

## Observing governance from the ‘street level’

### An investigation on First Access services in Bologna, Emilia Romagna, Italy.

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**Abstract:** This contribution aims at addressing how institutional changes might affect the spatial configurations of services in cities. Grounding on the territorial and multilevel features of governance in urban planning and social policy fields, the analysis focuses on the provision of specific services in a selected Italian context. Starting from the assumption that space is a product of policy decisions and instruments, the paper would consider three spatial dimensions of social assistance services: the localization (where services are located in the city), the container (in which building they are located and which functions are coexisting), the content (how spaces influence the services provision). Underrepresented in the academic debate, poorly financed among the social protection measures, rarely considered from a spatial perspective, social assistance services will be analysed for their fundamental role in local welfare provision. In particular, the contribution will focus on first access services, representative of the street-level meeting between citizens and welfare policies. Starting from an empirical research led in the Social Counters (i.e. Sportelli Sociali) of the city of Bologna - Emilia Romagna, the paper will furtherly address space-related issues of social services provision, that might reshape the contact between citizens and institutions and reorient policy decisions.

**Keywords:** welfare; spaces; social services; first access services.

#### Local welfare: a planning issue?

The panorama of the welfare services provision in Europe is consistently reshaped and challenged by major social, economic and demographic changes. The combined effect of economic reorganization processes, the increasing precariousness of the job market and the shrinking of the national welfare systems, have progressively eroded the traditional social protection measures and increased traits of fragilities in many European cities (Bricocoli, *et al.* 2017). These trends should be read together with a policy rescaling toward the local level, that finds origin and definition in the territorialisation policies of the 80s (Kazepov and Carbone, 2007, Vitale, 2009), which decentralized the decisional and regulative powers in many European countries to face post-industrial societal changes and new demands of social services (Ferrera, 2008). The withdrawal of the national states as direct suppliers of social protection measures, together with a significant reduction of the public resources dedicated to welfare services, led the basis for the involvement of third sector and private actors in the services’ provision, in order to maintain an adequate supply with a reduced public investment

(Ascoli and Ranci, 2003). The variety of actors involved in these welfare systems and the consequent redefinition of the role of the states in regulating their activities has been defined as welfare mix (*ibidem*). This new policy framework, that developed with specific features according to policy traditions and resources of different EU countries (*idem*), implied new patterns of governance and stimulated a renovated attention to the territorial scale as a reference to experiment policies and interventions (Bifulco, 2015, Kazepov, 2009).

In Italy these processes seem to be grounded in the normative reforms of the 90s, that were conceived to decentralize the policy decision at the local level, supported by emerging debates on vertical and horizontal subsidiarity. As in other European countries, new private and third sector enterprises started to be involved in the welfare services provision and, since their official acknowledgement in the Italian juridical system, they became part of a new territorial governance (Bifulco, 2015). This new regulative framework led the basis for the introduction of two major reforms that reshaped, and still regulate, the whole national welfare system (Ferrario, 2015, Vitale, 2009). Firstly, the reform L.328/00, that recomposed in a unitary framework all the interventions and the economic measures that have been formerly developed in a fragmented and categorized way, and established the roles, the responsibilities and the criteria of access to social services (Kazepov, 2009). This norm entailed the State obligation of guaranteeing a uniform provision of services at the national level (LIVEAS) and created a specific National Fund for the implementation of Social Policies (*Fondo Nazionale per le Politiche Sociali*). The law also introduced the so called Piano di Zona, a planning instrument for social services to be developed at the Municipal level following the guidelines of the Regional laws. Moreover, it established the criteria for the participation of the third sector and no profit organizations to the welfare services provision, acknowledging their official role in the public decision (Ascoli, 2001). A second relevant normative change has been the reform of the Title V of the national constitution (L.3/2001), that attributed autonomous decisional and regulative powers to the Region, the Metropolitan Cities and the Municipalities in all the subjects that were not framed under the direct intervention of the State, including social and urban planning policies. Since the introduction of this reform, the responsibilities of local administrations increased, as well as their economic involvement in financing policies and services at the local scale, often without appropriate transfers of resources from the central government or the necessary know-how to manage the new delegated subjects (Kazepov, Carbone, 2007, Bifulco, 2005, Sabatinelli, 2009). Many authors agree on the mismatch between the two considered reforms, with particular concerns on the regulative and decisional roles of the Regions and the Municipalities in providing and financing social services, that should have been financed by a dedicated national fund (Bifulco, 2015, Kazepov and Carbone 2007, Vitale, 2009).

Moreover, the impact of these reformistic attempts have been strongly limited by the economic crisis of 2008, that furtherly reduced the resources allocated to public administrations as well as the spending capacity of the families. The stagnation, where not recession, of the national economy, together with the introduction of austerity policies, have worsened the families conditions and drastically reduced public expenditure dedicated to welfare services provision. The consequences have been even more evident for the local administrations, challenged with the urgency of more adequate policies, with reduced resources. Furthermore, the increasing job insecurity, the ageing of the population, the new migration flows, the more frequent mobility, the more articulated life paths and the impoverishment of many families, have generated new heterogeneous needs, challenging the traditional sector-based welfare systems. In these sense, the actors of the above mentioned welfare mix have been constantly defied in finding resources and solutions beyond the traditional ones (Bricocoli and Sabatinelli, 2018).

### **Planning social services: where does ‘space’ fit in?**

Within this changing scenario, this contribution aims at addressing how spatial configuration of social services provision is/has been shaped by different decisional levels of urban planning and social policy fields. To understand the goal of this analysis, a terminological clarification needs to be addressed. The term ‘space’ is hereby approached as the tangible result of policy decisions and instruments (Lascoumes and Le Galès, 2007)



that often belong to different policy fields. In particular, this research focuses on the spaces of social assistance services from an urban planning perspective. Underrepresented by the academic literature and poorly financed by the national social protection measures, these services are fundamental for the implementation of local welfare policies, currently more and more relying on citizens' involvement and capacitation (Bifulco, 2015). Among the complex panorama of social services, each of which involving a wide variety of actors, instruments and policy levels, the contribution focuses on First Access Social Services (from now on: FASS), defined by law 328/2000 as *the door* of welfare provision. These are the spaces where people meet the system of welfare for the first time and, by extension, where they experience contents and rationales of welfare policies through bureaucracies and bureaucrats (Lipsky, 2010). In these spaces citizens can express needs for social help and/or economic contributions, appreciating the promptness of social work or experiencing the delay of public services. Most of all, these *doors* are both the metaphorical and physical entrance to the local welfare system, where people get to know the organization and its limits.

Within a “controversial and anomalous” role of the current national urban planning discipline, nowadays welcoming as many different perspectives as are the dimensions of the urban realm (Gabellini, 2018: 9), this contribution aims at reorienting the attention of decision makers of both urban planning and social policy fields on the relevance of space in services' provision. In particular, the analysis argues the necessity for urban planning policies to focus on social services as those primarily and institutionally devoted to answer citizens' needs, and at the same time suggests a need for social policies to consider the role of the spatial dimension in welfare services provision. Focusing on FASS, the spatial configuration is here tackled in three dimensions, each of those concerning various levels of governance and scales of observation, and influencing the users' experience in different ways:

- The localization: in terms of accessibility and distance to other meaningful centres;
- The container: the physical features of the buildings in which these services are provided and the coexistence with other different functions;
- The content: the influence that interior spatial settings exert on service experiences and on user-provider relationships.

### **Climbing back the ladder of multilevel governance in social services provision**

Against the considered territory-based policy framework, the paper focuses on FASS provision in the city of Bologna, Emilia Romagna Region, where welfare and urban planning policies have traditionally been implemented with far sighted instruments and within an extraordinary political continuity. Introduced by the Law 328/2000 to homogeneously accomplish the access to social services throughout the country, FASS have been implemented over time according to different regional laws and have been financed by the National Fund for Social Policies together with other local resources. FASS were conceived by the National Social Plan (*Piano Sociale Nazionale*, Dpr. 3/5/2001) with four main purposes: to inform, to provide help and counselling, to gather data about social needs and existing services, to promote citizens participation and community development (Pesaresi, 2008). Emilia Romagna introduced FASS with the regional law n. 2/2003, naming them ‘Social Counters’ (*Sportelli Sociali*). Following the regional guidelines, social services have been planned dividing the regional territory in districts, each of those hosting at least one Social Counter. The Municipality of Bologna introduced Social Counters in 2008, within the second edition of the Local Welfare Plan (*Piano di Zona*). Together with the new national territorialised policies, a huge process of decentralization reshaped the organization of public administration and the services provision in the city. In fact, from 2008 to 2016 welfare policies in Bologna have been managed at the neighbourhood level, where small local councils had the political and economic power to organize and provide social assistance services. The city was divided in 9 neighbourhoods and counted 10 Social Counters, one per each neighbourhood with the exception of Navile, the most populated area of the city, that had two. (Annichiarico *et al.*, 2009). Within this configuration, Social Counters were usually located in multifunctional buildings known as *Quartieri* (neighbourhoods) and worked in

strict contact with Neighbourhood councils, on which they depended. These structures hosted local administration and social services offices, school-related services and general register counters. Moreover, spaces dedicated to the activities of local associations could be found, together with multipurpose rooms for public events or collective meetings.

This configuration changed in 2016, when two intertwining reforms reshaped the entire local welfare system as well as the neighbourhood-based division of the city. The National restraints on public expenditure, together with the necessity to tackle different social and demographic challenges, led the Municipality of Bologna to rethink the structure of public administration and to reform the decentralized system of services provision (Tomesani, 2018; 2019, Evangelisti, 2018, Orioli, 2019). The neighbourhoods were reduced from 9 to 6, each of them counting around 60.000 inhabitants (see Figure 1). This implied both a significant reduction of public employees and a reconfiguration of the former decentralised administrative headquarters. The number of *Quartieri* buildings shifted from 9 to 6 and the offices of Social Counters from 10 to 6.

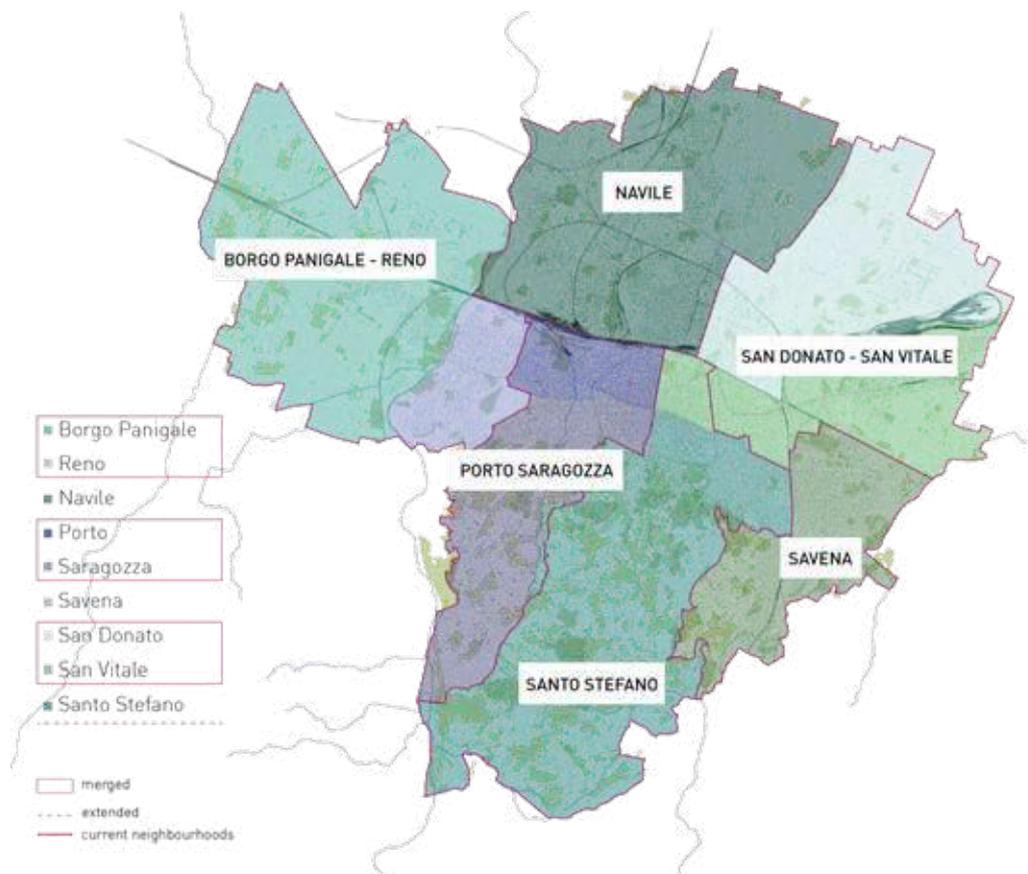


Figure 1: The neighbourhood reform of 2016. Elaboration of the author from the Open Data Comune di Bologna, 2016.

In parallel, due to the local welfare reform enacted in 2017, social services provision has been recentralized from the neighbourhood councils to a dedicated area of the Municipality named Area Welfare and Promotion of Community Wellbeing (*Area Welfare e Promozione del Benessere della Comunità*, from now on: Area Welfare). In practice, the decisional and economic powers of Neighbourhood councils have been drastically reduced, while welfare services, still relying on a territorial subdivision, became directly dependent on the public administration through the Area's chiefs. If on the one hand this new configuration in some neighbourhoods entailed a physical separation of social services offices from the *Quartieri* buildings and their services, with which significant collaborations have been consolidated over the years, on the other it was an occasion to rethink social services headquarters as independent monofunctional structures. This has to be read

together with the shift from a category-based system, that provided access to social services in different offices according to specific categories of need (elderly, disabled, adults, minors.), to a transversal one, guaranteeing a universal access in specific informative points, from which people could be reoriented to more specialized services (Tomesani, 2017). This orienteering task was assigned to local Social Counters (Regional Deliberation 1012/2014). Moreover, this reform also entailed a new Community-based welfare system (*Welfare di Comunità*), enhancing the interactions between different public actors, third sector bodies and active citizens. The idea was to promote local resources to develop a networked system of self-help, in the light of a possible ‘community taking over’<sup>1</sup> (Piano di Zona 2018-2020; Foschi, 2018). In this sense, social operators have been challenged to reinterpret their role as mediators between citizens’ needs and available local resources.

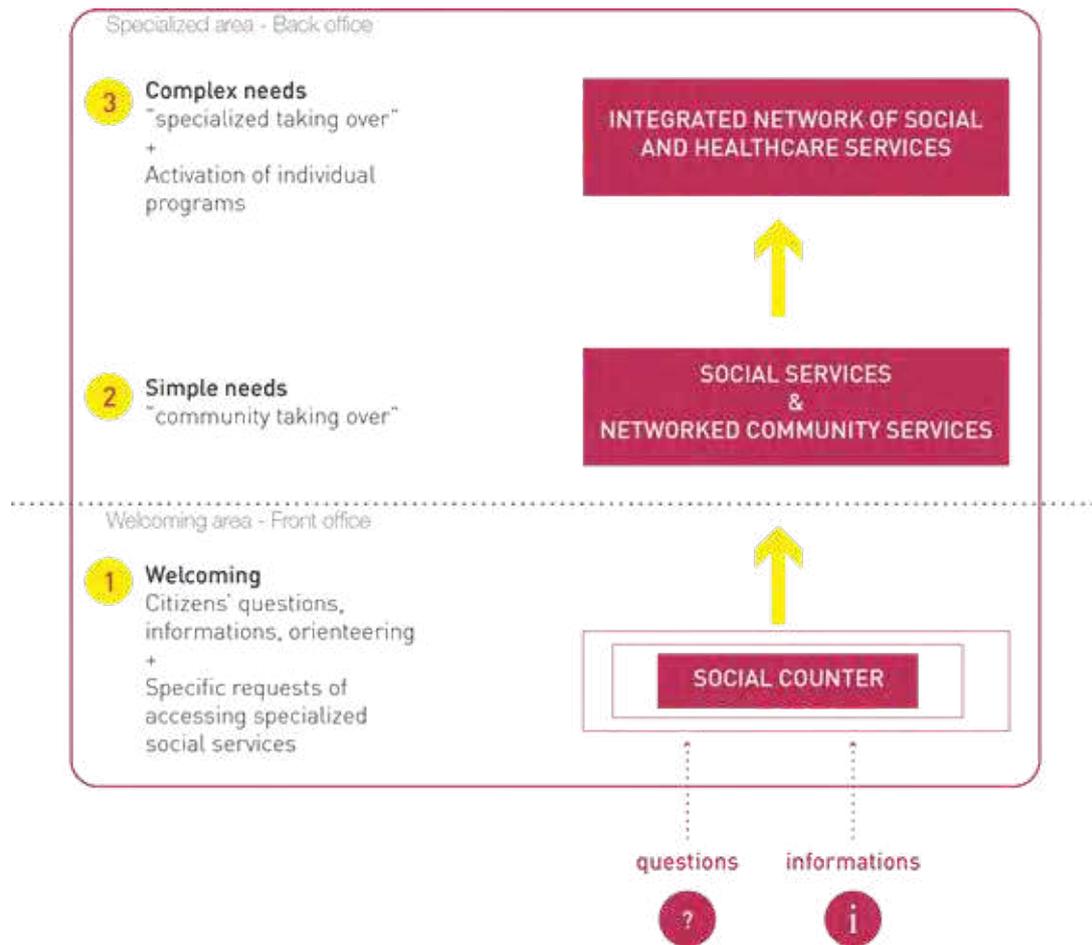


Figure 2: the pathway through the social services in Bologna. Schematic elaboration of the author from Forni, Regazzini, Paltrinieri, 2009, Tomesani, 2017.

<sup>1</sup> ‘Taking over’ translates the Italian *presa in carico*, i.e. the official process in which social assistants develop personalized projects for families or individuals and activate a series of ad hoc social and healthcare services.

The image represents the role of Social Counters as a *door* to access the overall local system of social services. In these spaces citizens can be reoriented to other services according to the complexity of their needs. In case of 'complex' needs they are taken over by the specialized social or healthcare services provided by the Municipality or other private bodies (e.g. ASP, Azienda Servizi alla Persona). In case of 'simple' needs, they are reoriented to a networked system made up by the Municipality, Third Sector Bodies, local formal/informal groups, etc. This 'light' networked taking-over is a major point of the renovated local welfare system and calls for the collaboration of different administrative levels and professional skills. In fact, the reform promotes a strong cooperation between the Area Welfare and the Area New Citizenships, Social Inclusion and Neighbourhoods (*Area Nuove Cittadinanze, Inclusione Sociale e Quartieri*), on which the reformed Neighbourhoods currently depend. The two areas collaborate through the Network Offices (*Uffici Reti*) with which the Representatives of local social services are in close contact. Born to monitor the initiatives and activities spread on the neighbourhood territory, these offices have the task to develop social inclusion through community capacitation and networking and depend on the central new-born Civic Imagination Office (*Ufficio Immaginazione Civica*). Their role is strictly related to the activities of the Urban Innovation Foundation (*Fondazione Innovazione Urbana, FIU*). This body, half participated by the Municipality of Bologna and half by the University of Bologna, organizes the majority of participatory projects in the city<sup>2</sup> and is entitled to monitor citizens needs in strict collaboration with the Network Offices, through the organization of periodic workshops named *Laboratori di Quartiere* (Tomesani, 2018). All the interactions and the interdependencies among different actors are represented in the scheme below (see Figure 3).

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<sup>2</sup> The FIU's collection of citizens requests in different areas of the city will constitute the basis for the next Urban Plan, that will be presented by the Urban Planning Department of the Municipality in 2020 (Evangelisti, 2019, Orioli, 2019, Ginocchini, 2019). This information is currently reported in the Urban Innovation Plan (see references).

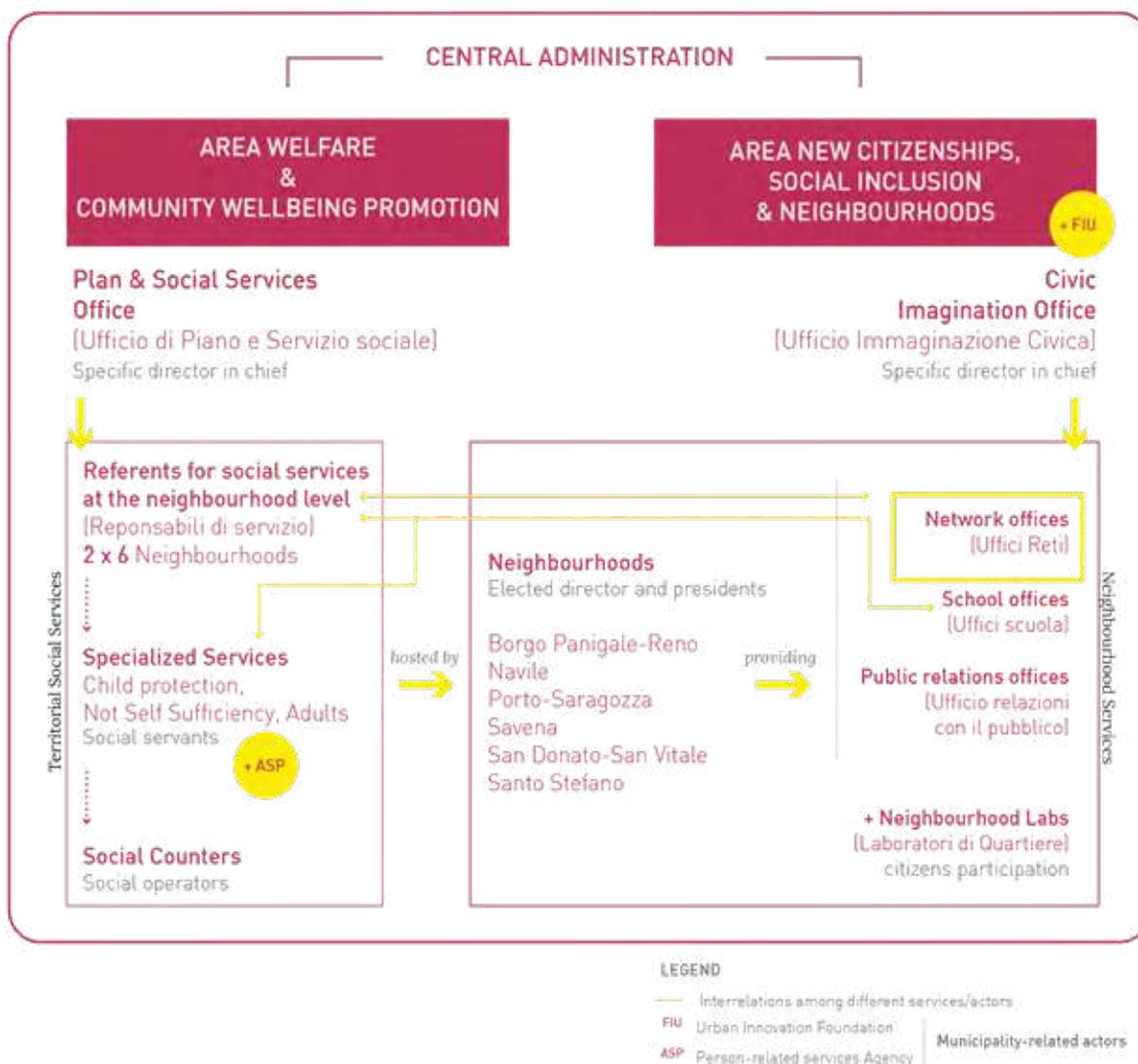


Figure 3: scheme of the governance of social services provision in Bologna. Interrelations among administrative levels and actors. Elaboration of the author from the fieldwork interviews (see references).

Against this background, Social Counters represent citizens' first access to a wide and complex system of welfare, of which they experience multiple features. The following paragraphs will be dedicated to the analysis of their spatial configuration in a specific neighbourhood of the city, chosen for its representativeness of the ongoing transformations. The aim is to show the influence of these institutional reforms on first access services through a spatial perspective (§2) The analysis relies on direct personal observations<sup>3</sup> of the Social Counters and semi-structured interviews to key actors of the services provisions.

<sup>3</sup> The author spent two months in the Social Counters in Bologna (February and March 2019). The direct observations have been transcribed in a logbook and are accompanied by drawings and photographs that would be presented during the conference.

### **Localization, containers, contents: the case of San Donato-San Vitale**

The two mentioned reforms had major impacts on the spatial configuration of social services provision in Bologna. A process of redistribution of both neighbourhood councils buildings and social services headquarters started in 2017, under the coordination of the central Office for Logistics of the Municipality and the Department for Public Works, together with other involved Areas (§3). As far as concerns the spaces of Social Counters, the result of this collective consultation was a plan of the forecasted transformations and the financial measures devoted to their implementation (Bruni, 2019). Its contents were agreed by the involved central administration offices and the local Representatives for the social services (Tomesani, 2019).

Among the transformations forecasted for the 6 Neighbourhoods, the following paragraphs would focus on San Donato-San Vitale, the most representative of the ongoing changes and one of the most complex for its territorial, social and demographic features. Created in 2016 with the unification of San Donato and part of San Vitale (see Figure 1), the neighbourhood counts 65.892 residents, the majority of which are adults (45-64 years old) and young adults. Among the 35.068 resident families, 10,1% are single parents, whose 85% are single mothers with children. The social services take over 4,2% of the population, in particular families with minors (Piano di Zona del Comune di Bologna, 2018-2020). The neighbourhood is renowned for its public housing estates, hosting many low income residents since the 60s and attracting numerous foreign families. Even if they already underwent a series of regeneration programmes concerning both the physical and the social dimensions, these areas are still in the spotlight of public debates and require a prior attention in local welfare policies and services provision.

As the result of two neighbourhoods' unification, the Neighbourhood San Donato-San Vitale presents different social services' headquarters, inherited by the former decentralized organization. Before the 2016 reform, San Vitale hosted in a single structure both the local social services and the *Quartiere* council offices, not far from the city centre and well-connected by public transports (Via Rimesse,13). San Donato counted three different buildings for social services, each one addressing different categories of need, respectively located in: Via Zanolini 2, just outside the historical city walls, Via Pirandello 8, in one of the mentioned public housing estates, Piazza Spadolini 7, at the underground floor of the *Quartiere* building. Social Counters, one per each neighbourhood, were located both in the structure of Via Rimesse 13 and in Piazza Spadolini 7. This localization was the result of former political choices, strictly dependent on the pre-existent real estate asset of the Municipality. The new configuration didn't entail a drastic change, but significantly relocated services in the different existing structures as shown in Figure 4.

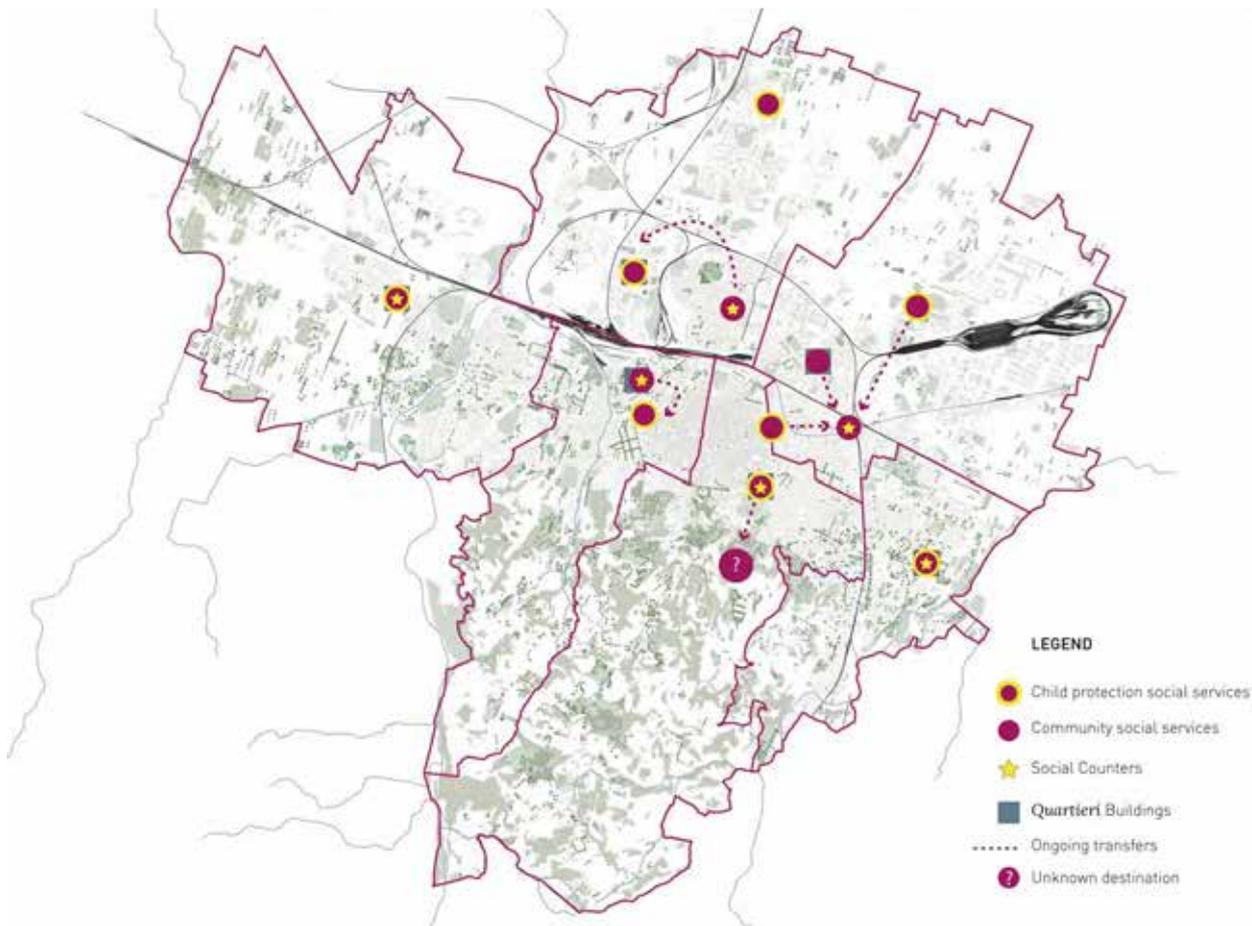


Figure 4: Localization and forecasted transfers of Social Services and Neighbourhood headquarters in Bologna. Elaboration of the author from the fieldwork, 2019.

For what concerns the spaces of FASS, the reform caused the reduction of Social Counters from two to one, due to the unification of the former neighbourhoods. Moreover, the Representatives of local social services, together with the chief of Area Welfare, the Office for Logistics and the Department of Public works, decided to aggregate all the decentralized social services – including Social Counters - in the building of via Rimesse 13, with the exception of the offices in Via Zanolini 2 and in Via Pirandello 8<sup>4</sup>. Originally designed as a school, this building was turned into San Vitale neighbourhood’s headquarter in 2008 and also hosted a daily elderly centre and the offices of social services, located in a small portion of the ground floor. When the elderly centre moved to another dedicated structure and the Neighbourhood offices were relocated, the Municipality took the chance to plan a possible extension of the social services to the whole structure (Figure 7,8). Today, the ground floor

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<sup>4</sup> As the Representatives of local social services have underlined, the combination of healthcare and social services located in via Zanolini 2 and in Via Pirandello 8 is fundamental to keep the long-standing service interactions and to maintain an already consolidated political consensus which rely on the presence of social services at the local level (Representative 1, 2019; Representative 2, 2019). As a possible compromise, the Area Welfare has suggested to maintain in Via Pirandello 8 a set of scheduled social orienteering and counselling activities in place of a stable office (Tomesani, 2019).

hosts social assistants and social counters offices, while the first is almost empty, except from two offices occupied by two social assistants of ASP (Azienda Servizi alla Persona), that would be relocated during the renovation works. This project has been approved by the different Areas of the administration in 2019 and would be implemented in the next years (Representative 1, 2019). The decision relied on the semi-central position of the building, but also on the idea that aggregating all the social services in a single space would have guaranteed the continuity of contacts among the social operators, improved the users experience through the complex local welfare system and contained real estate-related public expenditure (Tomesani, 2019).

### *At the 'street level' – Observations from the Social Counters*

The spatial configuration of Social Counters is organized in the whole city following general service guidelines provided by the Area Welfare and is generally arranged in three main spaces: the waiting room, where people are welcomed; the counters, where people are received by social operators and can express their needs; the backoffice, where social operators work when they are not at the counters and where they share doubts and information with colleagues. Then, every Social Counter in the city develops its own features according to the structure in which it is hosted. The following sections would focus on the direct observation of the spaces in via Rimessa 13, whose activities are framed in the theoretical stream of *Street Level Bureaucracies* as introduced by Lipsky in 2010. Within this framework, this paragraph aims at addressing the effects of spatial configurations on services provision, in particular during the first meeting point between citizens and institutions. The reported description and quotations are based on the authors' logbook, written in February 2019 during the site-based research. More spatial details about the user-provider relations in spatial terms are shown in Figure 5 and 6.

The main building entrance, that still brings the sign of the old Neighbourhood services, is equipped with stairs and ramps for disabled people. A glass door illuminates the reception desk from which citizens can be reoriented to different offices, and a small *waiting room* is dedicated to those users who already have an appointment with a social servant. On the left, a dark small corridor leads to a wider *waiting room* dedicated to Social Counters' wait. From this narrow space is already possible to see part of the future expansion of the services: a hole in the wall was made to test its consistency and is still open. Second-hand furniture and childish paintings representing the characters of 'Snow White' decorate this area. There's no room to swing a wheel chair or a pram, mothers should wait in the corridor standing against the walls. At the bottom of the room, a young woman sitting behind a desk welcomes people and invites them to take a number from a ticket machine. Her task is to ask them what they need and if they have prepared the correct documents to access the services. This welcoming figure is known as 'Open'<sup>5</sup> and has been introduced in January 2018 by the central administration to ease the working loads of social operators at the counters, saving both citizens' and employees' time in case of misleading information or incomplete documents. It is easy to understand why: in a single morning more than 60 people might come to the counter asking for economic support, social assistance, the activation of home-based services, or just to chat with someone willing to listen to them. Not everyone who

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<sup>5</sup> The Open preliminary filter to Social Counters is provided by a joint venture among the Municipality of Bologna, Cidas, Arci and Antoniano social enterprises. Around 20 people among 25 and 35 years old, already graduated or about to finish their studies, have been selected through a public call to welcome citizens in the waiting room, working 9 hours a week in shifts. A graduation in social sciences was not a specific requirement of the call but could constitute a preference for the selection. Before entering in contact with citizens they have followed a 4 hours training course to understand the activities of the Social Counters and few skills to manage the interactions with the public.

accesses Social Counters has experience of social services provision or is comfortable with the environment and its features or languages. “*Someone told me to go to the so called Social Counters, but I don’t know where to go...*” – asks a woman around 50 years old to the receptionist. “*I remember I went to the Social Counters many years ago, but they were in Piazza Spadolini: why did you move them? They were way more accessible over there! The Municipality never does something right*” – complains another user with the Open. People accessing the structure are generally disoriented and tend to ask for help to those they meet first. They don’t know where to go neither who is entitled to listen to their needs. A red and yellow totem with the logo of the Social Counter is located at the entrance of the small corridor, it is barely visible. This sign was thought by the central administration to homogenize the graphic identity of Social Counters, helping citizens to find this service within multifunctional structures. If they don’t find the totem or any other indications, people have to ask to, or are asked by, those they met as they step in. The first contact might be misleading: both the Open and the receptionist are not professionals of the welcoming interaction neither apprised of the overall social services provision or informed about service-related news. This might cause the unpleasant redirection of users who are struggling to find their way through welfare provision: “*Where else are you addressing me now? I have been here twice, you have always reoriented me to other services and they told me to come back here. Now I sit and wait. Full stop!*” - states an annoyed man to the Open. Despite these situations, people tend to rely on the information given at the welcoming desks, the nearest and the quickest they can find.

From the waiting room citizens are called to enter the *Social Counters*, the actual meeting points between citizens and public institutions. These spaces are enacted in small offices equipped with a desk, a printer, a computer and a board with information on the ongoing economic or social support measures. The offices are very impersonal, with standard furniture and few objects on the desk. This is mostly due to security measures introduced by the central office of logistics, concerned about social operators safety after several assault episodes. Even the position of the desk is thought to ease a possible escape of services providers, often to the detriment of users comfort. Considering the high numbers of people accessing the counters, some element of discomfort are (consciously or not) introduced to speed the meetings and receive the highest possible number of users. However, when a recipient with complex requests comes to the counter, social operators are entitled to understand his multifaceted need, to organize his/her future steps inside the social services. “*Is there an additional chair? I think it would take long and I don’t want my son to stand all the time*” – says an eighty year old man, accompanied by his son. These meetings could take from 20 minutes up to an hour, with evident drawbacks for those who stand in the tiny waiting room. On the contrary, economic supports are provided in 10/15 minutes, with a little interaction between citizens and social operators. This user-provider separation, emphasised by the presence of the desk, helps the social operator to prevent an excessive level of intimacy and personal involvement (Dubois, 2018) and to consolidate their institutional role. This attitude belongs to ‘an ambivalent identity’ of the street level bureaucrats (*ibidem*, 179), whose struggle is to balance their personal system of values, on which might rely a more or less extensive use of discretion (Brodkin, 2008; Dubois, 2018; Lipsky, 2010), and the tasks of the institution they are representing. This level of discretion not only belongs to the services provision, e.g. when bureaucrats decide which recipients deserve a support or have to be reoriented, but is also reproduced in spatial terms, when providers welcome certain users (typically mothers with children or elderly women) or protect themselves from others (typically adult men). On this purpose, street level bureaucrats tend to organize the space according to specific situations, even if it entails a violation of rules or suggestions given from the central administration. A shift in furniture’s position might facilitate the communication or impede undesired interaction according to the situation. “*You never know which is the mood of who’s crossing that threshold and how he/she would react to your statements*” – says a social operator pointing the door - “*but after years of experience you immediately understand whether is the case to take precautions or not*”. In this perspective, a very common trend among street level bureaucrats is to keep counters doors open to let people in the waiting room notice a possible difficult situation. This goes to the detriment of recipients privacy, to be universally guaranteed by right and particularly assured in services provision, but at the same time represents a fundamental strategy for bureaucrats safety.



Along the corridor, a small room dedicated to the *Backoffice* activities is shared by 4 social operators, two of them sharing the same desk. They work in shifts with their colleagues at the counters. Even if designed for other purposes, this space is frequently used for the provision of particular economic supports. At the same time, the Backoffice is also a sort of ‘outburst room’, where all social services’ employees come to take a break and chat with their colleagues. The result is an overcrowded space, where social operators have difficulties in concentrating and managing phone calls and where there is little room to accommodate recipients. Provider-users interactions are constantly limited by the presence of other social operators chatting, speaking at the phone, and entering the room. Moreover, here social operators express doubts or complaints that shouldn’t be listened by recipients in respect of the institutional image. Accustomed to uneven treatments and uncomfortable situations, users don’t usually complain about inappropriate spaces, even when they obstacle the expression of their need or undermine their privacy. Some of them try to capture other providers’ attention when social operators don’t respond to their need; others are visibly embarrassed. On the other turf, social operators take advantage of their colleagues presence to collectively solve uncertain or difficult procedures and/or to strengthen their institutional position in front of users grievances. Sharing the same space, user-recipient relationships tend to become collective, to the detriment of recipients privacy and their personal will to share his/her own needs.

As the observations show, spatial configurations affect user-provider relations and services supply in different ways. The analysed ‘moments’ of the Social Counter’s activities (welcoming and waiting, expression of the needs, backoffice activities and consultation with colleagues) are organized in specific spaces (welcoming desks and waiting rooms, counters, backoffice), each of them presenting a series of strengths and criticalities (Figure 5, 6). This rigid separation, designed following the guidelines of the Office of Logistics and the Area Welfare, is often overcome both by users and providers to adjust the service environment to different situations. Therefore, different professionals arrange the available spaces depending on users’ needs and/or services circumstances according to a certain degree of discretion. In this sense, the spaces of the first meeting between citizens and public institutions can be understood both as *site-specific*, i.e. enacted in different spaces according to the available resources, and *case-specific*, i.e. reframed according to different users’ features and demands. While encouraging new design strategies towards a more flexible spatial setting, these practices are firmly grounded in Regional and Municipal laws and guidelines that call for standardisation as a mean to guarantee a more homogeneous, universal and safer system of service provision.



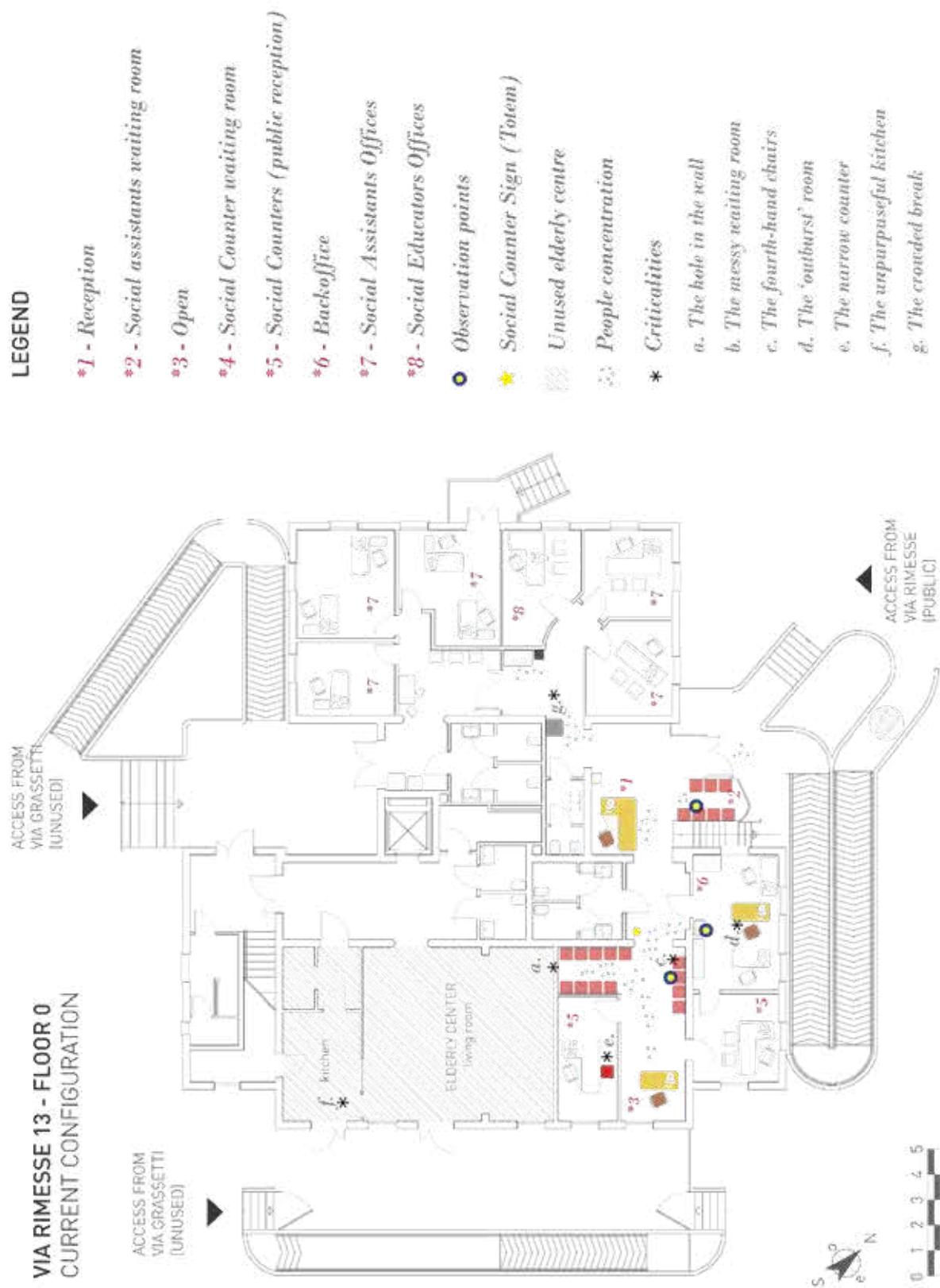


Figure 5: Plan of the building in via Rimesse 13, Bologna. Elaboration of the author from the direct observations and the cadastral plan.

- LEGEND**
- Observation points
  - ▨ Unused elderly centre
  - \* Criticalities
- a. The isolated service  
 b. The 'mentally ill proof' window  
 c. The 'mentally ill proof' elevator  
 d. The ignored storage space  
 e. The equipped bathroom

**VIA RIMESSE 13 - FLOOR 1  
 CURRENT CONFIGURATION**

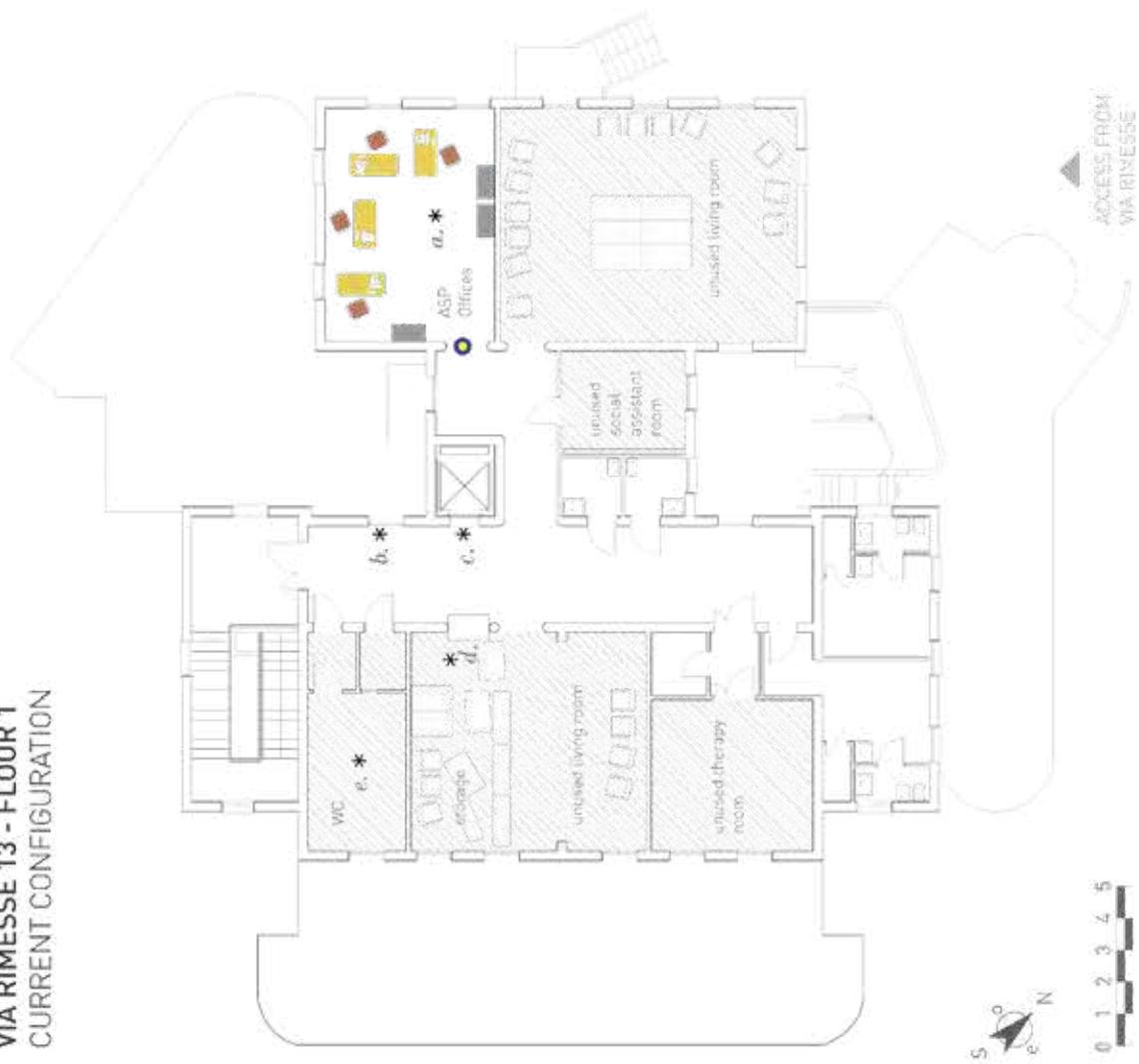


Figure 6 Plan of the building in via Rimesse 13, Bologna. Elaboration of the author from the direct observations and the cadastral plan.

- LEGEND**
- \*1 - Reception
  - \*2 - Waiting room
  - \*3 - Social assistants offices
  - \*4 - Social Counter (public reception)
  - \*5 - Open
  - \*6 - Backoffice
  - \*7 - Break area
  - \*8 - Staff-only reception
  - \*9 - Printing area
  - \*10- Social assistants offices
  - \*11- Social educators offices
  - ▨ New spaces - new uses
  - ★ Possible 'hotspots'?
  - a. Separate entrances
  - b. Which receptionist?
  - c. Waiting in front of what?
  - d. The hidden Open
  - e. A break for whom?
  - f. Printing 'en plein air'
  - g. Waiting in front of the offices

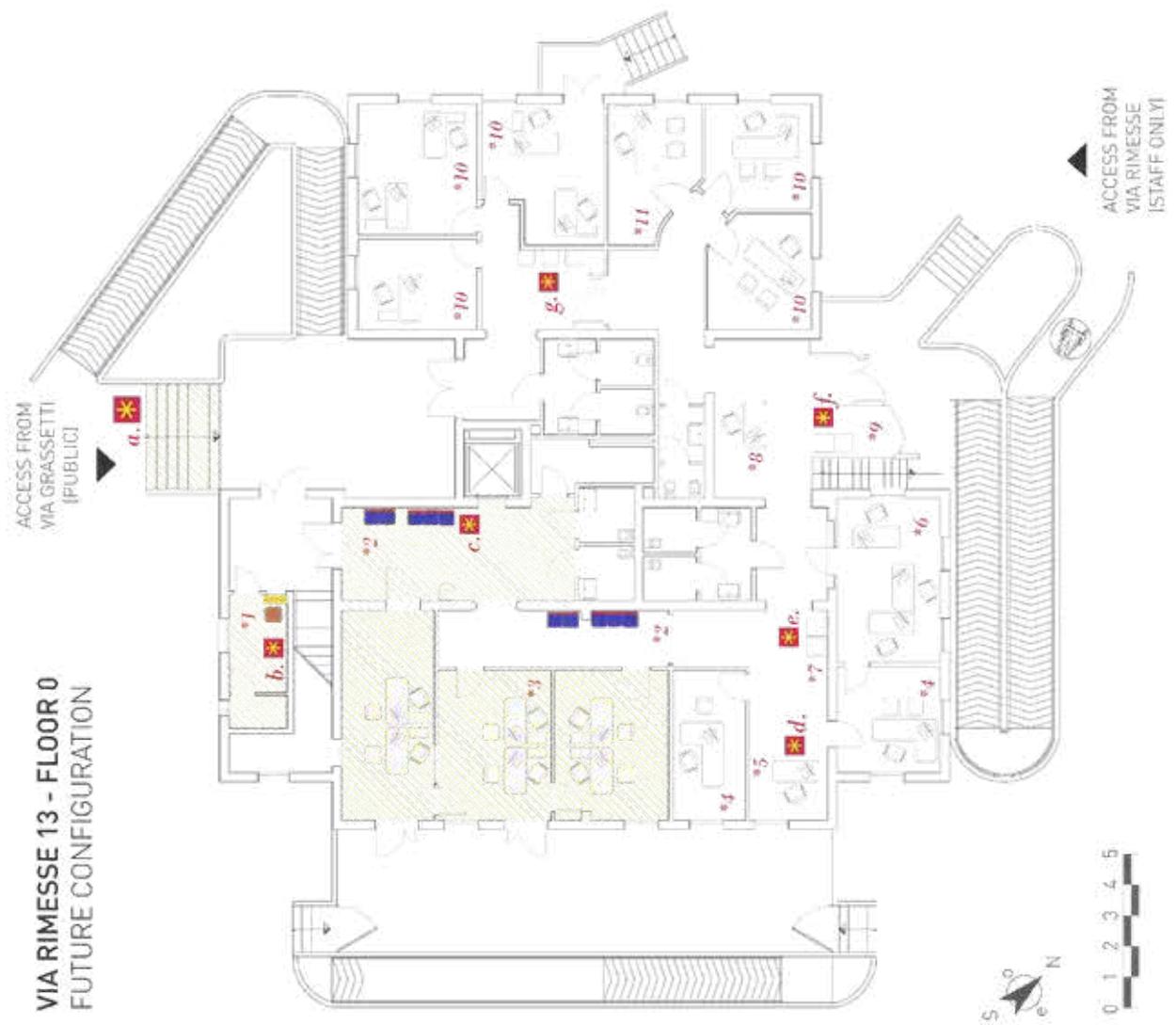


Figure 7: Plan of the future configuration of the building in via Rimesse 13, Bologna. Elaboration of the author from the design proposals of the Office for Logistics and the Area Welfare, 2017.

- LEGEND**
- \*1 - Social assistants offices
  - \*2 - Waiting room
  - \*3 - Spaces for private talks with users
  - \*4 - Lunch room
  - \*5 - Printing area
  - \*6 - Meeting room
  - ▨ New spaces - new uses
  - ✳ Possible 'hotspots'?
  - a. Waiting in the corridor
  - b. Overcrowded offices?
  - c. Lunch break together
  - d. Overcrowded offices?
  - e. Large meetings

**VIA RIMESSE 13 - FLOOR 1  
FUTURE CONFIGURATION**



Figure 8: Plan of the future configuration of the building in via Rimesse 13, Bologna. Elaboration of the author from the design proposals of the Office for Logistics and the Area Welfare, 2017.

## **To conclude: Fine-grain analysis for wider policy orientations**

The analysis developed in the previous paragraphs aims at addressing the different possible spatial drawbacks of institutional changes in social services provision from different policy perspectives. Among the FASS as traced by the national norms, the research focused on Social Counters in the city of Bologna, selected as a virtuous context of organizational and policy transformations. Grounding on two substantial local reforms that reshaped the local welfare provision, the research analyses the spatial effects of governance's changes focusing on three different dimensions: the distribution of services in the city (localization); the building in which services are provided (container); the spatial features of service provision and the user experience (the content). The analysis considers these dimensions simultaneously, basing on interviews with local administrators and social operators and grounding on personal site-specific observations.

Such a 'fine-grain' investigation is embedded in the idea that micro-scale observations could encourage further learnings on the links between different actors and policy levels and show how they are interconnected with wider systems. (Healey, 2015, 121). From this perspective, the research investigates how different levels of governance and policy instruments (Lascoumes and Le Galès, 2007) are intertwined in spatial configurations of Social Counters. Moreover, climbing back the ladder of multilevel governance, this contribution showed how different policy levels are/have intertwined in the creation and the modification of Social Counters spaces. For what concerns the National level, a major focus has been dedicated to the processes of policy territorialisation and decentralisation of the first 2000 and their partial *about turn* with the beginning of the economic crisis, that entailed a significant reduction of resources at the local level but also a drastic shrinkage of the public employees. In Bologna these phenomena led the basis for a reorganization of the neighbourhood subdivision and the local welfare reforms, implemented between 2016 and 2017. To investigate the effects of these reforms on the Social Counters, this contribution has focused on the case of San Donato – San Vitale neighbourhood. The main consequences of these normative changes can be summarized in three aspects. First, in those neighbourhoods that have been merged such as San Donato-San Vitale, the number of users have drastically increased, while social counters and social operators have shrunked, with significant drawbacks on social servants' workloads, on service localization and accessibility and on the consolidated interactions with other existing meaningful services. Second, these changes influenced Social Counters spaces, whose renovated organization led to a partial obsolescence of the existent structures and required different spatial settings that are still to be implemented. Third, social operators have been challenged to interpret increasingly different social demands with few dedicated instruments and to orient them to a variety of existing actors and services of whom they were not aware before.

Against this framework, the spatial configuration of services might be considered as both the results and the driver of institutional changes and policy choices. In particular, through spatial analysis it is possible to observe how different levels of governance are intertwined in services provision at the local level, and frame the main criticalities or advantages of such a complex system. Moreover, looking to governance changes through street-level observations of spaces and practices might lead to a deeper understanding of policy experiences and raise relevant aspects to reorient decision making processes and to develop more equal strategies of services provision.

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### ***Interviews***

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27.12.2018 and 18.4.2019, Piazza Liber Paradisus, Bologna, Italy.

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Valentina Orioli, Assessor of Urban planning, Private constructions, environment, Requalification and preservation of the historic city, Comune di Bologna:

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Giovanni Ginocchini, Director of the Urban Planning Innovation Fundation (FIU):

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Representative 2: Referent for the Child protection Area in San Donato-San Vitale, Comune di Bologna:

11.2.2019, Via Zanolini, 2, Bologna, Italy

Raffaella Bruni, Head of the Public Works Department, Comune di Bologna.

13.3.2019, Piazza Liber Paradisus, Bologna, Italy.