

Material Agencies of Survival: Street Vending on a Roman Bridge

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Abstract The material fabric of a city is never neutral. It speaks to the opportunities of access and usage that some are given at the exclusion of others. Scholars of the *everyday* have analyzed how city residents counter oppression by appropriating and transforming spaces. Less attention, however, has been given to how not only people, but also material things have agency in producing opportunities for insurgency. This paper examines how people and materialities imbricate, co-producing geographies of survival on Ponte Sant’Angelo, a bridge in Rome where diverse immigrants eke out a living by selling trinkets. Interviews and observations revealed that both seniority on the street and immigration status divide vendors into three groups, each with a different degree of power over other users of the bridge. At the same time, Ponte Sant’Angelo, a physical entity made by permanent built forms as well as contingent elements such as water levels and car traffic, generate five distinct areas, each with a different degree of attractiveness in the eyes of diverse vendors. Differences across vendors and material elements intertwine with one another. The nitty-gritty of the city, its seemingly banal materialities, partner with vendors as they negotiate power and counter exclusion. These circumstances call for expanding scholarship of the *everyday*, exploring how multiple, interdependent agencies shape urban patterns of oppression and resistance.

Key words Everyday, Material Agencies, Street Vending, Insurgency, Rome.

Introduction

Urban forms can play an important role in amplifying inequities and reproducing injustices. Scholars have shown how physical planning tools such as land zoning, design governance, and transit provisions very much determine the opportunities that people can—or cannot—access in the city (Schindler, 2014; Tonkiss, 2020). Decisions over what opportunities are made available to whom are never neutral. They translate uneven relations of power into the built environment, excluding people along intersecting constructions of race, gender, class, sexuality, and health (Goh et al., forthcoming; Miraftab, 2021).

But if a city’s form can perpetuate injustices, it can also create possibilities for countering oppression. Michel de Certeau’s theorization of the *everyday* remains a canonical paradigm for analyzing geographies of exclusion and resistance. As powerful actors impose *strategies* of control to discipline people and spaces, de Certeau argued, people respond through *tactics*, or those spatial appropriations that the dominant “urbanistic system was supposed to suppress,” but instead continue to “elude discipline,” reinforcing “themselves into proliferating illegitimacy” (1984, p. 96). The interplay of *tactics* and *strategies* informs the *everyday*, or the always-contested realm where dominant and resistant forces shape one another.

Scholars of the *everyday* have paid a great deal of attention to how, navigating urban forms that are hardly designed to satisfy their needs, unwanted city residents challenge exclusion by appropriating and transforming spaces (Crawford, 2011; Loukaitou-Sideris & Mukhija, 2014; Viderman & Knierbein,

2020). People appropriate hostile environments, for example, as they seize economic opportunity (Esguerra Muelle et al., 2021; Tayob, 2019), protest to demand recognition (Katz, 2020; Leitner and Strunk, 2014), respond to needs that would otherwise remain unmet (Beebejaun, 2017; Papatzani, 2020), or simply hang out in public spaces where authorities do not want them to be (Vathi & Burrell, 2020; Villani & Talamini, 2021).

A lens of the *everyday* is indeed very useful for understanding how people who are designated as “undesirables” counter oppression. These investigations are key for creating policies and designs that can assist underserved groups to dismantle injustices. By focusing on people as those who primarily activate an urban condition of insurgency, however, analyses of the *everyday* have tended to overlook the equally crucial agency that material things have in eliciting geographies of survival. That is, concentrating on how urban residents challenge oppression by means of their quotidian practices, most scholars have treated the material fabric of a city as a supporting background to those practices, rather than as an agent that itself can engender resistance.

This paper examines how people and material elements intersect, co-producing geographies of survival in the city. I focus on Ponte Sant’Angelo, a bridge in Rome where immigrants seek to make ends meet by informally selling trinkets to tourists. I begin by situating this inquiry within larger debates that interpret cities as entanglements of human and non-human agencies. Feminist scholars have long argued that people are only one kind among many species that intertwine with one another in making the world (Massey, 2005; Bennett, 2010, Houston et al. 2018). Critical urbanists have also called attention to how the materialities of a city are not byproducts, but rather integral makers of its power relations. (Amin and Thrift, 2017; Dovey, 2012; Yaneva and Mommersteeg, 2019). If a consensus has emerged that multiple agencies imbricate in shaping urban life, however, less attention has been given to how these imbrications concretely affect and reflect on space. Such an omission is especially evident in the literature on street vending where, despite growing interests in the spatial politics of trade (Carr, 2020; Crossa, 2016; Kim, 2015), the reciprocities between people and things have remained underexplored.

The case of Ponte Sant’Angelo can help address this lacuna. While neoliberal governance has turned the center of Rome into an exclusive playground for wealthy elites and global tourists, iconic public spaces such as Ponte Sant’Angelo remain one of the few resources that poor immigrants can access to eke out a living. Focusing on Bangladeshis, the largest group of immigrant vendors, I draw on observations and interviews to detail their relationships with the human and non-human actors of the bridge. I find that power hierarchies among vendors mostly depend on their seniority on the street and immigration status. At the same time, the materialities of Ponte Sant’Angelo, composed by both permanent and contingent elements, create hierarchies of strategic selling spots. Different vendors move across Ponte Sant’Angelo during the day, partnering with things in producing shifting ecologies of space and time. These ecologies call for more systematic attention to how people and physical elements collaborate in creating opportunities for resistance. Analyses of the *everyday*, I conclude, would benefit from examining the material fabric of a city not just as an outcome, but also as an agent of power.

Material Agencies and the Production of Space

Scholars have long established that a city is much more than the mere sum of its material elements and the people who inhabit them. Since urban life became the subject of modern inquiries, thinkers such as Georg Simmel (1900s), Walter Benjamin (1920s), and Jane Jacobs (1960s) tried to pin down the human and non-human interplays that make cities vibrant. While these thinkers (and most who followed) acknowledged reciprocal relations between people and their surrounding environments, analyses of the

urban tended nonetheless to identify humans as the protagonists of city life, while interpreting material forms as its supporting background (Amin, 2015; Houston et al. 2018).

The idea that people do not act alone in shaping the world gained traction during the 1990s, especially since Bruno Latour (1991) began questioning the anthropocentrism that European philosophies established through notions of order, causality, and subsequent temporalities. Refusing to interpret “society” as opposed to “nature,” a dualism that reifies problematic distinctions between who are the “subjects” and who are the “objects” of worldmaking, Latour argued that reality is made by networks of *quasi-objects* which intersect, and affect one-another. Building on this rejection of anthropocentrism, Donna Haraway (2010; 2015) suggested that humans are but one of many other species who, encountering in relations of interdependency, *become with* each other, forming transformative kinships. Philosopher Jane Bennett (2010) further expanded critiques to human exceptionalism by arguing that not only living beings such as animals, but also unanimated things possess agency (Appadurai, 2014).

While we inevitably tend to interpret reality through our own human lenses, we should then consider other agencies as equally relevant in shaping our world. Scholars of the urban have increasingly explored how non-human agencies intervene in the production of cities. Understanding space as a multi-scalar constellation of tangible and intangible forces (Massey, 1994; 2005), critical urbanists since the 2000s have argued that cities, including their stratified injustices, can only be understood as interdependent entanglements of people and things (Amin and Thrift, 2002; 2017; McFarlane, 2011; Söderström, 2014). At the same time, building on eco-feminist acknowledgments that we co-inhabit the world along with multiple creatures and materials (Anderson, 2014; Tsing, 2012;), urban theorists have urged planners and architects to investigate what a “post-human, good city” might be like (Houston et al. 2018).

Scholars in geography and urban studies have looked at the materiality of a city not as an ancillary part, but rather an integral force in shaping urban life. Most have focused on urbanisms of the South by exploring, for instance, how writings on Calcutta’s street-walls craft political imaginaries (Chatt), how material fragments such as sanitation infrastructures elicit political insurgency in Cape Town and Mumbai (McFarlane, 2018), and how cement, being both an aesthetic element and a ubiquitous material, mediates quotidian life in a Palestinian refugee camp (Abourhame, 2015). But if the “composite ecology of human and non-human interactions” is especially “visible in cities of the South,” it is “no less intense in cities of the North” (Amin, 2015, p.242). Indeed, scholars have shown, for example, that residential buildings in a Roman periphery enable the exclusion of racialized others (Ivasiuc, 2020); that the bodies of precariously housed people in Bucharest serve as affective-material loci to counter oppression (Lancione, 2019); and that the materialities of care, articulated through gardening, enable diverse urbanites to emplace insurgency in several European cities (Kotsila et al. 2020).

Scholars of the *everyday* have surprisingly tended to overlook the importance of material agencies. They have certainly agreed that a city’s fabric can amplify inequities and shape geographies of resistance (Loukaitou-Sideris and Banerjee, 1998; Low, 2000; Tonkiss, 2017). Yet, when analyzing interplays of power and urban forms, most inquiries focus on the ways in which people behave in space, taking no notice of how material agencies intersect with, and enable those behaviors. The rich literature on street vending is a case in point. Selling goods on the street is a skillful, laborious, and often dangerous job. But vending is also one of the few activities that poor urbanites can seek to undertake by accessing public spaces. And indeed, streets and squares around the world continue to serve as marketplaces with, and more often without, the consent of authorities (Cross and Karides, 2007; Carr, 2020; Skinner and Reed, 2020; Tucker and Devlin, 2019).

The spatial politics of vending have received a great deal of attention among scholars of the *everyday*. Research has shown that the form and appearance of spaces often facilitate the exclusion of traders. “Hostile design” (Rosenberg, 2020) elements are used to keep vendors out of historic downtowns and financial headquarters (Loukaitou-Sideris and Banerjee, 1998; Loukaitou-Sideris and Ehrenfeucht, 2009). Built elements such as steep ramps, discontinuous pavements, and narrow sidewalks prevent vendors from accessing public spaces (Kamalipour and Peimany, 2019). Areas nearby monuments and institutional buildings are often off-limits to street traders (Roever and Skinner, 2016; Ojeda and Pino,

2019). And straight, wide streets render vendors “hyper-visible,” exposing them to controls and confiscations (Li et al. 2018; Vargas and Valencia, 2019). Sometimes it is the absence, rather than the presence, of built elements that renders spaces hostile to vendors. For example, lack of streets can make it difficult for vendors to access selling areas from their home (Kim, 2015; Perelman, 2018). Lack of toilets and running water impact vendors’ ability to work (Carr, 2020). And lack of shade can impede sellers from occupying sidewalks in adverse weather conditions (Loukaitou-Sideris and Mukhija, 2019).

Space can also be an ally to vendors. Urban forms, for example, help sellers draw attention when they protest in prime spaces (Crossa, 2016; Steel, 2017). Along with supporting these kinds of organized forms of resistance, a city’s fabric can facilitate quieter, yet equally political *encroachments* of space (Bayat, 2000). Traders move daily across different districts in order to take advantage of the changing rhythms of urban life (Kim, 2015; Li et al. 2018). At the street level, some sellers remain itinerant in order to approach as many clients as possible, while others stay put and repurpose existing infrastructures, for example, by connecting to electric cables and water pipes (Kamalipour and Peimani, 2019; Ojeda and Pino, 2019). Urban fabrics frequently help vendors elude police controls by letting them quickly appear and disappear (Crossa, 2009; Meneses-Reyes, 2013). Strategic vending spots are usually located nearby hiding places, with vendors exposing merchandise on easily removable shelves (Alford et al. 2019; Huang et al. 2014).

Different spaces become available to vendors depending on their power on the street. Bogotá’s new vendors acquire legitimacy with older ones through the practice of *acreditar*, by occupying the same location every day (Vargas and Valencia, 2019). In Memphis, sellers hide themselves “in plain site,” appropriating dominant aesthetics that make them look like they “belong” (Kamel, 2014). And in New York City vendors secure good locations by building relationships with shop-owners and the police (Devlin, 2011). Vendors also speak back to power by developing their own cognitive cartographies of belonging (Loukaitou-Sideris and Gilbert, 2000). In Los Angeles, Latinx vendors re-create a sense of home for themselves and their clients by selling traditional foods (Munoz, 2015). Naples’ narrow lanes offer a *spatial intimacy* to vendors of multiple origins, favoring their bonding with shop-owners and passers-by (DeMaria-Harney, 2015). As shop owners and informal vendors in Ho Chi Minh City share sidewalks to attract more clients, solidarity emerges when the former offer refuge to the latter during police raids (Piazzoni and Jamme, 2020).

These studies have demonstrated how the materiality of a city concretely impacts vendors’ routines, either facilitating their oppression or supporting their resistance. But while there is a robust literature on the spatial politics of vending, most studies have interpreted people as the main actors of those politics, relegating material elements to an ancillary role. I seek to address this lacuna in the next sections. Combining conversations on material agencies and on the spatial politics of vendors, I examine the interdependent forces at play on Ponte Sant’Angelo.

Methods

This article focuses on Ponte Sant’Angelo, or the Sant’Angelo Bridge, one of the 30 locations that vendors occupy within Rome’s *centro storico* (1.5 mi²). The analysis of the bridge sits within a larger study of street vending in the city. Combining archival and ethnographic methods, I traced the long history of “marginality” in the center of Rome, where oppressed groups have resorted to vending as a means of survival since antiquity. Through observations of public spaces (Low 2000) and spatial ethnography methods (Kim 2015), I engaged with Bangladeshi vendors who compose the largest group of traders, and the third largest Roman immigrant community following Romanians and Filipinos (IDOS, 2021). Fieldwork over three years (2016-2018) involved 28 in-depth interviews with Bangladeshi vendors, 54 interviews with other groups (29 police officers, 12 residents, 2 policy makers, and 11 workers), and 100 face-to-face surveys with tourists. Engaging with diverse users presented several challenges and prompted me to change my methods in ways that I have discussed elsewhere (Piazzoni, 2020, 2021).

St. Angelo Bridge is located within the heart of touristic Rome. Built in the second century C.E. to expand the city on the right bank of the Tiber, the pedestrian bridge connects famous landmarks such as the Pantheon, Piazza Navona, and the Spanish Steps on the South, to Saint Peter's Basilica and the Vatican Museums on the North. This strategic position made the bridge a key path for the almost 20 million tourists who annually visited Rome before the COVID pandemic. Ponte Sant'Angelo is an iconic destination itself, with statues of angels drawn by artist Gian Lorenzo Bernini in the XVII century, and the Angelo Castle on its North end (originally the mausoleum of Emperor Hadrian).

The analysis of Ponte Sant'Angelo involved observations, interviews with six Bangladeshi vendors, as well as countless informal conversations with other vendors, street performers, and police officers who work on the bridge. I carried out observations on both weekdays and weekends from 9:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. in winter, and until midnight in spring and summer. I traced the shifting rhythms of the bridge annotating people's activities and interactions on a map. I then interviewed Bangladeshi vendors. I initially approached my respondents on the bridge and later relied on snowball sampling. Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were carried out in places chosen by vendors: cafés nearby Ponte Sant'Angelo, places where vendors hid during police raids, or the bridge itself. Interviews gathered information about the vendors' relationships with both the city's spaces and other groups, as well as their aspirations for the future. During my prolonged stays on the bridge, I became acquainted with several Senegalese vendors, who compose the second largest groups of traders, and with licensed vendors (two Italians and one Bangladeshi).

Context: Invented Traditions and Racist Exclusion in “Historic Rome”

Before the COVID-19 pandemic deserted the streets of Rome, roughly two thousand immigrants every day occupied the city center to sell roses, shawls, selfie sticks, and other trinkets. These vendors were primarily Bangladeshi men, who did not possess a vending license, and often lacked a regular immigration status. Forced to occupy iconic landmarks in order to eke out a living, vendors faced from fines of over 5000 euros for vending with no license, to incarceration and deportation in case of irregular immigration status. Multiple controls were enforced daily by municipal police (asking for vending licenses), state police (checking on immigration statuses), and financial police (chasing sellers of counterfeit merchandise). The precarious lives of the vendors were permeated by constant fear and uncertainty. These sentiments were not a mere byproduct of governance. As I explain below, fear and uncertainty form the very infrastructure through which neoliberal agendas and racist exclusion have systematically sought to eliminate “undesirables” from the center of Rome.

Anti-vending measures reflect wider beautifications that transformed Rome's *centro storico* (historic center) since the 1970s, when authorities started privatizing public assets and displacing low-income residents in favor of a more tourist-friendly, historic city image (Agnew, 1995). These trends accelerated over the past decade as cuts to public services, corporate-funded restorations of monuments, and mushrooming B&Bs increasingly turned the city center into an exclusive playground for tourists and elites (Celata & Romano, 2020; Galbo, 2019). As socio-economic inequalities accentuate the gap between the wealthy center and other city districts (Lelo et al. 2019), historically underserved groups assert their legitimacy in the city, for example, through housing occupations (Grazioli, 2017), transfeminist protests (Castelli, 2019), and visibilizations of their unwanted bodies in the city (Olcuire, 2020). These practices have challenged the status quo, disrupted established clientelisms, and sometimes elicited fruitful collaborations with policy makers (Celata and Coletti, 2018). Yet, organized forms of resistance have primarily taken place in peripheral districts, far from a city center that continues to agglomerate privilege and power (Clough-Marinario and Thomassen, 2014; D'eraimo, 2017).

Ambiguous vending regulations and discretionary law enforcement are instrumental in keeping “historic Rome” exclusive. Within the broader clientelism that governs commerce on public spaces across the city (Cough-Marinaro, 2019), selling in historic Rome has become hard for all vendors, and especially for vendors of color. Obtaining a vending license is relatively straight forward according to Italian law. Yet in practice getting a permission to sell is nearly impossible. City officials informally stopped issuing new permits in the late 1990s because of “too many vendors” on the streets. The city formalized this practice in the early 2000 while also outlawing all itinerant vendors in the center except from those with a special Type B “artisan” license. While a few itinerant vendors could buy licenses from retiring artisans (which today cost 40,000-60,000 euros), the vast majority of vendors had no other choice than to continue to sell informally.

Most itinerant vendors who populate the center of Rome are then “irregular” from a legal standpoint. But black and brown vendors are more illegitimate than others in the eyes of city authorities, the media, and white Italians. Depictions of vendors as polluters of an authentic Rome abound in right-wing, as well as leftist newspapers that associate immigrant sellers with the atmosphere of orientalized, “souk markets.” And patrollers explicitly target vendors of color while leaving white vendors unbothered. The systematic oppression of vendors of color speaks to racist logics that have long shaped Italian society (Giuliani and Lombardi-Diop, 2013), have permeated public discourses over the last 20 years (Herzfeld, 2007), and were further aggravated by the recent “refugee crisis” (Hawthorne, 2017). These racist logics have concretized into urban policies that neglect immigrant needs (Ambrosini, 2013), invisibilize minorities from public spaces (Moroni and Chiodelli, 2014), and systematically erase the traces of Italy’s colonial past from the built environment (Frisina and Ghebremariam, 2020; Scego, 2019).

In such a context, it is not surprising that vending policies follow racialized constructions of who looks like being an “appropriate” user of public space. As immigrants started resorting to street vending in the 1990s (King and Knights, 1994; Reyneri, 1998), city administrators throughout Italy instituted anti-vending police task-forces, displaced sellers with the excuse of renewing urban areas, launched anti-counterfeiting campaigns, and issued ordinances against people carrying “large bags” into historic centers (Dines, 2012; Riccio, 2002; Quassoli, 2004).

A rhetoric of safety and decorum has recently worsened these conditions. In 2017, as rampant xenophobia inflamed immigration discourse, the Italian government approved the “Urgent Measures in Defense of Urban Safety and Decorum.” The Measures demand municipal police to banish from city centers individuals that “disturb” the “free use” of public spaces. At the discretion of patrollers, people who loiter, beg for money, or sell on the street can be stopped, brought to police stations, and outlawed from “red zones” such as city centers for periods from forty-eight hours to six months (L. n.48/2017). In June 2019, Rome’s mayor Virginia Raggi incorporated these measures into the new “Urban Police Rules” with the explicit purpose of safeguarding “decency” in the historic center (Deliberazione n.43/2019). As discussed elsewhere (Piazzoni, 2020), patrollers on the street chose whom to stop and charge largely based on their own perceptions of who are “appropriate” users of the historic center, perceptions that often obey racialized imaginaries of Rome as a white city.

The People and Things of Ponte Sant’Angelo

In Rome as in the rest of Italy, then, police members are not only allowed, but they are required by the law to remove people whom they believe compromise ideas of “the appropriate.” These ideas are at the entire discretion of patrollers, and frequently obey racialized logics of order and decorum. Selective enforcement further precarizes the already fragile routines of those people who, like the immigrant vendors, seek to survive by occupying public spaces in the wealthy city center. Historic Rome, however,

is more than a space of ubiquitous oppression. It is also a place where multiple people and material things intertwine with one another, eliciting opportunities of insurgency for the vendors.

A Stratified Community of Vendors

Rome's vendors compose a diverse group of people with different histories, aspirations, and authority on the street. My interviews involved men between the ages of 17 and 74, with varied immigration statuses, who sold on the street from a few months to 17 years, arrived in Italy through different routes, lived in Rome from just a month to over 25 years, and grew up in rural as well as urban Bangladesh.

These diverse vendors share some habits. For example, most traders start working in the morning (9:30-10:30 a.m.) and continue as long as they can, police controls and weather conditions permitting. Working for 6 to 14 hours a day generates an average income of 35 euros during spring-summer and 15 euros during fall-winter. This is about one third of what vendors used to make before 2014, when police controls became more frequent and immigration flows brought new sellers to the street. On average, vendors invest a monthly sum of 30-100 euros to buy merchandise that they then try to sell for ten times the price (an increase is calibrated considering the risk, if not the certainty, that police confiscate merchandise once a week). A few vendors prefer selling roses, a perishable product, but one that police are unlikely to confiscate. They go to the flower market around 5 a.m. once a week or, for double the price, buy roses from compatriots who run flowers' stalls in the center. Most vendors prefer buying trinkets from Bangladeshi and Chinese-run wholesale shops located either in peripheral districts or in the semi-central Esquilino district, a known immigrant "gateway" since the 1990s. Most Bangladeshis tend to avoid selling counterfeited merchandise due to higher risks of fines and incarceration. During fieldwork, however, as profits from selling trinkets yielded virtually nothing, three interviewees started selling "fakes" along with West African colleagues.

Vendors usually chose where to sell considering multiple factors such as the presence of friends at the vending location, frequency of police controls, and, in some cases, one's own preference for a particular space. Commuting time from home is the aspect that vendors tend to value the most. Being able to access a vending area easily and quickly also determines vendors' housing choice. Most studies of Bangladeshis in Rome have focused on the semi-peripheral Torpignattara district where the community settled since the 1990s, and an area that immigrant residents have proudly designated as "Banglatown" (Pompeo, 2011; Priori, 2012). However, as I discussed elsewhere (Piazzoni, 2021), my research revealed that there is another, less visible "Banglatown" in the center of Rome. Most of my interviewees (24) not only worked, but also lived close to iconic monuments in order to reach their vending locations as fast as possible. For 130/150 euros a month, vendors rent a bed spot by sharing rooms with other 8/11 men in apartments (often basements). These apartments are often located in high-end buildings where other, more affluent residents ignore—or chose to ignore—the Bangladeshis' presence. Unable to spend time home where they lack space and privacy, vendors find themselves using the *centro storico* outside of working hours, for example, to video chat with their families in Bangladesh, rest, or pray.

Most vendors thus sell the same things, occupy the same spaces, and often live in the same apartment. Yet, seniority on the street and immigrations status determine quite fixed hierarchies of power among them. These hierarchies affect who can sell, where, and when. I distinguished three sub-groups of vendors which, while not mutually exclusive, tend to include vendors with similar relationships to spaces, other vendors, and the police. Informal conversations with Senegalese vendors suggest that seniority on the street and immigration status determine a similar organization within their community.

Established Vendors. Seventeen interviewees moved to Rome between two and fifteen years before my fieldwork and, crucially, lacked a regular immigration status. Some had overstayed after moving to Italy with a temporary work-permit, while others never possessed a permit as they travelled via land, entering Italy from Greece or Eastern Europe. Established vendors are then especially vulnerable from a legal standpoint. At the same time, however, as most have worked in the touristic center for years, established vendors tend to be more powerful within the vending community as they can count on a good knowledge

of the city's spaces, acquaintance with business owners, stronger connections to other sellers (especially Italians and Senegalese colleagues), and on a degree of familiarity with some police officers. As I detail below, established vendors tend to push other sellers away from the vending spots they like to occupy by yanking at them and occasionally stealing money or merchandise.

Senior Vendors. Six interviewees had lived in Italy from seven to 25 years and possessed a regular immigration status. Aged between their mid-fifties and seventies, seniors had usually lost agricultural or industrial jobs during the 2009 recession. Finding it hard, if not impossible, to compete with younger immigrants for the kind of laborious jobs that newcomers can hope to find in Italy (Barbiano di Belogoso, 2019), senior vendors resort to street commerce as their last resource. Albeit they are generally older than established sellers and less acquainted with vendors from other countries, seniors feel relatively safe on the street. For one, they reported feeling less exposed to police harassment due to their regular immigration status and well-spoken Italian. At the same time, their older appearance and lack of ability to perform on the job as vigorously as younger vendors (for example, by standing for prolonged hours), make seniors seem not particularly competitive to established colleagues.

Newly Arrived Vendors. Five interviewees lived in Libya (one to three years) before arriving in Italy through the Mediterranean less than a year before my interviews. Three of these newcomers had pending applications for immigration permits which, due to a change in Italian immigration policy, they were most likely denied shortly after my interviews. Two newly arrived were instead “minors” under the age of 18 who had obtained a regular status relatively rapidly upon their arrival in Italy. Newly arrived vendors were usually ostracized by established and senior vendors. In the eyes of more experienced colleagues, newcomers were not only guilty of overcrowding streets and saturating the market, but they also had the privilege of living in immigration facilities, therefore not carrying the burden of a rent to pay. Newcomers reported seeing police with a more benevolent eye than other interviewees. If their limited experience on the street made them a target of animosity from colleagues, newly arrived tended to interpret police officers as a resource for their own safety, should other vendors beat or rob them.

The demographics of Sant'Angelo Bridge reflect those of the vending community at the city level. Out of six interviewees who worked on the bridge, three were *established* vendors, followed by two *seniors*, and one *newcomer*. Informal conversations with vendors of different origins confirmed these proportions. As I turn to explain, the material elements of the bridge are not mere infrastructures of the appropriations of these diverse vendors. Rather, they elicit the different risks and opportunities that each trader navigates at different times during the day.

One Bridge, Five Vending Areas.

Sant'Angelo Bridge may appear as a homogenous vending space to the casual observer. Extending over 135 meters (443 ft.), the whole bridge is pedestrianized and has stairs located at each corner, leading to the river walks below. Roughly fifty vendors sell by staying put or walking on the bridge during peak hours (12:30-2:00 p.m.). What may look like a uniform space, however, is in fact a complex arrangement composed, and organized by different materialities.

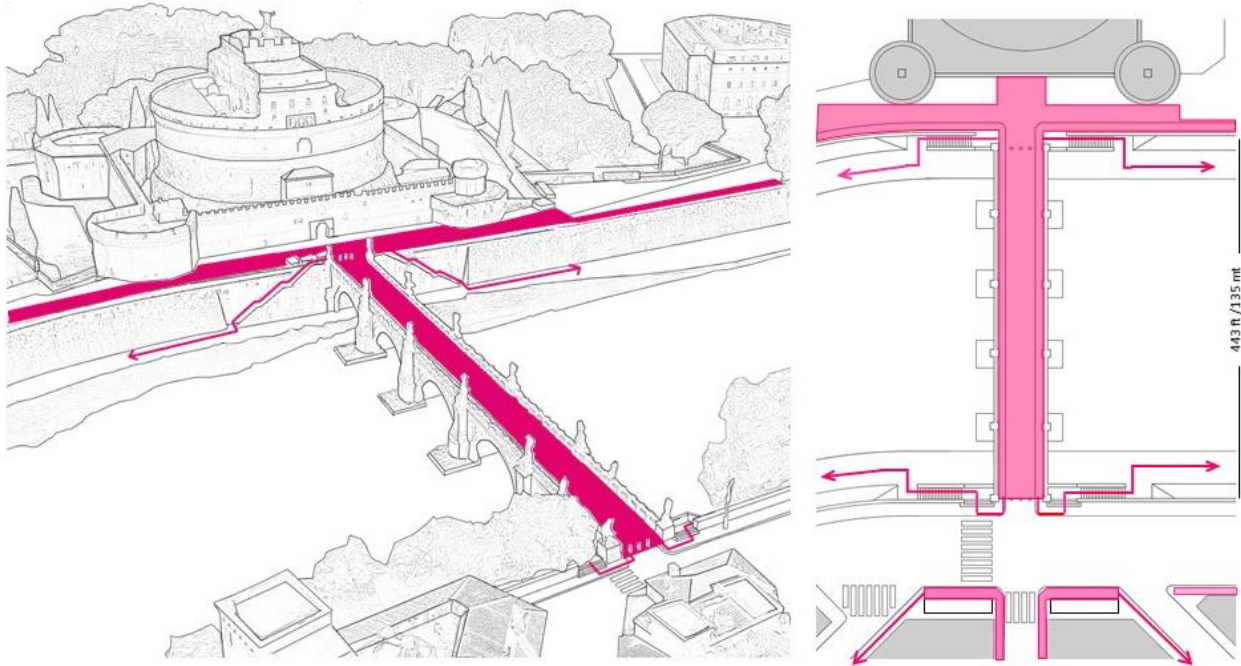


Figure 1. Ponte Sant'Angelo as an and apparently homogenous vending spaces (in pink), and four stairs leading to the riverbanks.

Several built and natural features make the bridge a welcoming selling space (fig.2). Both the Sant'Angelo Castle on the North and the visibility of the Saint Peter Basilica on the North-East draw tourists' attention by letting passersby slow down, look around and, possibly, buy merchandise. Sidewalks along the bridge demarcate an elevated vending area where sellers work while standing or sitting. A step below, the central lane helps direct tourists passing through, allowing vendors to walk along and approach possible clients. Diverse vendors reported believing that the pavement of the bridge, the *san-pietrini* cobble stones typical of the city center, contribute to creating a pleasant atmosphere for tourists. The bridge's parapet made of stone and iron serves to exhibit merchandise, sit, and seek refuge from the sun during the hot months of the summer. The park next to the castle is another important resource to escape the heat, with high trees, while also offering vendors the opportunity to rest, eat, and hide during police raids.

Together with these permanent elements, other transient materialities create opportunities for the vendors. There are, for example, three regular vending stalls on the North of the bridge that get assembled and disassembled every day, enhancing a market-like atmosphere. Flows of passersby are especially intense before 4 p.m., when tourists cross the bridge to walk from the attractions of "baroque Rome" to Saint Peter's Basilica and the Vatican Museums before closing time. Tourist busses drop off possible clients right in front of the Southern end of the bridge at specific hours known to the vendors. Street performers can also be allies to the vendors with their bodies and arts. While their music creates a cheerful ambience, some artists act in solidarity with the vendors by keeping and hiding merchandise during police raids.

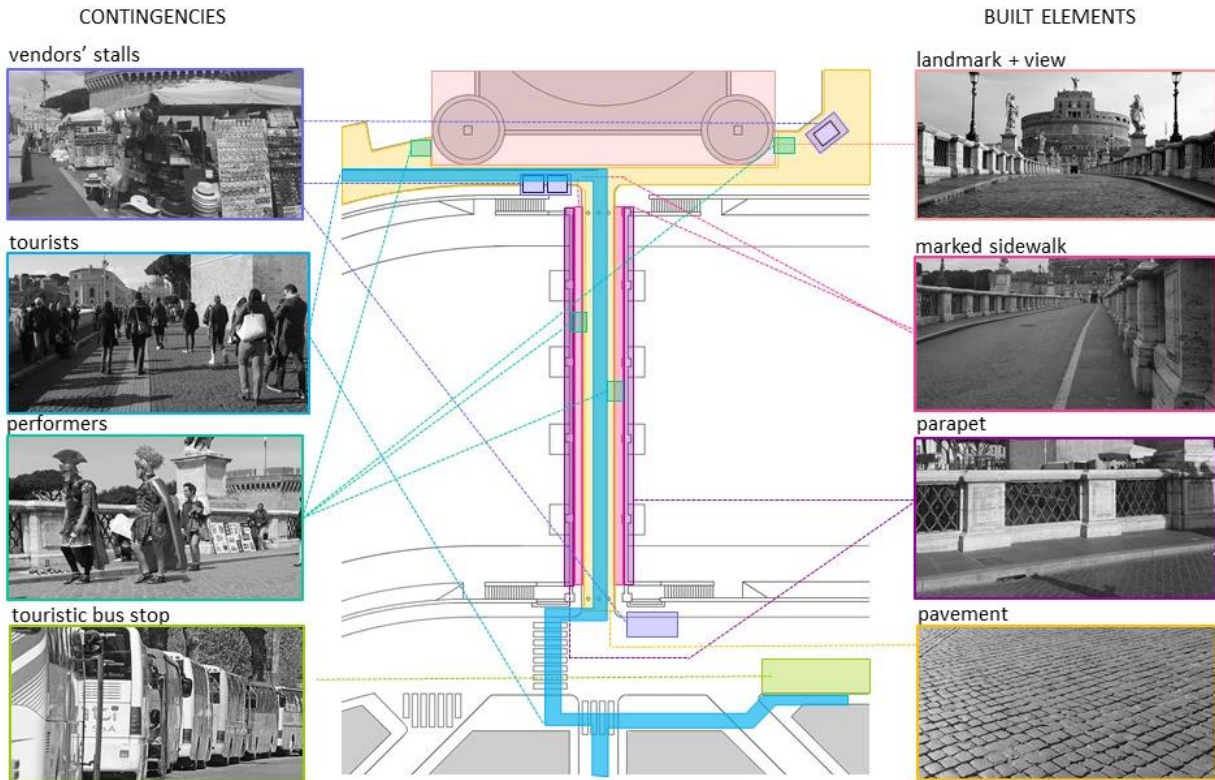


Figure 2. Elements that vendors interpret as "welcoming" on the Sant'Angelo Bridge.

But the materiality of the bridge can equally produce a hostile environment for the vendors (fig.3). Escaping police raids, for example, is much harder if one stands on the Southern area of the bridge. While useful to ensure no cars can access the bridge, stone barriers at the two ends of the bridge are dangerous impediments for running from police. The stairs located at the four corners of the bridge are steep and generally poorly maintained, making it risky for vendors to rush. On the Southern edge, an additional set of stairs in each corner makes it even more arduous to escape safely. The walks along the river below the street are unevenly maintained. Those on the North are relatively well kept and allow vendors to potentially run for miles. The walks on the South are instead poorly maintained, with discontinuous and broken pavements that are much harder to pass through. Rising water levels during winter aggravate the situation further, as the Tiber frequently floods and occupies the walks, making it impossible for vendors to run.

Bodies and things that pass across the bridge can equally obstruct vendors' routines. Sometimes police cars are parked next to the castle, inhibiting the presence of vendors as well as tourists' desire to buy. Performers can be both an asset and a liability. If their music creates a pleasant atmosphere and some artists help vendors during raids, the presence of performers also attracts police officers in charge of controlling artistic licenses. Similarly, while licensed vendors nearby the castle help create a market-like atmosphere, they can also dissuade informal traders. Indeed, most stall-owners do not like having informal vendors nearby their stalls (with the exception of a few trusted sellers), and push them away by intimidating them and threatening to call the police. Finally, cars passing fast on the street at the South end of the bridge render the area noisy and unattractive to tourists, while also making it more dangerous for vendors to escape.

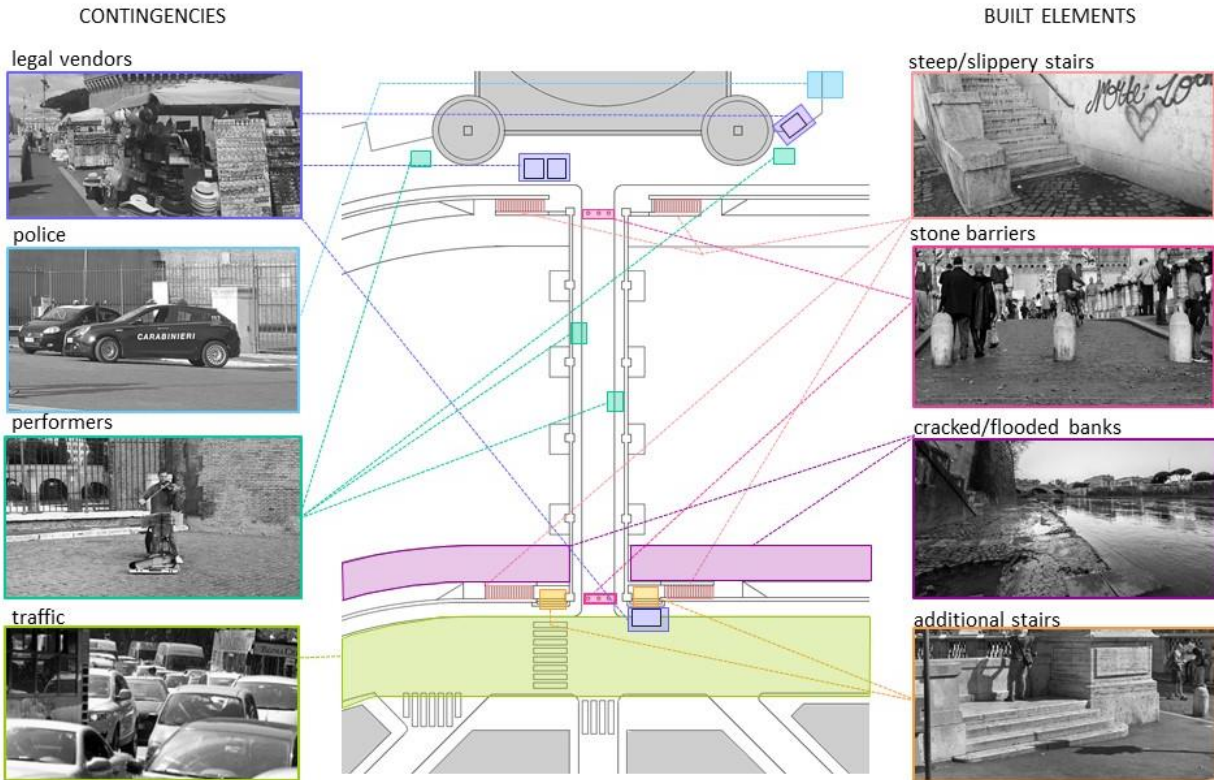
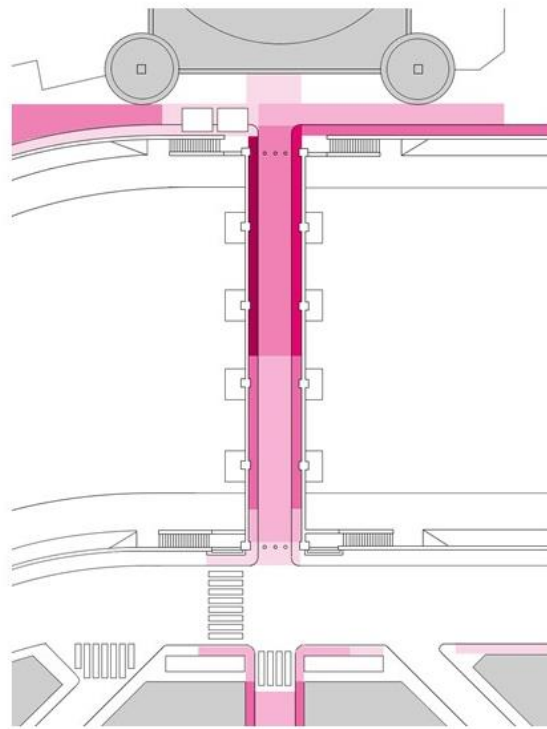


Figure 3. Elements that vendors believe to be "hostile" on the Sant'Angelo Bridge.

Both the permanent and transient materialities of the bridge collaborate, subdividing the bridge into five areas that become more or less attractive to the vendors (fig. 4). Spaces on the North end of the bridge are generally more attractive than those on the South. This occurs because, in case of police raids, spaces on the North give better chances of running away due to shorter, better maintained stairs which lead to river walks that are also in a better status. As shown in figure 4, the most desirable vending spots are located on the North/West end of the bridge. While sidewalks are generally considered good trading spaces because they help vendors align next to each other, the spots in front of Saint Peter's Basilica are particularly attractive because tourists tend to stop and take pictures, standing in front of vendors and their merchandise. The Eastern sidewalk is less panoramic and thus less desirable, but vendors still consider it an excellent spot given its proximity to the Castle and the pedestrian promenade.

Other areas are less desirable, but still valued by vendors as good locations. The central lane in between Northern sidewalks, for example, is strategically located towards the castle, but it is usually crowded by "acchiappini" workers (literally "catchers"), or people who approach tourists to sell them guided tours. Sometimes Italian or Eastern-European, but more often Bangladeshis and Pakistanis with regular immigration statuses, these workers make it hard for vendors to draw the attention of tourists. Sidewalks on the Southern part of the bridge present the same level of appeal because they are located in the noisier and more dangerous part of the bridge. Vendors tend to find the sidewalk and promenade in front of the Castle similarly attractive because, despite frequently crowded by tourists, these spaces are also often frequently occupied by "acchiappini," licensed vendors, and police. Fourth-tier spaces are located both on the Southern central area of the bridge and in less crowded Northern areas.

Finally, the fifth-tier, least attractive spots are nearby legal stalls on the North end (where "regular" vendors push "irregulars" away), at the entrance of the Castle (where some museum employees intimidate and threaten vendors, and police cars are frequently parked), and at the noisier Southern end of the bridge (where running away is extremely dangerous because of fast cars and riverbanks that are poorly maintained).



highly desirable desirable moderately desirable less desirable not desirable at all

Figure 4. Hierarchies of more or less attractive vending areas determined by the bridge's "welcoming" or "hostile" features.

Shifting Geographies of Survival

The different people and material elements of Sant' Angelo not only coexist, but together create shifting everyday geographies. Figure 5 shows how human and non-human agencies collaborate during a typical day in spring, when vending occurs from 9:30 in the morning to 6:30 in the evening. *Established*, *senior*, and *newly arrived* vendors occupy different areas of the bridge, which in turn condition their appropriations.

Newly arrived vendors from both Bangladesh and Senegal arrive on the bridge first in the morning. While not many tourists are around until 10:30, this is the time of the day when *newcomers* can occupy the best vending spots on the North end of the bridge. An hour later, *established* and *senior* vendors replace *newcomers* who move towards the Southern end of the bridge. This shift usually takes place without direct confrontations. *Newcomers* know that moving away is in their best interest. When they arrived on the bridge for the first time, more experienced colleagues pushed *newcomers* away through verbal intimidations, and occasionally through robberies. After 10:30, *established* Senegalese sellers tend to concentrate on the top-ranked North-West sidewalk while Bangladeshis occupy the second-tier North-Eastern sidewalk. This separation is not fixed, however. A few *established* Bangladeshi and Senegalese vendors sell side by side on the North-West sidewalk. Considered by other vendors as "in charge" of the bridge, these vendors exchange texts on police presence, reserve each other's spots, and keep an eye on each other's merchandise. Both Bangladeshi and Senegalese *seniors* avoid competing with younger colleagues and tend to stay away from prime spots. Yet, as their regular immigration status gives them relative security from police, and as

their older age grants them a degree of respect within the vending community, a few *seniors* carve out prime positions for themselves. For instance, three *seniors* from Bangladesh, two from Senegal, and one from Afghanistan occupy their usual spots on Northern sidewalks: spots that *established* vendors leave free as they wait for *seniors* to arrive.

Up to fifty people sell on the bridge during peak hours, between 12:00 and 2:00 p.m. Most vendors align next to each other along the sidewalks either exposing goods on sheets on the ground or holding them. While traders usually remain standing to run quickly if police arrive, a few sit down on the floor or on the lower side of the parapet in order to attract more tourists. Sitting vendors are often *seniors* who, given their regular immigration status, can afford to run less quickly than others if police arrive, and at times do not move at all. Other traders prefer approaching clients while walking alongside them on the central ally of the bridge. This is a tiring, but relatively profitable technique used mostly by *established* vendors and some *newcomers*. Some vendors organize in teams to maximize profits. Members of the same team walk along the bridge, one in front of the other, offering passersby the same product. After being approached with the same trinket multiple times, tourists are more likely to buy the good from a vendor, who will then share profits with other members of his team. I observed three groups of two to four traders cooperating in this way. While all groups I observed comprised vendors from the same country of origin, interviewees told me that some vendors teamed up with colleagues of different backgrounds.

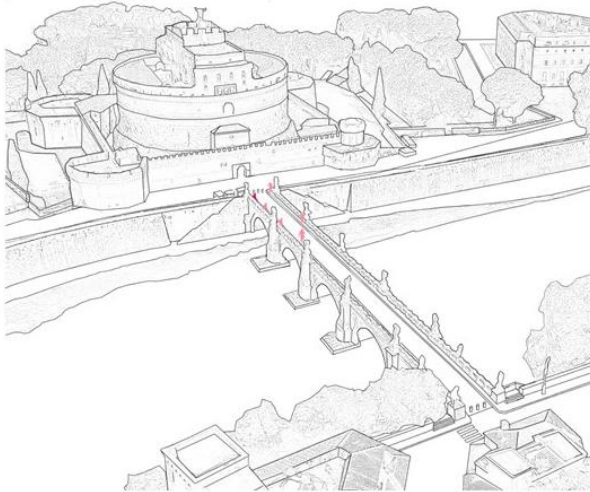
This congested scenario changes abruptly at 2:00 p.m., when only a few traders remain on the bridge. Rumor has it among vendors that police intensify controls during the “after-lunch” time between 2:00 and 4:00 p.m. (an occurrence that neither my observations nor my interviews with police officers confirmed). With an irregular immigration status exposing them to risks of incarceration, *established* vendors tend to leave the bridge at that time. They are quickly replaced by *newcomers* who can now return to the prime spots they were forced to leave in the morning. The fact that *newcomers* remain around at a time when officers are expected to carry out controls reflect a general sense of trust that most reported feeling towards police. Two vendors who arrived in Italy a few months before my fieldwork told me that they felt relieved by police raids which, forcing *established* sellers to run, were creating opportunities for *newcomers* to find better vending spots. *Senior* vendors are generally unimpacted by the 2:00-4:00 break and tend to remain on their spots. Next to both *seniors* and *newcomers*, a few *established* vendors of “counterfeit” merchandise, who usually sell elsewhere in the morning, reach out the Northern sidewalks on the bridge.

Only a few vendors return on Ponte Angelo after 4:00 p.m. as not many tourists walk on the bridge after the Vatican Museums are closed. Depending on their daily profits, some vendors stop working for the day while other move to busier locations such as Piazza Navona and Piazza della Rotonda.

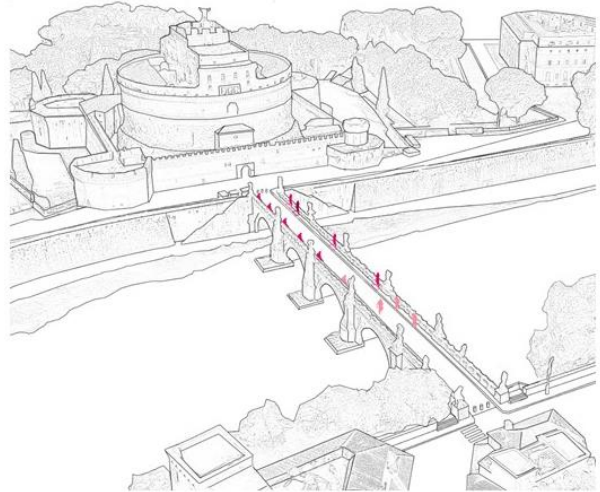
The bridge does not only collaborate with diverse vendors in shaping geographies of survival. It equally facilitates their encounter with others who inhabit the bridge. For one thing, both the vendors’ presence and material elements enable other informal businesses to flourish. Twice a day, two Senegalese women cross Sant’ Angelo Bridge delivering hot coffee for 50-cents a cup. If their clientele was initially composed of Senegalese men, over time other vendors as well as artists of all origins started lining along the sidewalk (so that other vendors could go on selling), chatting and gossiping. Diverse users and material forms also co-produce geographies of refuge. Traders of different origins, and especially *established* vendors, notify each other of police presence and hide together in lanes, tunnels, and passageways near Ponte Angelo. If fear of being caught initially brought vendors to inhabit these spaces, hideouts have become safe places where sellers go to take a break, eat, and talk with each-other regardless of police presence. Artists help vendors during police raids, for instance, by hiding merchandise among their bags and instruments, or by directing patrollers towards the wrong direction. The Saint Peter Basilica, visible from the bridge, allows tourist guides to pause and talk for a while, letting vendors stand among their clients. Once I saw a patrolman trying to take away a vendor standing among tourists; the tourist guide told to the officer that the vendor was one of her clients, convincing him to leave.

Finally, the material elements of Ponte Sant’ Angelo enable vendors to carry out personal activities other than selling goods or escaping controls. Outside of working hours, the same stairs that vendors use to run from police become peaceful spaces to video-chat with distant families. Some vendors strategically

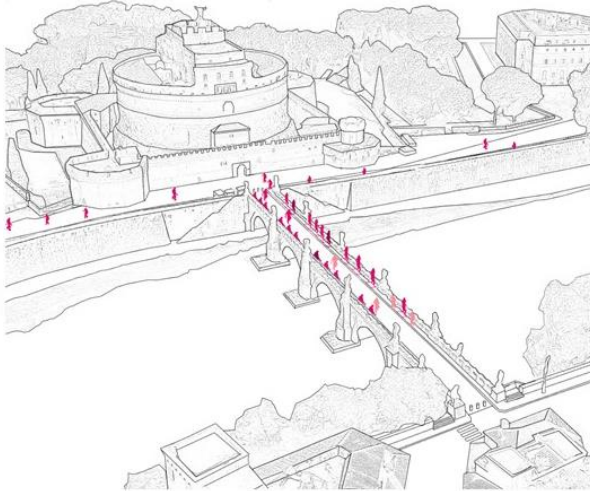
position themselves with Saint Peter's Basilica as a background in video calls, to show distant relatives a landmark they associate with a sign of "prestige." *Established, senior, and newly arrived* vendors suspend power hierarchies when occupying these spaces, which get taken on a "first come, first serve" basis. Diverse Bangladeshi as well as Senegalese vendors also find spaces to recite Muslim prayers either in the park behind Sant'Angelo Castle or on the same river walks that allow them to run from police during working hours. Taking advantage of both their anonymity among the crowds and the pockets that Rome's urban fabric offers them, vendors emplace non-Catholic practices in a city where policy makers openly ostracize Muslim places of worship.



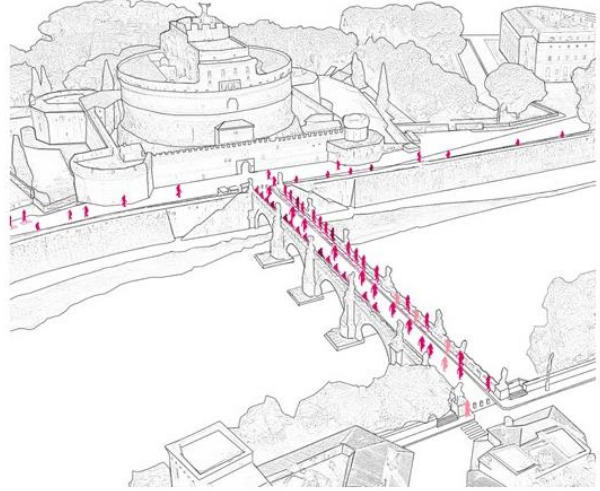
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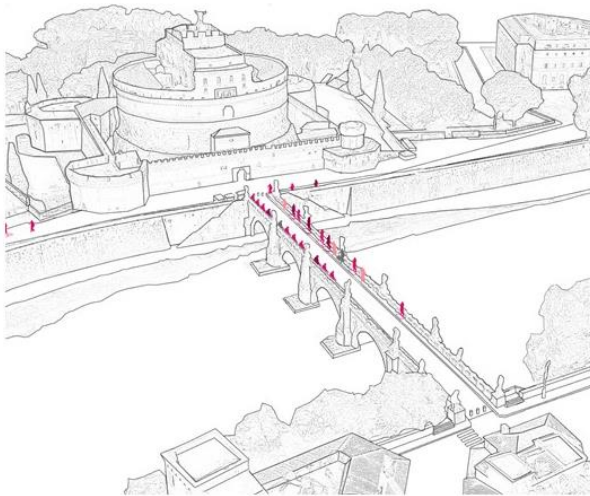
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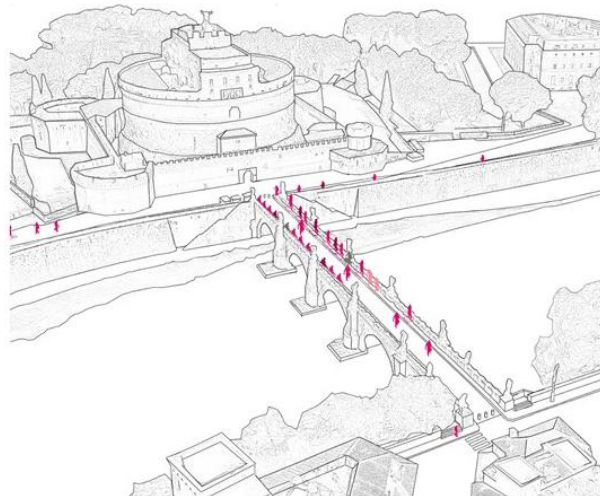
11:30 a.m.



12:30 a.m.



2:00-4:00 p.m.



5:00 p.m.

Figure 5. As the day progresses, less powerful vendors are pushed to the Southern, less attractive end of the bridge.

Conclusions

The case of Ponte Sant'Angelo demonstrates how people and material things are not separate entities in the city. They are intersecting agents that shape one another, co-producing geographies of survival. Neither Ponte Sant'Angelo as a physical space nor the vendors who inhabit that space are homogenous in any way. Seniority on the street and immigration status roughly divide traders into three groups: *established* vendors (more powerful among colleagues because having sold for longer times, but especially vulnerable to police due to irregular immigration statuses), *seniors* (with regular immigration statuses, but less integrated within the vending community), and *newcomers* (ostracized by colleagues because they are new to the street, but less preoccupied with police given their pending immigration permits). Power distinctions prevail over traders' origins. This means that Bangladeshi and Senegalese *established* vendors are more likely to work side by side than *newcomers* and *established* traders from the same country. Meanwhile, the materiality of Ponte Sant'Angelo, composed of both more permanent built forms and contingent elements such as bodies, cars, or weather elements, render the bridge a contested arena. Features such as steep stairs, poorly maintained river walks, or vehicular traffic make some spaces hostile. Other things, such as the castle, tourist busses, and the music produced by street artists become allies to the traders. These elements organize the bridge into five kinds of vending areas, from the most strategic sidewalks on the North-West to the noisy, dangerous spots on the South.

Differences across the vendors and the materialities of Ponte Sant'Angelo weave together. On a typical day, *newcomers* occupy prime vending stations at 9:30 a.m., but they are soon pushed towards less attractive spots by *established* vendors who arrive on the bridge an hour later. Similar shifts continue throughout the day. Between 2:00 and 4:00 p.m. for example, when vendors believe that police controls are more frequent, *established* vendors leave the bridge, allowing *newcomers* to take back prime vending locations. Meanwhile, *seniors* stay at their mid-tier spots and seated, often remaining on the bridge even if patrollers arrive. Not only do tunnels and narrow lanes offer precious hideouts during police raids, but the bodies of passersby help vendors too, for instance, by permitting them to stand among the crowds and remain unnoticed. Material elements also facilitate encounters among people that would hardly meet elsewhere. Strategic points of the bridge, for example, serve as delivery stations for coffee, food, and merchandise that immigrant entrepreneurs of different origins bring to the vendors, stopping to chat and get to know each other. Outside of working hours, the same stairs that usually serve vendors for running from police become comfortable, scenic sitting areas from which traders video-chat with distant relatives. And river walks offer vendors tranquil spaces to recite Muslim prayers just a stone's throw away from the Saint Peter Basilica.

These dynamics call for expanding analyses of the *everyday*, examining how interdependent agencies collaborate in creating opportunities for insurgency. As policies and designs reproduce inequities in cities across the globe, understanding how relations of power shape, and are shaped by, the built environment is key to assist people in dismantling oppression. Scholars of the *everyday* have engaged in this task. Their explorations, however, have tended to interpret people as the sole protagonists of urban life, while treating physical environments as mere supporters to that life. At the same time, if feminist and critical urbanists have shown that human and non-human entanglements shape cities, their studies have rarely examined the spatial minutiae associated with those entanglements.

On Ponte Sant'Angelo, things that might seem as trivial as the height of sidewalks, the steepness of stairs, or the light of the sun take up multiple roles. They become obstructors or allies of diverse vendors as they negotiate power and counter exclusion. I suggest that these kinds of imbrications deserve more rigorous scrutiny among scholars of the *everyday*. In order to support disadvantaged groups in using and producing spaces, research should look more closely at how the nitty-gritty of the city, its seemingly banal, mundane materialities, partner with people in shaping oppression and resistance.

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