Polyrhythmic marginalities and chronopolitics: a rhythmanalysis of a railway station

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ABSTRACT

The paper explores marginality through a rhythmanalysis of the railway station in Bergamo (Italy). Three kinds of rhythm were identified in the station: the crescendo of urban and infrastructural development, the sinusoidal rhythms of commuters and travelers, and the rhythms of endurance of marginalized and homeless people. The conflicts and synchronizations between these three kinds of rhythm are examined. The analysis suggests that a rhythmical reading of the railway station's social geographies can contribute meaningfully to understanding urban marginality, highlighting its temporal dimension and thus providing theoretical insights on temporal marginality. More precisely, the rhythmical lens sheds light on the politicization of time, and on how power is also maintained and enforced through rhythms and temporal structures.

1. Introduction: Investigating the complexity of temporal architectures and railway stations

Train stations are complex and controversial public spaces. Their most obvious function concerns transportation and mobility. Still, as discussed later in the article, there is much more to them than that; they are crucial hubs for policies for urban redevelopment, commercialization, privatization, and securitization, to name but a few (see, for example, Bán, 2007; Peters & Novy, 2012; Paone, 2023). It would be naïve to think of railway stations simply as non-places, anonymous passages devoid of meaning (Augé, 1992). Quite the opposite is true: as suggested by Cresswell and Merriman (2011) among others, urban studies must recognize the multitude of different ways of experiencing and inhabiting the train station—and other places related to mobilities—with their variegated social rhythms, spatialities and ways of being integrated in broader urban dynamics and development strategies.

The complexity of stations lies at the intersection of several deeply intertwined trends evident in many European cities. In one such trend, train stations' integration in processes of urban neoliberalization transforms them—often because of their central location—into centers of consumption for desired groups (such as tourists and privileged workers) through the growth of lounges, meeting spaces, and restaurants. Another significant trend is the increasing securitization and "sanitization" of railway stations and surrounding areas motivated by

the persistent presence of marginalized and stigmatized individuals, as well as informal practices and micro-criminality (see, for example, Bonnet, 2009). A variety of measures are used for these purposes, including hostile urban design (Rosenberger, 2017), efforts to ensure that certain people cannot use spaces inside stations (e.g., removing free restrooms, making some parts of the station accessible only by ticketed passengers, closing stations at night), and intensified control and repression though video surveillance, punitive regulations and heightened law enforcement presence. Seen in this light, railway stations are multifaceted places that mirror the contradictions and main development processes of contemporary cities. Nevertheless, few works in urban studies go beyond railway stations' transport and logistical functions to investigate their social geographies. Accordingly, this paper will scrutinize the variegated social geographies at the basis of the station's rhythms, investigating the railway station and its surroundings in Bergamo, Italy. In so doing, it hopes not only to unveil the multiplicity of railway stations' meanings and practices, but also—by exploring marginalization, social segmentation, exclusion, and stigmatization through rhythmanalysis—to produce a rhythmanalytical picture of urban marginality, highlighting its temporal dimension and thus offering theoretical insights on temporal marginality.

Such an approach is particularly relevant in view of geography's tendency to focus primarily on the spatial dimensions of marginality. In fact, geographical studies have often stressed how space contributes to

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privileging some groups and marginalizing others, spawning a broad and differentiated body of theories about the nature of margins, marginalization, and the processes of becoming peripheral (Trudeau & McMorran, 2011; Lancione, 2016). Most of these approaches emphasize questions of otherness and distinction based on intersectional categories such as class, religion, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, or characteristics of bodyminds, but rarely consider temporal perspectives (Frederiksen, 2013). With this in mind, this paper posits that power is also enforced, manifested and reproduced through temporal structures: according to Sharma (2014), conventional theoretical approaches tend to align space and the political, paying little attention to temporality, and even proposing universal, masculine narratives, as in the case of many discourses on time–space compression. By contrast, Sharma applies Doreen Massey's (2005) theory of power-geometry to time, advocating for a chronopolitics that can reveal experiences of time–space as differentiated rather than universal. Seen from this perspective, the railway station is (a) a *temporal architecture* where the time of privileged groups whose temporalities are valued, such as well-off commuters, can be managed and enhanced—not least by means of the temporalities of work by other people, such as drivers or garbage collectors (Bissell, 2009; Vitrano & Kębłowski, 2024)—and (b) a space of residual, low and arrhythmical temporalities for people whose time seems to have little economic value in the contemporary capitalist city, such as the dispossessed poor. The latter rely on rhythm-making as a survival strategy, forging what Simone (2019) called "rhythms of endurance" (see also Tran & Yip, 2020).

By focusing on intersecting trajectories at the Bergamo train station, the paper proposes a temporal and rhythmical reading of urban marginality, contributing to the literature on marginalized groups as agents in the production of polyrhythmic cities (see Tran & Yip, 2020; see also Earl, 2023). Analyzing the chronopolitics of the Bergamo railway station furthers an understanding of the complexities linking the struggles of vulnerable groups in everyday life with the apparently banal, regular movements of workers, students, commuters, and tourists that make up urban mobilities, alongside the parallel grandeur of urban development projects and urban transformations.

The paper is organized as follows. The next section reviews the literature on rhythmanalysis and railway stations. Section 3 then presents Bergamo and its railway station, along with the methodology used for the study. Section 4 enters into the details of our rhythmanalysis, distinguishing between three different rhythms, among the many possible: the *crescendo* of urban and infrastructural development (4.1), the *sinusoidal rhythms* of commuters and travelers and their diurnal-nocturnal dimension (4.2), and the *rhythms of endurance* of the marginalized and homeless (4.3). Lastly, the concluding section (5) discusses the potential of a rhythmical reading of urban marginality and the contribution that railway stations can make to analyzing urban dynamics and temporalities.

2. Rhythms, polyrhythms and railway stations

The study of rhythm, or rhythmanalysis, is now a widespread approach in urban studies. The key reference in rhythmanalysis is Henri Lefebvre's *Éléments de rythmanalyse* (1992). However, the French philosopher is just one of a series of influential authors who reflected on the nature and power of rhythms in society, including for example Karl Marx, Émile Durkeheim, Marcel Mauss, Roger Callois, Rudolf Laban, Émile Jaques-Dalcroze and Simone Weil (for reviews, see Brighenti & Kärrholm, 2018; Lyon, 2019; see also the introduction to the 2004 English translation Lefebvre's book, entitled *Rhythmanalysis; Space, Time and Everyday Life*). The term rhythmanalysis itself was not coined by Lefebvre, but by the Portuguese philosopher Lúcio Alberto Pinheiro dos Santos, author of a little-known 1931 essay entitled *A Ritmanàlise*, which in turn influenced the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard.

Overall, in their heterogeneity, these early works emphasize how thinking in terms of rhythms facilitates the development of concepts and critical perspectives for analyzing society, particularly the temporalities

of modern urban societies. In Lefebvre's case, the accent is on the idea that rhythms are not merely natural and social occurrences: they create quotidian disciplinary conditions that may be seen as a means of class domination. Taking this perspective, Lefebvre shifts critical analysis from the traditional setting of the factory to the broader urban space and everyday life (Reid-Musson, 2018), mobilizing rhythmanalysis to gain a richer understanding of urban processes (Soaita, 2023). Rhythmanalysis has thus been applied in several overlapping fields of research and debate, from the investigation of specific streets, squares, festivals, and public spaces (see for example Osman & Mulíček, 2017; Gibert-Flutre, 2022; Sun, 2022; Chan, 2024; Dang et al., 2025) to the exploration of the urban time-spaces of particular categories of human actors, such as migrants (Reid-Musson, 2018; Soaita, 2023); from theoretical investigations of how thinking in terms of rhythms can enrich our conceptualization of key notions such as space, territory, body, performance, and representation (McCormack, 2002; Edensor, 2010; Brighenti & Kärrholm, 2018), to studies of its potential for rethinking methods and methodologies (Simpson, 2012; Chen, 2017; Lyon, 2019).[1]

It is widely recognized that Lefebvre's brief and inspiring book (1992) is more evocative than well fleshed out in methodological terms (Highmore, 2002; Lyon, 2019). According to Lefebvre (1992/2004, p. 25), "[e]verywhere where there is interaction between a place, a time and an expenditure of energy, there is rhythm." Rhythms shape the diurnal, weekly, or seasonal experience and materiality of places, influencing their ongoing formation. This perspective avoids simplifying places as static, recognizing the dynamic nature of rhythms and flows, and the role of time in composing social differences within urban lived experiences. In his work, Lefebvre suggested several classifications of rhythms, distinguishing for example *cyclical* rhythms (regular, repetitive patterns, as in the case of daily routines) from *linear* ones (evolving); he described *corporeal* (sleep-wake), *natural* (day-night), *institutional* (opening hours), and *collective* (commuting) rhythms. In addition, he introduced a vocabulary of concepts to describe how multiple rhythms overlap or clash, determining different kinds of *polyrhythmia*: *eurhythmia* (harmonicity), *isorhythmia* (synchronism) or *arrhythmia* (irregularity). Beyond these evocative classifications and the invitation to recognize the importance of rhythms in thinking about space, time, and power, Lefebvre offers little practical detail (Lyon, 2019). Consequently, rhythmanalysis has been developed and practiced in several different ways and with different goals, as witnessed by a variegated literature in urban studies.

This paper deploys rhythmanalysis first to highlight how social divides can be framed in terms of arrhythmia in the use and experience of the railway station. Put briefly, the regular, normative rhythms of place—in this case, the rhythms of commuters and the crescendo of expansion and redevelopment of the Bergamo train station—promoted by officials, businesses, and standardized collective routines, clash with and are disrupted by other marginalized inhabitants, such as people experiencing homelessness, who inhabit margins as relational spaces of survival within and outside capitalist existence (DeVerteuil et al., 2022). This rhythmic analysis of marginalization thus illuminates a temporal understanding of the time-spaces of power, social differentiation, stigmatization, and class stratification in public space.

The analysis proposed here also aims to contribute to the dispersed literature on the geographies of train stations in contemporary cities. The vast majority of the geographical literature in the field focuses on perspectives from technology and transport studies, or proposes historical readings of the evolution of railways and stations (Hale, 2013) and the morphology of settlements (for example Pels & Rietveld, 2007; Brès, 2014; Diao et al., 2017), with a limited numbers of works exploring

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[1] Rhythmanalysis has also been applied outside urban studies to explore other rhythmic aspects of space, time, and society, such as financial markets (Borch et al., 2015) or climate change (Oppermann et al., 2020), demonstrating this perspective's flexibility.

the social and cultural geographies of actual stations. There are, of course, notable exceptions. Specifically, classic papers explored the dual nature of stations as nodes and places (Bertolini & Spit, 1998), introducing planning perspectives focusing on the development and redevelopment of the areas sited on, or surrounding, railway stations (Bruinsma et al., 2008; Trip, 2008; Peters, 2009; Dragan, 2017; Ostanel, 2017; Wenner & Thierstein, 2022), including those in small cities (Van Acker & Triggianese, 2021). In this framework, attention has been directed to environmental and sensorial perspectives (Liu et al., 2020), effects on retail and commercial landscapes (Zacharias et al., 2011), gentrification (Deka, 2017; Mireanu, 2020), or the ambiguous relation between neoliberalism, competitiveness, and infrastructural megaprojects involving stations (Peters & Novy, 2012).

Other studies, mostly grounded in social and cultural geographies, have investigated the crucial connections between railways and cities as key elements shaping the very idea of modernity (Richards & MacKenzie, 1986), with a massive impact on the power structures of societies, in terms of gender and sexuality, for example (Bieri & Gerodetti, 2007). Similarly, Chowdhury and McFarlane (2022) explored Tokyo train stations to highlight urban experiences of the crowds and the imaginaries of city life. Railway stations can be viewed as places of comings and goings, promising multiple opportunities, while simultaneously being mapped, surveyed, colonized, possessed, and regulated (Edensor, 2000). In this connection, marginality and criminality are key areas were several critical studies have probed issues relating to the politics of fear, perceptions of security, and surveillance (Cozens et al., 2003; Tay et al., 2013; Adey et al., 2013; Zhang et al., 2022), confirming that railway stations are fully integrated into the wider paradigms of the contemporary neoliberal city.

3. Context and research methods

3.1. Bergamo and its railway station

This paper is the result of extensive fieldwork conducted in Bergamo's train station and surrounding areas from March 2024 to December 2025. Bergamo is a northern Italian city with about 120,000 inhabitants at the center of a province of 1.2 million inhabitants, approximately 50 km from Milan. It is a wealthy town; according to the 2017 GDP per capita survey, Bergamo ranked 2nd out of 107 Italian provincial capitals, while a 2024 ranking of the most livable Italian cities put Bergamo first.[2] Economically speaking, this is due to a pervasive entrepreneurial culture and a large number of small and medium-sized enterprises in the mechatronics, chemistry, manufacturing, fashion, and design sectors. Bergamo is also known for its thriving culture and a Catholic-oriented ethos of social assistance and inclusion. Given the proximity to Milan, it is a critical transport and logistics hub. It not only has a significant international airport (the third in Italy by passenger transit and the third most crucial European airport for Ryanair flights, after Dublin and London), but also a vast area close to the city center that hosts train, tramway, and bus stations. This area, along with the large square, Piazzale degli Alpini, is an essential multimodal transport node which was the site of our analysis (Fig. 1).

The area around Bergamo station is widely regarded as rather disreputable, and it is presented in the local and national press and in public discourse as being populated by "marginalized" groups (Trolese, 2022). At the same time, the area is currently at the center of an extensive urban transformation process (the *Porta Sud* project, literally "southern gate"), which hopes to construct a new urban pole to attract tourists, businesspeople, and middle-class residents. As discussed in the next section, this project is the culmination of a decade-long process of transformation of an area that has long animated local public and
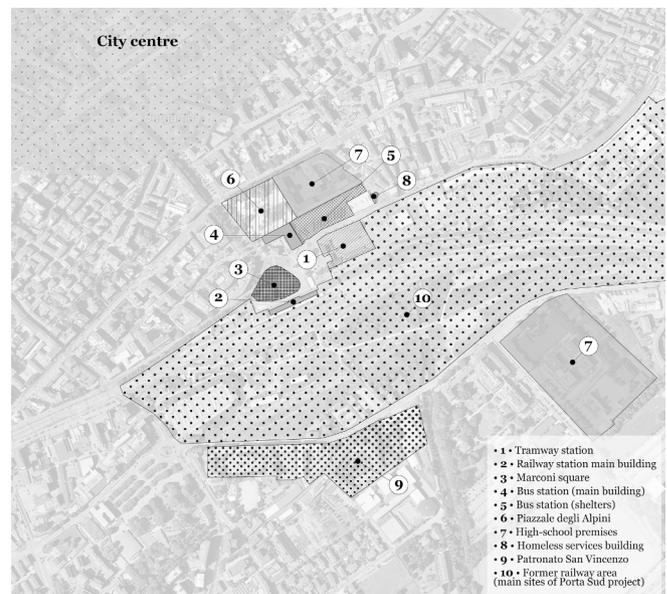

Fig. 1. The Bergamo station area.
Source: modified from Google Maps (June 2024)

political debates, as well as urban planning and policies. Since the 1970 s, planners have been grappling with how to overcome the barrier that the railway poses to the city's southward expansion.

Though the station area has long attracted the attention of public administrators, journalists and practitioners, paradoxically it does not figure prominently in the *Piano territoriale degli orari della città di Bergamo* (Local Timetable Plan for the City of Bergamo), known as the PTO. Mandated throughout Italy in 2000, the PTO is a municipal urban planning document that coordinates the timetables and rhythms of various urban services, aligning them with individual lifestyles, working hours and the needs and preferences of residents and visitors, thus making the city more accessible, welcoming, and attentive to different categories of people. In this context, public mobility clearly plays a crucial role. However, the Bergamo PTO, developed in 2006 and updated in 2024 (Comune di Bergamo and Politecnico di Milano, 2006, 2024 and 2024), pays little attention to the station zone. It focuses on other areas, such as the historic center and the upper part of the city, and on different issues, including accessibility of services and municipal office opening hours, conflicts between residents and tourists, and the revitalization of specific areas.[3]

3.2. Research techniques

Multiple techniques were employed to collect and analyze different types of material. The first step was an in-depth survey of media representations of the station and surrounding areas in all relevant articles (a total of over 1000) published in the city's primary newspaper, *L'Eco di Bergamo*, between January 1, 1980 and April 1, 2024. The purpose of this step was to understand the main events, practices, policies, and processes affecting the area in recent decades, as well as its representation in the local press. Articles were read, and significant passages and sections were highlighted and associated with keywords, which were then combined and compared. This process made it possible to identify three main thematic patterns (Boyatzis, 1998) concerning the rhythms of the railway station, which establish the narrative line presented in the next section.

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[3] PT0 2024′s only interest in the station area lies in mitigating the negative mobility-related effects of the construction sites that will affect it in the coming years.

Subsequently, semi-structured interviews were conducted with various stakeholders: shopkeepers and residents at different times of the day and night; social service workers supporting migrants and homeless people; municipal politicians responsible for managing other aspects of the area (i.e., the city councilor for town planning, the councilor for security and the councilor for social services); and journalists covering local news. In total, 19 in-depth interviews were conducted. All interviews lasted between 40 and 60 min, were recorded, and were subsequently transcribed. In addition, 20 unstructured interviews were conducted with commuters and tourists at Bergamo train station to tap their impressions of area. Several observation sessions were carried out in several areas of the station at different daytime and nighttime hours, days of the week, and seasons of the year. The people who frequented the areas and their activities in the public space were documented by means of notes, photographs, and short videos.

Lastly, the study included ethnographic work with marginalized people who use the area at different times of the day and the night. This work included deep hanging out, participant observation and spending time at popular gathering spots—such as spaces offering services and support to marginalized people (particularly Posto Caldo, which provides free lunch, and Drop-In, which offers breakfast and basic medical services)—together with conversations relating to their everyday practices and life stories. As part of this ethnography, we conducted 10 in-depth interviews with homeless individuals who used public spaces in and around the train station.

It should be noted that all interviews have been anonymized, with the subject's category (journalist, resident, tradesperson, tourist, etc.) as the only information provided. We recognize that this labeling process is partial and simplistic, given the intersectional and dynamic nature of individuals' social identities. We acknowledge that we have employed categories that refer to different aspects, such as profession (e.g., journalist), temporary mobility status (e.g., tourist or migrant), and housing conditions (e.g., homeless). However, we believe these categories help situate the interviewees in the analysis presented here.

4. A rhythmanalysis of the Bergamo train station

As it is impossible to explore and map every single rhythm making up the polyrhythmicities of city life, this section focuses on three specific temporalities concerning (a) urban and infrastructural development, (b) commuters and travelers, and (c) marginalized and homeless people. These three rhythms offer only a partial understanding of the complexity of the Bergamo railway station's temporalities, leaving out of the picture, for example, the timings of people accompanying passengers, those waiting for arriving acquaintances, taxi drivers, public transport operators, cleaning staff, or waste collection workers constituting the temporal architecture of the railway station (see Edensor & Holloway, 2008; Sharma, 2014; Vitrano & Kębłowski, 2024). However, these three rhythms were been selected because of their recurrence in public discourses reported in the leading local newspaper. Put differently, most media representations of the station mention rhythms and temporalities concerning long-term urban transformations and urban infrastructural improvements, the routine experience of commuters and the middle class (including their complaints about delays, inefficiencies and lack of safety in going about their everyday mobilities, or the organization of specific cultural or tourist events), and the spaces and experiences of marginality taking form in the place, particularly at night.

It should be emphasized that the three rhythms considered here are not conceptually separate, as they interact and contribute to shaping the station's temporal architecture. In fact, the distinction between different rhythms serves in developing the analysis, but "the analysis that separated them must join them back together because they enter into perpetual interaction and are even relative to one another, to the extent that one serves as the measure of the other" (Lefebvre, 1992/2004, p. 90). Accordingly, the concluding section of this article will reassemble the rhythmical stratification taking form in the station.

4.1. Rhythms I: The crescendo of urban and infrastructural development

Because of their location and physical configuration, Bergamo's station area and the railway tracks have served as a barrier since the city's post-World War II expansion. This barrier separates the wealthier and better served northern part of the city from the poorer and less dense southern area. As our close reading of the local newspaper showed, there have been repeated discussions over the years about the need to overcome or limit this border effect (for instance, by rerouting the railway tracks through a hypothetical new underground tunnel). But all such efforts have languished because of their high costs and complexity (as described by A., councilor for urban planning, February 26, 2024; see also Nikpalj, 2018). However, things have changed in the past two decades. The city has entered a period of sustained economic growth and transformation driven by the expansion of nearby Milan and the burgeoning tourist traffic through the Orio al Serio airport (in 2024, the airport served about 17 million passengers, as against some 700,000 passengers yearly in the Nineties). Against this backdrop, the idea of expanding, internationalizing and modernizing the station area, while also breaking down the barrier presented by the tracks to allow the urban center to expand southward, has become a central topic of public and political debate in the local media and the public sphere (F., journalist, March 12, 2024).

In line with the so-called Transport-Oriented Development concept (Knowles et al., 2020) this vision sees the Bergamo station not just as a node in multi-modal networks, but as a hub providing a variety of services and amenities, including restaurants, stores, libraries, cafés, laundries, cinema, and hotels (Trolese, 2022). This vision has materialized in the Porta Sud project, a 1 billion euro redevelopment initiative aimed at radically transforming the station area. The masterplan was presented in 2019, while work started in 2024 and will take several years to complete. The Porta Sud project also involves constructing an elevated plaza spanning the railway tracks and featuring businesses and services. The plaza will provide a physical connection between the city's northern and southern areas, facilitating their integration. New services, residential and commercial developments, and public facilities will spread around the station, bringing new centrality to the area and the city as a whole (Comune di Bergamo et al., 2021).

This development project marks the culmination of a 20-year transformation of the Bergamo station area, a crescendo of constant evolution and growth: the transport hub has expanded over time, accommodating the increasing mobility needs of both the local population and city users. Seen in this light, the overall expansion and intensification of infrastructural capacity, mobilities and flows reflect a typical linear narrative of modernization. Lefebvre (1992) uses the expression "linear rhythms" to describe those relating to the movements of work—the mechanical and industrial—marked by repetition at regular intervals, as exemplified by the rhythms of the metronome. There is clearly a linear dimension in the rhythms of urban and infrastructural development, though on closer inspection they are made up of a multitude of non-linear rhythms, including those of local and national policymaking, the many one-off and discrete interventions of urban renewal, and the swinging dynamics of local and supralocal investments. Interruptions and slowdowns resulting from unforeseen events and problems are also significant, as they demonstrate that the station's rhythm is only a crescendo when considered comprehensively and longitudinally, while it appears much more syncopated on closer analysis.

At the infrastructural level, the urban crescendo mainly involved improving the railway line and connections between the train station and other mobility systems. In 2009, the *Tram delle Valli T1* terminal was built next to the station. This tramway connects the city with the main villages of the Seriana Valley, and a project to extend it was recently approved. The *Tram delle Valli T2*, where construction began in 2024, will also depart from the same area and connect Bergamo's other central valley, the Brembana Valley. The climax of this crescendo is the project

to build a rail connection between the train station and Orio al Serio airport, scheduled for completion by the end of 2026. Beyond the sphere of infrastructure and transport networks, the station's crescendo has been driven by the logic of renewal and regeneration, including modernizing buildings, pedestrianizing several areas, and creating new retail outlets and eateries. This process began in the mid-2000 s with the construction of a pedestrian underpass below the railway tracks, which prompted an initial modernization of the station itself. The most significant change came in 2014 with the renovation of the train station building and the creation of a pedestrian space in front of it, with elegant flower boxes, well-maintained green spaces, a modern bicycle parking building, and the city's tourist office (Fig. 4) (A., councilor for urban planning, February 26, 2024).

The bus station redevelopment was also completed in 2010, with the construction of a large modernist-style building slated to host new retail and food spaces, the city's Urban Center (later replaced by public offices and the headquarters of "Bergamo Scienza," an annual science festival), and some mobility services (Fig. 2).

This renewal process also reached Piazzale degli Alpini, which has recently undergone several redesigns. The latest intervention, concluded in 2024, involved appearance upgrades to the square and the installation of a tall external gate so that the area can be closed at night—a decision which has been widely criticized for allegedly privatizing the square, which would only benefit the company that organizes the musical and recreational events held there, as well as the restaurants and cafès profiting from them (F., journalist, March 12, 2024) (Fig. 5). In sync with the area's gradual redevelopment, securitization has also been stepped up: the police have increased their presence and controls, and are now permanently stationed in the area from morning to evening (Conti, 2023). The entire zone has been under video surveillance for a decade, and there has been a permanent military presence patrolling the train station since 2024.[4] Since 2025, moreover, the area has been one of the city's six "red zones," where specific measures can be taken to control and combat crime and urban decay, such as banning individuals deemed dangerous or undesirable for offenses such as public drunkenness or bag snatching (Conti, 2025).

Fig. 2. The headquarters of "Bergamo Scienza", Friday, 12 December 2025, 9:15 AM. Photo by Olmo Fattorini.

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[4] This is part of *Operazione Strade Sicure* (Operation Safe Streets), launched in 2008 by Silvio Berlusconi's national government. It involves the deployment of soldiers to combat "widespread illegal activities linked to illegal immigration and organized crime" (Decree-Law 92/2008). Around 5,000 soldiers are currently deployed in Italy to carry out public security functions, particularly by checking and identifying suspicious persons and vehicles (Pino, 2023).

Fig. 3. Piazzale degli Alpini, facing the bus station. Friday, 5 December 2025, 8:30 AM (photo above); Wednesday, 16 April 2025, at 11:30 AM (photo below). Photos by Olmo Fattorini.

4.2. Rhythms II: The sinusoidal rhythms of transport and travelers

In recent decades, large urban transport hubs have gradually evolved to offer additional services, including food outlets, personal care services such as hairdressers and beauty salons, shops selling a wide range of products, lounge areas and meeting spaces. As a result, they have become multifunctional spaces, with transit increasingly associated with stopping and staying (Paone, 2023; Otsuka & Reeve, 2024). This effect has chiefly been seen in Italy's main railway stations, which were transformed under the so-called *Grandi Stazioni* program (Conticelli, 2012; Paone, 2023). By contrast, many stations in small and medium-sized towns still serve merely as transit hubs, offering only a few essential services—and sometimes not even those, as in the case of hundreds of so-called *stazioni impresenziate* (unmanned stations), where there is no staff to manage traffic or sell tickets. In Bergamo, the railway station is equipped with a ticket office, a bar and, following the 2014 renovation, a small supermarket; at the bus station, only a cafè-tobacconist and an automated luggage storage facility are available. All this, together with the physical layout of the premises (these are modestly sized buildings, with limited waiting areas), their location (a few hundred meters from the city center) and the transport configuration (the train and bus stations are mainly used as terminals, and not as transfer points), gives them specific *sinusoidal* rhythms: people arriving by public transport quickly disperse towards their destination, while those going to the stations to catch a train or bus arrive at the last possible minute, all of this resulting in extremely concentrated flows of people over time. We use the term *sinusoidal* to capture the intensity of flows, crowds, and movement over time, an intensity which peaks at regular intervals and decreases dramatically at other times. For example, the bus station, which serves the densely populated province of Bergamo (and the area's

Fig. 4. The train station and the renovated pedestrian area in front of it. Friday, 5 December 2025, 8:45 AM (photo above); Monday, 26 May 2025, 6:15 PM (photo below). Photos by Olmo Fattorini.

Fig. 5. Piazzale degli Alpini. Wednesday, 10 July 2024, 9:30 AM (photo above); Sunday, 13 June 2025, 9:00 PM (photo below). Photos by Francesco Chiodelli (photo above) and Olmo Fattorini (photo below).

high school students in particular), is crowded only at the start and end of the school day, i.e., between 7:30 and 8:30 a.m. and between 1:00 and 2:00 p.m. In these brief periods, thousands of students cross the area, which is almost deserted for the rest of the day (consider also that there are no buses before 6:00 a.m. or after 9:00 p.m.) (Fig. 3).

The railway station, too, has sinusoidal rhythms, albeit with slightly more frequent and wider peaks (Fig. 2). Many commuters use it, including workers and university students traveling to Milan and high school students traveling to Bergamo from the surrounding province (Fig. 4).[5] Fieldwork observations confirm the picture drawn by the 2006 PTO: traffic flows are also intensive at specific times, though more dispersed throughout the day than at the bus station: "When considered as a whole, the frequencies of trains throughout the week show a sinusoidal pattern, with a minimum around 10–11 a.m. and a maximum around 7:30 a.m. for both departures and arrivals. There are also two relative maximums: one for departures at 2 p.m. and one for arrivals at 7 p.m. A graph showing the total number of arrivals and departures during the week, hour by hour, indicates that the number of departures decreases dramatically after 8:30 p.m., while arrivals continue until 1 a.

m." (Comune di Bergamo and Politecnico di Milano, 2006, p. 106).[6]

Against this backdrop, users generally perceive the station area as serving no other purpose than commuting:

> "The station is a station. What else would I come here for?" (M., student, May 26, 2025);
> "I spend maybe five minutes here a day, just enough time to park my scooter and catch the train. It's a small station; it takes no time to get everything done. And when they cancel a train, I take a short walk, and I'm in a café in the city center in five minutes. Why would I remain here? There isn't even a covered bench to sit on." (M, commuter, May 2025).

The impression is that the lack of services makes the area nothing more than a transit space, to be used and abandoned as quickly as possible, imposing rapid rhythms of bodies coming and going. Consider the following interview excerpts:

> "We stayed for two days and are about to leave for Milan. Our hotel was opposite the station. However, we spent all our time in the city center because there is nothing in this area, and the center is only five minutes away on foot." (K., tourist, May 12, 2025);
> "I don't live in these spaces. I only come to the station to catch the train. I don't come here to socialize. It's a bad place, especially

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Piazzale degli Alpini and the bus station." (A., worker and migrant, August 6, 2024).

The perception of a "bad place" is probably linked to an esthetic of urban marginality, including the ambiguous visible-invisible (more on this later) presence of marginalized poor people and the homeless, combined with the public narrative periodically describing the area as a dangerous place, producing linear rhythms of territorial stigma (D., journalist, February 21, 2024; see Wacquant et al., 2014).

As a consequence of these overlapping rhythms, in the evening and during the night, when buses and trains become less frequent and eventually stop running, "the area is like a desert" (C., resident, July 25, 2024).

> "I pass through there every evening at around midnight, usually on my scooter. There's really no one around at that time. It's an objectively distressing space." (D., journalist, July 21, 2024)

The large, almost empty public transport spaces create an atmosphere of unease. Still, although residents and people who work in the area describe the station as deserted at night, this is not the case. Around a hundred people are present fairly regularly, sleeping in some recess or dark corner where they have created a makeshift shelter: the homeless inhabit the area. Their presence is visible, but the very fact that the area is described as a "desert" epitomizes the racism embedded in this narrative, which invisibilizes marginalities and makes them somehow less-than-human (on the politics of visibility and invisibility, see, for example, Rancière, 2000).

During the day, this heterogeneous group of the poor, racialized and marginalized sometimes moves to other parts of the city to access services provided for them (see the next section), either generating other circular rhythms, or blending into the sinusoidal rhythms of the crowds passing through the station. At night, however, these people are the station's only inhabitants, thus contributing to the air of disquiet pervading the area, of which they are also the victims:

> "I slept here for two days, but it's an area to avoid because at night, around three o'clock, there's no one around—no police, nothing." (A., homeless migrant, June 15, 2024)

The recent, occasional use of Piazzale degli Alpini for public events (Fig. 5) disrupts the place's rhythms. Cordoning off the area with a gate has made it possible to hold paid events there, with a rich program of concerts, particularly during the summer nights. This attracts people to the site, at times when the area would otherwise be almost "deserted." However, this is an intermittent use, which adds a wave to the area's sinusoidal rhythm, without changing its dominant pattern:

> "This is still a place of passage and fast consumption; an elusive spot. The activities in Piazzale degli Alpini do not change this, as people participate in them and immediately return home. They do not make it into a place where people enjoy going for a walk." (A., municipal social worker, May 20, 2024)

4.3. Rhythms III: The rhythms of endurance of marginalized and homeless people

Bergamo station is a place where marginalized individuals (such as homeless people and drug addicts) and petty criminality (such as drug dealing and pickpocketing) are concentrated. Analysis of the local press suggests that this has been true since the 1990 s at least (Nisoli, 1991; Falchetti, 1999a, 1999b; Carrara, 1999). And indeed, according to people who have frequented the area for decades, the situation was even worse in the past:

> "In the late 1990 s […] we used to pick up a body after an overdose death every two days; it was a much more dangerous situation than today." (D., journalist, July 21, 2024)

However, over the last two decades, public perceptions and the mass-media narrative have soured on the area as a result of changes in the ethnic composition of the marginal population, which is now mainly made up of migrant (particularly, black and sub-Saharan) people:

> "The type of people who frequent the area has changed profoundly. Paradoxically, they are less problematic. But they are foreigners, and this upsets the average resident of Bergamo much more than Italian drug addicts." (ibid.)

In addition, the number of marginalized people in the station area has increased each year. While there were only a few dozen in the 1990s, today there are, on average, between 100 and 150 (Coordinator of the Posto Caldo soup kitchen, April 16, 2024). According to our fieldwork, most are men; some are Italian, while many others are migrants with different legal statuses (mainly refugees and asylum seekers, as well as migrants with regular residence permits; a few are irregular migrants).[7] Each has their own profiles of hardship; their distinct problems. Some are chronically homeless who have lived here for several years, while others only stay for short periods while looking for better accommodation. Many are drug addicts or alcoholics, and some have serious mental health problems; almost all are unemployed. There is also a certain number of people who frequent the area just to take advantage of free social services, such as free meals offered by the Posto Caldo soup kitchen or medical services provided by Drop-in clinic,[8] and a few drug dealers who sell soft drugs primarily to students, as well as petty thieves (G., city councilor for security, October 28, 2024), as confirmed by our fieldwork.

Inspired by Simone's (2019) work on *improvised life*, we find "rhythms of endurance" generated by inhabiting the margins and interstices of the Bergamo station. For marginalized peoples living under the pressure of uncertainty and constraints, rhythm-making is part of a survival strategy, allowing livelihood-making through improvisation, relation, alliances, and the ability to be in the right place at the right time (Simone, 2019; Tran & Yip, 2020). Rhythms of endurance are collective productions, allowing for spaces of care at the margins of capitalist existence (Simone, 2019; DeVerteuil et al., 2022). At certain times, the margins of the train station become, for example, places of friendship and encounters.

> "I normally come here, the train station, during the weekend, especially on Saturdays. You know, weekend life. I usually come here and stay with friends, to see people. Exchange information. The station is a meeting point for most of the people." (I., migrant, February 18, 2025)

The ecosystem that has developed around the station relies not only on the essential services provided by formal structures, but also on the informal relationships and resources created collectively by marginalized individuals. One example is what is known among station users as

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[7] During the research period, the majority of migrants came from North and sub-Saharan Africa. However, their origins vary depending on the period and migration flows.

[8] The main services in the area for people experiencing severe marginalization are managed by organizations affiliated with Caritas, a Catholic Church pastoral group that promotes charitable and welfare activities. These services are located on the ground floor of a multilevel parking garage beside the bus station. There are a soup kitchen and a walk-in clinic. The soup kitchen, known as Posto Caldo, is open every evening from 7 p.m. to 9p.m. and also for lunch on Sundays from 11:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. On average, 120 free meals are distributed each shift (source: Report Servizio Esodo 2023, an unpublished report). The clinic (Drop-In) is open three mornings a week. It offers various medical services, carrying out tests (e.g., for HIV) and medical examinations, and distributing medicines and other materials such as sterile syringes. It also provides free breakfast for its users. In 2023, it assisted more than 400 different individuals (source: 2023 Annual Drop-In and Mobile Unit Review, unpublished report).

"Café Touba." Every afternoon, M., a 53-year-old Senegalese man who has been living in the area's reception facilities for three years, sits down near the bus station. He sits on a small carpet, turns on a small stereo and offers Touba coffee (a traditional Senegalese coffee-based drink) to passers-by in exchange for a small donation. This provides an opportunity for homeless people and migrants frequenting the station to socialize and exchange practical information (such as which public dormitories have beds available, which areas are safest to sleep in and whom to contact for specific issues), in a space not ruled by commercial considerations. It is a pivotal element of the rhythms of endurance at Bergamo station, an opportunity for care and improvised (but essential) relationships.

> "Café Touba serves as a meeting point not only for Senegalese but also for all foreigners. Most of them are employed, so they come here after work or on weekends. And homeless individuals pass whenever they are in the area. Occasionally, Italians visit as well. It's a place to exchange ideas and news—for instance, someone might have a job, while another is looking for one or for housing. As the café has become a social hub, many small opportunities have emerged. I know several young people who have secured jobs through this space. […] Additionally, it's a space where migrants talk and debate about socio-economic issues affecting them in the host country, Italy, as well as the social, political, and economic problems back home. You know, as migrants, staying informed about what's happening back home is important for various reasons". (M., migrant, August 25, 2025)

The intersection of the daily practices of marginalized individuals—their rhythms of endurance—is out of sync with the station's sinusoidal rhythms described in the previous section. Marginalized subjects inhabit space in ways that are basically disconnected from transport-related functions, to survive everyday life in the city: the stalls are used for sleeping, the corners for urinating, and the flower boxes for eating. These uses are notable for slowness rather than speed, and stasis rather than transit. As a homeless person explains,

> "I spend all my time here; I don't know where else to go. I know it's not a nice place, but you have to spend your day somewhere." (A., homeless migrant, March 3, 2025)

Rhythms of endurance thus incorporate dimensions of circularity and repetitiveness. People move between a limited number of spots, following the same routes day after day.

> "You get up at the station and come to the Patronato San Vincenzo headquarters for breakfast in the morning. Then you go to the Drop-In, where they also serve tea. Then you go to brother Andrea [Capuchin friars] for tea at half past ten, then to the friars' soup kitchen for lunch. Afterwards, you return to the Patronato, where you are given a food bag at half past four. Then, you go to Galgario for a snack. Finally, you go to the station in the evening to eat." (L., social worker, November 5, 2024)[9]

Still, atop this circularity, there is much improvisation (see Simone, 2019) to cope with everyday survival, making rhythms choppier and hard to parse. And, in any case, rhythms of endurance are to a large extent dictated by factors that are unrelated to how transport functions: the opening of the Drop-In clinic in the morning or of Posto Caldo in the evening, police checks during the day, potential evictions by the

Prefecture early in the morning, and occasional fights late at night.

For the middle class, grasping and interpreting rhythms of endurance is complicated, as their everyday lives are attuned to different rhythms. Ultimately, this fuels feelings and narratives of stigmatization, alienation, incomprehension, and rejection. According to a resident:

> "What are those people doing here all day? Nothing. They don't work; they just hang around. Hang around. They deal drugs, drink, and take drugs. But why are they here at the station?" (M., resident, May 12, 2025)

For residents whose lives follow different urban rhythms, marginalized people's everyday practices for survival are invisible or meaningless, reinforcing the idea that they are doing "nothing" and, consequently, have to resort to illegal or immoral means just to get by. In this framework, security issues overlap with those of mere urban decorum in public discourse: the "disturbance" caused by a homeless person sleeping on a bench is equated to safety problems (Cappelluzzo, 2024). The main issue associated with the station area has thus long been insecurity, as demonstrated by the abundance of press articles emphasizing problems such as drug dealing, violence, assault, and theft. Petty theft often occurs in the area—targeting not only tourists and students, but also the homeless; the same applies to small-scale drug dealing. But the area around Bergamo station is certainly not where the most serious crimes take place, such as large-scale drug dealing or violent incidents (serious violence is relatively rare and almost always linked to fights between marginalized individuals who live and struggle to survive in the area) (G., city councilor for security, October 28, 2024).

Even homeless people clearly perceive a sense of distance from the rest of the population and feel trapped in circular rhythms of endurance and survival, where others have more precise trajectories and regular, sinusoidal rhythms, passing by and walking away:

> "I always see strange people around me here. I always see normal people passing through the station to catch a plane or train." (A., homeless migrant, June 10, 2024)

5. Concluding remarks: turning a rhythmic gaze on divides

Urban social divides are on display in the Bergamo station area, a geographical concentration of city users, commuters, volunteers, the homeless, and marginalized people, as well as capital, projects, investments, services and more. This convergence of flows, logics and interests generates a multitude of rhythms which overlap in the same urban space. In this paper, we focused on three specific categories of rhythm: the crescendo of urban development, the sinusoidal rhythms of commuting, and marginalized people's rhythms of endurance. Combining and overlapping, these rhythms yield a temporal reading of social clashes, emphasizing the violence of stigmatization, exclusion, policing—and, more generally, conflicts over the use of space and practices of sociality, friendship, and solidarity. This complex story is suffused with the logics of capitalist urban development and boosterism—where the thinnest of lines separates regeneration from gentrification, urban decor from social marginalization, security from revanchism—and their specific rhythms shape the temporal architecture of the station. The rhythms of urban regeneration have risen in a crescendo over the years, along a path that has entailed improving public transport and connections between different mobility modes, as well as integrating the station area with the city center both functionally and in terms of appearance. The sinusoidal rhythms of commuters and travelers, defined by precise, sharp and well-planned regular timing, merge with the more infrequent rhythms of spectacles and events, which occasionally cluster visitors and bring a different life and flavor to the area during the night. Against the basso continuo of these perfectly synchronized rhythms, there are other rhythms that jar: those of homeless people and other marginalized subjects who experience the area as part of a mixture of circular daily rhythms and improvisation. They are thus

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[9] The *Patronato San Vincenzo* is located on the other side of the railway tracks, not far from the station. It is a key organization in Bergamo's third sector and is linked to Caritas. For decades, it has supported people experiencing hardship and marginalization, including homeless people, drug addicts, refugees, and asylum seekers. The *Galgario* is a Caritas-managed dormitory for men in situations of severe marginalization. It is located just over a kilometer from the station.

out of phase with the station's "normal" (i.e., dominant) uses and temporally asynchronous with the other rhythms. For example, homeless people populate the space particularly during the night, when the other rhythms are essentially absent (or at very low peak). Curiously, however, mainstream discourses describe the area as a "desert" at night.

These rhythms unfold in relation to others that have not been analyzed in depth here, sustaining the power geometries at the basis of the station's temporal architecture, as in the case of the rhythms of police patrolling the area, philanthropic services, or waste collection. Our analysis reveals that conflicts mainly arise when these rhythms overlap and create temporal clashes, or arrhythmias. At the point of contact between the rhythms of endurance and the station's dominant rhythms (crescendo and sinusoidal)—commuting, consumption, development—temporal marginalization and temporal stigma take shape. The fact that the homeless people are described as "wasting time" and "having nothing to do over the day" emphasizes the key role of a relational understanding of time, space, and rhythms in constructing the idea of urban marginality. Being homeless and "doing nothing" in public space during the day (implicitly: nothing productive according to mainstream attitudes and rhythms of production and consumption) or using space in "improper" ways (e.g., using a bench to sleep) and times (e.g., during the night) is a culpable condition, one that clashes with and disrupts the supposedly "proper" rhythms of that place, including the rhythms of redevelopment and modernization which call for hypermobility, speed, productivity, the visibility of the spectacle of urban development, and the parallel invisibility of poverty and marginality.

In other words, the rhythms of public transport and travelers are harmoniously synchronized with those of urban development. The progressive regeneration of the station area, in fact, enhanced mobility and public transport, and transformed the area to allow the rhythms of the desired and "legitimate" travelers (tourists, students, commuters, workers, and businesspeople) to reach their fullest expression. In this context, marginalized individuals are out of step. The spatiality and temporality of their daily survival routines—often based on repetitiveness, slowness, and unpredictable improvisation—are considered alien, undesirable and at odds with the spatial–temporal vision of that area advanced by public narratives and policies; even more, they are seen as an obstacle to the regular development of other rhythms and must thus be removed. Not by chance, evictions of the homeless population are often described as actions that enable the area to return to its rightful rhythmic functions: "Restoring the area to a state of decorum, full functionality and safety was necessary to ensure its full usability by students, commuters and citizens," declared Bergamo's councilor for security, for example (Eco di Bergamo, 2025).

In the public eye and according to policymakers, the station area must be the gateway to the city, as the name of the urban regeneration project—Porta Sud, "southern gate"—suggests: a place of efficiency, development, and modernity that introduces a city whose image is defined by these keywords. Anyone who is not in sync with the rhythms of this vision is therefore not welcome. It is no coincidence that the Porta Sud project has nothing to say about the future of the social services currently located at the station, such as Posto Caldo and Drop-in (F., social worker, April 16, 2024; R., director of charity foundation, September 30, 2024), nor—of course—of the homeless people who live there. In addition, the sole purpose of all security, decorum and policing measures is to relocate and disperse homeless people, even though this is a highly problematic choice that complicates and undermines the social services' efforts. Interestingly, action is taken to prevent homeless people's rhythms of endurance, shaping a politics of anti-rhythmicity. For instance, police checks take place at night, preventing the homeless from sleeping, and evictions are carried out in the early morning, when the homeless are starting their circular daily rhythmic routine. This, to a degree, makes it challenging to access morning services, such as the free breakfast provided by Drop-In. These interventions disrupt the rhythms of endurance, making marginalized people uncomfortable and pushing them to leave the area in search of somewhere they can rebuild their daily routine without interruption.

This rhythmical reading of urban marginality ultimately seeks to contribute to the literature exploring the politicization of time, and how power is also maintained and enforced through rhythms and temporal structures (Sharma, 2014). In line with Sharma's argument, our analysis shows the complexity of how time is experienced differently across groups in the same space. This gives rise to multiple temporalities that go beyond the classic fast-slow binary; they can be better understood through rhythmanalysis, which highlights their relational and uneven nature. Furthermore, exploring Bergamo station reveals the pivotal role of institutions in driving a process of selective investment and disinvestment: "institutions derive and exert power through their investment and control of people's time. [...]. Together they compose a temporal order that normalizes people's experiences of time, including maintaining established lines of temporally experienced privilege and difference" (*ibid.*, pp. 18–19). Certain groups (such as commuters and tourists) have been at the center of the 20-year-long process of transforming the station area and upgrading transport facilities. As a result these people's rhythms have become increasingly synchronized with their needs, as well as with other rhythms (such as those of consumption, production, and entertainment) that are considered important in the public narrative and representation of the city. However, others have experienced disinvestment, demonstrating that time is an unequally distributed biopolitical resource. Unsurprisingly, policies targeting homeless people and other marginalized individuals seek to render the station inhospitable in terms not only of space, but also of time (through actions that disrupt their circular rhythm), in a process of temporal dispossession that leads to exhaustion. As noted above, the Porta Sud redevelopment project is emblematic of this disinvestment, completely excluding marginalized individuals from consideration and removing fundamental elements such as the Posto Caldo and Drop-in services that structure their daily routines. Similarly, the Local Timetable Plan (PTO) only considers the disturbance the Porta Sud project causes to commuters and other transport users at the station; it completely overlooks the fact that hundreds of homeless people will lose their living spaces and have their daily rhythms disrupted as a result of the redevelopment.

In this framework, our analysis enables us to challenge the essentialism inherent in traditional understandings of marginality, shifting the focus from well-defined identitarian categories (the homeless, the immigrant, the unemployed) to categories of movement and rhythm. In a rhythmical reading, the conditions of stigma and marginality are defined by "doing nothing" during the day, "being there" at night, "not catching the train" like most "proper" people, and being in general "arhythmical" in the eyes of hegemonic understandings of place. There is significant theoretical potential in this analysis of marginalities, stressing practices over categories, movement over status, the processes of "making the margins" over the condition of "being marginal" in urban space, in a way that is coherent with intersectional understandings of marginality (Simone, 2019; Tran & Yip, 2020; DeVerteuil et al., 2022; Sharma, 2014). Moreover, it accounts for the specificity of particular settings in producing a rhythmical framework for marginalization, constructing an analysis that relates the rhythmic agency of all the elements—both human and non-human—that constitute a place, and tracing the multiplicity of relations and assemblages of people with objects, forces, atmospheres, and other beings. Embracing a rhythmical reading also opens further perspectives on urban or social policies, raising a number of questions: Is a just policy one that seeks to produce a homogeneous, synchronous rhythm? One that separates rhythms? One that accommodates polyrhythmicity?

Lastly, this paper contributes to the debates on the social geographies of train stations. As discussed at the beginning of the paper, train stations are laboratories for scrutinizing contrasting trends and transformations in cities, often at the crossroads between development paradigms, regeneration policies and narratives, security and privatization initiatives and—crucially for our aims here—spaces of life on the margins. The rhythmic specificity of railway stations—based on the

overlap between two kinds of rhythms that have always vibrated through these places: the linear rhythms of modernity and development, and the sinusoidal rhythms of scheduled departures and arrivals—is usually peripheral in geographical analyses of such spaces. However, looking at these rhythms enriches our understanding of railway stations by providing a layered and dynamic perspective on their interaction with the policies, practices and narratives of development and redevelopment. As regeneration, securitization, and privatization affect large swaths of contemporary cities, the forms they take in stations are forged by these rhythmic specificities—and the contrast with the rhythms of marginal populations who, despite all difficulties, continue to try to make the stations their living space.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Francesco Chiodelli: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Alberto Vanolo:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Senyo Dotsey:** Methodology, Investigation, Data curation.

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