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Interpreting the Roman Squatting Tradition

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Introduction

In its simplest definition, "urban squatting is living in – or otherwise using – a dwelling without the consent of the owner."[1] Recently, squatting in the city of Rome has received international media attention. The Rome City Council has claimed there are around 2,850 properties that are illegally occupied by squatters in the capital, making the city one of the most highly "occupied" in Europe.[2] The media has often framed these squats as an aspect of a larger movement for social justice and housing rights that is burgeoning in the city as a result of the lingering economic crisis plaguing the country as a whole. However, this is an oversimplification of the reality of the squatting movement in Rome and ignores its long tradition.

Squatting in Rome, as in cities across Italy, had its origins mainly in the Social Center Movement (*Centri Sociali*), which began as early as the 1970s and emerged out of a prior wave of occupations to combat the struggle for suitable housing in the 1950s and 1960s.[3] A Social Center is generally an urban space claimed by a heterogeneous group of people who use it to meet their needs and constitute a zone outside commercial or speculative interests and independent from external political supervision.[4] The Social Center Movement, still present in the contemporary city,

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[1] Hans Pruijt, "Squatting in Europe," in *Squatting in Europe: Radical Spaces, Urban Struggles*, ed. by The Squatting Europe Kollective (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2013), 17.

[2] Catherine Hornby, "Squatters of Rome scrape by at the margins in Italy's crisis," *Reuters*, December 13, 2012, http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/12/13/us-italy-vote-squat-idUSBRE8BC0C820121213

[3] Pierpaolo Mudu, "Resisting and Challenging Neoliberalism: The Development of Italian Social Centers," in *Squatting in Europe: Radical Spaces, Urban Struggles*, ed. by The Squatting Europe Kollective (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2013), 61.

[4] Pierpaolo Mudu, *At the Intersection of Anarchists and Autonomists: Autogestioni and Centri Sociali*, ACME 11, no.3 (2012), 419.

was created out of a desire for self-managed, anti-capitalist spaces in opposition to the dominant accumulation regime. However, the Social Center Movement was not a large, unified front by any means, as its true birth was a process of squatting intertwining with a complicated and fragmented leftist political landscape. A closer examination of the Roman Social Centers in the mid-1980s reveals the way multiple antagonistic political activist groups were absorbed, thus creating centers with distinct and complex ideologies.[5] Some Social Centers underwent a nuanced paradigm shift in the 1990s, growing from militant pockets of resistance into more public spheres within the city that maintained their individuality while beginning to network in order to act in common over certain demands.[6] This change helped set the stage for new organizations undertaking variations of squatting currently present in the city, which have grown partially out of two recent trends: 1) The increasing presence of international immigrants since the late 1980s whom did not fit into the traditional militant secularist mold of Roman squatting, but had a desperate need for adequate and affordable housing.[7] 2) A new wave of occupations initiated not only by politicized activists, but also by those who identify simply as

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[5] Mudu, *At the Intersection of Anarchists and Autonomists*, 419.
[6] Alba Solaro, "Forte Prenestino" trans. by Steve Wright in *A Window onto Italy's Social Centres*, Affinities: A Journal of Radical Theory, Culture and Action 1, no.1 (2007), 12-20.
[7] Piero Vereni, "Spaces In-Between: Squats and Religious Practice in Rome," *Workshop on Contested Social Spaces,* 4, http://csps.uniroma2.it/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/Workshop-on-Contested-Social-Spaces-Italy-and-Turkey-November-20122.pdf.

citizens, workers and local residents fighting land privatization/speculation and seeking basic public services.[8]

This paper will seek to highlight how squatting in Rome began partially as a response to the failure of Roman planning to counter the excesses of unrestricted capitalist development.[9] Yet it was not simply a lack of affordable housing that spurred on the movement, but rather the amalgamation, or perhaps more accurately the intersection, of left wing political groups responding to a broader social crisis generated by the transition from Fordism to the current tertiarized service economy. The resulting Social Center Movement represented a new and alternative form of social organization to battle the devaluation of place and accompanying alienation characteristic of a politically splintered capitalist society with a deteriorating social fabric, yet was itself fragmented due to internal tensions fueled by ideological differences. I will discuss the growth of the Social Center Movement in the city to provide a context for the way in which the current squatting movements have manifested themselves in light of increased international immigration and social unrest due to national economic stagnation. I will briefly review the history of urban development in the city since the promulgation of Rome's first master plan in the late 1800s. Rome's development history, and the dominant political discourse that lurked beneath the spatial reality, provide a necessary base for understanding the complex squatting landscape – currently, more than 30 Social Centers exist in

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[8] Donatella Della Ratta, " 'Occupy' the Commons," *Al Jazeera*, February 20, 2013, http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2013/02/20132171156515574 69.html.

[9] Michael Pacione, "The Social Geography of Rome," *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geogragie* 89, no.4 (1998), 369.

the city, but there are many other groups undertaking squatting projects. I will conclude by focusing on two current movements in the city. The first, a broad coalition built around providing public services through "occupying the commons". The second, a postsecular typology of squatting spurred on by a group, *Comitato Popolare di Lotta per la casa,* which seeks to foster an exciting cultural syncretism.

Theoretical Framework

Literature on European squatting movements offers many differing interpretations. Pruijt acknowledged this by attempting to use diversity as a starting point in his work which established five different typologies of European based urban squatting.[10] These typologies *(deprivation-based squatting, squatting as an alternative housing strategy, entrepreneurial squatting, conservational squatting, and political squatting)* are helpful in categorizing the movements in Rome.[11] The typologies provide insight on individual cases, yet due to Rome's long and diverse tradition of squatting and Social Centers, aspects from each have existed, sometimes simultaneously in the same squat. Pruijt's shrewd observation, "In squatting, ideology is loosely coupled to practice" is highly relevant to Roman Social Centers and is a notion that I will later touch upon.[12]

The complex history of squatting and its intersection with Social Centers make Rome a very unique case. Yet, there are undoubtedly wide reaching truths regarding self-managed autonomous spaces and the way they can simultaneously provide a form of Lefebvre's directly lived space while also contributing to a greater

[10] Pruijt, "Squatting in Europe," 19.
[11] Ibid, 21.
[12] Ibid, 48.

awareness of the consequences of national-global property speculation.[13] Urban Marxist and neo-Marxist theory regarding autonomous geographies are certainly helpful in understanding the specific case of Rome, as Rome's Social Centers have their root in heterogeneous leftist thought that has been developing, branching off and sometimes amalgamating since the 1960s.[14] Harvey's notion of "militant particularisms" – the idea that localized spaces of resistance fail to translate into more universal concerns – is a good point of theoretical contemplation when considering the squatting movement in Rome and its overall effectiveness. In this paper I will discuss a contemporary squatting group in Rome that is organized in a manner which promotes positive global ideals through localized place-based resistance.

When addressing the contemporary urban development of Rome and its relationship to squatting, it is important to keep in mind that the South European/Mediterranean city cannot be reduced to a combination of Anglo-American and Third World urbanization, but rather represents a unique spatial reality.[15] Despite the limited efficacy provided by generic models of Western cities to Rome, Molotch's theory of " The City as a Growth Machine" provides a helpful conceptual basis for understanding the consequences of unfettered capitalist urbanization under Fascist and Christian Democratic rule. Kreibich describes a Roman "cartel" of landlords linked to a corrupt political-administrative system

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[13] Jenny Pickerill and Paul Chatterton, "Notes towards autonomous geographies: creation, resistance and self-management as survival tactics," *Progress in Human Geography*, 30, no.6 (2006), 735-6.
[14] Mudu, *At the Intersection of Anarchists and Autonomists*, 415.
[15] Pacione, "The Social Geography of Rome," 359.

which followed speculative interests.[16] It is fair to say that in Rome, rather than a growth coalition, outward development was the result of a "growth cartel" whose goal was capital accumulation rather than the promotion of healthy economic growth for the region.[17]

For a growth machine to properly function, the movers and shakers driving the growth coalition must not view growth as self-serving, but rather as an outcome that will benefit everyone in the community. The idea behind the initial theory was that growth could reduce local property tax rates and generate increased property tax revenue that could then be channeled into public services such as schools, libraries, parks, etc.[18] Although contemporary research has challenged the actual efficacy of the growth machine theory, it is clear that in the case of Rome, those controlling growth (especially large scale speculators) were primarily concerned with improving their individual economic standing. The overconsumption defining the real estate sector was no doubt a symptom of an economy that was lacking diversity. This resulted in the State developing a relationship with landowners and builders that promoted unregulated, and ultimately unsustainable, outward expansion. This relationship can be referred to as a growth cartel, rather than a coalition, as it consisted of a small group of individuals who were seeking to benefit at the cost of the community.

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[16] Volker Kreibich, "Self-help planning of migrants in Rome and Madrid," *Habitat International*, 24 (2000), 206.
[17] Harvey Molotch, "The City as a Growth Machine: Towards a Political Economy of Place," *American Journal of Sociology 1976* in "The City Reader", ed. Richard T. LeGates and Frederic Stout (New York: Routledge, 2011), 251.
[18] Molotch, "The City as a Growth Machine," 252.

As stated by Pacione:

> The failure of Roman planning to counter the excesses of unrestrained capitalist development is a function of the nature of the Italian social formation and in particular the uneven distribution of political and economic power in favour of the land- and property-owning fraction of capital, and the symbiotic relationship that exists between *rentier* capital and the polity, including those agencies established to regulate capitalist activity.[19]

The relationship between the political right and the land interests in Rome resulted in a pattern of development that would give rise to a marginalized class of Romans on the city's periphery. The public response to the lack of affordable housing marked the genesis of squatting in Rome.

The empirical base for this paper are my observations from a Roman squat in the Centocelle neighborhood (*via delle Acacie 56*) that I had the opportunity to visit while spending several months in the city. This particular squat was operated by the organization *Comitato Popolare di Lotta per la casa* (The Popular Committee of Struggle for the Home). *Comitato Popolare di Lotta per la casa* is a group that I will focus on later in this paper, as I feel they exemplify the way the Roman squatting movement has evolved to include foreign immigrants. This new variation of squatting is promising as it seeks to achieve law, dignity, the right to housing, and social justice within an increasingly fractured society symptomatic of the contemporary "global city". Along with my field observations, I have analyzed coverage of Roman squatting by international media sources and used numerous secondary sources regarding Roman and European squatting, autonomous geographies, the urban development history of Rome, and, its deep political roots. I

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[19] Pacione, "The Social Geography of Rome," 369.

have attempted to utilize these perspectives and methods to build a context that will allow me to shed light on the current squatting movement in Rome.

Urban Development in Rome: A Dichotomy Between Thought and Practice

The history of contemporary urban development in Rome is characterized by a major disconnect between the planning machinery and the spatial reality of urban expansion. In other words, when it comes to Roman urban planning, thought and practice have often been at odds with one another.[20] Pacione categorized this dichotomy well when he referred to the contradiction between the *de jure* regulatory framework laid out in successive master plans and the *de facto* process of development which proceeded according to market forces since the late 1800s.[21] The unification of the Italian states in 1870 marked a new chapter of development for Rome, as it was selected as the national capital. Since then, four distinct master plans have guided most of the city's development (1883, 1909, 1931, and 1962). A new master plan approved in 2008 reflects the continued divergence between the reality of the public need and the practice of the building industry. Each plan was, quite obviously, highly influenced by the ruling political party of the time period. While it's easy to point out the failings of these plans and their implementation, it should be understood that Rome is a difficult city to create a comprehensive plan for: it is the national capital of Italy, the global capital of Christianity, a tourist center

[20] Ibid, 362.
[21] Ibid, 369.

filled with Roman and Etruscan Ruins, as well as Renaissance architecture and art, and a modern metropolitan commercial city.[22]

When Rome became the capital of unified Italy, it was a far cry from a metropolitan city, containing a meager 0.8% of the country's population.[23] Suddenly, all the new administrative government functions associated with a modern territorial state were deposited in a city lacking an economic base outside its ecclesiastical functions.[24] It makes sense then that bureaucracy and housing speculation, based on providing housing to the new civil servants, became Rome's defining economic functions.[25] However, an urban economy based largely on speculation can have only one outcome: major expansion. This prophecy would soon be fulfilled through the large-scale arrival of unskilled laborers from Central and Southern Italy seeking jobs in the building sector as masons, bricklayers and construction workers. The physical expansion of the city would come, quite literally, at the hands of these migrants, who simultaneously acted as builders and the demographic resource to fill the spatial expansion.[26]

In 1871, Rome had yet to experience its impending sprawl – approximately 96% of the city's 213,633 legal inhabitants lived within the Aurelian Walls, most concentrated in a 2.5 sq. kilometer area of land known as *Campus Martius* in the

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[22] Norman Krumholz, "Roman impressions: contemporary city planning and housing in Rome," *Landscape and Urban Planning*, 22 (1992), 107.
[23] John Agnew, *Rome*, ed. R.J. Johnston and P. Knox (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1995), 15.
[24] Agnew, *Rome*, 15.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Piero Vereni, "Spaces In-Between: Squats and Religious Practice in Rome," (Presented at *Workshop on 'Contested Social Spaces. Debating Postsecular Social Spaces in Italy and Turkey'*, Nov. 19-20, 2012)

bend of the Tiber.[27] Rome's municipal government recognized the need for city planning, yet there was disagreement as to whether a strong master plan should be developed before residential expansion, as opposed to speeding the development process up by simply considering individual private development proposals.[28] In 1873 the decision was made to create an advisory plan which heavily favored supporting the initiatives proposed by private investors.[29] Rome's hinterland, the Agro Romano, which had traditionally consisted of the villas of the wealthy, began to transform into an extension of the city through speculative building. Concurrently, there was a large in-migration of poor farm workers who took up informal jobs in the booming building sector.[30] Their crude shelters tended to be built illegally on the city's periphery due to their lack of a formal work permit, setting the stage for the eventual growth of *borgate*.[31] *Borgate* were small, often self-built settlements on the outskirts of the city that grew and developed over time. Unfortunately, Rome's first true master plan, promulgated in 1883, dealt only with the space inside the Aurelian Walls, thus allowing private builders to continue unregulated construction outside the city while even benefitting from tax exemptions meant to promote development.[32] The passage of the 1909 master plan did little to improve the growing issue of unregulated expansion, as it was littered with planning variances

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[27] Michael Pacione, "Rome City Profile," *Cities* 1, no.5 (1984), 457.
[28] Pacione, "Rome City Profile," 459.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Krumholz, "Roman impressions," 108.
[31] Kreibich, "Self-help planning of migrants in Rome and Madrid," 203.
[32] Pacione, "Rome City Profile," 459.

which failed to address the outward land speculation or the growing peripheral immigrant communities.[33]

After WWI, Italy was struck by poor social conditions and unemployment. Protests and a growing nationalistic ideology opened the door for the rise of Fascism.[34] When it came to planning, one of Mussolini's greatest aspirations was to return Rome to its ancient romanticized grandeur – he believed this necessitated the clearance of slums and the displacement of residents living in neighborhoods abutting some of the more famous piazzas.[35] To accommodate those removed from the historic districts, the government commissioned private builders to construct more *borgate* on the edge of the city. These villages consisted of low-density housing and were generally lacking in public infrastructure, including transportation, and thus rather isolated from the city. Interestingly enough, the government allowed the *borgate* to be constructed outside the area of the 1931 Fascist master plan.[36] It should be noted that the peripheral *borgate* constructed through the will of the Fascist government were accompanied by more naturally occurring *borgate* which consisted of immigrant workers in the construction sector, and eventually, artisans displaced from the city center through the tertiarization of the economy which was becoming increasingly based on tourism. Roman real-estate owners took advantage of the lenient master plans to sub-divide their peripheral land as agricultural plots but sell them as building plots to immigrants that were eager and capable of

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[33] Ibid.
[34] Federico Malusardi, "Rome 1989: The urgent need for a planning process," *Cities*, 6, no.4 (1989), 283.
[35] Krumholz, "Roman impressions," 109.
[36] Ibid.

achieving home-ownership through "self-help" housing.[37] During Rome's Fascist period (1922 to 1944) the number of people living outside the area covered by the master plan reached around 200,000.[38] As stated by Insolera, "…never in town planning history between 1870 and the last World War did Rome find itself so deprived of a master plan as after the 1931 plan."[39]

Rome's population increased by more than 700,000 inhabitants between 1931 and 1951, reaching a total of 1,650,000.[40] The growth continued to be driven by private builders engaging in speculative construction. The Roman growth cartel exploited the demand for housing, exacerbating the issue of unchecked annular development. The two major groups involved in the physical expansion of the city, the landowners and builder-developers, essentially made up a real estate oligarchy – in the mid 1950s around 10 companies or families controlled nearly all the land suitable for development.[41] In 1954, six private landowners, many descendants of the papal aristocracy, held the entirety of the 13 sq. miles zoned for residential development by the 1931 master plan.[42] The unregulated development undertaken by the growth cartel resulted in neighborhoods that were poorly engineered and lacking services.[43] The municipal government was eventually forced to install services in these neighborhoods, the cost being partially covered by a tax on those

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[37] Kreibich, "Self-help planning of migrants in Rome and Madrid," 203.
[38] Pacione, "Rome City Profile," 460.
[39] Malusardi, "Rome 1989," 283.
[40] Pacione, "Rome City Profile," 460.
[41] Agnew, *Rome*, 143.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Krumholz, "Roman impressions," 109.

seeking to "legalize" their homes.[44] As services were installed, land values would sky rocket, thus producing major financial gains for the large landowners who additionally benefited from Rome's lack of an effective system of property or income taxation.[45]

The Roman pattern of urban expansion, characterized by both large-scale private land speculation through a growth cartel including strong political connections and small-scale, gradual *macchia d'olio* (oil-stain) development through small landowners/speculators, created a unique housing issue.[46] Rome became defined by the paradoxical coexistence of housing stress and overconsumption, meaning that despite outward expansion, the ratio of people living in poor housing conditions was minimally reduced.[47] The city's favorable attitude towards private development and willingness to extend services to illegally built neighborhoods caused land values to rise to the point low-cost public housing could no longer be economically built and speculatively built housing for low-income groups was only profitable at high densities.[48] As speculation proved more profitable than building, most new construction was aimed at middle- and upper-income strata.[49] Serviced land was unaffordable for poor immigrants who were forced to purchase remote, peripheral tracts of land that had been illegally sub-divided and construct their own, technically illegal, homes.[50]

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[44] Kreibich, "Self-help planning of migrants in Rome and Madrid," 204.
[45] Agnew, *Rome*, 143.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Pacione, "The Social Geography of Rome," 362.
[48] Agnew, *Rome*, 144.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Ibid, 145.

Under pressure from residents unhappy with the swelling housing crisis, the Roman City Council scrambled to create a new master plan that would regulate expansion and deal with the peripheral *borgate* that were outside the previous plan. However, by the time the new 1962 plan was made law by the national government in 1966, the city's population, built area, and number of occupied rooms had each nearly doubled.[51] There is no doubt that the 1962 master plan had positive qualities (ie. create a new communications/service axis called the 'asse attrezzato', put a stop to illegal sub-divisions/formalize the *borgate*, and the construction of large parks extending from the center to periphery), but, the problem was that the outward expansion the plan sought to control had already occurred during the long period of political stall fueled by disagreements between the left and right. Furthermore, many of the plan's major precepts never came to fruition.

It is clear that the morphology of Rome's urban expansion from the late 1800s through the 1960s is a complicated story. As stated by Pacione, "it demonstrates the way in which a complex set of forces relating to a particular urban history, customs, planning philosophy, politics and public and private interests interact to produce the physical and socioeconomic structure of a modern city."[52] Perhaps the single continuity through Rome's contemporary urban development is the overarching narrative of the emergence of rentier capitalism in a territory transitioning from a loosely administered theocratic state to an interventionist, hierarchal, yet weak Italian state.[53]

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[51] Krumholz, "Roman impressions," 109.
[52] Pacione, "Rome City Profile," 463.
[53] Agnew, *Rome*, 57-59.

The Movement for Housing: Rise of the Left & Birth of the Social Center

In 1970, 50,000 marginalized Romans remained living in shacks, cellars, aqueducts and under bridges, demonstrating that the housing crisis remained a pressing issue.[54] Following the 1962 master plan, speculatively fueled urban expansion slowed, although, a decrease in migration to Rome and an end to the Italian "economic miracle" presumably played a larger role than the new city plan.[55] This time period was marked by a decline of the public sector, leaving the housing market increasingly under private control – a prominent theme as Rome continued its growth into a modern neoliberal city.[56] A large amount of housing stock remained empty due to the lack of demand for expensive homes among a population that was in need of cheaper rental options.[57] Yet, rents, even in newer public housing, had risen to unaffordable levels.[58]

The marginalized residents living in poor conditions were particularly outraged by the presence of empty apartments in the city. Housing provision had suddenly become an important local political issue – important enough to spur on an alliance between left-wing students, intellectuals and activists with workers and evicted families.[59] Such political organization was notable within the context of Rome's "southern culture of political and social indifference".[60] The result was the primary wave of organized squatting in Rome as groups began to occupy empty

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[54] Pacione, "Rome City Profile," 460.
[55] Agnew, *Rome*, 145.
[56] Maurizio Marcelloni, "Urban movements and political struggles in Italy," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 3 (1979), 255.
[57] Marcelloni, "Urban movements and political struggles in Italy," 255.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Vereni, "Spaces In-Between: Squats and Religious Practice in Rome," 4.
[60] Agnew, *Rome*, 57.

dwellings in the public, and eventually the private sector. Whereas left-wing groups in Northern Italy concentrated on workers' and students' struggles, the traditional leftist militant leaders in Rome emancipated themselves from these issues and instead focused on the marginalized urban population's struggle for housing.[61] At this point in time, the Italian Communist Party (*PCI*) played a large role in supporting these housing struggles. The rise of the new left in Rome, distinct from the typical leftist movements driven by the organization of factory workers, was a reflection of the incomplete industrialization of the city at the time. So, with no major organization of labor, what forces precipitated the growth of a unique and expansive leftist movement in the city? To answer this question it is helpful to briefly return to the Roman *borgate*.

As previously stated, the *borgate* were peripheral nodes of Roman development which were formed in one of two manners, or sometimes a combination of both: 1) Migrants who had moved to the city to work in the booming construction sector and artisans pushed from the center to due economic tertiarization bought illegally subdivided lots and constructed their own homes on them, creating low-density villages that were improved upon and developed into autonomous, medium-density (*palazzine*) suburbs with green space and land use mix.[62] 2) The Fascist government, or private developers working under their direction, built high-density housing projects (*intensivi)* on the city's outskirts to receive those who were evicted from the center during Mussolini's attempt to recreate Rome's former glory. The *borgate*, isolated from the economic and social

[61] Marcelloni, "Urban movements and political struggles in Italy," 255.
[62] Kreibich, "Self-help planning of migrants in Rome and Madrid," 208.

activities and services of the city far into the 1970s, became hotbeds for communism in Rome. Those who had been evicted during Fascism were obviously inclined to turn towards the *PCI*.[63] At the same time, residents upset with the lack of public services in their *borgate* were apt to spurn the right-wing ruling Christian Democrats (*DC*), who also had a reputation of colluding with powerful land interests.

The 1970s marked growing political dissent in Rome. Insolera believed this time period was dualistically defined by a ruling bourgeoisie city which dominated a peripheral subaltern city.[64] To combat this, the new left undertook a struggle for improved housing by rejecting Rome's previous pattern of unfettered capitalist expansion which had been promoted by dominant real estate interests. The burgeoning movement for housing rights utilized public demonstrations in an attempt to reclaim access to basic services.[65] By the mid-1970s, nearly 4,000 apartments in the city had been squatted.[66] Public dissatisfaction with the Roman growth cartel and its connections to both the ruling *DC,* and the powerful Catholic Church, had reached a breaking point, resulting in the *PCI* winning the municipal elections. While the *PCI* remained in control of the municipality over the next decade, they attempted to address the varied housing issues and experienced some mild success, especially in incorporating *borgate* into the city. At the same time the *PCI* had been victorious in the municipal elections, they had also entered into the

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[63] Vereni, "Spaces In-Between: Squats and Religious Practice in Rome."
[64] Agnew, *Rome*, 122.
[65] Pierpaolo Mudu, (forthcoming) *Ogni sfratto sarà una barricata: squatting for housing and social conflict in Rome*, 2014.
[66] Mudu, *Ogni sfratto sarà una barricata*.

"historical compromise" on the national level which created a coalition government between themselves and the *DC*.[67]

In the 1980s, the party system was slowly losing its role as the agent for leftist political organization and debate, opening up space for left-wing grassroots organizations to fill the void.[68] The *PCI* lost its political capacity to mobilize classes living in peripheral areas as a result of its incapacity to resonate with those affected by the growing social trends of poverty and migration.[69] The increasingly ideologically splintered left would soon draw on its previous collective experience of antisystemic mobilization during the 1970s aimed at building a shared political identity, to form Rome's first true Social Centers. Besides fulfilling a need for adequate housing from below, the pro-squatter actions of the 1970s were an attempt to foster spaces where people could politically organize in the absence of labor organization due to the minimal industrialization of Rome. It was during this time that the left's movement for housing rights took on the secular character that would generally come to define political squatting and Social Centers in Rome, until the large-scale arrival of international immigrants beginning in the late 1980s. The genesis of Roman Social Centers marked the start of a second wave of squatting movements in the city, which were unique in their political focus and tendency to absorb an ideologically fragmented generation of leftist activists.

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[67] Mudu, "Resisting and Challenging Neoliberalism," 63.
[68] Ibid, 64.
[69] Mudu, *Ogni sfratto sarà una barricata*, 4.

Roman Social Centers: Building and Maintaining Autonomous Spaces

Since the unification of Italy, anarchist groups have existed; these groups shared a critical outlook on authority and a claim for individual autonomy through freedom and equality principles.[70] After the Fascist period, these organizations regrouped within the context of the growing left, although the movement was still far from unified, operating through multiple factions.[71] Beginning in the 1970s, autonomists, such as Antonio Negri, also became a major part of the leftist landscape.[72] *Autonomia* consisted of multiple independent groups based around a locality, workplace or particular issue.[73] Anarchism and autonomism have similar origins in that both groups essentially used classical Marxism as a base that they then split away from. The end of *Autonomia* in the mid-1980s concurrently generated the Social Center Movement, which also absorbed a new generation of anarchists who identified as "punks" and were defined by a repudiation of the rules of modern capitalist society through dress, music, and a simultaneous rejection of political participation and development of political consciousness.[74]

Broadly defined, Social Centers are abandoned buildings, such as warehouses, factories, military forts, or schools that have been occupied or "squatted" and transformed into cultural and political hubs explicitly free from both the market and state control.[75] In the same way that Rome's overarching political

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[70] Mudu, *At the Intersection of Anarchists and Autonomists*, 414.
[71] Ibid, 415.
[72] Ibid.
[73] Ibid.
[74] Ibid, 419.
[75] Naomi Klein, "Squatters in white overalls," *The Guardian*, June 8, 2001, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/jun/08/globalisation.comment.

polarization made it nearly impossible to institute a cohesive urban planning strategy, the amalgamation of a fragmented landscape of leftist antagonistic movements (ie. anarchists, autonomists, punks, communists, socialists etc.) guaranteed Social Centers that differed from one another in terms of origin, political affiliations and internal organization.[76] However, Rome's squatted Social Centers have always shared some ubiquitous qualities, primarily their role as sites of occupation where the political dimension is dominant over urban housing needs.[77] Social Centers have also intersected in other characteristics, like the self-production and management of political, social and cultural events financed through funds collected by selling cheap snacks during events, or their shared network of political affiliations on the extreme left.[78]

In seeking to exist outside the dominant capitalist bureaucracy, it follows that squatted Roman Social Centers generally attempted to organize horizontally to achieve a form of direct, non-hierarchical democracy.[79] However, it is very difficult to occupy and self-manage a space non-hierarchically and without any guiding charter. Thus, Social Centers philosophically differentiated themselves from one another due to tensions based on debates regarding the divergence of ideology and practice in autonomous squatted spaces. These debates centered on the relationship between the consumer and the social center, the relationship between political entities and the social center (including the arguments over the legalization of these spaces), the relationship between the individual and labor, the provision of services

[76] Mudu, "Resisting and Challenging Neoliberalism," 67.
[77] Vereni, "Spaces In-Between: Squats and Religious Practice in Rome," 5.
[78] Mudu, "Resisting and Challenging Neoliberalism," 67.
[79] Ibid, 68.

in the context of the shrinking public welfare state, and a host of other, often hyper-localized, issues. Perhaps the greatest division was between centers that accepted a relationship with the municipality and those that did not.[80] But, Social Centers were forced to collectively address other realities as well – How should the centers be funded? Should the workers be paid? Was it possible to develop a political consciousness while maintaining the core mission of an autonomous self-managed space? What types of services should they aim to supply and was this even possible without introducing self-exploitation?[81] The way Social Centers chose to answer these questions influenced the form they took as time progressed. Today, Mudu has divided the existing Social Centers (they number in the 30s) into five distinct groups, exemplifying how they've maintained a fragmented underlying theoretical framework.[82] This no doubt partially accounts for the limited inter-center relations.

It is helpful to briefly return to the issue of legalization as an example of the way that critical ideological disagreements affected the form and function of Social Centers. A relationship with a municipality or private landowner is clearly paradoxical for an organization based on independence from political parties and the dominance of neoliberal capitalism through squatting. Yet, by 1998, around 50% of Social Centers had entered into agreements with the private or public owners of the properties that they occupied.[83] This institutionalization means that a

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[80] Ibid, 70.
[81] Mudu, *At the Intersection of Anarchists and Autonomists*, 422.
[82] Mudu, "Resisting and Challenging Neoliberalism," 80.
[83] Ibid, 70.

movement is channeled into a stable pattern based on formalized rules and laws.[84] Castells believes this results in a loss of identity.[85] So, what would drive a Social Center to seek legalization? As stated by an activist involved in the Social Centers Movement in the Italian city of Trieste, "If I can have a place without the terror of the cops knocking on the door every day, then I can do things I couldn't otherwise – for example have music and films within the occupied place."[86] Perhaps then, in the case of Roman Social Centers, legalization is more of a trade off: sacrificing a degree of the autonomy that comes with illegal squatting in exchange for security that allows for the creation of a desired political/cultural environment. It follows that legalization may actually be an avenue to maintain identity in some instances. It also helped create a model of success for future squats that contained international immigrants who were in an inherently precarious situation. However, it's easy to comprehend why the Social Centers opposed to legalization would be resentful of those which sought out this status. By creating a legal/illegal division between Social Centers, solidarity is broken and those of illegal status are immediately in greater danger of being forcefully evicted. The example of the legalization debate helps to illustrate the very real ramifications of ideological differences between Roman Social Centers.

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[84] Hans Pruijt, "Is the institutionalization of urban movements inevitable?" (Joint Editors and Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2003), http://www.eur.nl/fsw/staff/homepages/pruijt/publications/inevitable/.
[85] Pruijt, "Is the institutionalization of urban movements inevitable?"
[86] "Trieste: Chatting about the Social Centres" trans. by Steve Wright in *A Window onto Italy's Social Centres*, Affinities: A Journal of Radical Theory, Culture and Action 1, no.1 (2007), 12-20.

Although Roman Social Centers were clearly based in complex, if not at times abstract, leftist theory, focusing solely on their theoretical background may fall short in properly conveying the tangible effects they've had on neighborhoods and individuals. *Forte Prenestino,* a prominent Roman Social Center that was first squatted in the mid 1980s, provides a good case. Originally a military base, it was abandoned in the 1960s like many of Rome's buildings during an era defined by speculation at the hands of the growth cartel.[87] Located in a peripheral neighborhood known for high levels of unemployment and heroin abuse, the occupiers sought to offer a radical alternative to the marginalization of fringe city life through bottom-up local self-development/management.[88] An initial occupier expressed the excitement of the center's genesis, "All of a sudden, we were inside, 'running' the place – we who had never managed anything except our unemployment, our homelessness, our own little patch, our streets."[89] Such a statement seems to reinforce the picture painted by Insolera of the marginalized Roman city of the periphery. Within a decade, *Forte* had come to house an exhibition gallery, practice rooms for bands, spaces for theatrical performances, a dark room, a gymnasium and a café.[90] It held classes and film nights, while also creating its own music label made up of local rap and reggae bands, and producing a journal to document their activities and political discussions.[91] This undoubtedly demonstrates the critical role that Social Centers have played, and continue to play,

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[87] "In the Shell of the Old – Italy's Social Centres," trans by Steve Wright, https://libcom.org/library/in-shell-old-italy-social-centres-wright.
[88] Ibid.
[89] Solaro, "Forte Prenestino" trans. by Steve Wright.
[90] "In the Shell of the Old – Italy's Social Centres," trans by Steve Wright.
[91] Ibid.

in providing an alternative system to those marginalized by neoliberal capitalism – an alternative to flight into private life or resignation to violent militancy, two outcomes that became prominent in the late 1970s as the left-wing party system lost its status as an outlet for the political organization of the Italian youth culture.[92]

Further examination of the primary source related to the *Forte* reinforces the earlier discussion of the political fragmentation typical of the Roman Social Centers and how this affected the activities that were undertaken. "…From punks, who had pushed the concert programs…to people (not only autonomists) coming from the various political experiences of the seventies, who brought with them debates over nuclear power, anti-militarism and third worldism, the new left, censorship, psychiatry and so on."[93] This example makes it clear that there was a high diversity of leftist ideologies even within a single Social Center. Centers embraced this multiplicity of viewpoints by fostering a collective identity that valorized diversity and a trajectory of liberation outside monolithic structures and party lobbies.[94] The Roman Social Center Movement continued to grow in the 1990s as large protest movement occupations swept through Italian universities.[95] However, today the number of Roman Social Centers is fairly solidified and is unlikely to increase much.

Realistically, it is an exaggeration to claim Social Centers have achieved a collective identity. Rather, their relationship reflects the leftist fragmentation that has always defined them. Their criticism of neoliberalism comes from a number of perspectives, positing the overall movement as a cluster of similar, yet distinct leftist

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[92] Ibid.
[93] Solaro, "Forte Prenestino" trans. by Steve Wright.
[94] Ibid.
[95] Mudu, "Resisting and Challenging Neoliberalism," 76.

ideologies, whose strength lies in the crosscutting nature of its individual interests and the technological web which connects them allowing for rapid mass mobilization around important events.[96] Social Centers have been successful in creating self-managed, autonomous spaces outside of the dominant capitalist framework while simultaneously providing some services for the historically marginalized segments of the population. Most notably, they have helped to ameliorate the damage caused by the Roman tradition of speculative expansion by reconstituting abandoned and decrepit properties in the city for positive public use. Social Centers emancipated the antagonistic movement from the ghetto, but it is their continued connection to this secular movement which has made them somewhat incompatible with integrating the recent international immigrants who wish to keep their religious beliefs or involving citizens who do not want to operate outside of neoliberalism, but simply believe they are not being provided with the public services they are owed as tax payers.[97]

For the Social Center Movement to foster a large-scale social change in contemporary Rome, it must obviously evolve to include a broader sect of the population, but also begin to germinate the seeds of a significant system that could feasibly replace the status quo. There is an inherent postmodern root to the Roman Social Centers – from birth, their main aim has been to "help break up existing power structures" rather than seize power themselves.[98] This rings extremely similar to the Nietzschean notion of destroying the "old tablets". Yet, what is

[96] Ibid, 73.
[97] Ibid, 76.
[98] Ibid, 84.

destruction without creation but total nihilism? Perhaps, at the very least, Social Centers can act as a launching pad for the formation of a new, more expansive, movement. There has been evidence in recent years that suggest some of these centers are moving in the right direction. In the 1990s the Social Center Movement was fairly disconnected from those squatting simply to put a roof over their heads. However, a stronger networking framework has allowed the two paths to come closer together.[99] Now, it is common that squats for housing organize social activities on the premises of Social Centers or similar entities.[100] The emergence of squats that resemble Social Centers but are open to the public, acting more as community centers than militant political pockets, points to a new wave of squatting in Rome.

A New Wave of Roman Occupations: The Movement for "the Commons" & Postsecular Squatting

In recent years, a new wave of occupations has swept through Rome, building off the base provided by the squatting tradition of the Social Center Movement. However, whereas the genesis of Social Centers was in the combination of extreme leftist thought in an attempt to foster spaces free from the dominant neoliberal discourse, more recent movements have not been cultivated out of this inherent secularism. The Social Center Movement can be seen as a byproduct of the political context of the time period, namely the role of the political right in perpetuating a speculation-driven growth cartel and the ramifications this had in producing a marginalized, fringe-society under housing stress. The way the

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[99] Mudu, *Ogni sfratto sarà una barricata*, 19.
[100] Ibid.

movement chose to attack the power structure necessitated allowing their political dimension to take precedence over immediate housing needs. It did not seek to demand government services, but rather to act as a laboratory for reformulating space completely outside the dominant system. The new wave of movements are similarly grounded in a contemporary socio-political context that has had to account for an increase in international immigration and the continued downsizing of public welfare in the face of a lingering recession.

What hasn't changed is the need for affordable, adequate housing as the unemployment rate climbs – yet, swelling tax rates and a reduction in public spending have only exacerbated the crisis.[101] In 2003, the outstanding applications for council flats (public housing) in Rome numbered 25,000, causing as many as 8,000 families to resort to squatting.[102] Although the "occupations' galaxy" remains a collection of fragments, a subtle shift in the squatting paradigm could be described as a move from demanding the social right to housing, to actively pursuing the right to dwelling.[103] The right to dwelling may be posited as a physical solution to homelessness that seeks to reconstitute the pre-modern notion of "neighborhood" in a postsecular mold.[104] Although this is a characteristic particularly pertinent to the squatting typology exemplified by groups that integrate immigrants into their occupations, this section will also address the coexistence of a broader movement aiming to "occupy the commons". I will begin with the latter, which is less a specific

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[101] Hornby, "Squatters of Rome scrape by at the margins in Italy's crisis."
[102] Pierpaolo Mudu, "Patterns of Segregation in Contemporary Rome," *Urban Geography* 27, no.5 (2013), 426.
[103] Bartlett Development Planning Unit, "Rome, Occupation City," http://www.bartlett.ucl.ac.uk/dpu/programmes/summerlab/2013-series/rome.
[104] Vereni, "Spaces In-Between: Squats and Religious Practice in Rome."

squatting typology than an umbrella-term for occupations undertaken by disgruntled citizens upset with a lack of public services and space.

Occupy the Commons

There is undoubtedly a segment of the population that is upset with the speculation of pubic buildings and lack of public services, but uncomfortable assuming the extreme leftist position that characterizes many Social Centers in Rome. In reference to the centers, an article by *Vice* states, "…such places are found on the outskirts of town, and often the atmosphere is not actually very social. Militant political discourse, abrasive music and an overabundance of mangy dogs can characterize the squatter aesthetic."[105] Although this description is a caricature of various stereotypes regarding Social Centers, it certainly helps to illustrate why some Italians are uneasy to utilize them as an outlet for their political action. Whereas Social Centers have always aimed to tear down existing power structures, recent Roman occupations have expressed more concrete demands. As noted by Mudu, it's difficult to compare Social Centers and their complex foundations and actions to newer social movements that consist of more temporary or single-issue organizations.[106] However, examining the descriptions of several spaces occupied as part of the movement for the commons, in light of the earlier account of the *Forte Prenestino* Social Center, helps to delineate the differences between the two.

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[105] Al Burian, "An Occupied Cinema in Rome," *Vice*, October 22, 2013, http://www.vice.com/en_ca/read/an-occupied-cinema-in-rome.
[106] Mudu, "Resisting and Challenging Neoliberalism," 84.

In November of 2012, Cinema America, located in the historical Trastevere neighborhood of Rome, was occupied by a group of young students.[107] The movie theater had been designed by the famous architect Di Castro and was slated to be demolished in favor of a parking lot and luxury apartments.[108] The cinema was transformed into a community center that offered film screenings, theater classes and artistic workshops, while acting as a host for the neighborhood's public assemblies and a hangout spot for all generations.[109] Notably, Cinema America eventually mobilized a coalition of architects, actors and intellectuals who publicly supported the squat.[110] In addition to Cinema America, the early stages of the movement have resulted in several other high-profile squats of cultural institutions within the city.

Teatro Valle, an 18th century theatre in the city center, has been occupied since June 2011, when a group of actors, technicians, dancers and musicians took control of the space.[111] After learning the theater had been turned over to the state to be sold, the coalition began the occupation as a protest against art cuts that have resulted in the breakdown of theater associations and the physical closure of theaters across the country.[112] The occupiers have been successful in running the theater – they host nightly free shows featuring famous Italian rappers and singers,

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[107] Burian, "An Occupied Cinema in Rome."
[108] Donatella Della Ratta, " 'Occupy' the Commons."
[109] Ibid.
[110] Ibid.
[111] Tess Amodeo-Vickery, "Velvet revolution: inside the arts protests at Rome's Teatro Valle," *The Guardian*, October 7, 2011, http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2011/oct/07/arts-protests-rome-teatro-valle.
[112] Amodeo-Vickery, "Velvet revolution: inside the arts protests at Rome's Teatro Valle."

as well as participatory discussions and workshops.[113] These events are so popular that the 600+ seat theater is often filled to capacity.[114] The occupation has not only garnered public support from some important Italian directors and actors, but also received backing from prominent scholars who are cooperatively working with the occupiers to draft a law proposal protecting the "commons".[115]

In the San Giovanni neighborhood, another centrally located area, a forgotten public building that had formerly acted as the administrative headquarters for vehicle registration and driver's licensing has been refashioned into a neighborhood sports complex that provides activities for a variety of ages.[116] Renamed Sport e Cultura Popolare (Scup), the aging space was rejuvenated by a combination of activists, sport instructors, and neighborhood residents who were outraged by the disappearance of public space for leisure and sport in the rapidly gentrifying area.[117]

The term "movement" must be used loosely when addressing the occupations of the commons recently occurring in Rome. Although these occupations have built off the tradition of squatting established by Social Centers, they are fundamentally different because their overarching aim is to "re-publicize" previously closed spaces rather than creating a sphere that can horizontally operate outside capitalist relations.[118] Although on the surface, occupy the commons (OTC)

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[113] Ibid.
[114] Ibid.
[115] Donatella Della Ratta, " 'Occupy' the Commons."
[116] Ibid.
[117] Ibid.
[118] Tomaso Ferrando, "Liberation through Occupation: Italian Property Outlaws," *Critical Legal Thinking*, September 29, 2013, http://criticallegalthinking.com/2013/09/29/liberation-occupation-italian-property-outlaws/.

squats appear neighborhood friendly and oriented towards particular local issues, they are also inarguably linked to the currents of the global occupy resistance through social media communication. However, it is certainly possible to highlight the shared traits of the OTC squats in Rome in an attempt to build a rough defining framework.

Primarily, it is important to understand that the OTC movement is still fairly amorphous. Social Centers have long been a haven for leftist activists and those on the fringe of Roman society. There is a far broader collectivity in OTC – activists, students, and workers have come together in these squats, often gaining the backing of prominent cultural and academic figures. Furthermore, the OTC movement seeks to draw on citizens' outrage over a variety of issues (decreased welfare state and public services, speculation of public buildings and lack of public space, the housing crisis, unemployment, etc) in order to mobilize them within the current political system. The general end goal of such mobilization would be some type of legislative reform that would promote common utility over private interests and market logic.[119] The occupiers driving this movement have a strong belief that they are exercising their constitutional rights to the social function of property. OTC is not an attack against democracy, but more a challenge against top-down sovereignty through focusing on the specific needs of communities (ie. space for leisure or sport, community centers and nodes that provide room for the celebration of culture and the arts). A direct demand for housing appears to take a back seat to main focus of

[119] Ferrando, "Liberation through Occupation."

OTC, which is battling the global financial crisis by liberating community space from the accumulation regime.

Only time will tell if OTC can grow into a coherent movement with specific, shared goals and interests. Currently, it is better defined as a trend of squats addressing differing community needs, undertaken by a broad swath of participants. The question is whether a movement built on such a base can make the transition from a collection of temporary organizations into a permanent force with an articulate agenda. Although traditional Social Centers in the city may be accused of isolating themselves through a rejection of the current socio-political system, they have undoubtedly proven both their longevity and ability to create autonomous, self-managed spaces. OTC will have to demonstrate that squatting as a means to achieving rights as citizens is also a feasible way to produce tangible gains. OTC's attempt to foster a space alternative to the duality of public vs. private is a theme that will manifest itself in the forthcoming discussion of the postsecular squatting practiced by *Comitato Popolare di Lotta per la casa*.

Comitato Popolare di Lotta per la casa: Possibilities of Postsecular Squatting

In the late 1980s, a new flow of international immigrants began to stream into Rome. These foreigners were primarily from Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe and South America. By 2003, it was estimated that nearly 10% of all foreign residents in Italy lived in Rome.[120] Italian immigrant policies have been somewhat inconsistent as the legislation has sought to enforce legal provisions while allowing Italian

[120] Mudu, "Patterns of Segregation in Contemporary Rome," 426.

employers to benefit from the introduction of immigrants into the labor market.[121] Whereas the historic Roman underclass was generally pushed to the city periphery, new international immigrants have sometimes created ethnic enclaves in the city center (ie. the Esquilino neighborhood), although many have also been forced to the city outskirts and suburbs. The central immigrant neighborhoods have resulted partially from the employment of Asians and Eastern Europeans as domestic workers.[122]

Immigrants have been accused of self-segregation and the decline of certain neighborhoods has been attributed to their arrival by former residents.[123] Although the statistics related to immigrants are often spotty, the increasing number of shanty towns and poor housing for immigrants indicates the reality of a segregation process.[124] For many immigrants, the only option has been to turn to squatting. However, these new squatters, often of Muslim, Catholic or Protestant faith, have no link to the Roman underclass and cannot easily assimilate into its highly secularized tradition of squatting. The interests of these foreigners, whose primary concern has been to attain adequate shelter, does not quite match up with the militant nature of the highly politicized Social Center Movement. Luckily, institutions like *Comitato Popolare di Lotta per la casa* (CPLC) have stepped in to provide a squatting framework that successfully integrates both foreigners and Romans. CPLC achieves this by touting culture as a project for the future – something that should bring

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[121] Ibid, 431.
[122] Ibid, 427.
[123] Ibid, 434.
[124] Ibid, 437.

people together to gaze ahead at the possibilities presented by collective action across cultural divides.

CPLC was the brainchild of Pina Vitale, a middle-aged native of the Apulia region in Southern Italy who began her activism in the late 1970s while attending a Roman university.[125] To gain a better understanding of the postsecular nature of CPLC, it is helpful to first examine the manner in which Vitale structures the process of creating a squat at a new location. When the leadership of CPLC is prepared to undertake a new squat, they select a location, generally an abandoned publicly owned building, and begin to build a list of families that have expressed interest in participating. Those who come to CPLC for assistance are often the most marginalized in the city, homeless foreigners lacking any form of support network.[126] CPLC then begins to set up a series of meetings between all the families on their list – this serves the purpose of gauging interest, while simultaneously providing the potential squatters with the basic knowledge of occupations and allowing them to begin to build trust amongst each other.[127]

When CPLC finally decides exactly which families will be included in the new squat, the breakdown is purposely made to reflect roughly half Italians and half foreign immigrants. At this point, the occupation begins and the families enter the building while the political leaders of CPLC remain outside to negotiate with law enforcement in order to prevent an immediate eviction.[128] As the occupation

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[125] Ilenia Carrone, "Pina Vitale: vita quotidiana," *Doppiozero*, February 27, 2014, http://www.doppiozero.com/materiali/resistenza70/pina-vitale-vita-quotidiana.
[126] Vereni, "Spaces In-Between: Squats and Religious Practice in Rome."
[127] Ibid.
[128] Ibid.

continues, the occupiers begin a process of working communally to rebuild the space, subdividing it into family units while maintaining a sense of neighborhood through cooperation and reciprocity.[129] Those with building experience work together in order to construct the new flats one by one. While this goes on, the families are forced to share everything, including space and food.[130] The final product is an astounding transformation. The flats, although not large, resemble any other "normally" constructed apartments, and are all serviced with electricity and plumbing. Although the decorative style of each flat often reflects the background of the particular inhabitant, the squat still has an overarching sense of community and multiculturalism – there are an abundance of shared spaces, such as auditoriums and play areas for the children (the particular squat I visited was in a former school). Despite the fact that the building is "squatted", the families each contribute 100 Euros a month to a communal fund that goes towards the upkeep and construction costs of the property. This assures that all families in the squat have quality housing, not just those with the most money or experience in construction.[131] The CPLC squat in the Centocelle neighborhood of Rome is home to nearly 50 families, each reflecting stories of immigrants and Italians, young children and the elderly, all united by the need to have a roof over their heads, but especially a dignified alternative to the housing promised in vain by the capital for years.

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[129] Ibid.
[130] Ibid.
[131] Monica Pasquino, "Giornalisti squala contro i movimenti per la casa," L' *Huffington Post*, March 31, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.it/monica-pasquino/giornalisti-squalo-contro-i-movimenti-per-la-casa_b_5060064.html?utm_hp_ref=italy.

Vitale's own personal background demonstrates the way in which the Social Center Movement, an outlet for extra-parliamentary struggle, acted as the base for new squatting movements by providing environments that encouraged the interaction and exchange of many leftist ideologies. After participating in the initial struggle for housing as a university student in the late-1970s, Vitale became highly involved in the Social Center Movement. CPLC was born years later as the fulfillment of a vision of a different form of struggle – one that would directly address the need for housing while promoting a love for all humanity in the city. Although Vitale maintains a close relationship with the Social Center Movement (her daughter is the director of the Social Center called "Angelo Mai"), the squats operated by CPLC reflect a postsecular nature unique from the secular fabric that constitutes the Social Center Movement.

First, it is helpful to define postsecularism in order to comprehend how it can be attributed to CPLC's squats. A postsecular space accepts and preserves difference by engendering a blurred line between public and private – something akin to the pre-modern notion of neighborhood. This allows for religion to be publicly asserted and expressed. These neighborhood spaces must also be defined by a religious tolerance. The postsecular space is home to multiple religions that all respect one another. Furthermore, it is not "de-secularized"; rather there is a co-presence of both religious and secular worldviews.[132] Those of secular conceptions and religious ideals must take seriously each other's contributions to themes in the public

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[132] Massimo Rosati, "Longing For a Postsecular Condition: Italy and the Postsecular," (*Workshop on Politics, Religion and Culture in the Postsecular World*, May 2011.) http://synergia-isa.ru/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/rosati_en.pdf.

sphere.[133] Also, in a postsecular space the sacred can take on forms immanent and civic, as well as transcendent.[134] It is easy to see how CPLC's squats fit into this postsecular framework. The purposeful integration of Romans with international immigrants creates an environment where social, cultural and religious differences are not only accepted but encouraged. There is an underlying sense of community in these squats that is rare in an era of neoliberal cities defined by a sharp line between public and private space. This is probably a result of the communal process of rehabilitating the buildings. Although at first many of the occupiers participate simply out of the need to put a roof over their head, they soon come to understand that they are part of something bigger – a growing network of multicultural communities that challenge the traditional view of the city. CPLC occupiers come to share the feeling that the true meaning of life in the city is much bigger than individual needs or choices.[135] This collective postsecular outlook certainly stems from Vitale's leadership.

Vitale, a self-described "tyrant" at times, is a relentless force surging for law, dignity, and the right to housing and social justice. On the surface, her atheist stance does not appear postsecular – she has claimed, "Those who are desperate and give up belong to the church, those that fight are my people." Yet, upon closer inspection, her views are actually quite in line with the postsecular notion of the sacred being channeled into an immanent and civic outlet.[136] When expounding on her political views, Vitale states that she, "fought the Communist Party as if it was my

[133] Rosati, "Longing For a Postsecular Condition: Italy and the Postsecular."
[134] Ibid.
[135] Vereni, "Spaces In-Between: Squats and Religious Practice in Rome."
[136] Vereni, "Spaces In-Between: Squats and Religious Practice in Rome."

stepmother."[137] Yet, she also expresses dissatisfaction with being labeled an anarchist.[138] Vitale believes that the true revolution is a collective path which results in the building of community.[139] Her assertion that suffering is never personal, but rather linked to the outside and understood together, collectively, certainly appears to be a manifestation of the sacred through civic channels. Vitale imagines the city as a collective right that's achieved when everyone lives in a way that allows for dignity, freedom and multiculturalism.[140] If a new, open city is to develop, everyone must feel love towards the whole of humanity.[141] These feelings define her political discourse and thus are adopted and inflected in different ways by the occupiers that constitute the CPLC squats.

It is clear that CPLC's occupations, and those of similar groups, represent a movement that is unique and beneficial to Rome's urban fabric. Firstly, such movements are positive because they successfully rehabilitate decaying urban space. There is much practical value to the way these communities of squatters are able to breathe new life into disused buildings at a much lower cost to the municipality than any traditional private or public rehabilitation projects. Beyond the physical benefits, the postsecular nature of their occupations imagines a city that forgoes marginalization in favor of multiculturalism and freedom expressed through a love and respect of all human beings. Such a discourse challenges the city's history of speculation and seeks to reconstitute a sense of neighborhood that is often lost in

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[137] Carrone, "Pina Vitale: vita quotidiana," *Doppiozero*
[138] Ibid.
[139] Ibid.
[140] Vereni, "Spaces In-Between: Squats and Religious Practice in Rome."
[141]Ibid.

modern cities. Furthermore, the goals of postsecular squatting groups like CPLC avoid the hyper-localism of militant particularisms. As stated by Harvey:

> However, it is only a positive moment if it ceases to be an end in itself, ceases to be a thing which is going to solve all our problems, and starts to be a moment in this process of broader construction of a more universal set of values which are going to be about how the city is going to be as a whole.[142]

There is no doubt that Vitale's conceptualization of an open city which belongs to everyone is a sentiment that reflects universal values. Perhaps through this universality, the postsecular approach to squatting exemplified by CPLC can coalesce into a larger movement that will not only help alleviate the housing crisis in Rome, but also challenge the neoliberal trajectory of the city.

Conclusion

There is a long and complicated history of squatting in the city of Rome. This tradition began as a response to over 50 years of nearly unregulated urban expansion propelled by a growth cartel consisting of land interests and a right-wing government that supported private initiatives. The Roman system of unrestrained capitalism resulted in overconsumption and a housing stock which did not reflect the needs of the public. Those marginalized by Rome's history of urban growth spurred on an initial wave of squatting in the 1950s and 1960s aimed at gaining access to public services and adequate housing. As this peripheral class of citizens ceased to find a political outlet in the Communist Party in the late 1970s, the Social Center Movement grew to fill the void. The Social Center Movement was extra-

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[142] David Harvey, "Contested Cities: Social Process and Spatial Form," *Transforming Cities* ed. Nick Jewson and Susanne MacGregor (1997) in "The City Reader", ed. Richard T. LeGates and Frederic Stout (New York: Routledge, 2011), 236.

parliamentary in the sense that it sought to create autonomous, self-managed spaces outside the prevailing political framework. The movement was successful in challenging the dominant view of the city, yet fragmented due to the complex combination of leftist ideologies which animated them. In the 1990s, some Social Centers shifted from acting solely as militant pockets of resistance into somewhat networked public spheres which were less at odds with the concurrent squatting movements that posited housing as their foremost concern, rather than a free, secular space where politics could take forms outside the neoliberal capitalist discourse. This paradigm shift acted as the base for new squatting movements that have developed within the context of the lingering economic crisis and increased international immigration.

It is no wonder that there is a large and complex squatting landscape in the contemporary city of Rome. A lack of affordable housing is often the result of neoliberal capitalism, and in the last two decades Rome has certainly embraced neoliberal urban policies.[143] This has resulted in the privatization of municipal services, the defunding of municipal housing assets, an administration dominated by upper-class interests and security policies which are used to enforce social control.[144] Neoliberalism has presented no solution to the housing crisis in Rome. Policy on both the national and municipal level has protected speculators and put

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[143] Mudu, *Ogni sfratto sarà una barricata*, 4.
[144] Pierpaolo Mudu, (forthcoming) "Housing and Homelessness in Contemporary Rome," (Indiana University Press, 2014).

the responsibility of constructing affordable housing in the hands of private interests that have failed to produce major improvements.[145]

Squatting has been a response to the shortage of housing and public services in Rome for decades. However, the varying interests among participants has resulted in a number of separate movements and typologies. It seems that both the physical city and its inhabitants benefit from the reconstitution of dead and unused space that occurs through squatting. Although the various contemporary occupations (Social Centers, postsecular, occupy the commons, deprivation-based) have differing aspirations, it seems that they will have to continue to foster shared networks that will allow them to mobilize on a large scale. As stated by CPLC's leader Pina Vitale, "…the idea of the city is the following: everybody must learn how to coexist, everybody must have the same rights, the same problems to be solved."[146] The one thing that is certain is that squatting in Rome will continue to be a method utilized by the marginalized to achieve their right to the city.

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[145] Mudu, *Ogni sfratto sarà una barricata*, 6-7.
[146] Vereni, "Spaces In-Between: Squats and Religious Practice in Rome."

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