019).

If the urban planning debates fall short in defining the welfare spaces, the social policy literature has

long neglected the analysis of these spaces' localisation and physical characteristics. In one notable multidisciplinary exception, Bifulco (2003) highlights how spatial features, social interactions, organisations, and institutions are bound to shape welfare services provision and people's experience of welfare policies. These should be understood against the backdrop of a twofold shift that reshaped spaces for welfare at the beginning of the 2000s: "from quantity to quality" and "from structures to processes'' (Bifulco, 2003, p. 10; Bifulco & Vitale, 2006). The first refers to the inadequacy of quantitative-based planning tools to grasp and respond to changing social needs in contemporary cities (Tosi, 2003). The second concerns the mentioned challenges of local welfare systems and the ever-changing nature of social needs, which entailed a reinterpretation of the traditional structures of welfare provision towards flexibility and diversification. Indeed, DeVerteuil (2000) draws up a thorough overlook of how quantitative strategies for public services' localisation, mostly based on cost-benefit analysis and catchment areas (Teitz, 1968), have progressively been superseded by a more contextualised and human-based approach (Dear et al., 1994) leading to a "post quantitative era" of service planning. These scholars stress the differences between private and public services, questioning how public disinvestment and devolution might have affected localisation strategies and opening up the debate on how third-sector actors might contribute to reshaping public services' geographies (DeVerteuil, 2000).

Along with localisation, though, Bifulco (2003) also introduces other relevant physical dimensions that we embrace in this contribution, such as settings (i.e., the architectural and interior design arrangements) and artefacts (i.e., objects, lights, colours; Bifulco & Vitale, 2003; de Leonardis & Bifulco, 2003).

Evidence from organisational studies shows how these spatial aspects contribute to the process of "sense-making" (Weick, 1995), that is the way organisations create and acknowledge their environment. This analytical perspective has created a significant shift in this field of study, traditionally focused on functional analysis, towards more human-centred approaches. According to this theoretical trend, space is co-determined and constantly reshaped by the relationship between human and physical environment and can be interpreted as a sociocultural process (Gagliardi, 1990). In this "relational perspective" (Fjellfeldt et al., 2021) stands the "generative power" (Weick, 1995) of space for organisations, a continuous process of learning by/from doing that simultaneously reshapes spatial features, social interactions, and the meanings and goals of organisations themselves. From this viewpoint, the way spaces are planned, designed, maintained, and practised (Star, 1999) acquires a renewed importance, for the intertwining of spatial features and human behaviours generates a "social surplus" to the functional features of the physical environment (Amin, 2008). This surplus is

what defines "social infrastructures," i.e., those spaces that, besides hosting a functional use, can foster inclusion, publicness, and coexistence among different social groups (Klinenberg, 2018). It might seem tautological to state that the spaces of social services are social infrastructures. They are, in fact, "long-term physical assets in the social sectors that enable goods and services to be provided" as in the institutional definition of social infrastructure adopted at the European level (Fransen et al., 2018, p. 14). Still, they have not been regarded yet as spaces that—despite their strong institutional features and functional vocation—may also allow social gatherings and inclusion, in other words, as "affordances for social connections" (Latham & Layton, 2019). We believe this viewpoint is even more relevant in the light of the complex public-private partnerships that characterise the current provision of social welfare services, which questions not only the traditional planning strategies and tools used to design the spaces for social services, but also the ways in which people approach and experience their provision.

3. The Context: Roots and Recent Innovations in Milan Municipal Welfare

Social services have long received marginal resources and attention in the Italian welfare system. In contrast, most public financing has historically been devoted to old-age pensions and healthcare services. Support for persons in need has primarily been the responsibility of family solidarity and local bodies where it was lacking (Madama, 2010). In the prolonged absence of a national framework, municipal provision of social assistance has developed in a very diversified way. Typically, large municipalities display a set of physical premises, which are the sites of municipal social services, where social workers manage social assistance programmes and measures. After three decades of decentralisation in the absence of a national frame, in 2000, social assistance services have been framed by National Law No. 328 that also introduced specific tools to promote a social planning culture (i.e., the Piano di Zona, a three-year local welfare plan) that, however, had no connection with the urban planning tools and no focus on localisation of facilities. Currently, social assistance services are financed by the National Fund for Social Policies (Fondo Nazionale per le Politiche Sociali) and by regional and municipal budgets. The National Fund for Social Policies underwent significant reductions over the austerity years that followed the economic and financial crises of 2008 and 2011, passing from €1.8 billion in 2004 to €42.9 million in 2012—97,72%—which was followed by a recovery in 2013 (€343.7 million) and a substantial stabilisation afterwards (according to the authors' own calculations based on data from the Ministry of Welfare [Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali, 2022]). However, before the recent and comparatively late introduction of the first (2018) and the current (2019) national

minimum income schemes, the National Fund for Social Policies resources represented only 8.3% of the overall investments in social assistance provision, according to data retrieved from the National Institute of Statistics (Istituto Nazionale Previdenza Sociale, 2022). The provision of social services is still primarily assigned to municipal administrations that plan and provide services with resources based on national and regional norms and transfers.

The Milanese local welfare system is rooted in a long-term inheritance of enlightened charity activities. From the late 19th century and especially after the end of the Second World War, the tradition of reformist socialism and that of social Catholicism converged to a pragmatic attitude towards support provision (Agnoletto, 2015). The continuity of centre-left local administrations led by socialist mayors since the fall of the fascist regime and until the early 1990s promoted the building of a modern local welfare system imbued with universalistic principles and empowerment-oriented approaches (Benassi, 2019). The city administration developed an early capacity to steer the energies and the initiatives of civil society. Since the mid-1990s, over two decades of centre-right local administrations, a passive approach to the economic support of the poor prevailed, together with an exacerbation and repression of social conflict (Costa et al., 2016). It should be noted that, over the same two decades, Lombardy (the region of which Milan is the capital city) was also steadily governed by centre-right coalitions, characterised by extensive use of externalisation and marketisation policies in welfare provision (Gori, 2011). Despite the leading role of political parties endorsing both localism and the prominence of non-public actors, in these years, the distinctive local capacity for the governance of horizontal subsidiarity went "paradoxically lost" (Polizzi & Vitale, 2010). Sharp top-down relations characterised both the interaction between the region and the municipalities ("regional centralism"; Bifulco, 2011) as well as the connections between the Milanese city administration and the third-sector welfare providers. In parallel, the role of non-public bodies, like large bank foundations, able to finance welfare provision and innovation, grew significantly in the wake of the reduction of resources related to austerity measures.

In 2011, a significant political change at the local level brought a centre-left coalition to power after two decades. One of the distinctive characteristics of the new political action was a renewed attention to the centrality of local welfare interventions that aimed at reinterpreting the best traits of the Milanese tradition of horizontal subsidiarity, with the recovery of a decisive coordination role in the hands of the public administration, which was—as we shall see—also acknowledged by the non-public financing actors.

In order to face the challenges posed by the reduction of transfers from the national level and by the concomitant increase and diversification of social needs, starting in 2011, the Department of Social Policies of the City of Milan introduced a thorough reorganisation of the local welfare system. The social assistance services had been traditionally organised in a rigid category-based system typical of municipal welfare in big Italian cities. Each category—which represented a socio-demographic profile or a specific condition of need (e.g., households with underage children, the elderly, disabled persons, adults without underage children)—corresponded to a specialised municipal office with its own staff and facilities and a dedicated budget. In a cutting-edge rearrangement that demanded a significant effort from the staff at all levels, this category-based articulation was reorganised into three new transversal areas, corresponding to the main types of interventions of social assistance services: residential, territorial, and home-based (*residenzialità*, *territorialità*, *domiciliarità*; Ghetti, 2014). In parallel, the provisioning system was restructured into two levels: a first level of universal access, welcoming all the citizens expressing a need without any category-based restriction, and a second level of specialised services and structures to which citizens can be directed if necessary and appropriate.

Other Italian cities underwent similar organisational changes in the last decade. For example, between 2016 and 2017, the City of Bologna implemented a set of reforms to the local welfare model, introducing more transversal management and access areas and strengthening the role of citizens' access points (Marani, 2021; Tomesani, 2017). Moreover, many aspects of both the reorganisation cases of Bologna and Milan can be traced back to the pioneering and pivotal experience of the Microaree programme, implemented in 2005 in the City of Trieste thanks to an agreement between the regional health authority, the municipality, and the public housing agency, later also extended to third-sector organisations. This initiative was aimed at providing various forms of support to the residents of the most deprived neighbourhoods of the city, narrowing the gap between citizens and institutions while offering more appropriate responses to their needs and redistributing public spending (de Leonardis & De Vidovich, 2017; de Leonardis & Monteleone, 2007).

Within this broad reorganisation, a more specific reflection was initiated on the patterns of access to social services. The general decrease in the available resources made it necessary to rely on different channels granting additional funds to finance innovations and experimentations. In 2014, Fondazione Cariplo, a significant banking foundation, opened a public tender named Welfare in Azione (Welfare in Action), targeting proposals promoting new forms of welfare services that enhanced the joint action of public administrations, local communities, and third-sector bodies (Bricocoli & Sabatinelli, 2017c). For the first time, local public bodies were allowed to lead networks proposing projects to such tenders. The municipality of Milan led an extensive and diversified network of 16 local actors (public, private, and third sector, including university

departments), proposing the Welfare di Tutti (Welfare of/for All) project, which was shortlisted and financed. Welfare di Tutti, later renamed WeMi (an acronym for "Welfare Milan" and "We Milan"), aimed at overcoming the existing fragmentation of services provision, finding innovative answers to increasingly changing social needs, and extending access to social assistance services to a broader range of citizens, including those who may not be entitled to means-tested support, but still need orientation and intermediation to access reliable services through co-payment or out-of-pocket payment. WeMi mainly focused on home-based services, whose previously scattered and heterogeneous supply was being reorganised through a revision of the municipal accreditation system of non-public providers. The project aimed at testing two significant modalities of access to services. An online platform (https://wemi.comune.milano.it) was introduced, offering information on all the home-based service providers certified by the municipality of Milan, and allowing the matching between demand and supply. In parallel, the project aimed to test specific "territorial platforms," soon renamed "WeMi spaces," hybrid and innovative low-threshold places where citizens could find information and support but also offer their contribution as active citizens. These spaces were introduced with multiple purposes. First, to contrast the potentially adverse effects of the digital divide and the informative asymmetries that are typical in systems where private demand and private supply are supposed to be a direct match. Also, they aimed to support citizens in expressing their needs and, thus, increase the capacity of social services to grasp them. Furthermore, the WeMi spaces were intended to promote providers' supply and users' demand for new shared types of care and assistance services that are usually provided on an individual basis (e.g., babysitters, caregivers, after-school activities) to lower production costs and users' fees, but also to support the development of social bonds. Last but not least, especially for this article, the WeMi spaces were aimed at experimenting with new modes of allowing citizens access to social services, particularly through a different outlook on the spatial features of such places.

4. Case Study: An Articulated Collaborative Research Path

This contribution stems from an articulated experience of collaborative research, that is, a research process that bridges research and practice and in which scientific and societal stakeholders work jointly (Westling et al., 2014). Collaborative research is motivated by the awareness that the contribution of a variety of standpoints, not only from different scientific disciplines but also from the domains of both academic research and practice, is necessary to tackle complex issues and to produce "more usable knowledge" (Westling et al., 2014). Such added values, which for scientists also include access to otherwise unreachable information, come with

a change in the researchers' positioning, within a shift from "a culture of scientific autonomy to a culture of accountability" (Nowotny et al., 2001, p. 119). The pursuit of accountability in collaborative research, therefore, requires developing reflexivity in two directions. Firstly, as a self-critical reflection of researchers on their role in knowledge production, to enhance transparency and legitimacy. Secondly, as a perspective favouring the collective awareness among the different participants of the existence, and legitimacy, around any complex issue, of different viewpoints, interests, and power degrees, and of the necessity to acknowledge all of them to make progress in the comprehension of the phenomena and in the drafting of solutions (Westling et al., 2014).

More particularly, this article draws on the work that the authors carried out in two different collaborative research actions that are detailed below with their phases and methods. In parallel to these research actions, the authors carried out a review of the existing literature and of administrative documents and an analysis of institutional and statistical data to set the background.

The first was developed during the initial three-year WeMi experimentation. The Department of Architecture and Urban Studies of Politecnico di Milano took part in the partnership, a heterogeneous mix of professional backgrounds and competencies that drafted the project proposal and that developed it after the selection. The department was involved in various project steps, with a particular commitment to accompanying and scientifically supervising the co-design of the WeMi spaces (Bricocoli & Sabatinelli, 2017b, 2017c). As typical in the "collaborative research" context, this allowed close observation of project-implementation dynamics, giving the authors the opportunity to access information on both organisational and spatial changes that would have else been unapproachable. The authors participated in dozens of meetings, first during the drafting of the proposal and over the three years of project implementation. In these meetings, which were held under the coordination of representatives of the Municipal Welfare Department, and that included plenary sessions with representatives of the entire partnership as well as sub-groups working on specific actions of the project, advancements were circularly planned and discussed. Besides, the authors led an intensive co-design activity involving 26 social workers partaking in the project, employed in the municipal services and the third-sector partners, with a twofold purpose. The first aim was to share knowledge on the current organisation, working practices, and spatial features (especially weaknesses) of social assistance services. The second aim was to collectively identify the goals to be pursued through the experimentation of WeMi spaces and to provide references, case studies, field visits, and open discussions to feed design orientations. The co-design activity consisted of five meetings, for a total of 30 hours. During the first phase, the features of existing spaces for welfare

were collectively observed, analysed, and discussed. In a second phase, the co-design workshop more specifically focused on issues related to the realisation of the first three WeMi spaces, that would be inaugurated between late 2015 and 2016: WeMi San Gottardo, WeMi Capuana, and WeMi Trivulzio. Detailed notes of the five meetings have been taken by the researchers. In a third phase, the authors led close scrutiny of the development of the WeMi San Gottardo space, which was the very first to be activated and where the pilot project intended to explicitly test the unprecedented co-habitation of a social assistance space with a bar run by a social enterprise. In this space, one of the authors carried out a one-year participant observation (2016–2017) to gain an in-depth understanding of service methodologies, as well as of the interactions—in a single space—between social workers, bar managers and tenders, clients of the bar, and users of the WeMi service (Marani, 2017). The researcher spent 15 hours a week inside the space for eight months working in close contact with the architect designing the space, the managers of the social cooperative that would run the bar as well as the WeMi social workers, with whom she agreed the times and days of the observations. The field notes from the participant observation have been jointly analysed and discussed within the authors' group.

The second research action started after the end of the WeMi project, in 2018. The authors carried out, on behalf of the Municipal Welfare Department, an investigation of the physical features of the spaces for social assistance in the City of Milan, aimed at providing an overview to be included in the new Welfare Development Plan (the Milan Piano di Zona). The investigation had two focuses: one on the existing spaces of the "ordinary" municipal social services and one on the evolution of the WeMi spaces after four years of activity. This research entailed several actions. First, 15 semi-structured interviews were carried out with managers of the Municipal Welfare Department, coordinators, and social workers from different sites of municipal social services, as well as social workers from different third-sector bodies working in the WeMi spaces. The interviews were conducted in the social services' premises, with one informant in the case of managers, and with small groups of two to three social workers respectively. Second, the authors visited 13 sites. On each visit, the features of the specific spaces where the service is located were observed through a guided tour (Thomson, 2018) led by one or more coordinators/social workers. Explorative walks in the area around the space were also carried out, to observe the location, the connection with the surrounding, and the building where the space is situated. The semi-structured interviews and the visits were carried out by one, two, or three of the authors in different combinations, and audio recorded. Notes from both the interviews and the site visits were analysed with reference to the following analytical dimensions related to the organisation of the spaces: localisation, visibility, accessi-

bility, versatility of spaces, and uses. The analysis of localisation, settings, and artifacts (Bifulco, 2003), based on both documents, interviews, and visit notes, was synthesised through a graphic representation (conducted with Martina Bovo). A photographic survey (led by Giovanni Hänninen) was aimed to complement the effectiveness of the dissemination of the research results. In this article, a selection of these photographs helps the reader to visualise what is described and analysed in the text.

The articulated experiences of research detailed in this paragraph have benefitted from the above-mentioned major strengths that characterise "collaborative research," which are the access to invaluable sources of information, and the possibility to produce knowledge that concretely contributes to innovation processes. On the other hand, it also suffered from the main limitation of collaborative research, linked to the shift from a role that is external to the observed process to one that is embedded in the innovation process itself. The main countermeasures adopted have been the constant consideration of several diverse standpoints on the object of study, and the transparency in the authors' positionality in all the research phases, including dissemination.

The following section draws on the aforementioned research steps, focussing on the analysis of the spatial features of the WeMi spaces. In particular, the aim is to show how the involvement of different actors in social services provision leads to diversified spatial needs and outcomes that challenge traditional localisation strategies and planning tools. Also, the section analyses the potential of such spatial variety in creating "affordances for social connection" (Latham & Layton, 2019).

5. The WeMi Spaces: A Variety of New Access Points to Welfare Throughout the City

During the first phase of the co-design action, the general inappropriateness of many existing spaces for welfare in the city emerged. The viewpoints of the different actors involved (social workers and managers of both municipal services and third-sector bodies) converged in highlighting the unwelcoming settings and aesthetics, the scarce functional compliance and visibility, and, in some cases, the severely decayed conditions of either the structures, the internal spaces, or the equipment. The stigma as spaces for the poor and the lack of appeal for citizens who are not traditional welfare beneficiaries but still may be users of social services, such as the newly impoverished or the non-poor (like, for instance, foster parents), was also underlined (Bricocoli & Sabatinelli, 2017c). The Welfare di Tutti project aimed at tackling these limitations, experimenting with a different way of realising spaces for welfare. Within the three years of the funded project, three pilot spaces were developed: WeMi SanGottardo, WeMi Capuana, and WeMi Trivulzio. Drawing on this first experimentation, the three pilots were consolidated, while other WeMi spaces spread throughout the city. In spring 2022, their overall number

was 20. The new openings result from a negotiation between the Municipal Welfare Department and local actors with available spaces interested in integrating their (diverse) activities with a WeMi space. Along with the formal approval of the municipal administration, the organisations that decide to activate a WeMi space need to follow specific standards concerning their activities. In order to become a WeMi space, one of the requirements is also to conform to specific guidelines regarding the brand identity and coordinated image of their spatial configuration, defined by the experts of the Department of Design of Politecnico di Milano (Bucchetti, 2017). Geometrical forms in bright colours and an interactive panel presenting the WeMi programme are reiterated elements in all the WeMi spaces—although adapted to the specific physical features of each space. The development of a unique visual identity for the WeMi spaces has signed a marked difference to the existing sites of municipal social services, which—as opposed to other municipal services, such as day-care centres and pre-schools— lack even a unitary plate to signal the access point.

This section addresses the features of seven WeMi spaces among those analysed for the Welfare Development Plan in 2018, selected as typologically representative of the variety of the specific functional mix they host and of their diverse physical and spatial traits. The analysis is based on the findings raised both through the interviews and the site visits and, for WeMi SanGottardo, of the participant observation. Figure 1 outlines the basic features of the spaces and pinpoints their localisation in the different neighbourhoods of the city.

WeMi San Gottardo is the most emblematic example of the new Milanese welfare spaces. Here the aim was to develop a hybrid space where the WeMi space would cohabit with a cafeteria. Specially rented for the project experimentation, the space—formerly a grocery shop— was identified based on its location on a main commercial street (Figure 2), size, view on the street, and proximity to schools and urban gardens. Managed by a social cooperative that employs people with mental diseases (BarAcca), the bar coexists with the activities of WeMi, managed in shifts by social workers hired by different local cooperatives during the bar's opening hours:

Here social operators can experience very different working conditions, that often change during the day. The space is generally very convivial, populated by users of different ages, with background music and chitchats. It can also be very crowded during the evening, attended by younger customers enjoying a drink. (Social operator of WeMi San Gottardo)
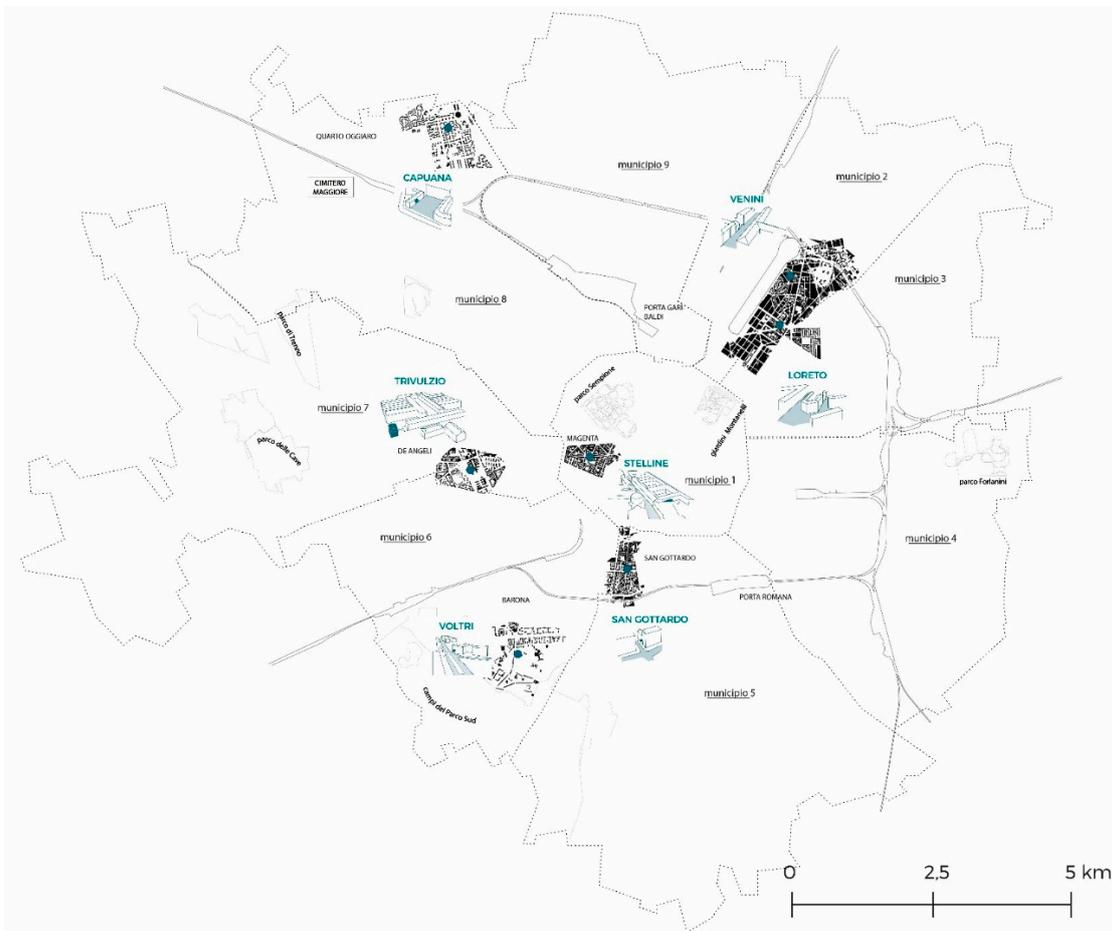

Figure 1. Localisation and morphological features of the WeMi spaces in the City of Milan, 2018.

Figure 2. RAB–WeMi San Gottardo, streetscape. Source: Courtesy of Giovanni Hänninen.

WeMi San Gottardo was designed by the architectural studio Consalez Rossi Architetti Associati that, through an intensive co-design process engaging all the actors involved (the municipal social workers, those from the cooperatives, and the social entrepreneurs managing the bar), emphasised its double identity, creating two distinct but communicating areas (Consalez, 2017). The reason was twofold: Firstly, during the aforementioned co-design workshop, social workers expressed the need for an intimate corner to be possibly used for private talks with the users if needed. Secondly, the municipal urban planning regulation required a precise calculation of those square metres dedicated to commercial activity and of those devoted to social services. Indeed, such a hybrid configuration had no previous reference in the local land use plan and the "smallest urban planning agreement ever drafted," in the words of a Municipal Urban Planning Department representative created a precedent for further experimentations. The aim was to jointly address the prospective users, people attending the bar and people requesting social services, creating an inclusionary space. To that aim, the use of the different portions of space is not exclusive: Outside of the WeMi opening hours, that corner can also be used by the patrons of the bar and, conversely, a WeMi interview could, in principle, take place at any of the bar tables. The double identity of the space can easily be detected from the outside through a double shop window that shows the bar counter on one side and the project graphics on the opposite side (Figure 3).

WeMi Capuana is located on a small square in a public housing neighbourhood of the periphery (Figure 4), inside a publicly owned space that had been entrusted for some years before the project to the use of a small network of associations and social cooperatives that mostly provide educational and parental support to the neighbourhood. The opening of a WeMi space provided an opportunity for this network to experiment with innovative, shared welfare services that further aggregate citizens' needs, providing them with a collective answer: "Listening to people is the greatest part of our job. Thanks to the diverse services we provide, we are able to grasp multi-dimensional needs and to provide individual and/or shared services" (social operator of WeMi Capuana).

From the physical point of view, the challenge was to operate in a space that was not purposely chosen for the project, but that was leased to it. The intervention aimed at reinforcing the space's flexibility that, through large doors and movable pieces of furniture, allows it to be adaptable for different activities at different hours or on different days. In the course of our observations, the space was often crowded with children who attended post-school activities in one of the sections of the large space, while their parents took the chance to formulate their needs to the social workers at the counter or in the dedicated office.

WeMi Trivulzio was initially located inside the largest nursing home in Milan (Pio Albergo Trivulzio), in the offices where a social cooperative managed the service that supported the demand-supply matching between households and individual carers for home-based services for dependent elderly persons. While flexible or hybrid use of the space was not an issue in this case, since the main function remained the support to demand-supply matching, carried out through individual

Figure 3. RAB–WeMi San Gottardo, view of the interiors. Source: Courtesy of Giovanni Hänninen.

meetings over the phone or in person, the site visit allowed us to appreciate how the location of the space was particularly important. Open to all citizens, it required walking through the entire length of the structure in order to reach it; this contributed to bringing the city inside the structure and letting citizens get in touch with some of the activities of the residents (Figure 5).

WeMi Voltri was created inside an informative point managed by a non-profit firm in a new, quite large social housing estate. Both orientation desks were opened within the framework of different projects funded by Fondazione Cariplo, and they now interact to cater to the needs of different people. This space is located on the ground floor (Figure 6), easily accessible from the
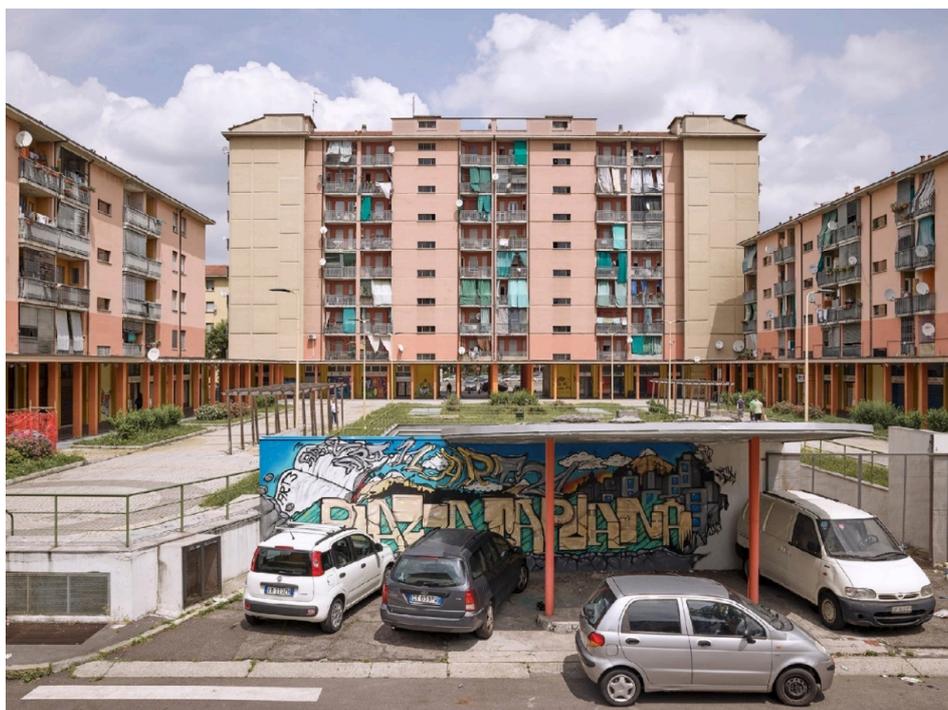
Figure 4. The square of WeMi Capuana. Source: Courtesy of Giovanni Hänninen.

Figure 5. The entrance hall of WeMi Trivulzio. Source: Courtesy of Giovanni Hänninen.

street. Besides the orientation desks, the space is available for different activities dedicated to and developed by the neighbourhood's residents (e.g., gym courses, parent meetings, etc.). The interviews conducted with social workers inside this space showed that these recreational activities were the occasion for the non-profit firm to establish a relationship with the inhabitants and their needs, and to direct them to other services provided by

Figure 6. The ground floor spaces of WeMi Voltri (on the right) inside the social housing estate of Via Voltri-Via di Rudini, Milan. Source: Courtesy of Giovanni Hänninen.

public and third-sector bodies already active in the area:

> During the inauguration of the space, a group of residents stopped by to ask about the possibility to use the space for recreational workshops. We agreed to share the space for this purpose and after this experience other initiatives were organised, some open to the residents and others to the whole citizenship. (Social operator of WeMi Voltri)

WeMi Loreto is located in the offices of a social cooperative, active for three decades in the field of social assistance and care services. The cooperative promoted its opening in partnership with the municipality and now manages it. Physically positioned in the internal courtyard of a residential building (Figure 7), its visibility from the street is guaranteed only by an external plate on the intercom system. A doorman indicates the presence of the services to the users during the morning hours. Our direct observations of the space, together with the interviews led by some of the social workers, show that the small dimensions of the space and its scarce visibility from the street are not conducive to collective activities. This encouraged the social cooperative to reach out to other actors and spaces in the neighbourhood, creating new partnerships and networks: "We reached out to some of the services located in the neighbourhood to look for potential collaborators and spread our services. We activated a collaboration with a bookshop and with schools, to activate cultural initiatives and workshops" (social operator of WeMi Loreto).

Also, WeMi Stelline is located at the site of the social cooperative (similarly active in care services for 30 years) that promoted and manages the WeMi space in collaboration with the municipality. What is radically different—as the researchers could hypothesise based on a preliminary desk analysis of the localisation, and then confirm through the site visits—is its location in the city, as well as the type of building where it is situated: a large, former orphanage for girls from the 16th century located in the city centre that now hosts a variety of private and public services, courses, and recreational activities. As in the previous case, the WeMi space is not visible from the outside and is also difficult to access due to the structural articulation of the building (Figure 8); users' orientation is supported by official plates and signs. On the other hand, it benefits from the coming and going that is specific to the building, due to the many functions it hosts. In any case, social workers state that the opening of the WeMi space has fostered local citizens' awareness of social services and stimulated their commitment, especially during evening or weekend events:

> Some people stop by during their visit to the building and the exhibitions hosted here just to ask about our service and its functions. They are usually elderly people with their grandchildren or parents with children asking for a babysitter or other personal or family services. (Social operator of WeMi Stelline)

Finally, WeMi Venini resembled the organisational model traced by WeMi San Gottardo, as it was located inside a multifunctional and fancy "hub" called HugMilano that opened in 2017 inside a former chocolate factory and hosted a bar, a co-working area, a bicycle repair shop, and a small stage for events. A complex co-existence of
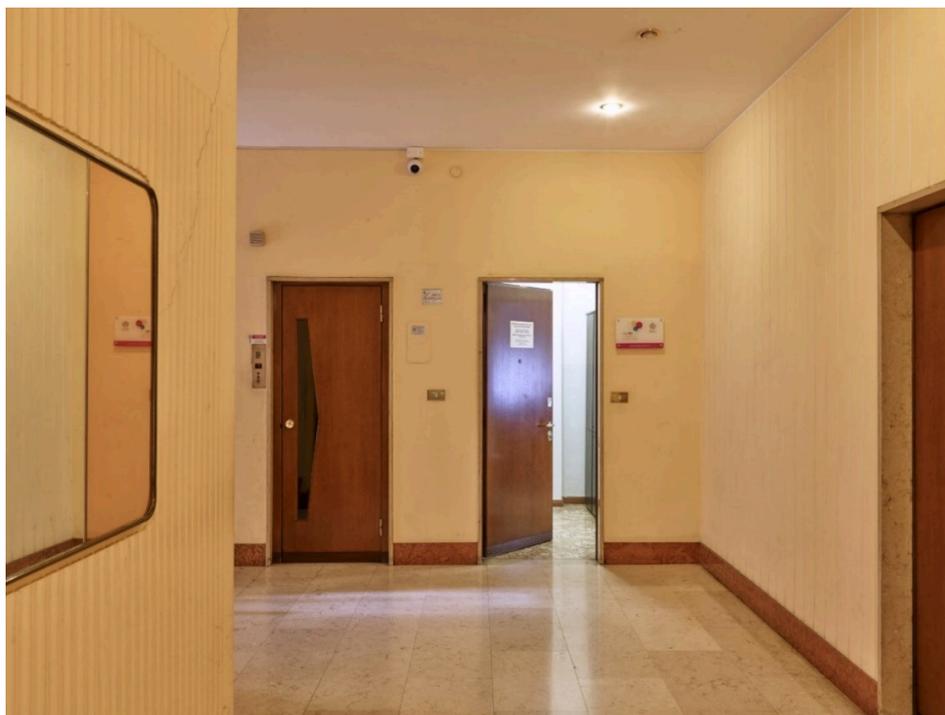
Figure 7. The residential building of WeMi Loreto. Source: Courtesy of Giovanni Hänninen.

Figure 8. The complex articulation of WeMi Stelline. Source: Courtesy of Giovanni Hänninen.

functions that was made possible by the strong versatile use of spaces managed through light tools and interventions: "Hug-WeMi is a cafeteria and a space for cultural events at the same time. All you need is to move the curtains. Also, we organise workshops and meetings on care-related issues, such as parenthood and disability" (social operator of WeMi Venini).

The place was not facing the street but was in an internal courtyard. The WeMi services were provided by an external social cooperative in an area near the entrance and a more private spot. In the course of our observations, we witnessed a lively atmosphere with loose spatial boundaries, where social workers, clients, and bartenders moved through the different areas of the

Figure 9. The courtyard whit the entrance of WeMi Venini/Hug Milano. Source: Courtesy of Giovanni Hänninen.

hub without specific restrictions, agreeing on the reciprocal circumstantial spatial needs. As we write, the hub is still open, while the WeMi space is no longer active as the social cooperative decided to relocate it to a different site.

In a nutshell, the brief overview of the WeMi spaces brought to light some common elements that will be discussed in the next section. Firstly, the relevance of the visual identity of WeMi, which helps users identify the service both from the outside (the plates on the building façade, the signs in the halls) and inside the space (the interactive panel). These *artefacts* (see Section 2) immediately communicate the presence of the social service and of those organisations involved in their provision. Secondly, the seven WeMi spaces are hybrid spaces that host various activities at different hours of the day, even simultaneously. This flexibility of spaces, serving differentiated functions and uses, constitutes an important "affordance," and broadens the possible range of provided services. This also allows mixing users with different profiles, contrasting services' targeting and stigmatisation. Thirdly, the interviews with the social workers inside these structures reveal the presence of a network of actors dealing with people's needs that is often reinforced by the coexistence of different subjects within the same multifunctional space. Finally, it is relevant to underline that none of these spaces is owned by the municipality of Milan, which promotes and coordinates the WeMi programme. This raises issues regarding urban planning localisation strategies and tools.

6. Discussion: New Spaces for Welfare, Old Urban Planning Tools?

The article outlined how the experimental project WeMi, developed within the reorganisation of the local welfare system of the municipality of Milan, led to the innovation of both social services and their spaces, improving *access* as a key strategy to branch out to a broader arena of users and to discourage services' categorisation and users' stigmatisation. In this perspective, the development of both the virtual and the physical WeMi platforms has had multiple purposes: to orientate citizens through the increasingly complex offer of welfare services and providers, to identify undetected social needs, to foster direct contact between citizens and social workers, and to promote shared service provision as well as the users' active involvement. They were deemed to work in an integrated way: The physical spaces offer support and direct interaction with citizens who, for different reasons, cannot autonomously use the online platform; the virtual platform is not only directly addressing the citizens but is also a tool that social workers can use to orientate them. In the spring of 2022, the online platform counted 292 services offered in the catalogue of home-based services, 55 providers reachable through the online platform, 4,491 social workers and carers involved with these providers, and 5,383 citizens that have accessed the

online platform to use the supply-demand matching service for family assistants and childminders, or to access to home-based care services to be paid out of their own pocket. Between June 2020 and May 2021 (during the Covid-19 pandemic), around 10,000 citizens accessed one of the WeMi spaces to obtain information or to seek orientation.

At the same time, services' *localisation*, *settings*, and *artefacts* (de Leonardis & Bifulco, 2003) have been core elements of this transformation as conveyors of the new institutional organisation and its welcoming purposes. Indeed, the WeMi spaces are scattered in various city neighbourhoods and arose spontaneously. This has created a heterogeneous panorama of multifunctional spaces, where commercial, residential, and care-related services often overlap. It is to be remarked that, after the three pilot spaces were created during the initial three-year experimental phase, the first wave of openings of WeMi spaces was concentrated in relatively central and semi-central areas. After some years, though, in the spring of 2022, WeMi spaces were active in 20 locations and various urban contexts, including some locations in the most remote periphery. While the introduction of a coordinated image and branding of the service plays an important role in terms of recognition of the service and affiliation to the city, the versatile criteria that rule the localisation of the services contribute to a significant de-standardisation of welfare spaces and to the exploitation of the potential that some unusual and extraordinary spaces may have.

Such *spatial welfare mix* embodies the mentioned shifts from "quantity to quality" (Bifulco, 2003, p. 10) that characterised both the debate on and implementation of service planning over time, challenging the traditional quantitative choices of localisation to respond to more flexible citizens' needs. Indeed, a variety of spaces may help to overcome the inadequacy of quantitative-based planning tools towards grasping the ever-changing nature of social needs and providing answers to them, which entails a reinterpretation of the traditional structures of welfare provision towards flexibility and diversification. This calls for a reframing of the design strategies of both urban planning and social policies and it brings about renewed attention to the physical features of welfare provision. In particular, the hybridisation of functions, services, users, and providers calls for a revision of the traditional urban planning tools that still rely on parametric assessments and zoning practices which were defined in a time of city growth when big quantities of new services were required to be localised to meet the increasing population (Bricocoli & Sabatinelli, 2017a). In this sense, the case of WeMi San Gottardo, whose combination of functions created a precedent for embracing a more significant number of welfare services in the land use plan, may well become a benchmark and contribute to renewing the debate.

The Welfare di Tutti project also highlights how contemporary spaces for welfare increasingly are activated

where spatial, human, and economic resources are made available. The "material infrastructures for welfare provision" (Cochrane, 2003) that have characterised the 20th-century welfare provision are now accompanied and sometimes substituted by new spaces, managed by a wider variety of actors, and host multiple functions. More and more, policy innovation is developed in places where social entrepreneurship and spatial resources can be activated. Such a structural change in the system of welfare providers, far from the public monopoly of the Glorious Thirty, is mirrored in a structural change in the localisation logic, which entails a significant modification of perspective in urban planning. While through a phase of (both urban and welfare) expansion, the approach of service planning was to build and distribute public facilities across a growing city and according to localisation and sizing, nowadays services (very often managed by third-sector entities) are frequently activated where a space—mainly an existing space and often not a public property—becomes available.

Somehow these developments challenge the idea that localisation and provision of public services are ruled by an overall principle of equal distribution across the city. The outcome is a map of services including facilities that are no longer directly covered—and that often are not even seen and acknowledged—by the traditional urban planning tools. The map of services offered in the domain of welfare policies is more and more dynamic as the presence, provision, and localisation of services can vary in a relatively short time, depending on the fate and timing of projects, initiatives and—more generally—uses (e.g., the case of WeMi Venini). This can put a strain on the stability of the services (and therefore their reliability for the citizens), as not all project-based services do get consolidated and institutionalised, as it happened with WeMi. Moreover, it complexifies the overall map of welfare services in the city. In order for urban planning to continue steering the localisation of services according to principles of rationality and equity, it is essential to develop tools and lenses to identify services where they are and to monitor changes quickly over time.

Against this spatial and functional variety, *settings* and *artefacts* play a decisive role in fostering services' welcoming. The previous paragraph stressed how accessibility has been a fundamental spatial requirement for WeMi to be visible and reachable from the street level. In some cases, this meant gaining a showcase on the street, like in WeMi San Gottardo. In other cases, it required branching out with flyer campaigns, involving elements from the context (like the doorman) to orientate users or implementing artefacts (like inventive signs) to catch the attention of the citizens. Furthermore, the adaptability of the distribution and the internal partition of space turn out to be essential features to ensure the possibility of hosting diversified activities and targets, either at different moments (e.g., a financial education course, a yoga class, a choir rehearsal) or simultaneously (as the bar's clients and the WeMi users in

WeMi San Gottardo or Venini). Even though this article does not focus on an analysis of the artefacts (that can be found in Marani, 2021), it is worth noting that the unitary visual identity communicates that a variety of different places, managed by a complex variety of (partnerships of) actors, all share common principles, objectives, and tools. A result that demonstrates the successful steering role of the local administration within a local welfare system characterised by an ever-complexifying governance. At the same time, the coexistence of multiple functions and actors within the same flexible space constitutes the base for the "affordances for social connections" (Latham & Layton, 2019) to develop and generate the "social surplus" (Amin, 2008) that stands at the base of social infrastructures.

To sum up, this pioneering case represents an interesting illustration of the fostering of social infrastructures in the city, and of how drawing on the potential of spaces where welfare services are provided matters in terms of allowing the development and maintenance of social connections. It also shows how innovative welfare projects may be drivers for integrating different planning practices that are often disparate and lacking in synergy. The possibility to institutionalise and upscale an innovative project that is grounded in the city, and that tackles relevant goals in the domain of social policies (namely, expanding access to welfare services to a broader range of prospective recipients) strongly depends on mechanisms that lie in the domain of urban planning policies and design. While urban planning tools have long tailored to a perspective of urban growth and extension, the features of current welfare policies challenge planning regulation at a much smaller and more refined scale in the face of the reuse and adaptation of existing spaces as well as in the regulation of combined and mixed uses along with a principle of localisation that follows a bottom-up or, better, a "pop-up" logic, in which services are popping up across the city, dispensing with any rational top-down planning approach. While this has proved to be relevant in the specific context of Milan, it is also a promising result from the perspective of dissemination, upscaling, and institutional learning.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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