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## **The Refugees Settlement in Florence: People Fleeing, the Search for a Roof**

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This paper does not claim to provide an exhaustive representation of the problem, but it rather would indicate some of the reading ideas of the dynamics following the squatting events of abandoned buildings in the Florentine area, making even more obvious the difference given to two conflictual phenomena: from one side, spontaneous forms of poor people's settlement in abandoned buildings where organised squatting represents a drastic form of appropriation in defence of housing right; it's not only a bottom-up practice of conflict and struggle, but it can also be read as an urban renewal project and social reconstruction process through solidarity and equality. On the other hand, the speculative processes of gentrification put in place through large cash flows, realizing huge profits thanks to foreign labour but reversing on the city the social costs of real estate speculation.



Figure 1 | Mural in the location wall's of Kulanka "Associazione di Mutuo Soccorso Abucar Moallim"

The Florentine event of refugees settlement and asylum seekers started several years ago, assuming characters of emergency since 2004, as when the agreements on citizens and goods circulation in the Schengen area entered into force, it was introduced the principle that asylum seekers must stay within the port state borders where their asylum application was submitted. This law generated an estimated flow of 20.000 people sent back to Italy from the Nordic countries of the European Community in addition of the usual coasts landings.

2004 April. A Somali boy kicked desperately a police car close to the main train station *Santa Maria Novella* in the hope that jail could provide him at least one bed and some food. Policemen didn't arrest him, but they gave him the address of the SMHR (*Struggle Movement for Housing Rights – Movimento di Lotta per la casa*). Since then started a long series of meetings where communication took place by arabic and english translations by movement volunteers. In this phase the first group of asylum seekers formed by 12 people was hosted in a classroom of the ex *ITI Caterina de' Medici in Viale Guidoni*, an old school squatted by Romanian, Albanian and Moroccan families.

In the following months the attendance increased so much that, in June 2004, 150 asylum seekers, including women and children, with supported by the SMHR, broke into the former convent *Sacro cuore di Gesù* wondering if it could be possible to give part of the conventual heritage in disuse to the dispossessed. But the complex was already sold to a private company intending to develop the unique Seven Stars Hotel in Florence and so the refugees were evicted after thirty days as the building permit was issued.

At the time of the eviction the municipal administration provided a shelter only for few women with children and two buses to transport the others 140 asylum seekers on the outskirts of the city, where in lack of others solutions, most of them took refuge in a school whose renovation was blocked for absence of funds. The occupation was tolerated as long as funding were found to complete the work and so, occupants were evicted again and conducted at the former Sanatorium Banti in the town of Vaglia, where they remained for some months under assistance by Civil Protection waiting that Territorial Commission assessed their asylum applications. After examination of the requests most of Somalis people got a *residence permit on humanitarian grounds* and in December 2004 they were convened by the social services Public offices to communicate them that their provisional accommodation was no more available. In fact, when they came back, they found the structure closed and inaccessible. In the following days the Somalis squatted Emma cottage donated to the Florence Municipality by Oiger Foundation and unused since 1996. In the same month about thirty Eritreans and Ethiopians squatted the former "*Casa del popolo*" *Yuri Gagarin* in the *San Frediano* district; the structure was unusable due to constructions in progress for its transformation in touristic mini-flats and so, after few days, refugees squatted others two buildings: one of them in *Corso dei Tintori* always in the *S. Frediano* district, and the other one in *Former Longinotti* area where, however, they were quickly evicted without other chances.

During the 2006 a housing program started for Somalis squatters of cottage *Emma*: Florence municipality got ministerial funds available to pay rents for ten private accommodations where all the 80 squatters were placed; funds lasted just one year, so, after been evicted refugees came back to contact again SMHR.

In these years, despite emergency for asylum seekers, the only official structures in Florence were *Villa Peragnoli*, with 45 beds places financed by the “*Villa Peragnoli*” SPRAR Project, and, active since April 2010 the multifunctional center P.A.C.I able to accommodate up to 130 refugees for a maximum period of 180 days. The rest of asylum seekers remaining in Florence, nearly three hundreds, hosted in squatted buildings by the *MSHR*: 180 people in the former ITI Caterina de’ Medici, 80 of which settled in the former CNR office in *via Delle tre Pietre* and then in *Istituto Tecnico in via Pergolesi* - where however, they have been evicted by the police few months later, others 35 refugees found hospitality for some years by the *Luzzari* squatters.

This series of evictions without providing alternative accommodation for these people brought subsequent reoccupation of other structures and increased pressure and overcrowding conditions in the previous occupations. In 2008, forty-seven people of Somali origin aged between 18 and 50 years, after the eviction of school in *Via Pergolesi*, settled themselves in the spaces below the overpass of *Cure*. The place was originally conceived as garages and then used as a warehouse of the former Children’s Hospital Meyer, decommissioned following the transfer of hospital complex.

The self-managed refurbishment proposal by the squatters took place during informal deals between municipality and occupiers. Refugees formed an ONLUS association with the aim to complete the activities shown in their proposal: realizing a self-managed hostel, a structure able to provide immaterial and material services aimed on social, housing and job inclusion through mutual aid and self-help actions. This project was focused on issues identified in collective discussion.

The municipal building was assigned for rent to the *Mutual Aid Association in memory of Abucar Moallim ONLUS* by a city council resolution in may 2009. Following this assignment building was officially handed over to the Association of former occupants to allow starting of activities planned in the “*Kulanka-project of a center for social integration of refugees and asylum seekers*”. Since September 2009 these are some of the project activities:

- Italian school
- Basic computer course
- Preparation of individual curriculum in European format and enrolment assistance to employment centres
- Socio-cultural activities (film screening documentaries and presentations of publications related to the problems of asylum seekers)
- Temporary accommodation service for n. 50 people
- Accompaniment at municipal offices for processing of paperwork (residence card registration, travel tickets renewal)

The starting of these activities in a completely self-organized and self-financed form has been possible only for active support brought by individuals and associations who are organizing various courses, professional training and social and intercultural initiatives.

Despite the ONLUS has required a contribution to Tuscany Region and to Florence Municipality to support these activities, the lack of funding from institutions remains the main uncertainty of project success relating to the need of money to pay utilities and rent. In January 2010 Association has required the definition of a free convention with the social security management of Florence Municipality to get at least a rent decrease. Without any reply.

The only available solution is the self-financing by volunteers and Somalis people, even if these resources are not even sufficient to pay utilities.

At the end of 2011, 50 Somali refugees were living in the structure in *Via Luca Giordano*, creating the *Kulanka* experience, 40 Eritrean were squatting in *Pratolino*, others 20 Ethiopian asylum seekers were living in another squatted pavilion of the *former Mayer Hospital* own by Municipality, from which they were soon be evicted.

In response to the next evictions, refugees and some associations and movements formed a tend camp in front of the *Fortezza da Basso* during the demonstration “Terra futura” looking for public opinion and institutional attention. After few days also local police evicted this camp for “public decorum reasons”.

130 refugees and asylum seekers squatted the former Tuscany Region offices in via Slataper sending the following appeal to the President of Region and City Mayor:

Appeal of refugees in via Slataper

To the City of Florence

To the Region of Tuscany

We are refugees and beneficiaries of international protection from 4 different countries: Liberia, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia. We are 94 people. We exist. We know that we suffer yet another eviction and for this, before seeing the police arrive, we ask you what you plan to do with us? How do we build a life every three months if we are evicted? We want to stay here till the institutions do not decide to talk with us in a serious way. We want to deal with institutions, even if they want this. The proposed solution cannot just be usual eviction. After all our protests, demonstrations and after evacuation of the camp, we ask to the City of Florence and the Tuscany Region to recognize our existence and our rights, discussing real solutions.

If you force us to evacuate again, we ask that our fingerprints are deleted from your file archive and our travel tickets and documents issued by you are re-grant, so we can finally leave your country. We are guests of Italian State and Land, and if they cannot accommodate everyone, even those in possession of the documents and residence permits, we want back our footprints, which are not cash dispensers full of money and earnings.

We are tired of the Italian playing with our lives.

We are tired of having to claim our rights: we need to live, to study, to work, to peace.

The Treaty of Dublin in 2003 obliges us to be here because it's the first country where we arrived. Since 2003 we have not seen meet one of our rights: a home, health care, education, and enough money to live.

Dublin Treaty has killed the hopes raised by Geneva Convention. We tried to go in other European countries, where treatment to refugees is very different because rights are guaranteed. The Italian state lies to other European countries on our condition in Italy, when questioned about the reasons for our escape.

What programs have the City and the Region to post eviction, what are the plans for people who live here, who have children, and risk to be homeless?

To understand problems of people, it's necessary to speak directly with those who deal every day.

For these reasons, we ask that the Tuscany Region and the City of Florence commit themselves to enter into negotiations with us to be open, transparent and serious.

Refugees of Via Slataper

At the end of 2012, it seems that the region of Tuscany is moving to find a solution similar to the one that Kulanka have realized for refugees in via Slataper. Meanwhile, for the last refugees arrived in Italy from Libya due to the last events, institutional projects are running out of funds and self-organized forms of mutual aid are taking place.

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