

That
building

over
the bridge



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Colletivo MaBo
<https://www.instagram.com/mabo.collective/>

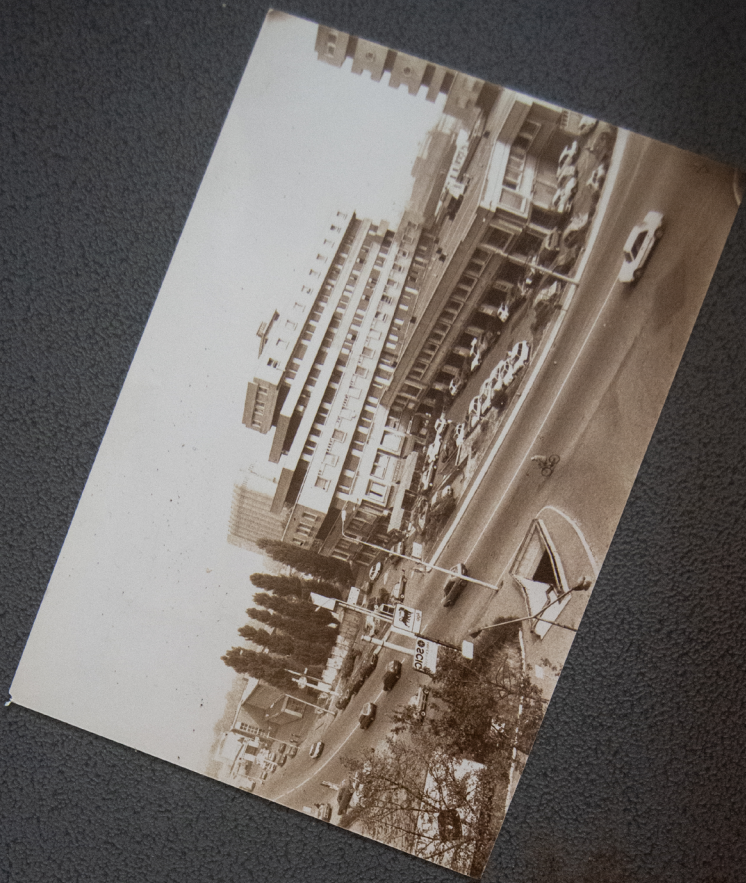
That building

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And thanks to Franco for his willingness to take part into this experiment and for being my father.

over the bridge



**Migration is part of our DNA.
Since the beginning of mankind, men and women
have never stopped travelling.
It's the sum of all these displacements that makes us
what we are today.**

Historical Background

The first wave of migration towards today's Northern District (*Area Nord*) of the city of Modena (located right past the train station overpass) started with the relocation of the port area outside of the city. The port was displaced from *Corso Estense* (once known as *Corso Naviglio*) to what would soon become today's *Darsena* (docks), and remained largely unchanged until the 1930's. Then, in the aftermath of World War II, the layout of the area underwent rapid and regular change due to housing initiatives (both state-run and private) and urban development. The construction of *Condominio R-Nord* (the "R-Nord apartment building"), the big, grey building that can be seen from the station, began in 1970. It replaced the local gas holder and was erected between *Strada Nazionale del Canaletto Sud* and *Strada Attiraglio*.

The building, designed by architect Vinicio Vecchi, was originally intended to provide housing for workers of the local cattle market: since WWII, this area had established itself as a major economic driver for the districts north of the train station. The structure layout is quite typical: a two-floors base complex hosting commercial premises (and with access to restrooms and interior stairways) serves as the base for two 7- storey apartment blocks, perpendicular to the streets, and featuring a descending, layered structure on both sides. Volume-wise, the most striking element is represented by two large balconies which, together with the multi – levelled shape of the complex, and the alternation of reinforced concrete and brick-red plaster provide a strong sense of horizontality .

It's here, or more precisely, in *Strada Attaglio*, that my father's story – my own story – begins.

1

The Father



That's me. I was just born. It was 1989. My mum and dad had just moved into a new apartment in the Saliceto Panaro area. Our new flat was bigger and brighter: a real home. My father was happy. He was working for a local company: he was a numerical control operator. A thriving period for small and medium enterprises.

Finding a job was easy. Also for an immigrant. Especially, for an immigrant. The manufacturing efforts of the Northern part of the country needed workforce.

II

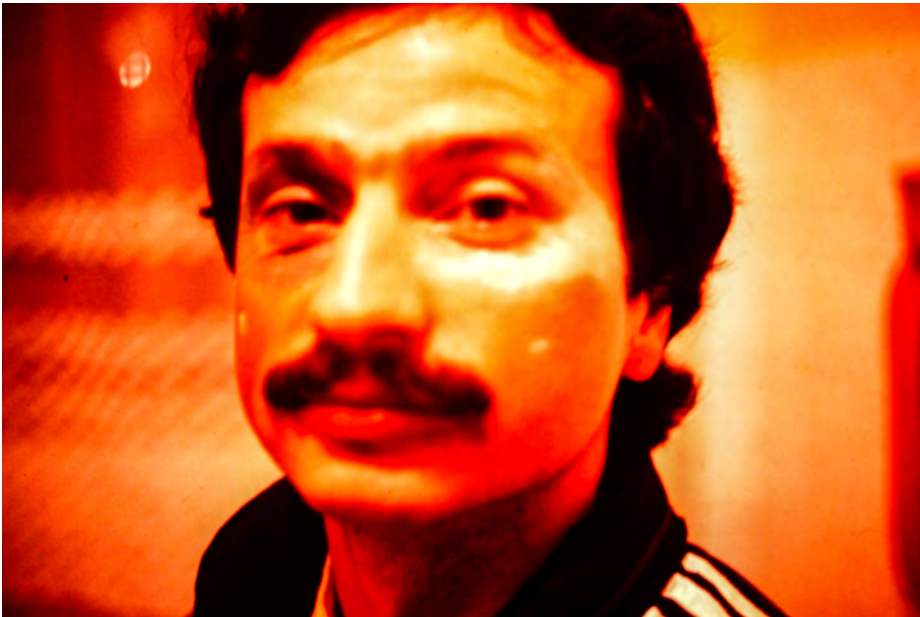
I'm an immigrant's son. Now that I think about it, I never really considered myself as such. But still I am. My father never told me much about his coming to Modena. For a long time, I had been meaning to ask him about those times, to involve him in something revolving around him, not me.

My father came from a tiny village from Southern Italy. Before moving to Modena he had lived in Germany and in the Marche region, working in shoe and paint factories; he had also been a labourer, a peddler, and a typewriter maintenance operator. Each time we walked near the station overpass, he would tell me that the big, grey building used be his first home.

"Did your father really live there?!" asked my friends.

I didn't know whether to feel proud or ashamed about it, all I knew was that the whole complex looked like a s*****e. My father hasn't been back since then, more than 30 years have passed.





[...] I lived on the third floor of the first building you can see from the bridge. Can you see it?! The second-last window from the bottom. The moment I got here I thought “What the hell am I doing here?”. I wanted to leave. The building overlooked the train station so I thought “I’m going to catch a train and leave right now”. I don’t know why it happens, but when you find yourself somewhere far from home, you sometimes feel this need to go to the train station. It makes you feel less lonely, and closer to home; you can always jump on a train and go back.

[...] It was one of those big buildings with a night porter. He must be dead too by now. 33 years have gone by, after all. I was your age when I first arrived in Modena. A friend of mine had moved here a little before me; plus, Modena sounded like a great city, a left-wing, progressive, alternative one. It was the secular and red Emilia Romagna. But then I started talking to people around me and they all had their kids attend catechism classes and Sunday Masses. One minute they would vote for the *Partito Comunista Italiano* (TN: the Italian communist party), and the next moment they would concern themselves with their kids first communion!

I went to this real estate agency in the old city. “Here it is! Go and check this one out. If you like it, it’s yours”. Who knows how many people like me came to them every single day.

The flat was just perfect: a studio apartment with bathroom, 290.000

lire per month. There was a short hallway right after the entrance, and some curtain to separate the sleeping area from the kitchen. I would cook with a small electric gas stove which really made me struggle. Each time some water dropped on it, it would immediately turn off. I also had a tiny colour TV I had brought along from Germany.

The complex looked depressing, and didn’t offer much. The supermarket was already there, yes, it had always been there. I remember a coffee place around the corner where I would occasionally go to have coffee.

Actually, shying away from socializing might be my biggest regret. I mean yes, I would have night outs and drinks with colleagues, but it never led to any long term friendship. Times were different, then, and I was also different. You need to actively look for bonds, and then be able to maintain them. I wasn’t very good at either.

[...] I can remember my neighbour: he was the typical know-it-all, and he obviously came from the South. We would sometimes chat about this and that. I told him that I was going to buy a house for me and my wife. His obvious reply was: “If you need to visit some apartments, I can help you out”. He said he knew lots of people. I never really figured out what he did for a living, nor whether the girl he lived with was his girlfriend or his sister.

[...] There were no foreign immigrants at the time. There was us, which is practically the same thing.



2

Number
308





CHE IMPORTA
DETERMINA
DELLA DANZANO
AGLI CHE FA
TEORIE NOSTRE
L'INFINTO
GODIMENTO?

IL SESSO
ASSE COMBA
LA CARNE
DI
CUORA DI M

DI CHE È MANCANZA
QUESTA MANCANZA
CUORE CHE È UN TRATTO
NE SELE DILLO

ROVISTATO
NEI TUBI
DE WACCA
E MI SI È
IMBROGLIATA
LA CODA

FENX

Large stylized graffiti letters, possibly 'X' or 'Z', with a central figure.



Dad couldn't remember the exact apartment number. They all looked the same from the outside. He had lived there two years, between 1986 and 1987, and had never come back since.

He comes to pick me up on a Saturday, early in the morning. I'm thrilled, maybe even more than him. 30 years have passed since the last time. My dad's memories - layouts, geographies and geometries - are getting clearer and clearer as we move closer to the building. He figures out the apartment position: the third window from the right. We walk past the porch. We stop in the entrance hall. It hadn't changed. Shall we enter?! At that very moment, a girl pops up and asks us if we wanted to come in. How can we refuse? We walk up the stairs.

It must be on the second floor: you had to get out of the elevator, turn left and then turn left again once in the hallway... first door on the right. The hallway is long, wide, scarcely illuminated, and with exposed brick walls. Dozens of doors on both sides. We look like three cops under cover. At least that's what the old lady standing next to us must have thought, before quickly walking past us and into the elevator. I was feeling uneasy. We should have asked permission before entering, I thought.

II

We go back to the ground floor and meet the night porter. We say "hi" and walk out. He looks confused. And rightly so. We look at the façade overlooking the station parking lot. It couldn't be the second floor. The apartments are too big. It has to be the third floor. Yes, the third floor.

We're walked back in. This time we knock and wait for the night porter to open up. We ask him to let us in. My dad used to live here, some time ago. He looks at us. He must also have mistaken us for cops. We can't really blame him.

In order to blend in among the local population and easily approach people, I'm rocking my girlfriend's late grandfather's fur coat and have put my long hair up. I look like I'm one of the good guys. As for Dario, he's wearing black boots and a leather jacket, on top of a pair of tight jeans. He's tall and slim. He's clearly the bad guy. My father is the old veteran teaching rookies. A casual look. He doesn't need any introduction, everyone knows him.

We walk upstairs. The apartment number is 308. We're like: "Should we knock? And to do what, then? "Yes, hello, I'm here with my father who used to live here in your apartment 30 years ago, would you mind letting us in?"

It's us, the three men from before. Moreover, we're wearing masks because of Covid. It can't possibly work. We decide to ask the porter, he must know. "Who lives at number 308?". More doubts. I remove my mask, he looks reassured. I explain my project to him: my father, his old apartment, etc.

The porter replies that a Filipino lady (who works as a private caregiver) now lives there with her husband. We will have to come back during the week if we want to talk to her.

I have to search a place I know nothing about, apart from what is written in the newspapers... condemning the drug trade around the block, the wild immigration trends and an overall degrading situation. A loud minority who shouts but has nothing to say. There has to be something else.

I send the property manager a couple of formal e-mails to ask for permission and also a couple of questions. He quickly dismisses us saying "that Covid and refurbishment works make it impossible to accommodate our requests". The estate agency my father went to more than 30 years ago - which, by the way, is still there and can be found at Via Castelmardo - tells me they would put me into contact with their reference person. They never got back to me.

I call Alex. He runs Spazio Happen, a local youth center. He's willing to help. He has already read something about our project. While on the phone, he gives me a list of contacts that could possibly be of great help. But it's too early to celebrate. He warns us: it's unlikely that any of the people on the list will be willing to help us out. What a shame. But one of them might actually accept: the cigarette shop lady.

Eureka! That's a start.



THE CIGARETTE SHOP LADY

[...] I've lived in many different cities. So I know how it feels. My father got hired by some guy from Bergamo who didn't pay his social security contributions for years.

When I arrived here everyone used to tell me this place was ugly. They would call it *Il Ghetto*, the "heroin hotel", *Scampia**, *le vele**, (*TN – two of the most notorious and crime-ridden spots in the city of Naples). There were drug trade, prostitution.

Look around you, we're in the city centre, not in some distant suburb. The only real barrier separating the two is the train station, which is a physical but also a social one. Living here feels like Milan, it feels like home.

My sister used to live in Modena. She married some guy from Correggio. That's when we joined them. I wanted my kids to be able to live free and make their own life experience. Milan is a complex and complicated city in a lot of ways.

I see more misfits around here these days. Lockdown has brought social degradation and decay back into the streets, and has opened up again the social gap that renewal initiatives had partly narrowed.

With the local underground economy completely flattened, the whole neighbourhood stopped moving, no more entertainment nor recreation. When neighbourhoods are lively and

bursting with life, then social decay looses ground, it fades away, it waters down.

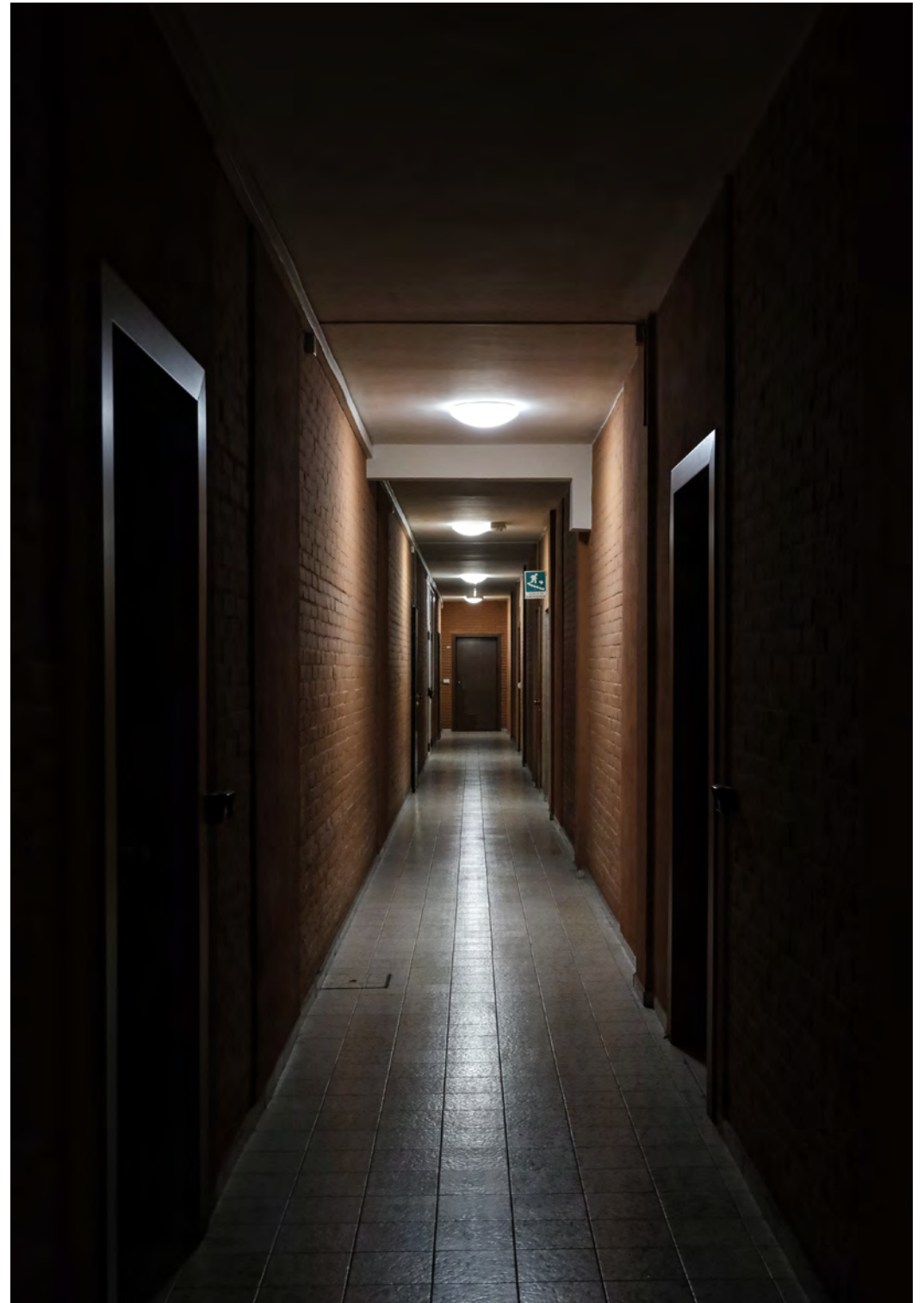
[...] We have take care of this place, or else it will never change. We need to be able to see its beauty, and to believe in it. When you live in a beautiful place, it affects you.

This beauty shows in whatever you do, in your social relationships, at work, at home. Instead, ugliness gets inside you, whether you like it or not. You become ugly.

Places feel what we think of them. Ideas affect the place where we live. They create it.

3

The meeting



We're going to make it this time, I can feel it. It's snowing outside. We get out of the car. The night porter had told us that if we came back the following Wednesday she would be there. I kept thinking about what to tell her the whole way to her place: "Yes, hi, I'm Giovanni, I'm here with my dad. We're working on a photo project about migrations. My father used to live in this apartment during the 1980's. He'd love to see it again".

Would I ever let myself in? No one is answering the door. Lallo, the night porter, isn't there either. We've become friends by now. What should we do? Should we go away? People start looking at us. It's not the first time they've seen us hanging around the building front door. Did they notice us? They must be fed up with people like us asking questions about life in the *R-Nord*: the declining neighbourhood, the drug trade, prostitution...

And then there are the migrants. Yes, the migrants... who isn't one? Lallo walks out of his room. I tell him we're ready to meet the lady. "All right, you can go". "What do you mean by that? Come with us". He replies he's not coming, the lady won't open to anyone anyway...

Apartment number 308. I take a breath. What should I tell her? I go over again my imaginary conversation with the Filipino lady. It can't work. I take a breath. I start knocking at the door.

II

I obviously didn't say any of the words I prepared. I mentioned a trip I did with dad, about how he used to live in that apartment, and how he would love to visit his past home once again... But no, she won't open up to anyone. She's scared (and rightly so).

Dad reassures her, and we walk away from the door so she can see by herself that we mean no harm. That's what we're telling her, at least, she can't be sure about that. Silence. "Ma'am?! Is your husband home? We could talk to him instead". We knock again. No one's answering. Did she call the police? Yes, she did indeed. We walk away, sad and daunted. We're going to need a mediator.



Interlude I

We used to have “community porters”, the creation of which was strongly supported by the Department of Security and Legality of the Municipality of Modena in the framework of an urban regeneration project concerning local areas.

From 2006 on, Modena community porters have been managing a co-housing space, two communal laundries and a shared kids playroom. And a series of other projects aimed at fostering beauty.

**This service was available from 2008 up to February 2020*



KHIRA – AKA THE VEILED WOMAN

[...] The idea to create a shared space stems from the need to generate movement, socialization, interactions.

Having families, women and children enjoy public spaces allows those areas to be put back under control, and ends up curbing social unease. You won't stop it, of course, but it can be contained.

[...] We wanted to provide the community with close support. If they didn't call us, we would go to them. Who were these people, women for the most part, who would only leave home to walk their kids to school and pick them up in the afternoon? We wanted to meet them. Sometimes we would just walk around and try to census building occupants. Once a year we would also meet the prostitutes and talk to them.

When I first came here, in 2007, this place was miserable in so many ways: the looks, the living conditions and overall housing quality.

The situation got better with time but issues will always be there.

Administrating and managing such a crowded condominium is no easy task. If small apartment buildings are already tricky to manage, then imagine how trickier things can get here, with all sorts of people coming in, each bringing along his own story, customs and personal issues.

[...] The *R-Nord* building has become a political matter. Neighbourhood security is being talked about a lot, but it's just a way of doing politics, making promises, inflaming crowds.

When I was working, I would sometimes finish late at night, even after 10 PM. I'd always come back home alone and I never had any issues.

[...] It's just a condominium like many others, except this one was made a symbol.

I was on very good terms with the prostitutes. The whole thing made laugh. I, a veiled and very religious woman, would listen to them speak about intercourse with their clients. They would say to me: "You're different", and were always very helpful. I spent beautiful and deeply humane moments with them.

It's not about integration, it's about us not being given a chance: I can see a lot of people walking around with a disgusted face, all filled with hate towards migrants. But we're all different and everyone should be given a chance to grow. Otherwise, people tend to become wary and suspicious.

MILINDA

[...] The centre was initially located in *Via delle Suore*, in what used to be the *PCI* headquarters* (* *TN: PCI = the then Italian Communist Party*). The manager had managed to negotiate a good rental contract with the local party cell.

It was mostly men who left their homes, just as it happens nowadays. Multiple male dorms were scattered around the city. The luckiest ones would rent a private room to share it with other men from their same country or village. They'd establish themselves and then have the rest of the family join them.

Men, migrants, families from the south: we'd welcome them all. Unqualified individuals needing basic literacy in a foreign language or ground-level IT skills. There was no such thing as being a "clandestine" back then. No true Visa-based system existed before Italy complied to the Maastricht Treaty, thus joining the Schengen Area.

People from Maghreb coastal countries needed no Visa to enter Italy. Many girls would come here to prepare for their marriage. They'd only bring a tourist visa, and sometimes not even that. Once in Italy, one could easily get the necessary documents. Then, with a little help from some trusty local contact (whether a cousin, a friend, a family member), it was easy to have your family join you. Then you had a year's time to find a job and get settled in. Later on, Europe started turning more and more into a for-

ress, making it increasingly harder for people to get in.

[...] I arrived in Reggio Emilia in 1989. My husband is from here. Sharing a common cultural background (my dad was French) made it easier for me. I had graduated in France, and every summer I used to visit my uncles who lived there.

But discovering a country as a tourist and actually living there are two very different things. Difficulties, nostalgia, adaptation. However you look at it, it's painful... sacrifices, love, disappointment... There are things you lose on the way and things you'd rather lose. Things you can't get your head wrapped around.

For example, the habit of mentioning God and the saints in advertisements. Or the way elderly people are treated. Or seeing people laugh at Giulio Andreotti impressions, which I couldn't understand. It wasn't part of my background. It took some time but then I also started finding those things funny. My first movies in the Neapolitan language, the songs by Pino Daniele. If you are able to share and enjoy such things, it makes you feel at home. But each person will react in a different way, depending on his needs and identity.

[...] Many fail at 'making the step', and end up in a limbo, far from either side. "I'm going to go back home as soon as I retire" they say, but a lot of them are actually afraid to go back. It's hard to strike a balance.



4

a sign
of peace



It's true. You only get one chance to make a good first impression. It's all about it: though often misleading, initial impressions will influence later opinions. Bad impressions last forever, however wrong they may be.

While I'm describing how hard it was to get in touch with the Filipino lady, a friend of mine suggests writing her a note and then having it translated by a Filipino friend of hers. The message, written on a yellow card, reads as follows:

Hi, I'm Giovanni. I'm 31. I was born and raised in Modena but my parents are from the South. My father moved into this flat in 1986. The apartment you live in used to be his first shelter. He was alone and scared, in not the most welcoming city for foreigners.

He would often walk towards the station, waiting for a train to bring him back home, thinking about the reasons that had made him leave. Despite the difficulties, he decided to stay. I'm thankful for all that. When we knocked at your door last week, we meant no harm.

I just wanted dad to relive some good memories. I wanted him to visit his first home once again. I knew he would appreciate it. And I bet you would enjoy it too. I would be great if we could come back at your invitation. It would make the best gift ever for his birthday.

Best regards,

Giovanni +3933***5**

To this day, as I'm writing this, my note is still left unanswered.

II



DON GRAZIANO

[...] I lived 2 years in the Philippines. I would have stayed there forever but then I felt the need to come back. If I came back, I'd be more useful to the community.

I used to live in the northern part of Smokey Mountain, a huge slum north of Manila where hundreds of families live a life of extreme poverty.

[...] For 11 years, I was a parish priest at the St. Augustine Church, the one where the Filipino community celebrates the Mass: each Sunday a pastor would come from Rome to celebrate it.

Italian Masses are hard for them to enjoy: it doesn't feel like Mass, they find it dry and cold.

I decided to get engaged when I realized how much they longed for pastoral care. The people I came in touch with were humble and good, but were paid too little attention from local parishes.

It made me ponder... If it was my father or my sister who lived in the Philippines, I would have loved them to be able to rely on a welcoming environment.

So I made my move. I started spending time with them, learning the language and celebrating the Mass when the priest wasn't available, first in English and then in the Filipino Language. Baptisms, marriages. I devoted time to them. I chose to leave to open up my mind.

[...] Everybody should experience immersion in a different context. The Filipino community is an universe in itself.

As is the case for all diasporas, migrant communities tend to recreate their original traditions, according to their country of origin. Things are changing, mostly thanks to kids born in Italy. Through school and work, families are starting to open up to the rest of society.

[...] But sometimes it's people from Modena who refuse to see them as peers, as friends: they see them as housekeepers, as caretakers for the elderly, but would never consider inviting them for a drink.



Interlude II

Throughout the ages, societies have created their own archetype of the foreigner and classed it within a number of set categories.

R-Nord represents one of these categories.

*The service has been in operation from 2008 until February 2020.

If you need to know something about the neighborhood, Danilo is the go-to person. A tall and well-built 70 years old man, with a lively personality and many stories to tell.

He's been studying and collecting endless material on the neighbourhood and its past. He's a true fountain of knowledge, and a keen admirer of the Este family and pre-unification Modena, "one of the 7 capitals".

It was mostly canals and meadows, or at least until the 1960's.

I remember a wide pit where people would go to play football. Yes, it was right there, next to the gas holder.

In 1967 my father took up the street food shack at the corner of *Via Attiraglio*, where he would cook fried fish and *gnocco*. There was no light. When my grandfather was born, in 1852, the Duke of Este was still there.

My father fought in the 1914-1918 war before moving to France for work. He was 50 when I was born.

The *Darsena* was covered up in the 1930's following the fascist-induced urban reorganization of the city. They demolished everything.

When I was a kid, cultivated lands and foundry scraps was almost all one could see.

I would collect scraps with my sister, and sell them to the ragmen who came to eat a piece of *gnocco* and have a glass of wine at my father's shack.



The yellow houses

“From the yellow houses and piss puddles, I’m from a place where black people sell drugs and raid cellars”

“hey! Yes? Hey B!”

Los T (28/09/1989), born Giovanni Zivillica, is an Italian rapper and producer from Modena, in the Emilia Romagna region. He got involved in freestyle rap and underground culture as a very young boy. He defines his style as “neighbourhood rap”. In 2016 he started working on his first record *Crocetta Tale*, a bundle of suburban stories. Today, other than being a musician, he collaborates with the local association *Kreattiva* in organizing and managing events. He lives with his girlfriend in *Via Due Canali Sud*, in his old family house which he ended up buying together with his brothers.

This record was inspired by life stories, both mine and my friends’. We grew up in this neighbourhood, observing and being part of it. We were like street kids, and used to hang out with them.

You could see all sorts of people: sons of southern-born Italians, newly-arrived young boys who had just entered our country (alone or with their families) and could barely speak the language. And then the second generation, kids who were born and raised in Italy and who identify themselves with the country.

Rap is an universal language, you know. And event if you don’t know, you can still feel the anger and the emotions it brings along. Everything is self-produced. I chose the skyline running over the “heroin hotels” as my personal logo. I know their actual name is *R-Nord* but everyone calls them by that nickname.

Drug dealing was never a secret nor a taboo for those who live here. Anybody who grew up here knows about that guy who “overdosed” in

Viale Gramsci or about needles turning up in public parks. Things have changed a lot in recent years, and we have better control over the situation.

But issues such as drug-dealing are still there. It’s very convenient for people to say that this is the only dangerous neighbourhood in the city, using it as a target for everyone’s frustration, except that those same people end up coming here to look for drugs or prostitutes. This is everyone’s problem, not only that of those who live here.

Then, with everyone being so obsessed with control, security, and neighbourhood watch, we’re only a few steps away from seeing neighbourhood patrols roaming the streets, and drug dealers and migrants being hunted down indiscriminately.

My father is also an immigrant. He was doing his military service in Modena when he met my mother, who had also moved here with her family when she was 7.



QUEUING AT THE POST OFFICE

I was young (23). Mail would travel by rail back then. I remember how we had to use a cart to load the mail onto the train.

Most of us weren't from around here and some of my colleagues rented a flat in the R-Nord; it was conveniently placed, just next to the station.

They would take turns staying in the apartment: they would spend a couple of days working in the city, and then take a train home when the last night shift was over, so that other two could move in. Two by two.

I also slept there a couple of times. I remember the wall bed: once you pulled it out, it would stop you from reaching the toilets or the kitchen in case you wanted to grab some water during the night. But often times I would just take a train back to Parma, my hometown, travelling by night. I mean yes, you could stumble upon a pick-pocket or two while on the train but that was all. I used to hang around a lot during night-time. I would never do that again nowadays. The building was ugly but not that ugly. There were a lot of workers, shift workers and railwaymen.

I started working in this post office in 2009. It's a well-known place in Modena, with people coming here from all over the city. Local businesses and factories employ a lot of migrant workers.

My office is open until the early evening, which is very convenient. We know pretty much everyone from around this neighborhood.

There's also this group of local residents, quite aged for the most part, who gather just outside every evening and, when the clock strikes 7.55PM, they all together swarm into the local supermarket to do their groceries.

There's also girls. Moroccans, Dominicans, South Americans, Russians. Each time a new cashier comes into the supermarket, they go like "Are you new? Take my cell number later".

This area changes a lot between day and night. From 8PM on it just becomes a no man's land. The supermarket and the post office are closed. But I have to admit, in all these years I've been working here, I never had a problem.

People say this is a scary place. As for me, I feel safe. I never have any problem. We're part of the community. I would never go elsewhere, I asked to be transferred here.

I usually walk by the porch at evenings, I can see them doing stuff. I sometimes think I shouldn't be going through here, but then I do and it's like they don't even notice me...



5

The cash cow



The building was originally meant to provide housing to local factory workers (such as my father). It was mainly composed of one-room and two-room apartments. Mr Rubbiani (the architect behind it) wished to bring this kind of approach to Italy: multiple small apartments featuring a brick-work facade. The first time I walked in I got scared, it felt like being thrown into a 1970's/1980's American police movie: big, dark, dull buildings, with long corridors and filled with doors.

At some point, people like my father moved elsewhere.

Then, migration changed its shape and needs changed with it. In the early 2000's, the municipality of Modena bought some of those flats and combined them wherever it was possible to achieve larger square footage. In a 10 years time, an average 100 housing units were bought and refurbished in order for them to be rented to families. Some issues have been solved, but others haven't. Properties in this area aren't easy to rent out. Those who can leave or ask to be transferred.

II

Prostitutes don't hurt anyone, but parents don't want their children to see them bringing clients in as they walk home from school. Those who can't leave just stay.

This area has always been a safe zone for the homeless and the needy. Especially during winter. If you don't know where to go, even a staircase will do. Each time a group of illegal squatters gets evicted, it affects the whole building. Today, the lower floors accommodate public facilities. When new activities and businesses are brought in, it helps diversifying the user base and makes the whole area more accessible for everyone. There' ll always be new people coming in, and the whole neighbourhood will become more integrated, closer to the city and more in touch with the needs of the citizens.

Requalification was intended to make the area more open to everyone. But the action of disruptive forces, conflicts, politics, personal interest and bad management makes it harder to reach this goal.



SERENA

[...] This is the best part of *R-Nord*: it's all grey outside, but once you get in, there's a whole world to discover.

I used to take dance classes at the local sports club: then, one bad audition made me decide to start teaching.

I wanted to create something of my own, something different. The dance world is a highly selective one, with everyone being wealthy and good-looking. The idea of opening a dance school here scared me: the other higher profile schools would end up losing students.

We were the only ones to answer the call for tender. I saw great potential in this space – it was quite big, with these huge and beautiful windows with exposed framing. I didn't care about where it was, I had danced in worse places. The area didn't shock me much. I could see beyond it.

[...] We were the first ones to open. The hard part was getting people to actually cross the corridor in order to enter the school. It was a mental barrier.

On the other hand, the residents of the building immediately wanted to check us out. Flocks of fathers. We also organised activities in the porter's lodge: Italian language courses for children with their mothers bringing snacks in.

In 2010 we launched the first edition of Funky Fresh, an international hip-hop and urban art festival. After we started, the area started filling itself with community services, some of which turned out well, while others didn't.

If you want to work here, you need to be ready for everything. You have to build your own customer base. Some of them will be prostitutes or drug addicts.

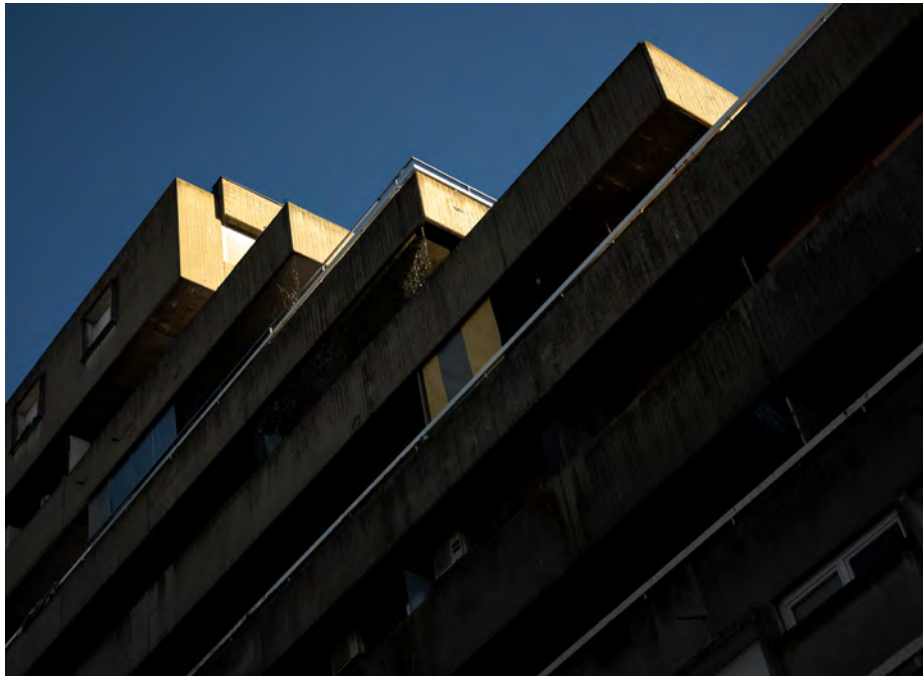
It takes commitment. Just like the coffee shop around the corner: they wanted to run a "regular" place, but after the first hurdles they never managed to get back on track. They would blame the rough sleepers constantly sitting around. But actually things only started going bad after they closed: businesses push crime and dirt away from the streets and attract people, such as those students who used to stop for coffee after school.

[...] Truth is, there's a strong resistance to change. It makes you realize that Modena doesn't work like a real city. It devolves. The refurbishment and requalification projects were met with strong opposition at first. The whole building never had any of it in the past.

[...] Some people wished for things to remain the same. Most of them were resident landlords.







In the end, R-Nord was good money. The construction boom, a lot of money around, people investing in real estate.

People coming and going, migrant workers creating a high demand, landlords getting rich without asking too many questions.



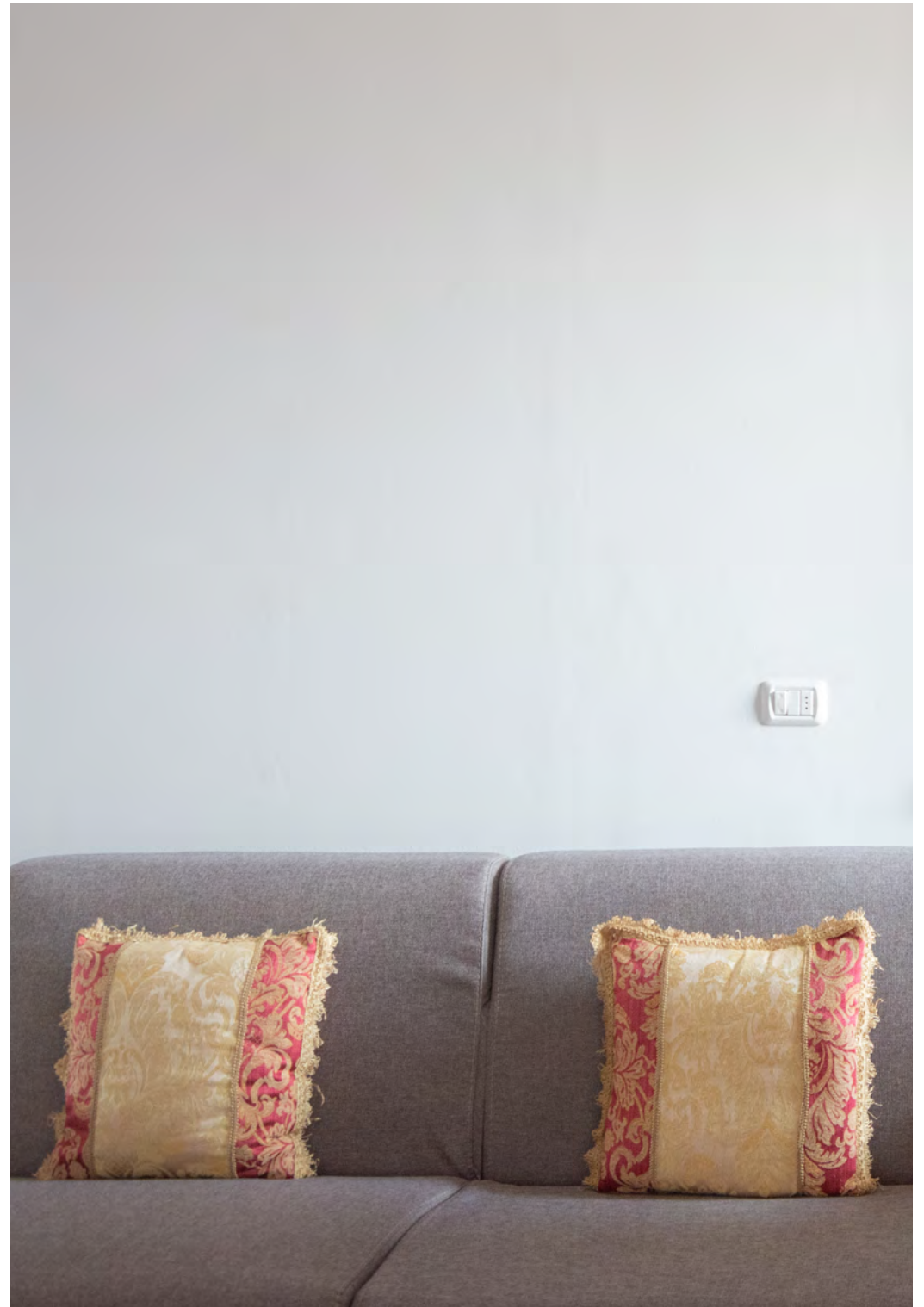
That was as long as money was coming in. Then, when the cash cow got sick out of a lack of care, and then stopped producing milk, the owners just tried to dump it.

That's when R-Nord has become a problem local authorities have been trying to fix.



6

Back
there



I look at my father. We've just stepped into one of the apartments run by *ACER Azienda Casa Emilia-Romagna Modena*, the agency in charge of the renovation and subsequent allocation of municipality-owned real estate property.

After so much hassle, we finally got to speak to the right person: his team was extremely kind in allowing us to visit one of the apartments. It's not my dad's one. He doesn't recognize it. He had even drawn a sketch of it to show me the layout: the front door, a small corridor and here it was. Home. The kitchenette, the dining table and the toilets on one side, and the sleeping area on the other, with only a curtain to separate the two. Places change. And my father changed too. It's not true that, in a migrant life path, start and finish are the same.

[...] I never felt the need to come back to my home region. I didn't have many reasons to: no bonds worth cultivating – it was hard to make friends with the locals – nor a single place I could call home.

I don't believe in circles, in having to go back.

Let's just say I never felt that call. I mean, it's always nice to be back, but I never really developed any real sense of belonging to my homeland or whatever you may call it. I never really looked back, I just thought "I'm leaving now", without much thought.

From this standpoint, if an immigrant is a person who leaves wishing to come back one day, then I guess I can't call myself that. And where would I go back to, by the way? After so many years away, what's the point in going back? Where do you expect go to? But above all, who have you become? You're surely not the same

person you were when you left. People change, and origins also do.

Departures are born out of a feeling of dissatisfaction with the reality you live in. It's the need for change that drives you, the desire to see things from a different point of view. Leaving home is an enriching experience. I don't think it was ever traumatic to me. Well, sometimes it wasn't easy either. Integrating yourself takes a lot of effort, but it's also a matter of personality.

If I had to leave Modena, I wouldn't really feel traumatized. The only scary thing about change is that it could potentially mean danger to me and my family.

I couldn't tell what *really* made me decide to leave: maybe I just wanted to, or maybe I was simply seeking something new, or maybe I just liked this whole idea of "leaving". It surely wasn't thinking about coming back.







7

The Albanian



A most sweet lady welcomes us into the apartment. It's her, her husband and their son. The apartment is gorgeous, extremely well kept and nicely lit, with the sunlight coming in so strong it gets almost blinding when faced from the entry corridor.

They've lived there for two years but will soon leave; they've just been allocated a new flat in the Albareto area, not the most convenient when you don't have a car. But it's still better than nothing, better than staying there. Living in that building isn't easy: people shouting at night, high monthly maintenance fees, limited interactions between residents. It's been a long time since someone visited them.

II

They're originally from Albania, which is striking as my family also has Albanian origins in some way.

When I first realized my family actually used to speak a different language, it was surprising (and also shocking) to me. It was in the 1990's: thousands of Albanians fleeing from a collapsing socio-economic and political system had already reached the Italian coast.

Try explaining them that the history – and the diaspora - of my family goes way further in the past than theirs. It stretches back to the 15th century, when some Albanian communities escaping from the Ottoman empire ended up settling in the South of Italy.

Does this make me an Albanian? Even if that's not the case, or at least not ethnically speaking, the whole matter has traumatised me

for yeas: I, son of *Arbëresh* migrants, living in the 1990's. And I don't even speak *Arbëresh*, by the way. We used to speak Italian at home.

As we grew up, we kept hearing the TV saying terrible things about Albanians: they're ugly, mean and filthy, and have a thing for stealing and selling drugs. Of I didn't want people to think that of me just because of my background. So I rejected that part of me.

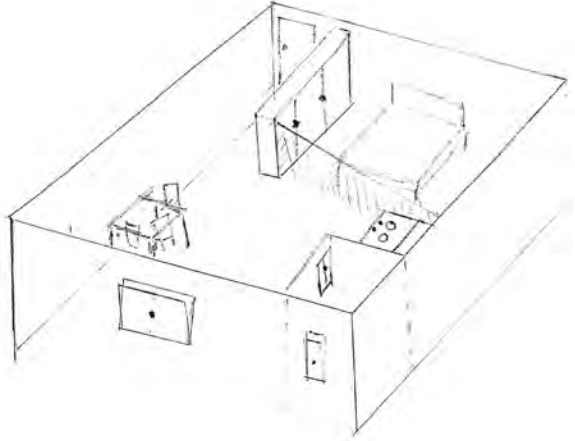
I would never mention that at school: when my friends came to visit me and they heard my parents talking, I would avoid the topic. I wouldn't have been able to explain it to them, and they wouldn't have been able to understand. Which, frankly speaking, I didn't do either.



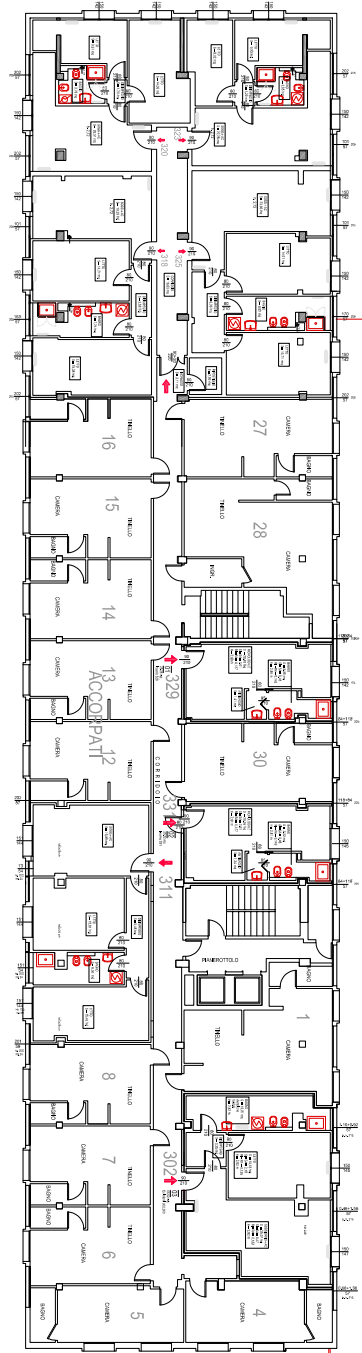


The other, those who are “different” from us, “them”, are but our reflection in the mirror; but as it’s turning its back on us, we fail to recognize it and relate to it. Sometimes it happens subconsciously, while other times it’s because we want it. Because it hurts, it’s scary, and it sucks. But we’re just the same as them, and admitting it is the first step towards turning the page.

Before leaving the building, we cast one last look over the bridge. We want to take a souvenir picture of us, and we need someone to do it. After spending months taking photos of other people, now it’s our turn. Two young men walk by, they’ll be the ones finishing the project. They smile to us. We smile back.



Pencil sketch
of apartment n.308 made by my father



Floor plan, Third Floor
Image courtesy of ACER Azienda Casa Emilia-Romagna Modena

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