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SHORT STORY

Housing Squats in the Pandemic: Viale delle Province 198

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ABSTRACT: The twin buildings located in Viale delle Province 198 used to be the administrative headquarters of the National Institute of Social Protection (INPS) in Rome, then left vacant since the acquisition by the real estate fund, *Investire SGR*. It was squatted in 2012 by hundreds of families in a condition of housing vulnerability with the political and logistical support of the *Blocchi Precari Metropolitan*, that are part of the local Housing Rights Movements. Given its layout and central location, Viale delle Province 198 has become a hub of autonomous infrastructures of the welfare and contentious politics from below, with a strong focus on healthcare. This vocation has been highlighted by the Covid-19 pandemic, whose unforeseen challenges compounded pre-existing patterns of exclusion. On the one hand, the activists, inhabitants and local social workers have engaged to consolidate the social innovations that have been devised since the onset of the pandemic. On the other hand, they and their solidarity networks are coalescing to cope with the repercussion of the eviction procedure that started during the summer 2022, and that would cause the dissolution of the autonomous infrastructures they have generated.

KEYWORDS: Housing squats; Pandemic; Viale delle Province 198; Rome

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In April 2020, Rome's local institutions enforced military lockdowns on some specific portions of the city of Rome, namely the housing squats where high numbers of people infected with Covid-19, yet without a national healthcare number, used to live. This condition depended mainly on the restrictions imposed by the Article 5 of the law n. 80/2014, popularised as 'National Housing Plan'. Despite the name, the latter did not contain any provision to increase the public housing stock, considering the rampaging housing crisis that was affecting Italian cities since the 2008 financial crash. On the opposite, the plan furthered the financialization

of public estates (article 3), whilst the Article 5 pursued the eradication of the squatting of urban vacancies for housing purposes by stripping the housing squatters of their civil, social security, welfare and also mobility rights through the ban to register their legally valid address in a squatted abode (Gargiulo 2020; Gargiulo and Grazioli, 2022). This provision was conceived after squatting for housing purposes gained a new momentum in Italian cities (and especially Rome) in 2012-13, when various housing rights movements, tenants' unions and support groups coordinated the simultaneous squatting of multiple vacancies, revamping a practice that had driven Rome's social urban movements' and underclasses' uprisings during the 1960s-1970s (Vasudevan, 2017). It was during one of these initiatives (the first *Tsunami Tour*) on the 6th December 2012 that the twin buildings of Viale delle Province 198 were squatted by hundreds of people (coming mainly from Southern and Central America, Central-Eastern Europe, Horn of Africa, Maghreb and Italy) who shared the same condition of severe housing deprivation/precarity. The action was accomplished with the logistical and political support of the *Blocchi Precari Metropolitan* (hereby BPM) collective which, together with the *Coordinamento Cittadino di Lotta per la Casa*, forms the *Movimento per il Diritto all'Abitare*. The latter can translate to 'Movement for the Right to Habitation' (henceforth MRH), marking the shift from a housing-only-concerned struggle to the contention for the 'right to the city' in its various facets (Mudu 2014; Grazioli and Caciagli 2018; Grazioli 2021).

The two Viale delle Province 198 blocks, located a few minutes away from the Tiburtina Railway Station, La Sapienza University and the highly-gentrified neighbourhood of San Lorenzo, used to be the headquarters of the INPDAI, the former civil servants' national pensions institute. As the latter has been progressively dismissing its estates, Viale delle Province 198 was acquired in early 2000s by the real-estate fund InvestIRE SGR (which collects public buildings in the dedicated Public Buildings Fund, *Fondo Immobili Pubblici*), which advertises the property emphasising its redevelopment opportunities and the strategic location¹. The plan has yet been hampered since 2012 by the presence of the over 150 households² who have settled in Viale delle Province 198 and transformed it into a hub of the urban commons through their daily cooperation and mobilisation with the BPM activists and the larger MRH. In the MRH's conceptualisation and actions, the 'right to inhabiting the city' is indeed understood as the reappropriation of the bundle of settlement and mobility rights that define the individual and collective right to live in the city with dignity, starting with the fundamental need for safe, decent and affordable housing. These points are particularly contested in city centres like Rome's, where the combination of gig economies, the financialization of public estates, and the systematic gentrification and touristification of the housing stock have made the city centre unaffordable (hence uninhabitable) for the precarious and the poor.

Against this backdrop, the central location and peculiar layout of Viale delle Province 198 has allowed the inhabitants and BPM activists to consolidate and dignify the housing reconversion and use, while experimenting with autonomous infrastructures that are directed both to the inhabitants of the housing squats and to broader local and activist communities. Among them, the former INPDAI's congress hall was reconverted to an assembly room that hosts the squats' internal assemblies as well as local, regional and even national political meetings of housing solidarity groups, urban social movements and activists. Besides, a former corridor on the ground floor was repurposed to a kids' library (known as *Biblioteca Mondo Piccolo*) attended mostly by the squats' and neighbourhood's dwellers, whose books' stock is based on the donation made by local residents, solidarity groups and charities (Mira 2022). Besides education, the connection

¹ The InvestIRE SGR's advertisement post can be found here:

<https://www.investiresgr.it/it/immobile/scheda/969/vialedelleprovince196> (retrieved August 11, 2022)

² The MRH use the family-neutral term 'household' to designate the person/people who live in a housing unit.

between welfare, health and housing has been a strategic point of action in the Viale delle Province 198 squat. Even before the eruption of the pandemic, the congress hall was also used to host the weekly meetings of the Coordinamento Regionale Sanità, a Lazio region-based network of groups and singles that are struggling for and within the public healthcare system as practitioners, patients and activists.

Fast-forwarding to 2020, Viale delle Province 198's vocation to being a hub of reflection, and practices, of communal welfare from below has been intensified since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, when the efforts to contain the virus' circulation were clashing with the new and old patterns of inequality and exclusion caused by the Article 5 of the 2014 Housing Plan. In fact, not having a legal home address, a national healthcare card and an appointed general physician made the 'ordinary' testing, tracking and quarantine procedure unfeasible for housing squatters. This problem could have potentially created a gap in the tracking of the virus spread inside housing squats, posing major health risks to communities already challenged by multiple patterns of inequality, hence more vulnerable to the most severe virus' conditions, as per Horton's (2020) explanation of how the *syndemic* works. Besides, it could have triggered a snowball effect leading to the enforcement of police actions (including, eventually, an eviction) motivated by the assessment of housing squats as "public-health problems." This was indeed what happened with another housing squat known as *Selaam Palace* (located in the *Romanina* district), which in April 2020 was militarily quarantined by Rome's military forces to enforce the testing and tracking of all the inhabitants (mostly refugees and asylum seekers coming from Ethiopia, Eritrea and Sudan)³.

While mobilising their solidarity networks to support politically and logistically the inhabitants of the *Selaam Palace*, the MRHs' activists and housing squats' inhabitants harnessed their autonomous infrastructures and sociopolitical connections to adopt precautionary strategies to contain the infections in each housing squat, while adopting contingency-plans whenever outbreaks inevitably occurred. On a general level, all the housing squats that are part of the MRH organised networks involving their districts' communities, local mutual aid groups, municipalities, institutions and NGOs to access, stock and redistribute personal protective equipment such as face masks, hand sanitisers and cleaning products for sanitising the single housing units and the common areas. Besides, medical NGOs' members volunteered to train the inhabitants of the housing squats about what to do to cope with Covid-19 in a particular environment like a housing squat. Also, Viale delle Province 198's inhabitants participated in July-August 2020 in this project and received formation pertaining how to manage infections in their homes, how to take care of common areas (including bathrooms and corridors) and other people who might be infected in their floor, kinship and family circle.

However, in September 2020 a birthday party caused a Covid outbreak in Viale delle Province 198 that started rapidly to spread. Once again, the fact that a large portion of inhabitants did not have a health card or a family doctor made the regular tracking impossible, hence the risk of an uncontrolled contagion very high. At that point, the BPM activists agreed with the inhabitants and the practitioners of the district's Local Healthcare Agency (*Azienda Sanitaria Locale*, hereby *ASL Roma 1*) to experiment with a street-level procedure of manual interviewing, tracking and registering into the National Health Service (*Servizio Sanitario Nazionale*) that could cover the whole Viale delle Province 198's population. On a short-term period, the thorough tracking of all the inhabitants allowed to contain the outbreak and monitor closely the conditions of those who were infected (Grazioli, 2022). Once the contingent crisis was sorted out, the BPM activists, inhabitants and *ASL's* frontline social workers kept in constant touch to follow-up later cases and problems. This problem-solving-

³ The solidarity statement written by the MHR in April 2020:

<https://www.facebook.com/blocchiprecarimetropolitani/posts/pfbid025YX28d7gce2mCFoX1fC6xu5ukXJi7GwzncwexZ2kZu2jVsnkwZVyajro7u7iVmul> (Retrieved August 11, 2022)

oriented interactions became also opportunities to discuss together the impact, and possible solutions to, the manifold ramifications of the Article 5. It was in fact evident for everyone that the law's interaction with existing inequalities, the exclusion from welfare, and the nefarious effects of Covid-19 posed a serious jeopardy to the squatters' and general population's health and social safety, as the MRH's and their allies' campaigns kept denouncing also during the pandemic (*ibid.*; Gargiulo and Grazioli 2022).

Dwelling upon these reflections and practical experiments, the BPM activists, inhabitants and social workers of ASL's Roma 1 decided to open in Viale delle Province 198 a fortnightly infopoint (*sportello*) dedicated to solving the problems in the access to welfare services caused by the Article 5. The sportello, inaugurated on the 8th March 2021, has been helping the squatters to sort 'ordinary' issues like having a family doctor and paediatric vaccines, while coping with pandemic-specific problems like the initial impossibility to get vaccinated (hence have the certification) for people who did not have a legally valid home address. Lastly, the infopoint has been a point of reference for the Ukrainian refugees who have fled the war and are currently seeking hospitality at their kins' also inside housing squats.

However, the endurance of the grassroots infrastructures and social innovations that were created in Viale delle Province 198 is currently jeopardised by the evacuation procedure that started during summer 2022, following the publication of a list of priority evictions filed by the Prefect in April same year. The eviction procedure has been expedited by the compensation lawsuit won by the InvestiRE SGR fund against the Italian State for failing to carry out the eviction and relocate the squatters. At the time of writing (August 2022) the inhabitants of Viale delle Province 198 are all being relocated to public houses within the city of Rome; at the end of the relocation procedure, the buildings will be returned to the real estate fund. However, the endurance of the autonomous infrastructures that were created inside the housing squat is yet in question. In fact, the BPM activists and the inhabitants of Viale delle Province 198 are requesting (but have not obtained yet) to relocate also the kids' library *Mondo Piccolo* and the *Sportello* to other public spaces in the same district to preserve their function and legacy. In conclusion, it can be said that the praxis of the right to habitation epitomised by Viale delle Province 198 (from the right to inhabiting the city centre with dignity to a nuanced understanding of public welfare) has shed light on the plurality of use values, urban commons and mutual aid practices that can be generated by the contentious, grassroots reappropriation and regeneration of urban vacancies that were destined to private uses and profits. However, the fact that the twin buildings will be reinserted within the circuit of real estate accumulation interrogates the MHR about how to accomplish the result of public houses for housing squatters, while making permanent a different, public use of urban vacancies that were reconverted from below to satisfy fundamental needs like safe and decent housing, instead of being privatised, traded and dissolved by the financialization of the urban space.

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Margherita Grazioli is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow in Urban Studies at the Social Sciences Unit, GSSI. Previously, she was a teaching fellow in the School of Business of the University of Leicester (UK) where she also got her PhD. Her thesis was about the practices of self-organisation, mobilisation and social reproduction enacted by squatters for housing purposes and Housing Rights Movements in the capital city of Rome (Italy), investigated through qualitative and ethnographic methodologies. Her current research interest beholds the formal and informal practices of local governance of the housing emergency actioned by Rome’s local municipalities in relation to housing squatters, urban social movements and civil society’s subjects (i.e. trade unions and associations). She has published articles in international peer-reviewed journals such as *Citizenship Studies*, *Voluntas* and *Quaderni U3*, while co-writing and networking with other scholars concerned with the same subject area.