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Metropoliz. Roma communities outside camps: new geographies of threshold spaces in Rome

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In the last ten years the city of Rome has seen many cases of evictions and persecutions of Roma people, due to the xenophobic policies and to the fact that the strategies of informal settlements have not been recognized yet. Those strategies are now known in all peripheries in the south of the world, where the informal settlements are not destroyed, but instead they are studied as cases of social organizations and physical adaptation of specific spaces where the intent of the inhabitants is to find better life conditions. In Italy, a public debate about the inclusion of Roma people in society is completely lacking, while in other European countries is an important issue, as the marginalized areas of the cities and poverty are growing quickly. On the other hand, the importance of planning having in mind an Intercultural City (Città Meticcias) is not yet recognized in Italy, thereby the idea of different cultural groups of Roma people living together with other migrant cultures and Italian families is far away from the governments aims.

Rome. The migrants, the homeless and the Right to the City.

In Rome the movements fighting for housing have always been an important political force. During the sixties and seventies in the absence of public policies, these movements have had the capacity of involving public opinion and national politics up to the point of arriving at the legalization of the suburbs of illegal cities and of realizing the large complexes of council houses of the public city. Later on, in the nineties, once the bulk of the housing problem was resolved, their role declined drastically, but a small portion of squatting has remained active as an instrument for fighting about the topics of land speculation and land tenure, against evictions and high real estate rents. The phenomenon has started off again with an unexpected quantitative and qualitative growth above all in the last decade and above all, thanks to the new waves of migration¹. For many foreigners the private market is, indeed, completely inaccessible and the public alternatives are absolutely incapable of coping with the new emergency. And so, due to the generalized, institutional delay the occupation of abandoned buildings has become the only reality capable of giving an answer to the speed of the phenomena taking place. In a crescendo of political and urban awareness, the struggle for housing has turned into a more general struggle for living and for the *right to the city* as a common benefit². From 2000 to 2005 in Rome, 1700 council houses were allocated; in the same period all the movements in the struggle for housing accommodated more than 2000 families³. At present about fifty-five buildings are occupied by an estimated population of 2500 families that is about 6000 people. And the most interesting fact is that 70% of this population is foreign.

Within the squatting there are not only houses but also important services that the Municipality is incapable to offer: counters for housing emergencies, Law Offices, elementary schools, after-school for child squatters and Italian classes for parents, recreation centres, places for musical activities, communal kitchens, popular pubs, bars, popular gyms, five-a-side football fields. This offer of services is also directed towards the exterior and has therefore the fundamental role of legitimizing the squatting and constructing networks and relationships with the surrounding territories. With a metaphor this constellation of occupied enclaves can be seen as lots of drops of oil in a large bowl of water. Portions of fenced in areas, withheld from the governance and from the laws that apply on all sides and that defend their own different nature, don't mix with water. In these parts of the city other laws prevail or rather internal regulations and every important decision is discussed and made at the management meeting. These, and others are in contact through a network, gathering in turn at other meetings, under various political acronyms often in contrast with each other, but nevertheless being part of a more general political force – the movements struggling for housing – capable of being united during its most important public demonstrations and of showing solidarity and support in the case of evictions or outside intimidations.

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- 1 In Rome on the 1st of January 2011 the foreign population was 345.747 people, 12 % of the population, see: <http://www.caritasroma.it/2011/12/osservatorio-romano-sulle-migrazioni/>. On these themes apart from the large amount of information supplied by the annual reports of the Caritas of Rome, Osservatorio Romano on Migration, Edizioni Idos, also see: Giorgio Piccinato (edited by), *La città eventuale*, Quodlibet, Macerata 2004 and Giovanni Attili, *La città dei migranti. Storie di vita e Pianificazione Urbana*, Jaca Book, Milan 2008.
 - 2 The Department of Urban Studies of the Università Roma Tre has carried out several researches on these themes. See: Giovanni Caudo, *Case di carta: la "nuova" questione abitativa*, in *l'Unità* (in two parts) 24 and 27 dicembre 2005; AA.VV, *Modello Roma. L'ambigua modernità*, Odradek, Rome 2007; Marco Cremaschi (edited by), *Tracce di quartieri. Il legame sociale nella città che cambia*, Franco Angeli, Milan 2008; Sonia Masiello, *Roma periSferica. La città, le periferie, gli immigrati, la scuola*, Franco Angeli, Milan 2009.
 - 3 Details were given to the authors by the Architect Sofia Sebastianelli, member of Action and author of the PhD Thesis "*Abitare la Comunità*", under the guidance of Prof. Giovanni Caudo. See. Sofia Sebastianelli, *Le occupazioni a scopo abitativo. Pratica quotidiana del diritto all'abitare.*" *lo Squaderno*" n° 14, December 2009 | *Protests and Riots* / pp 47-49. <http://www.professionaldreamers.net/images/losquaderno/losquaderno14.pdf>.



These micro-cities contain all the necessary skills for self-transformation: not only plumbers, electricians, brick-layers, welders, cooks, artists, but also lawyers, architects, translators, journalists. And when one of the skills are missing, the wider network can be employed. The training of the group of squatters is an important moment and it is a phase that can last even several months. It involves a long series of sessions during which the internal rules, risks, the successes obtained by other squatters and the political meaning that an occupation stands for, are explained, but more than political awareness it is the reasons and the attitudes for the choice of a community life that are above all evaluated. In fact once the space has been occupied there will be many moments when mutual respect and strong internal solidarity will be indispensable. The areas will have to be divided, in a way so that large families will be favored, the aged will be allocated areas in places that are more easily accessible, while young people and single-family households will be on the higher floors, living at times in cohabitation. The recognition of differences and the interest in intercultural exchange intended as enrichment coming from the evolutionary process between two or more different cultures, in synergy but not in symbiosis, then becomes important. Thus leading to a reciprocal approach and the will to modify one's personal habits and convictions, not simply tolerating differences, but making a common heritage of them. There's no doubt that from this point of view these acts of appropriation are an extremely important laboratory for intercultural cohabitation and that in this way new styles of living are experimented in an innovative form.

One other important topic that squat are giving answers to is the discrimination and racial laws. At present in Rome the right to the city is above all a battle fought by immigrants, it's thanks to them that places abandoned are coming to life once again, that squares are being transformed with new uses and actions. We want to focus on one very particular squat, Metropoliz, an abandoned industry that host also Roma people, the more discriminate population in Italy and Europe nowadays.

Metropoliz. Roma communities inside squats

Metropoliz is a an occupied ex-factory, but first of all is a symbolic place of the battle for the all-encompassing mixed-race style of living of the Roma people with the Italians and the immigrants coming from Africa, South America and from Eastern Europe. The result is a space dense, with 200 people and many contradictions in which the most important themes of the urban *counter-urbanism* are condensed: recycling and self-development of abandoned buildings as an alternative to the use of land, the battle against rent with proposals of public acquisition, the condemnation of the policies for creating ghettos for the Roma people regularly discriminated in all of Europe⁴.

The story of the Roma community of Metropoliz, is an interesting example of how social movements, local associations, university, artists and other social actors, can support and collaborate together in order to find alternative solutions beyond camps. The Roma population in Rome are allocated by government in camps, which are isolated spaces where Roma people are considered only users, without the right to decide their own way of living. Furthermore the complete lack of policies and government programs on real opportunities of improvement for Roma people, are drifting the public opinion in a real criminalization of this minority group in the everyday life (Stasolla; 2012).

Since Roma community arrived to Metropoliz in 2008, they worked hard in the building of their own houses in the abandoned spaces. Although the lack of government supports in building good quality houses, and the neighborhood negative reactions to the squat at the beginning, the families remain there and continue to work in improving the whole building, and towards the creation of a plural and inclusive city. Until this moment the community used to live in the "Canalone di Centocelle", a shantytown of cardboard, without water and electricity, full of mices and mud in winter and without air in summer.

4 See Francesco Careri, Metropoliz. Stazione Rom-A, "Abitare" n° 503, 2010, pp. 94-101; Roberto De Angelis, La Metropoli(z) by Tiziana and Florin, in Federico Scarpelli and Angelo Romano (edited by), Voci della città. L'interpretazione dei territori urbani, Carocci, Rome 2011, pp.185-208; Camillo Boano, The Metropoliz Wall. The architectural dispositif as recalibrating agent, <http://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/dpublog/2011/11/28>.

When discussing about living conditions, the community developed a common idea about its future perspectives, three main problems were identified: irregular housing situation, lack of jobs and poor health conditions. The answers were articulated in four fundamental points: refusal of the actual condition, refusal of the “equipped gypsy camps”, recognition of a permanent and settled way of living and need to live in a house. The proposal of build houses inside Metropoliz could have been “legally” implemented, whether the law of 2007, which allows transforming the industrial abandoned industries in residential buildings, was taken on seriously by the city government, unfortunately no political party has the courage to do so.

Housing improvements and political organization

When Roma families arrived, there was nothing in the big hangar allocated for them and people started to call this area of the industry; “Roma people City”. The assignment of this area was strategic, on one hand, because they arrived later than the other families who occupied the industry, on the other because they needed a lot of space in order to work with their trucks and materials. Almost immediately all the families started to build their own houses using the materials they preferred. Each family could work on the way they want, but they could have the assistance of volunteer architects⁵ (UN Habitat; 2011). They have established rules in order to maintain the common space in-between the houses clean. However, the management of the coexistence and the common space had been a very complex process. For example, the spaces in which they accumulate recycling materials, in particular mattresses, to sell directly in a great quantity to wholesalers, created health problems as mices came to the mattresses. Many negotiated rules about spaces for work change one time and another the spatial organization, because many materials can’t remain in the occupation more than a day. As their activities were new for Rome occupation movements, used to have squats for housing or social activities, they forbid some of this spaces, and many Roma families were upset. In many countries, houses are designed with work spaces, as for informal settlements and marginal populations, informal work, requiring in particular recycling spaces were to make a stock of recycled things, are essential for their surviving economy.

The organization was really hard at the beginning because Roma families were very young and they didn’t speak well the language thus they were left at the margins at the General Meetings. As it is very common in Italy, neither in these contexts, nor in the political ones, the notions of collaborative planning or participatory tools, are present (Sclavi, Susskind 2011). Participatory planning or design of spaces with many different cultures needs at least translators who can explain to who don’t understand the language what’s going on. Many of the problems between Roma people and other cultures living at Metropoliz, were due to misunderstandings and lack of common languages. Nevertheless in some occasions Metropoliz has hosted quite innovative events of participatory planning with its communities, as for example in 2012 the workshop held by Thomas Laureyssens of the collective MAP-it, in the occasion of Babel-Festival of critical dwelling. Roma people were evicted from their area by government in the summer of 2012, at that time solidarity was the main issue, and although some Roma families had to left Metropoliz, some others were relocated in the area of the great factory as it was the original plan⁶. Nowadays many families are building once again their houses in the big factory, and since they couldn’t take almost anything from the old area, they have to start again from the beginning, nevertheless they continue to work hard in order to give a different future to their children.

5 In The UN Habitat programs of Slums Upgrading all over the world there are many community architects, which support the self-building programs, and they are fundamental in improving and securing the conditions in informal contest. In the case of Metropoliz the volunteer architects were Maria di Maggio and Andrea Valentini from Popica Onlus.

6 The architect Maria Di Maggio told us that the original plan was to solve the urgent problem of Roma community by finding a big place for the families, but soon after they started to gradually transfer them inside the factory. Interview, Francesca Broccia, June, 2011.



A new topography for the use of Squats

The most original thing of the Roma presence at Metropoliz, is that they constrain the squats to start thinking themselves not only as housing areas but also as productive zones. In order to understand how important it is to think the new uses of squats we are going to described here an ordinary day in a Roma family and how they use the squat spaces. The day starts very early in the morning, when the men of the community go to work (that usually consist of gathering) with the car, the bicycle or the trucks and they come back to the house in the afternoon or in the evening. In the morning the women accompany their child to school and they come back to the house to do the chores and help their husband for example by taken out copper from the electrical hollow in the outside area of the fabric. In the evening the women go to school to take their child, and when they come back, especially in winter, they look for their husband and prepare for the dinner. Men, which in the evening stay in the house, park their trucks in the inner areas in order to repair them, and sort the gathered material behind houses, making fires in some cases in order to burn the materials they are not going to sell. At night the people of the community usually meet in the common space in front of the houses where they set the fire if it is winter and they talk for a while. The children who come back from school are allowed by their parents to play in all the spaces of the factory -they are freer and more autonomous in comparison to the other children who live in the occupation. As a consequence many times the conflicts within the community of the fabric have been caused on one hand because of the fires they make, and on the other hand by Roma child who infringed the implicit agreement on the common space, and in some occasion have broken common things. We noticed many prejudices against Roma people from the other cultures, in particular from those who have been living in Italy for many years, that ended up reproducing the stereotypes on Roma people that the rest of population has.

At the beginning Roma families organized their space to “defend” themselves from the outside. They were divided from the rest of the fabric by a wall, in such a way they felt they were “protected”. However, the participation of families to the different activities organized in the fabric, as well as the permanent exploration of the whole building by children, made this border “mobile” depending on the relationships.

Nowadays the Roma community is facing a new important change, after the government evicted the hangar, many families were transferred into the main factory. Some of the Roma families that experienced this transfer told us that they are better.

My young daughters have her own space, and I hope they carry on their studies and don't want to get married as young as Roma women are used to do. After work it's better to relax in a private space. When we lived with the others it was really difficult to sleep because there were many noises. Now we take actively part to the general meetings, and my wife started to talk with our neighbors from Eritrea, Morocco and Peru.

New threshold spaces for Roma communities towards a liberating future

We can think of the city of thresholds as the always emergent work of such a collective art when combined with efforts to create a liberating future. An emancipated “public culture”, will hopefully create out of these thresholds towards otherness bonds of solidarity and common life (Stavrides; 2010).

There are still many questions about what kind of new social organization could rise from the mix of the old organization in informal settlements and those in these new multicultural condominium/ occupations in Rome.

In our researches in different occupations at Rome we observe many spatial changes along the years. In general at a first moment inhabitants considered the occupation under risk, like all the illegal squats in Italy, thus people inside didn't invest a lot of money in houses. Then as times went by, people started to believe they were going to remain there and thus houses started to get improved and common places to change, some were called accordingly to the predominant ethnic group around, for example at Metropoliz they call the common spaces Peru Square, or the Kasbah. On the other hand spaces were born from the interaction

with other actors, such as the university Laboratorio Arti Civiche⁷ who has organized research, educational and artistic activities, creating the playground for children, the Michelangelo Square, and the Italian Classroom with the inhabitants and students in architecture. Last but not least the inner Restaurant “Cucina Meticcia”, which became the meeting point and the social place in the occupation. The intention was to get involved, understand and above all raise awareness on the outside, cross the threshold and render accessible what seemed to be distant and impenetrable from the outside. Civic art, in the sense of an instrument, that is both educational and civic, has the important role of building bridges between the inside and the outside through mutual knowledge.

Aknowleging the paper by Muzzonigro and Boano, published in this issue of *Planum* – “*Dwell the threshold: encountering Otherness*”- envisaging spaces of threshold as an opportunity to build a plural and multifaceted urban culture out of new hybrid identities, the ex Fiorucci factory, could represent one of the new thresholds of the Roma people story. There is a new cultural movement that, together with other actors, tries to practice solutions to the marginal and precarious city (Balbo; 2012). One of the questions that came out from the experience of Metropoliz is how planning could support this movements on one hand in the inner dialogues to solve conflicts, and on the other hand in the dialogues with the city in order to create a tolerant and multicultural new urban society. By now Metropoliz is like a small neighborhood looking for its Multicultural identity.



Figure 1 | Metropoliz. Occupied ex-factory Fiorucci in via Prenestina 913, Rome. Photo by: [MISSVILUP-PO 2.0](#). The complete photo-portfolio of *Metropoliz* is published [online](#).

Further materials, regarding BABEL-Festival of critical dwelling, participatory planning 2012 are presented on the website of the collective [MAP-it](#)

7 Laboratorio Arti Civiche is a research group that produces actions and projects aimed at interacting creatively with citizens for a collective and shared transformation of the built-up environment. It is active in different areas of research such as urban planning, architecture, public art, urban anthropology and works in the area of the informal city and on themes of the housing emergency, the socio-spatial exclusion of the Roma people and of intercultural squatting. (www.articiviche.net)

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