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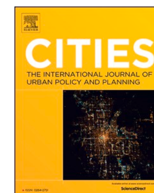

Eventually detached, eventually belonging. A residential narratives' based institutionalist perspective on urban regeneration and the middle classes in Milan and Marseille

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ABSTRACT

Notwithstanding major evolutions in both class identity and broader structural processes, generically defined "middle classes" are still a target for both investors seeking effective remuneration strategies and urban governments striving to achieve urban competitiveness as well as increased "social cohesion" and "order" in cities. However, despite this enduring centrality, scholars have yet to truly develop a critical discussion around the transformations involving middle classes' subjectivities within urban regeneration discourses and strategies and how they are shaped/adjusted/filtered through the specific forms that their design and implementation assume within particular contexts. We argue that a better grasp of these subjectivities can be critical for a deeper understanding of these strategies, their rationales, tools, outcomes, and shortcomings. The paper intends to fill this gap by investigating such subjectivities through the collection and discussion of "residential narratives", by which we mean the *collection* of discourses and representations set forth by households and analyzed about a series of relevant dimensions: expectations, boundaries, and belonging. The narratives were collected in two European urban neighborhoods - one in Milan (Italy) and one in Marseille (France) - involved in variably governed urban regeneration processes centered on shaping and mobilizing middle-class subjectivities. Based on the presented results, the paper argues for a bottom-up institutionalist perspective on how we study urban regeneration discourses and strategies as class-making governing processes.

1. Introduction: the mobilization of the middle classes as a tool of urban policy and broader political strategies

The construction of middle-class urban living has proved central in how governing urban coalitions have conceived and enacted discourses, strategies, and policies of urban regeneration. Shifting away from mass social housing production and towards homeownership (Ward et al., 2018), governance models mobilized in urban redevelopment programs included more and more the promotion of public-private partnerships focusing on the attraction of the middle classes back in urban areas. This approach was later further articulated into a focus on steering action and stimulating the creation of new, (to a various extent) grassroots "middle-class" subjectivities (Coppola, 2018; Uitermark, 2009). Their forging was seen as a crucial tool for both investors seeking effective remuneration strategies and urban governments seeking urban competitiveness as well as increased "social cohesion" and "order" in cities (Uitermark, 2014). As illuminated by a "governmentality" approach, the production and reproduction of middle-class subjectivities (Benson & Jackson, 2017) in urban regeneration strategies became a manifesto of the increasing ability of influential actors in urban governance to "governing at a distance" (Loopmans et al., 2010) by using discourses and a variety of collaborative devices to pursue urban policy goals.

However, being such middle-class subjectivities constantly plural and in flux, formulating these strategies is inherently problematic. Urban scholars have yet to truly develop a discussion around the mobilization of middle-class subjectivities and their transformation within "urban regeneration" processes and strategies and, more in particular, on how they are filtered and shaped through the specific forms that these processes assume within the specific contexts. We argue that investigating them by putting in tension households' trajectories, specific neighborhood and urban contexts, and governance and policy settings can help us to add one more critical perspective on urban

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regeneration strategies and their shortcomings by shedding light on the variety of concrete governmentalities deployed by them.

We think that the best way to embark on such an endeavor is to look at "residential narratives" (Czarniawska, 1998), by which we mean the *collection of discourses* and representations set forth by households about relocation decisions, daily routines (Blokland & van Eijk, 2010; Lucciarini & Crisci, 2018), perceived local geographies (Coppola, 2018), evaluations of current conditions and prospective changes, including those related to public policies). This paper intends to experiment with this approach by focusing on two urban neighborhoods - one in Milan (Italy) and one in Marseille (France) - involved in variably governed urban regeneration processes centered on middle-class subjectivities. These two cities were chosen based on a shared recent legacy of intense mobilization of urban regeneration as a major strategy for the legitimization (Pinson, 2020) of their governing coalitions, leading to the launch of ambitious projects and policies ostensibly aimed at attracting the middle and upper classes, with a specific focus on leveraging creative and cultural elements as ways to legitimize these strategies. More specifically, the two neighborhoods of Rue de la Republique, Marseille (from now on Rd) and NoLo, Milan, were chosen for their converging socio-demographic makeups and trajectories as their overall positions in the broader urban context. They are both highly accessible and central, with a legacy of significant migrants' settlement and the presence of portions of deteriorating, depreciating housing stock associated with a dearth of public housing. The point of contrast is the differing nature of the urban regeneration strategies - and related forms of middle-class subjectivities' mobilization - deployed in the two neighborhoods.

Diverging from a traditional approach, in which the middle class essentially comprises the positions occupying the middle or median grounds of the income distribution, we have instead chosen to look at creative and cognitive professions, both "established" and "emerging", characterized by a high cultural capital. In line with significant trends of change identified by the literature (Goos et al., 2009, 2014), we have looked in particular at people who hold jobs in areas of the cultural and knowledge economy (D'Ovidio, 2016) that are frequently associated *with* an influential *on* discourses around urban regeneration (Andreotti et al., 2015; Cremaschi & Lucciarini, 2022; Florida, 2017).

The paper is organized into six sections: first, we address the relevant debates and issues around the mobilization of the middle classes in urban regeneration policies with which this paper engages; second, we present the methodology and primary analytical dimensions of the empirical material; third, we introduce the contexts about the main structural conditions and urban regeneration strategies at both the city and neighborhood levels; fourth, we present the empirical data gathered through the residential narratives in the two neighborhoods; fifth, we discuss what emerges putting it in relation to the more contextual, policy features of the two cases; and then finally we move to the concluding remarks.

2. Sorting, mobilizing, reshaping: urban policy as a critical dimension for the remaking of middle-class identities

Scholars have highlighted the remarkable transformations that the middle class has experienced in recent decades, coming to dub it the "middle classes" (Butler & Savage, 1995; Bacqué et al., 2015) to convey the fragmentation and heterogeneity that characterize the current middle segment of the social stratification system. While some authors have defined it as a "restless class" guided by an individualistic logic and constantly engaged in implementing ascendant or defensive strategies to preserve their privileges (Gallino, 2001), others still underline its centrality in fostering social reproduction and stability (Florida, 2017; Oesch, 2006). Whereas until the 1980s, the middle class in Western capitalism meant occupying a middle position between capital and labor (Bacqué et al., 2015), expecting to steadily climb the ladders of income, consumption, and education, relative job security and protection from everyday risks (Milanovic, 2017; Rizza & Lucciarini, 2021), over the subsequent decades, this privileged position has been profoundly undermined. Even mainstream international institutions such as the IMF, ILO, and OECD have stigmatized the shrinkage, precarization, and relative impoverishment of the middle classes (Vaughan-Whitehead, 2016) in a context of growing inequalities in the distribution of income between the "rich" and the "poor". Scholars have underlined middle classes' increasing exposure to sources of economic vulnerability such as job instability, income stagnation, and welfare retrenchment, which have caused a shift in certain portions of them from "secure" to "insecure" (Lopez-Calva & Ortiz-Juarez, 2011). With the growth of debt for consumption, education, and housing, financialization has been seen yet as another driver of the growing insecurity of their social standing (Piketty, 2013, 2019). Such processes have led to an apparently paradoxical movement: at the time when social identification with the middle class became widespread, feelings of downgrading came to the fore leading to political discourses underlining both the centrality of the middle classes and the reality and risks of its "declassément" because of globalization forces and the resulting social polarization (Peugny, 2014).

In this context, attention has also been drawn to the non-material dimensions of change in middle-class identities, mainly in relation to consumption patterns and political preferences (Solimanos, 2014). According to these readings, its reference values have undergone a significant reorientation, with the value of exclusivity slowly gaining greater importance than inclusion (Sternberg, 2018), traditionally considered to be one of the leading value foundations of the middle class. Particularly in reference to the middle-classes rise in the Global South, identity-making processes have been seen as more and more based on the enhancement of social and economic status rather than on political participation (Chen & Lu, 2011; Xin, 2013), inviting caution regarding the common assumption of a causal link between the rising of middle classes and democratization (Short & Martinez, 2020; Tang, 2011).

Notwithstanding these evolutions, the middle classes' residential choices are seen to powerfully contribute to shaping the social division of the urban space. In the Global North, as in the Global South, middle classes' residential choices redefine social distance and behavior at a micro-scale, involving physical reconfiguration and changing the social structure from the bottom (Short & Martinez, 2020; Zhao, 2015).

Discussions regarding voluntary secessionism – through, at first, peri-urbanization and later the urbanization of the countryside – and then gentrification have shed light on the variety of strategies put in place by fragmenting middle classes that act both as agents of urban segregation and of social mixing (Bacqué et al., 2015). In this evolving context, Schumpeteresque urban innovators - i.e. creative sector professionals, part of cognitive and professional networks that are local yet integrated globally (Florida, 2002) – have become common targets and critical actors in urban policymaking. These cognitive middle classes have been seen as having a peculiar ability and effectiveness in generating broader, "high-quality" socio-spatial transformations in cities by deploying an "experimental" attitude (Galdini & Lucciarini, 2019; Murray et al., 2020). These evolutions have also been put in relation to the implications of the "second demographic transition" that has brought "increased diversity in family types and evolving gender roles", especially among urban-minded new middle classes, playing a crucial role in the "revitalization" of inner-city areas (Buzar et al., 2007; Bacqué et al., 2015). The rearrangement of the middle class into a diverse set of positions, each with different social, demographic, and economic attributes, was reflected in the complexification of middle-class settlement strategies leading to residential "archipelagos" organized around a variety of "mini-habitus" (Bacqué et al., 2015). Accordingly, city administrations and other governing actors have had to make more significant efforts to label urban regeneration and redevelopment initiatives by articulating specific discourses, most commonly discourses underlying elements of cultural consumption (Andersson et al., 2007). This latter approach incorporated economic and social dimensions into a logic of

"cultural revival", allowing to combine an elitist and distinctive appearance targeted at cognitive elites with a democratic-horizontal appearance promising to make the city accessible and inclusive to all residents (Hochstenbach, 2017). Cities have invested in creating urban environments better aligned with changing lifestyles centered around cultural consumption and distinction. Variably significant rent gaps characterizing sizable portions of inner cities in both the US and Europe have favored such policies, unleashing gentrification processes made possible by socio-demographic changes and the discreet, context-dependent actions of institutional actors located at the crossroads of the market and the State (Bernt, 2022; Lopez-Morales, 2011). All these processes led to a decisive re-orientation of regeneration policies towards middle-class norms and values (Epstein, 2005), including the pursuit of homeownership as one of the main tools for triggering urban property appreciation while leveraging on the increasing middle classes' preoccupation with financial security.

At the same time, the middle classes have been asked to play a strategic role in mentoring and structuring the life of the lower classes (Lunlay, 2010; Tunstall, 2003) by acting as a "social framework (…) through role models and linking social capital" (Rose et al., 2013) and "by making use of their entrepreneurial skills and social competence" in the shaping of local environments (Grabkowska, 2015). More broadly, the increased spatial variety and hybridization of uses and social groups has been a central issue in the discourse about "placemaking" (Calvaresi & Cossi, 2011), with "social mix"-oriented goals and tools increasingly being embedded in urban regeneration policies (Bacquè et al., 2011; Colomb, 2011). However, social mix policies have been questioned on numerous counts (Lunlay, 2010): for failing to understand and operationalize the difference between the mere spatial co-existence of social groups - i.e. the so-called "tectonics of social groups" (Jackson & Butler, 2015) - and the effective establishment of social networks between them (Hristova et al., 2016); for the fact that their orientation towards the social upgrading of low-income areas favors gentrification, rather than the accessibility of middle−/upper-income areas to lower-income groups (Lees et al., 2013); for its only partial understanding of how middle-class strategies of co-existence and avoidance can be articulated across different scales (the neighborhood, the city), areas of social reproduction (school, health, public spaces), and temporalities (Bridge et al., 2012; Oberti & Préteceille, 2016; Bacqué et al., 2015). The emergence of a "new urban crisis" - in which rocketing property values coupled with the relative impoverishment of the middle class has reduced the ability to afford to live in urban cores (Florida, 2017) - has contributed to a change of framing. Especially in gentrifying and super-gentrifying global cities such as Paris and London, social mix policies have been rebranded as tools to ensure the accessibility of housing to the middle classes (Bacquè et al., 2011; Bacqué et al., 2015). However, the focus of urban regeneration policies kept being the attraction of the middle classes, not to prevent super-gentrification but as a way of improving "social cohesion" and performing a "sociological rebalancing" (Bacquè et al., 2011) of neighborhoods against the risk of high concentrations of poverty and minorities. Despite all the critiques and a broader lack of evidence in terms of their effectiveness (Bolt et al., 2010), the changing and pluralizing nature of the middle classes, and the growing exclusivity of cities, these social mix policies - and consequently the need to mobilize and shape the middle-class subjectivities that order them - still occupy a central position in urban regeneration discourses and strategies. Revolving around the repopulation and the socio-demographic re-design of existing urban environments through a variety of interventions and at a variety of scales, from the implementation of full-scale masterplans redeveloping brownfields to the more incremental transformation of historic neighborhoods, urban regeneration must be understood as a spatial-temporal relational concept that always refers – although in different terms and degrees - to the changing relationship between a set of pre-existing and new populations and urban uses (Coppola, 2021; Porter & Shaw, 2013).

In this context, we argue that at a time of change and precarization of middle-classes positionings from the standpoint of the structural mechanisms of affiliation and integration, the relation with the urban has become a particularly relevant component of their identity-building processes. For this reason, urban regeneration policies have become critical factors in understanding how the identities of the middle-classes are shaped in a complex, dialectic tension between the promises conveyed to them, their broader expectations, and the experience they make on the ground when middle class households decide to move to a particular neighborhood also based on those promises. By legitimizing themselves through a variety of discursive elements - from exclusionism to the social mix, from innovation and creativity to the quality of life –, these policies can be analyzed not only long a structure-agency axis (Cremaschi & Lucciarini, 2022; Hay & Wincott, 1998; Jessop, 2009; Lucciarini & Galdini, forthcoming), but also based on how households in their housing choices apprehend such elements, through the adhesion to narratives mobilized by a variety of actors such as city government, private investors and local activists. And on how such narratives "filter" middle-class households, contribute to shaping their identities, and ultimately meet or fail their expectations once they are implemented into policies and in real, daily-life environments.

3. Materials and methods

We focused on European "ordinary" cities - not "global" ones, that are although variably, highly ranked for population size and economic weight in their respective national contexts and that are characterized by significant rates of employment in cognitive and creative occupations and average income inequality, compared to the EU context, as to avoid overly polarized and super-gentrified cities. Although Milan is wealthier, Marseille and its metropolitan area have been strengthening their economic position in recent years in the context of a more dynamic national economy.

As recently pointed out by OECD (OECD, 2020), metropolization in Europe and elsewhere goes hand in hand with an expanding productive base and more in particular a broadening service economy. Marseille's and Milan's Functional Urban Areas (FUAs), defined based on daily people's movements and their functional and economic areas of influence (OECD, 2012), are no exception in this regard. To better understand their comparability, we have looked at selected demographic and socio-economic data attempting to overcome discrepancies in the scale of data's collection. As Table 1 shows, both Milan and Marseille have good employment performances, even if the first reported a lower unemployment rate and a higher activity rate. Despite these slight differences, the inequalities rate (Gini coefficient) is quite similar across both cities, revealing a significant gap between high low-income and inhabitants. The overall economic performance significantly leveraged on cognitive occupations mainly in Marseille, where the cultural driver has been leading the economic "renaissance". In Milan cognitive workers represent a relevant 20 %, making the city the Italian capital of knowledge occupations.

Moreover, as we will see, the two cities also present significant

Table 1
Main demo and socio-economic data on Marseille and Milan Metropolitan areas.

	Marseille	Milan
Population (thousand)[a]	870.000[1]	1.370.000[1]
Activity rate[a]	66[1]	73,4[1]
Unemployment rate[a]	8,2[2]	5,6[2]
Cognitive occupations (% on tot. emp.)[b]	37[2]	20[3]
Gini[a]	0,29[3]	0,31[3]
% Foreigners oo total population[b]	9[1]	13[1]

[a] Source: Eurostat - cities and greater cities.
[b] Source: OECD Stat - metropolitan areas.
[1] Data available for 2018.
[2] Data available for 2020.
[3] Data available for 2015.

similarities in terms of current urban policies, including a long-standing emphasis on urban regeneration as a key to the competitiveness of the two cities. Coming to the two neighborhood case studies, they have been selected based on three criteria. The first is the role of the imaginary, referring to the existence of a consistent, articulated public discourse casting both areas as "regenerating". The second is the presence of active commodification processes, promoted by housing-market brokers, targeting young high-skilled professionals and families, stressing class homogeneity, and developing a kind of social texture “creaming effect” in both neighborhoods. The third involves the specific spatial qualities of the two neighborhoods, as they are both semi-central areas subject to recent processes of urban decline and, therefore, potential rent-gap creation through the manipulation of the existing building stock and not through the creation of new residential areas in the form of brownfield redevelopment.

To characterize the respective contexts, discourses, governance arrangements, and mechanisms of real estate investment and housing policy systems involved, we reviewed official documents, news, and studies conducted in Milan and Marseille. This was followed by a qualitative analysis of our research sites - RdR in Marseille and NoLo in Milan - from January 2018 to July 2020 through participant observation of relevant situations and events and the gathering of social and mainstream media coverage. Finally, we carried out a set of 35 in-depth semi-structured interviews with residents and key local actors. The interviews involved the residential narratives of households who had purchased apartments in one of the two areas in the preceding five years (see Table 1).

Households were selected based on a few criteria. First, their choice to move to the areas was voluntary, insofar as it can be understood as the outcome of a “preference” rather than simply of spatial and economic constraints (Floor & Van Kempen, 1997). This preference is the result of symbolic and cultural values and a corresponding lifestyle (Pattillo-McCoy, 1999), shaping the individuals' system of expectations (Van Kempen & Bolt, 2009), leading to the framing of a particular neighborhood as “desirable” (Annunziata & Lees, 2016). The decision to focus on recent homeowners is due on one side to the goal to intercept households that had recently achieved a reasonably established position within their trajectories in terms of professional development, family formation, and financial standing in the way that makes them able to operate longer-term financial and symbolical investments. On the other, more specifically, by using such criteria, we intended to focus on a group of new residents that moved to the area at a critical juncture of their “housing careers”, as interviewees moved from previous rentals within the same cities or elsewhere to first-time homeownership. This was also aimed at selecting new residents who decisively invested in the two neighborhoods, complying with the expectations of discourses and urban regeneration strategies discussed earlier. Overall, this allowed us to assume the role of generational differences in class formation (Bacqué et al., 2015), identifying households that can be considered fully part of the urban “middle classes” also in temporal terms. In other terms, we consider being middle-class as a position that is laboriously achieved at some point in life and often after years of more precarious conditions and experiences through which the household's relation with the urban dimension was less mediated by longer-term investment and symbolical perspectives and investments. In this perspective, we mean that to be fully part of the urban middle class means to be located at a specific point in the distribution of capitals (Bourdieu, 2016; Oesch, 2006), but also at a specific point in time and a specific point of space.

Moving from this conceptualization, we used residential narratives as a means to closely investigate dimensions of subjectivity (Touraine, 2002) concerning the relationships between the new resident with the neighborhood, other residents, and the expectations that initially drove and would later confirm or undermine the decision to move. These three dimensions are closely associated with some classical categories of analysis in socio-spatial studies (Jacobs, 1961): *belonging*, understood as the connection between households and places (Mumford, 1939); *boundaries*, understood as how processes of socio-spatial differentiation are produced (Lamont & Molnar, 2002); and *expectations*, which represent the imagined lifestyle in the neighborhood (Lefevre, 1961). Analyzing the narratives across the two cases through these three dimensions allows us to enquire into how specific urban regeneration strategies produce and are supported or impeded by particular subjectivities. The framing of such narratives in the context of urban regeneration strategies – and the urban agenda in its broadest sense (Benson & Jackson, 2017) – in a multi-scalar perspective allows a more nuanced interpretation of how different strategies mediate such subjectivities. In the next section, we will synthetically review the broad urban regeneration policy orientations over the last two decades, the involved multi-level governance arrangements, and the essential workings of the real estate and housing policy systems in the two contexts moving from the city to the neighborhood scale (Table 2).

4. Urban regeneration by building a middle-class environment: Rue de La République (RdR) in Marseille and North of Loreto (NoLo) in Milan

The context of Marseille's urban policies is characterized by the substantial involvement of the State. In 1995, *Euroméditerranée*, the largest redevelopment project in Southern Europe was launched turning Marseille into a “chantier interminable” (“never-ending worksite”) (Peraldi & Samson, 2005: 177; Peraldi et al., 2015). Its design and implementation, the core of a broader urban competitiveness strategy, were associated with a long, right-wing – from 1995 to 2020 - mayorship. *Euroméditerranée* relied on public-private partnerships, including international investors. Its main elements focused on bolstering mobility with the arrival of the high-speed train in 2001, the construction of a tramway in 2007, and rebranding with the city's appointment as a *European Capital of Culture* in 2013 and *of Sport* in 2017 (Géa & Gasquet-Cyrus, 2017). The initiative focused intensely on symbolic policies to overhaul Marseille's image as a run-down, disreputable, racially polarized city, becoming a state-sponsored “Operation of National Interest” (OIN). The initial funding came from public sources, while the second phase, dubbed *Euroméditerranée 2* and launched in 2007, aimed to attract private investments shifting the focus to housing (Euroméditerranée project, 2010–2017). This second round was operationalized in the context of new national urban regeneration policies emerging in the early 2000s as a response to unrest in the “banlieues” (Lelévrier, 2013). The “Solidarity and Urban Renewal” law (from now on “SRU”), approved in 2000 by a left-wing majority, and the launch of the “National Urban Renewal Programme” (“PNRU”) both pursued social mix policies through housing interventions. SUR aimed to trigger “positive” micro-territorial dynamics by leveraging the middle classes' social, economic, and cultural capital (Provan, 2017) to combat segregation. The PNRU promoted a “deverticalisation” approach (Veschambre, 2018) aimed at eliminating high-rise homes for the poor while inserting new middle classes residents through a mix of tenures, thereby expanding the role of private actors.

Moving to the neighborhood scale, RdR was initially created as Haussmann's axis between the old and new ports, representing the city's trading and political grandeur. Based on its symbolic resonance and cultural diversity, its legacy of international trade, and valuable architecture, the area was among the earliest targets of *Euroméditerranée*. Here, many dilapidated 19th-century buildings were owned by small landlords for whom renovation was not cost-effective in the absence of a remunerative market demand. *Eurazèo* and *Lone Star Funds*, key investors in the initiative, marketed the area as a “business catchment area”, leveraging the improvement of transportation and the expansion of the skilled employment base already achieved through state investments in new cultural and university centers. RdR's location, potentially valuable housing stock, and glorious past constituted key points in constructing a discourse of symbolic attraction to draw in the middle classes as part of a redevelopment project also aimed at

Table 2
Interviewed households.

Case-study	Self-employed cognitive workers	Employees of cognitive and creative firms (public and private)	Local actors
RdR – Marseille	Single (4) Families with children (5)	Couple with children (6)	Activist (3)
Nolo – Milan	Single (4) Couple with no children (1) Couple with children (2)	Single (4) Couple with no children (3)	Social cooperative manager (1) Political representative (1) Activist (1)

Source: Authors' elaboration.

enhancing retail and tourism. The two investors sought to expel long-standing residents who, being fragmented and socially vulnerable, were deemed easily "movable" (Borja, ibid.). They also benefited from state guarantees and contributions to mitigate the risk of vacant housing and unpaid rent, as well as the right to expropriate owners who did not comply with the plans for transforming their buildings (Berry-Chikhaoui & Beboulet, 2007). These devices triggered a wholesale exchange of residents, with a significant rise in property values beginning in 1999. Homes were left vacant first and later purchased by middle-class households primarily employed in the public sector. In the mayor's words, *Euroméditerranée*'s objective was to bring "tax-paying executives" to the city (CVPT (Centre Ville pour tous), 2016/2017). Indeed, scholars defined those involved as "buildings for the second-class elite, " distinguished from the first-class elites who long inhabited the hilly area to the south (Fournier & Mazzella, 2004). With the 2008 financial crisis, two investors sold their properties to other public-private organizations (ANF, Atemi, and Prologis. For a critical discussion, see the CVPT survey, ibid.). As they intended to increase the proportion of middle-class residents, the new players renegotiated rents with the original residents or encouraged them to move. This two-sided approach led to inconsistent and highly fragmented interventions, with both spatial and social consequences. Some of the 208 buildings on this street - nearly 4000 dwellings and 205 commercial premises - were selected for renovation on a building-by-building basis because SUR regulations imposed specific market-to-social housing ratios. Multiple factors were considered, such as the structural constraints of some dwellings - which proved challenging to consolidate with others - and the composition of the resident population (older or newer renters), with priority given to buildings already inhabited by the middle classes.

In some cases, the investors adopted targeted diversification strategies, renovating buildings to serve as student housing, but overall, the parceling out of the redevelopment undermined the original project. Not only was the idea of constructing a space to be shared by old and new residents alike invalidated, but the confusion and uncertainty that grew around the RDR's positional standing discouraged the middle classes from moving to the area. These processes led to the insulation of the initial waves of middle-class inhabitants, a fairly homogeneous cohort who held professional positions. Another actor played a crucial role in this redefinition of the neighborhood's social geography. Beginning in the 2000s, the collective 'A City Centre for Everyone' started to mobilize former residents and shopkeepers, providing legal assistance on eviction and relocation to old residents. This mobilization undoubtedly served to bring the controversial aspects of the project to the fore while exacerbating the framing of the RdR's inhabitants as two separate and opposing groups. While many investigations have focused on the condition of the long-standing residents (CVPT, ibid.; Borja, 2013, ibid.), little attention has been paid to the new ones.

In recent years, Milan has been praised as a case of "urban renaissance" (Camagni, 2017). Since the 1990s, by making planning tools and regulations flexible and ensuring competitive investment conditions, the local government succeeded in regenerating brownfields and in attracting the middle and upper classes back to the city (Bricocoli & Savoldi, 2010). This was achieved through large-scale urban redevelopment programs, such as the *City Life* and *Porta Nuova* (Anselmi, 2019), that involved major international real-estate and financial players (Anselmi, 2019), and through a myriad of smaller redevelopment plans combining housing, offices, and retail space (Pasqui, 2019). In 2011, a center-left mayor came into power after an almost twenty-year-long center-right hegemony. The new majority dealt with finalizing ongoing urban redevelopment projects while also staging the Expo event in 2015, in the context of growing population and property values and investments. Urban regeneration discourses were partially rebranded under the new administration with the mobilization of participative and collaborative frameworks (Polizzi et al., 2019), the increasing role of private foundations and universities, a new focus on culture and creativity as well as on "social cohesion", and some limited attempts at spatial equalization policies (Coppola & Caudo, 2020). Unlike in Marseille, the role of the state – and of national housing and urban policies in particular - has been significantly less relevant. With divestment from new public housing programs and the liberalization of rental markets in the late 1990s (Coppola, 2012), the State recentered its action on the incentivization of homeownership and the renovation of the existing building stock, with more limited interventions in the regeneration of peripheral areas (Coppola & Bricocoli, 2012; Coppola et al., 2021). At the same time, it has supported the structuring of actors and tools to provide new social housing for the lower-middle class, often associated - particularly in Milan - with discourses on the "social mix" (Coppola & Bricocoli, 2012). Besides large urban redevelopments, formerly working-class areas have undergone extensive gentrification processes and, until 2019, no broad-ranging spatial tools to produce affordable housing were put in place. Moving to the neighborhood scale, NoLo comprises the densely built area reaching across two thoroughfares starting from Piazzale Loreto, a large square located northeast of the city's center. The area was historically an entry point for successive waves of migration, first from southern Italy and later from the Global South (Alietti & Agustoni, 2015; Arrigoni, 2011). Migrants were attracted by its high degree of accessibility and cheap housing, with ownership patterns characterized by high levels of fragmentation and a lack of public housing (Coppola & Pacchi, 2021). From the 1990s onwards, mostly in the eastern sections of the area, many dwellings were rented in highly exploitative, informal ways to migrants. Overcrowding, a decline in civilities, and a lack of maintenance led to widespread degradation and, ultimately, the filtering-down of a significant portion of the housing stock (Coppola & Pacchi, 2021). Furthermore, as many established low-income migrant families found homeownership opportunities in the area, since 2008, the neighborhood became one of the city's hotspots for foreclosures (Coppola & Pacchi, 2021). These processes went hand in hand with widespread stigmatizing discourses and an aggressive law and order agenda took on by the city, which racialized housing and safety issues (Verga, 2016). This led first to social unrest and later to a grassroots response, with the development of new actors focusing on diversity pushing a "positive" reframing of the area (Arrigoni, 2011). With the change of administration in 2011, the city's policies shifted towards a "social cohesion" agenda, supporting third-sector actors, and focusing on developing social capital, cultural diversity, and increased civilities (Coppola & Citroni, 2020). As of the mid-2010s, the discourse on the area's urban regeneration took on a new direction, bringing new middle-class residents to the fore and leading to new actors' development. The area was rebranded as NoLo, short for *North of Loreto*, and the NoLo Social District (NSD) - a "social street" - was

launched by recently settled young professionals. It aimed to “create connections between the people who live in NoLo, to improve the neighborhood's quality of life” (cited from the "cooperation agreement" signed by the Milan municipality and the representative of Nolo Social District). From its beginnings as a Facebook group, NSD rapidly expanded offline, organizing initiatives ranging from neighborhood breakfasts and clean-up drives to a radio station and local tours. In 2021 the group had more than 8000 members and mostly served as a platform for promoting local events, sharing information and opinions, and exchanging requests for and offers of help. Other groups rapidly sprang up, such as *NoLo for Kids* and *NoLo Creative District*, while new establishments attracting a younger, more professional, GLBTQ+ customer base made the area a nightlife hotspot while changing local retail. Furthermore, multifunctional spaces opened, becoming sites of daily informal meetings of peer groups sharing specific interests and promoting activities aimed at the “revitalization” of the area (Coppola, 2019). New cultural events often spearheaded by NSD activists were established, such as *Biennolo*, an art biennale, the *NoLo Fringe Festival*, and the *SanNoLo Festival*, a local music festival. The city administration increasingly came to rely on these new actors and initiatives and subsequently leveraged the strategic opportunities presented by this area's growing functional and social diversification. Starting in 2014, it launched several urban beautification initiatives, and in 2018, it supported projects that mobilized NSD activists and a broader network of actors, leading to the creation of new public spaces and cycle lanes (Coppola & Citroni, 2020). In the same vein, the city set a revitalization plan for the local covered market, involving NSD activists and a university, ad proposed a comprehensive scheme to revitalize Piazzale Loreto and Via Padova built on ideas of beautification, retail upgrade, and soft mobility, and opened in 2022 a new community hub managed by a coalition of not-for-profit actors. A project to permanently repurpose former warehouses already being temporarily reactivated for the Milan Design Week and other events was also initiated. As the possibility for new construction is limited by the very high building density of the area, real estate investments have been directed mostly to upgrading the existing housing stock while shifting tenure from rentals to homeownership. Brokers have been successfully selling apartments also in the most troubled blocks historically characterized by rentals occupied by low-income migrant households, also specializing in selling foreclosed apartments. The relevance of these processes is reflected in the sustained dynamism of both property prices and market intensity – i.e., the portion of the housing stock being on the market – and in the changing demographics of the area, which has seen a relative decline of residents with an immigrant background and a raise of relatively young households with a native, middle-class standing (Coppola & Pacchi, 2021). In the lack of social and tenure mix provisions for new constructions and renovations and rent regulations acting within the existing housing stock, the role of the State is limited to the facilitation of these processes through policies favoring homeownership and renovations. Therefore, unlike in the case of Marseille, the housing transformation and financial accumulation dynamic operates at a significantly lower organizational scale and degree of change in physical capital. We will now move to present the empirical material drawn from the collection of residential narratives from the two areas.

5. Middle classes' residential narratives in NoLo and RdR

Notwithstanding the differences in the contexts and the related households' self-selection effects in reference to the discourses mobilized by the two strategies, the desirability of the two neighborhoods and the agency exercised by households in “choosing” them seems to be produced at both converging and diverging levels. In NoLo, the narratives indicate the influence of factors such as the location, size, and affordability of homes and the availability of a range of leisure and socialization opportunities. For many interviewees, buying an apartment in NoLo marked a decisive turning point in their housing career in terms of changes in family composition and the stabilization of their professional paths. Meanwhile, for those living in Marseille, the choice of RdR coincided with similar transitions but with a stronger emphasis on professional development, class trajectory, and capital remuneration strategies. However, in RdR, there is a significant misalignment between interviewees' expectations regarding the perceived quality of the local environment, particularly concerning leisure and cultural consumption; indeed, these are overwhelmingly sought out in other city areas. This fact is associated with a low level of identification with the neighborhood. In a sense, for many, the community has yet to take shape, as the transition between the “old” and the “new” promised by real estate agents has not materialized.

> “*Having the opportunity to live in a distinguished middle-class environment in the center of a renovated city was very important to me - a personal achievement, given that I grew up in a small provincial town*”
>
> (RdR, Interview 10)

> “*Which expectations have been fulfilled? It would be easier to tell you which ones have not been fulfilled. I wanted a neighborhood where I could live the life I wanted. Shops, nice people, culture, initiatives. But there is none of that, and what little there was - the few shops that there were - have closed down*”
>
> (RdR, Interview 3)

> “*I am happy with the house. The building is beautiful, the walls are impressive, and I feel like an important person living here. The neighborhood does not have much to offer yet, but I am sure it will have a lot to give in time. […] It is central, it connects the port to the inland area, it has history, that these walls convey… but it is lacking new people, and the atmosphere feels old even though it has all been renovated*”
>
> (RdR, Interview 1)

> “*I felt as though this neighborhood had everything I could ever wish for. Impressive buildings, lots of shops, an idea of an intellectual city full of life. That was the initial idea, and even the real estate agent told me that I would feel at home - a home full of possibilities. But I do not really feel at home at all, and I cannot see those possibilities anymore… they have closed down shops, and many homes are now empty… how is it possible to feel at home with no services and no people around?*”
>
> (RdR, Interview 3_b)

The overall sentiment is different in NoLo, with high satisfaction levels for the neighborhood associated with variable patterns of involvement with recently established local forms of middle-class socialization and engagement. Although some interviewees acknowledge their existence while keeping their distance from them, others see such forms of engagement as strategic in the making of their daily lives and the fashioning of their broader “urban” lifestyle. New ties in the neighborhood are seen as conducive to friendly, even familial relationships and as opportunities for recreation and engagement. More specifically, these ties prove crucial for residents coming from outside the city. In some cases, they are also conducive *to* and are intertwined *with* occasions for professional development, as the “creative” nature of the neighborhood has provided some with opportunities to “develop projects” and feel that they are part of a cohort of similar people, with comparable skills and preferences - in other words, a similar ethos. Moreover, the neighborhood's media exposure is seen as an additional source of identification and mobilization.

> “*We feel very much at home in this neighborhood; I did not know anyone, and (Anonymized personal name) did not know many people either. We have met many people I could call just by going to bars and restaurants and organizing and taking part in events. I feel very good here - accepted, included - and I think that I can include other people without making plans, just deciding to live*”
>
> (NoLo, Interview 2)

"*The fact is that I have my group here in NoLo, even outside of the neighborhood activities - they are just guys from the neighborhood. If I had to count my friends, I could tell you that some of them are guys from the neighborhood. I am more comfortable, I feel safer, and I consider them more reliable. [There is a] family network, and it is something real and irrefutable; it is the family that you choose, the familiarity that you have built for yourself, and that gives you a good life*"

(NoLo, Interview 9)

"*Yeah, [it is something] personal to find a network in the place where you live, to get on well with the people who are your neighbors. Until a few years ago, my network of friends was not here; I did not get any opportunities to meet anyone… I really do not even leave the neighborhood anymore; at this point, I do everything here! Our adult friends come and do things here…*"

(NoLo, Interview 10)

"*And then the other very interesting mechanism is that external recognition and pride - I mean, there are people who lived here their whole lives, but maybe just used it as a place to sleep and then went out, but as soon as there was some sort of recognition from outside, and the press started talking about NoLo, it created this feeling of "we are from NoLo, we NoLers". But the interesting thing is really how it created a sense of cohesion…*"

(NoLo, Interview 8)

Meanwhile, in RdR, the levels of involvement in local forms of engagement and sociability seem to be very low, with anxiety over the diverse social composition of the neighborhood - and in particular, the presence of "long-standing inhabitants" - being the dominant tone. This situation is seen as a departure from what was promised by real estate agents, who pushed a specific segment of professional classes to buy in the area by promising them a socially homogeneous environment. Many among them are also concerned about the risk of devaluation of their investments and still hope for the launch of a marketing strategy capable of building confidence in the long-term class trajectory of the area.

"*If they had told me that it was not a neighborhood yet, but instead a jumbled mishmash of such different people, I would not have chosen this area*"

(RdR, Interview 13)

"*The real estate agent assured me that it was in the interests of the owners of the various plots to sell to specific categories so as not to devalue the area. And for me, it is important to be able to live in a middle-class environment*"

(RdR, Interview 12)

"*Many long-standing residents still have a habit of living in tents on the street, and I do not want my children to experience that as if it were a normal thing. I would prefer to move to another neighborhood. We spend a lot of time in Le Panier, which has lovely cafés and bistros, or we go to the beach in the city's south. I do not even do my shopping in the neighborhood*"

(RdR, Interview 2)

"*It's becoming very different from how they told me it was at the [estate] agency. But I am seeing a lot of changes, and I feel as though that could bring in new businesses. And I hope that property values go up and that only people of a certain status are left here. It means old tenets, mainly immigrants, will move, and young professionals like us will remain*"

(RdR, Interview 8)

In NoLo, too, the unevenness of the conditions in the neighborhood - with the continued existence of certain spatial pockets of perceived insecurity and the lack of certain amenities – is also a cause for concern, but this is expressed with different tones and at times associated with different themes. For some, the "regeneration" of the neighborhood itself poses issues, as they question how much it will change its retail structure, livability, and social diversity. Moreover, in some instances, the diversity of the social composition is seen as a positive feature. However, this diversity is perceived as more of a scenario than a real possibility of cross-group relationships. While these divisions concern the urban space, others exist on the micro-scale of the apartment block. Recent buyers seem to be engaged in improvement efforts that, to various extents, imply certain levels of disagreement with pre-existing owners, who are seen as representative of an "old way of doing things" in the neighborhood. Conditions within the condominium are in one instance the reason for a broad deception in relation to initial expectations.

"*… (in the block residents' meeting) there were a few somewhat reactionary viewpoints from the 'old guard'; that is when I realized that lots of people who had been responsible for this deterioration over the last 20 years - or at the very least, who had contributed in some small way - had not really mended their ways. That is why certain unwholesome behaviors were legitimized because as long as they paid the rent at the end of the month, that was enough. I do not want to generalize, we're not on opposing sides here - but it was clear that there were landlords who wouldn't hesitate to carry on renting out a flat to ten people*"

(NoLo, Interview 7)

"*…changes to the public space, initiating a few projects. Suppose I had to say how I perceive it from the point of view of a resident. In that case, these seem to be interventions that I have felt to be impromptu interventions, not ones that give me a greater sense of neighborhood unity or any sort of recognition that develops around these spaces and projects. I have noticed a huge difference in how the spaces are used on either side of Viale Monza: on this side - the Via Venini side - I feel more like it is a social district, whereas, on the other side, I see a lot of marginalities*"

(NoLo, Interview 5)

"*…a multifaceted identity, which I like, and that is important because this is the neighborhood, that way it cannot become– that way it cannot degenerate, like [the] Isola [neighborhood]. The people who were there no longer recognize it; I would like to go on being able to recognize it*"

(NoLo, Interview 4)

"*at times, I would have liked to have been able to carry on a greater variety in the group of moms that have been set up (…). Because we say we are more or less similar (….,) we say it is a pity that we are unable to draw in that certain groups (i.e., certain migrant communities) continue to remain almost impenetrable*"

(Nolo, Interview 4)

In Nolo, everything that has improved the village-like dimension of the neighborhood, its retail opportunities, and the quality of life it offers are seen as a promising trend. More particularly, whatever initiative further improves the "thickness" of the local dimension – in terms of potential to be self-contained and self-reliant – is seen as a change in the right direction.

"*They have opened up a bookshop in via Crespi (…) They have opened up a posh little restaurant…I might not go myself, but it means that people pass through, they stay out and do not just find nightclubs, but actually find places for them in their own neighborhood - as in, you do not have to go to* Corso *Buenos Aires to find a bookshop. The people are reclaiming these places, so if I want to have a drink or buy a book, I can stay here. These places are becoming more my own…*"

(NoLo, Interview 7)

"*… I'm not saying it for me in terms of the value of the apartment… I really liked the redevelopment of the area around Via Rovereto (…) and rainbow square, too. I think that these are excellent initiatives for breathing life back into dead areas…the rainbow square used to be an extremely dangerous intersection where people are playing ping pong at all hours of the day*"

(NoLo, Interview 4)

We now move to the discussion of the gathered residential narratives looking at them through the three mentioned analytical dimensions and connecting them to the specific features of the two urban regeneration strategies and their respective contexts we discussed in Section 4.

6. Discussion: convergence and divergence in the making of belonging, boundaries and expectations in the two cases

In the last two decades, Milan and Marseille have known comparable trajectories of re-urbanization. In both cases, re-urbanization has also involved an influx of middle-class households from other places related to the expansion of jobs in the cognitive and creative economy and variably connected to gentrification processes. Naturally, longer-term differences in the social geography of the two cities and in how middle-class households' preferences adapt to such differences are to be considered in assessing these processes. However, the key feature of both cases is the intention of certain social groups to go live in certain urban neighborhoods notwithstanding initial conditions of diversity and relative devaluation also based on discourses that have "invited" them to consider that choice. Although Milan and Marseille are both characterized by the relevance of such urban regeneration discourse and strategies centered on attracting the middle and upper classes, the two cities strongly diverge on the significance of the State's role. Marseille represents a case of the State taking a "steering role" with the local government (Béal et al., 2018). Differently, Milan represents instead a case of a local government taking a steering role with the local civil society, with a minor direct intervention of the State. In Marseille's case, this difference is also reflected in the existence of binding spatial and non-spatial regulations aimed at defining and building the social mix as an essential operative frame of urban regeneration. Such regulations do not exist in Milan, where the social mix – at the scale of existing neighborhoods – is rather a rhetorical discourse aimed at legitimizing specific interventions more than a coordinated and binding policy. Accordingly, in RdR, the strategy design and implementation resulted from a vast coalition of public and private actors working with a multi-level, capital-intensive set of coordinated policies. The middle classes' formation and "filtering" mainly depended on the close coordination between housing and other policy areas, such as employment and culture. The initiative's appeal was based on a powerful symbolic narrative targeting specific sections of the middle classes and aimed at combining elitist symbolism - high culture and State functions - with a more romanticized idea of Marseille as a diverse Mediterranean city. Differently, in the case of NoLo, "urban regeneration" resulted from more incremental, distributed, and less capital-intensive processes and networks of actors. Institutionally unable to promote an organized strategy and appropriate state resources, the city selectively supported private investments and emerging patterns of middle-class activism through discursive mobilization and discrete, more limited actions. The discursive mobilization of the actors involved was centered around the increased attractiveness of urban consumption, creativity, and conviviality of a neighborhood that had long borne a great deal of stigma. Residents' bottom-up practices, presented as crucial factors of "regeneration", were further legitimized by their inclusion in official policy frameworks related to public spaces and "social cohesion" and by their cooptation in broader discourses on Milan's urban renaissance (Table 3).

Table 3
Comparing the institutional and regulative contexts of the two urban regeneration strategies.

	Governance arrangements	Local participation	Real estate investment/ housing organizational logic	Social mix
Marseille	Multi-level governance with relevant role of the state and public-private partnership	Multi-level governance and public-private partnership (mainly public in the first phase, mainly private in the second), local conflicts	State-led promotion of homeownership implemented in partnership with private developers, role of spatial planning	National policies with binding regulations at the local level
Milan	One-level, decentered, and louse public-private partnership	Informal, collaborative bottom-up, absence of outright conflicts	General state support of homeownership, fragmented private ownership, "unattended" and unregulated market mechanisms, no spatial planning	Generic discourse, lack of planning and policy provisions and regulations, social mix as temporary outcome of market mechanisms

Source: Authors' elaboration.

The residential narratives we have gathered illuminate how these different features contribute to shaping and articulating the mobilized middle-class subjectivities from the standpoint of the three analytical dimensions. That of **belonging** reveals the mechanisms and degrees of the interviewees' identification with the place by clarifying where they stand on an imaginary continuum of orientations between the poles of 'associative' and 'individualistic' (Ball-Rokeach et al., 2001). These two poles are defined as a propensity towards a high level of involvement and participation in local affairs (the former) and, conversely, a more individualized and instrumental relationship with the neighborhood (the latter). In RdR, we observed a low degree of identification and engagement with the local dimension, as interviewees frequently expressed a sense of belonging to their professional group of peers first and foremost, then to the city as a whole, but very rarely to the neighborhood. Instead, a sense of belonging was fostered by the proximity of their homes to the cultural centers where most interviewees are employed. At the same time, the absence of collective actors organizing new residents clearly limits their ability to nurture a sense of belonging stemming from locally based relationships and engagement. While, at the same time, the inexistence of such actors was not a reason to decide not to move to the neighborhood.

Conversely, in the case of NoLo, many - although not all - interviewees expressed identification with the neighborhood, and patterns of local engagement seem to be of greater relevance. Daily and recurrent interactions, along with specific digital and offline hubs and opportunities for such interactions, were observed to play a strategic role in forging a local sense of belonging. A pattern of what we could define as a sort of "domestication" - i.e., the representation of neighborhood spaces and relationships as familial, domestic environments - can be observed among many interviewees. Furthermore, the perception to be participating in the production of a new, supposedly bottom-up narrative on the area of their own making, which is also recognized at the city level and beyond, seems to be, for some, a relevant force in the making of local belonging. And even among interviewees who do not directly participate in these forms of sociability and activation, their existence is presented as a factor in the desirability of the neighborhood. The different ways in which, based on specific features of the two strategies, local belonging developed or not developed after the households' decisions to move, contributing to the shaping, and reshaping of the middle-class identities, are better explored below.

The second dimension involves the **boundaries** (Lamont & Molnar, 2002) that operate in the residents' perceptions of their relationships with other residents and the area's geography. In both cases, such boundaries seem to be organized around bundles of variables - class,

profession, ethnicity, ways of using urban spaces, and, to a lesser extent, age - that are mainly expressed through a narrative based on an ‘old residents/new residents’ dichotomy. However, these boundaries demarcate different cleavages, operate at different scales, concern different places, and involve different attitudes. In RdR, the most substantial boundaries concern profession, class, and ethnicity. Their effect is twofold: on the one hand, they mark the perimeter of the use of public and retail spaces, and on the other, they establish differentiation in the practices of socialization and encounter (i.e. by favoring social contact in private spaces rather than in public-ones). Although the social mix in the neighborhood was decreasing with the expulsion of old residents, there was nonetheless a noticeable, persisting division between new and old residents, which was also expressed by the existence of actors actively structuring this boundary. This pattern was reinforced by the professional homogeneity of the former, as well as the fact that the latter engaged in fierce protests and asserted their claim to remain in or be integrated into the neighborhood. In NoLo, diversity appears to be grounds for more positive framings and tentative engagement: for some, notwithstanding possible conflicts with the “old resident”, diversity is a given character of the environment that is assumed to be in line with their preferences, as well being a factor of the desirability of the neighborhood; for others, it is also problematized as it is deemed as a reality with which there is limited actual interaction and whose existence is put at greater risk by the possibility of intense change, namely full-scale gentrification and displacement. Another factor of divergence between the two cases is the scale at which disagreements, or even conflicts, develop. In NoLo, also in the absence of actors that actively represent in conflictual terms “old residents”, this predominantly occurs at the building level - albeit, with some references to persistently “problematic” places and nightlife hotspots - while in RdR, it is that of the broader neighborhood, as most interviewees seek out the opportunities not available locally elsewhere. This diverging articulation of scale also relates to the very different characteristics in terms of real estate and housing provision systems associated with two “regeneration” processes: a comprehensive plan, leveraging on assertive planning tools – including expropriation - that has isolated individual buildings from others disregarding the neighborhood scale in RdR; a more granular process of filtering-up of the housing stock facilitated by a more general policy orientation towards homeownership, operated through more indirect regulative devices, in Nolo. Accordingly, in the latter, conflicts take place mostly within buildings with trenches variably opposing long-established landlords, and longer-term residents on one side and new middle-class homeowners on the other while in the former they operate in a more unmaterial way at the neighborhood scale opposing new and old residents, including their collective forms of representation. Although partially explained mainly by different initial expectations (see below), these diverging patterns in terms of boundaries contribute to the shaping and reshaping of middle-class identities also by ordering their spatial and scalar dimensions differently.

The relationships between the interviewees and the neighborhood (belonging) and other residents (boundaries) define the content of the third dimension, that of **expectations**. Such dimension is analyzed based on the individuals' satisfaction with the contribution that the decision to move gave to the development of their housing careers, but also on their broader satisfaction with the neighborhood where they decided to move and the confirmation or refusal of the same system of values and preferences embedded in their original relocation choice. At the same time, this dimension also involves the interviewees' assessment of changes that are underway or likely to happen in the area and how these align with their preferences. In RdR, the heterogeneity of the neighborhood is at the heart of widespread dissatisfaction. As the status of the place ultimately failed to correspond to the social status of the new residents, as promised by those behind the property sales, the interviewees criticize the lack of social homogeneity, which limits their levels of social control and the prevailing of their understanding of sanctioned and acceptable behaviors. Therefore, as systems of values and preferences seem to be confirmed, expectations for the future focus on the possibility of the realization of the property promoters' promises, namely in the form of a solidly homogeneous middle-class neighborhood providing a lifestyle and urban environment consistent with that image. In NoLo, the interviewees expressed a high level of satisfaction in terms of their initial expectations being met, although looking to the future, perceptions seem to be going in diverging directions. A certain degree of variety between respondents is perceptible, and opinions are not necessarily polarized, as differing views can form part of the same individual narratives. For many, expectations appear coherent with initial preferences and revolve around the continued implementation of “change” in the incremental form that has prevailed till now, through limited public policy and the starting of new retail and leisure initiatives. For others, they revolve around the need to curb any such change by preserving the neighborhood's diversity and preventing its complete transformation (i.e. gentrification). Overall, in RdR, unsatisfaction follows a somehow vertical axis – from residents towards public and private actors – and revolves around the fear of an uncompleted process of social and urban change with a register of resentment and frustration. In Nolo, it revolves around the conflicted divergence between the expectation of continuing, incremental change and the fear of it reaching a critical tipping point beyond which the same identity of the neighborhood as desirable may be at risk, falling therefore out of line with movers' initial preferences. Therefore, the two governance models – more top-down and with clear responsibilities in RdR, more “governing at a distance” and dissimulating responsibilities in Nolo – also contribute to shaping and reshaping middle-class identities: more frustrated and oppositional in RdR, more consensual and at worst reflexive in NoLo.

Overall, what emerges from our inquiry of these three analytical dimensions, is how middle-class identities are not only variably “filtered” by different discourses on and strategies of urban regeneration to specific places, but also how they are variably reshaped after the decision to move. In Nolo, new middle-class residents mostly presented themselves as being part of a process of “natural”, cumulative sorting of households with comparable preferences, skills, and professional identities. Many of them also share a feeling of having been “invited” to the neighborhood by a narrative deployed by a variety of actors and across peers' networks. Such representation was also made possible by how these households had access to homeownership, in the form of a granular entry in buildings characterized by relatively high levels of diversity and – at least inititially – affordability. This was made possible by Italy’s unregulated housing market that, missing any tenure, or rent protection measures, allows unrestricted change in the existing housing stock. In Marseille, it was the state-led project sorting new middle-class households based on professional profiles, institutional affiliations, and more structured and formalized expectations. This process took place through their entry into buildings that were taken over and refurbished by real-estate promoters that were able to displace previous inhabitants, also displacing conflict from the building to the neighborhood scale.

This divergence in the housing-related institutional mechanisms is also related to another difference. In Milan, the skills of new middle-class inhabitants were in some instances directly mobilized in the making of “urban regeneration” processes, turning this partnership into a direct or indirect source of enhanced identity for them while strengthening governing possibilities for the city administration and other actors. In Marseille, the “top-down” nature of the strategy implied that the skills and resources used to bring the strategy to fruition were primarily internal to the main actors involved, and inhabitants' skills and professionalism were not directly included in “neighborhood-making”. This lack of mobilization did not facilitate the governing of a more complex and difficult situation, that is – of course – also a function of the more ambitious strategy attempted in Marseille.

These differences are also factors in how middle-class households position themselves in the new environment, also based on the variable success of the strategies and their tools. This is an additional source of identity-building for them as they must confront divergences between

expectations related to their values and the realities they experience. As mentioned, unsatisfaction is widespread among RdR interviewees and that could put into question their overall preference for living in large, diverse cities and more specifically in the kind of diverse neighborhoods certain sections of the middle classes can only afford. In Milan too, despite higher satisfaction, conflictual conditions in buildings, as well as the risk of complete gentrification, are in some instances sources of concern if not re-assessment of initial choices for some.

7. Urban regeneration as class subjectification and its risks: the need for an institutionalist perspective

Urban neighborhoods are increasingly becoming a matter of social choice, and the ability to choose and exercise forms of spatial "elective belonging" is an important, although highly variable, dimension of identity-making processes for the urban middle classes. Also, it is a key criterion for households to assess the level of their agency and control of their overall social and class trajectory under a set of constraints and limitations. In this perspective, urban middle-class identities are arguably more and more place-based and spatially bound, both in the sense that spatial factors play a role in forging them and in that the space is intentionally appropriated by them as a resource for identity-making. More specifically, urban middle classes' identity-making efforts and struggles for distinction appear to be linked in various ways to locally based forms of collective action, that range from practices of "selective neighborhood advocacy" (Bacqué et al., 2015) to less explicitly political practices based on values of "activation", "collaboration", and "neighborliness". Urban scholarship has already underlined how, to understand the residential choices of the urban middle classes, we must articulate the fragmentation and pluralization of their positions and preferences with the complexity of scales, spaces, and temporalities of concrete practices in specific contexts (Bacqué et al., 2015). Our findings broadly confirm these assumptions but also confirm the need to further articulate them with a perspective looking at how such urban middle-class identity-making processes, and related forms of collective action, are filtered/mobilized/shaped by the complex institutional mechanisms and discursive dimensions associated with specific "urban regeneration" strategies. As already stated, in this paper we have considered such strategies as one privileged way of governing the city. Through these strategies, governing coalitions attempt to respond to the representation and legitimization crisis by nurturing the role of the "middle classes" as their "natural partners". Differently from studies looking at urban regeneration strategies from a purely policy and governance perspective, the use of residential narratives we have made in this paper can be seen as a way of looking at them from the standpoint of the deeper class identity-making processes that make governing possible. The use of residential narratives of new middle-class residents allows us to do this by looking at their evolving identities and logics of action as they are located, in the context of urban regeneration strategies, at the complex intersection of households' trajectories, initial neighborhood contexts, the specific forms of orchestration of discourses, governance, and real estate investment and housing policy mechanisms. This points to a new, broadly definable institutionalist perspective on the role of class-making in the production of the city and its governing.

Furthermore, this perspective allows us also to focus on the fact that urban regeneration discourses and strategies can also fail, lacking the ability to successfully contribute to subjectification processes among the middle classes in ways that expand the possibility of governing the city. The choice of middle-class households in regenerating neighborhoods is the outcome of a difficult balance between their preferences and what they can afford, and diversity can be in this regard a variably "passive" choice. In this context, urban regeneration policies are perilous exercises as they imply complex assessments in terms of the relational conditions – with pre-existing populations and environments - in which such "middle classes" households have to be "invited", inserted, and mobilized. The same "social mix" policies must be reconsidered in this perspective: far from being able to achieve social mixing, as proved by much scholarly research (Bacquè et al., 2011), they rather represent attempts to build such relational conditions in ways that are optimal to the flourishing of middle-class identities that makes *governing* possible, and they should be critically assessed on this level. In this regard, misalignments between discourses and expectations and between the promises brought upon by those discourses and implementation can be reasons for ineffective implementation, if not failure. Moreover, the level of financial and regulative resources mobilization appears to be far from a guarantee of success, as the higher the ambition, the more cumbersome the planning process, and the more uncertain is how this effort will articulate and mobilize class-making processes. Naturally, if at least in the short-term, the remuneration of capital and the realization of the rent gap are achieved, urban regeneration will be a success for property financial actors, but city governments and other actors may be left with conflicts, tensions, and misalignments: precisely the opposite of what they supposedly intended to achieve.

Class mobilization and subjectivization is a difficult art, and its exercise implies a very articulated balancing of discourses, expectations, tools, institutional mechanisms, and their granular socio-spatial consequences. Urban scholars should pay more attention to these matters, keeping together a view of local contexts, the evolving class structure, and their relations to urban practices and preferences with a renewed, grounded institutional perspective that looks at how policies adjust to/filter/shape these processes.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Alessandro Coppola: Conceptualization, Methodology, Case study of Nolo, Milan, Results analysis, Writing, Reviewing.

Silvia Lucciarini: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Case study of RdR, Marseille, Results analysis, Writing, Reviewing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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