

Housing Squats as “Educational Sites of Resistance”: The Process of Movement Social Base Formation in the Struggle for the House

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Abstract: This paper aims to contribute to the scholarly work on the internal dynamics of contemporary housing movements. In particular, it explores the spatial strategies through which squat inhabitants change the configuration of the squat to turn an abandoned building into a house for multiple families. The main argument is that these strategies, requiring horizontal participation and solidarity, catalyse the transformation of a sum of people dispossessed of the house into a collective, political subject. Therefore, the author proposes to analyse housing squats as “educational sites of resistance”. The findings come from the author’s participant observation of Rome’s housing movement organisation *Coordinamento Cittadino di Lotta per la casa*. In addition to providing empirical knowledge, the paper aims to offer inputs for investigating to what extent the process of politicisation is shaped by the space and what constitute the peculiarities of a so-recomposed collective subject.

Keywords: housing squat, space, strategy, ethnography

Introduction

This article aims to contribute to the analysis of housing movements, looking into the movement’s squats. The main argument is that the process of squat space construction is intricately linked with the formation of social movement’s base. I sustain that the attempt to make a house for dozens of families out of an abandoned building triggers solidarity between inhabitants and, in turn, it can catalyse their political awareness. To shed a light on this process, I propose to analyse housing squats as “educational sites of resistance”, assuming a spatial and strategic approach. By describing the pathways through which inhabitants put in place strategies to transform the squat space, I aim at highlighting the process through which they are educated to be a collective subject and what are the limits, potentialities and the preferred developments of a so recomposed collectivity.

Many scholars have investigated housing squats, thus contributing to mapping their different organisational configurations and their socio-political contexts (Martínez 2007, 2013). Among the different typologies of squats that have been elaborated (Bouillon 2009; Péchu 2010), two theoretical approaches emerge. On one hand, as the squat offers an immediate solution to precarious housing conditions, the squatting practice has been analysed as a resilient, direct social action (Bosi and Zamponi 2015; Cattaneo and Engel-Di Mauro 2015), or also as a form

of “welfare from below” (Paba 2010), providing a response to a social need (housing) that is not adequately taken into account by institutions. In this sense, occupation produces the so-called “deprivation-based” type of squat, a form of squatting that involves mainly “poor, working-class people who are suffering housing deprivation” (Pruijt 2012:22). On the other hand, housing squats have been analysed with attention to their implications, focusing on their attempt at resistance and protest (Fillieule et al. 2009). According to this second interpretation, these squats have been termed “political spaces” (Pruijt 2012) and defined as the field of action of people engaged in anti-systemic politics, who identify themselves as revolutionary political subjects and who often include squatting for housing purposes in their activity. Accordingly, in the literature, the social function of the housing squats, that is the provision of accommodation for homeless people, tends to be distinguished by, or also juxtaposed (Anon 1972) to, the political aim of the squat, that is to protest against the neo-liberal paradigm producing housing precariousness.

Nevertheless, in recent debates, the dichotomy between a “deprivation-based squat” and a “political space” squat has been problematised. Some scholars have pointed out that housing squatting always has a political implication (Martínez 2018; Piazza 2012) because it subtracts a building from the market and the process of speculation. For example, Cattaneo and Martínez define political squatting as “a direct answer to housing deprivation and other social problems inherent to the dynamics of neoliberal capitalism” (2014:3). Therefore, even when triggered just by the urgency, housing squats are considered political because they prefigure alternatives to capitalism. Nevertheless, these analyses underline that there is a political dimension within housing squats originating with a social purpose, but they lack the investigation of the social and political aspects as two dialectic moments. Thus, in typologising the concept of squatting, the literature has risked assuming that squats are static realities.

The difficulties of grasping the dialectic relationship between social and political functions stem from the fact that housing squats have been prevalently approached from an external perspective, leaving the internal dynamics under-explored. For example, while some notable studies have focused on the decision-making processes occurring within squatted social centres (Piazza 2012), few have investigated the same in housing squats. Moreover, the social and political character of housing squats has been evaluated according to the consequences in the external field, but nothing has been said in relation to squat inhabitants.

The empirical case examined here aims to show that housing squats interpreted as resilient answers and as spaces of resistance are two dialectic moments of a whole process of transformation. Generally speaking, when people join the housing movements, they are not focused on changing the general political conditions at the base of squatting. They rather are moved by the urgency of interrupting phases of homelessness or living in degraded housing conditions (Mudu 2014). Therefore, people are linked together in the struggle for the house by no more than a concrete, immediate need (Martínez 2013). Nevertheless, despite the first intention, life within these spaces requires a series of transformations that trigger political elaboration.

According to this precept, the urgent question to pose is: “how does a deprivation based squat evolve in a political space?” The paper argues that (a) this transformation is due to sets of “configurations of strategies” on space elaborated by inhabitants to make a house from an abandoned building; and (b) these configurations of spatial strategies are at the base of the construction of a political, collective subject. In a nutshell, I argue that spatial change epitomises the political elaboration of the movement’s social base and thus housing squats work as “educational sites of resistance”.

In the next section I will illustrate the methods for data collection. In the third section I will present the analytical approach by setting the boundaries of two key concepts: “configuration of strategies” and “educational site of resistance”. In the fourth section I will analyse the squat space construction and in the fifth I will point out to what extent this process contributes to the development of a collective subject. In the concluding section, I will summarise what emerges from the analysis and I will delineate the further steps of the research.

Methodological Issues

The findings presented in this paper come from an ethnographical research conducted in Rome in 2016. Housing precariousness has always been a feature of Rome (Villani 2012) and social movement organisations struggling for the right to a house have a long tradition in this city (Grazioli and Caciagli 2018). This makes Rome a paradigmatic case for studying forms of housing resistance.

The analysis refers to the longest standing housing movement organisation of Rome, *Coordinamento Cittadino di Lotta per la casa (Coordinamento)*, in which I conducted six months’ participant observation. The internal dynamics were grasped through my militant ethnography (Juris 2007). Indeed, I lived in a *Coordinamento* squat, sharing the daily life within the squat and at the same time having free access to the other occupations. Therefore, the data rely on the greater part of *Coordinamento* squats.

During the fieldwork I conducted semi-structured (Della Porta 2010) and “on-the road” (Staid 2014) interviews with people of the housing movement organisations. In particular, I conducted 14 interviews with *Coordinamento* members: nine with activists and five with squatters. The interviews offered me a large variation: four of the interviewees were immigrants and 10 Italians, eight of them have been part of the movement since the beginning in the 1990s, and five of them joined *Coordinamento* later on. Interviewees were selected partially making use of the existing networks among the population studied (Salganik and Heckathron 2004), and partially through the suggestions of privileged witnesses (Della Porta 2010). In this paper there are excerpts of seven interviews that I considered to be relevant for the topic under study.

This methodological note allows me to point out the differences between squatters and activists that encompass the whole paper. In *Coordinamento*, activists and squatters share the experience of living in squatted dwellings, participating in the daily life of the squat as well as in the political protests. Nevertheless, they have two different approaches towards the housing struggle: what

distinguishes their position is the political awareness through which they contribute to the struggle. However, activists and squatters are not two categories: as the paper aims to show, life within squats nurtures a process of political elaboration in squatters too.

The reflections presented are circumscribed to the years of the financial crisis. The heterogeneous composition of squatters that shapes many of the daily dynamics depends greatly on the varied subjects who joined the housing movements because of the economic difficulties exacerbated by the crisis (Martínez 2018). Moreover, the “configuration of strategies” at the base of the process of education to resistance has been characterised by the features from back in the 1990s, when *Coordinamento* started to squat abandoned dwellings, mainly of public ownership, originally developed for different purposes (i.e. hospitals, offices, schools). On the contrary, before the 1990s, *Coordinamento* used to occupy public houses which were vacant because they had never been assigned by the authorities (Grazioli and Caciagli 2018). This implies different relationships with the squatted space (for example, significant transformations were not required in buildings constructed to house families). Therefore, the process of “education to resistance” has historical boundaries.

Even if the findings are based on *Coordinamento* and cannot be generalised—because internal organisation and the spatial characteristics of the squats vary on a case-by-case basis—the paper aims to offer analytical insights into other housing and urban movements.

Theoretical Premises: A Spatial and Strategic Approach

To properly interpret the practices that transform the squat space I use the notion of “configuration of strategies”. This notion is constructed on the basis of James Jasper’s (2004, 2006) conceptualisation of strategy. Calling strategy into account, the freedom of social actors appears essential as well as conditioned. Indeed, the scholar does not intend for strategy, like game theorists, to be completely free choice. On the contrary, strategy implies that “all strategic action is filtered through cultural understandings, but at the same time cultural meanings are used strategically to persuade audiences” (Jasper 2004:4). In this sense, strategy is similar to the Bourdieusan *habitus* (Bourdieu 1986), the patterns in behaviours that are the result of previous years of struggle and of the position of subjects in a specific field. This means that strategy is spatially conditioned. Therefore, in my understanding, strategic attitude is a disposition to act in a spatial context that is the result of long-lasting sedimentation in a specific social field. In this sense, it is not just an instrument intentionally used by subjects, but rather a legacy that, reproducing itself, also shapes the context and the subjects themselves. Thus, a spatial configuration is also the outcome of strategy.

Using the term “configurations of strategies”, I want to stress the modalities through which the strategic attitude, conceived as above, concretises in specific acts and performances. In particular, the term identifies the repertoires used by squat inhabitants to deal with the squat space. These repertoires depend on practical knowledge and experiences (Shoshan 2017). Therefore, “configurations of strategies” are to be understood as internalised common sense strategies that

shape the attitude and behaviour of social movement participants (Flesher Fominaya 2014). Thus, the “configurations of strategies” also regard “everyday, improvised decisions that produce squatted spaces” (De Moor 2016). The notion aims to stress not just the regulated and orchestrated character of the selection of strategies, but also the unclear and unconscious ways through which practices are reproduced in squatted dwellings.

As already done before me by Federico Rossi (2015), who coined the similar term “repertoires of strategy”, I argue that strategic approach exists in the movement’s daily spaces. In this sense, I consider these configurations as spatial strategies because they always have a geographical implication (Routledge 2017): they are informed and shaped by the spatial structure in which they are embedded and that they want to change (Martínez 2013). The squat is more than the container of resistant subjects; it has an active role in forging their resistance. To highlight this mechanism, I propose to interpret squats using the notion of “educational sites of resistance”.

This notion draws on similar concepts, in particular the notion of “spatialities of resistance” recently adopted by Arampatzi (2017), based on the work of other scholars (Pile and Keith 1997; Routledge 1993). Authors who account for the daily reproduction of resistance recognised that proximity in space is a relevant factor enabling the formation of social relations among people (Massey 2004; Nicholls 2009, 2013). For example, this has been pointed out by Nicholls (2009:83) who, combining a territorial and relational approach, argued that “solidarities built up in particular places over time contribute to enhancing the collective powers of social movement activists”. According to this interpretation, the presence in the same field motivates people towards cohesiveness, urging them to translate their dispositions in social and political collective behaviour (Nicholls 2009, 2013). This means that “being physically in common” generates relations of solidarity that are the basis of new political possibilities (Routledge 2017:56).

Introducing the new term of “educational sites of resistance”, my aim is to link together two processes: the process through which the squat is transformed, and the one through which the people inside nurture the seeds of political awareness, recomposing themselves into a collective subject. In this sense, it allows me to concentrate on the mechanisms through which resistance is forged, not just within specific spaces but *through* these spaces. People re-propose themselves as a collective, political subject thanks to their attempt to transform the spatial configuration of the abandoned building. The space itself has an active role in educating people to become a resistant, collective subject. Accordingly, the term “education” is not intended as a top-down process, it is rather to be intended as a horizontal process that occurs between people placed in the same field.

From an Abandoned Building to the House of Dozens of Families: What is at Stake in Squat Space Transformation

Besides the satisfaction of the concrete urgency of the house, living in squats calls into play broader scopes linked to the self-determination of people who inhabit

them (Maeckelbergh 2012). As the interviewee cited below points out, squatting is also a way to re-appropriate income by subtracting it from the trap of indebtedness (Lazzarato 2013) and to direct this money to other activities:

When I was living in a rented apartment my salary was completely absorbed in paying the rent, the food, the bills ... Since I joined the movement I have managed to regain more than 700 euros a month. With this money I can now do many things that were not possible before: my little girl can now go to a dance school, for example. (*Coordinamento* squatter)

Therefore, considering squats as merely emergency shelters is reductive. Moreover, the heterogeneity of the people in these spaces contributes to the complexity of squats. Squatters and activists define squats as the “*mestizo* cities inside the city”. Indeed, they present most of the characteristics that geographers and sociologists attribute to contemporary urban environments: a complex division of space, strong cultural variations among inhabitants and a multiplicity of territories (Massey 2004; Mudu and Chattopadhyay 2017; Soja 1989). In the frame of this complexity, it is easy to understand how cohabitation cannot be a spontaneous event but is rather a complex relational process (Nicholls 2016:301).

Before encountering *Coordinamento*, most families had usually experienced a sort of pilgrimage from one emergency shelter to the other. Therefore, the main aim of most squatters is to ensure shelter for themselves and create a pathway to housing security and independence rather than claim their rights. However, this approach, which exists at the beginning of the squatting experience, is not a suppositional datum structuring the daily life in the squatted space. On the contrary, as this activist highlighted, an engagement at a political level tends to be the outcome of daily life in the squat:

The life in the squat is structured around the attempt of creating relationships among equals: among people who are in the same economic conditions of dispossession. On the basis of this common feature, squatters are not just recipients of services but they become active subjects. (*Coordinamento* activist)

What exactly are the mechanisms that allow squatters to become subjects of a resistant path? Is it sufficient to share a space to make a political subject of dispossessed individuals? On the basis of my ethnography in the housing squats, the horizontal decision-making processes, solidarity and cooperation needed to construct a house from an abandoned building are the propellers of the squatters’ transformation. Indeed, they enforce the establishing of collectivity among people who have nothing in common but the “mere urgency of having a roof” (*Coordinamento* activist). This does not mean that no conflictual relations exist. Rather it means that this collectivity is recreated in trying to deal with conflicts facing them within a collective framework, as I will try to explain in the next section.

Configurations of Strategies for Transforming the Spatial Structure

As described above, *Coordinamento* occupies buildings that were previously designed for other purposes. Living in these buildings entails severe

transformations with regard to the buildings' architectural structure. Accordingly, this process of spatial transformation is composed of two moments of *destruens* and *construens*: the squat needs to be destroyed in the form of its previous spatial characteristics, to then be reconstructed according to its new function (to house dozens of families).

Due to the status of neglect and the large size of the building, the spatial transformation is a challenging task that implies that all inhabitants work together for a common goal to develop a sort of "makeshift approach to housing" (Vasudevan 2015b):

There is no-one else to do things in your place. This means that if you want to live in good living conditions you have to do it on your own, with the help of the others. It is challenging because it means that you have to deal with many other people who mean nothing to you: they are not your family, not even your friends. They are living with you just because, like you, they have no other choice. (*Coordinamento* squatter)

According to what I observed, this effort of collectively constructing and maintaining the house is realised through a strategic attitude made up partly by the decisions of more expert activists, and partly from a repertoire corroborated by previous struggles, shaped during time, which inhabitants reproduced by the simple fact of being physically present in the squat space. I identified five configurations of strategies through which this strategic attitude converges. They are:

- barricading process;
- division of internal spaces;
- connection between common and personal spaces;
- relationship with the neighbourhood; and
- daily defence of the squat space.

Combined together, these five configurations of strategies give the occupied building the squat's spatial identity and forge the attitude of resistance in the people who inhabit the squat.

Barricading Process

The process of barricading is something innate to the struggle for the house, a conscious choice and also an instinct. As often pointed out by many squatters and activists: "It is not a housing squat if it does not have barricades". These barricades are erected in each of the *Coordinamento* squats in the very first days of the occupancy to resist attempts at eviction. In the following period, the barricades are crucial to maintain control over the space (O'Dochartaigh and Bosi 2010:408). As this excerpt testifies, barricades end up having a symbolic—and even controversial—meaning, providing inhabitants with a collective frame:

A barricade is a wall that creates a division between two people, or two groups of people. But at the same time, barricades unify the people who find themselves on the same side. This makes clear, visible and concrete exactly what the contraposition is, who the allies are and who the enemies. (*Coordinamento* activist)

The barricading process entails the construction of fortified doors and walls at the most strategic points of the building. As soon as everybody has entered the building, an assembly is immediately organised to form the committee (*comitato*). The many functions of the committee are to set up groups of squatters responsible for directing the work to construct the barricades. This is the first step towards cultivating horizontal participation and self-management because this gives everybody a role in the process of transformation, so that all the squatters are urged to become active subjects instead of passive observers.

Most of the squatters, who do not fully comprehend the risks and challenges of squatting, are very disappointed with this practice, perceiving it as an unnecessary, compulsory task that causes them anxiety:

We arrived here afraid, tired, exhausted, and we immediately started this thing ... the barricading. I wanted just release ... you know? I did not understand ... Why do we have to barricade? If the police want to evict us, so be it. (*Coordinamento* squatter)

Therefore, the main challenge in the first days of the squat is to dissipate these negative feelings and trigger collaboration. Despite conflicts and complaints, the commonly shared urgency of not losing the house is what allows people to agree to participate in the effort of barricading:

The importance of barricades is not well understood by people who have never been part of a social struggle ... But in the end everybody collaborates because nobody wants to lose the roof over his head. This is what compels them to work with the others. (*Coordinamento* activist)

In this sense, what forces people to squat (the economic condition of dispossession) is also what pushes them to actively collaborate.

The spatial transformation realised through the barricades can be considered an inversion of Bentham’s “panopticon” (Foucault 1979; Kohn 2001). The prison designed by Jeremy Bentham organised the internal space of the building so that the guard (placed outside the cells but in the centre of the building) had maximum visibility when monitoring the prisoners (closed inside the cells and unable to tell if they were being monitored). Because of the specific spatial configuration, the guard controlled the space through the management of two main principles. First, through the individualisation of the parts; indeed, everybody was recognisable and identifiable; and second, the placing of the prisoners in separate sections to prevent them from interacting among themselves.

The spatial transformation realised by the squatters with the barricades moves in the opposite direction. The control points are located for maximum visibility of the exterior, changing the relationship between controllers and controlled (Sack 1986:32). Squatters who are inside want to increase the control over those who control them. The point is not just to enforce control over behaviour but also to prevent visual access to the internal space of the squat. Here spatial strategies control visibility and, consequently, the knowledge of squatters regarding the police and the institutions.

Division of Internal Spaces

The second configuration of strategies occurs once the first rudimentary barricades are erected and as soon as the immediate danger of eviction is mitigated. Activists plan how internal space is to be divided between families. Depending on the nature of the spatial structure of the building, what were former offices, rooms, corridors, halls or big open spaces need to become apartments. The methods and difficulty linked to this set of strategies largely depend on the specific structure of the squatted buildings. Indeed, due to the status of abandonment, much work needs to be done to renovate walls, drainage systems and so on.

To afford the costs for the work, inhabitants collect money through a monthly whip-round that will be used to self-finance the renovation. As testified by this squatter, this practice proves to be essential for shaping people engaged in the struggle as active subjects who organise with the others to reach results that they would not achieve otherwise:

Here there are no owners and no tenants: we are all engaged in the same struggle. We pay the same, even if for someone it is difficult even to find ten euros. But if you are alone, what can you do with your ten euros? Nothing. But here we combine my ten euros with the ten euros of all the others: this allows to build a house. (*Coordinamento squatter*)

Inhabitants cannot rely on experts such as plumbers, bricklayers and so on to construct their house because they cannot pay for them and also because external users cannot have free access to the squats (De Moor 2016). Nevertheless, thanks to the elaboration of “do-it-yourself practices” (Vasudevan 2015a:325), they do not have to renounce to improve their living conditions:

It is not a palace, but this is my house, and I’ve done it with the help of the others. I’m an electrician but I’m not a plumber. Instead, my neighbour is a plumber but not an electrician. This means that I need him and he needs me. I’m forced to work with him because we are here. If I were in the external world I could pay for someone, but I’m here: we have to rely on each other to get what we need. (*Coordinamento squatter*)

As this reflection highlights, mutuality and collaboration are not cultivated in the absence of selfish attitudes or conflicts. They come from the attempt to re-organise individualistic feelings of tension and competition to liberate the housing conditions of each family.

This emerges clearly in the strong competition nurtured among squatters over the size of their apartment spaces. It is common for some families to feel that the space assigned to them is too small or too uncomfortable. This leads to strong conflicts among the squat’s inhabitants. Without trivialising these feelings, activists try to reorient the process for allocating space towards a collective need-based model: the bigger the family unit, the more space the family is allocated. This practice follows this re-distributive criterion:

There is a difference between dividing spaces and resources in equal parts and dividing them equally. We aim at realising here what we want to see in society: a distributive principle that takes into account those who need more. Families with five

members need more space than a couple: this is unequal but equitable. (*Coordinamento* activist)

This means that the context of the squat sets new rules in order to guarantee the right to the house that was not guaranteed to low-income families in the external social field. The newly apportioned apartments are part of a “common” (Mudu and Aureli 2016) that does not coincide with the amount of living space created. Indeed, the squat is the result of a process of placing everything in common and then attempting to create personal spaces within that common space. This brings us to the third configuration of strategies: the renewed relationship between domestic/personal areas and collective/common ones.

Connection between Personal and Common Spaces

The third configuration of strategies consists of creating a fruitful interweaving between reclaimed living spaces and the common areas. In the squats, every portion of space is used: this indicates the elaboration of good practices in contrast to wasting existing dwellings and use of land. Indeed, before creating something new, housing movement organisations propose making the best use of what already exists. The interpersonal areas—the gardens, corridors, halls—become architectural elements with a “connective” and overturned meaning. Indeed, if in a condominium these areas delimit the private properties, in the squat they compel people to be in touch and socialise with one another. The interpersonal areas are often used as extensions of these spaces. Objects associated with the domestic sphere, such as clothes dryers, shoes and plants, are placed in common spaces, becoming the symbols of the spatial and social revolution performed in the squat. Thus, the materialism of the things is maintained but with a changing role (Vasudevan 2017).

Depending on the spatial configuration of the dwelling, the common areas can contain common facilities such as toilets or washing machines. In this case, the co-habitation can be very hard because it implies sharing personal aspects of life with other families. For this reason, collective use of the common areas requires many rules of co-habitation in order to manage the harsh conflicts that arise. These rules can be decided in the time and space of the squat’s assemblies. It is interesting to note that while activists have a more decisive role in setting the political struggle and informal hierarchies, and thus, ipso facto, the structure concerning the organisation of political struggle, with regard to the rules of cohabitation, the horizontal participation of squatters immediately emerges strongly. Indeed, even those people less engaged in political evaluation deal with the issues of daily life, participating in setting the boundaries of the day-to-day routine within the squat.

The rules set to access the washing machines offer an interesting example of this process of compromising between different necessities:

On the basis of how many we are and how many washing machines we have, we divide into groups. If, for example, in my group there are seven families, we decide one day a week in which each family can have use of the laundry. For example: I can

use the washing machine on Mondays, [name removed] can use it on Tuesdays, and so on. It works but it is hard because we have to sacrifice our will to do what we want and when we want. (*Coordinamento* squatter)

This example highlights a conflict point that is at the base of many tensions among a squat's inhabitants: the rules in the squat do not just regulate life in common, but also the personal sphere. Indeed, it causes life in the squat to be perceived as a denial of the very personal freedom that should be at the basis of *Coordinamento's* action. This trade-off is tried to encourage people to rebuild their priority ranking:

We have to accept that there are hierarchies between values. The right to live in dignity, with a roof for us and our family is prior to the right to people to use the washing machine when they want or to go out for a trip instead of participating in political manifestations. In this sense, we have to have clear in our minds what the whole picture is, what the right is that we are demanding, what the project is that we are pursuing. (*Coordinamento* activist)

From this excerpt, an important point emerges: in the squat people have an experience of "home" and personal sphere that is not linked to that of private property. The constructed apartments are never termed by activists and squatters as "private spaces" but rather "personal places". This terminological distinction is paradigmatic because it underlines that the reclaimed apartments are not free zones in which people can do what they want and that the behaviours in personal spheres need to be coherent with the politics of the broader movement organisation. Indeed, even in their apartments, the behaviour of families is to be consistent with principles of anti-violence, anti-sexism and anti-racism. This is a distinguishing feature of *Coordinamento*:

There is a fundamental difference between people who squat abandoned houses and people who squat abandoned buildings with a movement organisation. This difference is that we are enlisted in a collective project. It means that you are protected by the others, but it also means that you have to limit your interest in favour of a broader framework. If neo-liberalism is about the possibility "to do what you want", movements are about "doing what is fair". (*Coordinamento* activist)

The illicit behaviour of people can have severe implications. Indeed, the other inhabitants can decide to remove people from the movement. This produces tensions between people: most of them force themselves to respect the rules because of the fear of being evicted by other squatters, rather than because they understand and share the motivations. Nevertheless, the mechanism of the assemblies helps in triggering the elaboration because the decision to evict someone from the squat is not of some activists. Instead the decision is reached in the time and space of the assemblies by the people who are present. In this sense, the decision comes from a process of collective evaluation.

Relationship with the Neighbourhood

The fourth configuration of strategies is linked to the neighbourhood in which the squat is rooted (Vereni 2013). In a sense, it is in opposition to the

mechanism created through the barricades, which are intended to fortify the squat. The relationship with the surrounding area is primarily achieved through symbolic acts, like for example affixing banners on the external walls of the buildings to make the dwelling recognisable to the neighbouring inhabitants. Squats can be opened to the neighbourhoods and they become the sites of activities for the external users too. In many cases, squats organise help desks for families under the process of eviction, or in other cases, they become the location for cultural activities.

While the building was inaccessible for people before occupation, once occupied it takes on an identity in the eyes of external people and comes to have a role in the neighbourhood. In this sense, the squat moves from being an architectural skeleton to being an element of the city landscape. However, this does not mean that the relations with the neighbourhood are always easy going. The local inhabitants can react badly to the squat, pressing institutions to evict the inhabitants or organising protest parades against them. Nevertheless, the effort to integrate the squat with the external field contributes to the political consciousness of squatters. As this squatter testifies, around the role of the squat in the neighbourhood, squatters forge a large part of their approach to the housing struggle:

During the first period in the squat, I felt ashamed of living in a squatted dwelling: I wanted to attract the attention of the people of the neighbourhood as little as possible. I wanted to make myself as invisible as possible. But now I understand that it's important to be visible. We have to claim our condition of housing squatters to change our status. (*Coordinamento* squatter)

In addition to this, the neighbourhood dimension allows squatters to experience the trade-off between the dynamics of the inside of the dwellings and those dominating outside. Many *Coordinamento* squats are rooted in central, gentrified areas (Grazioli and Caciagli 2017): for weaker categories the only way to live in these expensive and consolidated urban fabrics is through squatting. This is not just because of the high living costs, but also because the only way for squatters to afford the challenges of living in the metropolis is to rely on networks constructed within the squat:

I'm from Ghana and all my family is still there. If I come back home and I do not want to be alone it is enough for me to knock on the other doors: in squats you will always find a plate of Pasta, a glass of wine. For my part, I offer to take kids to school, because some squatters work far away from here. Rome is a complicated city: we all need help to survive in this jungle. (*Coordinamento* squatter)

This interview tells us that, despite the difficulties of co-habitation, life in the squat is acceptable because it constitutes the only way to cope with the challenges of living as dispossessed people in demanding environments. In this sense, the housing dimension is immediately related to access to the urban space: squatting is a way to find accommodation as well as the channel through which to experience the city.

Daily Defence of the Squat Space

The last configuration of strategies complements the barricading process and develops around the attempt of squatters and activists to guard the squat on a daily basis. This mainly consists of two main strategies.

One strategy is not to leave the squat empty, so that if the police arrive, there are a sufficient number of people to try to prevent the eviction. Therefore, squatters have to communicate their absences so that departures can be scheduled. This generates many tensions among squat inhabitants, as I noted in my field diary:

The scheduling of departures obliges people to accept that they must coordinate their personal issues with those of the others. This is a challenging and pervasive mechanism that makes squatters often feel limited in their freedom. Indeed, in assemblies many squatters complain that they cannot leave when they planned. (Field notes, March 2016)

The second strategy develops around a system of “pickets”. During the sensitive hours of the day, a small group of people patrol strategic points (usually the roof and the main doors) of the dwelling from which it is possible to monitor the surrounding space. A protocol, decided on a squat-by-squat basis, guides this strategy, instructing people who are picketing in what they have to do in case of danger. What distinguishes the pickets in *Coordinamento* squats is that they are in charge of all the families. Depending on the numbers of people living in the squat, each family may have to picket once a week or even more.

These two guidelines to defend the squat daily require great efforts from the squatters, especially for those who do not always perceive the risk of eviction as something real. Nevertheless, it is exactly around the organisation of the daily defence that most of the horizontal participation is forged:

Yesterday, for example, I was assigned to the picket round from 8 am until 16 pm. I was working and it was impossible for me to attend. So, I changed my turn with [name removed]. For her it was the perfect time and for me her previous turn was perfect: here we are, we figured out a solution! We had to, because we need a roof. (*Coordinamento* squatter)

Even if inhabitants don't like to, they need to cultivate interpersonal relations. In this sense, the urgency of defending the squat requires a massive cooperation that would not be required in other types of spaces.

To facilitate practices of cooperation, during the assembly, activists and squatters form the “group for picket”, made up of four or five squatters (depending on the total number of people living in the squat) who are in charge of setting the picket rosters. Every Friday afternoon the group organises the rosters and posts up the calendar for the following two weeks. In this way, the squatters can check their turns and find someone with whom to swap when needed. This enforces people to collaborate despite interpersonal conflicts. Indeed, people know that neglecting the picket roster may cost them expulsion from the movement. Accordingly, during the squat assembly, each squat decides on a method to monitor the effective presence of inhabitants in the roster

in order to evaluate when the presence of the family within the movement is to be reconsidered:

Squatters know that pickets are important: if they do not picket, they risk losing the roof over their heads because police can evict them but also because they can be driven out if they put in danger all the others. This makes collaboration prevail. It is interesting to see how on Friday afternoons the corridors are full of people moving from one house to the other. (Field notes, May 2016)

The cooperation around the pickets does not mark a definitive, collaborative approach, but it testifies that on the basis of some crucial, important issues they are prepared to coordinate their action. So, apparently, rather than an incentive for political elaboration, horizontal participation seems to be supported by the simple fear of being evicted. Indeed, a large proportion of interviewees explain their disposition to collaborate as a strategy to not be evicted:

We need to take in charge our problems or we will be homeless. If we want to keep the roof for our children, we have to work hard in each single moment of our daily life. (*Coordinamento* squatter)

Nevertheless, the mechanisms triggered by the “groups of pickets” that implies that the members change once a month encourage people to not simply feel like beneficiaries but also as promoters of the squat, responsible with the others for the life of the collective house:

We are not tenants, we are squatters: we have to be responsible because we will pay on our skin our carelessness. There is a lot at stake: the possibility to all of us to life with dignity. (*Coordinamento* squatter)

Analysing the Educational Process of Resistance: Boundaries and Potentialities

As exemplified in Table 1, each one of these five configurations of strategies change different spatial aspects of the squat. What previously was an abandoned, destroyed, empty building turns into a renovated and safeguarded house for dozens of families. Nevertheless, this spatial overturning is a challenging process because it needs to rely on the diffuse participation of all squatters.

As shown above, this mechanism does not imply the absence of conflicts; on the contrary, it is a continuous effort to address controversies in a collective framework. As already pointed out by Vasudevan (2015b:349), the work done on the architecture of the space became “a key process for exploring a new micro-politics of connection and solidarity”. In this sense, the transformation of space can catalyse the squatters’ attitude to being part of a collective, resistant path. Accordingly, squats should be better explained as “educational sites of resistance”, places in which dispossessed individuals re-construct themselves as a collective subject though social ties enforced by co-habitation within the squat. Nevertheless, we should clarify the features and the boundaries of a so recomposed collective subject.

Table 1: The five configurations of strategies constructing the squat space

The spatial structure of the abandoned building	Configurations of strategies	New spatial configuration of the squat
Abandoned building, empty inside, controlled by people externally	Barricading process	Fortified dwelling, monitored inside by the people who are controlled from the outside
Halls, big open spaces, rooms	Division of internal spaces	Re-claimed apartments, restored spaces and facilities
Interpersonal areas used to separate private spaces	Connection between common and personal spaces	Interpersonal spaces with connective meanings, common spaces used as much as personal areas
Architectural skeleton	Relationship with the neighbourhood	Element integrated in the city landscape
Neglected space	Daily defence of the squat space	Place taken care of by its inhabitants, inhabited by many people at the same time

The daily practices catalysed by the five configurations of strategies have worked to produce a new understanding of the placement of squatters in the squat, making the precariousness of the housing situation a dignified condition and a legitimate position. Their words are emblematic:

Living in the squat, I realised that I was not the only one with no choice, no employment and no house. So, I understood that the problem was not only mine and I also understood that if I want to get out of this uncertainty I have to figure out a collective solution. I mean, if I have no voice, together we are hundreds of voices. (*Coordinamento* squatter)

Even if solidarity is stimulated by the attempt to improve personal living conditions, it nevertheless obliges people to recognise the collective dimension as representing the only way to overcome the difficulties of living in a squat. This sort of “moral shock”, as referred to by Jasper (1997), is something that accelerates the politicisation, despite an original free-rider approach:

Probably no one wants to be here, you know? I mean, if you can choose to have your own house, without the necessity of proving that you deserve it, would you not prefer it, too? I think you would. But we do not have this possibility so we have to make of our necessity our strength. (*Coordinamento* activist)

This mechanism brings people to realise that “we are poor, we are low-income families, but we are many: this is our resource” (*Coordinamento* activist). This is a shift in the groups’ self-representation that can be well explained by this reflection of Buechler (2011:23):

As people identify their interests, act upon them, and engage in overt conflict, we can expect a shift from “groups-in-themselves” based on categories to “groups-for-

themselves” based on collective identity, group consciousness, and political organization. The sharper the conflict, the greater the solidarity within groups and polarization between groups.

Squatters slowly start to feel their poverty no longer as a personal, individual and shameful condition but one that involves all the people living in precarious circumstances and forced to squat an empty building. Difficulties and discomfort due to the life in a squatted dwelling are necessarily elaborated as something due to housing precariousness rather than to other squatters. The illegal act of squatting is reframed as a licit position because of the unfair conditions regulating life in contemporary cities. Figure 1 illustrates the steps of this process of spatial and subjective transformation.

It is interesting to note that, on the basis of this process, the political awareness of squatters originates first as a physical position and then as a cognitive understanding. The daily disposition to stay put in the squat is preliminary to the conscious choice to resist. Accordingly, the resistance performed in the squats should be better approached as a “structured and structuring structure” (Bourdieu 1980:88–89), something that passes through the physical presence of people and disciplines their presence in the field.

Nevertheless, some boundaries need to be set in the evaluation of the process of political elaboration in which squatters are involved. To conceive a broad process of education for resistance does not imply that all people in the squats have a similar perception of what being in a movement means. There is not only one path leading from spatial transformation to political elaboration; on the contrary, basic differences exist between inhabitants’ ways of living (in) the squat. As an activist pointed out during an interview, “every way to stay put in the squat is a legitimate position: what counts in the end is that if you are dispossessed, you are here” (*Coordinamento* activist). This testifies that the crucial point in squatting is not how to construct a homogeneous collective subject, but rather how this collective subject can be recomposed among the squatters’ variegated approaches to the squat’s daily life:

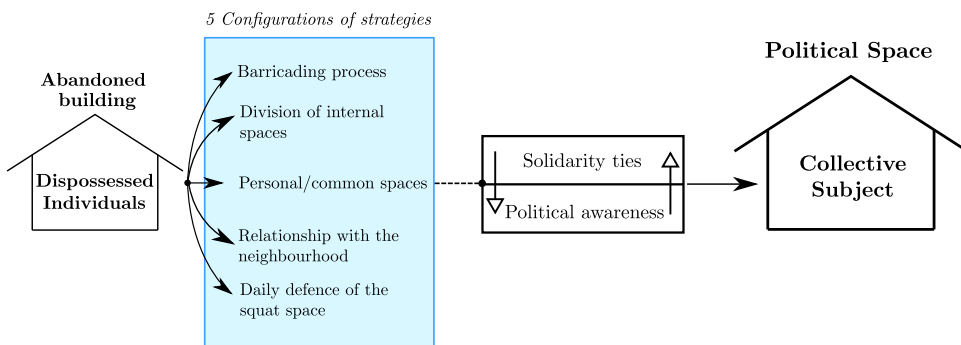


Figure 1: Educational process of resistance [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

We cannot think that there is a right and a wrong way of being in the movement. I think that at the end of the story what really matters is that people *are in* the struggle, that is to say, between the sites of dominance and resistance, people are aligned with the latter. (*Coordinamento* activist)

There is, of course, a different degree of participation of people. As in other groups, people who inhabit the squat are not perfectly bound and consensual things. Group-making is rather a complex cultural and political process that leads to the construction of common modes of feeling (Brubaker 2002:167) or also to “collective agency” (Arampatzi 2017:54). Therefore, we could conceive squats as the spaces in which a series of practices are reproduced that re-create a collective, political subject, made up of both activists and squatters, on the basis of the common dispossession of the house.

This follows what was theorised by Gramsci. Indeed, the scholar “stops short of arguing for all equality among members of a coalition” (Purcell 2012:517). As clarified by Purcell, one group of activists should take a leading role in constructing movement. With the verb “leading” he means:

Not the same thing as dictating or dominating. It involves a complex politics between leaders and the led. The proletariat should lead, for Gramsci, by means of a political party, a permanently organized cadre of leadership. (Purcell 2012:518)

To understand the type of collective subject forged by housing movements, we should re-scale the definition of the relationship that Gramsci provided for social groups in society within the structure of *Coordinamento*. If we do this, an interesting point emerges: the sense of the social struggle is not to make all people equal in participation, but rather to involve them in a broader process. Therefore, in timing theoretical and practical poverty, the crucial point of this social struggle is to give back to dispossessed people a set of instruments to direct their position in the social and political field.

Concluding Remarks

The paper has focused on analysing the process of squat space formation, based on ethnography conducted on the movement organisation *Coordinamento Cittadino di Lotta per la casa*. In the housing squat, the attempt to shape the geographies of daily life through the five configurations of strategies generates the movement’s social base. People who live in squats tend to become a collective, political subject beyond conflicts and differences. For this reason, it is promising to interpret the squat as an “educational site of resistance”. The transformative potential of the squat, in terms of both space and the squatters’ attitude, indicates that the squat’s identity does not rely on a deprivation-based model, nor on a political space model (Pruijt 2012). The squat’s identity relies on the process that drives it from one configuration to the other.

While the neo-liberal paradigm individualises and separates the different manifestations of an unequal distribution of resources (Della Porta 2015), the squat is animated by the opposite goal: to collect together, in the same space, the individuals deprived by means and resources. In this sense, the squat works to

overturn the depoliticising effects that the stigma has produced on poor, working people (Nicholls 2016). This has ethical, social and political implications. Therefore, a solution from below to a social need also affirms the social as the starting point for renewed political participation (D’Albergo and De Nardis 2016).

Nevertheless, many shadows exist in the process that has been illustrated here. Even if the people dispossessed by the house have been recomposed into a collective subject, housing squatters are not, at the state of the art, bounded with other groups affected by other forms of dispossession. Therefore, the question we need to ask is: how is it possible to group together different forms of deprivation? The challenge is nowadays, for both militants and researchers, to target new sites of intervention that emerge as conflictual (Routledge 2017:148), not just around housing but involving many other urban dispossessions. Further researches should focus on this point: on identifying the paths through which a broad “collectivity of urban dispossessed” can be recomposed.

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