

## **Buildings communicate.**

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### *Abstract*

Abiola and over 20 West African and South Asian asylum seekers were forced to wait two years (2017/2018) in the *Fiastra Abbey*, a vast expanse of land owned and managed by the Giustiniani Bandini Trust. For over a century, the exact same rooms accommodating them, were home to sharecropper families, like the Ciccioli (1935/1963), the Galassi (1964 to 1979), and others before them, who worked the land owned by the Bandini family from 1802 until the 1970s, when it was ceded to the Trust. The headquarters of the Trust occupy the mansion of Prince Sigismondo Giustiniani Bandini, who restructured what used to be the kitchen and refectory of the Cistercian monks that established the Abbey in 1142. Using the ruins of the nearby Roman town of Urb Salvia, destroyed in 498 by the Visigoth king Alaric, they built sacred and productive infrastructure that stand to this day. During last century's fascist regime, the mansion was known as the Urbisaglia Bonservizi Camp, one of the many internment camps where Italian and foreign jews, stateless persons and "enemies of the state" were confined. Paul Pollack and over 100 of them lived there for over two years (1940/1943), much like Abiola and his fellow asylum seekers. What does the spectral presence of abbots, princes, sharecroppers, jews and stateless persons, in the same rooms now occupied by asylum seekers communicate?

Architectural Studies scholars have for long asserted that buildings communicate, and that what they communicate can be read and interpreted. They have, of course, debated what exactly they communicate and how to read and interpret them for equally long. Buildings have alternatively been conceptualised as architectural texts whose internal grammar can be decodified, as material objects expressing their own and their occupiers' biographies, as borders and migration infrastructure, as spaces where struggles over the meaning of citizenship, nation and habitation unfold, as a condensation of the totality, as points where here and there, now and then, remain largely undistinguishable. Buildings, Lefebvre famously asserted, are a brutal condensation of social relations. They reveal spatio-temporal maps expressing the thick condensation of social relations that sustain them, and the open-ended nature of these relations. Buildings are both things and a relation between things. They are lively.

Through the exposition of the multiple (after)lives that animate the rooms of buildings in *Fiastra*, the paper suggests that what buildings not only communicate the complex spatiotemporal maps that sustain them, but perhaps more significantly, the process of contestation over their very social meaning. It is such process of contestation that transform buildings into protagonists of a postcolonial chronicle. Buildings are not just vanishing points where multiple social forces converge, but focal points configuring an unstable conceptual terrain and an ambiguous political horizon.

Buildings make cities and cities do not exist without buildings. Buildings and cities actualise multiple and contested geographies, communicating a series of unresolved tensions that bring together crisis, conjuncture, and political potentials.