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An empty street in Turin, Italy. MikeDotta/Shutterstock, CC BY-NC-ND

Coronavirus: locked-down Italy's changing urban space

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Languages

Français

English

The past days have seen a dramatic transformation of Italy's urban space in a time of great tragedy. With the population under orders not to leave home apart from for specific needs, cities and villages have undergone a kind of desertification.

As a scholar of the urban environment living and working in north Italy, I have noticed how the use of urban spaces has suddenly changed. Old and new places of public life, like streets and squares in the city centre and commercial districts within and outside cities, are empty. Urban space has lost any hierarchy and streets look similar without open shops or people during rush hour.

Despite global alarm about the spread of the novel coronavirus, this desertification has been a gradual process, as people showed resistance to the interruption of the use of social spaces.

Rethinking urban space

This is despite the reminders of past epidemics found in Italy's urban spaces – as in many cities across Europe. Buildings from the early modern age constructed for care during epidemics continue to stand, such as the quarantine island of the Lazaretto Vecchio in Venice's lagoon. The emblematic skyline of Venice includes the 17th century church of Madonna della Salute (Virgin Mary of Health), built as a votive offering for the city's release from the plague.



Madonna della Salute, Venice. Andrea Mangoni/Shutterstock

Rethinking public spaces is challenging. Museums and cultural heritage sites have closed. Concerts have been cancelled and movie theatres have stopped running. Now, new digital initiatives have been developed to cope with the current lack of cultural life.

Museums are re-opening online. The Brera Gallery offers virtual visits to its collection. The Uffizi Gallery is offering “Hypervisions”, a way for viewers to discover its masterpieces online. Other cultural projects include a live-streamed event that will see philosophers discuss tools for coping with the quarantine from 10am to midnight on 21 March.

Public interactions are moving online as people are encouraged to stay at home. Under the shared hashtag #iorestoacasa (I stay at home), celebrities are recording messages to encourage people, especially young people, to stay inside.



'Stay at home, everything will be ok'. Pasquale Senatore/Shutterstock, CC BY-NC-ND

New rituals

The online environment also allows for virtual social encounters. Under normal circumstances, people in Milan and other cities in Italy would meet in the early evening for *aperitivo*, a glass of spritz or another drink in a coffee shop or bar before dinner, accompanied by a buffet of finger foods. People spend half an hour meeting friends or perhaps conducting an informal work meeting.

The ritual of *aperitivo* was one of the first losses of social urban life with the order to close coffee shops at 6pm. Now, all coffee shops are totally closed. But this ritual is moving online, with new habits diffusing from Milan: a “smart *aperitivo*” that takes place in living rooms. An invitation circulates for groups of friends to join the *aperitivo* through a link, and they gather online with a glass of wine or beer in hand to converse.

This *aperitivo* ritual is perhaps more intensive than usual, and maybe more inclusive. Because of the small size of some apartments, it isn't easy to create a completely private space, and so this new *aperitivo* includes other relatives of all ages.

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Life is difficult and people is afraid. But sometimes a simple action like playing tha national Italian anthem from the balcony can help. Thank you guys.
[#coronarvirusitalia](#) [#Covid_19](#) [#covid_19italia](#)
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11



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Physical open space continues to play a role. Society has moved from places at street level to balconies and windows, which act as a filter between the intimate spaces of isolation and the public realm. The need for sociability and to be part of a community has become something relevant to be told and shown. Some time ago we saw citizens of Wuhan shouting from their windows as a way to communicate and create the sound of a community. People now appear from the windows of Italian streets too.

Italian cities can be very noisy. The silence now is incredible but surreal. When it is interrupted the sounds are unusual: loudspeakers in the streets encourage citizens to stay at home.

There are also some positive and comforting sounds. A new kind of flash mob creates collective actions from people's windows at scheduled times: to light up Italy, to clap together in honour of doctors and nurses who are working without rest, to play some music, to sing the national hymn or simply to sing a song, together.

During a recent *aperitivo* with international guests, we learnt that the practice of clapping from windows has moved to other countries, like Spain. It's a way to meet neighbours who in normal time maybe you haven't ever considered: just smiling together to interrupt the silence.