Introduction

1. This book is a contribution to the social conversation on cities and their future.

The book revives an idea that has been circulating for some time, and that in recent years has received greater attention: that of a city of proximity, in which everything that people need for daily life is just a few minutes away by foot from where they live. This is also a city in which functional proximity corresponds to relational proximity, thanks to which people have more opportunities to see each other, support each other, take care of both each other and the environment, and collaborate to reach goals together. Ultimately, it is a city constructed on the life of its citizens, and on an idea of *livable proximity* in which people can find everything they need to live, and to do so together with others.

This city of proximity, or the "15-minute city" as it is now often called, proposes a clear and simple vision of the direction to be taken, giving strength to the idea. But implementing this vision requires a deep cultural change and strong political will: it is necessary to definitively break with a vision of a city divided into specialized parts, and as a consequence, to carry out a radical reorganization of existing infrastructure and forms of governance. Above all, it requires combatting the inequalities that characterize society, and thus contemporary cities as well. The advantage of proximity cannot merely be the prerogative of some privileged neighborhoods, but must extend to the entire city. It must be a right for all citizens.

The underlying issue posed by the book is this: can we construct the contemporary city starting from a new idea of proximity? The response that the book gives is yes, it can be done. And, I add, the social innovations of the last twenty years give us a concrete indication of how to do so; or at least where to start.

Recent history shows us that, in numerous ways and on various themes, these innovations can generate forms of community and proximity that go in the direction indicated here: communities linked to things to do together and places in which to do them; open and dynamic systems of proximity in which these initiatives are situated, that at the same time collaborate for regeneration of the communities; hybrid proximities, whose existence largely depends on the digital instruments at their disposal.

On the other hand, if these initiatives give concrete form to the proposal of the city of proximity, the relationship between social innovation and proximity could also be read in the opposite direction: the city of proximity could become the common horizon for the many different types of experimentation that have taken place in recent years. Thus, it could give cities more strength and more possibilities to spread.

2. The theme of cities of proximity, in its essence, is not new: it can be observed that there are cities, or more often parts of cities, that already approach this condition (having inherited neighborhoods from the pre-modern past in which the limits of public transportation meant that all daily life had to be based on proximity). Moreover, this theme has returned to circulation with different names and, driven by environmental motivations (reduction of traffic, and thus of pollution) and social motivations (the fight against solitude and for quality of life), some cities have launched projects and programs based on this idea.

Given this, it is urgent today to revive the discussion of the theme in light of what has happened in the last twenty years, and is happening today. The backdrop is the growing evidence of the interaction between environmental crisis, with the need to question the ways and times in which this crisis must be addressed, and the social crisis given by the increase of the distance between those who accumulate wealth and those who have less and less, with the need to regenerate the urban fabric.

In this context of difficulty the pandemic then exploded, with all of the dramatic implications we are experiencing. Even though we are not yet able to predict the full consequences of this event, the book shows some aspects that are already sufficiently clear. We can in fact see that everywhere, the pandemic has reignited the discussion on the future of cities and more in general on the physical and territorial dimensions of sociotechnical systems. And that is not all. It is certain that the pan-

demic has produced changes in behavior on a scale and of a depth that would have been unimaginable beforehand. One of the most evident is the movement of the center of gravity of productive activities and consumption towards the digital dimension, with growing portions of work, studies, and entertainment online, and with all of the relevant implications in terms of daily mobility, social relations, and the use of cities and their services.

Faced with these phenomena, the idea of the city of proximity seems to be extraordinarily relevant today: it can in fact be a positive and workable guideline for environmental and social challenges, as they had been posed well before the pandemic. But it could also be the best proposal for the post-pandemic society, and in particular to oppose the emerging city of "everything at/from home": de facto a non-city of self-confined individuals in isolation in their homes, who for reasons of convenience, could continue to live this way even when it is no longer an obligation. Ultimately, the city of proximity, in which everything is close by, can be the perspective that allows for combatting this dystopian, but unfortunately very powerful and already widely operational condition of everything at/from home.

3. Therefore, the issue is not new: much has already been said and many are discussing it. What does this book add to the debate? Its minimum goal is to contribute to articulating and examining the theme of proximity in depth, showing how it touches various aspects and different dimensions of cities and the experience of citizens within them. Set against this basic motivation, there are then more ambitious aims, which can be summarized in three points.

The first concerns the *construction of communities*. Many authors and writings converge on the idea that, given the multiple crises we are facing, it is necessary to re-establish the social fabric and (re)construct communities.

But once this goal has been set, the next step is usually missing, which is both simple to state but difficult to achieve: how do we (re)construct a community? And when a community already exists, how do we help it regenerate itself and last in time? The book tries to give a response, which briefly, is as follows: a community cannot be designed because it is a social form that emerges from multiple events. What can be done is to create a suitable environment, and if necessary, produce stimulus that

generates encounters and launches conversations from which new communities can emerge. Here the question of proximity comes into play: experience shows that communities need an environment in which there is appropriate proximity; that is, a system of proximity that is sufficiently diversified and balanced between its functional and relational components. Certainly, there is no guarantee that, given these conditions, communities will truly be formed. But we can say with the same level of certainty that these favorable conditions, that we call the city of proximity, make the birth and life of new communities more likely. So returning to the initial question, in concrete terms, these favorable conditions are what must be designed.

The second point is linked to the first one and to how to design a city of proximity focusing on the *relationship between cities, proximity, and care.* Recently, there has been much discussion about care, intended as care work and also other modes of interaction between human beings, and in general, between human beings and everything that makes up the network of life. There has been much discussion on how and why the city of services, as it has existed until now, is a careless city; a city in which the inhabitants are no longer seen as citizens capable of care, but only as (potential) users and clients of services. The book considers these discussions and advances the hypothesis that to regenerate a city capable of care, it is necessary to develop new communities; and that to do so, a new generation of services is *also* necessary: collaborative services, distributed throughout the local territory, that can represent a stimulus and supporting infrastructure for these new communities. The observation of social innovation tells us that this can be done by operating simultaneously on multiple levels: bringing services and activities close to citizens (*localization*), favoring the construction of communities (*socialization*); extending the network of actors involved (*inclusion*); involving actors initially not considered (*diversification*); and horizontally connecting different areas of intervention (*coordination*).

The third point concerns *the relationship between the physical and digital dimensions of proximity.* For some time now there has been discussion of the increasingly hybrid, physical-digital character of the space in which we act and how the great social experiment imposed by the pandemic has accelerated this process. The book assumes that today we cannot speak of proximity, community, and care without taking this factor into account. Proximity, community, and care, despite being rooted in the physical

world, have an increasingly important digital component, and could no longer exist without it. On the other hand, this digital component, that today is largely represented by the different forms of platforms, is not neutral. Each platform supports activities but has characteristics that, de facto, orient the activities that it makes possible. This is why platforms must be designed with a clear idea of the type of activity intended to be promoted and supported, and thus the social forms one wishes to see emerge. These themes are further examined in the essay by Ivana Pais that concludes the book.

4. The city is a complex organism. To speak of it we must adopt different points of view, including views showing it from above, as a whole, and a view from the inside. The book adopts the second of these, which is the view of the citizens. This perspective from the inside is also indispensable if we truly want to speak of proximity and care.

On the other hand, since everything that we can say on these questions depends on the context to which we refer, to speak about the subject I had to make some choices. And I chose cases situated in the contexts I knew the best, principally Milan and Barcelona. In both of these cities much has been done on the theme discussed here. But I certainly could have found good examples elsewhere as well: from Turin to Copenhagen, to remain within the classic typology of European cities; or from New York to Shanghai or Seoul, to open up to other urban forms and histories; or I could have spoken of the density and proximity of the favelas in Rio or the slums of Nairobi. Each city would have had its own story to tell, but I would not have had enough direct experiences to do this, so I leave this task to others.

However, once the inevitable specificity of each case has been recognized, along with the limits of what it can tell others in other contexts, I believe that, if we know how to recognize and interpret them, each case has something to teach everyone, applicable to every context. Referring to European cities to discuss proximity can certainly be seen as the easiest choice: if compared with cities with high vertical density (cities of skyscrapers) or those with low density (cities of suburbs) or informal cities (cities of slums and favelas), European cities seem intrinsically closer to the proposal of a city of proximity. Thus focusing on them as cases of reference means making the easiest choice. This is true. If, however, it is necessary to break a consolidated cultural and operational model such

as that of the city of distances, and at the same time divert the tendency underway towards non-cities of everything at/from home, this seems to be the most reasonable choice: if the task is difficult, then it is useful to start from a place that is (relatively) easy. Moreover, while it is true that in the cities to which we refer there are (still) some neighborhoods rich with activities and services of proximity, this quality has been under attack for years, and it is necessary to do something to invert the processes of social desertification underway and trigger the evolution of what remains of pre-modern proximity, that still characterizes them, towards contemporary forms of proximity. That is not all: while it is true that in some historical neighborhoods of these cities the system of proximity is sufficiently diversified and relational, there are others in which this is not the case at all. In these same cities, the challenge is thus to extend the idea of the city of proximity to the entire urban territory, including the parts in which this appears most difficult.

5. The book is divided into four chapters, plus a substantial final essay by Ivana Pais.

The first chapter introduces the other three, discussing the theme of proximity, considering its different meanings and the dynamics of its current evolution. The second speaks of the city and its evolution considering it from the standpoint of the forms of proximity that can be found in it: the city as a mixture of systems of proximity. Three scenarios are introduced: the *city of distances*, as a scenario of the cities that the previous century produced and passed down to us, and two new scenarios that are currently competing, that of the *city of everything at/from home*, and that of the *city of proximity*. The third chapter discusses the relationship between cities, proximity, and care, considering the latter as a form of interaction – between people and between people and the world – on which the construction of cities of proximity should be based. The book assumes that what is called the city of services has become the city without care, and attributes this result to how services themselves have been conceived and carried out. Starting from this point, it indicates two complementary strategies to contribute to constructing the city of proximity as a city of care. The fourth chapter zooms in on the heart of all of the previous proposals, i.e. if and how it is possible to design new communities that can act as the basis for all possible cities of proximity and care. The close observation of two cases allows for recognizing the weave of

designs, of different natures and scales, of which these communities consist and on which they feed to last over time. Starting from those cases, the book discusses in more general terms the implications in terms of design strategies.

The concluding essay by Ivana Pais introduces and discusses the theme of digital platforms for cities, showing their complex nature, evolution in time, and the contribution that, if correctly designed, they could make to the city of proximity.

6. The contents of this book are the results of many stories that came together before and during the writing process: that of the author and the experiences on the theme of design for city-making in recent years in many cities of the world, and in particular, in Barcelona and Milan; that of Ivana Pais, with whom the idea for the book was born during a conversation in a bar in October 2020; that of Giordana Ferri, with whom I discussed the theme of living proximity and with whom, in November 2020, I organized an initiative of the same name; that of Davide Fassi, who very generously introduced me to one of the cases that was most useful to bring the ideas proposed in this book into focus; those of Lekshmy Parameswaran and Julia Benini, with whom we organized an event on communities of care; and those of Hilary Cottam and Lluis Torrens, who helped fill it with content. Lastly, there is the encounter with Albert Fuster, Roger Paez, and many other colleagues at Elisava, with whom I worked for three years in Barcelona on the issue of design for cities.

A book is also its cover image, which in this case came from a talk with my son Matteo, who gave us the gift of a contemporary interpretation of the *Allegory of Good Government*: the great fresco in the *Palazzo Pubblico* of Siena in which, seven hundred years ago, Ambrogio Lorenzetti depicted much of which should be done today, to which this book intends to contribute.

Finally, a book is a book. It is a product, the result of the work of a group of people who decide to invest in an idea and help it become an actual book. In this regard I thank Alessia Uslenghi, Cinzia Facchi and Cristina Casati of Egea for the trust, flexibility, and professional contribution they made to the success of this project.