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Inhabiting the City: Solidarity Practices in Urban Mobilizations in Italy

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Introduction

When neoliberal tendencies such as gentrification and 'touristification' hit the urban ground and overlap with multiple crises, the right to the city is at stake. This is especially true for the lower strata of urban populations who are facing increasing dispossession. Against this trend, activists and the local communities they belong to self-organize to help each other, simultaneously stating their right to the city. Their practices strengthen a sense of community, cohabitation and neighbourhood care by addressing basic needs and creating 'commons' through the sharing of skills and the reclamation of urban spaces. As such, they point to alternative visions of the neoliberal city and create new spatial subjectivities as 'inhabitants' which expand traditional notions of citizenship.

The challenges posed by gentrification and touristification include spiralling costs for housing and disruption of urban and neighbourhood communities (Jordan and Moore, 2018). Scholars have identified touristification and short-term rentals as new battlegrounds within the city (Gotham, 2005; Cocola-Gant, 2016, 2018; Jordan and Moore, 2018; Wachsmuth and Weisler, 2018). These processes do not hit the urban ground homogeneously but tend to be incomplete, leaving some areas with a combination of inhabitants and short-term users. We focus on the ongoing transformation of *quartieri popolari*,[1] that is, neighbourhoods located in historic city centres and traditionally inhabited by a mixture of poor, working-class people and artisans. These neighbourhoods have been at the forefront of gentrification processes, having their communities partially displaced and, more recently, affected by hyper-touristification, which rapidly erodes services for local inhabitants and substitutes it with tourism-related services.

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In this chapter, we look at the resistance to these processes through urban struggles for 'the right to the city', which simultaneously address economic, social and cultural rights. The struggle for the use of space is engendered by those who inhabit it, regardless of their formal status. The liveability of the neighbourhood is protected by building a sense of community across its inhabitants as opposed to the short-term users, perceived as invaders. Slogans such as 'refugees welcome, tourists go home' are self-explanatory in this regard. The notion of 'inhabiting' points at how urban forms of contention advance alternative ways of being political in the city. In this sense, the term 'inhabitant' is used to indicate the role of dwellers – regardless of their citizenship status – in fighting for a liveable city (Dadusc et al, 2019; della Porta and Caciagli, 2025).

Italy is a leading tourist destination worldwide and has remained so throughout various crises. As in other global urban tourist destinations, touristification in Italian cities accelerates general gentrification processes (Diaz-Parra and Jover, 2020). Because tourists increasingly book accommodation outside of the traditional hotel industry, the expansion of short-term online rental platforms is 'crucial to understanding the how and where of contemporary overtourism' (Celata and Romano, 2020, p 1), especially its negative impacts on the housing market, but also the very way of living in the areas. As a major global player in the short-term online rental market since its creation in 2008, Airbnb and its impact on urban developments have received significant scholarly, political and public attention (Dolnicar, 2019; Guttentag, 2019; Celata and Romano, 2020). 'By allowing the conversion of thousands of residential apartments into tourist lodgings, short-term rentals immediately cause a substantial decrease in the housing stock available for long-term residents and contribute directly to the depopulation of city centres', Celata and Romano (2020, p 4) argue.

While gentrification and hyper-touristification displace residents through an increase in housing costs, short-term rental platforms reduce the available housing stock, as residential apartments are turned into tourist accommodation. As a result, the coupling of gentrification and touristification replaces residents in a cyclical fashion: poor and working-class locals are first ousted by middle-class and 'lifestyle' migrants, who are then superseded by tourists or other short-term visitors such as international students (Diaz-Parra and Jover, 2020). These processes affect especially historical city centres (Diaz-Parra and Jover, 2020, p 2) and, as we highlight, the *quartieri popolari* located within them.

Theoretical framework

Solidarity-based responses to multiple crises

Scholars emphasise the need to pay attention to the structural and institutional dimensions of neoliberalism to understand how social movements respond

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to multiple crises with mutualist forms of solidarity (della Porta, 2015; Giugni and Grasso, 2016). Following the financial crisis of 2008, the long summer of migration and the COVID-19 pandemic, forms of solidarity and direct social action re-emerged (della Porta, 2018; Bosi and Zamponi, 2019; Zamponi, 2023). Thus, it is in the context of multiple crises that activists self-organize and develop grassroots practices on the right to the city. The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically highlighted the centrality of care and care work, the importance of social ties and the necessity of communities that provide their members with mutual support. At the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic has shown the limitations of an economy grounded on the monoculture of tourism as it increases social inequalities – specifically hitting the social basis which social movement organizations aim at mobilizing (della Porta, 2022). Especially at the urban level, the pandemic reduced public spaces of conviviality and worsened material conditions and has had pervasive effects on the structures of the urban fabric. In response, a large-scale diffusion of solidarity practices to distribute food and bring support to the lower strata of the population reaffirmed the crucial role of local communities against the restriction of social rights for those inhabiting them.

In these *quartieri popolari*, social movement groups pursued traditions of 'mutualism' which has developed in new forms compared to previous crises such as the financial crisis. They oriented activities to directly provide help for their social constituencies, opposing conceptions of charity or humanitarian support and pushing instead for more horizontal forms of solidarity. By doing so, activists experiment with alternative ways of living in the neighbourhood through constructing spaces for encounters and leisure. 'New mutualism' provides 'not only bread but also roses'. This slogan, commonly attributed to a strike by women workers in the textile industry in Lawrence, Massachusetts in 1912 and widely used within Italian social movements of the 1970s, highlights both physical and social needs. New mutualism, thus, improves the quality of life, not only through material help but also through the empowerment of constituencies perceived not as clients of a surrogate welfare state but rather as participants in a community enacting their own rights.

'Commons', care and inhabiting

These practices are varied and alternatively focus on housing, community building and migrant support. However, they all share a potential to transform residents' relationships to their neighbourhoods and the local community. We here explore these practices through the concepts of caring and commoning to illustrate how they generate new spatial subjectivities of 'inhabitants' and foster a sense of belonging, while also

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envisioning new ways of dwelling in the city that go beyond traditional notions of citizenship. Additionally, we observe the changes these practices have undergone through multiple crises. Recent scholarship examines how city inhabitants respond to the 'new urban enclosures' (Hodkinson, 2012) through practices of commoning and caring. Parts of this literature focus on the commoning of public space as a reaction to its increased commercialization. Montagna and Grazioli (2019), for instance, analyse Italian squats and show how their participatory practices at the intersection of housing and migrant struggles common urban space. Caciagli and Milan (2021) define commons as 'dynamic configurations that move along the continuum between prefigurative politics, daily practices and spaces, positioning themselves differently vis-à-vis the neoliberal model of urban development' (Caciagli and Milan, 2021, p 397). According to Caciagli and Milan, the commons take on three potential shapes: as resilient spaces which allow survival in the face of lacking or privatized public goods; as resistant and transformative spaces that defy the neoliberal urban development model; or as incorporated spaces which become integrated into the model they sought to challenge.

Commoning practices arise from acute needs among urban inhabitants; they produce new social relations and community (Zechner, 2021). Often, they consist of caring activities and 'mutual aid' (Spade, 2020). Following Tronto (1993, 2000), we understand care not only as paid service work, but as everyday reproductive practices through which people take care of their communities and their environments. As such, commoning practices are 'social practices based on mutuality, solidarity, care and decommodified exchange' (Montagna and Grazioli, 2019, p 3) which help in 'building communities in neighbourhoods characterised by deepening atomization, individualism and competition mechanisms' (Bertuzzi et al, 2019, cited in Caciagli and Milan, 2021, p 405). Travlou (2020) highlights how collective cooking initiatives that emerged out of material need in Greece amid multiple crises and increased migration, common and preserve immaterial resources such as skills, knowledge and cultural heritage. Similarly, during the financial crisis, in Greece as in Spain, commons were built on health, housing and food provisions, with activists promoting democratic decision-making in self-management (Malamidis and Roussos, 2021).

Often employed in the commons experiments, the notion of caring involves non-hierarchical practices which transcend the division between political activism and everyday life (Beveridge and Koch, 2019; Federici, 2019). Although forms of care are often devalued, they have the radical potential of allowing the survival of marginalized communities (Hobart and Kneese, 2020), prefigure alternative ways of urban living (Spade, 2020) and build dynamic 'care infrastructures' (Gutiérrez Sánchez, 2021; Schilliger, 2022) that become part of broader urban infrastructures.

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Inhabitation beyond *citizenship status*

Practices of mutualism unfolding in central and poor neighbourhoods, in which the re-appropriation of space is coupled with the commoning of resources and skills, are part and parcel of the struggles against the 'habitability crisis' (Grazioli, 2024). The latter is characterized by an advancement of housing vulnerability, expulsion, segregation, precarity and deprivation as a global scenario that is turning the neoliberal city into an uninhabitable space (Simone, 2019). The local initiatives we observe transform the relationship between the city and its dwellers, building the spatial subjectivity of inhabitants. Stemming from practices of caring and commoning, the subjectivity of inhabitants involves both autochthons and migrants, old and new dwellers of the neighbourhood who participate in collective activities. Notions of inhabitation transform community ties and envisage new ways of living in the neoliberal city. They are forged in everyday life commitment and long-term practices, which in time build a sense of cohabitation and neighbourhood care.

Notions of inhabitation differ from the notion of citizenship as traditionally linked to the formal status as a national, while also moving beyond the administrative conception of residency. Liberal democratic understandings of citizenship envisage top-down institutionally granted forms of individual membership in the body politic, commonly at the national level (Marshall, 1965; Turner, 1992). On the contrary, notions of inhabitation are built upon bottom-up practices of participation and belonging. Additionally, the subjectivity of 'inhabitant' is locally based and built within a rather limited area of the city, such as a neighbourhood and its relatively small community. In many ways, the bottom-up character of the spatial subjectivity of 'inhabitant' resonates with scholarly works on Critical Citizenship Studies (Bauböck, 2003; Isin and Nielsen, 2008; Schwiertz, forthcoming).

This literature departs from a critique of institutional notions of citizenship. Acts of citizenship stress the performative character of citizenship and focus on those fleeting moments of contention that subvert the order of institutional citizenship through bottom-up forms of participation of subjects, who are formally excluded from the body politic (Isin and Nielsen, 2008). While the performative character of citizenship stresses the agency of aliens, opening a breach for 'non-citizens citizenship' (Bosniak, 2006), it does so by focusing on short-term, disruptive acts. Practices of inhabitation, on the other hand, are characterized by an extended temporality and a less openly contentious form. In this way, inhabitation is a long-term practice grounded in the politics of everyday life, rooted in a rather limited portion of territory, which provides inhabitants with a form of political belonging, while envisaging an alternative way of living in the city. In this context, the concept of inhabitation closely aligns with Schwiertz's (forthcoming) idea

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of 'horizontal citizenship'. Schwiertz argues for transcending the dominant view of citizenship as merely a legal status, while also critiquing the emphasis on visible, momentary acts of protest and individual political actions.

Inhabitation also engages in dialogue with concepts such as *ius domicilii* and urban citizenship, which have been used to define the city as an alternative space of belonging, irrespective of residence status. Shifting the scale from the national to the urban level, these concepts have been particularly useful to inscribe policy responses in support of irregular migrants at the municipal level as well as the urban poor's right to the city (Bauböck, 2003; Varsanyi, 2006; Holston, 2009; Kaufmann, 2019; Kaufmann et al, 2022). Similarly, inhabitation constitutes an instance of down-scaling of political belonging. However, in contrast to other forms of local scale belonging – generally referring to the city – the space of reference is here further reduced to the neighbourhood community. Additionally, inhabitation, as we develop it in the empirical sections that follow, emerges in a context of general scepticism towards institutional politics – perceived as either absent or as partially responsible for the process of dispossession at the expense of the lower strata of the population living in urban centres. In fact, inhabitation denotes a process of subjectivation that arises from the mutual recognition of dwellers who perceive their living environment as under threat.

Inhabitation thus represents a form of political belonging that is locally circumscribed, built from below, based on community membership and aimed at protecting vulnerable parts of the city from neoliberal aggression. Dispossession (in this case through processes of over-tourism and gentrification) is a threat to the most vulnerable sectors of the population, encompassing both native and migrant residents who belong to the lower classes. Inhabitants protect their right to live in the heart of the city through practices of mutualism grounded in everyday life, which transform the neighbourhood itself by building caring communities and commoning resources and spaces.

Situating the two research sites

We have studied the neighbourhoods of Ballarò in Palermo and San Frediano in Florence, both of which are affected by gentrification, touristification and the 'precarization' caused by financial and health crises. We compare *quartieri popolari* in two medium-sized cities in Italy, which are capitals of their respective regions and, as such, constitute regional political centres. Beyond these similarities, the case studies have significant differences: first, they lie on the opposite sides of Italy's North–South split, with Palermo exhibiting significantly worse socioeconomic conditions than Florence. Politically, Palermo is characterized by centre-right governments both at the city and at the regional level, with autonomous traditions at the local movement

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level, while Florence is characterized by centre-left political leadership with a concomitant institutionalization of left-wing political traditions.

While touristification and gentrification have started to affect Palermo recently, they have reached extreme expressions in Florence; the latter being one of many Southern European cities affected by extreme forms of touristification (Diaz-Parra and Jover, 2020). This development is exacerbated by online short-term rental platforms such as Airbnb – Celata and Romano (2020) identify a high density of listings in the urban centre of both cities, where tourist accommodation is equal to or higher than the number of residential accommodations. As Figure 2.1 shows, additional pressure is created by 'studentification', with Florence being a major destination for international students and a site of numerous foreign universities. In the academic year of 2023–2024 alone, Florence received a total of 18,000 international students, who represent an important economic force and are specifically welcomed by the municipal administration, while Italian students deplore the aggravating housing problem and high cost of living which renders it impossible for many students to live in the city.

In Palermo, tourism has started to change the face of the city relatively recently. While the so-called 'Palermo spring' of the 1990s, with Leoluca Orlando as city mayor, brought with it a gradual transformation of the

Figure 2.1: Graffiti against high rents and gentrification, Florence residential neighbourhood of Le Cure



Source: Joana Hofstetter

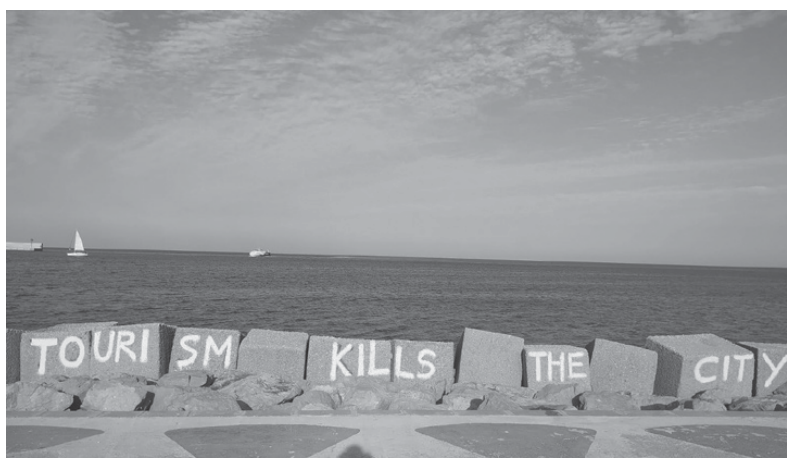
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city's image (built around an idea of a 'renaissance'), since Orlando's 2012 re-election the local administration has started to structurally invest in promoting the city for tourism (Calderone, 2022, p 95). Between 2014 and 2020 the city gradually established pedestrian areas along the two main streets that criss-cross the historic centre, and with these changes, shops and restaurants designed for tourists flourished. These material transformations have been built upon symbolic re-articulations of the city's image (Picone, 2021); for example, Sicilian street food has been branded as part of the authentic experience of Palermo. Similarly, the historic markets of Mercato del Capo, Vucciria and Ballarò have been incorporated into the multicultural image of the city with enduring changes (Picone, 2021; Crobe et al, 2023).

Tourism is often presented as the only source of wealth in Southern Italian cities with a fragile socioeconomic fabric. The tourist industry acts upon the urban territory as a fully fledged industrial policy aimed at diverting infrastructural and cultural resources, while simultaneously devaluing the working conditions of hospitality workers and shrinking residents' right to the city (Agostini et al, 2022). In this sense tourism can be referred to as a monoculture, destroying the city, as stated in Figure 2.2.

Albeit with contextual differences in Florence and Palermo, the neighbourhoods considered here have been the site of mobilizations from below aimed at building a sense of community across inhabitants and countering gentrification and touristification dynamics. In particular, our analysis focuses on the following local initiatives: the Arci Porco Rosso Circle in the neighbourhood of Ballarò, Palermo and the squat of Via del Leone in San Frediano, Florence. Following a qualitative research approach, we conducted place-based ethnography over the course of nine months in the period spanning

Figure 2.2: Tourism kills the city, Palermo seafront graffiti



Source: Angela Adami

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from June 2023 to February 2024. Our dataset comprises documents, field notes taken during participant observation, and 20 semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted with local activists and organizers we recruited through theoretical sampling. Participant observation focused specifically on the activities conducted by the activist groups in the two neighbourhoods, and on the construction of relationships of inhabitation within them. Following a snowball sampling technique, the interviews collected covered a broader area, including key informants, activists and politicians involved in local institutional politics, allowing us to gather data at the city level.

Inhabiting San Frediano, Florence

San Frediano is an inner-city neighbourhood of Florence located south of the Arno River. Historically inhabited by artisans and the working class, and more recently also migrants, the neighbourhood has been increasingly gentrifying after the big Arno River flood in 1966 left many buildings in urgent need of restoration. Especially since the 2000s it has become a hub for tourists, international students and 'lifestyle migrants', and was recently called one of the 'coolest neighbourhoods worldwide'.[2]

San Frediano is home to one of the last two squatted social centres in the Florentine city centre, the squat of Via del Leone, which occupies an abandoned residential building owned by the municipality. The squat was established in 2013 at a time when the introduction of online short-term rental platforms such as Airbnb accelerated gentrification and touristification processes in the city. The squatters of Via del Leone sought to respond to the negative impacts that were taking hold of San Frediano. They specifically identified a 'lack of meeting spaces, especially for younger people' (field notes taken during assembly, 25 September 2023) and wanted to 'hinder a process of Disneyfication of the city of Florence starting from a historically resistant and mixed-race neighbourhood'.[3] The reference to 'Disneyfication' and Disneyland highlights the commercialization of the city, where tourism transforms cultural assets into commodified theme parks. Since its establishment, Via del Leone has been under constant threat of eviction.

Of particular relevance are activists' communal practices around housing and care. These activities materialize mostly in and around Piazza Tasso, a square located at the end of Via del Leone, through cultural and social events (for example, film screenings, discussions, collective neighbourhood dinners) and regular 'mutualist assemblies'. During these meetings, activists offer counselling to inhabitants affected by housing insecurity and eviction threats. An anti-eviction network created in response to the growing evictions in the neighbourhood has succeeded in preventing some of them.

Crucial to these mobilizations are activists' practices of taking care of public spaces, recovering them for communal use and defending them from

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privatization. In Piazza Tasso, activists hosted carpentry workshops to equip the square with benches, and pressured the municipality into replacing the worn-down ground of the public football pitch (one of two remaining in the historical centre of Florence). The activists also campaigned against the sale of the nearby Nidiaci housing and garden compound, which was initially donated to the municipality for communal use, but then sold off to private investors. Owing to neighbourhood mobilizations, parts of the Nidiaci were preserved for communal use and provide local children and youths with one of the few freely accessible spaces for leisure time activities and gathering.

With these activities, activists aim at resisting the 'desertification of squares', highlighting the problematic 'real estate speculation … overwhelming tourist industry, institutional indifference, gentrification and the rhetoric of the "most beautiful city in the world"' (Martinez, nd). Activists frame these practices around notions of care, mutual support and inhabiting. These are particularly visible in their anti-eviction activities, where protest banners read 'houses belong to those who inhabit them':

FIELD NOTES TAKEN DURING ANTI-EVICTION PROTEST
27 July 2023

> Let's reinhabit the squares. The spaces where you could imagine another life, where you could organize to build it, are fewer and fewer and are increasingly under attack. Evictions and militarization of large parts of the city are part of that attack. We want the squares to live again, to become our places of meeting, experimentation, and organization.

As illustrated here, practices of (re)inhabiting are understood as transformative and prefigurative, collectively creating commons and pointing to alternative and inclusive visions of the city and life within it.

These mutual support practices and mobilizations became even more relevant during the COVID-19 pandemic. Activists collected food from local shops, distributed it to people affected by food insecurity, and maintained a free shop for the distribution and exchange of clothes and other items. 'We were organizing a whole network of food recovery around the neighbourhood, from the baker to the butcher, the grocer, the bar, all the pizzerias made huge amounts of Margherita pizzas' (Interview I-15), a young activist of Via del Leone squat said.

Activists distinguished these forms of neighbourhood solidarity from institutional and commercial practices, for example via a 'subvertising' campaign initiated during the COVID-19 pandemic. In a subversive imitation of a municipal sticker which marks historical Florentine businesses, activists created similarly recognizable icons and a register of 'Florentine solidarity shops' which participated in the food distribution in San Frediano:

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> We distributed [food] and entered in a register of Florentine solidarity shops all those shops that participated in this mechanism. And then we gave this laminated sheet … with all the icons that explained that this was a business that participated in the solidarity of the neighbourhood, and so in some way you go and buy there because at least they try to do something to help the community. (Interview I-15)

Many neighbourhood shops engaged in these solidarity practices despite high risks of bankruptcy, as they were motivated to 'at least help out those who are worse off', the activist shared (Interview I-15). The pandemic thus highlighted how activists constitute commons through their daily practices of caring and inhabiting. Resilient spaces created in San Frediano allowed people's survival in the face of lacking or privatized public goods (Caciagli and Milan, 2021).

The willingness to support others despite economic losses emphasizes how solidarity practices of reclaiming space and caring for the neighbourhood are rooted in social ties among inhabitants and activists. Because the first activist generation of Via del Leone grew up in San Frediano and inhabited the squat, personal connections constituted a link, gave legitimacy and acceptance to the squat's activities: 'Because some of us grew up here there is a credibility … so in the end things always ended well, with various dynamics … maybe you don't come together for different reasons, because surely you are different types of people, but anyways you care about each other' (Interview I-15).

Activists have prioritized an amicable relationship with the neighbourhood's inhabitants, as the squat's housing front states, with a large graffiti, 'love your neighbourhood'. As emphasized in the squat's self-understanding:

> [Via del Leone] holds dear the territory in which it is located and this is why we try to have a good relationship with the neighbourhood and limit the organization of parties in the space. People live next to us who we hope to include in a path of struggle … being a disturbing element is counterproductive to our struggle as well as exposing us to becoming a vehicle for gentrification.[4]

Yet, activists have continued to face social transformations in San Frediano, in particular the changing composition of the neighbourhood. Gentrification and hyper-touristification have pushed former inhabitants to the periphery where 'they could afford a mortgage with the money they were paying there' (Interview I-15). As a result, the same activist added, the conviviality in the neighbourhood 'is a bit of a mess' (Interview I-15), with conflicts erupting more frequently and being harder to resolve. Sports activities in the renovated football pitch, for instance, have yielded noise complaints from other residents. Players again defended their activities by highlighting

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their functions for local youth, the activist continues: 'As one comrade at one point said, "Excuse me … but if we should not drink, should not do drugs, should not make music, what should we do? Should we also go to bed at 10? At least let us do sports!"' (Interview I-15).

Via del Leone activists have attributed this tension to the changed social fabric in the community and the resulting loss of community ties, which were previously activated in conflict resolution: 'A lot of these dynamics are also due to the fact that the ties in the neighbourhood are torn, so between the old lady of 80 years and the boy of 15 there is no longer any bond' (Interview I-15).

Transformations in the social fabric of San Frediano were paralleled by a change in the composition of the squat, with the first generation of activists getting older and moving on to other cities and political or professional activities. Consequently, the relationship between the squat and the neighbourhood has deteriorated, which has reduced the acceptance of the squat's activities.

Activists increasingly struggle against gentrification and hyper-touristification as the municipality facilitates financial investments into the neighbourhood. Rather than benefiting from this process, they have observed an increase in evictions, rental costs and the presence of gastronomic businesses, while the municipality exhibits disinterest and opposition and avoids direct engagement with activists, inhabitants and their concerns. Participatory mechanisms promoted by the municipality, such as neighbourhood assemblies, are well-visited, yet frustrating for activists and inhabitants who have felt ignored and conclude that the municipality 'carries on despite complaints' (Interview I-15), as one Via del Leone activist said. According to the activist, the neighbourhood's impending conversion into a tourism and visitor attraction, similar to the rest of the city centre, has represented a 'loss' of the neighbourhood, but also contains something to be saved:

> It is a neighbourhood in which there are too many big interests, because the whole centre of Florence is a world heritage site where there are different problems, too many parts are now lost. Here, where something can still be saved, we would like to create a model that can then be replicated in other neighbourhoods. (Interview I-15)

By opposing hyper-touristification and gentrification, activists have tried to preserve San Frediano as a last remainder of conviviality in the city centre, and have stimulated alternative visions for urban development from there. Here, Via del Leone activists have found that traditional tactics of squats are increasingly ineffective and remain defensive. Instead, they have attempted to develop new strategies and organize 'in a proactive way … to stop focusing on

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the opposition to imposed projects' (Interview I-15), as one activist explained. One example is the alternative urban development plan collectively created by inhabitants and activists in the 'DiladdArno Workshop', a 'laboratory of activation of the neighbourhood against gentrification' (Interview I-15). The plan was presented to the neighbourhood council and established not only an alternative future of San Frediano, but for the city of Florence as a whole, as activists plan to spread it to other neighbourhoods through cooperation with other local initiatives. By 'designing it from the bottom up' (Interview I-15), activists and inhabitants have put forward a new model of urban development through prefigurative and transformative practices that connect intersecting issues and initiatives in a horizontal way: 'In short, all this was, in my opinion, political ferment, a whole idea of multi-scalarity of political organization, not vertically, but organically, to be a horizontal structure. So, to succeed in having a structure but not with hierarchical levels, with various forms, and various territorial and political spaces' (Interview I-15). In their practices of caring and inhabiting, activists have thus engaged not only in responsive actions in the face of multiple crises but in transformative, prefigurative politics. The commons they have created emerge within localized urban spaces and from the daily collective practices of their inhabitants who face dispossession and expulsion. Rather than only opposing the tangible expressions of neoliberal urban development in their own neighbourhood, activists have aimed to expand the commons beyond its local boundaries to alter the city as a whole and the politics that govern it. Carefully seeking to avoid neoliberal co-optation, the commons created around Via del Leone and Piazza Tasso constitute resistant and transformative spaces that defy the neoliberal urban development model (Caciagli and Milan, 2021).

Inhabiting Ballarò, Palermo

Ballarò lies at the heart of Palermo's city centre. Well-known for its historic market, this *quartiere popolare* gathers multiple souls within itself. The neighbourhood is divided into two parts: Ballarò, closer to the centre, featuring the more ancient, and largest, market in the city, and Albergheria, with its informal market where people gather on a daily basis to sell second-hand goods on the sidewalks and on temporary stalls. Ballarò is home to the lower strata of the city's population, including the poor, working-class people, migrants and traders at the historic market. There are also some university buildings located in the area, and some university staff and students reside in the neighbourhood. This fragile socioeconomic fabric faces diverse challenges, both old and new, among which touristification is a relatively recent phenomenon.

At the heart of Ballarò, Arci Porco Rosso opened as a social space for the neighbourhood in 2014, where a group of activists coming from different

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political traditions gathered and started working with the neighbourhood inhabitants. They focused their activity on a variety of issues, including ecology, migration and feminism. Over the years, Arci Porco Rosso has become a convergence point in the neighbourhood – for regular meetings on ecological issues and on feminist struggles, as a helpdesk for migrants, and for participation in active networks of associations engaging with issues relating to the transformations and liveability in Ballarò. In line with the neighbourhood's internal differences, a great number of various people cross this space, both as users and active participants. Furthermore, Arci is a national association and connects the local group with the country at national level.

While recent, the process of touristification in Palermo has intensified through the course of the last decade. Unlike other areas of the city, such as the Kalsa neighbourhood and the Vucciria market, which have undergone a more radical change due to tourism (Jeanmougin, 2021; Crobe et al, 2023), Ballarò is only now beginning to experience such transformations. To understand the processes of touristification and gentrification in Ballarò, it is first necessary to consider the specific context in which they take place. The growing stream of tourists that has flowed into Palermo in the last decade has likewise begun to transform Ballarò – from its markets to its housing opportunities, the latter of which has become increasingly accessible for short-term rentals. As an activist from Arci Porco Rosso shared (Interview I-1), a market that sells fresh goods is inevitably fated to change when, instead of locals buying market produce, there are tourists taking photos of the stalls. And yet, criticizing the tourist industry in Palermo is far from straightforward. In fact, the city's socioeconomic condition makes tourism an appealing source of income whose pitfalls are often downplayed:

> Here it is not like in Barcelona, criticizing tourists in Palermo is a politically very complex matter, given our social condition. On the other hand, it is clear that in this context, tourist development is not at all democratic and often leads to poor quality employment. And on the other hand, it is creating conditions whereby the poorer part of the neighbourhood finds it difficult to stay. (Interview I-1)

Housing is another central challenge in the neighbourhood, though it is not exclusively related to tourism. The housing market in the city centre, and especially in Ballarò, is frail. Likewise, the housing conditions of many residents are poor: uninhabitable buildings stand next to houses inhabited by the residents and flats renovated for tourists.

Additionally, the city of Palermo has registered a steady decrease in the local population over the course of the last decade (Gallitano, 2021, p 21), even though this has only limitedly interested the historic centre of Palermo.

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This highlights the peculiarity of a city where gentrification and touristification are taking place in a context of overall population decline:

> How do you gentrify a city where the population decreases? There are this and other contradictory elements. For example, one of the issues that most roots the poorest part of the population in these latitudes, in addition to the presence of much deteriorated housing, is also the presence of a strong criminal economy, which is criminal but is also an economy. (Interview I-1)

Faced with these contradictions and fragmentation, Arci Porco Rosso constitutes a political space in which the neighbourhood can come together and Ballarò's different inhabitants can join community-based activities and, over time, recognize one another as co-inhabitants of Ballarò, 'We work precisely on the creation of relationships of trust not only with the most marginalized categories but, in general, with those who live here, through various activities that tend to be an expression of a community that wants to recognize itself' (Interview I-1).

These activities include the co-creation of networks and projects to protect the neighbourhood's liveability, such as SOS Ballarò and Sbaratto. The former brings together a network of groups and associations active in Ballarò, including Arci Porco Rosso activists, and primarily addresses issues related to its historic market. In particular, the network has been following a development project which was aimed at providing a roofing structure for the market, and it has since denounced the resulting roof stall. This project started in 2017, but since its completion the structure has remained unused and has turned into a place where rubbish accumulates and homeless people find makeshift shelters.[5] In 2019, from the project of SOS Ballarò, Sbaratto was founded. Sbaratto is an association bringing together sellers from the Albergheria market, and has collectively worked to regulate the market referred to as the 'Area of Free Exchange of Albergheria'. In a part of the neighbourhood that is especially vulnerable, Sbaratto has worked with the vendors for recognition of their labour status, while emphasizing the relevance of a self-organized practice of collecting and recovering durable goods. These long-term practices are central to preventing the expulsion of the most socioeconomically fragile inhabitants from the neighbourhood, valuing what already exists in the neighbourhood.

Ballarò is also home to newcomers; it hosts several migrant communities who have come to the neighbourhood at different times and now reside there. The Sans-Papiers helpdesk in Arci Porco Rosso is a key gathering point for migrants living in the neighbourhood and beyond, and where many go to meet and also to find social and legal assistance:

> People come in and receive socio-legal support, human advice and support, networking and so on. Whatever is needed, with what can

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> be given, can be done or can be shared together is done. It also often happens that people come in to have a chat, and that's super nice, it's welcome. (Interview I-2)

Other activists have likewise emphasized the social dimension of the helpdesk and how Arci Porco Rosso has become a point of reference for many different inhabitants of the neighbourhood, migrants and non-migrants alike. The activities of the Sans-Papiers helpdesk span from on-the-spot socio-legal assistance offered once a week and the mobile helpdesk in rural areas, to the project 'From Sea to Prison'.[6] The former provides support and monitors what happens in rural areas and in the suburbs of Palermo. The latter focuses on the imprisonment of so-called captains, migrants who are criminalized for guiding the boats that cross the Mediterranean Sea. The Sans-Papiers helpdesk thus provides an instance of commoning that goes beyond the sharing of space and encompasses the commoning of a network and socio-legal expertise that are treated as shared resource, made available for newcomers who are regarded as part of the community.

The helpdesk's practices contribute to building the new subjectivity of inhabitants, grounded in mutual aid and participation, located in a defined area of the city and within a given community, and yet are non-exclusionary. Thus, protecting the neighbourhood is not mediated by top-down, institutional and exclusionary understandings of citizenship. On the contrary, it is enacted through long-term practices that blur the boundaries between citizen and newcomers, expanding notions of political belonging beyond the citizenship status traditionally intended. Moreover, the activities of the Sans-Papiers helpdesk move beyond the territory of the neighbourhood itself, bridging people and building alliances across different fragile spaces – borders, prisons, countryside ghettos, peripheral reception centres – de facto protecting those who are more exposed to expulsions (Sassen, 2014) and re-stating their right to belong.

The existence of a local community was only confirmed during the COVID-19 pandemic, when activists of Arci Porco Rosso organized several activities, including grocery and meal distribution, and provided assistance with the complicated procedure for obtaining aid from the municipality. Here, food distribution is described as an immediate response to urgent material needs and is problematized by activists, who emphasize the discomfort in adopting such a practice which is not defined as care:

> In Palermo as elsewhere, and perhaps more so, there was this need to reach the invisible with material goods. It's not great and we didn't like picking up packages of groceries and taking them to people's homes, not even during the pandemic. Sometimes we did it, but it is an activity that you know is very critical in a city like Palermo where the

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> relationship between politics and the people has often been a corrupt relationship, so let's say we did it when strictly necessary. (Interview I-1)

Much more than externally oriented, care is used to describe the group's internal relationships during the COVID-19 pandemic. The participation in self-organized practices for the neighbourhood was essential for the wellbeing of the activists themselves. These activities allowed them to feel empowered in the face of a difficult and solitary period. Participation gave them the opportunity to feel connected to their community, experiencing a sense of belonging by lending a hand to others at a difficult time.

The notion of care associated with bottom-up solidarity practices is an increasingly used and contested concept, around which activists interrogate themselves. An activist of the Sans-Papiers helpdesk shared a challenge they encountered with their activity, as a way to express the limitations of care.

> There was a crisis, a loved one was very sick and there was no place where he could sleep peacefully in a safe house, and the Porco Rosso was asked to solve this problem: there is no solution. Dozens of people come to us asking for a home. The situation is clear: we want our friend to be safe. One expects that an activist from the helpdesk would host him at home or one expects a solution to be found through that friendship network, that community network. How is it possible that these people, who are part of our community, do not find a solution among us? It's not that simple, it doesn't work like that. Not least because otherwise we would all be burnt out. How do we handle this failure? (Interview I-2)

Here the impossibility of responding to the basic needs of migrants who are part and parcel of the same community is regarded as an inevitable limitation of care. This directly invests the capacity and the boundaries of the community itself: the greater the material needs, the greater the problem of community boundary and care.

Community practices constitute bottom-up efforts to protect the right of the population's lower strata to inhabit the changing neighbourhood in the city's historic centre. Improving the liveability and coexistence for the different groups in the neighbourhood is central to these practices. The notion of inhabitation presented here refers to long-term types of practices building a sense of community and expanding institutional and exclusionary notions of citizenship. In the case of Ballarò, where the process of touristification is just beginning, these practices envisage forms of non-exclusionary inhabitation from below, rather than targeting tourists per se. In this light, these practices advance a way of inhabiting the city that is directed at protecting the rights of old and new inhabitants – prefiguring an alternative

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way of living in the city where housing rights, workers' rights, and ultimately the right to a dignified life in the city are guaranteed and enhanced.

Conclusion

While the habitability crisis is a global phenomenon that is engendered by neoliberal urbanization, this takes different shapes across different territories. As we have argued, the financial crisis as well as the COVID-19 pandemic have restricted rights and increased inequalities, with different effects on different territories. The urban setting is highly heterogeneous with specific social challenges affecting the historical city centres and, in particular, *quartieri popolari*. Although quickly spreading, processes of gentrification and touristification are not homogeneous, so that, in the very same spaces, the old inhabitants cohabit with new ones as well as the short-term tourists who are often perceived as invaders. In these contexts, local initiatives develop and oppose 'private ownership and exclusive liveability for the affluent' (Grazioli, 2024, p 237) by commoning spaces, knowledge and skills. By turning these resources into commons, activists foster forms of care for the neighbourhood that is struggling against dispossession. Moreover, these practices transform the relationship between inhabitants and the city, strengthening forms of mutual recognition and belonging to the neighbourhood community, which we here have referred to as the 'spatial subjectivity of inhabitants'.

No hard boundaries define who is an inhabitant and who is not: both new and old residents, including migrants, are part of the neighbourhood community; while there is increasing hostility towards affluent tourists who are viewed to be directly responsible for the ongoing processes of dispossession affecting the neighbourhoods. The fight for the right to the city is not just a defence of living standards against increasing costs of living, but also a claim to the right to the city as the right to stay and keep one's own identity – the bread but also the roses. During the COVID-19 pandemic, caring began to be perceived as the basis upon which different relationships with the environment and between individuals could be built. In our research, commoning and caring have emerged as concepts resonant with the notion of inhabitants, which is considered as more inclusive than the notion of citizenship. Here, 'inhabitation' points at a form of political belonging that occurs at the micro-scale of the neighbourhood. With its limited spatial scope, inhabitation has the potential of identifying a way of life in the city related not so much to the urban geographic landscape but rather to the micro communities that develop within it. The notions of inhabitation we have developed here point to forms of urban social re-composition grounded in long-term daily relational practice and rooted in a rather limited portion of territory; these practices build a bottom-up

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form of belonging. Unlike traditional understandings of liberal citizenship, and distinct from instances of performative citizenship described by acts of citizenship, inhabitation envisages a form of belonging that develops locally and from the ground up, regardless of formal residency status (Isin and Nielsen, 2008).

Within these *quartieri popolari*, activists have reclaimed urban spaces as commons for communal use, effectively inhabiting and caring for the neighbourhood. They have turned them into sites of unique resistances and prefigurative politics through re-composition of the local communities' social ties.

Appendix: List of interviews

I-1 Arci Porco Rosso activist, at Moltivolti, Palermo, 17 November 2023
I-2 Arci Porco Rosso activist, helpdesk activity, at Porco Rosso circle, Palermo, 28 November 2023
I-3 Zabut activist Palermo, Scuola Normale Superiore, Florence, 24 January 2023
I-4 Officina del Popolo and Asia USB activist, Ballarò and Zisa, Palermo 25 January 2023 and 18 November 2023
I-5 People's Clinic Borgo Vecchio activist, Anomalia social centre, 26 January 2023 and 25 January 2024
I-6 Non Una di Meno activist Palermo, gynecological helpdesk, online and at Social Centre Anomalia, 24 January 2023 and 6 February 2024
I-7 Key informant mapping Palermo, Scuola Normale Superiore, Florence, 25 September 2023
I-8 Municipal counsellor and Zen Insieme association member, Palermo, 29 November 2023
I-9 Doctor and activist at the People's Health Clinic, Anomalia social centre, Palermo, 29 January 2024
I-10 Arci Porco Rosso activist, mobile migrants helpdesk, Piazzetta mediterraneo, Ballarò, Palermo, 7 February 2024
I-11 Arci Porco Rosso activist, migrants helpdesk, Palermo, 8 February 2024
I-12 Doctor and activist at Zen Insieme Social Clinic, Zen, Palermo, 9 February 2024
I-13 Key informant mapping Florence, Scuola Normale Superiore, Florence, 16 June 2023
I-14 Key informant and activist, Firenze Città Aperta, Scuola Normale Superiore, Florence, 19 June 2023
I-15 Activist of Via del Leone squat, Piazza Tasso, Florence, 26 September 2023
I-16 Social worker and activist of Nosotras, Empoli, 11 October 2023
I-17 Non Una di Meno Florence Activist, Piazza Ciompi, Florence, 7 November 2023

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I-18 Former municipal counsellor and activist of Firenze Città Aperta, Il Conventino, Florence, 15 November 2023
I-19 Activist of Cooperativa Sociale CAT, online, Florence, 4 February 2024
I-20 Activist of La Favoloska/la Magnifica, Piazza Santissima Annunziata, Florence, 9 March 2024

Notes

1 *Quartieri Popolari:* neighbourhoods located in historic city centres and traditionally inhabited by a mixture of poor, working-class people and artisans.
2 See https://www.businessinsider.com/worlds-coolest-neighborhoods-2017-8
3 Self-presentation at https://viadelleone.noblogs.org/
4 Quote from https://viadelleone.noblogs.org/
5 Open letter written by SOS Ballarò activists to the President Sergio Mattarella: https://palermo.repubblica.it/cronaca/2023/10/12/news/caro_presidente_mattarella_venga_dagli_ultimi_di_ballaro-417593138/?fbclid=IwY2xjawEhZQpleHRuA2FlbQIxMAABHTON5RBvn5DR5daLwI3uxCH-6m96-CfVVJFfbsDz2-MgFv5eQIEyCIaskQ_aem_Qa9NV5SG5qjJyumSRDsAQg
6 See https://fromseatoprison.info/

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