Self-Making the House, Struggling for the city

Squatting and Rome

Convegno Sisp

Milano 15-17 September 2016

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Abstract

In cities more and more affected by social exclusion and misery, actions from below, as the squatting of empty buildings and abandoned dwellings, are assuming renewed meaning and relevance. In the struggle for the house leaden on by contemporaneous housing right movements, squatting is not just a tool of actions among others but the core of a the movement aiming both at providing houses for dispossessed people and also at voicing the difficult housing conditions produced in the paradigm of ‘city for profit’ dominating the contemporaneous urban landscapes.

Focusing the attention on one of the long-lasting movement in the Italian capital city, the ‘Coordinamento cittadino di lotta per la casa’, this work wants to analyse the role played by the practice of squatting into the struggle for the house in Rome in the post-crisis period. Using qualitative and ethnographical approaches based on structured and semi-structured interviews, on the analysis of self-produced documents and on my direct participant observation in the movement, I will try to shed a light on the squat (a) in its social function, as a socio-spatial alternative territory rooted in the city and (b) in its political content, as an action challenging the embedding socio-spatial environment. In this double declinations, squatting appears as a practice that deals with the reformulation of housing conditions, and also voices the urgency to overturn the precariousness and to map an alternative, resistant city.

*keywords:* Squatting, Resistance, Housing Right Movements, City
Introduction

The practice of squatting has been defined as the action of ‘living in a dwelling without the consent of the owner’ (Pruijt: 2013a) or, underlining the shared dimension as ‘the illegal occupation of a place for housing or for its collective utilisation’ (Fillieule, Mathieu, Péchu: 2009: 524). Despite general definitions, the practice assumes different forms and meanings according to the type of buildings (or places) occupied, to the actors implied and to the resulting functions. Many theoretical designs have been developed in order to reduce the big variation the term sums up. From the typology of Pruijt (2003) to the two-tales classification of Bouillon passing through the two-logics of Péchu (2010), scholars tried to take care of the various experiences squatting can produce taking into account configuration of spaces, relations constructed inside or actors conducting them. Basically, squats have been inquired looking at their emergency conditions and paying attention at possible impacts on local policies and field (Martinez: 2013). However, even if squatting has been a widespread practice all over the Europe since 1970s (Martinez: 2013), in the last decades it saw a new increasing. This fact poses new challenges to the attempt to classify.

The new relevance this practice assumes seems to be so important to push some scholars to define last events as a new wave of squatting movement (Martinez: 2007, Pruijt: 2003). However, because of their being linked with the urban characteristics, the definition of the squat remains an empirical question to be investigated on a case-by-case basis (Andretta, Piazza, Subirat: 2015). What emerges, despite all the differences, is that all squatting activities have in common their being strongly related with the urban context. Indeed, some authors consider it as the favourite tool of action of new urban social movements (Castells: 1983). According to them, squatting can be considered as a more radical instrument employed by movements to deal with the re-appropriation of the process producing and reproducing conditions of urban life (Andretta, Piazza, Subirat: 2015). In any case, the diffusion of these activities testifies how cities are not just dimensions for exclusions but also sites new forms of political participation take place in (Sassen: 2012). If the metropolis is ‘normative constructed’ (Sassen: 2012), squatting let emerge the possibility for powerless social actors to design different paths and new territorial configurations. Then, at the stake of this practice there is not just local distribution of space and resources, but also the global opportunities to change the paradigm of ‘city for profit’ (Bayat: 2012) dominating local and global relations of power (Andretta, Piazza, Subirat: 2015).

Analysing urban context and squatting practice, a preliminary and usually shared raw distinction is made between squatting to satisfy housing conditions and squatting to develop
social activities. In the first case illegal occupations of buildings is leaden on by housing right movement in order to provide houses for weaker categories; in the second one it is the basis of the self-managed and self-organised social centres (Piazza: 2012, Mudu: 2014b). Even if in many cases the distance between the two types of squats are becoming narrow, I think they deserve two independent analyses. Leaving apart the self-managed CSOA, the present work will focus the attention on the analysis of squatting practices as performed by the housing right movements in the Italian capital city, Rome, in the post-crisis period.

Squatting leaden on by housing right movements can be read as a specific type of direct social action (Bosi, Zamponi: 2015), as an immediate solution to the precarious housing conditions produced by the crisis and the consequent austerity politics. In accord to this, squatting for housing activities can be looked as “forms of collective actions that aim at directly changing, by means of the very action itself, some specific aspects of society without being primarily oriented towards securing the mediation of public authorities or the interventions of other actors” (Bosi, Zamponi: 2015: 374). The residual role played by welfare policies, and housing ones in particulars (De Leone and La Forgia: 2007), pushes people to gather their resources and to provide by themselves to their difficulty of having access to the house. As boycotts, purchasing groups and alternative finance, also squatting could be considered a form of resilience (D’Alisa, Forno, Maurano: 2015; Cattaneo, Engels: 2015) in times of economical and social crisis.

However, squatting in the housing right movements seems to be more than a direct social action aiming at filling the vacuum leaved by institutions. The necessity of having an accommodation is what all squatters have in common (Martinez: 2013, Mudu: 2014a), the reason that –more than common identity or than a shared concept –collects people together in the struggle. If squatting considered as a direct action aiming at giving people what administration is not able to provide underlines a resilient connotation, squatting as the prerogative of housing movements, becoming the occasion to contrast a diffuse paradigm and for experiencing alternative life-styles (Mayer: 2013), let emerge a resistant attitude. As Mudu underlines “shanty towns and homelessness go together with various forms of resistance” (2014a): from illegal appropriations, squats became the transversal places of contestation (Smith: 2002) where resilience is converted in the resistance against the broader paradigm at the base of the contemporaneous cities.

In the present work I argue that another important distinction should be addressed in the analysis of squatting practice. By a side, this practice can be considered as an (a) action aiming at denouncing the unequal distribution of spaces and resources in urban areas
challenging the current socio-spatial configuration; by the other side squatting can be taken into account as an (b) alternative territory produced into the urban bounders and performing alternative socio-spatial contexts. I think that taking into account squatting in this double (a) political and (b) social connotation will add important perspectives in the inquiry of the role played by this practice in the contemporaneous cities.

Reflections and considerations of this paper refer to the post-crisis period and are moved by the in-depth inquiry on one of the long-lasting movement in the capital city: the ‘Coordinamento cittadino di lotta per la casa’. Born in 1988, when hundreds of people squatted 350 social housing apartments in the neighbourhood of San Basilio, in the north-east periphery of the city¹, this movement is one of the main actors in shaping the housing question (De Leone, La Forgia: 2007) in Rome and one of the main witnesses of housing challenges of yesterday and today. The paper will be driven by two main arguments. The first one takes into account squat as socio-spatial alternative territory inside the city and focuses the attention on the social practices and functions produced inside. In the second argument squatting is considered as an action voicing the socio-spatial configuration of the city and framing the housing matter as a political question. Even if distinguished, the two parts are considered dependent one to the other. Socio-spatial configuration of the surrounding urban environment results to be the condition that move the struggle and what movements aim at changing (Smith: 2002).

I argue that, framing the practice of squatting as a political action and as a social alternative territory, the current housing right movements emerge as the best candidates not just to put the roots for different housing conditions but also for mapping a broader alternative urban experience in alternative cities. The resistance expressed by the squatting practice has the potentiality to become the language through which demanding and practicing a renewed ‘right to the city’ (Lefebvre: 1970 and 1972; Harvey: 2012).

**Research design and methodology**

Descriptions and considerations at the base of this paper come from a broader research on housing right movements in Rome. The work aims at open the floor for new perspectives in the analysis of the relationship between urban dimension and conflicts produced around the house. Squatting is analysed as a practice that is both an action and a territory. In both the two

¹ The apartments were vacant because local administration did not draw up the waiting list with the names of recipients.
connotations, the socio-spatial configuration plays an important role being at the same time the reason that let movements exist and also what movements deal with (Piazza: 2013). Looking at squatting as an action emerges the political meaning of the struggle: recovering abandoned places and using them out of the profit-oriented logic, activists and militants show up rejections of the capitalistic distribution of social-spatial resources and denounce the political responsibility and the high discomfort that institutions had produced around the house. Rather, analysing squat as an alternative territory became clear the social function they have legitimating house not as merchandise but as a social right (Pisano: 2012, Mudu: 2014a). Squats become places where new relations of power are possible not out of the city but inside its bounders and deficits. This double connotation shows the potentialities of the squats to open new scenario of urban life (Péchu: 2010). The example of Rome and, in particular, of ‘Coordinamento cittadino di lotta per la casa’ demonstrates how the practice of squatting more than underlining the limits of the neo-liberal and capitalistic city, perform new urban and social model of living together.

In the next chapter I will approach squat as an alternative territory inside the city, having a look in its internal socio-spatial features. Far away from being places detached from external dynamics, squats lead on alternatives social relationship performing different usages of the spaces and developing new models of housing. Squats are heterotopia sites (Foucault: 1984) where conflicts are faced with new paradigms with the attempt to create educational site where people learn what resistance means trough the daily performance. Not just the house of hundreds of families, squats became the physical manifestation of resistance against liberalism and austerity politics. In the forth chapter I will consider squatting as an action directed to challenge at political level the urban socio-spatial organisation of the city. I will address the question of what squatting means for a city like Rome addressing the example of the struggle for the implementation of the ‘regional deliberation n 18/2014’, a legislative framework that can be considered the political result of the recent movements’ struggles. Squats performed by ‘Coordinamento cittadino di lotta per la casa’ represent the ‘voice’ of the housing precarious conditions of many families, otherwise hidden. The spaces given back in inhabitants’ hands map a different Rome where different living conditions are possible and urgent. The last chapter shows preliminary conclusions and inputs for further researches. Potentialities of squatting in the housing right movements will be discussed with their limits. Even if discourses and actions collected around the topic of the house are recognised as forces to obtain a broader change in the social structure (Kohn: 2001), it remains to understand if the time for this change is coming and with what kind of alliances and strategies it can be
reached.

Concerning the methodology, the paper is based on qualitative and ethnographic approaches (Milan: 2014). Data and material comes from three principal sources: my direct participant observation in the movement under study, the analysis of self-produced documents, texts, books and forums, and a set of structured and semi-structured interviews (Della Porta: 2010) with experts, activists and militants in housing movements in Rome. Interviews have been conducted in two steps. A first group of people was interviewed in a preliminary phase of my fieldwork in June 2015 and a second, and more numerous ones, between November 2015 and June 2016 during my fieldwork. Speeches concerned the history of housing right movements, the housing situation in Rome and then it focused on the struggles leaden on in the post-crisis period. People have been selected in part with a snowball technique and in part in order to choose privileged witnesses.

I conducted six interviews with militants of ‘Coordinamento cittadino di lotta per la casa’. Two of them are part of the movement since the real beginning in 90th, other two since the 2000s and other two militants in the movements since three-four years ago. Four more interviews have been conducted with activists of the other two biggest housing movements in Rome: ‘Action’ and ‘Blocchi Precari Metropolitani’ (BPM). In order to check if the use of squat has peculiarities respect the use made by others grassroots level organizations, I interviewed two militants more: an activist of an important social centre in Rome and a leader of an association that occupied an abandoned building to give back to the community an important space for socialisation and cultural activities. At least, I conducted five more interviews with professors, administrators and politicians in order to understand the political, economical and institutional features of the environment movements act in.

The period considered for the analysis is the post-crisis one, with particular attention to the last 3 years. This period was very intense for Rome: many squats occurred, many manifestations and protests took place, as well as many evictions. Also the media and institutions’ attention increased in this period (Armati: 2015) and squats, from being more or less autonomy and alternative practices, obtained more visibility (Bosi, Zamponi: 2015) rising up as renewed wave of movements and affirming themselves as referent points for housing political decisions. In these three years regional and local administration dialogued with movements recognising them, ipse facto, as important interlocutors (Armati: 2015).

The present work is an in-depth analysis of the specific case of Rome and it does not aim at generalisation. Nevertheless, as said before, the discussion wants to provide new cleavages in the analysis of the role played by the squatting and housing movements in shaping patterns
of old and new cities.

**Rome in squatting: An alternative socio-spatial territory**

"People living in the squats are all different. What we all have in common is a specific urgency: The urgency to have a roof" (Int. 1)

The squats of housing movements can be seen as the terminal points of broader movements' initiatives and, simultaneously, as the sites where movements' struggle born and starts. Even if they do not exhaust the repertoire of actions (the right to the house is affirmed also defending families treated by an eviction procedure, organising manifestations and pushing institutions to design or to abolish law framework concerning housing policies), they are fundamental parts of the struggle for the house. Not just an empty building, the squat is a complex reality that needs to be destroyed in what it is (for example an abandoned school, never used offices, empty hospital) and to be re-constructed as the house of many different people. In both the *destruens* and *construens* moment, the never-ending transformation of the place aims to be physical and, consequently, social.

The heterogeneity that animates the squats is both a datum and also a goal to reach that across time assumed various configurations. No more social houses, today ‘Coordinamento’ squats public abandoned buildings or private properties symbols of speculation. Even the composition of squatters changed across the time. At the beginning of 90th the struggle was conducted by poor families in extremely difficult economical and social situation: typical squatters were people coming from ‘borgate’ –the self-constructed and abusive peripheral areas at the margin of the city (Mudu: 2014, Cellamare: 2007) -, poor workers and immigrant from the south of Italy. Squatting occurred, generally, in the neighbourhoods where squatters lived since long time (Gregoretti: 1976). On the contrary, the composition of the current movement, and of the squats, seems to be less territorial-based and more mobile. With extremely poor people, also young professionals and precarious workers join the squats moved by necessity (Pezzetta: 2012). The unvaried datum is the high presence of families and aged people characterising struggle for the house in Rome and in Italy. As an interviewee remarked: “Since its beginning squatting for housing purpose have a peculiarity: most of squatters are families” (Int.4).

Another important change in the internal composition concerns the phenomenon of immigration. Even if the number of Italian people is growing up, the 70 per cent of squatters are now immigrants, overturning the number of the external urban landscape (Mudu: 2014;
Staid: 2014). Then, the multiculturalism is a central point: in posters, announces and web sites people living in the squats are quoted as ‘mixed-race Rome’ (Roma meticcia) identifying with the inhabitants of the squats the population they would to see in all Rome. Not just a datum, the ‘mixed-race Rome’ is also a difficult goal to reach. Far away from being a non-conflict space, squat has to negotiate day-by-day the cohabitation between different people sharing just the need of having a roof. At the beginning most of them lives occupation as “an action that interrupts phases of homelessness, or living under degraded housing conditions without being motivated by changing the general political base” (Mudu: 2014: 137). In accord to this, squats are not just the container of already awake political need; squats are places where the individual need to have an house is reframed in the collective attempt to struggle for a right for all. The alternative approach to housing problems is constructed with a daily practice that makes of squats real political spaces (Pruijt; 2013). If to take a roof is the starting point of the struggle, it is not the final goal: “When we take an abandoned school, empty offices or never-restructured hotels, with no doubt we are avoiding the streets for ourselves; but we are also struggling for a right, the right to the house for all people” (Int.5). Then, squats became places for political elaboration.

This switch from a personal need to common right calls into account renewed social relations between squatters. Relations that are not taken for grounded but that are constructed first of all by sharing spaces for living. Sharing spaces of the squatted building means also to share the reasons of the protest and to be engaged in all the activities movements lead on. Squatters have to participate to the week-recurring meetings, manifestations, pickets for evicted families and, in small groups, to other many activities as the legal support for indigent families, the organisation of parties, fund-raising collection, public relationship with media and so on. These transversal practices realise a sort of ‘horizontal democracy’ (Armati: 2015) made by shared decisional making processes. Resistance is not, or it is not necessary, the reason that move people to enter in the struggle. On the contrary squatters and militants are educated trough the daily presence in the squat to resist. Then, squat functions as an educational site of resistance. This theoretical and practical change is what makes of squat an illegal but also licit act. If squat is illegal because out of the recognised ‘right to the property’, it is legitimate according to the not yet recognised ‘right to the house’. (Sebastianelli: 2009).

Modification of the spaces, and new ways of living them, opens to new relationships between private and common spaces. As gardens, also the corridors are not just pass impersonal zones. They became sharing spaces that families can use both as attachment of the
extracted houses and also as places for socialisations. Object of the daily life, as clothes dryers, are symbols of the revolution performed in squats (Armati: 2015). A revolution that starts changing the conventional usage of the space and recovering resources. Apartments constructed inside the buildings are just a part of what squat is. Common spaces are fully used as well as the private ones: this is what gives to the abandoned and recovered building the particular identity of the ‘squat’. Even if overturning the way space is managed in the external field, squat is not detached from the embedding environment. On the contrary “our goal is to be open to the neighbourhood we are embedded in. We want to be a resource for the environment and people living there” (Int.5). The spaces are cleaned up and recovered by activists and squatters in order to become public spaces returned to inhabitants for social usages and not for consumptions. In Rome where the access to public spaces are quite totally reserved to commercial activities and shopping (Semi: 2015), the territories that squats open are often the only spaces for the socialisation of the neighbours. Initiatives organised in the squatted buildings can be opened to external users as to the internal ones. In one of the most famous and long-lasting squat of ‘Coordinamento’ called ‘Porto Fluviale’, in the neighbourhood ‘Ostienese’, activists rig-up a school of languages and a cafeteria managed by internal volunteers but open to neighbours as well.

The modification of the spaces composing the squats do not occur just for squatters usage but, more exactly it represent a paradigm that need to be spread in the city and for the city’s necessity. This attempt frames also the relationship between squats-movements and the urban dynamics: “the goal is not to speak the same language of the outside to be understand and accepted – (Int. 6) –the goal is to bring the internal paradigm outside and try to change their language, their paradigm of making the city”.

These collections of resources occurring in and for the squats have been also defined as a sort of “welfare from below” (Mudu: 2014a) but I think that their power is exactly in not trying to substitute the institutions in their tasks. They do not aim to be a sort of ‘welfare’ cause they do not want just to feel the gap leaven by institutions, and –moreover- the housing conditions they can ensure are different from the ones administration and local politics should provide. Taking in charge what administration forgot they challenge administration more than simulating it. The organisation and coordination of the squats aim at a deep political elaboration (Cellamare: 2007). “We could be a self-standing community that solve the problem of the famine of houses by their means, but we wont. We want to be a breach in the social field, the starting point of a general change” (Int. 6). Squats are territories dealing with the current housing conditions on the base of their concrete dispossession.
The squats are not just houses for homeless; they are the continuous elaboration that moves from ‘deprivation-base’ to ‘political space’ squatting (Pruijt: 2003), what makes of the squat the ‘physical site of resistance’ (Vereni: 2015). The political moments of manifestations are the results of a daily-life practice experienced with difficulties and conflicts. As Tilly points out: “resistance deals with everyday life rather than concentrating on rare moments of concerted action” (1991: 596). Manifestations are moments possible just after (and with) a practice that educates people to collect their condition of being dispossessed and to overturn it: “In demonstrations parade not political parties but the hunger. A hunger that is, first of all, hunger of right to the house, to the salary, to the instruction, to the healthcare” (Armati: 2015: 106). Finally, the protest in the streets is converted in the performance of alternatives in the squats. The squat realises the change that aims to be extended to the distribution of space and resources in urban dimension.

Squatting in Rome: Challenging the socio-spatial environment

“If every times a squat takes place in the city, it makes the difference. More you can imagine and less we would” (Int.3).

If the daily practices performed in the squats are essential to the resistance, they do not exhaust the performances of the movements. Together with the social dimension of the alternative territory, movements need to frame their struggle at the political level, challenging the institutions or, better, “recalling administrations and politicians to their responsiveness” (Int. 6). Squatting became an action aiming at impacting the political discourse, looking for visibility and denouncing the inequalities underlined in the urban landscape. In accord to this, squatting occurs in Rome but also for Rome, for changing the socio-spatial context in which disposessions and resistances take form. The shared need of the house can be framed as a social right of the new ‘urban democracy’ (Della Porta: 2004) just contesting the actual distributions and dispositions of spaces in the city.

Together with the function of being a roof of people, the action of squatting recalls on the topic of the house political attention, denouncing a paradoxical housing situation in Rome. More than before, Rome appears as “the city of the people with no house and houses with no people” (Il Manifesto, 10 October 2015). The Italian capital city does not emerge just for the enormous number of people in difficult situation (Data show up a relationship between procedures of eviction and resident population of 1 families on 240 resident ones; despite a national media of 1/334), but also because there are an incredible number of not rented
apartments and abandoned buildings (L'espresso 18/12/2015). Despite this, housing policies continue to have a residual role (Baldini, Poggio: 2013) as well as the territorial one (Allulli: 2010) with the result of a city characterised by fragmentation and marginality (De Lucia: 2003). If housing is not systematically inserted in the political agenda (Sehtman: 2015; Tosi and Cremaschi), the political effort of the housing right movements is to make that institutions recognise housing precariousness of many citizens as a structural problem characterising the city since long time. As an interviewed said me “politics and administrators are continuing to face housing problems as an emergency but it is not, housing in Rome is a structural problem” (Int. 7).

Not just the aim, the political is also the dimension where movements obtained a role as actors able to shape urban dynamics. In recent years, the legitimacy of these struggles is grown allowing the creation of channels for the participation of the movements to the housing arena (De Leone, La Forgia: 2007). One example is the battle for the regional deliberation n.18 of 2014, a policy instrument not yet implemented but expression of a political participation more and more relevant. The delibera is the result of a debate-space opened between movements and the Regione Lazio started after a series of important occupations called ‘tsumani tour’ (Armati: 2015). Between 2011 and 2014 the three main housing movements in Rome (‘Coordinamento’, ‘Action’ and ‘Blocchi Precari Metropolitani’) conducted sets of simultaneous squats in the city, showing up the entity of the housing discomfort and the social conflict around the house. The strong political pressure on the social department of the Region, one of the responsible institutions for housing issues after the decentralisation to the local governances (Baldini, Poggio: 2013), produced two important outcomes: the instauration of a table between region and movements concerning the housing emergency (Armati: 2015) and the co-elaboration of the already mentioned delibera n.18 called “Extraordinary plan for the housing emergency in Rome”. Approved as ‘delibera di indirizzo’ in January 2014, just two years later, in March 2016 it has been approved as ‘delibera attuativa’ (n. 110 of 2016). Even if inserted in an emergency framework, this policy instrument presents some important U-turns. First of all, allocating at about 197 million of euro, politics invest again in social housing for an amount of at least 1200 affordable public housing. To this material achievement, it has to be added a symbolic one: the delibera assigns a percentage of the total amount of the houses to the people squatting with the movements. The militants in the movements are not just recognised as recipients of public founds, the deliberation recognises them a ‘right to the house’ usually denied naming them ‘abusive’, ‘squatters’, ‘illegal occupants’. Despite the formal approval of the ‘delibera’, its
implementation is far away because of the many oppositions coming from different political institutions. The months successive to the approval were characterised by a strong opposition of the Municipality of Rome, under the direction of the commissioner Francesco Paolo Tronca. To obstruct the implementation of the regional deliberation, another municipal legislation has been created – the municipal delibera n. 50. Even if the realisation of this second policy instrument has not yet occurred, it had the immediate effect of impeding the realisation of the first regional delibera. Not the political role of squatting practice is also to denounce the regional default, keeping high the attention of population in demanding responsiveness of parties and administrators.

Together with pushing for reforms and keeping high the attention of the housing question, the squatting have also the important political role of ‘voicing’ the effects of individualistic and neoliberal paradigm realised in a particular distribution of the urban space. If by a side squatting occurs because of the socio-spatial unequal distribution in the city, the practice of squatting aims to change and overturn the socio-spatial distribution that create the condition of the squatting. The action of squatting not just demand a new city but also map a different urban context forcing the bounders and messing up an already defined distribution. Then, squats bring city centre back in inhabitants’ hands. The gentrification, occurred in many central neighbourhoods, had progressively pushed low incomes and precarious people away in periphery (Semi: 2015). The access to many public spaces, as squares and pedestrian zones have been prohibited because of the many bars and shops that administration let rise up. These areas are accessible just for consumption and not for living the city (Semi: 2015). If ten years ago the most of squats occurred in more peripheral neighbourhoods, since few years they start to interest also central zones.

Squats of ‘Coordinamento’ rise up in central neighbourhoods as the one in the street Corso d’Italia, in central and rich area of the city, near university and hospital. If gentrification pushes away, movements affirm a sort of ‘right to stay put’ (Newman and Wyly: 2005) giving centre of the city back for inhabitants living. The right to have the access to the house is enlarged and transformed into the ‘right to have a position’ (Semi: 2015). Squat became not just houses for many people, but also the attempt to win back the opportunities and possibilities of living in urban areas. Using terminology of Bourdieu, movements struggle in the field to conquer a position in the field (Bourdieu: 1980). They claim for the city, for living into the city and not in their margins, isolated in the borders with no services.

The geography of Rome design zones completely separated, often out of reach with public transport. Despite this separation pursued by spatial configuration, housing
movements live and design different trajectories. Solidarity bounders connect not just squats situated in different part of the city, but also distant experiences and people. Even if the squats of ‘Coordinamento’ are located in distant parts of the city, they are not separated; rather, they are linked to the same struggle as parts of the same body. Then, if Rome spatially exclude, movements try to connect what is excluded through the participation to the same struggle. Exactly in this feature housing right movements are not local ones. If urban movements risk a ‘scalar trap’ (D’Albergo and Moini: 2011) not recognising the final enemy of their struggle and concentrating on the local dimension, I think housing right movements demonstrate that trans-scalar behaviour is possible and also urgent, both at cognitive and strategic level.

Squatting for Rome: Moving from ‘housing’ to ‘city’

“The truth is based not in a manifestation, neither in thousands of manifestations. It is based in a process reinforced in daily practices that, in times of theoretical and practical poverty, give back to dispossessed, abused, low-paid people a set of theories and actions.” (Armati: 2015: 170)

The goal of the paper was to address new perspectives in the analysis of the squatting practice. Far away from an exhaustive and generalizable dissertation, the work aims at increasing the analytical instrument to think about the relationship between resistant practices and contemporaneous urban landscape. The main argument of the paper considers the practice of squatting both as a (social) alternative territory and as a (political) action. The first aspect enables to concentrate on the internal dynamics produced in the squats, letting emerge how through the modification of the space alternative relationships are performed; looking at the second aspect squatting appears as a political action challenging the socio-spatial disposition of the city. These two aspects of the same phenomenon should be considered linked but not symmetrical or specular manifestations. Rather they are in a dialectic relationship where one is dependent to the other without reducing it. Squatting as a political action is legitimised by the daily practices of resistance taking place in the alternative territories that squats are; at the same time the meanings of the squats, the de-codification of their performances follow from a broader political goal that is demanded and denounced through political actions.

In both the two aspects of squatting the space assumes a central importance revealing not just in the construction and formation of relationship of domain of capitalism, but also in
defining the social actions challenging such kind of organisation (Soja: 1890). Space results to be the dimension the housing struggle takes form in and also the dimension that it wants to change. If at the very base, squatting is a direct social actions aiming at give an immediate solution to many people risking to be homeless, it is also the occasion to create new socio-spatial realities inside the bounders of the city and pushing for political changes. Squatting became the occasion to overturn discontents and precariousness and translate them in opportunities. New linkages between private and public, integration and collaboration with people similar just in the necessity of having roof, make of squat not just a space for concretising housing solutions but a space where alternative life-styles are plotted. Because of the big variation of experiences squatting can produce, all the definition provided by scholars appears insufficient for describing squats in Rome. The same term reveals limits and seems to not fit in this particular context (Mudu: 2014a).

Occupied buildings are the ‘spatial occasion’ to articulate a counter-power testing the limit of legitimate power (Polletta: 1999). However, squatting as a political practice allows scholars to thinks about the squats not just as ‘free spaces’ (Polletta: 1999) detached from the environment but also as actions challenging the distribution of power underlined in the city. Then, squats seem to be ‘conflicts spaces’ (Piazza: 2013) having a dialectic relationship with the city, struggling to exist and also to change urban conditions. Then, squatting is the visible manifestations of scraps of neo-liberal paradigm and also the overturning of these limits in new experiences.

If political discourse frames the housing question as the ‘emergence’, trough squatting movements reframe it as a ‘structural problem’ of the city. As well as media treat housing needs as ‘public order’ issue; movements reframe housing precariousness as social problem. Movements struggle no more for the ‘right to the house’ but for the ‘housing right’, for alternative living conditions, for more houses inserted in suitable neighbourhoods. Their aim is to contrast social segregation contrasting the spatial one. They start from taking back spaces to take back the social. As an activist said me “asking for the houses is just the starting point. Struggle for the house is the struggle for surviving. Once we obtain the house we start the struggle for housing conditions, for extending a right” (Int. 5).

In their double aspects of space and action, squats are ‘performative’ protest (Butler, Atanasiou: 2013): protesting they also propose new practices. The vulnerability these bodies are exposed to becomes something different: “the body becomes a turbulent performative occasion and this multivalent interaction of bodies opens ways for thinking the materiality” (Butler, Atanasiou: 2013: 178). The condition –both material and existential –of being
dispossessed is reversed in the resistance against this vulnerability. Not just for necessity, in the squats people struggle for changing the conditions of misery, pains, exclusions. Then, they struggle for changing the urban paradigm that these conditions let emerge. Squatting designs new housing paradigm but also it tries to map a different Rome. A Rome where city centre is back in people hands, public spaces are for citizens and not for profit and where the weaker categories find a collocation.

However, as the example of the struggle for the implementation of the regional deliberation n.18 shows, the process for a fruitful enlargement of what movements ask, is not easy to reach and, maybe, not yet up to come. Activists, and the right to the city with them, are stuck in this moment: in the passage from survival to live, from house to city. I think that this passage is urgent and also near to come. Following a similar dialectic the further researches on housing right movements, as well as in urban social movements, should focus on the link between house and city, squats and urban fabric and construct the theoretical framework to move from the possibility to answer to a necessity of a category to affirming a right for a community. The aim of housing right movements, more than material answers, is to give community the instruments to contrast the bio-politics of power (Foucault: 1975) that construct and reconstruct the bodies and lives. In this spread goal there is more than a struggle that refers just to people who have not the house. This is a struggle concerning all citizens dispossessed from the possibility to construct and live their city.

Then, the real question to pose now is not just when but also with what kind of strategies and alliances (Jasper: 2006). As Ciccarelli wrote in his article, these movements are performing the contraposition between administrative legitimacy and social legitimacy (Il Manifesto: 16/02/2016). This powerful contraposition is far away from being with no consequences and difficulties. The institutional and political sides are not receptive and to move from demanding houses to demanding additive conditions is still hard. Any idealisation of what squat is and what squat can change risk to be dangerous and useless. From theoretical and practical perspective, activists and scholars should continue to reflect upon their limits and find new paths to reach the goal: bring city back in.
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