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CARESPACES: RETHINKING WORKSPACES FROM A CARE PERSPECTIVE

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INTRODUCTION

The diffusion of remote work, once a marginal practice, has – since the pandemic – become an increasingly entrenched feature of everyday life for many people, compelling institutions, professionals, and families to rethink spatial configurations and the temporal dynamics associated with them. Within this context, this paper seeks to explore a new dimension of work spaces by interweaving them with the concept of care. Specifically, the contribution draws on a design-based research experience aimed at investigating the transformation of the ground floors of two existing buildings – one in Milan and the other in Cagliari (Italy) – into "Carespaces": new shared environments embedded at the neighbourhood scale, designed to address emerging needs related to care, work, and social interaction.

THE ESCAPES PROJECT

This study is conducted within the framework of the PRIN2022 national research project “ESCAPES – Experimental Spatial Solutions for the Sustainable Management of Remote Work and Family Care”, funded by the European Union (Next Generation EU, National Recovery and Resilience Plan). The project is jointly developed by three research units representing complementary disciplinary fields: Architecture (Politecnico di Milano), Family Sociology (University of Cagliari), and Labour Law (University of Milan). The research is grounded in an interdisciplinary approach that brings these fields into systematic dialogue, with the objective of analysing the socio-spatial implications of the growing diffusion of remote work.¹ In particular, the project examines how remote work is reshaping everyday environments – ranging from domestic spaces to workplaces and urban contexts – and reconfiguring social relations, including those involving family members (with or without children), older adults, friends, and non-human companions. The pandemic functioned as a critical turning point, bringing to light both the potential and the structural weaknesses of a work model centred on the dematerialisation of the office. On the one hand, this shift has resulted in the downsizing of conventional office environments and a growing demand for temporal and spatial flexibility. On the other, it has exacerbated unequal distributions of care responsibilities, which continue to be borne – largely without formal recognition – by women, single parents, and newly emerging caregivers.

Emerging Spaces for Remote Work

A first line of reflection concerns the transformation of work spaces. The pervasive diffusion of digital technologies has profoundly reshaped everyday life, giving rise to what has been described as an "onlife condition,"² in which physical and digital dimensions are increasingly intertwined. While this condition has been widely discussed in relation to social practices, its implications for work spaces remain comparatively underexplored. The traditional workplace – defined by stable physical locations, fixed schedules, and clearly delimited tasks – is progressively losing its centrality. Contemporary work spaces are instead becoming multiple and dispersed: they extend into domestic environments, permeate urban settings, and are increasingly concentrated within personal digital devices, which now function as fully fledged mobile offices. Against this backdrop, a critical question emerges: what spaces are suitable for remote work today? In the post-pandemic context, marked by the widespread adoption of smart working practices, identifying alternative sites for work beyond the conventional office has become a pressing concern. These sites encompass a hybrid constellation of settings, ranging from home-based workspaces to a variety of New Working Spaces (NeWSps),³ such as coworking spaces, fab labs, and makerspaces, which are typically grounded in principles of collaboration, sharing, and social exchange. However, the analysis highlights a significant gap in current approaches: limited attention has been paid to how work environments outside the traditional office might also respond to personal and everyday life needs, particularly those related to care. This critical observation informed the development of the "Carespaces" workshop, conceived as an exploratory design exercise. The workshop provided a framework for reflecting on and investigating the interconnections between architecture, work, and care, with specific attention to their social, urban, and labour-related dimensions within a contemporary context increasingly shaped by remote working practices.

WORK-CARE SPACES

Students were asked to design "Work-Care Spaces," namely environments that integrate work-related activities with care functions in order to support workers' well-being. The empirical material collected throughout the project revealed a growing interest in spaces that incorporate care and wellness-oriented services, including nurseries, after-school facilities, shared kitchens for meal preparation, laundries, home-based healthcare services, spaces dedicated to yoga and physical activity, and forms of assistance for older adults.

The concept of care was explored through key theoretical references and subsequently reframed in relation to architectural practice. On the one hand, the project proposes an interpretation of care in relation to the physical activation of space, understood as a catalyst for positive dynamics within the neighbourhood – what has been described as "design as an act of care."⁴ On the other hand, it seeks to restore a sense of publicness to regenerated spaces by framing care as a collective and community-based practice, capable of reintroducing social and relational value into the urban environment.⁵ In this perspective, care emerges as the guiding thread that connects architectural intervention and social action, contributing to the construction of a more inclusive city oriented towards people's well-being. Architectural design is no longer conceived as the generator of a static space, interpreted as fixed, timeless, and immutable. Rather, it is understood as a dynamic spatial condition that unfolds in relation to the temporal dimension of everyday life.⁶ This shift marks a departure from traditional approaches centred on the production of definitive and permanent spaces, towards a more fluid and adaptive perspective.

The "Carespaces" Workshop

Held in February 2025, the "Carespaces" workshop brought together students from the Politecnico di Milano – namely from the School of Architecture, Urban Planning and Construction Engineering and the School of Design – and from the Faculty of Architecture at the University of Cagliari. The workshop was conceived as an exploratory framework to examine the potential transformation of the ground floors of two existing buildings, one in Milan and one in Cagliari, both sharing a similar spatial typology rooted in the tradition of the nineteenth-century urban gallery. Within the workshop, these buildings were examined as instances of urban interiors that, while historically connected to the legacy of passages, are currently subject to processes of functional redefinition and spatial reconfiguration. Both case studies are characterised by high architectural quality and are based on an explicit integration between architectural form and the surrounding urban fabric. The Ormus Galleries in Cagliari, designed by Giulio Minoletti between 1963 and 1967, were conceived as part of the city's post-war expansion and aimed at accommodating the needs and aspirations of the emerging middle class. Likewise, the building in Milan – designed by Mario Asnago and Claudio Vender in 1959 in the Bande Nere district – was developed within a broader programme of urban growth. Despite these shared premises, the two cases reveal divergent evolutionary paths. In Cagliari, the gallery, originally envisioned as a vibrant urban interior, has never fully realised its intended function and remains characterised by an indeterminate use, leaving the space in a condition of persistent ambiguity. In Milan, by contrast, the spatial dynamics are more heterogeneous: while the units facing the adjacent public square continue to be actively used, those opening onto the gallery are largely unoccupied, exposing a clear inconsistency in patterns of use and spatial experience. In this perspective, the gallery should be understood not only as an architectural element, but as a socio-relational space shaped by tensions and uncertainties, where the interaction between the city and its inhabitants is continuously redefined and takes on new spatial configurations.

THE DESIGN EXPERIENCE OF THE ORMUS GALLERIES

Among the two buildings investigated within the workshop, this contribution focuses on the Ormus Galleries, a complex of five buildings designed by architect Giulio Minoletti (1910-1981) and constructed between 1963 and 1967 in the San Benedetto district of Cagliari (Italy). The site belongs to the city's first post-war expansion areas and underwent significant redevelopment processes around the early 2000s. The architectural complex consists of residential towers arranged in a comb-like configuration and set upon a shared, double-height base forming a public "plinth" devoted to offices, commercial activities, and food services. Rather than being conceived as a compact and enclosed block, this base functions as a porous element, articulated through two courtyards and three galleries that cut across it, connecting the streets surrounding the site. The search for permeability and transparency is further expressed through large domed skylights that filter natural light into the galleries, punctuating and animating the internal circulation.

Despite the architect's initial intention to create a lively and attractive hub within a growing neighbourhood, over time the Ormus Galleries have become a neglected and deteriorated space marked by abandonment and lack of maintenance. The few sporadic attempts at re-signification have taken the form of spontaneous appropriations of space by young people from the neighbourhood, often met with resistance from residents. This condition of uncertainty and suspension has represented the main design challenge addressed during the workshop.

The intervention area focused on a portion of the ground floor characterised by the central courtyard and crossed by the three galleries, as well as on the roof level of the base. The workshop explored possible operations capable of fully reactivating the plinth as a public infrastructure.

Following an on-site survey and an initial ethnographic investigation conducted with the support of the sociology research unit of ESCAPES Project,⁷ the students – working in groups – carried out an urban analysis by mapping the activities present in the neighbourhood and their temporal patterns of use. Based on this investigation, they developed a functional programme aimed at fostering dialogue between the Ormus Galleries and the surrounding urban fabric. Each group spatially interpreted its own idea of a "Work-Care Spaces," adopting a design strategy oriented towards achieving a balance between private life and professional activity.

Five Spatial Strategies for Work-Care Spaces

The project "Strale" – as illustrated in Figure 1 – aimed to reactivate the Ormus Galleries through the introduction of work and care spaces that engage with the imposing presence of the nearby Teatro Lirico. Accordingly, the site's primary vocation is artistic, framing "care" as a form of cultural and recreational engagement for both adults and children. The core of the project is a multifunctional "modern amphitheatre" overlooking the theatre square, which establishes a dominant east-west axis. This axis is further reinforced by two "enfilades" of spaces: to the north, a wider sequence dedicated to shared leisure activities – such as an open-air cinema, urban gardens, a bistro with a collective kitchen, and the amphitheatre itself; to the south, a band of more formalised functions including a nursery, a coworking space, and a dance hall. The aim is to transform the space not only into a workplace, but also into a place of encounter and social interaction for the neighbourhood community.



Figure 1. "Strale" project carried out by the students: Francesca Bosis, Zixian Fang, Silvia Milone, Ilaria Nieddu, Francesca Pozzi

"Lanterna urbana" is a project that sought to reconfigure the space in order to turn it into an attractive hub capable of welcoming a diverse user base, including children and young people as well as adults and the elderly (Figure 2). To achieve this, the design strategy focused on maximising the permeability of the plinth: large, openable glazed walls establish a continuous relationship between the interior spaces and the galleries. Functionally, the project distinguishes between work-related and care-related spheres, assigning the former to spaces that visually project towards the street, and reserving more internal and sheltered areas for the latter. Accordingly, the central spine hosts a coworking space accompanied by a public garden and a café that also extends to the upper level, while more secluded areas accommodate a laundry, a facility providing home-based healthcare services, and, side by side, a nursery and a communal room for the elderly, both sharing an external green courtyard. The underlying idea is to create a place where care is understood as an opportunity for intergenerational exchange.

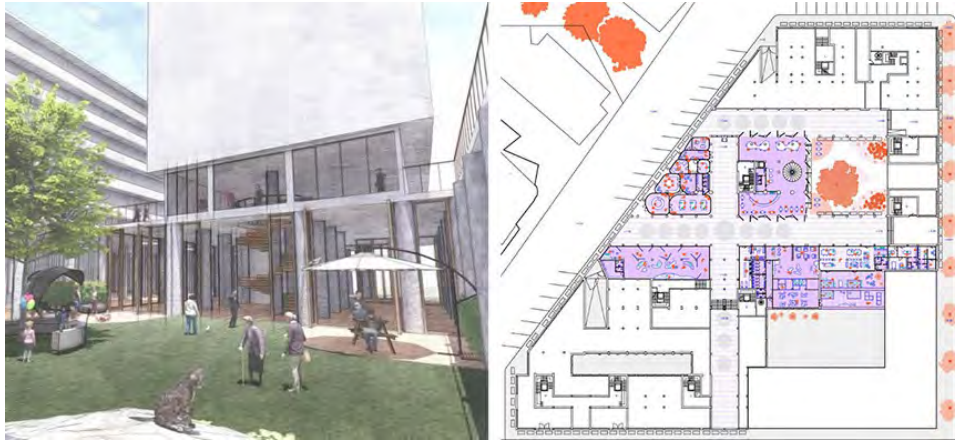


Figure 2. "Lanterna urbana" project carried out by the students: Irene Arango, Lucrezia Bonaiti, Virginia Bottolo, Alireza Khorasani, Beatrice Sanna.

The design concept of "Giardino introflesso" is rooted in a series of compositional operations involving the reconfiguration and translation of volumes at ground level, with the aim of activating and enlivening movement through the galleries (Figure 3). This approach leads to a redefinition of circulation paths, privileging the east-west axis and dividing the north-south passage into two segments, effectively "forcing" circulation through the garden courtyard, which becomes the heart of the project. Overlooking this space is a bar and refreshment area that also extends to the upper "plinth level" and connects directly to a public coworking space at the rear. The project also introduces an informal workspace for the residents of the Ormus buildings, placed in sequence alongside a series of cubic volumes of varying sizes that host different care-related services: a nursery with after-school activities, a laundry, a healthcare facility, a social concierge, and a communal room for elderly.



Figure 3. "Giardino introflesso" project carried out by the students: Carlo Borghesi, Elizaveta Fomicheva, Roadhàn Mckenna, Martina Pecorari, Giacomo Spanin.

With "Trame" the project deliberately performs a "tabula rasa" of the existing spatial and distributive layout, modifying the dimensions of the galleries by, in some areas, absorbing them into interior spaces and, in others, expanding them to incorporate collective functions (Figure 4). The key theme lies in the multiple interpretations of the threshold space between inside and outside, public and private, within a plan conceived as a mutable theatrical scenography. Each environment remains connected and continuous with adjacent spaces yet can be reconfigured and compartmentalised when necessary. At the core of the layout is a coworking space around which a series of support functions

for workers are organised: a bar and restaurant space opening onto the gallery; rehearsal rooms and workshops directly connected to the adjacent Teatro Lirico, envisioned both for theatre artists and for after-school activities for the workers' children.

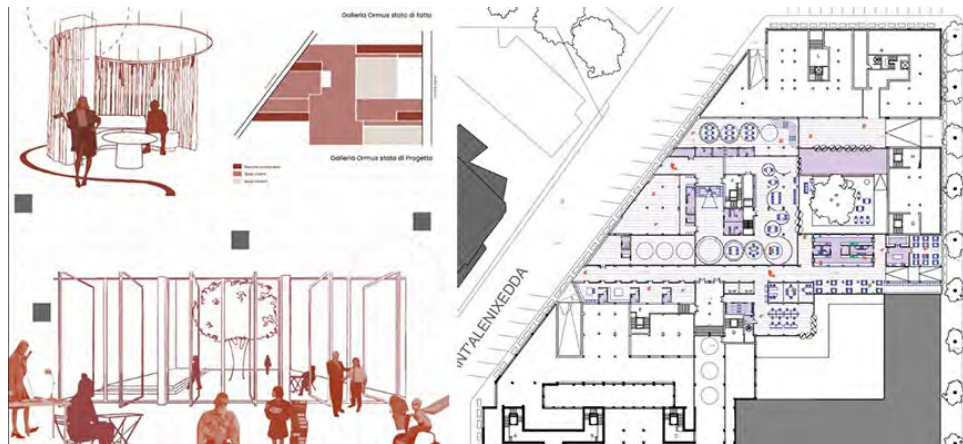


Figure 4. "Trame" project carried out by the students: Maria Cuccu, Marta Marangoni, Alessandra Marcialis, Perla Nasrallah, Arianna Simonetti, Irene Taborri.

Inspired by the defining architectural element of the galleries, the skylights, the final project, "Oculus," adopts the same circular form as a device to disrupt the orthogonal grid of the galleries and to create a central square conceived as a place of encounter and dialogue among the various activities arranged along its perimeter (Figure 5). This square is imagined as a multifunctional space, structured by the existing column grid, suitable not only for social interaction but also for performances and exhibitions. The axes of the galleries crossing the square generate four distinct functional zones: to the south-east, a work-oriented area directly connected to a baby space for working parents, both opening onto an internal green courtyard used as a playground and family reunion space; the south-west corner hosts services primarily intended for residents, such as a locker room, concierge, and self-service laundry; in the north-west area, care is interpreted in terms of physical wellbeing through the introduction of a gym; finally, the north-east corner is dedicated to a bar conceived as a community gathering space, with the possibility of expansion into the internal garden.



Figure 5. "Oculus" project carried out by the students: Maria Bologna, Heloise Paillard, Diana Tortolato, Nicola Vargiu, Alessandra Zappa.

CONCLUSION

Despite their differences, all five projects converge around a shared objective: transforming the “Minolettian” plinth into a public hinge capable of reconnecting the residential towers with the surrounding neighbourhood. The galleries, once inert and degraded corridors, are reimagined as relational infrastructures: “Strale” adds an amphitheatre as their terminal; “Lanterna urbana” dissolves their boundaries through extensive glazing; “Giardino introflesso” introduces a green courtyard that diverts circulation and generates new connections; “Trame” incorporates portions of the galleries to create flexible spatial scenarios; “Oculus” employs the galleries as *cardo* and *decumanus*, inserting a central square at their intersection.

Along this shared trajectory of permeability, the overarching aim was to reduce the everyday gap between productive and reproductive spheres by offering services that simplify care-related activities. Each group experimented with design strategies grounded in proximity concept: coworking spaces adjacent to nurseries and baby areas; laundries, concierges, and locker rooms clustered to alleviate domestic tasks; spaces for the elderly located near healthcare services; bistros and collective kitchens extending work breaks into moments of social interaction, often paired with green spaces and urban gardens.

From a spatial perspective, movable and transparent partitions, together with volumes arranged in enfilades, enable a blending of productive time and care time. The result is a shared programmatic framework that, through the aggregation of interconnected micro-spaces, restores continuity to the historic galleries and transforms the plinth into a permeable, flexible, and intergenerational civic device. Through these perspectives, the Ormus Galleries emerge as a laboratory of everyday social innovation, capable of fostering self-managed collective practices and neighbourhood-based micro-economies.

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NOTES

¹ Michela Bassanelli, Imma Forino and Marco Mareggi, eds., *Work-Care Spaces. Gli spazi del lavoro a distanza in una prospettiva di cura* (Siracusa: LetteraVentidue, 2025), 7.

² Luciano Floridi, ed., *The Online Manifesto. Being Human in a Hyperconnected Era* (New York Dordrecht London: Springer, 2015), 7-13.

³ Ilaria Mariotti, Elisabete Tomaz, Grzegorz Micek and Carles Méndez-Ortega, eds., *Evolution of New Working Spaces: Changing Nature and Geographies* (Cham: Springer, 2024), 1-3.

⁴ Annalisa Marinelli, *Etica della cura e del progetto* (Napoli: Liguori, 2002), 49.

⁵ Joan Tronto, *Moral Boundaries. A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (Chapman and Hall: Routledge, 1993), 118.

⁶ Michela Bassanelli, *Dispositivi e architettura. Lo spazio dinamico dell'abitare* (Milano: Postmedia Books, 2024), 13.

⁷ The Sociology Research Unit is coordinated by Caterina Satta and composed of Anna Carreri, Arianna Cattalini, Ester Cois, Valentina Cuzzocrea, Mariella Popolla, Claudia Secci, Enrica Spada.

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