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## EDITORIAL

### The value of the city. Rent extraction, right to housing and conflicts for the use of urban space

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**ABSTRACT:** The extent of residential alienation and urban inequalities made visible in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis shed light on processes of politico-economic transformations that altered the role of housing within society since the late 1970s. The focus on (re-)commodification and financialization has become central in the debate and opened up rich interdisciplinary strands of research on the impacts that these processes have on housing. Building on such a fertile academic body of work, it is paramount to contribute to the setting of the public agenda, putting housing issues at the heart of the political debate and policy actions. Introducing this special issue, the paper is firstly asserting the political dimension of housing. Secondly the issue of urban rent extraction is discussed as crucial, especially in the face of the disruptive effects of extensive processes of re-commodification and financialization of housing and land markets in a context of neoliberal urban policies. Thirdly, the Italian case is presented as extremely relevant when it comes to understanding the political dimension of housing, recalling the controversial debates and clashes developed along the 20th century and the current trends of a country confronted with intense processes of financialization of housing, with a significantly accelerated real-estate cycle transforming the residential landscape and resulting in the most intense building cycle of the last half-century. Finally, the dynamics of de-politicisation (and re-politicisation) of housing are recalled with reference to the contributions collected in this special issue.

## **KEYWORDS:**

Housing, Italy, Politicisation/Depoliticisation, Re-Commodification, Right to Housing, Right to the City, Urban rent, Value extraction

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## **1. Introduction**

In the last fifteen years, scholarly attention to housing has grown enormously, while transcending disciplinary boundaries. Inevitably so, since the extent of residential alienation and urban inequalities made visible in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis shed light on broader processes of politico-economic transformations that altered the role of housing within society since the late 1970s. The focus on re-commodification and financialization (or hyper-commodification as referred by Madden and Marcuse, 2016) has become central in the debates on displacement, accumulation by dispossession, new social housing schemes, gentrification or rent-gap (Lees and White, 2020; Wachsmuth and Weisler, 2018; Belotti and Arbaci, 2021) and opened up rich interdisciplinary strands of research bringing together planners, urban sociologists and geographers, and politico-economists among others. Building on such a fertile academic body of work, it is paramount to contribute to the setting of the public agenda, putting housing issues in the place it needs and deserves: at the heart of the political debate and policy actions (see also Monbiot, Grey, Kenny, Macfarlane, Powell-Smith, Shrubsole and Stratford 2019).

This special issue has a two-fold aim. On the one hand, it seeks to offer an interdisciplinary contribution from social sciences to the political dimension of housing, i.e. the relationship between conflicts, political processes and regulation. It is not a question of providing an inventory of political movements, conflicts and practices (in the broad or narrow sense); rather, of bringing to the fore the eminently political nature of housing and, above all, the regulation of the use of urban space. Thus, the focus on policy-related actions and instruments from a critical approach in social sciences is central in the papers presented in this special issue as lenses to explore societal and politically significant issues and voices by social movements, political activists, public institutions and civil society as a whole. The question is not only about the problematisation of the phenomena, but also on progressive policies, actions, and discourses.

On the other hand, this special issue presents analytical works that contribute to the broader theoretical debate. It does so with a focus on a specific context, the Italian one, which displays some distinctive features that may be regarded as exceptions but helps to consider and discuss some aspects of the regulation of housing and urban space as a political process.

## **2. The political dimension of housing**

Following the financial crisis of 2008, the housing question took a central stage in the social sciences, with housing studies no longer considered a niche field. The worldwide financial collapse ended one of the most intense housing cycles of the Post-War period and, in Western advanced capitalist societies, revealed how the dismantling of the Keynesian-based welfare regimes changed the role of housing systems from a

redistributive instrument for the many (housing as a right) to a device for accumulation for the few (housing as a good and an asset) (Belotti and Arbaci 2019). The impact on housing deprivation and inequality has been profound and planetary (UN Human Rights Council 2017). In the public debate and in the media, the discussion often revolves around the idea of the housing crisis as a local and conjunctural phenomenon, and as a result, short-sited and emergency solutions are offered (Tosi 2017). Conversely, considerations on housing crisis as a structural call for more systemic views and policy responses.

Social movements and social science scholar often see the housing question as an eminently political issue: as Madden and Marcuse (2016, 9) argue, "for working-class and poor communities, the crisis is the norm". To state the political dimension of housing means to take at least four key aspects of the issue into serious consideration. The first aspect – which could be called of political-moral quality – concerns the role of housing in the lives of individuals, families and societies. Asserting that housing is an essential part of the foundational economy – that provides the infrastructure for everyday life and social cohesion (see Foundational Economy Collective 2018) – is not a trivial assertion; rather, a normative proposition based on a variety of orders of justification. For instance, in a philosophical anthropology perspective (see Sen's 1999 capabilities approach), the availability of essential goods and services, including housing, is considered a prerequisite for a life worth living, as the basis of elementary and complex functions. Materialist anthropology, drawing on Engel's theorem, recalls a hierarchy of needs and aspirations ascribed to consumption practices whereby the demand of housing as a core good/service is particularly inelastic (see Foundational Economy Collective 2018, chapter 2). A great deal of qualitative empirical research, in fact, shows how social actors' perceptions of their needs and preferences inform what "the place of the home" should constitute (see f.i. Bourdieu 2000). Finally, broader political-moral justifications underpin the constitutional arrangements of many European democratic states, whereby housing is conceived as a basic need, and therefore as a social right. This is not just a tokenist criterion that complies with legal norms, whereby fundamental rights are regarded as a rhetoric instrument to maintain the status quo, as argued in critical legal studies (see Kennedy 2002). Conversely, constitutional arrangements must be interpreted as historical expressions of social orders, since these reflect established conceptions of the common good and social welfare. From this perspective, right to housing can be seen as an essential part of a citizenship strategy based on the renewal of the foundational economy (Foundational Economy Collective 2018), while considering the enormous impact housing has – together with other foundational economic sectors such as food and transport – in terms of environmental sustainability and climate change (Gough, 2017).

The second aspect of the political dimension of housing relates to regulatory processes and the role of the State. One of the essential characteristics of the public sphere in the forty years of neo-liberalisation is the representation of social and economic transformations as a technical, and thus the substantial depoliticisation of the housing crisis (Hay, 2014). Technocratic responses persist as the dominant paradigm in public action, while disguising a relentless process of de-regulation of the housing market, particularly the rental sector and own-ownership capital gains. As Marcuse (1996, p. 40) pointed out, "it is not, however, a reduction in the role of the state; to the contrary, it may even be an increase in that role. (...) They rather shift direction, from a social and redistributive to an economic and growth or profit-supporting purpose. At the same time, they shift from a public, in the sense of democratic or popular instrument, to an instrument of private business purpose." Meanwhile, housing financialization might be driving a re-regulation process, but one that benefits corporate accumulation of wealth. Public housing has been an essential part of the construction of democratic states in Europe. Although it has largely retained the characteristics of 'one-class solidarity' as financed mainly through payroll taxes, public housing has been an essential part of the infrastructure of basic goods that have underpinned welfare and social cohesion in Europe. Moreover, in many cases - such as in

context of the social democratic policies and vast building program of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century “Red Vienna” (Tafari 1995) -it has been a major laboratory of architectural and social innovation. However, since the late 1970s, most European welfare states have halted the production of public housing, privatized the social housing stock, and withdrawn social policies for housing needs. Since the 1980s, housing has become one of the most neglected topics in the political agenda (while housing studies have been relegated to a niche field of studies), now considered an “amputated arm” of the welfare state (Cole and Furbey 1994, 2). The role of the State in the housing question is, however, even more crucial nowadays. At the heart of the processes of re-commodification and financialization of housing, there is indeed a considerable process of regulatory transformations, which have paved the way, for instance, to the expansion of the mortgage market, the liberalisation of the private rental market (from the abolition of rent control to the weakening of security of tenure), or the securitisation of the public housing stock already sold to profit and non-profit companies (Aalbers 2016). Central in this process of housing re-commodification is the State’s active role in fostering the market-led extraction of rent value from urban space (accumulation of wealth), thus weakening the potential redistributive role of housing policies and regulations

The third aspect of the political nature of housing lies in its symbolic complexity. As Pierre Bourdieu reminds us, a dwelling is never just a shelter: it is the object of desires, aspirations and representations, which emerge from the trajectory of actors in the social field. A fundamental aspect of the symbolic dimension of housing is what the sociological scholarship calls the homeownership ideology, which regards home not just as a use value (living space), but as an exchange value and an asset. This is not a straightforward ideological construction but the outcome of a process of “rationalisation of existence” produced through a succession of «norms now deeply imprinted in governmental practices, institutional policies, and management styles» (Dardot and Laval 2013, 22). The symbolic frame associated with the notion of home(-ownership) varies greatly. For example, in many Northern European countries, the fostering of a homeownership ideology is a recent phenomenon that developed along, and underpinned the re-commodification of their housing system (e.g. the earliest was the UK since Thatcher’s period). Conversely, home-ownership ideology has always been the dominant in Southern Europe countries since attached to the notion of ‘family patrimony’ which should perpetuate through generations (thus differing from the conception of home-ownership as a tradable good). Home-ownership is, in fact, central in the reproduction of other pillars of familistic Southern European welfare regimes as a model of national political economy where the family plays a double role as the key provider of welfare and a key agent in the model’s socio-economic and political reproduction (Arbaci 2019).

Finally, the political dimension of housing sheds light on the importance of political claims. As early as in the 20th century, claims to housing rights were no longer an appendix of the industrial conflict with the prospect of an emerging urban revolution (Lefebvre 1970). In the last four decades, struggles for housing have suffered an almost disparaging representation in the public sphere: at best, they are described as desperate expressions of urban misery; at worst, as acts of sheer illegality that endanger urban decency. Overall, the picture of housing movements, which played a decisive role in the construction of welfare in the 20th century, is today very composite. Among the most significant mobilisations, we found activists developing research and analysis, as well as freelance journalists whose empirical work disveals the ways financial actors and local governments undermine the right to affordable housing across Europe (see for instance, the Arena for Journalism in Europe - <https://journalismarena.eu/> - that recently released the result of a comparative research over 16 European countries - “Cities for Rent: Investigating Corporate Landlords Across Europe”, <https://cities4rent.journalismarena.media/> - developed by 25 journalists and experts in visualisation). Grassroots networks including public officials, academics and lawyers are emerging across

the globe to address issues related to increasing urban inequalities and access to adequate housing, while reclaiming housing as a fundamental right, away from its notion of commodity, asset-class or extractive industry (<https://www.make-the-shift.org/>; Rolnik, 2019). The role of civil society in actions aiming at a socially sound housing renewal that ensures genuine affordability and the right to the city is nowadays at the core of the policy making debate in some urban contexts (Garcia Lamarca 2017) and not limited to a discursive narrative. Big cities are swarming with innovative experiments (sometimes building on the legacy of 20th century experiences) offering a greater diversification of tenures and typologies. A variety of new actors working in partnerships are developing new social housing programmes that ensure affordability and respond to emerging housing demands and social profiles (Arundel and Doling 2017; Peverini 2019; Bricocoli and Salento 2020). There is a renewal of cooperative and mutualist forms of housing that, by moving away from individual ownership, offer alternative forms of affordable access to housing and security of tenure. A great potential of social innovation is nested, and may be generated, in this variety of experiments. Their radical nature is not ascribed to ethic, aesthetic or cultural experiments addressing the style of living, rather to political experiments concerning the modes – and regulation – of the use of urban space (see Bricocoli and Salento 2020). These experiments challenge market-led mechanism of urban rent extraction, a core issue that – as discussed in the next section – is at the heart of the housing question (as both problem and solution).

### 3. The question of urban rent extraction

By re-centring the housing question on its political dimension, the crux of the matter lies, above all, on urban rent extraction. In a nutshell, we are arguing that the housing question is fundamentally about the value of urban space and how it is used, owned, and governed. From a classic Marxist perspective, «it is the rent of land and not the house that is properly the main object of building speculation in rapidly developing cities» (Marx 1894, vol. III, Part VI, ch. 46).

The escalation of housing price, combined with the stagnation of salaries and fall of households' purchase power, has hampered access to (affordable) housing, especially in cities and towns attracting large-scale real estate speculation. Residential inequalities have widened dramatically, especially since the the mid-1990s, following a variety of processes of re-commodification and financialization of housing and land markets. Housing prices are, in fact, linked to land value (rather than building value) which is positional, since it depends on its location. By buying or renting a house, one buys or rents, first of all, a location in the urban space – so that, for instance, in the centre of Palermo the price of an apartment is on average double than in the suburbs, but three times less than in the centre of Milan (Nomisma 2014, 244). Although this seems obvious, the question of the value of urban space is essentially removed from the public sphere.

On an international scale, a recent survey of 14 advanced economies across the globe revealed that, between 1950 and 2012, just 19% of the increases in housing prices were related to rising construction costs, while escalating land prices accounted for the remaining 81% (Knoll, Schularick and Steger 2017). Ultimately, housing problems cannot be addressed in isolation from land rent dynamics; in other words, on how the (socially produced) value of urban space is made subject to the appropriation and value extraction, and how land value could be secured, conversely, to collective welfare.

Classical economists were extremely sensitive to the issue of land rent, which of course, referred to the land as key to agricultural production. The privileged position of the landowner was paramount: since the

supply of land cannot increase at the pace of the growing demand, the price increases. Hence, the concept of rent as an unearned income underpinned the concern – common to Smith (1776), Ricardo (1817) and Mill (1848) – that land ownership could generate individual wealth and adversely affect growth. Henry George's ground-breaking work on *Progress and Poverty* (1879) described the positional nature of rent, closely linked to the processes of urbanization, and argued that rent extraction curbs economic growth, as rent tends to grow more than income. George's proposed solution – the Land Value Tax – was confiscatory taxation that would reduce the tax burden on labour and production, finance public investment, and foster productive investment over rent-seeking. The idea of the Land Value Tax was never implemented, and the focus on urban rent faded away with the emergence of the neoclassical paradigm. Once the concept of land was absorbed into capital (Clark 1891), land rent was assimilated to any other form of return on capital.

Since the 20th century, the exploitation of urban space largely increased. Typically, the case is that of transforming agricultural land into building land on the edges of expanding cities. More recently, speculative land value extraction has transformed entire districts through complex governance arrangements between public and private actors. Either short-term urban programmes (Micelli 2020), or longer-term processes, these have often resulted in gentrification, touristification and displacement (Atkinson 2000; Tulumello and Allegretti 2021). «When housing units are bought on the assumption that they can be turned into more liquid commodities, displacement is the predictable result» (Madden and Marcuse 2016, 43).

An impressive acceleration was given to these processes by the introduction of new financial practices and instruments. Since the 1980s, the expansion of credit for home buyers and builders has financed the most impressive real estate cycle of the century, which collapsed in 2008. The spread of real-estate funds, significantly since the 1990s, has transformed housing into financial products (Rolnik 2019; Belotti 2021). Non-financial companies also contribute to this process: firstly, by diverting investments from productive activities to eminently financial activities, such as real-estate (and often introduce into their portfolios participations in real estate companies); secondly by capitalising their twentieth-century real estate assets – such as large factories or railway yards – through complex urban regeneration operations, or financial instruments. In this respect, the redevelopment of the former industrial sites of the Pirelli and Falck industries in the North of Milano are remarkable cases (Kaika and Ruggiero 2016; Savini and Aalbers 2016).

Platform capitalism has in turn contributed to this transformation of urban space by building tools for the *mise en tourisme* (Kadri, Bondarenko, Pharicien 2019) of private real estate through short-term rentals (which curbed the supply of long-term rentals). Airbnbification – as it is slangily called – has relevant impacts in terms of valorisation of housing stock and entire neighbourhoods with the emergence of new economic actors (e.g. households who operates as rentiers, or small entrepreneur in the tourism sector) that merge earned income with unearned income. But also a vast number of multi-property companies operate in this domain, sometimes in the guise of individual hosts. However, the protagonist of value extraction is undoubtedly the platform itself (Srnicsek 2017; Aquilera, Artioli and Colomb 2019)

The outcome of these transformations is what Madden and Marcuse (2016) call the hyper-commodification of housing, referring to the replacement of the use-value of the house with its exchange value (or, more correctly, its asset value), resulting in the residential alienation of an increasing proportion of the population.

## 4. The relevance of the Italian case

Most of the contributions in this issue refer to Italy. In the framework of the international literature on housing transformations, the Italian case is relatively under-represented. This can be due to at least two different reasons. On the one hand, Italy is a relatively peripheral context, and even the Italian academic field remains – though with remarkable exceptions – on the margins of some fields of international social science research. On the other hand, like other Southern European contexts, it is considered (mistakenly) relatively uninvolved in the processes of financialization. On the contrary, here we argue that the Italian case is a laboratory of great importance for understanding the housing question as a political issue, because some questions that are now discussed in the international literature have arisen in Italy with particular evidence and, sometimes, prior than in other countries.

Firstly, in Modern Italy, the relationship between the housing question and the extraction of income from urban space has emerged very clearly and has been the terrain of a violent political clash. After the Second World War, Italy's large cities, both in the North and South, expanded rapidly. The transformation of land use in the city's outskirts was the driving force behind an abnormal growth in rent. At the time, 'building speculation' even became the subject of movies (Francesco Rosi's "Le mani sulla città" was awarded the Golden Lion in Venice in 1963) and novels (see f.i. Italo Calvino's "La speculazione edilizia"). Above all, in the urban debate, the question – with all its political entanglements – became a much-debated theme, at least until the 1970s (see e.g. Campos Venuti 1972). In the early 1960s, the issue was openly raised in the political arena when a radical reform project was presented in Parliament. The reform envisaged that the right to build would be disconnected from private land ownership: land on the outskirts of cities would be acquired by municipalities in exchange for compensation equal to its agricultural value, and then municipalities would auction off the right to build, earning profits to be allocated to works of urban interest (Sullo 1964). A broad political spectrum rejected the reform project and the promoter of this reform, Christian Democrat MP Fiorentino Sullo, was the target of a campaign of denigration.

On that occasion, the extraordinary strength of a political composition transversal to the political parties emerged – which was defined by its critics as the "brick block" (Parlato 1972) – that could count on the tendency of a substantial portion of the Italian electorate to defend the reasons of private property even in the face of an evident collective interest in limiting speculative phenomena. In other words, the spread of a homeownership ideology well rooted in the Italian social fabric. The pre-eminence of homeownership is not a recent acquisition, but a constitutive element of the family spirit, was decisive in that political affair. Moreover, private property – the "terrible right", as a famous Italian jurist called it (Rodotà 1981) – has always exercised a powerful hegemony even in legal culture. In 1977, the Italian Constitutional Court profoundly downgraded a subsequent attempt to separate the right to build from the private ownership of land - Law No 10 (the so-called 'Bucalossi Law'). However, the spread of private homeownership, does not mean that Italy is – as is often claimed – "a country of small owners". Instead, it is a country of small, medium and even large owners: property value is concentrated in the hands of an elite (Filandri, Olagnero and Semi 2020), and the wealthiest 20% of households owns around 60% of the housing stock value<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The patrimony of the Catholic Church in Italy is particularly large. The lack of transparency of its finances does not allow accurate estimates, but – according to journalistic reconstructions (Zunino 2016) – in Rome, where between 8 and 10 thousand wills in favor of the clergy are registered every year, a quarter of the real estate (partly for the use of the clergy themselves, partly for investment) would refer to the Church.

It can be understood that Italy is no stranger to the phenomena of hyper-commodification and financialization of housing, which have fuelled a significantly accelerated real estate cycle, transforming the real estate landscape. According to Istat census data, between 1981 and 2011 the number of dwellings not occupied by residents rose from around 4.4 million to around 7.1 million (20% to 23%). Against this apparent surplus of supply, between 1981 and 2007, according to data reconstructed by Muzzicato, Sabbatini and Zollino (2008), the average price of housing in Italy has multiplied by 5.5 times, thus showing that the demand for dwellings is mainly independent of *housing* need. As happened elsewhere (see Aalbers 2016), such a disconnect stemmed from the increasingly close relationship between real estate and financial activities. In Italy as in the rest of Western Europe, over the last three decades, the volume of private financing, both to construction companies and households, has grown dramatically in line with a market-driven European integration process. The changes in the regulation of the banking system (Cotula and Rossi 1989) have been a turning point for the new dynamics of the real estate market. The outcome was the resounding increase in consumer credit and mortgage loans, also boosted by the banks' ability to securitize mortgage loans (Hardt and Manning 2000; Aalbers 2008). The role of banks on the supply side of the market was equally relevant. Between 1998 and 2011 the number of loans to the construction sector increased from around 54 to around 163 million euros a year. Similarly, since 1994, the activity of real estate funds has started in Italy and developed with particular intensity. Since the late 1990s, it has overgrown, boosted by the favourable tax regime, the sale of properties by banks, insurance companies, industrial companies, and the securitisation of public real estate assets. Between 2001 and 2015 the number of real estate funds active in Italy rose from 7 to 402, and the total net asset value went from around 2.5 to around 48 billion euros. In 2019, Italy became the third-largest country in terms of managed assets, totalling 77 billion, 11% of which is represented by residential stock (Scenari Immobiliari 2019).

The main result of a neo-liberal regulation of housing and rent is the most intense building cycle of the last half-century, second only to post-war reconstruction. Between 1997 and 2006, the production of residential buildings grew by around 40%; annual sales doubled; real estate values increased by 63% in the national average and almost doubled in Milan and Rome; the growth of investment in construction (13.6%) was twice that of GDP. However, the two cycles display very different features. After the war, real estate development grew along with social wealth, and housing was the primary use value for families. In the new century, the production of real estate grows along with the financialization of the economy, fostering wealth accumulation, and houses are widely viewed as an investment tool: exacerbating instead of reducing inequalities; boosting financial accumulation and making indebtedness grow out of proportion.

This remarkable transformation is the result of political processes, which have revolutionised the normative basis of capital accumulation. However, when it comes to urban transformation, the role of politics and local administration is also crucial, especially when the exploitation of urban land takes place in already built areas rather than in greenfield areas (see Tocci 1999). Redefining the functions and appearance of significant portions of the urban fabric is a much more complex task than traditional building speculation: it implies the activation of a profound transformation of the urban context, with the involvement of economic, financial, political and cultural actors, as well as complex communication and sometimes even the involvement of local communities. These are processes that enjoy a broad consensus, not least they seem to incorporate «some of the recipes invented in the 1970s and 1980s as alternatives to functionalist urbanism: patrimonialisation, pedestrianisation, “tramwayisation”, the re-conquest of riverbanks and waterfronts for the benefit of leisure and entertainment activities, and so on» (Pinson 2020, 68). Negotiated urban development plans and urban regeneration schemes play a decisive role in transforming urban space into a financial



product. Given the different socio-economic compositions of Italian cities, actors and modes of interaction may be significantly different. Among cities with the most significant presence of prominent financial players, Milan presents the most relevant cases. The redevelopment of vacant sites has been the terrain in which these processes have been flourishing. While the redevelopment of the Pirelli factory in the Bicocca district (see Kaika and Ruggiero 2013) was the pioneering case, it is worth mentioning the transformation of the former Falck industrial site (Savini and Aalbers 2015), the Porta Nuova district (Anselmi and Vicari Haddock 2019), and the CityLife complex in the Portello area (Mosciaro 2020). In large cities where the penetration of financial actors is moderate, such as Rome, the protagonists of “negotiated urbanism” are “traditional” players in the construction sector, who – through a (broadly speaking) collusive relationship with the political class – manage to maintain a hegemonic position in urban planning (see the essay by Esposito, Moini and Pizzo in this issue). Although this phenomenon primarily concerns large cities, smaller cities are not exempt: they present a wide variety of forms of patrimonialisation and gentrification of historical centres (Gentili, Tassinari and Zoboli 2018), especially in the case of cities and towns which are attractive touristic destinations. In any case, the difficult financial situation of Italian municipalities puts them in a weak position in negotiating the use of urban space.

When it comes to understanding the political dimension of housing, the Italian case is also extremely interesting from the perspective of housing movements. Between the 1950s and the 1970s, housing policies resulted from the strength of social movements that demanded a right to housing (Daolio 1974). A relative 'autonomy' of the urban question emerged. While in the large industrial cities of the North, housing was one of the demands of the workers' movement, in the large cities of the Centre and South – where the industrial fabric was much less developed – the housing movement operated as a sort of "functional equivalent" of the workers' movement. The trade unions themselves realised that the urban question was emerging as a relatively autonomous issue from the industrial conflict, deserving a specific organisational structure. In 1972, the CGIL Union set up a union of tenants and assignees of public housing (SUNIA), with a clear commitment to «raising and defending the working and living conditions of workers [...] not only within of factories and other workplaces but also outside, even to avoid that [...] increases in wages, salaries, pensions, are frustrated by increasing housing costs, by physical and psychological damages, by the general surge of the cost of living»<sup>2</sup>. As in the rest of Western Europe, the last thirty years in Italy have not only been a time of a sharp decline in social rights, worsening inequalities and increasing poverty, but also a time of decadence of representative democracy. In this context, the question of housing – and more generally the question of the use of urban space – has been progressively removed from political agenda. Although there are social forces abstractly capable of conceiving and representing its moral and political value, the entire foundational economy has undergone a process of de-politicisation. In this framework, the peculiarity of the Italian case – or, as Perry Anderson (2014) would say, the Italian disaster – is the special de-legitimation that the political class has earned since the 1990s and, conversely, the growing legitimisation of technocracy as a way out of the impasse of the country's 'ungovernability'. The impressive sequence of 'technical' governments in the last three decades coincides with the process of neo-liberalisation of a country that in the twentieth century had gained a constitutional set-up in many ways close to that of an accomplished social democracy.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.sunia.info/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/tesi-per-costituzione-sunia.pdf>

## 5. Investigating variety : the political dimension of housing in the contributions of this issue

The common goal of the essays collected in this issue is to explore the political dimension of housing and to understand the dynamics of de-politicisation (and re-politicisation) developed in the last thirty years.

The enduring vitality of movements for the right to habitation - their ability to offer innovative perspectives for housing policies - is the subject of Margherita Grazioli's contribution. Through an ethnographic research on squatting for housing purposes in Rome, the essay shows that the movements for the right to habitation not only express a claim for the right to housing as such, but also mobilize a great capacity for experimentation, repurposing different types of urban constructions. They offer prospects for radical innovation in housing policies, but above all show that the practice of homemaking through the re-appropriation of urban vacancies and interstices has the capacity to transform models of social reproduction, responding also to the imperatives of environmental and social sustainability, and disrupting both the idea of housing as an asset and the privatised notion of habitation "as the place where the individual households' life (and carework) unfolds". Far from being represented as a pure expression of deprivation, housing movements express - through their capacity for spatial and relational regeneration - a grounded vision of the right to the city, capable of crafting innovative practices and emancipative everyday routines, radically questioning the traditional conception of public housing as agglomerates of social marginality at the fringes of the city centre.

An opposite aspect of the political dimension of the use of urban space is the intertwining of administrations and private actors in the operationalisation of a top-down conception of urban regeneration, concentrated on the renovation of private estates. The contribution of Esposito et al. adopts the concept of urban regime to analyse the collusive relationship between public actors, land rentiers and real estate developers. The analysis is based on a research on large-scale Urban Development Projects in Rome: instruments designed in the 2000s, under different local political majorities, as strategic devices for enacting a polycentric metropolisation, attracting investments in the periphery or near-periphery. The case study concerns the realisation of the new Italian headquarters of the BNP Paribas bank, located within a wider large-scale development site. Through the analysis of secondary data and the non-participant observation of multiple rounds of public consultation, the essay illuminates some characteristics of the typical configuration of hegemonic projects: they are presented as the innovative and regenerative way to pursue objectives of general urban interest, but in fact operate as instruments of coordination and conciliation between specific interests, local and extra-local, to implement accumulation strategies based on the capture of urban rent.

In the same line of argument, Veronica Conte's contribution analyses the role of planning and state actors in urban development processes, focusing on two urban development projects: CityLife in Milan and Tour and Taxis in Brussels. Far from being irrelevant, planning and state actors play a primary role in urban development, giving stability to the balance between private and public interests, i.e. providing a common scheme for cooperation to public bodies and private interests. The differences between the local contexts are very relevant - and this calls the researcher to a contextual analysis focused also on the specificities of the structures of opportunities, governance settings and planning systems, and therefore on the different interpretation of urban development projects - but the research clearly shows that in both cases planning has mainly benefited the interests of financial investors and property developers, legitimising the idea that the city should be a business friendly context.

The relationship between strategies for extracting value from urban space and the costs of living is the issue addressed by Marco Peverini's contribution. Here, the concept of affordability is used both as a criterion for analysing the processes of housing alienation that citizens undergo in an urban space penetrated by processes of financialization, and as a criterion on which the idea of a grounded city can be based (Engelen, Froud, Johal, Salento and Williams 2017), i.e. a city understood and designed as a space of interactions that provide an increasing quantity and quality of foundational goods and services for a prosperous life, rather than as an engine of economic growth. Affordability - the author argues - is not an abstract characteristic of real estate when its market price is related to income. On the contrary, it is a political attribute, since it is produced in the urban space, on the basis of the processes of urban restructuring, of capitalist accumulation, and above all on the basis of local governance (that is not only about housing policies). Affordability is shaped - Peverini argues - by different policy domains and their interactions: spatial planning, active land policies, housing allowances, localised welfare services. As the only contribution not referring to the Italian context, this essay considers the case of Vienna as a particularly interesting example of a fertile field of affordability policies in action, though not immune from the global affordability crisis.

The studies collected in this issue testify that housing is again a topic of political debate. This does not necessarily mean that a process of re-politicisation of housing is taking place everywhere and univocally. Tulumello and Caruso's contribution, which closes the volume, shows that the usual categories of comparative politics and political economy – according to which Southern Europe can be considered a homogeneous area – do not account for the variety of situations. In spite of its tradition of activism and political conflict over housing, Italy is an exception. Although housing struggles are still many on an urban scale, a specifically political (and conflictual) understanding of the problem on a national scale, nor corresponding national policies and politics, does not emerge in Italy. The explanation of this “absent politicization” – the authors find on the basis of an empirical research on Turin – lies in the special consumption of the political and institutional fabric, in a country where a mass disgust for politics has emerged, and local administrations – even when led by so-called populist political forces – are entrusted to the reassuring management of technocratic elites.

A contextual approach to the analysis of the housing question is therefore indispensable -neither to deny the evidence of international isomorphic transformational processes nor to replicate once again the pattern of capitalism and welfare models -to refine the macro-hypotheses by enlarging the framework of the analysis.

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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

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# RETHINKING PUBLIC HOUSING THROUGH SQUATTING. The Case of Housing Rights Movements in Rome

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**ABSTRACT:** This article analyses the contribution of housing squats and Housing Rights Movements (HRMs) in Rome in envisioning a new model of public estates that could respond to the surge and complexification of the post-2008 housing crisis. The first part of the article fleshes out the theoretical and methodological framework for investigating the peculiarities of housing squats in comparison to other forms of housing informality and urban squatting. In the second part, it analyses the development and composition of housing struggles since the post-Second World War. It then details the new demographics of the housing crisis in Rome to provide a framework for the innovation in the HRMs' confrontational politics and demands towards a more comprehensive notion of the 'right to the city'. Their emphasis upon the role of city developers and real estate agents, and the opposition towards the exclusionary nature of contemporary social welfare, have in fact redirected squatting actions towards different urban vacancies that are repurposed for habitation. I conclude by suggesting that these practices prefigure a new model of public housing estates that is economically, environmentally sustainable and socially inclusive, whereby it pivots around use value and commoning.

**KEYWORDS:** Commoning; Housing Rights Movements; Housing Squats; Public Housing; Rome

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## 1. Introduction

In the prolonged aftermath of the 2008 crisis caused by the explosion of the subprime mortgages' bubble (Caudo and Memo 2012; Rossi 2013), housing precarity, deprivation and displacement have been constituting one of the more radical manifestations of the inequities entrenched in post-neoliberal urbanism, whereby the differential allocation, and accumulation of different forms of housing represents one of the epicentres of post-capitalist operations and logistics (Enright and Rossi 2018; Mezzadra and Neilson 2019). In response to this polarisation, manifold manifestations of self-made housing (Chiodelli and Grazioli 2021) have emerged globally as part of a larger pattern of self-made urbanism (McFarlane and Lancione 2021) that points towards the temporary as well as permanent satisfaction of residential (and existential) ambitions and necessities that could not be satisfied through legally sanctioned actions. Among them, squatting for housing purposes stands out as a peculiar form of popular mobilisation (Leontidou 2010) and grassroots welfare reappropriation in Southern European contexts (Leontidou 1990, 1993; SqEK 2013, 2014; Di Feliciano and Aru 2018) where the gap between housing precarity (and thus request for public housing), and the mostly privatised housing stock could not be compensated by the social welfare already shrunk by austerity urbanism (Peck 2012; Mayer 2013). In Rome, squatting for housing purposes has been promoted mostly by Housing Rights Movements (henceforth HRMs), that have consolidated since the 1970s as grassroots urban movements who could organise, and mobilise, the inhabitants of the urban shantytowns where the urban poor and internal migrants had been displaced since during the Fascist regime, and whose demands for public housing and universal welfare (Di Feliciano 2017; Vasudevan 2017) were not as effectively represented by institutional political actors.

However, the ontologies and demographics of housing squatting in Rome have been changing consistently at least since the 1990s, when housing precarity began to intersect with migration (Montagna and Grazioli 2019) and the penetration of labour precarity, logistics and exploitation in all the realms of social (and spatial) reproduction as they 'hit the ground' (Mezzadra and Neilson 2019). These changes have upscaled in the prolonged aftermath of the crisis started in 2007-8, when thousands of housing-precarius (or utterly deprived) urban dwellers in Rome have chosen to join the HRMs and to realise the so called '*occupazioni abitative*' (housing squats). The latter are intended as diverse types of urban vacancies (either of public or private ownership) that are squatted, and then repurposed for habitation purposes without the consent of the owner, nor of public authorities (Grazioli 2021). Even though over 70 buildings in Rome are currently occupied in this capacity (Grazioli 2019; Di Noto 2020), the theoretical (and political) importance of these experiences is still underestimated, because the scholarship concerned with urban squatting (e.g. Prujit 2013) and informality tends to focus either on the issue of deprivation, or confuse housing squats with other Italian forms of housing self-production and promotion labelled like '*abusivismo edilizio*' (Cremaschi 1990; Clough Marinaro 2020). Based on my activist ethnography (Graeber 2009; Boni, Koensler and Rossi 2020) inside the Blocchi Precari Metropolitani (hereby BPM) collective in Rome (Grazioli 2021), the article maintains that the experience of housing squats in Rome constitutes a fascinating analytical prism for unsettling obsolete conceptions of housing and welfare. The article therefore interacts with the issues raised in the current special issue as it shows a viable alternative (if not antidote) to the logics and functioning of housing marketisation, which by default requires extensive patterns of differentiation, selective access and marginality in order to keep housing a profitable resource. These issues are elaborated upon in the article starting from three consequential considerations.



Firstly, what HRMs and housing squats demonstrate through their confrontational politics and acts of reappropriation is that housing could be not only be made available to anyone, but radically re-conceived as a collective resource supporting alternative, cooperative models of social reproduction, if the urban estate was considered in the light of its use instead of exchange value. Secondly, the transformative practice of homemaking (Dadusc, Grazioli and Martínez 2019) through the reappropriation of vacancies temporarily deserted by capitalist operations and estate valorisation prefigures a radical connection between insurgent urban regeneration (De Carli and Frediani 2016) and the reaffirmation of housing as a use instead of an exchange value. Thirdly, the replicability of this regenerative practice (as epitomised by the presence of over 70 housing squats within Rome's ringroad) is exemplary for a new model of housing welfare, and estates, that could effectively solve the chronic housing crisis affecting Rome through the environmentally, and socially sustainable recuperation of neglected urban vacancies. In this perspective, I propose to overcome rudimentary, deprivation-based (Prujit 2013) conceptions of squatting and informality (Simone 2001) in order to grasp their radical, prefigurative potential as infrastructures of the urban commons (Linebaugh 2008; Stavrides 2016).

To make this argument, the second section of the paper contextualises the theoretical and methodological framework around which the analysis of the Squatted, self-made Rome, pivots. Firstly, it proposes to distinguish Rome's housing squats (*occupazioni abitative*) from other forms of urban squatting and informality to grasp their heuristic value for contemporary reconceptualisations of housing, the 'right to the city' (Lefebvre 1996) and urban commons. Secondly, it outlines the activist ethnographic method (Boni, Koensler and Rossi 2020) I have been using to carry out the research and excavate theory (Grazioli 2021). The third section then outlines a genealogy of the squatted city, starting with the description of the processes of urbanisation, displacement and settlement fostered by the Fascist regime's conception of urbanism, and then with the affirmation of HRMs in Rome as sociopolitical actors capable of self-organising and mobilising the subaltern urban inhabitants who could not be co-opted by mainstream forms of habitation. This is preliminary to the delineation of the character of the current HRMs' in their relationship with the territories and conceptualisation of the 'right to the city', starting from the new demographics and setting of the post-2008 housing crisis. The fourth section elaborates upon the evolution of political actors like BPM from housing-oriented political actions towards a broader vision of the 'right to the city' (Lefebvre 1996) epitomised by the 'Movimento per il Diritto all'Abitare' (Movement for the Right to Habitation) self-recognition and contentious politics (Grazioli and Caciagli 2018; Caciagli 2020). In their perspective, the reappropriation of the right to housing stripped by neoliberal urbanisation (Chatterton and Pickerill 2010; Grazioli 2021) represents the point of departure for repossessing multiple rights, recuperating indirect income, and experimenting with forms of daily life in common that are at odds with the nuclear social reproduction proposed by the neoliberal hegemonic model of urbanity and society (Linebaugh 2008; Cattaneo and Martínez 2014). Far from being an ephemeral response towards housing deprivation, the richness (and variety) of the housing squats' sociospatial experience ultimately prefigures a new vision of public housing and council estates that could be realised beyond the schemes of real estate urbanism. In fact, the insurgent regeneration (De Carli and Frediani 2016) and upcycling (Coppola 2012) of seemingly unproductive urban interstices (Brighenti 2013; Parisi 2019) represents a groundbreaking lead for a new vision of low-income, affordable housing subsidised by the State entrenched in social, economic and environmental sustainability. The conclusive section wraps up the main theoretical considerations about these matter, while offering insight in prospective lines of research that could derive from the intersection

between the persisting housing crisis, and the socioeconomic repercussions of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic.

## 2. Theoretical Context & Methodology

Within the extensive scholarship concerned with housing informality, the coordinated forms of housing self-construction promoted by grassroots urban movements in Southern European cities like Rome tend to be analytically placed in the grey area between the ontologies of self-made urbanism (Lancione and McFarlane 2021) that pertain to illegal forms of constructions, and the urban squatting performed by social urban movements (SqEK 2013, 2014) as part of their anti-capitalist contentious politics (della Porta and Mattoni 2014; Tilly and Tarrow 2015). However, the ontology of housing squats differentiates substantially both from ‘purely’ political squatting (e.g. social centres, see Mudu 2004) and the forms of non-legally sanctioned construction that, in Italy, are identified with the label of ‘*abusivismo edilizio*’ (Cremaschi 1990). On the one hand, the latter include all those forms of non-authorized construction, and real estate development, that aim at the satisfaction of private residential ambitions, homeownership models and lucrative opportunities on a nuclear (e.g. household) as well as corporate level (ibid.). In these cases, housing represents an exchange value, either in the form of a refuge good (Filandri, Olagnero and Semi 2020) and/or asset in the transmission of intergenerational family welfare (Arbaci 2019), or as a credit within the broader financialisation of housing (Caudo and Memo 2012; Rossi 2013) as it has manifested during the neoliberal heyday (Enright and Rossi 2018). On the other hand, existing taxonomies and configurations of urban squatting tend to focus on features such as the squatters’ ideological background (Bouillon 2017), purpose in relation to mainstream forms of housing (Fuller and Jonas 2003) and degree of anticapitalist orientation (Piazza 2012) to gauge the squats’ politicized nature. These elements of distinction weigh in the analysis of the squatting scene as it has been manifesting in Italy, whereby they emphasise overtly political forms of squatting such as social centres (Mudu 2004; Giannini and Pirone 2019), whilst they lead to framing squatting for housing purposes as deprivation-based infrastructures (Prujit 2013). However, these categories fail to capture the radically transformative potential of the urban politics, alliances activated by the coalitions of dispossessed urbanites (Lancione 2018) because of their conditions of shared deprivation. Besides, they neglect the political prefiguration entrenched in the everyday processes of homemaking (Dadusc et al. 2019) and living in common (Stavrides 2016) that start from the moment of cracking into a place (Grazioli 2021). As these actions work through the transformation of spatial and relational arrangements, they determine the re-making of a new sense of emplacement and political legitimacy (Ferreri 2020) in the city and its societal infrastructures (Simone 2008, 2018), as it has been unmade by processes of commodification, dispossession and displacement.

For these reasons, I contend that a thorough investigation of the housing squats’ ontologies can unearth the composition of a new vision of the ‘right to the city’ (Grazioli 2017) that conceives ‘urban commons’ (Grazioli 2017; Stavrides 2016) as practices entrenched in the everyday life (Lefebvre 1991), and as the daily rhythms (Lefebvre 2004) of the manifold struggles carried out by disenfranchised urbanites to reconcile their precarious presence in the neoliberal city with the right to stay put, and move, within it (Purcell 2002; Grazioli and Caciagli 2018; Lancione 2018). Within this grounded vision of ‘the right to the city’, the withdrawal of urban interstices from capitalist accumulation (Mayer 2013), and then their insurgent regeneration (De Carli and Frediani 2016) for habitation purposes represent the key for demanding multiple rights connected to settlement and mobility beyond the formal enfranchisement provided by citizenship (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013; Grazioli 2017). In fact, those rights are claimed as attributes of the presence,

and transformative action, of those inhabitants of the city that are exploited and excluded from mainstream social reproduction (Merrifield 2011) and forms of inhabitancy (Grazioli 2021), and who therefore have to figure out their way of navigating cityness. In this perspective, the autonomous, squatted city (Vasudevan 2015) created by housing squatters in the city of Rome envisions low-income, affordable housing as use-value commons (De Angelis 2019) that should guarantee the collective right to stay put inside the city (Hartman 2002; Grazioli and Caciagli 2018). Furthermore, I propose a conceptualisation of the housing squats as urban commons as all those spatial, organisational, social infrastructures of habitation commoning (Linebaugh 2008; Larkin 2013) that are radically alternative to those established by neoliberal urban regimes (Gibson-Graham 2006; De Angelis 2019). First of all, their presence alters predefined geographies, uses and entitlements of the urban space through spatial and relational regeneration (De Angelis 2019; Grazioli 2017; Martínez and Cattaneo, 2014). By this token, the housing squats' urban commons can be identified as all that home and placemaking, crafting practices and everyday routines that allow a group of former strangers to make their daily lives in common and emancipate from the precarity and alienation they endure (Lefebvre, 1991, 2004; Linebaugh 2008; Dadusc *et al.* 2019; Montagna and Grazioli 2019). Hence, housing squats can be considered as urban commons when they become social and spatial infrastructures that nurture not only the satisfaction of deprivation-based needs (like having a shelter, see Prujit 2013) but manifold desires and necessities (Bresnihan and Byrne 2014) in saturated environments (Huron 2015).

Following these theoretical coordinates, I relate to the recent field of transdisciplinary scholarship that is concerned with urban squatting (SqEK 2013, 2014) as a fundamental manifestation of the urban and mobile commons (Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013; English, Grazioli and Martignoni 2019). In fact, the direct reappropriation of housing stability (Ferrero 2020) is the fundamental point of departure for repossessing those manifold, radical commons (Bresnihan and Byrne 2014; dos Santos 2020) concerned with settlement and movement (Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013) that compose the contemporary 'right to the city' (Lefebvre 1996; Grazioli 2017; de Finis and Di Noto 2018). Besides, it relates to the literature that points to reframing of Lefebvre's right to the city (Lefebvre 1996; Merrifield 2011; Grazioli 2017) by paying attention to the proceedings of everyday life (Lefebvre 1991, 2004) inside conflicted and saturated urban settings (Bresnihan and Byrne 2014; Huron 2015) like Rome's. Given this context, my direct, bodily engagement with the everyday life and politics of HRMs' in Rome has been a crucial tool for 'excavating' (Purcell 2002) theoretical conceptualisations that could be reflexive of the housing squats' richness and relevance on the ground. This commitment was methodologically translated in the activist ethnography (Graeber 2009; Boni *et al.* 2020) that I have been conducting inside the collective BPM since early 2015 (Grazioli 2018, 2021). Until 2019, I have carried out a comparative ethnographic study among housing squats that present similar features in terms of size and geographical location in post-industrial neighbourhoods (see Grazioli and Caciagli, 2017; Grazioli 2018). More recently, I have also expanded my focus towards the reflection about the possible impact of HRMs and squats on housing, welfare policies and urban planning, including preliminary considerations about the scenarios determined by the current Covid-19 pandemic (Grazioli 2021). During this ongoing process, theoretical conceptualisations as well as empirical accounts have relied on a panoply of ethnographic materials such as in-depth interviews and informal interactions; field notes and diary; visuals' collections; secondary data analysis and archival research (*ibid.*).

### 3. A Brief Genealogy of the Squatted City

The roots of Rome's contemporary housing crisis go back at least to the housing policies and urban planning realised during Mussolini's government, whereby the regime's grandiloquent ambitions of renovating the city centre to its imperial splendour clashed with the reality of the city's dwellers presence and patterns of habitation. In an article published on the 'Popolo d'Italia' newspaper in 1928, Benito Mussolini addressed urbanisation as the main obstacle to the recuperation of Rome's greatness, as well as to the full development of rural areas (Testa 2015). He then advocated for the necessity to forcibly displace the urban dwellers living in the city centre, while preventing by any means necessary the settlement of new ones. While encouraging the rural/urban divide, the regime then proceeded to the massive displacement of the city centre's public houses' dwellers to enable the demolition and urban décor plans that unfolded during the 1920s. In this context, the construction of public houses and neighbourhoods at the fringes of the consolidated city was meant to compensate for the emergencies created by the so-called city centre's 'evisceration' (sventramento; Cederna 1979; Villani 2012). On the other hand, the fascist regime tried to discourage the settlement of new urbanites in two main ways: it proceeded to the liberalisation of the rental market, and then approved the so-called 'Law against urbanisation' (*Legge contro l'urbanesimo*), which forbade until the 1961 moving and being registered as an inhabitant in cities with a population above 25,000 inhabitants.

However, the Regime's continuous reference to Rome's greatness became a potent attractive drive for the internal migrants who kept moving to the city from the regional and the Southern inner areas at the same time when the city centre's renovation plans caused the drastic reduction of the available public housing stock. This is to say that the city's demographic growth was not adequately compensated by the offer of low-income, affordable housing and related services. It is then not surprising that, already in April 1931, the ISTAT's special investigation about habitations of April 1931 revealed that the 26.2 percent of Rome's population were living in overcrowded conditions (Liseo and Teodori 2016), while the shantytowns (*baraccamenti*) were proliferating in the interstices of the urban fabric (Villani 2012). The presence of these settlements, the dearth of adequate housing policies for low-income population, and the lack of public interest in planning yet persisted well beyond the fall of the Regime, becoming a benchmark of Rome's urbanisation in the following decades (Insolera 1962). While the new national and city governments were striving to plot the new industrial development, and conceived public housing as a means of accommodating the prospective industrial labour force (Pietrangeli 2014), the so-called 'baraccamenti' already housed almost the 10 percent of the population according to the 1951 census, and over 70,000 people at the beginning of the Seventies (Puccini 2018). However derelict, Rome's urban settlements were identified by long-sighted sociologists like Berlinguer and Della Seta (1976) as the epicentre of grassroots, transformative processes that would challenge the classist, exclusionary underpinnings of Rome's post-war urbanisation that were neglected by 'traditional', representative politics (Berlinguer and Della Seta, 1976, 352-8). When social movements started to thrive and organise the autonomous demands of subaltern urban dwellers since the end of the Sixties (Vasudevan 2017), extra-parliamentarian formations dedicated to the '*lotta per la casa*' (housing struggles) established themselves as propellers, and collectors, of the demands of those subaltern urban dwellers that had been pushed in the interstices of the consolidated cities (Di Feliciano 2017), thus representing their demand for housing first, and then adequate infrastructural and welfare services (Armati 2015). As part of their contentious politics, HRMs began to coordinate the shantytowns' inhabitants' struggles and demands for decent and safe housing, alongside undertaking the first squatting actions of

vacant council estates since early 1970s to leverage the construction and allocation of new ones. Lastly, they organised the demands of public housing tenants for rental and bill caps to be modulated according to the households' income levels (Martinelli 1989; Vasudevan 2017).

The conflict was so intense that, during the harbingers of the 1977-8 uprising, the Movement had to count even fatal casualties such as the young *Autonomia Operaia* militant Fabrizio Ceruso, who was killed in September 1974 by an unidentified police gunshot during the military eviction of a squatted public housing complex in the borgata San Basilio. As the revolt erupted, the City Council and the Italian government agreed to abort the police operation and transfer the evictees into regularly assigned council houses in Casal Bruciato (Vasudevan 2017; Grazioli 2018). Furthermore, these struggles led the Communist mayor Luigi Petroselli to scheduling the complete evacuation of the shantytowns through a massive public housing plan, and then through the infrastructuring of the new neighbourhoods within the framework of the 1982 General Regulatory Plan. During the following years, thriving on these achievements, HRMs remained active by retaining their role of propellers of grassroots mobilisations and watchers of the public action's evolution (di Feliciano 2017; Grazioli and Caciagli 2018). In fact, the interstice between the 1980s evacuation of the baraccamenti and the explosion of the 2007-8 financial recession has been the hotbed of Rome's contemporary housing crisis' new demographics, and therefore agents of housing struggles, whereby transcalar trends related to the socioeconomic function of housing intertwined inside the city's fabric.

In fact, the idea that a permanent infusion in the public housing stock would be a necessary compensation for the otherwise unbearable inequalities caused by real estate, capitalist development (Campos Venuti 1978) was soon trumped by the ideology of real estate valorisation and homeownership fostered by neoliberal urbanisation, of which the financialisation of housing (Aalbers 2016) has been one of the main pillars. In Southern European cities and housing systems like Rome's, the combination of housing commodification, rental markets' deregulation (Caudo and Memo 2012) and shrinkage of social welfare systems has thus made homeownership the tenure pattern (Buckley 2018), and asset of intergenerational welfare (Arbaci 2019) prevalently chosen "by households in the context of housing policies and markets which offered no alternatives" (Allen, Barlow, Leal, Maloutas and Padovani 2004, 20). Hence, neoliberal urbanisation in Rome has taken the shape of the accumulation by dispossession (Harvey 1989) through three main patterns:

- 1) the valorisation of the city centre towards tourist, real estate development and service-oriented economies (Gainsforth 2019; Grazioli 2021);
- 2) the imposition of the real estate sector as the first provider of legal habitation (Gentili and Hoekstra 2018);
- 3) the uncontrolled urban sprawl by the means of corporate real estate development (Marchini and Sotgia 2017) and white-collar informality (Erba 2013), also profiting of a context of poor planning and substantial absence of rent control regulations since the end of the 1990s (Caudo and Memo 2012).

The latter also encouraged homeowners to consider housing properties as sources of additional (if not primary) income (Filandri et al. 2020) to place on a tenancy marketplace mainly targeting low-income and precarious urban dwellers (Mudu 2006, 2014; Marra 2012) who could not access homeownership nor public housing, and were therefore vulnerable to the swings of the market and gentrification processes (Annunziata 2014). Based on these elements, it is not surprising that the harbingers of the new squatted mestiza city (Città Meticcica) (Grazioli 2021) would already emerge in the Nineties, when the first experiments at 'migrant squatting' (Dadusc et al. 2019) (like the 1990s pasta factory Pantanella, see De Angelis 2014) were supported logistically and politically by HRMs. As these experiences anticipated the more recent struggles against the EU migratory system (see Dadusc et al. 2019; Montagna and Grazioli 2019), they also spoke

about the new composition and spatiality of the housing crisis, as it would be revealed in the prolonged aftermath of the 2008 financial recession.

In 2018, Rome's association of construction entrepreneurs estimated that 37,500 housing units have been vacant/unsold in Rome since the crisis' outset, whilst 57,000 families were experiencing conditions of housing inadequacy/segregation. These figures were aggravated by the steady growth of foreclosures and tenants' evictions lawsuits. In 2018 alone, the 73 percent of the overall 6,113 eviction notices issued in Rome were against economically defaulting tenants, whilst other 7,778 eviction requests were filed by single landlords, real-estate societies or banks that repossessed foreclosed properties (Sina 2018; Grazioli 2019, 2021). On the other hand, the request for access to council housing (Edilizia Residenziale Pubblica, hereby ERP) and/or 'housing emergency' facilities have surged. While the number of ERP applications topped 13,500 in 2020, only few apartments per year were allocated from 2017-2020 (57 in 2018, 300 in 2019), either because of the apartments' poor maintenance and the lack of staff for processing and expediting the applications. Furthermore, provisional figures point towards a further aggravation of the housing crisis caused by Covid-19 pandemic's socioeconomic repercussion. In Rome, one third of the families in a tenancy tenure have requested the Council or Regional rent check during the pandemic yet receiving only an average of 245 euros per household; on the other hand, the numbers of evictions and foreclosures trials have kept growing again (Sina 2021). This genealogy of the 'Squatted City' then shows how, in the same way as what happened during the 1900s, the deliberate disinvestment in low-income, affordable housing and welfare systems has made the current council estates' stock completely inadequate to cope with the magnitude, and demographics, of the post-2008 housing crisis (Puccini 2016), whilst the profit margin requirements of the housing marketplace feed the paradox 'houses without people, people without houses' (Gentili and Hoekstra 2018). At the same time, the permanence of HRMs as grassroots social movements in the city has enabled them to preserve the housing struggles' repertoire of action, while transmitting the knowledge of squatting as a viable form of popular mobilisation (Leontidou 2010) to the intersectional, young, largely migrant composition that nowadays forms the demographics of the housing crisis in Rome. The latter is also what undergirds the HRMs' nominal and political shift towards a comprehensive understanding of the 'right to the city' and its commons (Grazioli 2021).

#### **4. From the Struggle for Housing to the Right to Habitation**

In the light of the previous contextualisation, it is evident how the transition from the 'Lotta per la Casa' (Struggle for Houses) to the 'Movimento per il Diritto all'Abitare' (Movement for the Right to Habitation) is not a matter of semantics. It is rooted in the new political elaboration, and praxis, of HRMs and housing trade unions since the repercussions of the 2007-8 financial crisis conflated with Rome's structural dearth of low-income, affordable housing. The previous section already outlined how the linkage between settlement and mobility was already entrenched in the social composition of the post-war inhabitants of Rome's baraccamenti. However, the complexification of the contemporary housing crisis' demographics reflects the evolution of the connection among precarious housing and the differential forms of inclusion (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013) entrenched in formal citizenship and social welfare as they have been weaponised to ensure the neoliberal governance of the city (Gargiulo 2020). On the one hand, it can be affirmed that the Italian households and individuals who are currently choosing to squat with HRMs represent that share of urban precariat (Jørgensen 2015) that got stuck in the trap of labour (Fumagalli and Morini 2013) and housing

(Mudu 2006) precarity because they could not rely on institutional, nor family welfare (Allen et al. 2004; Arbaci 2019) to stabilise their housing position, nor invest income resources into prospective homeownership (Adkins and Konings 2020). However, the larger part of the current HRMs' is formed by migrants with differential backgrounds, geographical origins and even statuses, who though share housing instability and discrimination for two main reasons. Firstly, they may be not formally eligible for public housing because of the proliferation of citizenship-related administrative borders (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013; Gargiulo 2020) that make them the main targets of sub-standard, segregated tenancy accommodations (Mudu 2006; Marra 2012). Among this group, the largest communities are the South American, Maghrebi (Tunisian, Moroccan and Algerian), Habesha (Ethiopian and Eritreans), and Sudanese ones who share a history of 'migrant squatting' in Rome (see Dadusc et al. 2019; Montagna and Grazioli 2019) that has facilitated the access even of younger or more recent migrants to HRMs. Secondly, they might be part of those migrant populations that, because of their ethnicity (being Roma) or migratory status (e.g. being asylum seekers and refugees) are forcibly channelled into the 'Humanitarian Industrial Complex' (Dadusc and Mudu 2020) epitomised by reception centres, Roma Camps (Maestri 2019) and temporary housing structures (Grazioli 2019).

Furthermore, HRMs' have pondered the political agency of real estate and city developers in fostering housing precarity and segregation because of their role of primary providers of legal housing. Hence, they have identified the reappropriation of different vacancies (of public and private ownership) as the means for tackling the soaring demand for public, affordable housing that stems from the long haul of the 2007-8 financial crisis. In so doing, HRMs have engaged with updating their strategic (as well as tactic) repertoire of actions and demands (Bosi and Zamponi 2015; della Porta 2013) to acknowledge the new intersectional demographics of the post-2008 crisis housing crisis (Grazioli 2021). Throughout this process, HRMs have also reconceptualised the function, and possible ontologies, of public housing, starting from the housing squatters' experience of transforming for habitation purposes non-residential, vacant infrastructures such as factories, barracks, schools, warehouses, former hospitals, private practices, institutional facilities and so on. These elements have thus supplemented their political narrative about the reasons that undergird the deliberate institutional choice not to adopt decisive housing policies, and instead to criminalise housing squatters and activists as a socially dangerous threat to laws and order. Lastly, the new demographics of Rome's housing crisis has interrogated the movements' classic repertoire of welfare demands, fostering the passage from a struggle concerned with the pursuit of public housing as a right connected to the Italian social citizenship, to an urban scale of unionism speaking to multiple forms of dispossession and displacement intersecting class, race, ethnicity, gender and migratory status (Martínez 2019; Grazioli 2021).

The practical application of this new political elaboration was made visible during the so-called 'Tsunami Tours', that are simultaneous rounds of squatting of vacant buildings that were realised from 2012 to 2013 in different parts of the city featuring BPM, the Coordinamento Cittadino di Lotta per la Casa (City Coordination of the Housing Struggle, hereby CCLC) and other groups like Comitato Obiettivo Casa (COC, Committee Objective Housing), Action, and the grassroots tenants' union like A.S.i.A.-USB (Armati 2015; Caciagli 2016; Nur and Sethman 2017). This practice differentiated consistently from the Seventies occupations; whilst the latter that were mainly targeting unassigned council estates, the Tsunami Tours involved urban vacancies and interstices (Brighenti 2013; Parisi 2019) that were not necessarily meant for residential uses, nor of recent construction. Another element of distinction was the fact that the squatted buildings were not only public properties, but also private ones left vacant as the result of different speculative operations (e.g. discontinued productive sites; real estate funds' properties) (Grazioli 2021). This

innovative approach towards the struggle for housing in the city of Rome has been enshrined by the strategic coalition between BPM's and CCLC under the 'Movimento per il Diritto all'Abitare' (Movement for the Right to Habitation) signature (Nur and Sethman 2017; Grazioli and Caciagli 2018). From the Tsunami Tours onwards, this coalition has been gaining the strength to act upon the political centrality of real estate agents and city developers in Rome's urbanisation, acknowledging the rapidly mutating ontologies of capitalism and governmentality (Rossi 2013) inside the city. In fact, they have mapped the extent to which top-down processes of urban regeneration, the elimination of rent control legislations, and the sale of the public housing stock promoted by recent national legislations (like the 2014 Housing Plan) have reduced the available stock of public and affordable houses in the city, while fostering aggressive processes of touristification and displacement in central and semicentral areas (Gainsforth 2019; Lelo et al. 2019).

Hence, BPM and CCLC have been strategically mixing confrontational politics (Caciagli 2019, 2020) and multilevel negotiation with the 'traditional' institutional actors involved in housing policymaking in Rome to bring forward their new vision of housing as a fundamental urban resource, yet without being co-opted in representative politics (della Porta 2013; Bosi and Zamponi 2015; Caruso 2015). Besides, they tactically mobilise and campaign against evictions, police brutality, and the weaponisation of the social welfare system and administrative borders (Gargiulo 2020) against the urban squatters. For instance, they have been mobilising against the Article 5 of the 2014 National Housing Plan, which strips housing squatters of their entitlement to local social welfare (included healthcare and education) by denying registering their home address in a squatted abode. The article also forbids the squatters' legal access to utilities such as water and electricity, while excluding them from being subsidised public housing. On the one hand, the Article 5's declared purpose was to punish current squatters and discouraging prospective ones, starting from the assumption that social welfare is also a scarce asset that should be allocated to formally enfranchised, deserving citizens (*ibid.*). However, the HRMs' capacity to mobilise their consolidated repertoire of actions (squatting) organisational rites (assembly-based decision making; collective care of communal spaces; the sharing of carework and social reproduction) (Grazioli 2021) to stimulate the transformation of various urban vacancies into dignified houses and commoning infrastructures radically challenges this scarcity assumption. At the same time, the presence and quality of housing squats inside the city questions the traditional conceptions, and realisation, of public housing as agglomerates, and thus proliferating agents, of social marginality located at the fringes of what is construed and mapped as the city centre. In fact, the 'traditional' council estates' stock is modelled on the image of the white, working-class, 'native' households (Puccini 2016), whose residential trajectories and ambitions are affected by a marginalising conception of social, and spatial peripherality. By this token, the majority of council estates (and their inhabitants) in Rome are located at the borders of the Grande Raccordo Anulare ring road and the suburban areas, where the quality (and presence) of public services (e.g. public transportations) thins out and inequalities tend to increase (Lelo, Monni e Tomassi 2019). On the other hand, the repurposing of various urban vacancies located in central as well as peripheral parts of the city reveals a quick, and more sustainable, solution to cater enough public housing for all those who demand it without furthering land speculation, nor the real estate uncontrolled urban sprawl in already congested areas, while restoring the right to urban centrality (Purcell 2002; Merrifield 2011; Grazioli 2017). Lastly, the richness of many housing squats' everyday life and activities prefigures an alternative model of urban citizenship based on solidarity and commonality, instead of on the competition for the commodified urban resources along lines of class, race, ethnicity and so on.



## 5. Conclusions. Rethinking Public Estates Through Housing Squats

In this article I attempted at translating into theoretical considerations the manifold empirical inputs I have been experiencing during my activist ethnography inside BPM, and therefore inside the ‘Movimento per il Diritto all’Abitare’ in Rome. I have thus detailed how the complexification of the HRMs’ demographics has stimulated the innovations of the movements’ ‘traditional’ configurations of activism, space and demand for public housing in the post-crisis that has been configured by the prolonged aftermath of the 2007-8 recession. On the one hand, the existing quality and quantity of the current public housing stock is structurally (and administratively) inadequate (Puccini 2016) to respond to the to the expectations about the right to the city that are expressed by those urban inhabitants who cannot access marketised nor public housing, or who have withdrawn from the institutionalisation within the Humanitarian Industrial Complex (as in the case of asylum seekers, refugees and Roma population) (Dadusc and Mudu 2020). On the other hand, the recuperation of even non-residential urban vacancies dispersed inside the urban fabric promoted makes the HRMs the law-breaking policymakers (Aureli and Mudu 2017) of a sustainable, innovative model of public housing as the tenet of the ‘right to the city’. In this perspective, housing is not gauged in relation to its market value, nor conceived as a matter of private ownership, yet in the light of the social and spatial outcomes it produces. Furthermore, the commoning of social reproduction that urban squatters enact to sort their life necessity speaks to a model of urban life that disrupts the privatised notion of habitation as the place where the individual households’ life (and carework) unfolds. The latter is replaced by a public city model based on reciprocity, commonality and the hybridation of consolidated social roles (e.g. the sharing of childcare; the unsettlement of the clear-cut partition between private and public space) (Grazioli 2021). Hence, I contended that the grassroots reconversion of different urban vacancies operated by housing squatters suggests to policymakers a new way of conceiving, and then realising, public housing in a sustainable manner, as opposed to the predatory (and marketised) model fostered by real estate urbanism. This is even more urgent in a city like Rome that, as the paper discussed at length, has been suffering from the mismatch between the demand for public housing, and the type of habitation planned by urban institutions and developers, at least since the past century, and that has thus been extremely vulnerable to the socioeconomic repercussions of the crises erupted since late 2000s. The post-2008 housing crisis’ complexification have thus broadened the scope of HRMs, that ‘evolved’ from housing-focused movements, to social urban movements concerned with the ‘right to stay put in the city’ (Hartman 2002; Grazioli and Caciagli 2017, 2018).

The latter is materialised by a new model of urbanity that considers the direct reappropriation (Bosi and Zamponi 2015) of housing stability (Ferrero 2020) as a point of departure for affirming different settlement and movement (Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013) rights inside the city that cannot be ‘covered’ by traditional welfare systems, nor by traditional rights as they are conceived in relation to citizenship. Hence, this vision of habitation tallies with a non-formal, post-citizenship (ibid.) understanding of urbanity (Grazioli 2017) that is condensed in the self-definition of the HRMs’ housing squatters as the ‘Roma Meticcias’ (mestiza Rome). As this definition has permeated also popular culture and music<sup>1</sup>, it is important to grasp how it aligns with the debates that have animated post-colonial studies, feminist theory and cultural anthropology during the past decades, and that question the substance and conceptualisation of the relation between identity, space

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<sup>1</sup> The rap group Assalti Frontali published the song ‘Roma Meticcias’ in their 2011 album ‘Profondo Rosso’.

and culture (see Anzaldúa 1987; Amselle 1998). Within this vision of the city, the everyday life modalities that stem from the radical regeneration and ‘upcycling’ (Coppola 2012; De Carli and Frediani 2016; Grazioli 2021) of interstitial urban vacancies (Brighenti 2013; Parisi 2019) prefigure a completely new conception of housing and public estates, and therefore the radical revision of the political imagery associated to them. In fact, council estates are nowadays not a viable horizon for housing squatters, unless the policymaking approach towards housing and urban regeneration changes radically, like HRMs keep invoking. It is also a matter of fact that ‘traditional’ model (and stock) of council estates is structurally inadequate to respond to the needs, and desires, of an increasingly diverse composition of urban dwellers that conceive public housing as a point of departure for contrasting instability, precarity and exploitation within the labour, housing and reproduction marketplace. On the other hand, the richness of the squatted, mestiza city prefigures for policymakers an economically, environmentally and socially inclusive model of estates that radically differs from the traditional, post-Second World War one. In fact, the recuperation of so many urban vacancies that punctuate the entirety of the urban fabric (from the city centre to the so-called peripheries) shows that a great number of houses could be obtained by different types of urban constructions without further land consumption. This would interrupt pluridecennial patterns of real estate development and displacement, while debunking the neoliberal assumption that social welfare is (or should be) a scarce resource that should be contended by deserving, formally enfranchised citizens. Lastly, rethinking public estates through the analytical prism of housing squats radically challenges the idea that the private sector might rightfully extract profit from the emergencies entrenched in the urban social reproduction, as it is the only actor capable of investing adequate and efficient resources.

In conclusion, the HRMs’ emphasis on the urban inhabitants as legitimate unionising actors in the negotiation of how to use urban resources and spaces for the general welfare draws a line towards social innovations that could be crucial in a post(?)-pandemic scenario where the socioeconomic repercussions of Covid-19 are only partly foreseeable. However, it can be said that the multilevel institutions involved in the governance of housing (starting with the national government) have instead chosen to weaponise welfare and citizenship rights to make the replicability of housing squats less attractive, while refusing to take action for solving the housing crisis. In fact, at the time of writing (August 2021), the criminalising attitude against HRMs and urban squatters persists, to the point of not lifting the Article 5. At the same time, public institutions do not seem dedicated to putting housing policies at the centre of the political arena, if not when debating how to modulate evictions and foreclosures after the moratorium ended in June 2021). In fact, the resources destined to housing by the final draft of the Italian plan for the Next Generation EU (NGEU), the ‘Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza’ (PNRR) once again converge towards a top-down conception of urban regeneration, concentrated on the renovation of private estates. Future lines of inquiry could then investigate how HRMs have been affected by, and then reacted to, the policymaking framework delineated by the PNRR and the NGEU on a local as well as transnational scale, since European coalitions are starting to mobilise and campaign together. Besides, future research could gauge whether multilevel policies have ultimately co-opted the grassroots movements’ innovations to tackle the spike in housing poverty, or if they once again chose to feed in the vicious circle of emergency-driven, austerity-based approaches.

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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

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# The political economy of a collusive urban regime: making sense of urban development projects in Rome

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**ABSTRACT:** The relative hegemony of land rentiers and real estate developers over the process of urban socio-economic reproduction is a defining characteristic of the “collusive regime” of Rome. Through the analysis of a case study, we tried to establish if the realisation of Urban Development Projects in this regime favours the unequal distribution of the benefits deriving from urban development. Applying a neo-Gramscian lens to urban political economy, we identified an interpretative model for explaining the role of UDPs in the urban regime of Rome. First, UDPs are suitable occasions for realising accumulation strategies based on the capture of rent gaps and the valorisation of urban assets. Second, the actors involved in UDPs mobilise ideational and material resources for gathering consensus for a project, that rewards their specific interests, by framing their investment as the best solution for localised collective needs. UDPs in Rome, therefore, facilitate the concentration of benefits and the generalisation of costs of urban development.

Our research contributes to the understanding of Rome’s fragile trajectory of growth and offers insights on the mechanisms reinforcing unequal urban development.

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**KEYWORDS:** neo-Gramscian approach; Rome; unequal urban development; urban development

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\* Although this article is the result of joint research, discussion and effort, Edoardo Esposto was the main author of section 2, Barbara Pizzo of section 3 and Giulio Moini of section 4. Sections 1 and 5 have been written jointly.

projects; urban regime; urban rent.

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## 1. Introduction

Rome is the largest municipality in Italy and one of the largest in Europe, but its status as a modern metropolis is contentious. Researchers have described Rome as being subjected to an uncertain and weak metropolisation (d'Albergo, Moini and Pizzo 2018) and as a city in transition from the ephemeral success of the mid-1990s to a deep fiscal and political crisis from the mid-2000s onwards (Causi 2018; Coppola and Punziano 2018; Tocci 2015).

Scholars have highlighted the nexus between the physical expansion of Rome and its historical development model. The spatial pattern of growth that the city has followed since the 1950s is a monocentric structure replicating itself outwards and increasingly further away from the city centre. The economic mechanism supporting this outward growth was based on the capture of the value increase of the abundant agricultural land surrounding the ancient and modern city that was converted into sprawling building sites (Pizzo 2020).

A social outcome of this development model is the spatialisation of inequality, which is a linear function of the distance from the historical city centre. The city's outskirts are, on average, characterised by the highest socio-economic fragility and marginalisation and by poor or insufficient public services.

As a corrective to this unsustainable development model, the last masterplan of 2003-2008 introduced the idea of polycentrism, which would be realised through so-called "urban-metropolitan sub-centres" (Marcelloni 2003). They were presented as a way of contrasting the marginalisation of the suburbs, which was connected not only to their physical distance from the city centre but also to the lack of functional specialisation of those areas. The antidote should have been public and private investments in advanced services, specialised productive hubs, knowledge centres, mega-event facilities, and so on.

This policy discourse and *ad hoc* planning regulations framed the urban development of Rome for 20 years. Two decades since the approval of the masterplan and the subsequent realisation of many of those "sub-centres", the city is still characterised by strong and increasing inequalities between the centre and the peripheries (Lelo, Monni and Tommasi 2019).

Large-scale urban development projects (UDPs) were a strategic component of the planned polycentric metropolisation. Several UDPs were devised in the periphery or near-periphery to act as catalyst for further investments, and a smaller subset was realised.

These projects were devised under different general economic conditions and local political majorities, and they widely differ in scope and content. However, all these UDPs had a weak socio-economic impact for the city, whose trajectory of development is still ridden with fragilities and seemingly unable to lead to an actual shared economic growth.

These considerations beg the question of why there is a gap between high expectations and unsatisfactory collective outcomes of UDPs. Which political, social and economic characteristics of the urban development model of Rome can help interpret the weak impacts of UDPs on the city and its citizens? Have UDPs contributed to the unequal distribution of the benefits deriving from the localised process of wealth production?

The article is organised as follows: the next section presents the theoretical framework guiding our study, applying a neo-Gramscian lens to read the urban regime of Rome, and briefly discuss the methodology we followed. The third section details the case study we selected for empirical research, the new Italian headquarters of the *BNP Paribas* bank holding company located in eastern Rome. In the fourth section, we propose an interpretive model based on our case study, which helps to answer our research questions. The final section briefly discusses the results of our study.

One last introductory remark: the research has been conducted from late 2019 to mid-2020. For this reason, the article is not addressing the challenges posed to urban environment by COVID-19 pandemic.

## 2. Theoretical framework and methodology

### 2.1 Urban political economy: a neo-Gramscian reading

In Rome, the interrelations between various actors – chiefly landowners, developers, investors, and local institutions, as well as public and private enterprises, national politicians and government officials – form a relatively stable field of interaction that can be described as an ideal-typical “collusive” urban regime (d’Albergo and Moini 2015). The term “collusive” is not employed in its juridical meaning. It instead defines a political-economic model presiding over the development of the city.

The relative hegemony of land rentiers and real estate developers over the process of urban socio-economic reproduction is a defining characteristic of this regime (Pizzo and Di Salvo 2015). This statement requires two qualifications. First, focusing on the hegemony of developers and land and property owners does not equate to considering them to be the most influential power players of the local elite, who alone determine the economic decision-making and policymaking in the city. The concept of hegemony (discussed below in further details) emphasises the relational and strategic nature of social power, as well as its consensual and coercive dimensions. Furthermore, it is incompatible with the simplified depiction of social actors as homogeneous, individual-like rational agents. Speaking of hegemony implies the recognition of diversified social class positionings, that are determined by the unequal structuration of socio-material reproduction. Actors are capable of agency upon societal arrangements inasmuch as they generate shared cultural-political imaginaries and organise for collective action.

Second, the role of rent and rent-maximising actions in urban development must be addressed<sup>1</sup>. For investments in land and property, the principle of “highest and best use” of capital translates into seeking the highest rent gap (Smith 1996), either by the increase in value obtained from land tenure transactions or by new development or renewal projects. Capturing the highest rent gap implies satisfying at least one of the following conditions (Pizzo forthcoming): 1. the project starts on a low-productivity plot that was not previously eligible for development (e.g. capturing the value increase produced by turning agricultural land into a construction site); 2. brownfield sites are purchased to capitalise on favourable existing conditions (such as existing infrastructures). An investor often waits for someone else’s investment to realise condition 1 or 2, or both, and then jumps on the bandwagon by acquiring or redeveloping a surrounding plot.

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<sup>1</sup> Several contributions have aptly captured the importance of the debate on ground rent for the evolution of the research agenda of urban political economy (see *inter alia* Haila 1990; Ward and Aalbers 2016). The complexity of this category led to various theoretical impasses, especially in the 1980s, and it still proves to be an elusive topic for empirical investigation.

“Someone else” is often the local or national government, or a public or semi-public institutional investor. The possibility or impossibility of claiming higher rent by exploiting rent gaps shapes investment and selling decisions, maintenance or disrepair of existing buildings, the degree of building density in an area, and so on (Clark 1995). “Islands of opportunity” and discontinuities in the urban fabric are thus formed, which co-determine the spatialisation of urban inequalities and orient the strategies of rent-seeking actors in a path dependent manner.

Land rentiers and real estate developers share interests and goals shaped by the common position they occupy in the urban socio-material structure. However, they compete among themselves for realising the most profitable investment opportunities, they confront other local or extra-local economic actors that are equally interested in directing the course of urban development, and they face the limitations and the costs imposed by public policy and local politics. A degree of collective coordination is essential for overcoming barriers, acquiring resources and having an influence on the use of urban space.

The collusive regime of Rome is a response to this need. It can be described as a set of political-hegemonic relationships between local and extra-local actors, that establishes a contingent coherency between their interests and goals and, at the same time, allows them to pursue specific strategies for taking maximum advantage from the general process of wealth production (d’Albergo and Moini 2013). It steers the development model followed by the city, but it fosters an opportunistic commitment of material and ideational resources by key economic actors. Moreover, the generalised benefits deriving from the development model – routinely invoked for building consensus around it – are tenuous and unequally distributed over the socio-spatial fabric. Further conceptualisation of urban power blocs is important for understanding the evolution of Rome’s collusive regime, the weak metropolisation of the city (Moini and Pizzo 2017), and the growing socio-economic inequalities found in the urban area (Esposito and Moini 2020).

The neo-Gramscian approach to urban political economy (Jessop 1997) explicitly takes into account the articulation of economic strategies and political projects in the urban space. The urban context is here understood as the site of various accumulation strategies, or courses of action devised by actors for advancing their interests in the context of the historical and localised pattern of productive and distributive relationships in which they are embedded (McGuirk 2004). The conflicts and cooperation among these actors – within the structural limits imposed by the modes of production and allocation of material resources – determine the predominant configuration of capital accumulation in an urban space for a relatively long time (regime of accumulation). Political relations, institutional systems and ideational constellations coevolve with the accumulation regime and contribute to its reproduction (mode of regulation).

The combination of an accumulation regime and a mode of regulation delimits a provisional development model for an urban space, which tends to differ city by city. This is the meaning of the concept of urban regime adopted in our study.

The relationships among actors have a crucial importance for explaining the stability or transformation of an urban regime. The dominant and subordinate capitalist class fractions and the subalterns<sup>2</sup> constitute the point of departure for studying how territorial alliances and conflicts are organised and how they, in turn, re-organise the space of accumulation. Analysing these relations in term of class fractions helps to overcome

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<sup>2</sup> In themselves variegated, being subjected to different modes and levels of exploitation and being characterised by different cultural, ethnic, gender, national, etc. identities. For Gramsci, as S. Hall remarked in an important contribution to Gramscian studies, «is understood that classes, while sharing certain common conditions of existence, are also cross-cut by conflicting interests, historically segmented and fragmented in this actual course of historical formation. Thus the “unity” of classes is necessarily complex and has to be produced – constructed, created – as a result of specific economic, political and ideological practices» (1986, 14).

the double pitfall of local voluntarism (i.e. individual actors and their contingent decisions are the causal forces that shape an urban regime) and territorial determinism (i.e. economic structures and their path dependent development are the only explanatory variables). Nonetheless, the concept of class fraction is slippery. It risks reproducing, at a higher level of abstraction, the variety of actors found operating in every empirical case.

S. Clarke (1978) offered a definition of class fraction grounded in the Marxian analysis of social (productive) relations under capitalism. Different capitalist agents enter into the process of economic production and reproduction owning a «“particular form” of capital», which corresponds to «specialized “functions” in the circuit of capital which [...] give rise to specialized capitals: productive capital, bank capital, commercial capital, [and] landed capital» (*Ibid.*, 57). Following this insight, we can use the analytical label “class fraction” to describe a function of the total movement of capital (landed capital, commercial capital, industrial capital, interest-bearing capital) and to identify the distributional mechanism through which revenues are received by the capital owners (rent, commercial profit, industrial profit, interest).

These functions are represented by agents (i.e. individual capitalists) in production, exchange and distribution. Fractional positioning is not a fixed and immutable identity attributed once and for all; it changes with the development of the capitalist mode of production. Marx already noted that the concentration of money-capital in the banking sector was eroding the importance of specialised commercial money-dealing capitalists (Fine 1986). D. Harvey has argued that landed property is losing its historical peculiarities and is becoming increasingly indistinguishable from the ownership of financial assets (Haila 1988).

Moreover, as convincingly argued by J. R. Bryson (1997), the individual agents may represent one or more of these fractions in each concrete case. A good example are the owners of capital who play a major role in the built environment, such as landowners, real estate developers, construction companies, and financial investors: a developer-*cum*-builder represents the commercial and industrial fractions, a bank investing in real estate assets represents the interest-bearing and the landed ones.

Class fractions should be understood as an analytical tool for studying how the interests and goals of concrete actors are shaped by the prevalent function they fulfil in a spatio-temporally situated accumulation process. An actor will try to devise an accumulation strategy that satisfies its fractional interests – its “economic-corporative” interest in Gramscian terms – and sustains the expansion of accumulation.

Political unity among the various social forces involved in, or affected by, an accumulation strategy is a necessary condition to minimise opposition and foster coordination, and it is not reached automatically. Establishing a provisional consensus for an accumulation strategy among the fractions of the capitalist class and (part of) the subalterns is the rationale of hegemonic projects. They entail the mobilisation of ideational and material resources for gathering «support behind a concrete program of action that asserts a contingent general interest in the pursuit of objectives that explicitly or implicitly advance the long-term interests of the hegemonic class (fraction) [...] while derogating the pursuit of other interests that are inconsistent with the project» (Jessop 1997, 62).

B. Jessop insists on the importance of the act of separating a local socio-economic space from the indistinct flow of capitals across places and scales, by evoking various economic and political imaginaries (Jessop 2010) for consolidating a community of interest that may support the accumulation strategy and provide it with its extra-economic conditions.

A fraction of capital becomes hegemonic when it succeeds in forming a bloc connecting its interests and goals to those of the subordinate fractions and of the subalterns. Following Gramsci, this «local hegemonic

bloc» (Jessop 1997, 51) is characterised by the “concrete coordination” of class interests. The dominant fraction has to offer, to the subordinate fractions and to (part of) the subalterns, the possibility of identifying their own material interest and desired outcomes with the projected course of action. In other words, the hegemonic bloc needs a principle of generalisation of interests and goals, together with a principle of inclusion-exclusion, to discern who has needs and desires that are consistent with the overarching goals of the hegemonic projects.

Starting from the 1980s, accumulation strategies and hegemonic projects at both national and local levels have undergone a reconfiguration, as a result of processes of scalar reorganisation of production and de-structuring of the nation-wide institutions and social compacts associated with the Fordist-Keynesian regulation of socio-economic reproduction. This paradigmatic change, which established the basis for the neoliberal phase of capitalism, has been associated with a transformation in the form of hegemony. In Fordist-Keynesian development model, the centrality of the wage relation, in both production and consumption and for both capital and labour, induced the dominant fraction of capital – the industrial – to pursue an «expansive hegemony in which the support of the entire population is mobilised through material concessions and symbolic rewards» (Jessop 1991, 175). In that context, capitalist urban development and housing were receptive to the need to lower the cost of labour power by the means of public provision, and they were equally subject to the political and social claims of organised labour (Harvey 1976).

The form of hegemony that emerged with neoliberalism has been described as “two-nations” hegemony. It «require[s] containment and even repression of the other nation at the same time as [it] involve[s] selective access and concessions for the more favoured nation» (Jessop 1991, 175). Neoliberal hegemonic projects became less concerned with gaining the support of the entire population but were instead more selective and directed toward specific social groups and spatial contexts (Smith 2011). Urban development and housing provision also underwent similar transformations, mobilising the support of selected groups of urban dwellers for site-specific interventions while passing the costs of an increasingly unequal urban development to others.

The construction by public and private actors of homeownership and property-based wealth as a justification of wealth polarisation, and of the built environment as an ideal and material site of redistribution of income from labour to capital, was crucial in the consolidation of neoliberal hegemony (Aalbers and Christophers 2014; Béland 2007; Madden and Marcuse 2016).

The shift to neoliberal forms of socio-economic regulation and cultural-political imaginaries was associated with the increased centrality of credit-money in the accumulation process (Jessop 2013) and to the importance of wealth derived from the capitalisation of claims on future surplus value, i.e. the ownership of fictitious – yet socially effective – capital, as in the case of stocks, bonds, and land (Harvey 2013).

Finance and finance-led growth has become central to a burgeoning multidisciplinary research agenda, especially after the 2008 crisis. This rich scholarship is especially significant for urban political economy (see *inter alia* Aalbers 2020; Halbert and Attuyer 2016; Sokol 2017). Contributions have explored the preconditions and results of the growing weight that credit has in the supply and demand of residential and commercial real estate (Aalbers 2019; Weber 2015); the role of financial instruments and financial expertise in construing real estate as an investment diversification opportunity (Guironnet, Attuyer and Halbert 2016); the work of financial innovation, that enabled the transformation of credit relations involving urban assets into tradable securities (Gotham 2009); and the importance of state or public-private investment schemes and asset management funds in enabling and sustaining the flow of finance into urban development and land properties (Byrne 2016). Finally, scholars have stressed the significance of regulatory and macro-economic

changes happening outside the built environment (Schwartz 2012; Toporowski 2010; van Loon and Aalbers 2017). These structural factors help construct what R. Fernandez and M.B. Aalbers (2016) defined as “a wall of money” sustaining urban development.

UDPs are a good empirical reference for studying the changing accumulation strategies and hegemonic projects in contemporary cities. Since large-scale UDPs have special relevance for urban economies, they can be conceived of as magnifying lenses for reading actors’ agency and place-specific political economic conditions, as well as reconnecting them to the extra-local trends affecting the spatial and functional transformation of the social, political, and physical cityscapes (Bryson *et al.* 2017; Guironnet and Halbert 2014).

There are several possible explanations of the genesis and significance of large-scale UDPs, but scholars generally consider them as the currently prevailing tool for remaking the urban fabric (Orueta and Fainstein 2008). Contributors observed how the discourses and material practices associated to UDPs tend to frame them as “creators of growth” seemingly independent from the «residential and entrepreneurial demands of [the] localities» they are embedded in (Savini and Aalbers 2016, 880-1).

UDPs have recurrent features: changes in land-use; several public and private funding streams; an increasing importance of the financialisation both of real estate and the land markets; the involvement of various institutional actors on different scales of action; and the presence of strategic players, such as developers, property owners, local governments, and equity funds. UDPs stress the importance of public-private partnerships as a structure and process of urban governance and as the go-to solution for providing strategic metropolitan infrastructure.

Scholars highlighted that UDPs favour the erosion of the rules and processes of decision-making of local representative bodies, increasingly downplayed in favour of the quick and effective delivery of the projects (Raco 2014). The well-known «new choreography of elite power» (Swyngedouw, Moulaert and Rodriguez 2002, 542) is taking place precisely within this space of weakened collective decision-making. UDPs are legitimised in public and political arenas using various narratives, such as the need to modernise cities, the weakness of public sector, and the limits imposed by austerity, and they are sustained by the deployment of various techniques of local stakeholder engagement and participatory methods (Moini 2012). Moreover, the effect of UDPs on the city is selectively presented in terms of the positive spill-over that urban renewal would have on surrounding property prices (Türkün 2011). These discursive and material practices help legitimise UDPs as desirable and almost inescapable features of contemporary cities, a sign of their spatial, functional, and economic development. In brief, UDPs are constructed as the best urban actions for pursuing the general interest and realising collective benefits.

## 2.2 Methodology

In order to enquire into the socio-spatial impacts of UDPs in Rome, we selected the case study of the new Italian headquarters of the *BNP Paribas* bank, located within a wider large-scale development site. We conducted an extensive review of existing secondary data, particularly planning and policy documents, national and local databases, press releases and published PR artifacts. The collection of secondary data spanned over 6 years, between 2014 and 2020. The secondary data containing technical information on the UDP helped increase the accuracy of the description of the case study, which will be presented in section 3. The secondary data that were relevant for understanding the ideational resources mobilised by actors

involved in our case study (discussed in section 4) have been examined adopting the perspective on the discursive “production of hegemonies” proposed by cultural political economy (Sum and Jessop 2013).

During the period 2014-2015 two of the authors took part, as non-participant observers, to multiple rounds of public consultation about the redevelopment area, organised by the Local Authority District Two of Rome and involving citizens and all the major stakeholders of the project in a participatory process (Moini 2017). In elaborating our analysis, we made use of their field diaries and extensive notes on informal exchanges of information with stakeholders.

Finally, we integrated the available evidence by conducting, in 2020, an hour and a half in-depth interview with an employee of *BNP Paribas Real Estate* involved in the realisation of the new headquarters, who prefers to remain anonymous.

All collected data, primary and secondary, are in Italian. We decided to rely mostly on indirect renderings of texts and of the interviewee’s words, rather than on literal translations. In all the cases where we refer to discursive artifacts, a link to the original Italian text is provided in the footnotes.

In order to organise the evidence we gathered and use them to make sense of the case study, we present an interpretative model which borrows from process tracing analysis (Buseti and Dente 2017; Ravazzi 2018)<sup>3</sup>. The model breaks up a logical process of causation in a sequence of steps (Beach 2017). In section 4 we will discuss each step together with the supporting evidence emerging from the case study. In implementing this method, we relaxed some of its most stringent requirements and focused on the advantage it offers for formulating and discussing an interpretative hypothesis in relation to a case study (Bennett and Elman 2006). Our usage of some analytical tools deriving from process tracing is intended to be purely analogical, with no ambition to test the hypothesis with the level of confidence attained by rigorous application of the technique (see *inter alia* Beach and Pedersen 2013; Bennett 2010).

### 3. Case presentation and discussion

#### 3.1 Contextualising the case study

The new headquarters of *BNP Paribas* is located in the historical *Pietralata* neighbourhood, in the Eastern IV District of the city, not far from the city centre. In broad terms, the site where the case study is located is what remains of an unrealised large-scale public project contained in the 1965 masterplan of Rome: the *Sistema Direzionale Orientale* (SDO), or the Eastern Directional System. The SDO as a whole was abandoned, while a minor part of it has been reconverted in one of the 18 urban-metropolitan sub-centres of the current masterplan (see figure 1). The *Quintiliani* sub-centre should eventually host advanced public and private research and commercial facilities. Until the present, the sub-centre remained largely on paper.

The *Pietralata* area has been the first one where a *PR.INT.*<sup>4</sup> has been launched in Rome. The programme is aimed at urban renewal, and particularly at addressing urban decay. After a first approval in 2013, the

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<sup>3</sup> We are indebted to one of the anonymous reviewers for directing us towards this method. We would like to thank she/he and the second referee for their constructive comments that greatly helped to improve the paper.

<sup>4</sup> *PR.INT.* means *Programmi Integrati* (Integrated programmes), one of the many planning tools introduced in the 1990s (Law 179/1992), and it has a mixed legacy. On the one hand, it tried to relate spatial goals with social, economic, and environmental goals in a stricter and more direct manner than traditional planning tools. On the other hand, it tried to overcome the rigidity and slowness of the master plan, but it also undermined the very logics of urban planning (Brenna 2008).



*PR.INT.* was finalised in 2019, over a decade after its drafting. In the first phase of the programme, 14 out of 29 private projects will be realised, and their revenues will finance 9 public projects out of the planned 31.

Another national policy programme landed here: the so-called *Piano Città*, a funding programme of the national government which was expected to multiply public investments through public-private partnerships. The public resource obtained for the area through the *Piano Città* have been directed to small projects of minor systemic significance (Pizzo 2014).



**Figure 1 - The area of the case study: plans, programmes and projects. The letters indicate the planned interventions financed by *Piano Città*, the blue dotted line represents the subway B line and the blue dots subway stations.**

Source: Author's elaboration.

The *BNP Paribas* headquarters is located within a main redevelopment area where an old railway station (*Tiburtina* station) was rebuilt in 2006-2011 in order to become the main station for high-speed trains. As it happened in Milan, Turin, Vienna and Berlin, this station should have become a main connectivity hub and thus the pivot for the renewal of its surrounding area.

The *Tiburtina* station and the *BNP Paribas* headquarters are part of the major redevelopment programme launched in the early 2000s by the national railways management company, *Rete Ferroviaria Italiana* (RFI), a subsidiary of the public railroad holding company *Ferrovie dello Stato Italiane* (FS).

### 3.2 The new headquarters of *BNP Paribas*: the *Orizzonte Europa* building

Between 2011 and 2012, *BNP Paribas* acquired an area of 7,350 m<sup>2</sup> from RFI for 73.2 million euros. It was the first plot to be redeveloped out of the 92 hectares of past railway working sites and brownfield sites owned by RFI and the Municipality of Rome, which owned 2/3 and 1/3 of the area, respectively.

The deal reached with *BNP Paribas* for the new building *Orizzonte Europa* was the first of its kind in Rome, but similar trajectories have been followed in Turin and Milan (Moini, Pizzo, and Vicari Haddock 2019). In fact, the three main banking groups in the country – *Intesa San Paolo*, *Unicredit*, and *BNP Paribas* – moved their headquarters near formerly secondary, recently renewed high-speed train stations, which became strategic locations of real estate investment in the country.

*Orizzonte Europa* has a total surface of 75,000 m<sup>2</sup>, despite an initial allocation of building rights for 43,800 m<sup>2</sup>. The new building can host 3,300 employees, with twelve office floors and around 20,000 m<sup>2</sup> of underground floors. Besides offices, it hosts 2,100 m<sup>2</sup> for canteens, a separate VIP restaurant, a kindergarten, a gym, and a 300-seat auditorium<sup>5</sup>. It is adjacent to the new train station and surrounded by a new system of streets, parking lots, and a square, which should contribute to the overall regeneration of the area.

*Ferservizi* and *FS Sistemi Urbani*, two subsidiaries of FS, finalised the deal with *BNP Paribas* for around 1,000 euro/m<sup>2</sup>, and the revenues from the deal contributed to financing the new *Tiburtina* station<sup>6</sup>.

The land and property owner in the area is a public national actor whose core business is cargo and passenger railway transport. The holding group FS has the Ministry of Finance as its single public shareholder and owns various subsidiaries that operate the railway network and carry out ancillary activities. One of these subsidiaries is especially important in our case: *FS Sistemi Urbani*. It is 100% controlled by FS, and its mission is the valorisation of real estate assets owned by the holding group, which are no longer employed in core business operations. FS owns a large asset wealth as a result of over a hundred years of infrastructural investments in transportation carried out by the national government. Stations in large and small cities across the country, former industrial yards for storage and maintenance, and central and local office buildings are examples of the assets FS and its subsidiaries can sell or redevelop. By turning its productive assets into prospective real estate assets, the FS group is increasingly functioning as a landed capitalist rather than solely as a traditional commercial one.

*BNP Paribas* is a major transnational financial player that originated in Europe but operates in 72 countries worldwide. As of 2021, it is the third largest bank holding company in the world by assets. The French group acquired in 2006 the Italian banking group *Banca Nazionale del Lavoro* (BNL), which was among the largest in the country and historically based in Rome. Consequently, the financial investor in our case is a large financial conglomerate operating at the transnational level but deeply rooted in the Italian, and especially Roman, context.

Overall, *BNP Paribas* invested around 300 million euros for the realisation of the new headquarters. The deal was concluded by *BNP Paribas Real Estate*, the real estate subsidiary of the French group. *BNP Paribas Real Estate* acquires and valorises assets in the built environment across Europe, operating as a consultancy firm for real estate projects, a developer of commercial buildings, an asset management firm, and an

<sup>5</sup> <https://bnl.it/it/Scopri-BNL/Chi-Siamo/BNL-Oggi/Spazi-e-modelli-lavorativi/Roma-Orizzonte-EUROPA>.

<sup>6</sup> The *Tiburtina* station, as well as all the major railroad stations in the main Italian cities, is managed by another subsidiary of FS, *Grandi Stazioni*, a joint stock company whose majority shareholder is FS (60%) and the minority is *Eurostazioni* (40%), a private joint stock participated by three major Italian investment groups: the *Benetton Group*, the *Caltagirone Group*, and the *Pirelli Group*. The business model of *Grandi Stazioni*, geared towards the refurbishment of central stations into commercial hubs inside the inner city, was first experimented during the 2000 jubilee in *Roma Termini*, the central station of Rome.

investment manager. In the case we are examining, it valorises the assets *BNP Paribas* acquired in Rome, which include the buildings formerly owned by BNL, many of which are located in prestigious locations in the city centre.

In our case study, *BNP Paribas* does not represent interest-bearing capital, i.e. the class fraction lending capital to be invested in productive activities and earning an interest. Instead, *BNP Paribas* and *BNP Paribas Real Estate* function as commercial capital (facilitating the circulation of ownership titles in the urban environment and earning a service fee) and landed capital (pursuing *ad hoc* valorisations of owned properties to maximise rent).

The third and last main economic actor involved in the UDP is *Parsitalia General Contractor*, a subsidiary of the *Parsitalia* holding group that is controlled by a family of building developers, the Parnasi. *Parsitalia* acted as a general contractor for *Orizzonte Europa* that led and coordinated the various industrial capitals mobilised to realise the project, such as construction and engineering companies.

The *Orizzonte Europa* project was planned, approved, and realised over seven years. In that same time span, due to the unstable political context of Rome, three different political majorities followed one another: the centre-right coalition of G. Alemanno (2008-13), the centre-left of I. Marino (2013-15) and the “post-political” M5S majority of V. Raggi (2016-present). The changing political majorities did not influence the regulative context in which the project was embedded. The large-scale UDP centred around the *Tiburtina* railway is an example of the contractual approach to the regulation of urban development, which emerged as a central policy tool for urban planning since the 1990s (Governa and Salone 2005). Over the two decades of redevelopment, a series of bilateral agreements between the municipality and RFI<sup>7</sup> superseded the specifications of the city’s masterplan, and bent land-use regulations to accommodate the needs of the property owner (e.g. allowing an increase of tradable building rights in exchange for the prospective realisation of public services or infrastructures).

### 3.3 The outcomes of the project

*Orizzonte Europa* is considered a major success by the main economic actors involved in the UDP. Setting aside the direct benefits accruing *BNP Paribas* – which we will discuss in further details in the next section – the project allowed RFI to move ahead with the redevelopment of the remaining plots in the *Tiburtina* area with the further sale of two of the eleven plots<sup>8</sup>: one acquired by the University of Rome *La Sapienza*<sup>9</sup> and the other by *MTK Developments*<sup>10</sup>. However, the nature of the collective benefits deriving from the redevelopment is less clear.

On the one hand, the new headquarters and the other projects in the area added one positive economic outcome to the neighbouring districts: the average housing prices in the *Tiburtina* area remain higher than the city average. The 2008 crisis generated a prolonged stagnation of the real estate sector in Rome (Crisci 2019). Housing prices did not resume the upward trend of the late 1990s and early 2000s, and they dropped significantly in most of the near-peripheries and peripheries. Before the crisis, housing prices grew more than

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.ppan.it/stories/tiburtina-nuovo-hq-ferrovie/>; <http://www.ppan.it/stories/tiburtina-come-porta-romana-accordo-fs-comune-poi-le-aree-sul-mercato/>.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.investinitalyrealstate.com/it/property/roma-tiburtina-area-da-valorizzare/>.

<sup>9</sup> [https://web.uniroma1.it/gareappalti/sites/default/files/Disciplinare\\_tecnico\\_progettazione.pdf](https://web.uniroma1.it/gareappalti/sites/default/files/Disciplinare_tecnico_progettazione.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.mtkgroup.com/details/tiburtina-rom.html>.

the city average in the study area<sup>11</sup> where important transformations were expected because of the *Tiburtina* station project (see figure 2). During the planning and construction of the *BNP Paribas* headquarters from 2011-17, housing prices of the area remained more stable than those of the city overall.

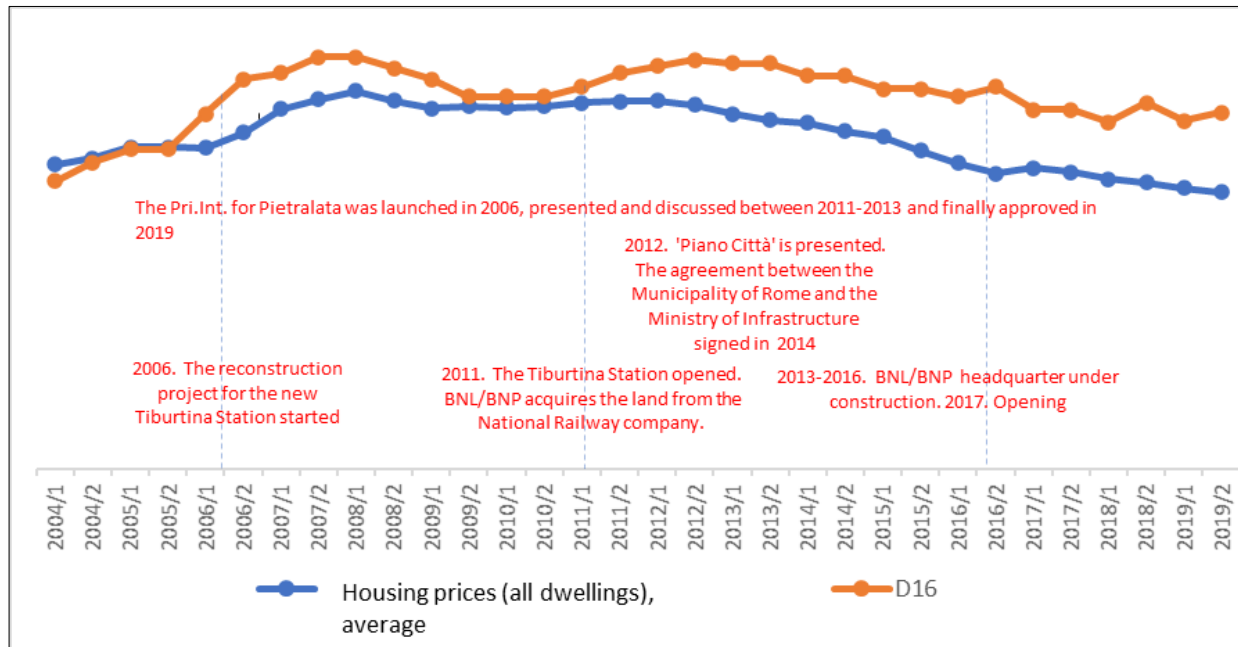


Figure 2 - Trend in housing prices in the selected area and Rome; chronology of UDPs in the area.

Source: Author's elaboration on the data of the National Revenue Agency.

On the other hand, diffuse and long-term spatial, economic, and social outcomes are less evident and more difficult to ascertain. In urban and planning perspective, there is no evidence that the project achieved the expected effects on the neighbouring space (e.g. enhancing the connection between the *Tiburtina* station and the *Pietralata* district<sup>12</sup>). It stands almost completely separate from the neighbourhood in a compact, quasi-autonomous, and self-confined spatial configuration that does not contribute to connect the two sides of the *Tiburtina* area through a public pathway.

Regarding the impacts on the redevelopment of the broader site, it has not contributed to accelerating the realisation of the *Quintiliani* sub-centre, where a single public complex – the new headquarters of the national institute of statistics ISTAT – is in its design phase<sup>13</sup>. The project had little effect on the *Tiburtina* station too. *Orizzonte Europa* did not contribute to the scalar change of the station into the main transport hub of the city. From a strategic urban project, the station has been scaled back to a commercial hub that has borne little success to date, with many retail spaces yet to be sold or already emptied even before the COVID-19 pandemics.

There are two crucial areas where *Orizzonte Europa*, together with the renewed train station, should demonstrably produce positive effects if the premises regarding the collective desirability of the project are to be met. These are two dimensions of urban inequality and social fragility, which are particularly severe in

<sup>11</sup> For convenience in analysing the data, we compared the city's average to the value of one "OMI zone": zone D16, where the case study is located. OMI stands for "Units of the Real Estate Observatory" of the National Revenue Agency.

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.atelierfemia.com/it/2017/06/nuova-sede-bnl-bnp-paribasroma/>.

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.dire.it/13-03-2019/308087-roma-ecco-la-nuova-sede-istat-a-pietralata-vince-lo-studio-abdr/>.

the surrounding neighbourhoods. First, the housing stock in the populous *Pietralata* neighbourhood exhibits the highest level of physical obsolescence in the city<sup>14</sup>. The renewal of that housing stock is a prospective result of the project, as a consequence of the increased attractiveness of the location for professionals and skilled workers<sup>15</sup>. Second, the project should have some positive impacts on the underlying social problems and socio-economic fragilities in the neighbouring areas. The social fragility index<sup>16</sup> of the three eastern planning zones closest to *Orizzonte Europa* – C5 “Tiburtino Nord”, A5 “Casal Bertone”, G5 “Pietralata” – are, respectively, significantly higher (4.25), higher (2.36) and slightly higher (1.15) than the base value for the city (0)<sup>17</sup>.

However, disaggregated data at the planning zone level for these two central dimensions of urban social exclusion are derived from the 2011 Census. It is not yet possible to ascertain through quantitative data the impact, if any, of the project on them. Nonetheless, even discounting the impact on social inequality, the project exhibits limited impacts on the surrounding areas while well-defined and conspicuous benefits are observable for its promoters.

In the next section we will present an interpretive model that helps to explain why the project of the new headquarters has resulted in concentrated benefits with minimal positive externalities on the area where it is located, and on the city’s development trajectory.

#### 4. Interpreting the case study

The description of the case study allowed us to identify the main actors involved in the project and their main interests and goals on the basis of the class fraction they represent. Moreover, the analysis identified an outcome of the project that we consider worthy of further enquiry: it is viewed as a success by the key actors involved in its realisation, but it had weak and limited impacts on the neighbouring areas.

As explained in section 2.2, for better understanding our case we devised an interpretative model inspired by process tracing analysis (see figure 3).

The knowledge objective we are pursuing in studying the new headquarters of *BNP Paribas* is to improve our understanding of the characteristics that UDPs in Rome have acquired over the past decades. The assumption here is that our case study shares one or more paradigmatic features with those UDPs.

We identified a twofold causal mechanism which helps explain the outcome of the case study, drawing from the concept of collusive regime and from a neo-Gramscian analysis of the political economy of Rome. First, our hypothesis is that UDPs developed in Rome function according to the typical configuration of hegemonic projects, i.e. they establish a provisional coherence between specific local and extra-local economic interests, and they are presented as the most suitable course of action for reaching goals that are in the general interest of the city. Second, UDPs are crucial components of trans-scalar accumulation strategies of actors that aim to maximise the land and property rent deriving from the urban assets they own.

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<sup>14</sup> The rate of building obsolescence in the area is 2.29, among the highest in the city, the city average being 0.75 (Roma Capitale 2016).

<sup>15</sup> We do not express a value judgement on the desirability of such outcome, which may introduce further social issues, such as the risk of gentrification.

<sup>16</sup> The social fragility index is a weighted average of four indicators: employment rate, unemployment rate, ratio of youth-to-adult and educational attainment (Roma Capitale 2016).

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.mapparoma.info/mapparoma25-lesclusione-sociale-nei-quartieri-di-roma/>.

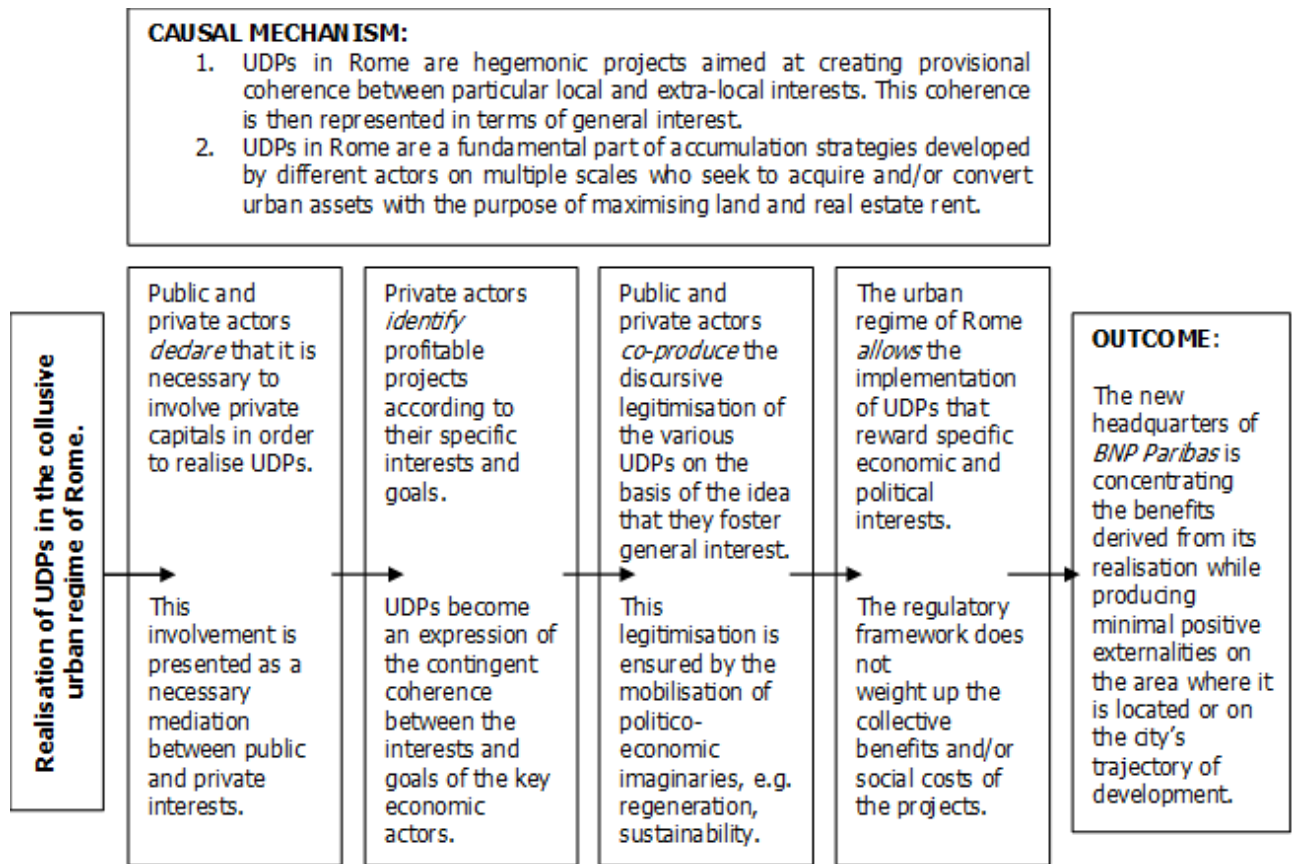


Figure 3 - Interpretive model of the case: step-by-step description.

Source: Author's elaboration on Beach and Pedersen (2013).

The logical causal process can be subdivided in several interconnected steps, which allow us to detail the unfolding of the causal relationship and present the evidence supporting our hypothesis.

The first step refers to the recurrent public and political discourse in Rome about the necessary involvement of private actors in urban programmes and projects. Conventional explanations of private sector involvement stress the poor financial situation of the city, which binds the local government's hands and obliges it to rely on private investments for pursuing urban development goals<sup>18</sup>.

A former cabinet member for urban planning, who oversaw the realisation of *Orizzonte Europa* at the time, explained the significance of the new headquarters in similar terms. He stated that only through this private investment, the redevelopment of the *Tiburtina* area – a process fifty years in the making – was finally set in motion<sup>19</sup>. Similarly, the former CEO of RFI maintained that selling the site to *BNP Paribas* represents an important first step towards the valorisation of the *Tiburtina* area and towards its transformation into a strategic asset for the city<sup>20</sup>. Public and private actors converge in construing private interests as a fundamental driver of long-term urban development.

<sup>18</sup> For a thorough review of this argument, see Causi (2020).

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.ppan.it/stories/caudo/>.

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.monitorimmobiliare.it/bnp-paribas-re-acquista-da-fs-area-tiburtina-dove-sorgera-headquarter-bnl>.

This political and public discourse does not circulate only within the local public sphere, but it is replicated at the national scale. During the press conference celebrating the inauguration of the new headquarters, the former Italian Prime Minister P. Gentiloni stated that *Orizzonte Europa* is an “investment on the future of the city” and a potential trigger of additional public and private investments in the whole eastern Rome<sup>21</sup>. The public relevance of private engagement is the key underlying idea here. Consequently, UDPs tend to be framed as sites of mediation between public goals and private priorities.

Moving to the second step of the proposed causal mechanism, the UDPs are initiated by key economic actors with the purpose of realising profitable investments in the built environment. These accumulation strategies are carried out by agents that are positioned at different points in the process of accumulation (i.e. represent different fractions of capital). The capability of advancing fractional interests while sustaining the expansion of a localised process of accumulation determines the success of a specific strategy in a given socio-economic and spatial context.

Our case study can be analysed considering the convergent strategy pursued by the two most important players: RFI and *BNP Paribas*. RFI developed a nation-wide strategy of valorisation of the urban assets it owns. By redeveloping the *Tiburtina* station, it increased the prospective rent derived from the surrounding brownfield sites. In this case, RFI acts as a real estate actor and a representative of landed capital that tries to capture the rent gap deriving from the assets it owns. Through restructuring its core activities, RFI was able to turn previously productive sites into prospective real estate assets, whose high profit potential derives from their location inside the main metropolitan areas of the country<sup>22</sup>. It is worth noting that this very same process of assetisation – an important dimension of financialisation (Ward and Swyngedouw 2018) – is associated with a process of privatisation of former publicly owned properties.

*BNP Paribas* acquired and developed the plot in *Tiburtina* for achieving two main goals. On the one hand, the bank declared that it was guided in the choice of the project by functional reasons. In choosing the site, the bank could take advantage of the existing and planned infrastructures: the new station has a direct line to the Fiumicino International Airport, a subway station, and a bus terminal for local and regional public transport. Moreover, there is the rationalisation of its office buildings in Rome, which also means a substantial reduction of management costs. The consolidation of administrative functions in the new headquarters vacated eight BNL buildings<sup>23</sup>, cutting the yearly expenses on maintenance and utilities<sup>24</sup>.

On the other hand, *Orizzonte Europa* had a significance that goes beyond the reduction of costs for the bank: it contributed to opening a new accumulation strategy in the city centre. The old office buildings located in central Rome have been converted into real estate assets to redevelop or sell. As the employee *BNP Paribas Real Estate* explained during our interview, the initial investment of about 300 million euros in the new headquarters may earn the banking group a two or threefold return when the redevelopment of the bank’s property located in the inner city will be completed<sup>25</sup>. These prospective gains seem very realistic considering the example of the residential complex *Domus Aventino*, formerly a BNL office building, located in the centre of Rome. An apartment in the complex is priced at 8,000-10,000 euros per square

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<sup>21</sup> <https://www.radiocolonna.it/economia/2017/07/13/tiburtina-inaugurato-il-nuovo-headquarter-di-bnl/>.

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.fssistemiurbani.it/content/fssistemiurbani/it/chi-siamo/missione.html>.

<sup>23</sup> [https://bnl.it/rsc/SupportingFiles/47\\_Nuova\\_sede\\_BNL.pdf](https://bnl.it/rsc/SupportingFiles/47_Nuova_sede_BNL.pdf).

<sup>24</sup> <https://bnl.it/it/Responsabilita-Sociale/Responsabilita-Ambientale/Sedi-ecosostenibili>.

<sup>25</sup> The bank’s real estate assets will mostly become luxury residences, temporary accommodation, and tourist facilities.

metre<sup>26</sup>. The *Orizzonte Europa* project, apparently spatially confined to the *Tiburtina* area, is part of a broader accumulation strategy aiming at the valorisation of bank's properties throughout the city.

The third main actor involved in the development of *Orizzonte Europa* is the *Parsitalia* group. If *BNP Paribas* and RFI had a leading role, the developer fulfils a subordinate and instrumental role in the realisation of the accumulation strategy connected to real estate valorisation. However, the Parnasi family is a good representative of the local type of developer-cum-builder-cum-property owner that played a major role in the sprawling development of the city since the 1950s (Erbani 2013). In the early 2000s, the *Parsitalia* group formed a partnership with BNL and *BNP Paribas* for the realisation of a conspicuous UDP in the high-end residential and business district of EUR, one of the most valuable real estate areas in the city. The UDP was the 172,000 m<sup>2</sup> *Europarco Business Park* that is comprised of two skyscrapers and a mall<sup>27</sup>. The Parnasi family had stable and long-lasting links with local and national political actors, as a recent judicial investigation has brought to the public attention<sup>28</sup>. This actor was an important component of the network that presides over the local "space of dependence" (Cox 1998) and interacts with extra-local and trans-scalar actors, functioning as a connector or, vice versa, as a circuit breaker of the capital flows directed towards and outwards the city.

Despite being framed as the result of a mediation between public and private interests, the UDPs in Rome seem to respond to a different relational logic. They are the outcome of a contingent coherence between accumulation strategies directed to valorise urban assets. If there is a mediation, it happens between private interests, particularly between the interests and goals of local actors and trans-scalar actors that operate within the local space of dependence.

The contingent and strategic choices taken by private players are powerful drivers of territorial differentiation and spatial inequality. Land-use regulation has been a standard public response to this tendency towards unequal and chaotic growth. However, the regulatory regime in Rome has been framed by the idea of "planning by doing" for several decades (Iacovino 2016). As a result, the masterplan «does not plan. It ratifies. It does not invest in the future, it regulates the counts with the past. It does not shape the structure of the city, it does not have a vision but it takes note of what was produced by the agreements between public authority and landed property» (de Lucia and Erbani 2016, 36).

The third step in the discussion of the causal mechanism concerns how the accumulation strategies acquire legitimacy and gather consensus. We would like to introduce this dimension by the means of an example from the case study. During the press conference presenting *Orizzonte Europa*, the former president of BNL stated that few investments were comparable to the new headquarters in terms of symbolic importance and future impact on the development of the city<sup>29</sup>. The bank discursively legitimised the project by appealing to the contribution it will give to the future of Rome. This idea is only one discursive trope deployed to represent the UDP as highly valuable and desirable for the city and its dwellers. The actors involved in or supportive of the project – the national and local politicians, the business community, architects and urbanists – represented it using the repertoire of contemporary politico-economic imaginaries: digitalisation,

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<sup>26</sup> [https://domusaventino.it/appartamenti\\_aventino/](https://domusaventino.it/appartamenti_aventino/).

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.parsitalia.it/media/pages/39/attach/Parsitalia%20Brochure.pdf>.

<sup>28</sup> The group was the main developer in the large-scale UDP for the realisation of the new A.S. Roma football stadium. After a scandal emerged around an alleged corruption attempt brought about by the developer, and after the project was put on hold in the late 2010s, the main subsidiaries of the *Parsitalia* holding were liquidated and the proceedings were used to pay the debt contracted with the banking sector (in particular, with the *UniCredit* group). See <https://espresso.repubblica.it/attualita/2013/11/25/news/mattone-football-club-1.142587/>.

<sup>29</sup> <https://st.ilsole24ore.com/art/notizie/2013-10-09/posa-prima-pietra-lheadquarter-134718.shtml?uuid=Ab8eWLrI>.



innovation, regeneration, sustainability, etc. These hegemonic representations are advanced and replicated by promoters, realisers, and regulators, and they are reinforced and diffused through media engagement campaigns.

These imaginaries offer a set of values and principles deployed to help legitimise the projects vis-à-vis alternative uses of resources and space. These ideas help coordinate the interests and goals of the actors that promote and realise the projects while minimising the opposition from those who are passively subjected to them (e.g. the inhabitants of neighbouring areas). They are a fundamental component of the hegemonic project associated with the accumulation strategies realised through the UDPs.

A common discursive trope employed in the case of *Orizzonte Europa* is the regenerative potential that the project has. The building is depicted as a powerful stimulus to the regeneration of the *Tiburtina* area because it will repurpose the neighbourhood to host a variety of advanced service companies and new businesses. On top of revitalising the surrounding area, the project is described as having a systemic value because it will accelerate the renewal of public transport and the infrastructure stock connecting the new building and *Tiburtina* station with other hubs within and outside the city<sup>30</sup>.

The repertoire of imaginaries deployed is naturally much broader. For example, the building has been designed and publicised as an innovative project in terms of sustainability, which directly aims at minimising the environment impact of its construction and day-by-day operations<sup>31</sup>. Among the various discursive tropes, it is useful to consider the very same idea that guided the architect who designed the project, A. Femia, in conceiving the building. Femia stated that the concept for the new headquarters has been proposed by the former president of BNL, who had invited the architect to answer the question: how should the headquarters appear if the bank wishes to be perceived as a linear and transparent business<sup>32</sup>? Linearity and transparency evoke clarity, coherence, public accountability, straightforwardness, and full visibility of the reasons that guide choices and the means used for achieving them. As the employee of *BNP Paribas Real Estate* we interviewed explained, in realising *Orizzonte Europa* «the bank is doing the bank's business»<sup>33</sup>: the bank aims to maximise the return on its investment. Nonetheless, it needs to frame its choice as transparent and linear. This discursive device not only legitimises the project, but it turns it into symbol of the renewed relationship between the city (here understood as the sum of prospective clients of the bank) and *BNP Paribas*. The idea conveyed is that the bank is changing its approach in doing business, and it is returning to be a trustworthy partner of consumers and smallholders after the tremendous negative impact of the 2008 crisis on the public perception of the banking sector.

The final step in the description of the causal mechanism is how the collusive regime of Rome facilitates the realisation of UDPs characterised by the lack of public goods and services provided to the community. The problem is describing the processes that open windows of opportunity for pursuing the interests and goals of the promoters of the projects, regardless of their potential benefits or prospective costs for the city.

Two regulatory practices – both historical features of the urban regime of Rome – are at play. First, the municipality allows the immediate start of works at the construction site, but it postpones, at times indefinitely, the complementary constructions that developers are required to realise for properly connecting

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<sup>30</sup> <https://ntplusentilocaliedilizia.ilsole24ore.com/art/il-cielo-roma-si-specchia-nuovo-quartier-generale-bnl-firmato-51aa-ADBQ12DB>.

<sup>31</sup> <https://bnl.it/it/Scopri-BNL/Chi-Siamo/BNL-Oggi/Spazi-e-modelli-lavorativi/Roma-Orizzonte-EUROPA>.

<sup>32</sup> <https://st.ilsole24ore.com/art/notizie/2013-10-09/posa-prima-pietra-lheadquarter-134718.shtml?uuid=Ab8eWLRl>.

<sup>33</sup> «La banca fa la banca, per questi investimenti [...] ci deve essere un business case. [...] Dipende dal margine che vuoi realizzare su quel tipo di asset...c'è un range di riferimento con un minimo [...]» (Interview, 11 February 2020).

the projects to the area they are located (e.g. infrastructure, parks, public pathways) and for compensating the public for the use of space. Second, the quantification of the complementary constructions is systematically downplayed, and it is disproportionately lower than the economic value of the projects it should compensate for (Tocci 2020, 173).

The result of these two regulatory practices is that the public goods and services are seldom realised as planned, neither quantitatively nor qualitatively.

However, the lack of direct, observable public goods deriving from the UDPs should be balanced by the systemic positive impacts they have on the city as a whole. Evaluating this latter effect is surely more difficult since the impact can be subtle and spread over several years. If we take our case study as a reference, the more important impact expected at the city-level is the transformation *BNP Paribas* can help to realise in the inner city. The bank holding company is a major asset owner in the city centre, and it has emptied many of the buildings it owns there by transferring the staff to the new headquarters. According to G. Caudo, a former cabinet member for urban planning, these buildings could have become a resource for increasing the housing stock in the central area of the city, which suffers from decades-long population deficit, with only 115,000 people living in central Rome out of a total population of 2.8 million. The then centre-left majority was asking *BNP Paribas* to contribute to this objective by including quotas of social housing in its renewed buildings<sup>34</sup>. This prospective future benefit seems quite unrealistic if one considers the type of redevelopment projects *BNP Paribas* is envisioning, such as the aforementioned *Domus Aventino* luxury complex.

The different temporalities in which private gains and collective benefits are realised is an often-disregarded problem of urban development. The possibility of obtaining short-term valorisation of owned assets is a fundamental component of accumulation strategies aiming at maximising rent. However, these strategies are discursively framed as sources of long-term benefits for the general public, which are often only loosely defined or purely imaginary. These discursive and symbolic elements confer the character of a collective endeavour to strategies rewarding a contingent ensemble of specific interests. They are combined with the selective reward of a material interest: the increased price of properties located nearby the project site. This shared short-term benefit is a crucial component in the creation of hegemonic projects over the urban environment, since it ensures a degree of “concrete coordination” between the interests and goals of the hegemonic fractions of capital and those of part of the subalterns.

If the long-term benefits of a project for a whole city are difficult to ascertain, its long-term costs are even more elusive. They represent the long-term losses of social cohesion and social inclusion due to increasing inequalities, the displacement of culturally diverse neighbourhoods due to gentrification, the diminishing standards of living and lack of decent working opportunities for entire social strata due to a development model centred upon asset-valorisation and rent-extraction, and so on.

If no conclusive evidence of the long-term costs associated with the *Orizzonte Europa* project can be given here, there is a final piece of evidence that we would like to discuss. In 2019 *BNP Paribas* acquired a brownfield site in the vicinity of the new headquarters, displacing a political squat, *Officine Zero*, where activists were providing working spaces and student accommodations. On the site of the former squat, a new luxury student residence is planned. The displacement of a self-managed social space that helped reveal and meet social needs, and potentially politicised them for social change, is a controversial result of *BNP Paribas*' strategies over the *Tiburtina* area.

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<sup>34</sup> <http://www.ppan.it/stories/caudo/>

## 5. Conclusive remarks

Despite the framing of UDPs as creators of shared growth and wealth, the results of our case study suggest that there is no such a thing as a mechanical connection between large-scale projects and a generalised improvement of urban living standards and socio-economic conditions.

The engagement of extra-local and transnational actors is often described in the Italian academic literature and public discourse as a much-needed discontinuity from the diminished entrepreneurialism of local and national capitalists. Our case study does not support this conclusion. On the contrary, those actors reinforced and deepened the rent-seeking strategies adopted by the local business class over the decades to similar outcomes: the unequal distribution of benefits derived from urban development.

The analysis of the case allows us to propose an interpretation of the nature of UDPs in Rome for further empirical confirmation. First, the project is a suitable occasion for realising accumulation strategies based on the capture of rent gaps and the valorisation of urban assets. These strategies imply a circumscribed coordination between the interests and goals of the various capital fractions. They incentivise the opportunistic commitment of resources under certain conditions: rewards are immediate, costs can be deferred in time or displaced to other people or places, and new opportunities for accumulation are opened by acting. Second, the actors involved mobilised ideational and material resources for gathering consensus for the project, that rewarded their specific interests, by framing their investment as the best solution for localised collective needs. Therefore, the case study exhibits the basic features of hegemony applied to the urban context.

Finally, and consequently, the project facilitated the concentration of benefits and the generalisation of costs (Wilson 1980) of urban development. This imbalance between costs and benefits reflects the tendency of UDPs to guarantee the short-term remuneration of the private actors involved in them, while they give no certainty about the nature and timing of the collective benefits they may generate.

Our case study is embedded in the collusive regime of contemporary Rome. This regime offers a general framework within which multiple projects can coexist. The regime legitimises these projects vis-à-vis alternative uses of resources and urban space, and it tones down the requirement of direct or indirect public benefits obtainable from them. The coexistence of multiple contingent strategies over specific sites of the city is one crucial factor explaining the fragmented development and the mosaic-like form of Rome. Future research should address the link between private investments in urban assets and Rome's increasingly unequal development trajectory, displacing in space (towards the city's outskirts) and in time (to the future repayment of household mortgage debt) the costs of managing a metropolis for the benefit of rentiers.

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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Planning: a glue for development coalitions? State actors' agency and power relationships in urban development projects in Milan and Brussels

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### ABSTRACT:

In this paper, I combine urban regime analysis and financialisation scholarships to uncover the role of planning and question the role of state actors in urban development processes. Through an analysis of CityLife in Milan and Tour and Taxis in Brussels, I argue that state actors have a strong agency in decision making as they own a critical resource: planning.

My investigation reveals that, in projects characterised by uncertainty and internal conflicts, planning functions as a glue of development coalitions. Local governments mobilise it to bring together private and public interests, in order to achieve their agendas. Nevertheless, this glue function plays out differently in Milan and Brussels. While in Milan local administrations used planning to facilitate the anchoring of capital, in Brussels local governments enacted planning to shift the balance of power between them. This outcome reveals contextual differences that ultimately depend on local governance settings and planning systems.

The comparison depicts the making of two different development regimes. CityLife indicates a financialised turn in governance, in which planning choices are driven mainly by economic – and financial – imperatives. Tour and Taxis symbolises an experimental entrepreneurial urban regime, a sort of “laboratory” to test new governance and planning frameworks.

### KEYWORDS:

Brussels, development regime, Milan, planning, urban development projects

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## 1. Introduction

Due to the current phase of fiscal austerity, state actors have become heavily dependent on financial capital to achieve their development goals and implement their political agendas. Scholars have produced an extensive amount of work on the role of finance and financial players in shaping urban development processes. But under which conditions does this happen? How do private players acquire the power to orient decision making? What is the agency of state actors? And, finally, how can we explain contextual differences?

To address these research questions, I draw on urban regime analysis and the grounded accounts on the financialisation of urban development. Both approaches adopt an actor-oriented perspective to study how local governments cope with international competition and bargain with private players. They draw attention to local state structures as key sites in which ‘planning and redevelopment are implemented and political conflicts are mediated’ (Gotham 2000, 209). Lastly, they provide theoretical lenses to understand the change in power relationships in the negotiations over planning regulations and urban projects.

The article focuses on two urban development projects (UDPs) in Milan and Brussels: CityLife and Tour and Taxis. Their selection is in line with both the scientific literature on UDPs, that considers them as symbols of entrepreneurial urban agendas, and with financialisation scholarships, that see them as engines of financial markets. Moreover, the two selected projects represent privileged sites to study the restructuring of local governance as they have been promoted by changing public-private partnerships.

The analysis of CityLife and Tour and Taxis proves that state actors do not have a passive role in urban development. Planning represented a crucial resource for local authorities: as such, it was mobilised to enhance the stability of development coalitions, in order to bring together private and public interests for the implementation of their development agendas. In both cases, planning benefitted financial investors and property developers. However, in the case of Brussels, it was used as a leverage for local governments to affirm their authority in an institutional setting characterised by unbalanced power relationships. Therefore, the study underlines substantial contextual differences, depending on the specificities of governance settings and planning systems, as well as on the existence of a shared public political agenda.

The comparison additionally shows the interplay between UDPs and the making of two different European development urban regimes. The case of CityLife calls into question whether the city is experiencing a shift to a financialised governance, aimed to promote Milan as an international city and a major target for real estate investments. Tour and Taxis, instead, has represented a sort of planning laboratory, a key arena to redefine local governance and planning, in order consolidate the role of the Brussels Capital Region in urban development matters.

The paper is organised as followed: in the first section I build my theoretical and analytical framework; in the second part, I outline the methodology and introduce the case studies; in the third and fourth sections, I present and analyse the cases; finally, I discuss the main findings.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

Due to the current phase of fiscal austerity, state actors have become heavily dependent on financial capital to pursue their political agendas (Farmer and Poulos 2019; Peck and Whiteside 2016; Guironnet, Attuyer,

Halbert 2015; Weber 2010). In this process, planning has a clear role in directing the flow of interest-bearing capital in the built environment' (Waldron 2019, 689). Through specific land-use planning procedures, the state influences investments' financial conditions (e.g. profitability) and affects financial intermediation (Halbert and Attuyer 2016), regardless of the socio-spatial impacts on the city.

Hitherto scholars have produced an extensive amount of work on the role of finance and financial players in shaping planning frameworks and urban policies. But under which conditions does this happen? How do private players acquire the power to orient decision making? What is the agency of state actors? In the literature, these questions remain understudied. To answer them, urban development must be considered a "social phenomenon" (Logan and Molotch 1987, 1), a "politically loaded" process (Clark, Gutzon, Lund Hansen 2015 2015, 23), strongly embedded in institutional settings crafted to create a "good business climate" (Logan and Molotch 1987, 59) to anchor capital investments. In particular, it is unclear how changes in planning frameworks are entangled in broader processes of governance restructuring, and how the former affect power relationships, between financial players and state actors as well as within the state apparatus.

Addressing these literature gaps requires the adoption of an analytical approach that, through a focus on actors' agency (O'Brien, O'Neil, Pike 2019, 1295), brings to an understanding of the ways actors mediate their interests *through* planning. It additionally requires framing urban development within the political economy of the city as it depends, and is constrained, by 'locally specific structures of opportunities' (Halbert and Attuyer 2016, 7), namely multi-level state configurations and political agendas. Thus, in this contribution I combine a broader analysis of governance with the study of – financialised— urban development projects.

I refer to Urban Regime Analysis (URA), a sociological and political theory 'regarded as a particularly appropriate means' to comprehend shifts in urban governance (Hall and Hubbard 1996, 156). URA's core argument is that, in a context characterised by a turn 'from managerialism to entrepreneurialism' (Harvey 1989), a necessary condition for any given urban policy is the foundation of development coalitions, composed of governmental and private actors endowed with different material (i.e. financial capital) and immaterial resources (i.e. technical-financial expertise and organisational capacity) (Stone 1993). A "common scheme of cooperation" (Stone 2005), made of regulatory frameworks, fixes the rules according to which "public bodies and private interests function together" (Stone 1993, 6), thus gaining the *power to* (Stone, 1993) orient the political agenda and achieve their interests, i.e. what Stone (1993, 2004, 2005). refers to as 'regime'. Planning is at the centre of the analysis: through it, development regimes '*promote growth or counter decline*' by linking private investments to public action (Stone 1993, 19).

The main argument of this paper is that state actors do not play a passive role in urban development matters. Planning represents a crucial resource for local governments to shape power relationships within the coalitions. As such, it is mobilised to promote the stability of development coalitions, by bringing together private and public interests towards the implementation of specific political agendas. To validate my hypothesis, I develop my analysis on urban development projects (UDPs). Implemented through flexible planning frameworks, they play a major role in entrepreneurial models of urban growth (Harvey 1989; Diaz Orueta and Fainstein 2008), thus becoming crucial policy tools to enhance the international appeal of the city (Ponzini and Nastasi 2011). From a political point of view, UDPs are the result of 'coalition politics' (Harvey, 1989:5) and public-private partnerships (PPPs): they represent key political arenas that 'reflect

profound power struggles and position-taking of key economic, political, social or cultural elites' (Swyngedouw, Moulaert, Rodriguez 2002, 563). All this considered, UDPs are privileged sites to study:

a) how 'neoliberal systems of governance are crafted and through which a new articulation of regulatory and governmental scales is produced' (Swyngedouw *et al.* 2002, 546);

b) how power relationships unfold in the so-called 'trading rooms' (Theurilat, Vera-Buchel, Crevoisier 2016), i.e. during negotiations (Mosciaro 2020; Savini and Aalbers 2016; Guironnet *et al.* 2015; Guironnet and Halbert 2014).

Recent financialisation scholarships additionally contend that UDPs are 'one of the engines of financial markets' (Savini and Aalbers 2016, 2) as for the tendency of private and public actors to treat land as financial assets. Scholars point to the *de-contextualization of land-use planning* as one of the consequences of the entrance of financial actors in governance matters. Local governments tend to employ planning in an instrumental way, to 'facilitate the influx of financial investments' (Ivi, 3), without taking into consideration the local socio-political contexts and, therefore, the real social demand of inhabitants. They do so either by defining more flexible legal procedures or by adjusting land-use to meet private requests. The latter often have to do with financial calculations on expected returns, that "rarely take into consideration the complexity and uncertainty of urban projects" (Ibidem) but rather depend to the risks associated with the management of larger real estate portfolios.

In the case of Saint-Ouen, a Red Belt municipality in the periphery of Paris, Guironnet *et al.* (2015) conclude that this instrumental approach to urban planning is particularly evident when capital investors own the land to be redeveloped. In these situations, investors acquire a leading role, not only in the phase of development but also in orienting strategic planning decisions (Ibidem). 'This', they state, 'has important policy implications, since power relationships in the definition and implementation of urban redevelopment projects may be increasingly tilted in favour of financial investors' (Ivi, 20).

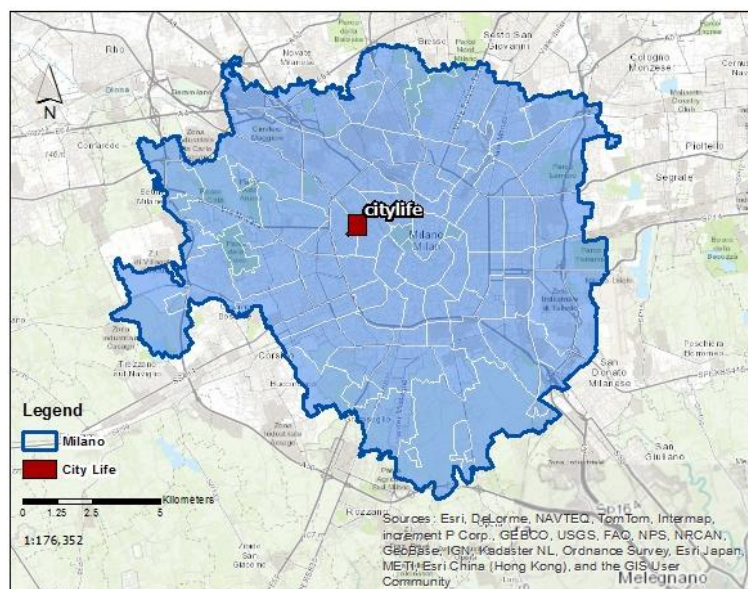
### 3. Methodology

The article is built on a comparative research design, based on a diverse case selection strategy. Milan and Brussels have acquired a leading regional role in the world economy and represent important business and service centres. Yet they followed distinct development trajectories: while Milan has emerged on the international scene only over the last two decades, Brussels has long been considered a secondary world city for its status of Capital of Europe (Corijn and van de Ven 2013; Taylor 2006). In addition to that, the transition to service and business economy has been driven by distinct sectors: the administrative sector in the case of Brussels (Corijn and Vloeberghs 2013; Papadopoulos 2006; Baeten 2001) and finance, real estate, fashion, design, research and communication in Milan (Andreotti 2019; Bigatti 2016; Gibelli 2016a, 2016b).

The cases differ for their governance and planning systems. In Milan, the implementation of a regional law in 1999 launched *Programmi Integrati d'Intervento* (PIIs), highly flexible instruments that refer to specific metropolitan areas and are subject to negotiations between local governments and their private partners. Due to that, the city has experienced an intense process of restructuring through UDPs (Anselmi and Vicari Haddock 2020; Mosciaro 2020; Kaika and Ruggiero 2013). By contrast, Brussels' local governance is characterised by fragmentation and overlapping competences among the Capital Region and 19 municipalities. This complexity has, to a great extent, impeded the creation of flexible planning tools for

large-scale operations. Nevertheless, in 2015, a federal reform was introduced to simplify planning procedures, mitigate conflicts among local authorities, and regionalise planning competences.

In order to develop a more nuanced understanding of the issues proposed, I identified two UDPs: CityLife and Tour and Taxis. Their selection is in line with the literature on UDPs that sees the latter as symbols of the post-industrial transition of urban economies as well as of the shift from managerial to entrepreneurial forms of governance. Both projects are located in highly strategic areas. CityLife is a 36-ha site in the West of the city (Figure 1), rising in the area of the historical fair district of Milan. Tour and Taxis (T&T) is a 45-ha complex, originally functioning as a multi-modal platform and gradually dismissed since the 1980s. It is located within the Canal Zone (Figure 2), a strategic area for the development of the whole regional territory. The development of CityLife and T&T has been driven by changing development coalitions comprising local authorities and a number of real estate operators and financial players (Mosciaro 2020; Brill and Conte



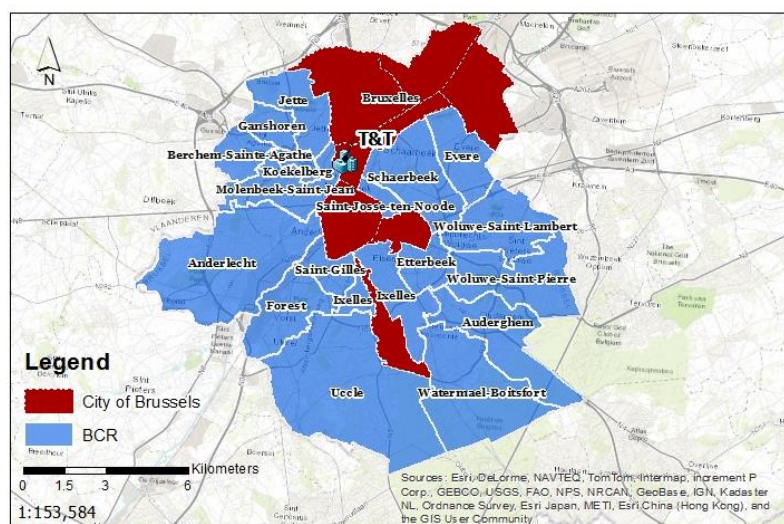
2019; Vermeulen 2015; Van Criekingen and Vandermotten 2007).

Figure 1 – Location of CityLife

The collection of data, started in 2017 and ended in 2018, was based on the analysis of policy documents, annual corporate reports, community groups' reports, and press articles. With respect to policy documents and corporate reports, I consulted land-use plans, master plans, and private companies' annual reports. I relied on 45 semi-structured interviews with key informants (25 in Milan and 20 in Brussels): public officials, developers, real estate consultants and advisors, other stakeholders (e.g. Fiera Milano and the Port of Brussels), journalists, and community groups' representatives. The interview guide followed the same logic in the two cases. It included a series of open-ended questions divided into two sections focusing on the

urban/regional development agenda and on the UDP under study. Lastly, according to the specific profile and expertise of each informant, I posed specific questions to scrutinise project-related issues.

Figure 2: Location of Tour and Taxis



#### 4. Framing Milan's planning system within the entrepreneurial turn of the city

Milan, the 'industrial and financial epicentre of the country' (Foot 2003, 9), has reinforced its leading economic status since the 1990s, thanks a to a strong diversification of the urban economy. At the turn of the new millennium, urban development, previously characterised by a strong public leadership (Savitch and Kantor 2002; Vicari and Molotch 1990), became the pillar of entrepreneurial strategies aimed to boost the international image of the city and attract investments in real estate.

The gradual reform of the planning system played a key role in this process. It provided local authorities the power to transform several strategic large-scale brownfield areas and open the local real estate market to new investors (Bolocan Goldstein 2009). In 1999 the regional government introduced the *Programma Integrato d'Intervento* (PII), thus setting aside the rigid and state-led planning system of the past. In 2001, PIIs were followed by *Documento di Inquadramento delle Politiche Urbanistiche – Ricostruire la Grande Milano* (Comune di Milano 2001). The latter indicated the future development trajectories of Milan, along the West-East axis and between the urban core and the North-East of the city, and established a number of evaluation criteria for the approval of PIIs, such as environmental quality and provision of public amenities (Mazza 2007). It also specified that, in exchange of open negotiations and flexible timeframes, private actors should not only convert half of the surface into public utilities but also contribute to the costs of infrastructures (Ibidem).

Hence, UPDs became a policy tool and a brand-new season of real estate operations began. New actors entered the Milanese real estate market i.e. insurance companies, financial intermediaries, mega-developers, and industrial groups converted to finance and real estate (Pasqui 2019; Memo 2010). Today the city is a major target for investments (Urban Land Institute and PricewaterhouseCoopers 2017). Between 2014 and 2017 it attracted EUR 427,3 M of foreign investments (Scenari Immobiliari and Risanamento 2019). These figures will probably increase considering that, by 2030, it is expected that 1.3M m<sup>2</sup> of the metropolitan area will be involved in urban regeneration programs.

## 5. CityLife

Up to the 1980s, the area of CityLife hosted *Fiera Campionaria*, an international exhibition centre and major symbol of the 'made in Italy' in the word (Maria Langoni 1997). The decision to move the fair must be traced back to the 1990s, when the regional government, the municipality of Milan and Fondazione Fiera (FF) decided to transfer it to the dismissed oil refinery of Rho-Pero, in the western outskirt of Milan. However, the operation did not start until the early 2000s, when the partners agreed that the costs to acquire and reclaim the area in Rho-Pero, expected to be about 750 million EUR (Mosciaro 2018), had to be covered by the sale of the historical fair district.

Having established the price of the area (EUR 310 million), in April 2003, FF launched an international call for proposal on *Il Sole 24 Ore*, an Italian newspaper. The selection went through different stages. At first, FF and its public partners shortlisted the proposals on the basis of the participants' core competence, financial capability, and expertise (Roth and Artusi 2005). After the preselection, proponents presented their economic offer and business plan, indicating time and costs of the operation. Among the finalists, the pool of actors headed by Generali Group proposed the highest offer (EUR 523 million). At the end of 2004, the project CityLife, designed by prestigious international architects (Zaha Hadid, Libeskind, Isozaki), won the competition. In this way, FF was able to make around EUR 213 million profit, money that was reinvested in the operation in Rho-Pero.

The result of the call paved the way for the transfer of the property from FF to the CityLife Spa, a special purpose vehicle created by the winning financial consortium. The latter was initially composed of financial companies and developers: among the former, Riunione Adriatica di Sicurtà (RAS Spa)—which sold its shares to Allianz in 2005—and Generali Group; among the latter, the Spanish group LAR, Lamaro Appalti, and Progestim -Società Immobiliare S.p.A. The first negotiation led to adoption of the PII *Quartiere Storico Fiera Milano ed Aree Adiacenti* in 2005. According to it, the area would have comprised 195,896 m<sup>2</sup> of residential units, 84,034 m<sup>2</sup> of office space, 16,000 m<sup>2</sup> of retail, 15,578 m<sup>2</sup> of public amenities (Comune di Milano 2005). The plan additionally defined that CityLife Spa would have financed two museums and a park (EUR 69 million) (Brenna 2013).

The PII was revised in October 2008, when the financial crisis hit the Milanese real estate market. The variant, explicitly aimed at coping with the changing economic conditions, included 'some *flexible* indications that would have guaranteed a better organisation of the space and the execution of the plan' (Comune di Milano 2013, 3, Author's translation). Indeed, it decreased the residential, retail and office volumes. Given the lacking accessibility of the site, the two partners made a deal on the construction of a new metro station (Comune di Milano 2013): local authorities would have financed the infrastructure, in exchange of EUR 20 million building fees for the renovation of an old pavilion of the fair and the

construction of public facilities, such as the kindergarten and Modern Art Museum (Comune di Milano 2005).

Soon after the works of the first residential units started, while the consortium was gradually falling apart. The project was at a standstill. The housing stock could not find a niche in the Milanese real estate market (Brenna 2013). Some members of CityLife Spa could no longer sustain bank loans as financial risks were mainly concentrated in the residential sector.

“From 2003 to 2005, residential demand fell by 20-30% (up to 50%). This was significant! Investing in the residential sector when the market had fallen by 50% became difficult. They made some assessments. Then we must also consider the scarce component of other destinations compared to residential. The former ensures that the risk is distributed across multiple segments. Having a risk centered on the residential sector at a time of crisis has led many to slip away. [...] banks require a return on investment and, if the agreed times are not respected, they demand it anyway” (Interview with a real estate consultant, Author’s translation).

2013 marked a turning point with the implementation of the last variant and the acquisition of the property by Generali Group. The latter asked to further postpone the completion of the project to 2016. In exchange, the municipality of Milan was assured on the completion of the park and other public works (Comune di Milano 2013). Due to the recovery of the Milanese real estate market, CityLife Spa slowly –but gradually—brought the process to an end: the park was open to the public in 2016 and the office towers were acquired by Allianz (for about EUR 285 million) and Generali (for about EUR 286 million) (Mosciaro 2018). The retail space was completed and open in November 2017. Finally, the construction of the last office tower, which was previously suspended, finally started in May 2018, when the municipality and CityLife Spa found a tenant, Price Water Cooper (PwC), and signed the last operational convention.

## **6. Understanding Brussels’ planning system: institutional fragmentation in a socio-spatial divided context**

The status of Brussels as a small world city is intrinsically related to its designation as Capital of Europe. The city also plays a key role within the Belgian federal state, characterised by the coexistence of two linguistic communities and three regions: Flanders, Wallonia, and the Brussels Capital Region (BCR). Created in 1989, the BCR is composed of 19 autonomous municipalities and defined by a double layered institutional structure: while communities are in charge of people-related issues, the regional government is competent in territorial matters (e.g. economy, spatial planning). The Europeanisation of Brussels was accompanied by a long wave of large-scale office development, which had a twofold effect: while giving a great impetus to the economy, it left the city with a highly divided socio-spatial structure (Kesteloot 2000). The latter became the main development priority of the regional government that identified the broader Canal Zone as a major development target.

In relation to UDPs, the case of Brussels tells a different story than Milan. On the one hand, the legacy of the past became a sort of burden for local authorities and a highly contested political issue. On the other

hand, the adoption of the *Ordinance of Urban Planning* in 1991 did not foresee any solution for the overlapping competences between the region and the 19 municipalities. Indeed, the absence of specific planning tools and conflicting visions have slowed down, and even impeded, any large-scale operations.

Yet, since the 1990s the BCR gradually set the stage for a regionalisation of planning competences, with the introduction of a number of strategic and operational plans aimed to leveling out socio-spatial inequalities and bringing back tax paying population. The region identified a number of zones of regional interests (among which Tour and Taxis), with the *Plan Régional d'Affectation du Sol* (PRAS) in 2001, and implemented a master plan, the *Schéma Directeur*, in 2009. Nevertheless, these frameworks did not bring to any binding land-use plans. Because of that, when the Sixth State Reform on the *Politique des Grandes Villes* and the *Code Bruxelloise de l'Aménagement du Territoire* were introduced, the BCR revised planning procedures in order to gain more competences in the development of large-scale areas (Nassaux 2018).

## 7. Tour and Taxis

T&T is located in the municipality of Brussels and within the Canal Zone, close to the city centre and the North Station – one of the main commuting nodes of the city-region. Up to the 1980s, the site functioned as an important logistics platform connecting the port of Antwerp to Charleroi. Today, it is a 'new district' in Brussels (La Fonderie 2010), standing as a symbol of the rebirth of the Canal Zone.

The complexity and the governance system of the BCR has found a clear expression in the development of T&T. Unlike CityLife, the conversion of the area has been characterised by cycles of investments and disinvestments (Van Criekingen and Vandermotten 2007), 'unclear planning procedures' (Vermeulen 2015, 217), conflicting visions between public authorities, and a highly fragmented ownership structure (Ibidem).

In the 1990s, the site was owned by the Ministry of Finance, the national railway company, and the Port of Brussels. Throughout that decade, three different culture-led plans were proposed but not finalised, because of lacking financial resources and a strong opposition by civil society (Brill and Conte 2019; Vermeulen 2015; La Fonderie 2010; Van Criekingen and Vandermotten 2007). In 2000, the property was acquired by a joint venture 'Project T&T NV' composed of Leasinvest NV, a subsidiary of the Belgian holding company Ackermans and van Haaren (AvH), Robelco NV, and IRET development. The venture proposed the Master Plan HOK, designed by an American Architectural firm and a Brussels-based architectural office, in which the culture-led design was put aside in favour of a mixed-use development.

In the meantime, the regional government and the municipality of Brussels proposed a few plans for the area: while the BCR recognised T&T as a strategic regional site (2001 PRAS), the municipality of Brussels, competent for the delivery of building permits, approved its own local land-use plan (2001 *Plan Particulier d'Affectation du Sol*-PPAS). The latter was not well received for the scarce involvement of community groups in the decision-making process, and the insufficient focus on social and public amenities (BRAL 2017). In contrast with the vision of the municipality of Brussels, the new social-democrat coalition at BCR accepted citizens' requests and, in 2004, launched a public call for a Masterplan and a number of participatory events (Ibidem). This brought to a non-binding regional Master Plan – the 2008 *Schéma Directeur*, and to a regional Decree in 2009, through which the developer obtained building rights for 37-ha (La Fonderie 2010).



Nevertheless, the renovation only started in 2012 because negotiations suffered a number of setbacks due to internal conflicts within the partnership. On the public side, local authorities disagreed on what to do. In particular, the municipality of Brussels, that was also directly involved in another competing large-scale operations (i.e. the Neo Project in Hysel), was hesitant enough to enact a binding land-use plan. On the private side, the joint venture could not reach a common vision, given the different investment attitudes as well as the lacking flexibility of the planning instruments. The situation within the partnership changed when the Extensa Group, another subsidiary of Ackermans and vaan Haaren (already within the board of the joint venture since 2001), entered the process, thus becoming major shareholder. Meanwhile, the election of a new Master Architect at the regional planning agency was a prelude to a political change in the management of strategic UDPs. A new political agenda was finally put forward and experimented, for the first time, in the case of T&T: in order to give the region more bargaining power, the logic was to consult all stakeholders, make arrangements, and give municipal authorities detailed instructions for the delivery of building permits.

“The kind of support that the Master Architect gives is not only about making good architecture, but also about improving the way the building permits are delivered. He always says: “I want to jump into a project before the building permit stage so that afterwards, when the building permits are introduced, we will have consulted all stakeholders, we will have given our remarks and then we can make deals, respecting the public enquiry” (Interview with a planner working at the BCR#1)

The BCR and the Extensa Group finally reached a compromise: the development of the area would have gone through a feasibility study and a public competition; in exchange, the region would have worked for the implementation of a municipal land-use plan. The latter was finally introduced in 2017, nearly 8 years after the regional framework (i.e. *Schéma Directeur*). From then on, the site could finally head to its completion.

## **8. The role of planning in UDPs: a glue of development coalitions ?**

CityLife and T&T confirm the argument that planning is a crucial resource for local governments. The two cases illustrate that coalitions’ internal balance of power depends, in the first place, on what Halbert and Attuyer (2016) call the *local structures of opportunities*, such as the specific local institutional architectures and the existence of a shared public political agendas. Yet they finally show that planning changes are instrumentally enacted to shift power relationships, in order to promote the stability of public-private partnerships.

In Milan, due to the transfer of planning competences to local authorities, the Lombardy region and the municipality of Milan took the control over urban development. The case of CityLife points to the key role of the regional authority in the initial phase of the operation, when it offered FF the opportunity to move to Rho-Pero.

“The Lombardy region gave us a kind of order: if you decide to go outside Milan you should go to Rho because this would allow us to clean up an area that had been the headquarter of one of the oldest refineries in Europe for 40 years. [...] The region killed two birds with one stone: it freed the city of an

unbearable burden, and reclaimed a problematic area of the Milanese belt” (Interview with Fiera, Author’s translation).

The change in the regulatory framework set the stage for the consolidation of a ‘planning by project tradition’, which set aside the statutory planning system in favour of more flexible instruments (i.e. PIIs). The case of CityLife clearly shows that local governments were aligned on the political agenda and that there were no conflicting visions on what to do with the area. Planning was an important pawn, jointly played by local administrations, to facilitate the anchoring of capital and the transformation of the historical fair district.

“We have a very important area, and we want excellent or emblematic proposals to be made, but we don't want to impose anything in the first place. We prefer to collect private proposals and, of course, dialogue and choose” (Interview with municipal councillor, Author’s translation).

The first PII variant, for instance, did not include any specification about the functions to be allocated in the area, thus leaving ample room for manoeuvre to private proponents.

“The first urban variant only indicated what should not have been done and not what should have been done. In the new settlement [...]. It was not possible to establish congestive functions. Otherwise, it was possible to do residential, retail or tertiary space. The important thing was to privilege the functional mix” (Interview with municipal councillor, Author’s translation).

By contrast, in Brussels, the hierarchical planning system and the divergent interests of local authorities did not favour the definition of a shared public political agenda. In this case, planning was an important card played by local governments to shift the balance of power between them. The BCR could not implement a binding land-use plan, although it attempted to introduce strategic plans for the development of the site (e.g. PRAS and *Schéma Directeur*). However, such attempts were not followed by the delivery of building permits by the municipality of Brussels. As a matter of fact, after the *Schéma Directeur* was approved in 2008, it took almost 9 years for the approval of a local land-use plan.

This delay, as one of my interviewees noted, raises doubts about the whole public procedure: “And then you ask: «Is that a regional planning or is it the results of private initiatives?»” (Interview with a planner). It also calls into question the role of the municipality of Brussels that has historically enjoyed greater decision-making power, for its status of federal and regional Capital City. The City of Brussels was engaged in two competing large-scale operations: in T&T, as land-use regulator, and in the Neo Project, as both land-use regulator and property developer. Delivering the building permits on T&T would have potentially compromised the development of the Neo Project, in which the municipal authority had a strong interest.

Nevertheless, the governance settings gradually evolved from the 2010s: the approval of the Sixth State Reform in 2015 empowered the BCR, through the creation of regional planning agencies (e.g. [perspective.brussels](http://perspective.brussels)) and the adoption of a new planning code on large-scale sites.

“There’s been a choice to further empower the region, so to ease off the municipalities (which are not necessarily well staffed and competent). Basically now, all major projects, having more than 200 parking lots, are automatically granted by the region (whereas before they used to be instructed by the municipalities). It must be said that the BCR is quite young: it dates back to 1989 and is progressively growing. The municipality of Brussels has often been named a «feudal castle», because it was only looking at its own territory (which has made it very messy at the regional scale)” (Interview with a planner working at BCR#1).

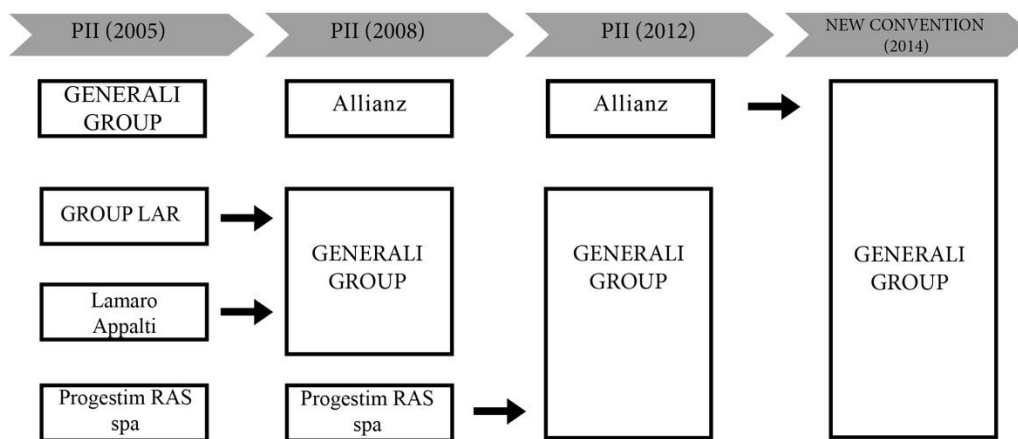
In both cases, development coalitions have been quite unstable. While in Milan this mainly depended on the lacking coordination among the shareholders of CityLife Spa; in the case of T&T, the coalition’s hold was also undermined by an insufficient coordination among public authorities. CityLife Spa’s structure underwent numerous internal reorganisations over the years. The Lar Group left quite early as it was not in line with the business plan of the consortium (Mosciaro 2020). The end of the collaboration with Progestim in 2011 was due to political and judicial scandals involving its manager as well as to the difficulty to cope with the effects of the crisis. The costs for completing the project significantly raised from the 1.7 billion EUR, set in 2005, to more than 2.1 billion EUR, at the end of 2009. The financial leverage decreased, which implied that shareholders could no longer count on banks credits but should have directly financed the project. While the initial agreement set that the operation would have been covered mainly by bank credits and 20% by shareholder investment, ‘under the new agreement banks would provide only 67% and the shareholders the remaining 33%’ (Mosciaro 2018). Finally, in 2013 the Generali Group acquired all the shares, thus taking the control of CityLife Spa. With only one major shareholder, the situation changed quite drastically, and the project could start again.

“At the beginning, the group included operating partners who commanded and guided everything. With the crisis, the decision-making process was frozen, and the development was no longer possible. When Generali took over, the development restarted because that represented an opportunity to re-start. And it actually was!” (Interview with the developer, Author’s translation)

In general, local authorities enacted planning to sustain private investment strategies and the coalition’s hold. If we consider the first negotiations on the moving of the fair to Rho-Pero, local governments derogated from what prescribed in *Documento di Inquadramento* about the density of the historical fair district, to allow FF to make a more profitable deal from the sale of the area. Instead of granting a density equal to 0.6 m<sup>2</sup>/m<sup>2</sup>, local authorities increased it to 1.15 m<sup>2</sup>/m<sup>2</sup>. This calculation enabled FF to make substantial cash to finance the operation in Rho-Pero (Mosciaro 2020; Brenna 2013). Later on, local authorities adjusted land-use to meet CityLife Spa’s requests. The 2008 PII variant revised the residential and tertiary plots within the master plan, and foresaw a new metro station, mainly financed by the public sector. The PII was again modified in the coming years, in order to postpone the completion of the project to 2016. Finally, when the property and the management of the site passed to Generali, they signed another

operational convention to further postpone the end of construction works. Figure 3 clearly shows that PII variants occurred almost simultaneously to CityLife Spa's internal changes, thus validating the hypothesis that they were the results of private demands.

Figure 3: Planning procedures and CityLife Spa's shareholder structure (2005-2019)



T&T development was also affected by internal tensions within the joint venture, because of different development ideas (“Each one had their ideas and visions, but they didn’t like the sun to shine for the other” –Interview with developer#2) and, most importantly, expectations of the on their investments.

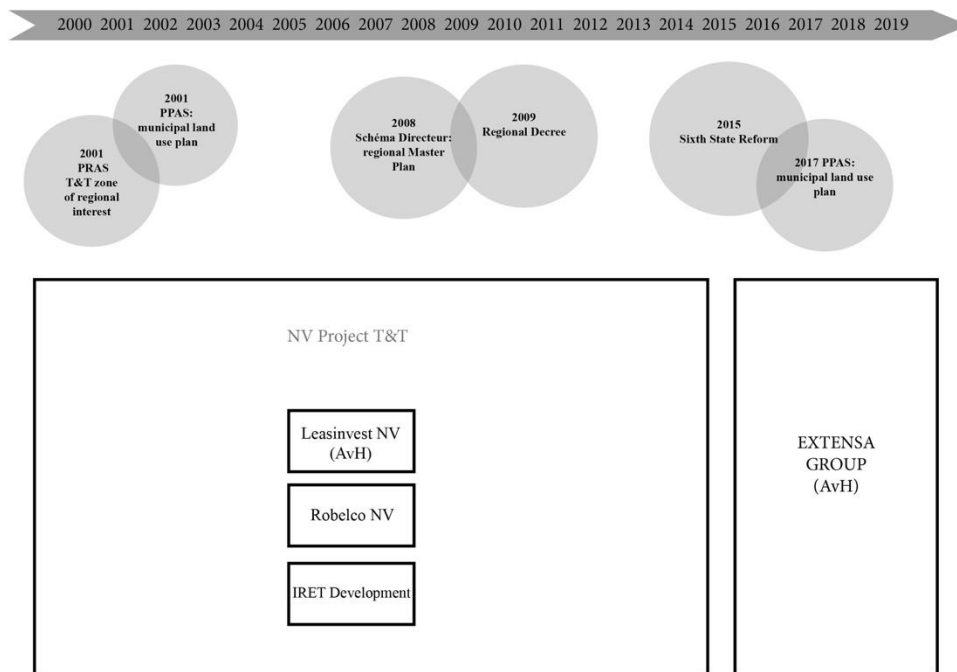
“The conflict was not so much on the vision for the development of the area. In fact, it was more about different attitudes. If you are a developer of this kind of project and have a problem in investing small money, then this means that you already have a problem. It’s going to be a bit longer, it’s a long-term process. You cannot say: “I want my money now!” and things like that. That is not going to work” (Interview with developer#1)

As in the case of CityLife, the internal tensions within joint venture affected the whole process. The situation eventually changed when the Extensa Group became major shareholder.

“The process has evolved according to the owner. In the past, different shareholders that did not agree on everything so the process was very long. I have the feeling that things have changed since 2013 and since Extensa acquired the whole property” (Interview with a planner from the municipality of Brussels)

Due to the 2015 reform, the BCR gradually acquired a more influential role than the municipality of Brussels. The rebalancing of power within the coalition was therefore fundamental for the identification of a common vision on the development of the site, and for the delivery of building permits in 2017 (Figure 4): ‘Since May 2017, there’s a framework and we can’t argue about it any longer. That’s the basis and it helps the negotiation’ (Interview with a planner working at BCR#2).

Figure 4: Main planning instruments and T&T ownership structure (2000-2019)



In line with the financialisation literature on UDPs, in both cases planning decisions were ‘de-contextualised’ (Savini and Aalbers 2016; Guironnet *et al.* 2015): on the one hand, they came at the expenses of more distributional goals; on the other hand, they seemed not be based on a clear evaluation of local needs. In both cases, negotiations benefitted private developers. In Milan, for instance, social housing was never at stake and the municipality also showed a certain weakness in negotiating public amenities. Local authorities modified planning frameworks to enable their partners to postpone the end of construction works and build more or less residential plots/office space when it best suited them. When the PII was revised in 2008, they moreover bore the costs of the infrastructure investment, contributing to increase the value of land.

In Brussels, private actors took advantage from the tensions between the municipality of Brussels and the BCR on the inclusion of public amenities and social housing. If we consider the former, the City of Brussels demanded 10% of public amenities, while the BCR asked 5%. The 2017 local land-use plan recognised the regional alternative (18,500 m<sup>2</sup> min), but discussions on building fees remained open. The residential function was initially included in the 2008 *Schéma Directeur* and then left out in the 2009 Decree. These two episodes again reveal the contested nature of planning in Brussels. According to a regional planner, the cut in social housing was a political move. The municipality of Brussels never demanded it: “The City of Brussels has already a lot of social housing. Thus, *a priori* we haven’t demanded social housing because we wanted mix” (interview with a planner from the municipality of Brussels). The fact that, after the 2008 *Schéma Directeur*, negotiations were carried out between the regional Minister President and the owner of T&T suggest that, before the 2009 Decree, there was another deal between the region and the City of Brussels.

“The negotiations, which occurred after that master plan [*Schéma Directeur*], were carried out on a pretty high level, basically between the Minister President and the owner. These negotiations ended up in that decree which no longer stipulated that there had to be social housing. So again, this is a matter of negotiations! Public authorities were a bit weak” (Interview with a planner working at BCR#1)

As a result, the 2018 plan encompasses only subsidised housing, that will cover 44,000 m<sup>2</sup> (30% of the total number of dwellings). Yet, also in this case, the matter is still included in the discussions on building fees (BRAL 2017).

## 9. Conclusion: two European regimes in the making

In contrast to the literature assigning a passive role to state actors in financialised urban development processes, the analysis of CityLife and Tour and Taxis proves that state actors do have a strong agency in decision making. The adoption of URA’s analytical framework (Stone 1993, 2004, 2005) was paramount to reveal that, despite the initial imbalanced dotation of *material resources* (i.e. capital) in favour of their private partners, state actors owns a crucial resource: planning. Through it, they succeed in anchoring capital investments to their entrepreneurial political agendas, while ensuring the functioning of development coalitions.

Planning functions as a glue in urban development processes. As such, it is instrumentally mobilised to shape power relationships, in projects characterised by growing uncertainty and the withdrawal of partners. Nevertheless, this glue function plays out differently in Milan and Brussels. In the Italian case, the presence of converging interests between local authorities meant that planning was crafted to maintain the profitability of investments, so to allow CityLife Spa to carry out the real estate operation. In the Belgian case, planning negotiations not only had to take this aspect into account, but also had to lead to a resolution of local governments’ disputes.

This outcome depends on the cities’ different *local structures of opportunities* (Halbert and Attuyer 2016). Firstly, while in Milan planning reform delegated, and clearly defined, planning competences, in Brussels this was not the case. Secondly, in Milan local authorities built a shared political agenda, aimed to launch the

city at the international scale, also through UDPs. PIIs were designed for this very purpose. On the contrary, in the Belgian case, planning did not provide for any flexible tools for this kind of operations, which remained at the mercy of local governments' "power games". This was further complicated by the fact that the municipality of Brussels and the BCR always struggled to find a solution for their conflicting interests on the area.

By showing the role of planning in UDPs, the comparison depicts the making of two different European development regimes. In Milan, urban regeneration through large-scale projects has represented the core of the entrepreneurial city management approach since the 1990s (Anselmi and Vicari 2020; Mosciaro 2020; Gonzales 2009). The affirmation of the so-called 'planning by project tradition' was meant to open the real estate market to capital investments and put in practice new forms of private and public collaborations. The final objective was to position the city on the map, thereby increasing its competitiveness in the global real estate market. CityLife is an emblematic example of this process. Its analysis opens a new question on the shift to a financialised governance of UDPs, in which planning choices are driven by economic – and financial – imperatives, and local governments increasingly embrace finance logics and depoliticise the decision-making process (Theurilat *et al.* 2016, 1510).

In the case of Brussel, T&T is the symbol of an *experimental* (Lauermann 2016) entrepreneurial urban regime. The project represented a sort of "laboratory" to test the functioning of local governance and planning frameworks. Its contested development led the regional government to take a step forward in the transformation of strategic areas and in the definition of new planning tools. This process, which began in 2015, resulted in the introduction of *Plans d'Aménagement Directeur* in 2018. The latter override the hierarchical system and represents the only framework for the regeneration of large-scale strategic sites. Lastly, they relegate municipal plans to a marginal position, in order to entrust the region with more negotiating and decision-making power. This marks the continuation of a regime change that began with Tour and Taxis.

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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Grounding urban governance on housing affordability: a conceptual framework for policy analysis. Insights from Vienna.

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**ABSTRACT:** Growing and attractive cities, such as Vienna, globally face housing crises. Urban land rent (inflated by the huge housing demand in attractive areas and the consequent housing shortage) is transferred to housing prices and results in increasingly unaffordable and inaccessible cities. Housing affordability is a critical factor for enjoying the use value of housing and the broader set of values associated with cities. To assure urban agglomerations' inclusiveness and spatial justice, urban governance should be "grounded" on affordability by redistributing land rent and keeping housing prices hooked on income levels. However, the relation between urban land rent and housing affordability is rarely connected in Housing studies. Furthermore, it is often neglected by urban governors, generally competing to increase housing prices and attract investments. This article contributes to fill this policy/research gap and offers new conceptual avenues for the analysis of urban housing affordability governance. A theoretical basis and a coherent analytical framework for policy analysis are empirically applied in a case study of the city of Vienna, focusing on affordable rental housing. Based on peculiarities—of history, political stability, and a solid welfare system—the Viennese case offers relevant insights for disentangling the complex network of policies and institutions that ground urban growth on affordability.

**KEYWORDS:**

Housing affordability; Policy analysis; Urban land rent; Urban governance; Vienna

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## 1. Introduction

In the pressing context of a global urban housing affordability crisis (Wetzstein, 2017), this article proposes a conceptual framework for a multidimensional policy analysis of urban housing affordability. Borrowing concepts from the foundational economy (especially that of grounded city) and spatial justice, this article aims at: creating new theoretical ground for “urban” housing affordability and connecting it with urban land rent, filling a historical gap in Housing studies; developing a coherent framework, offering new conceptual avenues for the analysis of urban housing affordability governance; disentangling the complex network of policies and institutions that ground urban growth on affordability in the city of Vienna. Though affordability is crucial in all tenures, the empirical part of this contribution—coherently with the specificity of the Viennese case—focuses exclusively on affordability of the rental sector.

The dichotomy between the market and use value of housing—reflecting its double nature of exchangeable and commodified good and asset *versus* that of social infrastructure—has become increasingly apparent in today’s dynamic global cities. Most cities worldwide have observed a substantial growth in real estate values after the 1980s, but some global and growing cities saw a veritable explosion in housing prices. In attractive cities, expectations of future return and virtually unlimited demand have made land and housing attractive assets for short- and long-term financial investment, driving up land and housing prices to unaffordable levels (Aalbers, 2016). Housing price growth predominantly depends on the appreciation of the underlying land assets, which ranges from 40% to over 77% of the total depending on countries as showed by a recent study conducted in 14 advanced countries (Knoll, Schularick, and Steger, 2017). Thus, it must be linked to the inherently urban and locational character of housing.

This means that the “value” of the city—what in Urban Economics is referred to as *urban land rent*, or the monetary counterpart of the advantages of urban locations (Camagni, 2016)—, is transferred to housing prices. Then, however, property owners, developers, and usually financial actors “extract” this value from inhabitants’ incomes in what could be called a strategy of “value grabbing” through housing prices (Andreucci, García-Lamarca, Wedekind, and Swyngedouw, 2017). This is reflected in increasing affordability problems that are sharpened by intensified income inequalities, as acknowledged by many scholars (see among others: Bramley 1994; Yates 2008; Albouy, Ehrlich, and Liu, 2016; Rohe 2017; Wetzstein 2017). These trends have contributed to creating the conditions for the emerging “global urban housing affordability crisis”, as described in Wetzstein’s frequently cited article (2017), meaning that low- and middle-income groups are increasingly unable to afford decent housing in cities and are facing the risk of expulsion.

The theme of housing affordability has indeed gained new relevance in the academic debate, especially from such urban perspective. Some scholars have gone beyond some traditional issues (e.g., affordability and poverty; rent-to-income *vs* residual-income approaches) to analytically explore and problematize in a “fresh” way the increasingly urban dimensions and implications of housing affordability and adopting an explicit focus on “urban housing affordability” (hereafter, UHA). According to Haffner and Hulse (2021, 65): «if housing affordability was seen primarily in the twentieth century as a social policy issue centering on the relationships between housing, non-housing expenditures and income poverty, the aftermath of the GFC (2009 onwards) has seen revival of discussions about housing affordability as a consequence of house price and rent increases and urban restructuring». Though not being clearly defined by these authors, UHA emerges as a reconceptualization of housing affordability that explores the primarily urban and spatial character of housing affordability, its dependence on major capitalist urban dynamics and its devolution to the local level. Shifting attention to UHA also means acknowledging that, in the neoliberal era: housing issues have been de-politicized and increasingly devolved down from the state to the market (Aalbers, 2016) and, to local (urban) governance (Kazepov, 2010); coherently with a new entrepreneurial role of public management, the urban dimension of

the affordability crisis has not been a primary target of urban governors, which have focused more on inflating housing prices and competing in capital attraction (Harvey, 1989). Due to these trends, cities have experienced unprecedented trajectories of increasing inequalities and polarization (Kazepov, 2005) and challenging issues of spatial justice (Soja, 2010) that are deeply connected to UHA.

Moreover, due to State retrenchment, cities are increasingly at the centers of new local welfare arrangements (Kazepov, 2010). Coherently, increasing attention is going to local—instead of national—housing regimes (Hoekstra, 2020). In this sense, the degree of freedom of urban governors in tackling UHA and their concrete local policy instruments should be investigated. In her book *The Just City* (2010), Susan Fainstein argues that within a capitalist political economy and national and supranational constraints (e.g. funding, welfare systems), urban governors still have some power—and therefore responsibility—for assuring justice, which she understands in terms of equity, democracy and diversity in processes and outcomes of city making decisions. In furtherance of equity, Fainstein includes the theme of affordability arguing that «[a]ll new housing development should provide units for households with incomes below the median [...] with the goal of providing a decent home and suitable living environment for everyone” and “housing units developed to be affordable should perpetually remain in the affordable housing pool or be subject to one-for-one replacement» (Fainstein, 2010, 172). I agree with Fainstein that urban governors have some power but, I argue, to shape concrete and just public action: 1) there should be a clear and accepted definition of what is “affordable housing” that is connected to the broader issue of UHA; 2) UHA is not only the outcome of market and housing policies but of rather a more complex set of interdependent policies. In this sense, understanding the role of local governors in tackling UHA needs new conceptual avenues and frameworks of analysis.

Within this framework, Wetzstein (2017, 9) calls for politicized knowledge production dedicated to «achieving affordable futures for all» and proposes a research agenda for addressing the knowledge gap between policy making and the outcomes of policies concerning UHA. He presents five possible entry points to this broad challenge. This article responds to this call by addressing specifically the fifth point on «(affordable) housing policy development and implementation», which invites reflections «on the nature of housing policy trajectories in-between path-dependence and innovation» (Wetzstein, 2017, 9). Reflections that are empirically concerned with «tracing policy transfer and best practice patterns globally, internationally and nationally including the identification of the main forces, key resources, network architectures and resulting effects on affordable housing policies» and identifying «opportunities for new models to spread (e.g., German tenancy law, Vienna and Singapore housing models)» (Wetzstein, 2017, table 2). Part of the research agenda proposed by Wetzstein on UHA regards then opening the black box of specific “model” housing regimes, such as that of Vienna, to both problematize UHA and propose pathways for policies, tightly linking research to the elaboration of policy proposals. I consider the analysis of concrete examples helpful in disentangling UHA complexity and shedding light over policy instruments of urban governance.

This article embraces this articulated research agenda by attempting to fill some of the highlighted gaps. Specifically, the article aims at: providing new theoretical ground for UHA that encompasses its multiple dimensions and scales and addresses the under-investigated relation with urban land rent dynamics (Bricocoli and Salento, 2019); providing a coherent analytical framework for the analysis of UHA governance, addressing how different policy domains and their interrelations and interactions shape housing affordability outcomes and to providing new ways to conceptualize this complexity (Wetzstein, 2017); using the framework to disentangle the complex network of policies and institutions that ground urban growth on affordability in the city of Vienna and expanding the knowledge on concrete policies to provide more affordable and just cities (Fainstein, 2010; Wetzstein, 2017).

The article is organized as follows. Section 1 introduces the methodology and research design. In section 2, the article theoretically reflects on UHA and highlights the relation between urban land rent and

(un)affordability—the presence *or not* of affordable housing for the whole population and especially low- and middle-income citizens in a housing system—and its relevance for the literature on Housing studies and spatial justice. Section 3 and 4 bring public policies into the picture: in section 3, the article develops a conceptual framework for analyzing urban governance of UHA; in section 4, the framework is applied to the Viennese housing system (identified as a “model” by Wetzstein among others) to disentangle its policy mix to provide rental housing affordability and highlight its achievements and limits. Finally, in section 5 the article discusses the relevance of the conceptual framework for the debate on UHA and to the emerging concept of “affordable city”, and addresses some elements of reflection about the peculiarity of the Viennese model.

## 1. Methodology

The article adopts a mainly deductive research method and comprises three steps. The first step, in section 2 and 3.1, consists of building new theoretical and conceptual ground for UHA that challenges inadequate conceptions of affordability in Housing studies. It relies on the scientific basis offered by urban economics and on the normative and critical assumptions of the foundational economy—and the related grounded city concept—and of spatial justice, first analyzing market outcomes (section 2) and then bringing public policies into the picture (section 3.1). The second step, in section 3.2, consists of building a theory-driven framework for the analysis and development of policies addressing UHA in urban governance. The framework is influenced by the literature on institutions and public policy analysis and aims at opening the black box of urban governance from the perspective of UHA. It is based on the application of two concepts: that of housing system, as «a typically vague but convenient shorthand expression to encompass the full range of inter-relationships between all of the actors (individual and corporate), housing units and institutions involved in the production, consumption and regulation of housing» (Bourne, 1981, 26); the concept of local housing regime, or «the configuration of actors and institutions that is responsible for the provision, regulation, allocation, and consumption of housing in a particular administrative entity (a city or a region)» (Hoekstra, 2020, 79), that here I use interchangeably with urban housing governance. The third step, in section 4, is the empirical application of the conceptual framework to the city of Vienna (mainly focusing on rental affordability) aimed at providing insights on an institutional system that is regarded as a model in concretely influencing affordability outcomes. The framework is intended to be generally applicable with proper adjustments to any governance system, and its relevance and applicability are discussed in the final section.

## 2. New theoretical and conceptual ground for urban housing affordability

This section focuses on theory building, proposing a reconceptualization of UHA and investigating the relation between urban land rent and housing (un)affordability. This relation, lesser investigated in Housing studies, proves crucial in determining urban and spatial justice, and the distribution of the value of the city. Moreover, it is tensed in growing and attractive cities, giving shape to unjust geographies of (un)affordability.

Cities are typically regarded as engines of economic growth, producing large parts of the national GDP figures and being the centers of employment and opportunities, the foremost producers of knowledge and innovation, and hubs of a globalizing world economy, especially for real estate. However, urban areas could also be interpreted as “public goods” (Artle, 1973) since they benefit from tangible and intangible assets and values—of agglomeration, proximity, accessibility, to mention some—that are collectively generated and turn into individually exploited values. According to Camagni (2016, unpaginated) «a city is a great collective good created through investments and decisions both public and private. It produces collective advantages—externalities of various kinds that enhance the well-being of citizens and the efficiency of production activities.

Therefore, the economic value of a city's individual parts—places or urban spaces—is not determined by individual action, but by collective action external to the individual actor».

The capacity of benefitting from the collectively generated value of cities also depends on inherently urban and spatial factors and accessing decent and well-located housing is undoubtedly one of those. Housing has a value of use as an element of satisfaction of certain modern housing principles (Tosi, 1994)—e.g., privacy, comfort, hospitality. But “dwelling” in a particular place has also a value because it creates the opportunity to access specific urban amenities and economies, often capitalized by the market. In this sense, housing has two conflicting natures: firstly, that of foundational infrastructure of everyday life (see further in this section) with a use value also related to its location; secondly, that of an exchangeable good with a market value that depends on its quantity and quality but also on the specific urban location, reflected in the urban land rent. According to an early interpretation by Marx, «it is the ground-rent, and not the house, which forms the actual object of building speculation» (Marx 1894, Vol. III Part VI, Chapt. 46). This assumption is still relevant since, as shown by Knoll *et al.* (2017), the steep surge observed in housing prices since the 1980s is mostly due to skyrocketing land prices.

Urban land is an essential resource—spatially fixed and scarce—for the production and consumption of housing. Additionally, accessibility to good spatial externalities—such as access to jobs, services, amenities, social interaction—makes accessible land (and housing) even more scarce, determining extremely uneven geographies of land and housing prices<sup>1</sup>. The housing market is mostly shaped by the land market and therefore by urban land rent. The underlying costs of location—and therefore, of the value of the city—is being transferred to housing prices and charged to the inhabitants. Among others, Camagni (2016) has concentrated on urban land rent as a key factor for the distribution of the value of the city among different actors and users: in market-oriented urban development, land rent appears in development gains and, without specific regulation or taxes, it is generally appropriated by developers or landowners and transferred into housing prices. With this argument, Camagni stresses on its redistribution according to more equal principles.

In market economies, housing is mainly allocated through the market. Having a certain income (or assets) is thus critical to access specific housing in accessible locations and thereby the corresponding urban values: given a certain distribution of urban land rent (transferred to housing prices), the opportunities of localization are therefore generally determined by both income and the share of it that one decides and is able to allocate to housing. This entangles a relation between urban land rent and housing outcomes, particularly housing (un)affordability, that can become tensed in particular situations—such as with growth, attractiveness and housing shortage—and determine unjust urban geographies of housing (un)affordability.

Generally speaking, housing affordability links the housing situation of households (such as tenure, adequacy, distress, exclusion) to their economic situation (such as income, savings, access to credit, debt) (Anacker, 2019). Moreover, housing affordability has a double nature: on one side, it is an *analytical indicator* and part of the housing outcomes, a «set of indicators that describe the housing situation in a particular area» (Hoekstra, 2020, 80); on the other, it is a *policy framework* related to social and political assumption, such as the right to (afford) housing somewhere specifically (Whitehead, 1991). In both its natures, when it comes to translating the notion into metrics, housing affordability becomes contestable. A review of academic and grey literature (Peverini, 2019) found five main metrics according to which housing is affordable: 1) when prices and rents are below the market price of a particular share, usually 20-30% (*below market*); 2) when they are the mere sums of the production costs (*cost rent*); 3) for a specific household, when the share of its disposable income spent on housing is below a certain share (*cost to income*); 4) for a specific household, when the

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth mentioning that there is a whole debate about the forms of the city and their impact on housing, transportation, services, etc. This debate, highly relevant to housing affordability, is beyond the focus of this paper.

residual income after housing costs is above a minimum (*minimum residual income*); 5) for a specific household, in a specific place, when the share of its disposable income spent on housing and transportation is below a certain share (*housing+transportation*). All of those are useful conceptualizations, but while the last one is explicitly spatial, the other need to be contextualized and spatialized to become effective in UHA. Further attempts to combine the dimension of supply and demand in a particular context (usually a city) can be made by measuring the quantity of housing that is affordable for certain incomes (*housing accessibility*, see Sendi, 2014) or linking affordability to different spatial variables (*location affordability*). These attempts, which also inspire this article, are coherent to the “spatial turn” in social sciences (Soja, 2010) and to new conceptualizations of housing affordability as an urban problem (Wetzstein, 2017).

Usually, urban policies condense UHA in merely “affordable housing”, a segment of the housing stock—either intermediate between “social housing” and full market housing (as in Czischke and van Bortel, 2018), or also comprising the social housing segment (as in Urban Agenda for the EU, 2018)—that is within the responsibility of housing policies. Building on the above-described reflections, I propose a different approach, arguing that UHA should not only be intended as a mere part of the supply (which and how much housing is affordable?), but rather as a multidimensional outcome produced by the housing market and the local housing regime (see section 3). Operationally, I propose to consider UHA as an assessment of the capacity (or not) of the broad range of individuals and households (with different socio-economic conditions) to access and maintain housing within a housing system, with good quality and in accessible locations, paying a fair share of income for housing expenses and having enough left to live a decent life. On the other hand, unaffordability triggers housing exclusion, conditions of poverty (residual income poverty, commuting poverty, energy poverty, etc.) and spatial injustice (segregation, gentrification, etc.). In this sense, UHA especially refers to the conditions of access to the housing supply for households in certain socio-economic conditions (and especially low- and middle-income households) in an urban housing system and to the social and spatial consequences of the geographies of affordability<sup>2</sup>.

In fact, the costs of accessing housing in the market usually includes the capitalization of urban land rent, so the commodification of land and housing—as opposed to their socialization—is a critical factor in determining (un)affordability outcomes. In a situation of commodified land and housing, the geography of urban land rent determines the possible spatial geographies of affordability: households settle where housing costs represent an affordable share of the income or, if able, spend more than the affordable share to access better locations but potentially affecting the residual income and therefore their living conditions<sup>3</sup>. This means, typically, that low-income households are spatially filtered away from the most valuable parts of cities, or have to spend a substantial part of their income on housing to access them. In other words, there is a powerful intrinsic relation between UHA and urban land rent that is inherently urban and spatial and UHA can be considered a measure of the capacity for a broad range of people to benefit from and enjoy the value of the city. This unveils the role of public policies and local housing regimes on influencing the geography of UHA as a central element in the (re)distribution of the value that a city generates. Additionally, it opens a reflection about different strategies to operationalize this redistribution, such as through securing low-income households access to more valuable locations with affordable housing provision or through improving living conditions in less valuable locations. This paper does not reflect on this point and, while considering both strategies valuable, concentrates the analytical efforts on the first one.

<sup>2</sup> One concrete example is the “nurse index” adopted to measure housing affordability and accessibility of Norwegian cities. It measures the number of dwellings in an urban market that would be potentially affordable with a nurse’s salary, which is close to the average median national one (see Cavicchia, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> In this sense, (un)affordability does not totally determine the behaviors in the process of settling down, there is some preference and choice involved. The final outcome can be interpreted in the relation suggested by Soja (2010: 55) between “geographies of choice and geographies of privilege”.



Finally, stressing the spatial dimension—as Soja reminds—should not overshadow the dimension of time (and history). The description made until now is rather ‘static’, while there are also dynamic factors to consider. The value of land and housing change over time mostly because of change in urban land rent, often connected to general or local economic phenomena but also reflecting the value generated by urban agglomerations. As showed in the pioneering work by Neil Smith, ‘rent gaps’ are generated in this process that can be turned into increasing housing prices and cause gentrification (Smith, 1979). In this sense, many cases of urban regeneration can be interpreted as phenomena of filtering up of upper-middle classes that reduce UHA and may cause, when involving existing residential fabric, gentrification, and displacement (see, for example: Annunziata, Lees, 2016). At the same time, incomes can increase or decline, and their distribution can get more or less unequal. In conditions of urban growth and attraction—meaning increased urban land rent—and of stagnating incomes and increased income inequality (which is the case in most Western agglomerations), the geography of UHA is subject to continuous dynamic rearrangements that should be taken into account.

### **3. A conceptual framework for housing affordability governance**

Based on the theoretical structure exposed in section 1, this section brings public policies into the picture and elaborates a conceptual framework for analyzing policies that ground urban governance on UHA.

#### **3.1 Grounding urban governance on urban housing affordability**

The relation between UHA and urban land rent is shaped by the market, as in the description of the previous section, but also by public action in many ways and scales. Land and housing are tradable commodities in market economies, but their actual uses and values are shaped by institutional frameworks and public policies at different levels, influencing affordability outcomes. Some policies directly target UHA, either in the supply—e.g. social and affordable housing provision, rent control—or the demand—e.g., income support, housing allowances. Some other influence housing systems’ affordability outcomes indirectly.

“Foundational economy” and “grounded city” are two useful concepts for framing the usefulness of UHA within urban governance without reducing it to a sectorial, decontextualized and a-spatial discourse on “affordable housing”. The foundational economy is the material and providential infrastructure for the everyday life. It involves all the infrastructures, broadly intended, for ensuring decent living conditions and a safe and evolved life to all citizens (The Foundational Economy Collective, 2018). Housing is part of the infrastructure of the foundational economy, consisting both of a *material* (the housing stock) and a *providential* infrastructure (concerning ownership, tenure, regulation). Housing outcomes such as UHA (with housing quality, availability, satisfaction, housing-related capabilities, and tenure security) define the overall quality of the housing infrastructure. From a more urban perspective, the foundational economy is central in what Engelen, Froud, Johal, Salento, and Williams (2017) call the “grounded city”: a way to conceptualize the city not as an engine of growth and capital accumulation but as a space where everybody can collectively and accessibly provide for everyday needs of the foundational economy. In line with the critique of neoliberal urban governance (see Harvey, 1989; Fainstein, 2010), they identify a dichotomy between the mainstream vision of *competitive* cities, interpreted «like firms, as machines that combine inputs to produce outputs while they are engaged in competitive struggle» (Engelen et al., 2017, 408). In their view, real estate asset appreciation and especially housing prices, inflated by urban growth and financialization, act as “accelerators” of a city’s economic growth and simultaneously allow rent extraction to more powerful elites. Instead, they propose the challenging vision of *grounded* city, as «a space where we can collectively and accessibly provide for everyday needs by improving the quantity and quality of foundational goods and services» (p. 408). To

realize good urban governance, they propose to shift the emphasis from competitiveness and real estate indicators to «a dashboard of tangible welfare indicators (like social housing new builds and housing waiting lists) as a part of a policy reset and a new language for thinking about good cities, which invokes values like security, robustness, protection and inclusion» (pp. 417-418). The grounded city is then based on the foundational economy infrastructure, that acts as a “stabilizer” since «the welfare of the city population always depends on reasonably priced access to goods like decent housing and utility support» and «on a broad distribution of affordable foundational necessities of decent quality» (p. 417). However, in an age of austerity cities face difficulties in meeting this provision, while real estate development (dependent on growing land values and real estate prices) is intended as the only way for municipalities to keep the flywheel of internal revenues for overheads. So, «growing and successful cities often generate unequal access to foundational goods instead of providing every resident with a minimum standard that is good enough» (p. 418). Housing has a specific role in determining how much a city is competitive or grounded, and can be both an accelerator or a stabilizer of growth, depending on the prevalence of, respectively, the market value or the use value (Bricocoli and Salento, 2019). UHA then, connecting local incomes and the local housing supply, could be considered a “stabilizer” of growth, a tangible indicator of how “grounded” a city is on its socio-economic conditions and, allowing low- and middle-income citizens to afford decent housing in good locations, how equally the city is redistributing its collectively produced value. In fact, grounding urban governance on UHA also means affecting urban land rent: Clark (2014) suggests that “good” urban governance involves «making the rent gap theory not true», which means controlling land rent to avoid the exclusion and expulsion of lower-income households. UHA—on a urban housing system characterized by “accelerators” such as certain housing market pressures, demand, population growth and migration flows—should be “stabilized” by the housing regime, a certain governance arrangement that include a mix of policies with the aim of improving affordability outcomes that is described in the next section.

Given these positions, a crucially contemporary issue is to understand viable ways to realize grounded urban governance without relying on the—rather nostalgic and unrealistic—assumption of a reinstalment of traditional welfare state policies in the context of their continuous devolution. Therefore, tackling UHA in this light concretely means looking at the broad spectrum of public action and governance and identifying the main policies that shape the playing field for private or hybrid actors and households and stabilize affordability outcomes (see section 3.2).

### **3.2 A framework for the analysis of affordability governance**

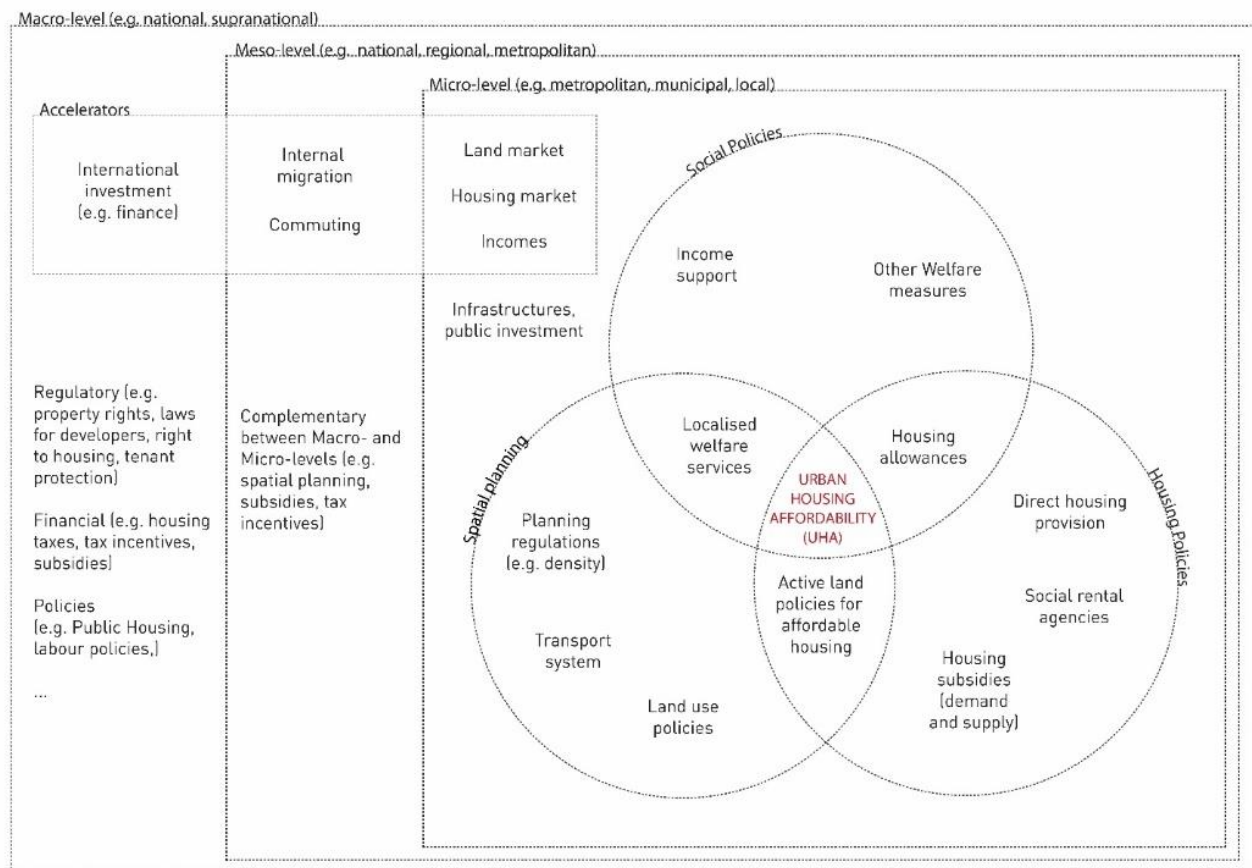
This section, based on the theoretical conceptualization of UHA described in section 2 and on the positions on urban governance exposed in section 3.1, aims at opening the black box of public action’s influence on UHA outcomes, addressing the multiple questions regarding the inherent complexity of urban housing regimes. In Wetzstein’s words (2017: table 2): «how do different policy realms (e.g., land-use, taxation, infrastructure/transport, labor laws, rent regulation, migration policies, financial regulation, construction sectors, welfare, etc.) and their interrelations and interactions shape housing affordability outcomes? How can those complexities be adequately conceptualized?».

Here, I propose an original conceptual and analytical framework of urban housing regimes that target UHA outcomes at the nexus among different policy domains. A similar approach proved fertile for the analysis of local influence on the housing system of the cities of New York and London by Whitehead and Goering (2020), but specifically addressing UHA require a more appropriate analytical model that considers: housing policies, social policies, and spatial planning. The framework is schematized in figure 1.

The housing domain is obviously relevant, comprising policies that affect the level of commodification of the housing system like direct public provision, housing subsidies or rent regulation: these are usually at higher

levels of government (state, region) but local levels have usually some influences. Spatial planning has a crucial role in shaping the spatial dimension of the housing system and dealing with urban land rent through (among others) land use, transportation policies and zoning: this domain is often situated at the level of the municipality but within supra-local legal frameworks. Social policies “fill the gap” of housing policies and planning through measures like income support and welfare services that impact on life quality in relation to households’ residual income. Their position depends on the multilevel arrangements and on the fiscal and political autonomy of the local level. Finally, relevant policies are situated at the intersection of these domains, mainly: active land policies, housing allowances, localized welfare services.

**Figure 1—A conceptual framework of stabilizers of affordability in urban governance.**



**Source:** made by the author.

I consider these three domains as the most relevant while other domains could also be considered relevant depending on specificities<sup>4</sup>. All three domains of policies are situated in a multilevel interplay that encompass—depending on system specificities—the micro- (metropolitan, municipal), meso- (national, regional, metropolitan), and macro-level (national, supranational).

<sup>4</sup> For example, labor policies, though clearly influencing incomes, are deliberately kept out of this framework since they are only partially under the control of the local level, being more often part of the contextual conditions within which a municipality must operate. Despite the emphasis on local governors on job creation in the design of urban policies, the real ability of influencing wages and labor market at the local level is uncertain and rather problematic.

This framework is useful to analyze the urban governance of UHA, concentrating on the role of local welfare in a multilevel system and considering the interplay of different policy domains. The integration in a policy mix is crucial to understand the set of policies that can act complementarily, counterbalancing each other and generating different UHA configurations in different systems. For example: demand-side subsidies (such as housing allowances) or income support can improve the overall affordability level of an otherwise unaffordable housing market, but only for the recipients of the benefits; providing affordable housing to outer locations can affect the transportation system and the local welfare services of the settlement community, generating congestion and negative externalities; allocating public housing dwelling to the poorest families on a cost-to-income basis should make sure that they face affordable housing costs, but could result in an unbearable burden for the public housing provider, if not balanced by adequate financial transfer for maintenance and management. The framework is used in the next section to analyze UHA governance in the case of Vienna, analyzing its various policy domains with a particular focus on active land policies.

#### **4. Case study: housing affordability governance in Vienna**

Many acknowledge the results of the Viennese housing policies (e.g., OECD 2020), that allowed to build and maintain one of the biggest public and affordable regulated rental housing systems in the world (altogether over 40% of the total housing stock). The rental sector here is very relevant, comprising over 40% of households in Austria and almost 80% in Vienna, and the analysis will concentrate on rental housing affordability. The theme of housing affordability of the rental sector has historically been at the forefront of the local political debate, and the city has set up a complex and sophisticated policy system (analyzed in section 4.1) with the explicit task to improve affordability levels.

Vienna is a particularly interesting case study since, despite having experienced strong dynamics of demographic growth and real estate acceleration after 1989, it shows comparably good level of rental affordability. Average rents in Vienna are close to half those of London, around 50% less than in Munich or Copenhagen, and slightly lower than those in Rome or Lisbon, where incomes are however significantly lower (Eurostat, 2020). Average rent for a one-bedroom apartment is close or higher than monthly median equivalized income of persons aged 18-24 in most European capitals, while less than half in Vienna (Fondation Abbé Pierre - FEANTSA, 2021, p. 28). Despite being sometimes criticized for excluding specific categories, affordable housing policies are widely acknowledged for being a primary reason of the city's high quality of life for large part of the population, allowing Vienna to reach the first position in many world rankings. It is therefore a highly relevant and fertile field of analysis of affordability policies in action. The following sections develops an empirical analysis of the governance regime of housing affordability in Vienna along the lines of the theoretical and analytical framework exposed in sections 2 and 3, especially deepening the interaction of different policies and the pivotal role of land policies in stabilizing UHA and grounding urban growth.

##### **4.1 Introduction to the case study: Vienna from decline to growth and acceleration**

The Viennese housing system has followed a specific path-dependent trajectory (Matznetter, 2002; Lawson, 2010) that is also related to the phases of decline and growth of the city. Vienna has touched its demographic apex at the turn of the 20th Century, being the capital of the Austro-Hungarian empire with around 2,1 million inhabitants. With the end of the empire and the first democratic elections, the city was administratively separated from Lower Austria in 1922 becoming a separate federal state (*Bundesland*), and a rent freeze introduced during the war was the main housing policy. This separation was an important condition for the subsequent fifteen years of socialist local government. In this period, known as “the red Vienna”, the city experienced slight population degrowth and the main effort of housing policy, aimed at improving the critical

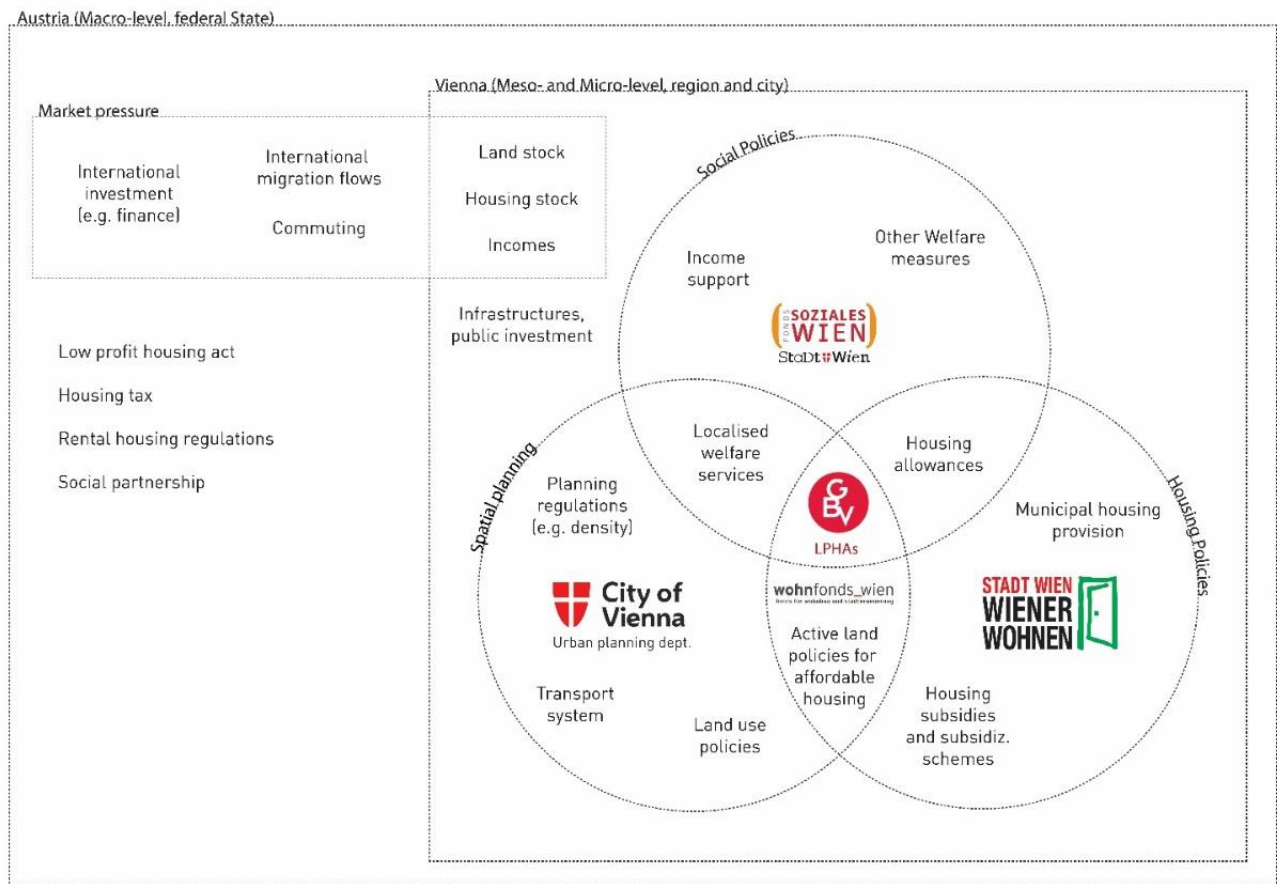
housing conditions of the city's working classes, was the construction of over 60.000 new municipal dwellings (Tafari, 1980). In the turbulent times before and after WWII housing policies became less relevant, and the city experienced further degrowth that stabilized in 1951 at around 1,6 million inhabitants (to remain constant until the beginning of the 1970s). After WWII, urgent reconstruction was the focus of housing policies, with municipal housing still playing a substantial role in the overall housing stock and rent control was gradually lifted during the recovery (Förster, 2020). With the post-war reestablished Austrian Second Republic, the so-called "social partnership" represented the foundations of the new social housing policies, a national pact that included strong intervention by the public in housing welfare and involvement of limited profit housing associations (hereafter, LPHAs)—an institutional evolution of the cooperative housing sector (see section 3.2.1)—to balance lower incomes. Unlike other welfare systems, housing was (and is) one of the pillars of the Austrian welfare state. Matznetter (2002) spoke of a social housing policy in a conservative welfare state, characterized by a social-insurance-based fragmentation of welfare entitlements, a pro-family bias in welfare provision, and corporatist forms of interest intermediation. A corporatist housing system was established based on political bargaining: subsidized owner-occupation for the interest of the Conservative party and subsidized public and limited profit rental housing in that of the Social-Democrats (Matznetter, 2002). In Vienna, a municipality with the autonomy of a state, the political majority has been firmly held by the social democratic party (*SPÖ*) and policies in the rental sector were much more relevant than elsewhere in the country.

Like many other European cities, after 1970 Vienna started a phase of shrinkage and housing policies shifted to housing and urban renewal with gradually reduced direct public production. However, after the 1980s, following the crisis in former Yugoslavia and the fall of the Iron Curtain, Austria and especially Vienna found themselves in an unexpectedly central position and began to be the destination of new immigration fluxes (Kampschulte, 2006; Novy, Swiatek, and Lengauer, 2013). Since then, the population of Vienna has been rising steadily from around 1,5 million in 1990 to over 1,9 million in 2019 and the predictions have been continuously revised upwards. Such a situation has been causing an unprecedented housing shortage, intertwined with global trends of acceleration of financialization and real estate investment in global cities, that expose housing and land prices to an intense upward pressure. Between 2000 and 2010 land prices rose from 575 to 961€/m<sup>2</sup> of realized living space (RLS), average rents rose by 37% and average prices reached 4.500 €/m<sup>2</sup> with exorbitant peaks between 17.000 and 30.000 €/m<sup>2</sup> for luxury housing in the inner city (Kadi, 2015). After the financial crisis, acceleration of real estate showed a comparable boost to other European global cities. Average land prices reaching in 2015 600€/m<sup>2</sup> in disinvested areas, 1.200 in good locations and 2.000 in invested areas (Ritt, 2015). Average gross market rents have grown 14% between 2013 and 2017, from 7,7€/m<sup>2</sup> to almost 9€/m<sup>2</sup> (Statistik Austria), while market rents in new buildings now range from 12 to 25€/m<sup>2</sup> (Amann and Mundt, 2018). According to current forecasts the population of Vienna will grow by over 250.000 inhabitants between 2020 and 2040, increasing the pressure on the housing market. Despite these trends of acceleration, considerable measures were put in place to stabilize UHA (see section 4.2).

## **4.2 The Viennese policy system for housing affordability**

This section analyzes the most recent (still active) policies for UHA. It does it according to the framework described in figure 1, analyzing the integrated system of actors and institutions situated in the three policy domains (housing, urban, and social policies) or at their intersection to improve UHA outcomes and stabilize growth. This local housing regime is based on path dependent conditions described in section 4.1 and, continuously adapting, has taken the present shape from the 1980s on. The main actors and policies in each domain of the Viennese housing regime are showed in figure 2 and explained in the following subsections.

**Figure 2 - The governance framework of housing affordability in Vienna.**



**Source:** made by the author.

### 4.2.1 Housing policies

Historically, the primary housing policy measures in Vienna has been municipal housing production and rent control on the private market. By the time, however, both have declined in importance. Rent control has been gradually deregulated at the federal level and today comprises an increasingly limited number of old contracts with an overall much less relevant effect on affordability than in the past (Kadi, 2015). The stock of municipal housing has been mostly produced during the Red Vienna and post-war period, with 200.000 municipal dwellings produced until 1981 and only around 20.000 until 2004 (when direct municipal production ended). This stock, almost never sold and always kept in good conditions, is now managed by the public agency Wiener Wohnen and still constitutes the main social housing policy of the city. It allocates the pepper-potted (figure 3) and well-maintained municipal housing at cost-rents—fairly low but not dependent on incomes, see section 4.2.2—to a broad range of low- and middle-income households, therefore directly stabilizing the housing situation of over 20% of the population. After 1980s, the city slowed down municipal housing production, also due to the impact of austerity measures that accompanied Austrian accession to the European Union, and the municipal stock increasingly residualized though maintaining a comparably high social mix (Friesenecker and Kazepov, 2021). Since then, a significant shift in the city’s housing policies happened, coherently with the one from public housing to the “social market” described by Kemeny (1995): while

decreasing direct production, the city furthered the already relevant “hybridization” of affordable housing production through the strongly controlled mechanism of public-private-partnerships with LPHAs that cater for middle-income households in a vision of unitary rental system (Lawson, 2010). Hybridization means reaching housing objectives through public-private partnerships and private actors such as housing associations, housing cooperatives, and other no- or low-profit third sector actors in an intermediate and partly regulated segment of the housing market (Mullins, Milligan, and Nieboer, 2017). These actors act mainly according to below-market and cost-rent affordability metrics and influence the affordability levels already in market conditions—rents of LPHAs in free-financed operations in Vienna are from 15 to 35% lower than the private unregulated market rents (Amann and Mundt, 2018). The affordability outcomes are increased by the “state-directed” integration into housing policies (especially at the local level) through subsidies and/or land provision (Mullins *et al.*, 2017). In Vienna, hybrid actors are mainly represented by limited profit housing associations (LPHAs) that are united into the umbrella organization GBV (*Österreichischer Verband Gemeinnütziger Bauvereinigungen—Revisionsverband*) and operate within a very restrained and controlled federal legal framework (*Wohnungsgemeinnützigkeitsgesetz*). The framework provides them full exemption from corporate tax in exchange for: 1) restricted business activity and obligation to build; 2) limitation of profits, with return on investments (ROI) statutory capped at 3,5%; 3) asset commitment (equity has to be reinvested in new construction); 4) rent control: rents are calculated based on the costs of construction and maintenance (cost-rent) until repayment of investment and then defined by law (basic rent) afterwards; 5) auditing and compliance rules.

Meanwhile, the municipality kept a protagonist and steering role with subsidies and land policies (see also 4.2.3) and LPHAs can be regarded as a “lengthened arm of housing policy”, working on a social market basis for goals strongly influenced by the public (Amann, 2005, 11). The hybridization of affordable housing production through LPHAs is linked to a system of integrated policies and institutions that are meant to achieve social policy goals even on a market-oriented basis. Housing subsidies (*Wohnbauförderung*) is the most important financial tool. It is a prevalently revolving fund alimented by a housing tax on incomes (*Wohnbausteuer*, since few years administered autonomously by federal states) and distributed in the forms of (mainly) long-term low-interest repayable loans and grants. In this sense, affordable housing is also referred to as *subsidized* housing. According to GBV, a typical financial scheme for LPHAs in Austria would rely for only 30/40% on a bank mortgage loan, while another 30/40% is provided by public subsidies (mostly long-term repayable loans), 10/15% by owned equity, and a small portion of tenant’s contribution in terms of down payment (a quasi-loan by the tenant to the LPHA, paid back when leaving minus 1% yearly interest). Housing subsidies can be regarded as a form of public investment in providing housing as a foundational infrastructure that is economically sustainable and cost-rent affordable. Housing subsidies amounted in Vienna amounted around 533mln€ in 2018 (slightly over half from housing tax and the rest from previous loans’ repayments), of which 300mln€ for subsidized housing construction, 164mln€ for subsidized renovation (also rent controlled for specific durations) and 70mln€ for housing allowances (see 4.2.2).

LPHAs act on this operative framework that is determined by the legal framework at the federal level and by local policies in terms of subsidies (mainly those for new construction) and access to land. The concrete aim of these policies is to create a feasible business model for LPHAs to operate within very restrained conditions and stabilize rent levels through large new construction activity. In Vienna, LPHAs accomplished around 200.000 units and account for about one-third of new housing, a stock that can be considered fairly rent controlled. As a condition for accessing housing subsidies and cheap land (see 4.2.2), LPHAs must comply with statutory rent caps (annually indexed) fixed for different subsidization schemes (Amann and Mundt, 2018) and have a mandate to preserve the dwellings, preventing the commodification of the newly created affordable housing stock. At the time of writing, the statutory net rent cap for regular subsidization models is set at around 5 €/m<sup>2</sup> per month, which leads to a final rent level of 7,5 or 8,0 €/m<sup>2</sup> per month including taxes, utilities, and

expenses, very similar to the rent charged in municipal housing and from 30 to 60% lower than market rents (*ibidem*).

#### 4.2.2 Social policies

With “social policies” here I mean policies that impact on affordability without directly supplying or regulating housing (such as income transfers, allowances and localized welfare services). The whole regulated market created through the subsidizations schemes follows a cost-rent affordability criterion, in which final rents are statutorily controlled also by compressing the final costs through a mix of financial support (subsidies) and land policies. Rent levels, even in municipal housing, are charged independently from the households’ incomes. Affordability conditions for lower-income households is then influenced by additional demand-side complementary policies that are here described<sup>5</sup>.

Households, depending on income, can access housing allowances (*Wohnbeihilfe*, managed by MA50, the same department of housing subsidies). This policy can be situated at the intersection between housing and social policies since it is financed by housing subsidies (see section 4.2.1). It is calculated based on reference qualitative standards of square footage (50m<sup>2</sup> for singles, 70m<sup>2</sup> for couples and 15 m<sup>2</sup> for each additional person). The average housing allowances amounts to around 1.500€ per year, with a peak of 67.615 recipients an 100mln€ budget in 2010 that decreased to 49.394 and 74 mln€ in 2019. Moreover, minimum income support (*Mindestsicherung*) by the social department of the municipality (*Fond Soziales Wien*)—based on a national law—to reach the monthly poverty line (of 949,46€ for singles, 712,10€ per person for couples and additional 256,35€ for each child). Parts of these figures are dedicated exclusively to housing costs (up to 237,36€ for singles, 178,02€ per person for couples) and can be subtracted from regular housing allowances. The total amount of income support in Vienna grew from 283mln€ in 2003 (of which 26% for housing) to 690mln€ in 2017 (19% for housing). In 2019, 649mln€ were distributed to 136.467 recipients (18% for housing). Together with minimum income support, the municipality also provides allowances for public transportation, leisure, and education (in the “mobile pass”) and for energy costs. These measures are very relevant for UHA outcomes: if income support for poor households was abolished or diminished, municipal housing would immediately become unaffordable for many lower-income households<sup>6</sup>. Moreover, along with new affordable housing buildings the city provides a set of proximity services at affordable rate, ranging from nursery schools to “mobility points” (where bikes, cargo bikes and cars can be rented when needed). Though not directly supporting incomes, these services alleviate other expenditures, providing higher life quality with the same residual income. Overall, “social policies” play a fundamental part in the policy mix to stabilize urban growth and tackle UHA.

#### 4.2.3 Spatial planning and active land policies

Spatial planning and (at the intersection with housing policies) active land policies also influence land rent and UHA in Vienna. Limiting land prices is crucial to enable affordable housing production and allow the social orientation and hybridization of LPHAs, also since land costs for subsidized housing by law cannot exceed €188/m<sup>2</sup>, which is 3 to 10 times lower than land market prices (Kadi, Vollmer, Stein, 2021).

One main instrument is public land banking. Vienna, like many other Austrian cities, established land funds that act as major publicly backed players in the local private land market. Land banking is a process by which government authorities assemble land for various purposes, primarily housing and infrastructures. In the early versions, mostly consisted of buying greenfield suburban plots at low prices to enable infrastructures and

<sup>5</sup> Data are extracted by the statistic website of the city of Vienna (accessed 2 august 2021).

<sup>6</sup> According to Wiener Wohnen, a relevant share of municipal tenants pays a rent that is over 30% of the income.



housing development for present and future needs, control land speculation and eliminate oligopolistic prices. Land banking has strong potential in influencing the relation between land rent and UHA and stabilizing growth. Though public land banking does not eliminate land rent, it allows the public institution to give up (part of) its capitalization to realize public or affordable housing development at below-market prices. It can be considered a strategic tool since acquisitions bring advantages mainly in the future.

In Vienna, strategic land banking has been carried out almost continuously since the period of the Red Vienna, taking advantage of some competitive advantages of the city over the market and practically monopolizing until the 1980s acquisition of greenfield land in new development areas (Amann, 2005: 14). It relied on specific conditions, such as: planning and zoning powers to make coherent acquisition choices; the effects of other policies (such as rent control) and circumstances (such as the collapse of the land market after WWI) which made land cheaper in a certain time (Lawson, 2010). In 1984 the city established the Vienna Land Procurement and Urban Renewal Fund, then renamed Vienna Housing Fund (*Wohnfonds\_Wien*, hereafter “the land fund”). It is a non-profit private organization acting in the land market as a socially responsible land developer, subject to direct political control by the city councilor for housing. Land previously banked was transferred to the land fund, that also started performing land banking, or “land procurement” (*Bodenbevorratung*). It has no exclusionary power to purchase but operates in a context of limited competition and close collaboration with spatial planning department (MA18), making cheap land more easily available (Schluder 2005).

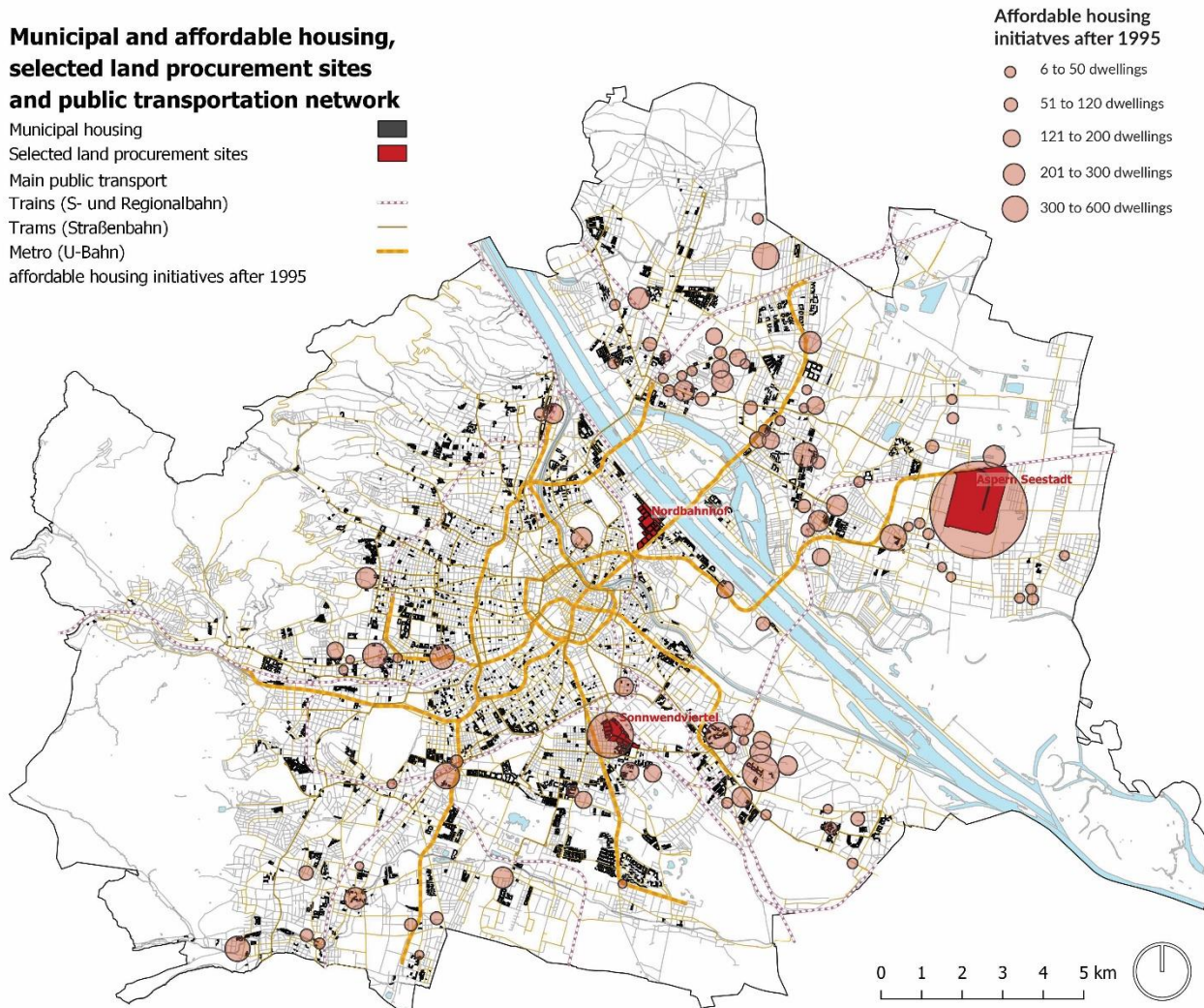
The banked land, coherently with the Urban Development Plan (*Stadtentwicklungsplan*) is connected to infrastructures and to a widespread and efficient public transportation network (Palmer, 2019). Transportation is, in this sense, part of the actions to improve affordability by reducing the residual income, and indeed the yearly public transport ticket is provided at the “political” price of 356€ (1€/day). Land banking gave the municipality of Vienna a decisive power to stabilize UHA when housing speculation could have allowed amazing land rent extraction. At present, the land fund holds around 3,2mln m<sup>2</sup> (*Wohnfonds\_wien*, 2021), acquired by direct transfer from other public agencies or bought upon by the time on the land market and stored for future development.

The land fund does not only bank land. It works as land developer according to expected housing needs and municipally-oriented urban development visions and has a pivotal role in the governance system described in section 4.2.1. Based on master planning, the land fund directly negotiates operational details with the planning department (such as green areas, density, urban forms) and divides developable land in plots that are leased or sold to LPHAs together with subsidies for regulated housing development (Palmer, 2019). Economic parameters are controlled during the development process to balance the publicly established social objectives of housing development and the economic feasibility for the LPHAs, according to the limited-profit housing act and to the subsidy schemes that include detailed rent control (Mundt and Amann, 2018). Additional requirements are introduced, such as income eligibility criteria and direct allocation by the city. Also, since 1995 land is awarded to LPHAs through competitive tenders, or development competitions (*Bauträgerwettbewerbe*), that evaluate architectural and environmental details of the projects together with rental affordability and the provision of social infrastructures. In this way, public control on housing development is present not only on final rent levels and allocation criteria but also on a broader set of city-making issues, including the provision of localized services that accompany housing (see section 4.2.2).

In the last period, acquiring land became more difficult and expensive due to reduced overall available land and increases in land prices. Nevertheless, control over land is considered a crucial instrument in public hands to balance stabilize urban growth and provide UHA. Thus, the city has been very reluctant to sell off land and has continued acquiring strategic green- and brownfield plots in new ways, even if at a slower pace. The most significant example is the dismissed Aspern airport site, acquired by the fund from the federal airport agency and afterwards rezoned according to a masterplan for the new satellite town. *Aspern Seestadt* is expected to

have 20.000 inhabitants and around 10.500 dwellings, the majority of which subsidized at the end of the prolonged metro line U2 (figure 3). Moreover, the city through the fund has been having a protagonist role in the development also of not directly owned land assets, such as the former railway yards owned by the national railway company, ÖBB—e.g. those of *Sonnwendviertel* and *Nordbahnhof*. Here, the zoning was a compromise between market-rate real estate, allowing development gains directed at infrastructural investments, and affordable rental housing comprising from 58% to 74% of the new built stock (figures by GBV). Through these new forms of land procurement, the city has managed to enlarge the affordable housing stock in very central and well-infrastructured locations that form a widespread geography of UHA together with pepper-potted municipal housing and other minor affordable housing developments (figure 3). In 2018 the city has also adopted *inclusionary zoning* in the new urban planning regulation, which became effective in March 2019 and provided the first plot during 2020 (Wohnfonds\_wien, 2021). It is a planning rule (zoning category “subsidized housing”) that requires private developers of newly rezoned area over 5.000 m<sup>2</sup> RLS to set aside “the majority” of units for subsidized housing, then specified in “regularly two thirds”. This new policy is intended as a new instrument for stabilizing the real estate market in a situation of scarce and increasingly more expensive land and therefore of decreasing land procurement activity.

**Figure 3 - The governance framework of housing affordability in Vienna.**



**Source:** made by the author on sources provided by the city of Vienna and on Franz, Gruber (2018).

### 4.3 Discussion: policies and conditions for grounded urban governance in Vienna

Vienna is not immune from the global affordability crisis and has seen significant processes of neo-liberalization and acceleration. However, it is still comparably much more affordable than most global cities and has succeeded in grounding its growth with good levels of UHA (Kadi, 2015; Ritt, 2015; Kadi et al., 2021; Friesenecker and Kadi, 2021). Within the constraints of federal reforms (taxes redistribution, rent regulation, etc.) the city stabilizes urban growth with a complex mix of housing and social policies, spatial planning, and notably active land policies. In this way, UHA is stabilized and grounded on local conditions, assuring that part of the value generated by the city is redistributed to lower income groups.

The effectiveness of the Viennese institutional machine highly depends on conditions of institutional collaboration and, therefore, on political stability and sustainability. If one part failed, the overall system would be affected or need restructuring. Historical political stability at the local level (with the relative autonomy of being a city-state) and the social partnership at the federal level have prevented most attempts to dismantle this system. Nevertheless, the federal government recently introduced measures that could threaten the Viennese system of affordable housing, such as a right to buy for tenants of subsidized dwellings some years after completion. Moreover, increased pressure on the land market is challenging the public land banking scheme and inclusionary zoning had to be introduced in the municipal urban planning regulation in 2018 to keep the machine working. The longer-term outcomes and effectiveness of the introduction of the inclusionary zoning policy will become clearer in the next years while land banking is still the main land policy.

As often argued from many parts, the political sustainability of the Viennese governance system of affordable housing, in times of massive population growth also relies on its capacity to reach a vast part of the society, not limited to the poorest households, and create political consensus. Consequently, the subsidization schemes have targeted a high range of middle-income households overshadowing the more pressing housing need of other more vulnerable groups (especially newcomers and migrants). Additionally, a significant increase of the waiting list for municipal housing happened in the years following the financial crisis, since the stock produced in public-private partnerships is not as affordable as traditional municipal housing (Kadi, 2015; Franz and Gruber, 2018). In Vienna, the municipal and the affordable housing sectors partially overlap on rent levels and on income limits. However, they do not completely overlap in access criteria and tenant contributions, making municipal housing far more suitable for lower incomes than regular subsidized housing<sup>7</sup>.

These are acknowledged by critics as some of the major injustices of the system. Though legitimately blemished for excluding newcomers and overshadowing the poorest ones, this system accommodates in Vienna over 50% of households in the regulated municipal or subsidized and LPHAs housing stock (often with unlimited contracts) meaning that their affordability conditions are stabilized from the ongoing trends of real estate acceleration (Friesenecker and Kazepov, 2021). Moreover, the city has addressed these issues by introducing new policy layering, such as the introduction of *Smart* dwellings and, more recently, the program for 4.000 new municipal housing units launched in 2015, which however represent “a drop in the ocean” in the dynamics of acceleration faced by the city now and in the next years (Kadi et al., 2021).

In Vienna, social policies have the role of filling the gap left by policies on the supply side, by providing direct support in the form of income transfers, housing allowances and proximity services. Moreover, the relevance of income support measures in Vienna has grown significantly in the years following the crisis. To some extent, these are relevant policies for maintaining good affordability outcomes in a housing regime that is based on cost-rent metrics and shall be counted within the stabilizers.

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<sup>7</sup> The municipality has recently introduced additional subsidization schemes (so called “Smart housing”) to address lower income households, but parallelly also enlarged the range of subsidies on the middle class with the housing program launched in 2017 and significantly named *Wohnbauoffensive* (housing offensive), referring to its aim to make a relevant number of new dwellings available in a short time (Amann and Mundt, 2018).

Land policies have proved a central pillar of the Viennese institutional system of affordability governance, with a pivotal role between housing policies and spatial planning in stabilizing housing prices and coordinating public-private partnerships. Strategic land banking was performed by the city of Vienna in times of demographic stability (and of pessimistic trends), proving a convenient and powerful policy to stabilize UHA in times of growth. The vast land banking program was mainly addressing greenfield agricultural land bought before planning gains, which allowed the municipality to buy cheaper land and compress final costs. In the last years, since land availability has decreased and land prices rising steeply, economic feasibility of land procurement pressed to push up density and tenants' contributions, with the result of producing very densely built residential areas and decreasing affordability. Moreover, since available land is not always in line with the other strategic planning directions (such as public transport lines or brownfield redevelopment) housing and urban development sometimes tend to "run after" land banking resulting in a municipally-directed sprawl and contribute to the very bad national performances on soil consumption (Getzner and Kadi, 2020). Additionally, while public housing dwellings are "pepper-potted" all over the city, except for the redevelopments of former railway yards new affordable housing is mostly produced in suburban locations. Against this backdrop, while land banking is still the predominant land policy there are signs of a gradual alignment of the Viennese land policies to more common inclusionary zoning strategy on private developments, though with significantly higher requirements than most other cities. The new zoning rule provided the first land plot for subsidized housing in 2020, which means it is still too early to assess if this will represent a real shift in the Viennese land policies, to which extent and with which consequences.

Notably, UHA and the control of land rent are two faces of the same coin in the Viennese policy system, while politically they are treated in very different ways. As of 2020, affordability (*Leistungsfähigkeit*) is still one of the main political keywords of the municipal administration<sup>8</sup> and affordable housing production (*Sozialer Wohnbau*) is highly advertised and promoted as tourist attraction. Control of land rent through land banking, essential for affordable housing policies, is instead a rather backstage political and administrative work for motivated civil servants that operate "behind the scenes".

## 5 Conclusions: policies and conditions for urban housing affordability

Most cities in the world are facing a global urban housing affordability crisis, and there is a need for dedicated and politicized knowledge production for addressing the "policy-outcome" gap in policy making concerning UHA towards "achieving affordable urban futures for all" (Wetzstein, 2017). Affordable housing has become an important claim and policy objective, and literature on housing affordability has been shifting the scale from national social welfare to urban housing affordability (Haffner and Hulse, 2021). With the rising importance of local welfare and national-states withdrawal from housing, local housing regimes are crucial in assuring UHA. This article, mostly focusing on rental affordability, has contributed to the affordability literature by filling some critical gaps in the literature.

In section 2, the article has provided advancements on the theoretical side. Firstly, by framing the city as a place of collectively generated values that is reflected in urban land rent and transferred to housing prices creating unjust geographies of segregation. Secondly, proposing a broader conceptualization of UHA that goes beyond that of *affordable housing* and encompasses multiple dimensions, including the urban and spatial ones. Thirdly, by investigating the relation between UHA and urban land rent and demonstrating its central role in distributing the use value of housing and the broader set of values generated by the city and associated localization.

<sup>8</sup> It was also an important keyword in the coalition program of the 2020 coalition between the Social Democratic party and the Liberal party.

In section 3, based on the exposed theoretical ground, the article has brought public policies into the picture. Firstly, building on the critique to neoliberal urban governance I embraced the concept of “grounded city”, contributing to it by considering UHA as an important stabilizer of urban acceleration, especially in conditions of growth. Secondly, by developing an original conceptual and analytical framework for policy analysis that considers affordability as the outcome of a mix of housing policies, social policies and spatial planning (and especially of land policies). Policies for the grounded city should not only address the “affordable” segment of the stock but rather maintain a broader vision of UHA, intended a multidimensional outcome of the housing system, and target urban land rent.

In section 4, the developed framework was applied to the relevant case study of Vienna, a city that as faced acceleration dynamics but has succeeded in mitigating (though not preventing completely) the potentially consequent affordability crisis. Vienna is a very relevant concrete case study. However, it must be looked at with proper lenses, to not overshadow the pieces that constitute its policy-machine. The framework proves fertile in opening the black box of the Viennese housing regime, highlighting its main policy instruments, analyzing their characteristics, and offering original and more comprehensive insights of this remarkable case of policies in action. As the case study illustrate, active land policies are especially promising for UHA governance—since they are usually controlled by municipalities while, for example, taxation or rent control are usually not—but do not suffice even when performed extensively: social policies targeting direct support to households’ is very relevant for the inclusion of lower-income households.

Realizing grounded urban governance and tackling UHA without relying on the reinstalment of traditional welfare state means looking at the broad spectrum of public action and governance and identifying the main policies that shape the playing field for private or hybrid actors and households and stabilize affordability outcomes. Vienna has demonstrated the ample possibilities for integrating private action within the policy goals of stabilizing affordability. Learnings from the case of Vienna, though very useful, should however be carefully used. Firstly, because of its path dependency and peculiar history. Secondly, because, as shown, it is a complicated machine that works with carefully designed (and maintained) parts: instruments like land banking and inclusionary zoning are embedded in a mix of policies concurring to create conditions of affordability, including supply- and demand-side subsidies and provision of transportation infrastructures and local welfare services. Thirdly, because it deeply involves public-private partnerships with third sector and market-oriented actors as final housing welfare providers at the local level, but it does so within a clear legal and operative framework that clarify respective roles and expected (and demonstrable) affordability outcomes.

As this article has shown, tackling UHA means looking broadly at its urban implications and articulating a complex mix of policies. Therefore, researchers and practitioners engaged in shaping imaginaries for policy design and concrete action should keep this complexity in mind and reflect it in the analysis of concrete cases and in the design of policies.

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## Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

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### '[La casa] non è più sexy in Italia.' The absent politicization of housing in Italy, insights from Turin

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#### ABSTRACT

During the years of economic crisis and austerity, and the subsequent economic growth dependent on real estate and tourism, housing has returned into the spotlight on the political agenda in Southern European countries and cities, where activists and social movements scaled up their struggles and created bridges with institutional actors, fostering policy change. The latter, however, did not happen in Italy. In this article, based on exploratory case study research carried out in the city of Turin, we present three themes that help explain what we call the 'absent politicization' of housing in Italy during the last decade: a multi-actor, multilevel housing policy capable of defusing specific problems; the absence of bridges between politicized and institutional actors; and the role played by party-politics, with attention to 'populist' Movimento 5 Stelle in power in Turin. By focusing on differences with Southern Europe, we contribute to overcoming dichotomies that have long dominated comparative housing studies; and contribute to linking housing studies with contentious urban politics in the post-crisis years.

#### KEYWORDS:

Comparative housing studies, contentious politics, housing needs, housing policy, problematization analysis, social movements, Southern Europe.

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## 1. Introduction

As this special issue testifies, housing is back in the spotlight on the political agenda. The economic crisis, austerity policies, and the subsequent real estate investment and speculation amid economic growth have determined increasing disconnection between housing costs and household incomes, resulting in rising hardships and evictions throughout the world (Madden and Marcuse 2016; Farha 2017). As a response, housing movements have grown in quantity and intensity in cities on all continents (Vilenica et al. 2019), forcing institutional actors at multiple levels – from international institutions to local authorities – to reengage in housing policies. Southern European cities have been at the forefront of these processes: there, economic crisis and austerity policies have hit cities especially hard (Knieling and Othengrafen 2016); economic rebound was particularly dependent on real estate, construction and tourism, bringing about processes described as gentrification and touristification (Sequera and Janoschka 2015; Alexandri 2018; Cocola-Gant and Gago 2019); and social conflict regarding housing has been fierce (Annunziata and Lees 2016; Arampatzi 2017; Mendes 2018). And yet, significant differences existed in the patterns of nation-wide politicization of housing, which has become a central topic in changing national politics in Spain, Portugal and Greece; but not in Italy. Although the latter is probably the Southern European country with the fiercest history of housing activism, during the last decade the action of activists and politicized actors has not resulted in nation-wide movements, and housing did not get to the centre of media and political discussion.

Why did this happen? What keeps Italy apart from the Southern European trajectory of housing re-politicization? This article takes some steps toward answering these questions through case study analysis in the city of Turin. Exploratory in nature and based on qualitative methods (see Section 3), the main goal of our study is that of extracting, from the empirical material, preliminary explanations for what we call the ‘absent politicization’ of housing in Italy. We define the politicization of housing, for the purposes of this article, as the process through which housing is publicly understood to be a ‘problem’, and conflictual understandings of this problem (and possible solutions) are articulated among different actors and scaled up to the national stage.<sup>1</sup> By ‘absent politicization’, therefore, we do not intend the absence of political struggles over housing – quite the opposite, we will discuss some of those struggles in Turin; rather, we refer to the absence of: i) the emergence of a generalized, nation-wide understanding of housing as a problem, ii)

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<sup>1</sup> See Gusfield (1989) on the difference between ‘issues’ and ‘problems’; and Foucault’s problematization analysis (2001, 171-173), that is, the epistemological focus on the process of problem/solution formation.

articulations in the public arena of conflictual understandings over that problem, and iii) significant changes of national policies and politics resulting from those articulations.

By focusing on differences within Southern Europe, we pursue a secondary goal, that of contributing to overcoming the dichotomic thinking, which has dominated comparative housing studies, that sets the South (and East) apart from the rest of continental Europe, concluding that the former has a less advanced housing and welfare policy than the latter. The seminal work by Judith Allen and her colleagues (2004) has been crucial for subsequent efforts at exploring Southern European housing systems in their own terms – see, e.g., Tulumello and colleagues (2018) on why dichotomic thinking fails to explain housing policies in Portugal, or Arbaci (2019) on the limits of the concept of segregation. By pursuing these two goals, finally, our study contributes to linking housing studies with contentious urban politics<sup>2</sup> in the post-crisis years.

Our argument is organized as follows. We start by discussing the recent politicization of housing in Southern Europe and its absence in Italy – at the same time as we exclude simplistic explanations for the latter. Then, we describe our epistemological approach and methodological design (Section 3). Thereafter we move to the case study, introducing Turin and its housing problems (Section 4), and then present three interlocked themes that emerged from the fieldwork and which help to explain the missing politicization of housing in Turin (Section 5): the capacity of local policies to defuse specific problems; the absence of dialogue or confrontation between activists and institutionalized advocacy and political actors; and the role of party politics, particularly of Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S; 5 Stars Movement) – a young national party that refuses to be categorized within the left/right spectrum and is commonly labelled as ‘populist’ (e.g. Adinolfi 2016). In the conclusions, we discuss our findings in comparison with the trajectories of other Southern European countries, at the same time as we qualify the extent to which the dimensions emerging from the case of Turin may be generalized to the Italian case.

## **2. Re-politicization of housing in Southern Europe**

As anticipated, we follow in the steps of the tradition of comparative scholarship inaugurated by Judith Allen and her colleagues (2004) and inspired by Gøsta Esping-Andersen’s theorization (1990) of varieties of capitalism. Allen and her colleagues have advocated the necessity to develop theoretical tools to explore Southern European housing and welfare in their own terms – rather than looking at them through the lenses

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<sup>2</sup> On contentious politics writ large, see Tarrow (1996).

of traditional housing studies as they developed in Central and Northern Europe. Not only do Southern European housing systems share a number of characteristics that make them ‘constitute a family resemblance’ (Allen et al. 2004, 3); but, more recently, all four countries have also shared a number of analogous transformations in their position in the global division of labour, namely in the sense of a progressive peripheralization within the European continental block (e.g. Gambarotto and Solari 2015). These transformations have had significant impacts on housing, especially since the burst of the economic crisis: first, Southern European housing systems have been among the most affected by the global economic crisis; and, second, they have been more or less directly pushed by European institutions to implement reforms to liberalize the planning and housing sectors in the name of fostering economic growth through real estate and touristic development (Tulumello et al. 2020), further aggravating housing hardships during the years of economic growth that followed (see Introduction).

This is the context in which, during the 2010s, housing has emerged at the centre of nation-wide political and institutional transformations in Spain, Portugal and Greece:

- in Spain, movements like the Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca (PAH; Platform of the Affected from Mortgages) – that emerged out of street politics during the years of austerity – have scaled up from the local to the national level, becoming crucial for the promotion of housing reforms at various governmental levels and the emergence of a party, Podemos, which took power in main cities and reached the national government in 2019 (de Weerd and Garcia 2016; de Andrés and Smith 2019);
- in Portugal, the stratification of long-term housing problems with a housing crisis escalating during economic rebound was met by a visit of the UN Special Rapporteur for Adequate Housing in 2016, the fast growth of social movements, and, since 2018, a range of new policies (Mendes 2018; Allegra and Tulumello 2019);
- In Greece, and especially Athens, the spatialized politics of anti-austerity urban movements – in particular squats and the network Αλληλεγγύη για Όλους (Solidarity for All) – put housing at the core of their action and were part and parcel of the rise to power in 2015 of party Syriza, itself among the funders of Solidarity for All (Arampatzi 2017; Karaliotas 2019).

Granted, differences existed among the three countries, in the actors involved, temporalities and outputs: for instance, in Spain, housing scaled up as a national topic during the years of crisis (since 2009, with intensification in 2012-2013) in connection with mobilizations on mortgage defaults; while, in Portugal, growing housing prices made housing a nation-wide topic during economic rebound (roughly 2015-2019, with special intensity in 2017). The cases of Spain, Portugal and Greece show the capacity of activist groups to scale up the struggle for housing and, by creating coalitions with institutionalized actors, push forward transformations in the public understanding of, and policies for, housing. Politicized actors in these countries

were able to make housing a ‘problem’ acknowledged by the general public and, ultimately, institutions, which ultimately provided responses in the form of policy reforms.<sup>3</sup>

This did not happen in Italy, where housing has remained, as it has long been, outside of the national political and policy agenda (Petrillo 2017). Even the explosion of the Covid-19 pandemic, whose socio-economic consequences have deepened longstanding housing problems, has not been followed by a resurgence of housing struggles or policy reforms (Accornero et al. 2020; Chiodelli 2020; Esposito 2020; Gainsforth 2020).

Indeed, all our interviewees agreed that housing has long remained marginal to the social and political debate in Italy:

It’s not really useful we beat about the bush: my conclusion is that there is no housing policy in Italy (councilman, City of Turin).

This problem is not acknowledged, I don’t know how to put it differently: [housing] is not ‘sexy’ anymore in Italy [*non è più sexy in Italia*] (head of department, ATC Central Piedmont).

Let’s put it like this: housing issues and their space in the political agenda have been forgotten by everybody. Housing is not a topic to be used during elections, [not] a topic that brings votes (union representative, SICET Turin).<sup>4</sup>

Before moving to the empirical exploration, let us rule out three simplistic explanations of the absent politicization of housing in Italy. First, absent politicization cannot be attributed to the absence of housing problems. Though average housing prices have stagnated during the last decade (Davico 2019a, 2019b), the economic crisis brought about increasing poverty and, after some decades of disinvestment in housing policies (Caruso 2017), fast-growing housing hardships, evictions and mortgage defaults (Davico 2019b; Pozzi 2019). The following economic growth added complexity to the picture: housing burdens kept

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<sup>3</sup> Granted, we are not arguing that new policies have ‘solved’ housing problems: indeed, in many cases, those reforms have been criticized by activists and scholars for being insufficient or even counter-productive (see, for the case of Portugal, Tulumello and Silva 2019; Mendes 2020).

<sup>4</sup> The authors translated these and following quotes from interviews. See next section for details on methodology and the list of interviewees.

growing; evictions plummeted nationally, but continued to grow in cities like Milan, Turin, Bari and Rome (Davico 2019b). It should be noted that housing hardships are particularly intense, especially in the form of exposure to involuntary rent arrears and housing deprivation, for migrant households (Sunia-CGIL 2012; Medici Senza Frontiere 2018). This is partially to be explained by (racialized) housing discrimination: migrant households are more dependent on the private housing market than Italian households, reproducing segregation and vulnerability to exploitation along racial divides, and feeding conflicts with the native population (Oliveri 2018).

Second, the absent politicization of housing can hardly be attributed to the absence of activism in a country with a long and strong tradition of contentious politics in the field of housing – see, for instance, the history of squatting movements (Mudu 2012). During the last few years, social movements concerned with housing have emerged in several cities: anti-touristification groups in Venice and Naples (Vianello 2016), the articulation of squatting and anti-gentrification movements in Rome (Annunziata and Lees 2016), and the participation of movements from Milan in the European Action Coalition for the Right to Housing and to the City.<sup>5</sup> And yet, ‘Italian social movements have found less space for debate and dialogue with institutions and local administrations in comparison with what has happened elsewhere, for a number of complex historical-political reasons that cannot be analysed here’ (Petrillo 2017, 148; our translation).

Third, Italy has long been considered the country of homeowners *par excellence* (Allen et al. 2004; Filandri et al. 2020) – slightly less than four households out of five live in a home they own. Critical housing studies have long argued that the promotion of homeownership has been one of the linchpins of neoliberalization (e.g. Lundqvist 1992; Jacobs and Manzi 2013), part and parcel of the transition toward an asset-based welfare policy (Rolnik 2013; Di Felicianantonio and Aalbers 2018).<sup>6</sup> From a different perspective, comparative studies have emphasized the importance of homeownership in ‘familistic’ Southern European systems, where inter-generational support has historically counter-balanced the absence of universalist housing policies (Allen et al. 2004; Arbaci 2019). In short, a general agreement exists over the role homeownership has had in stemming social conflict in Southern Europe. As summarized by one of our interviewees:

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<sup>5</sup> See [www.cantiere.org/](http://www.cantiere.org/) and <https://housingnotprofit.org/>.

<sup>6</sup> In Italy, the promotion of homeownership has been implemented through the deductibility of mortgage interests (introduced with Decree of the President of the Republic 917/1986) and the sale of public housing to tenants (Laws 513/1977 and 560/1993).

In the 1980s, things were quite different, it looked like we had abolished poverty! [...] I mean, in a country where 80 percent of families were homeowners, well, we all thought that poverty wasn't a thing anymore (head of department, ATC Central Piedmont).

And yet, this cannot explain the Italian peculiarities in the recent re-politicization of housing, for the very simple reason that the Italian homeownership rate, though high, is not peculiar as it remains within European averages and slightly below those of other Southern European countries (Filandri et al. 2020, fig. 4.1). Italy is a country of homeowners, indeed, but definitely not *par excellence*, fostering us to seek more nuanced explanations of the absent politicization of housing in Italy.

### **3. Epistemological and methodological notes**

Our epistemological strategy is exploratory case study analysis. The selection of the case is based on Flyvbjerg's insights (2006) on how to theorize from case studies: Turin, former national industrial capital, is at the same time 'paradigmatic' of the Italian context, that is, a case that 'highlight[s] more general characteristics of the societies in question' (idem, 232), and a 'critical' case, that is, one that has 'strategic importance in relation to the general problem' (idem, 229). Despite its peculiar characteristics, Turin is paradigmatic of the Italian case in the specific sense that simplistic explanations of the absent re-politicization of housing do not apply (see previous section): first, the city suffers from significant housing problems, aggravated in the aftermath of the global economic crisis; second, it has a long history of contentious politics; and, third, the nationally high rates of homeownership cannot explain differences at the Southern European and local scale. At the same time, the existence in Turin of articulated housing policies built up by a complex network of public and private actors (Caruso 2017), a characteristic of a handful of Italian cities, makes Turin a critical case for testing the capacity of institutional action, though insufficient to solve housing problems, to stem social conflict.

Method-wise, our main source of evidence is 15 in-depth interviews or focus groups (see Table 1), carried out in June and July 2019, with key actors identified among different levels of government (Region, Metropolitan City, Municipality), the non-profit and social entrepreneurship sector, advocacy and activist groups, and scholars. Interviews, which lasted between 31 and 97 minutes, were transcribed and analysed thematically.

**Table 1. List of interviews and focus groups**

<i>Government</i>	1	int.*	Head of department, Region Piedmont, Directorate Social Cohesion*
	2	int.	Head of department, Region Piedmont, Directorate Social Cohesion
	3	focus	Head of department, ATC Central Piedmont (public housing management body)
			Head of department, ATC Central Piedmont
	4	int.	Head of department, Metropolitan City of Turin, Directorate Territory and Transportation
	5	int.	Councilman, City of Turin
	6	int.	Councilwoman, City of Turin
7/8**	int.	Head of department, City of Turin, Directorate Public Housing	
<i>Non-profit and social entrepreneurship</i>	9	focus	Executive, Compagnia di San Paolo (bank foundation)
			Project manager, Compagnia di San Paolo
	10	int.	Project coordinator, Fondazione Sviluppo e Crescita (bank foundation)
11	focus	Architect, I Luoghi Possibili	
		Architect, Architects without Borders Turin	
<i>Advocacy and activism</i>	12	int.	Union representative, SICET Turin (tenants' union)
	13	int.	Activist
<i>Academia</i>	14	int.	Researcher, Turin University
	15	int.	Researcher, Polytechnic of Turin

\* This interview was not recorded and we used the notes taken by the interviewer.

\*\* Two interviews were carried out with this interviewee, at the beginning and end of the fieldwork.

**Source:** authors' elaboration

Additionally, we carried out an exploratory participant observation with activists. To enter the field, we both used contacts provided by personal acquaintances involved in activism and contacted the most active *centri sociali* (socio-political and cultural spaces) in the city. We found that, during the last few years, most activist groups have de-prioritized housing (see Section 5). Additionally, the participant observation was made difficult by several years of state repression of social movements (see, e.g., Chiaromonte 2019), which has weakened the latter and made activists quite reluctant to share information with strangers, especially with regard to actions, like squats, that are criminalized in Italy – and this is a crucial reason we decided not to carry out formal interviews with activists from *centri sociali*. In summary, we collected one interview with an activist that has supported the struggles in two housing squats (see Table 1) and four informal conversations with activists that took place during public events (a football tournament organized by one of the *centri sociali*, a seminar, and an open day organized in a squat). Because of the limits of the participant



observation, we will use the insights above all to document activities explicitly mentioned by activists. Finally, we took advantage of the longstanding experience of one of the authors, who has been researching housing policy in Turin, and screened original documents on the policies and programmes we describe.

In terms of analytical strategy, in line with the exploratory nature of the study, we allowed arguments to emerge from the thematical analysis of the interviews and notes from the fieldwork, inductively building the three arguments through which we explain the absent politicization of housing in Turin.

#### **4. The case study: Turin**

Turin (890.000 inhabitants), capital city of Piedmont Region, is a second tier city with a strong industrial past (Caruso et al. 2019). It has long been the Italian ‘one-company town’ for the presence of FIAT and the powerful automotive sector, which has not only structured the economy but also its demographic and social characters. After the heyday of the Fordist industrial model, the economic transition brought about the need to reinvent the city’s economic future and image. Since the 1990s, the city had been questioning its identity by promoting institutional innovations through planning and urban policies: the masterplan was updated, inserting large urban design projects to develop vacant industrial areas linked to the railway system; forms of strategic planning and engagement of local actors were implemented; and the city launched extensive urban regeneration programmes for its deprived neighbourhoods, with integrated and area-based approaches (Governa et al. 2009; Rossi and Vanolo 2013).

Despite the significant growth of some sectors, above all the universities, the transition of Turin toward a service-oriented city was only partially successful (Vanolo 2015). This became particularly evident due to the global financial crisis, which hit a labour market already under stress particularly hard, resulting in growing redundancies, unemployment and inequalities. Economic hardships have in the long run contributed to the erosion of the consensus for the centre-left elite that had governed the city since the early 1990s by embracing, and leading, the national ‘third way’ transition of former Partito Comunista Italiano (see Caldarola 2004, 77 and 113; Belligni and Ravazzi 2013). In 2016, M5S won the municipal elections, capitalizing on the discontent of peripheral neighbourhoods, and especially the most deprived and marginalized ones (Cepernich et al. 2018).

This background is crucial to understanding the complex changes in the field of housing. Despite large private real estate investments in the masterplan’s development areas, up until 2008 the housing market was not characterized by overall growing prices (Governa and Saccomani 2009). The crisis affected the housing market, increasing housing hardships. On the one hand, housing prices have been falling, and as of today real estate prices are among the lowest in northern and central Italian metropolises (Davico 2019a, fig. 4). At the same time, the crisis deepened longstanding differences and polarization among neighbourhoods (Davico 2019a, fig. 8) – some districts (e.g. Barriera di Milano) are characterized by low prices and the presence of

many unsold buildings, while others have seen reinvestment, for instance Vanchiglia and San Paolo, in connection with the growth of universities (Coccorese 2018).

On the other hand, low prices did not mean absent or even reducing housing hardships. On the contrary, growing poverty and unemployment meant that difficulties with loan repayments and rents have been rising, while the local market was less and less able to give answers to the needs of vulnerable households (Governa and Saccomani 2009; Davico 2019a, 2019b). As we have seen at the national level, housing hardships are particularly intense for migrant populations – for instance, in 2019, 36% of public housing units were assigned to non-European migrant households (Città di Torino 2019). Moreover, the general lack of systematic policies supporting refugees' access to housing has been considered to be a trigger for squatting practices (Bolzoni et al., 2015).

While the population is slowly decreasing (about -1% from 2010 to 2018), eviction numbers show the effects of the crisis (Città di Torino 2019, 26). In 2014, the worst year, 4,700 families lost their homes, 17% more than the previous year and double that of 2004 – in the vast majority of cases, evictions were ordered because of rent arrears. 2014 was followed by a decreasing trend, with around 2,200 evictions in 2018. Demand for public housing is also very high: between 2012 and 2016, the Municipality opened a call, collecting about 14 thousand validated applications.<sup>7</sup> The Municipality owns around 17,700 flats and manages to allocate around 500 per year, of which slightly more than 250 through the waiting list<sup>8</sup> – i.e., emptying the waiting list would take decades.

According to regional regulations (Piedmont Law 3/2010), the city's socio-assistance service can recommend households in need – a category called 'housing emergency' (*emergenza abitativa*), attributed in situation of eviction or repossession. These emergency requests, in most cases related to rent arrears, have been steadily growing since 2001, when they were ~700, to 2019, when they were ~900 (the peak was once again in 2014, with ~1100 requests) (Città di Torino 2019, 85).

Finally, homeownership can only marginally explain the absent politicization of housing in Turin, for two reasons. First, because rental contracts are more prevalent in big cities, and Turin is no exception: in 2018, 64% of families owned their home, against ~75% at the national level (Città di Torino 2019, 25). Second, because homeownership *per se* does not solve housing distress, especially in contexts like Turin.

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<sup>7</sup> A new call opened, with a new administrative procedure, in 2018, when 4,480 requests were collected. Whether this decrease of requests is due to reduced needs or lacking trust in the chance to be attributed a house will be clearer in the next years.

<sup>8</sup> The others are used for the *emergenza abitativa* (see below) and other emergency situations.

Problems come from homeownership too. If you consider studies on poverties produced by housing, it's quite clear: there are a lot of poor homeowners, those who have hard times for paying the mortgage, or those that accepted, a couple decades ago, a trade-off toward worst neighbourhoods or toward low quality housing because of a market made quite rigid by controlled rents (head of department, Metropolitan City of Turin).

Those that had bought their [council] flats often came back [to public housing] as tenants, because they couldn't pay the mortgage (head of department, ATC Central Piedmont).

In short, though poverty is overall more diffused among tenants than homeowners, it is in big cities like Turin – where, for instance, most public housing flats were sold to tenants – that poor homeowners are concentrated (Filandri et al. 2020, 87-90); and housing burdens are significant among poor, indebted homeowners (Filandri and Pauli 2018).

This brief collection of data shows that, despite housing prices being relatively low in terms of the national comparison, Turin is characterized by serious housing needs and the overall incapacity of public housing to solve them – therefore excluding the possibility that absent politicization could be due to the absence of housing hardships in the case of Turin.

## **5. Explaining the absent politicization of housing in Turin: three themes**

### **5.1 Multilevel and multi-actor housing policies**

In my opinion, precisely because Italy has not been capable of giving any response [to housing problems] at the national level, [...] this has stimulated the multiplication of a number of experiments and, yes, a variety of experiences (executive, Compagnia di San Paolo).

With housing policies having been de-prioritized for several decades and scarce national resources being used to fund public-private partnerships (Caruso 2017; Poggio and Boreiko 2017), Italy has long lacked a universalist housing policy. However, a complex patchwork of policy approaches has emerged since competence over housing has been devolved to regions (Decree-Law 112/1998). The territorial inequalities

of the country made the scenario particularly complex (see Filandri and Autigna 2015). As discussed above, Turin is no exception: on the one hand, available public housing is overwhelmed by demands; and, on the other, market regulation, which could ease a household's burden in the free market, is a national competence that has long been abolished.<sup>9</sup>

And yet, despite scarce resources overall, our interviewees generally agreed that a complex multilevel network of actors, both public and private, from the city to the regional level, has built up an articulated system of responses that has been effective in dealing with the most acute impacts of the housing crisis. In the words of a councilwoman from the City of Turin:

The most important thing, the core [of our mission] is to try... to prevent people from being evicted, to ensure that they don't lose their homes; in short, to put a halt before the disaster [*patatràc*] happens. [...] This, by the way, is the logic of *salva sfratti* [literally: eviction stopper], [that is,] the [financial] support to paying the rent when income abruptly drops.

This is achieved through a number of interventions, which can be grouped into four fields (for further details, see Caruso 2017, ch. 3):

- financial support and vouchers for families struggling to pay rents (in the free market or public housing) or mortgage instalments, funded by the Region (Regional Law 3/2010; Decision Regional Council 4-8049/2018) and bank foundations (Compagnia di San Paolo and Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio Torino);
- several forms of temporary housing in public-private partnership – in Italian, dubbed *housing sociale* – funded by bank foundations and Piedmont Region, and managed by Turin municipality or non-profit actors – e.g., Compagnia di San Paolo promotes its own housing programme (Programma Housing), which supports forms of temporary housing and funds the activities of several associations;
- responses to the 'housing emergency' (see previous section) by the municipality, which uses units of council housing and *housing sociale* to host (for up to 6 months) households that have lost their homes and are waiting for the assignment of stable public housing;

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<sup>9</sup> At the end of the 1970s, in the aftermath of mobilizations for labour rights and better living conditions, the Rent Act (Law 392/1978) introduced the *equo canone* (literally: fair rent). Rent regulations were contrasted by landlords, who often responded by shifting investments toward other sectors. The *equo canone* was eventually abolished (Law 431/1998).

- and several forms of rental housing agreements, supported by fiscal incentives and managed through the mediation of municipal agencies (Agenzie Sociali per la Locazione, regulated by Decision Regional Council 4-8049/2018), non-profit real estate agencies (e.g., Stesso Piano, promoted by Compagnia di San Paolo) and tenants' unions (e.g. SICET).

Despite the intervention of bank foundations (mainly as supportive funders) and the non-profit sector (active agents on the ground), this strategy is framed by municipal and regional programmatic documents (see Regione Piemonte 2007; Città di Torino 2008) and centred on the coordination of the municipality – virtually all interviewees agreed on the crucial role played by a head of department at the Directorate for Public Housing.

There are no systematic measures of the impact of these interventions in Turin. Filandri and Autigna (2015) measured the impact at the regional level and compared it with that of public housing, concluding that the latter, even if insufficient overall, is quantitatively much more significant than the former. The results may be slightly different in Turin, where most measures other than public housing have been developed (but also most public housing is concentrated). Still, the overall 'size' of the interventions we have listed above remains quite limited: Davico and Gullino (2017, 185-186) recently counted some 50 projects of *housing sociale*. Of these, 51% had fewer than 10 beds and only 15% had more than 50, for a total of less than 1,000 users. The comparison of these figures with the figures around housing needs (see above and Davico and Gullino 2017, 186) confirms that they can only address a small part of the housing problem.

What these interventions do quite effectively is to unpack housing needs and target narrow, specific categories of beneficiaries, as explained in an interview by a researcher based at the Polytechnic of Turin:

We tried to crunch some data, including the public expenditure by the City, the presence of volunteers in the care sector and the crucial role of bank foundations, above all Compagnia di San Paolo. The resulting picture, once compared with the ten main Italian metropolises, is quite unique; and this is the reason why social conflict has not exploded in Turin in horrific ways.

Turin's multilevel, multi-actor housing policy is effective where the potential for social conflict is particularly high: in situations of eviction and repossession; supporting middle-class households squeezed out of the market by sudden losses of income, but who are not poor enough to get public housing – dubbed, in Italy, *la zona grigia*, the 'grey area'; improving the meeting of supply and demand. Not by chance, the field where this strategy is less effective, namely the housing needs of recently arrived migrant populations and asylum seekers, is also the one where conflict, to which we shall now turn, is fiercer.

## 5.2 Conflictual practices: fragmentation and absence of dialogue

The main Italian blue-collar metropolis, Turin experienced, during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, intense conflict, particularly in the fields of labour, social rights and housing (e.g. Piraccini et al. 1974). Deindustrialization, since the 1980s, has not only jeopardized the economy of the city, but has also transformed its contentious politics. During the 1990s, on a par with the global emergence of the *altermondialist* movement, a complex galaxy of *centri sociali*, socio-cultural and political spaces active in global and local politics, emerged throughout Italy (Barzano and Gallini 2000). Crucial to the trajectory of these actors in Turin has been, since the late 1990s, the participation in the environmental conflict in the nearby Susa Valley, sustained by the so-called No TAV movement (TAV stands for *Treno ad Alta Velocità*, High Speed Railway), and particularly the toll paid to decades of criminalization (Chiaramonte 2019).

Long-term fragmentation and weakening of movements have influenced the position of housing within contentious politics. Activists from one of the *centri sociali* with whom we interacted – one of the longest-standing in the city whose political background is self-defined as *autonomia* (autonomy) – told us that they had supported several squatter households in the previous years. However, since all squats had been cleared, the households had lost the will to keep fighting, and the *centro sociale* had progressively prioritized other activities. The other *centro sociale* – self-identified with an *antagonista* (antagonist) political background – organizes a help desk for households in housing distress. At the time of our fieldwork, some activists from this *centro sociale* were also supporting two housing squats promoted by, and hosting, migrant households and asylum seekers: Ex MOI, which counted more than a thousand squatters at its peak and was cleared late in 2019, is a complex of residential units built for the 2006 Winter Olympics and afterwards abandoned; Spazio Popolare Neruda still hosts about 120 persons in an abandoned municipal building. In both cases, the role of *centri sociali* has been that of supporting politically (and often legally) the struggle of squatters, and organising socio-cultural activities and fundraising events (see Migliaccio 2016, for a journalistic account).

In summary, in the field of housing, traditionally conflictual actors have recently prioritized, if not exclusively pursued, the support for squatting practices. A head of department at the City of Turin, interviewed, told us that 41 council flats were occupied illegally as of June 2019, against an average of 15/20, before 2016/2017 (see also Città di Torino 2019, 96); and explained this growth with the support given by activists to squatters. At any rate, squatting is less prevalent in Turin than in other major cities like Milan, Rome or Palermo, where hundreds, even thousands, of public flats are occupied. According to the same civil officer and those we interviewed at the ATC, these small numbers are due to the effective management of public housing, where the rate of empty apartments is always quite low.

But have squatting and other conflictual practices contributed to building the foundation for a re-politicization of housing? Here, we found mixed outputs. To begin with, squatters and their politicized supporters in Turin have very rarely engaged in dialogue with other actors in order to contribute to an institutionalization of their understanding of the problem of housing – e.g., to foster the legalization of the

squats. Though, as anticipated, our ethnography does not allow for generalization of all social movements in the city, all the activists we interacted with showed no interest in cooperating with institutional actors. The latter, which are driven by a legalistic understanding of squatting as a crime, have clearly expressed that they have no interest whatsoever in liaising with squatters.

Let's be honest, illegally occupying [*occupazioni abusive*] [in council flats] [...] means taking a home from someone on the waiting list (head of department, Region Piedmont).

I cannot take a person from a squat and give them a council flat, they would be illegal forever. Should they stop being illegal squatters, should they move to, say, an aunt, move their residency to the aunt[']s place], [only] then could I put them onto a path [to public housing]. [...] A bully, a person that takes, often in an organized way,<sup>10</sup> something they have no right to... Because, let's take a look at the characteristics of those persons: in some cases, they are those that 'my wage is insufficient to have a house big enough!', it's not just destitute people [*disperati*] (councilwoman, City of Turin).

*Interviewer: What I am trying to understand is whether, like them or not and all their contradictions notwithstanding, are squatting practices politicising housing [porre il problema].*

Indeed, but [our union] is doing it as well! Is it useful politicizing [housing] in that way? It exploits the poor wretches [*poveretti*], it does! [...] They put the poor against the poor, and ultimately those who vote 'Italians first!' get to win. I mean, if you take 50 refugees and bring them to a squat, no one will vote [left] in that area (union representative, SICET Turin).

These excerpts summarize a number of ideas that are quite widespread among our interviewees, including those actors that loosely pertain to the centre-left of the political spectrum, like the tenants' union representative and the councilwoman.<sup>11</sup> The criminalizing argument and the representation of squatting as a war of the poor against the poor, work as a barrier to the dialogue between institutional actors on the one hand, and squatters and the movements that support them politically on the other.

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<sup>10</sup> Literally *in modo organizzato*. The interviewee is referring to organized squats and maybe even alluding to the possibility that some squatters may have received support from organized crime (*criminalità organizzata*).

<sup>11</sup> The councilwoman pertains to M5S, but see next section for a discussion of the socio-political composition of the city council.

The tenants' union representative interviewed also bridged housing with ethnic/racial cleavages, fields that are deeply intertwined: on the one hand, as we have seen, housing hardships are particularly intense in migrant and racialized households; and, on the other, recent migrants and asylum seekers have been protagonists of most squats, therefore of housing politics at large. This intersection has influenced the patterns of politicization. In Turin, an excellent example is the clearing of Ex MOI, which did take the national stage, either because it was considered a best-practice example of integration (e.g. Camilli 2019) or because it was criticized as a paternalistic, even violent, intervention (e.g. Migliaccio 2019) – in any case, not represented as an issue pertaining to the field of housing. A similar framing is typical of media discussions about squatting in public housing. A recent article in the local section of *La Repubblica* (Cravero 2020) is emblematic. The title stated: 'Public housing: illegal squats doubled in 2019'. Inside, the article quoted a right-wing member of the Regional Parliament: 'all illegal squats are wrong – explains the party whip of FdI [Fratelli d'Italia] – but those made by Roma people bring with them unacceptable decay [*degrade*] and unbearable living conditions' (apud Cravero 2020, 10).

A unique, to the best of our knowledge, case of cooperation among conflictual and institutional actors is Le Salette, another space squatted in 2014 by some 90 migrants that had left the Ex MOI. The actors involved were the squatters, further activists from one of the *centri sociali* with whom we interacted, non-profit organizations (Architects without Borders Turin and Co-op L'Orso), social entrepreneurs (I Luoghi Possibili) and the local diocese, owner of the building, which granted a gratuitous commodate, allowing the creation of a collective transitory residence (see Cottino et al. 2019; Ferrero 2020). The local government and public administration have been completely absent from the process, as emphasized by the architects we interviewed from I Luoghi Possibili and Architects without Borders Turin. Interestingly, for a case study of legalization of a squat and a successful housing initiative that put together such different actors, Le Salette never made it to the local or national press.<sup>12</sup>

### 5.3 Party politics: 'populist' Movimento 5 Stelle?

At the time of our fieldwork the city of Turin had been governed for three years by a mayor, Chiara Appendino, and a majority from M5S, whose election campaign had been based on the critique of the local centre-left. However, once elected, the new majority did not bring about the radical changes it had promised,

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<sup>12</sup> We searched for news on the online search engines of the local and national editions of *La Stampa* and *La Repubblica*, with no success.



as particularly evident in the field of housing. Despite having won the elections thanks to the peripheral neighbourhoods, not much changed, as explicitly argued by both a member of the local government and a civil officer:

My idea is that, [in policy] like in the kitchen, whatever works should not be trashed [*non si butta via niente*]. You keep it, you give it value and you insist on whatever is working (councilwoman, City of Turin).

The first thing that [the new councillor for Social Policies] said when she met me was: ‘let’s be clear: you keep doing exactly what you’ve been doing so far, until the day I may decide we need to make some changes.’ [She told me] this because, in those days, the papers had sensationalist titles along the lines of: ‘the new council will throw out [*manderà nel cesso*] everything done by the *fouls* [*mattanzoni*] that were governing before!’ The political input I received was just that: the city has been following a policy acknowledged to be among the best in Europe, so we take all the time and pay all the attention we need [to decide] whether we may want to change something (head of department, City of Turin).

As explicitly stated by one of its representatives, in short, the new local government bought into the idea that existing housing policies were effective in addressing the most pressing problems. When pushed to admit that, this effectiveness notwithstanding, existing measures are insufficient to meet the wider scale of housing problems and that there is not a city-wide debate on this issue, another councilman we interviewed thus answered:

*Interviewer: You were appointed, though with your independence, by an M5S majority, a party that won with the crucial votes of peripheral neighbourhoods: how do you see the absence of housing in the political debate, both at the national and local level?*

With a lot of sadness and contradiction, it’s exactly as you just explained it. Still, if you consider the problem – that is, we came to power in a city with a debt of more than 2,700 million euros, which means 250 million euros of instalments in our yearly budget – and compare it with the resources available for housing, the conclusion is quite obvious (councilman, City of Turin).

Two dimensions help make sense of the use of arguments on continuity with the past and fiscal responsibility by members of a ‘populist’ local government: the progressive institutionalization of M5S once it grabbed power (Biancalana 2017); and the peculiar socio-political composition of the city council appointed by mayor Appendino, which is not made up of party cadres but of ‘independents’ picked from the same local elites that the local centre-left come from.<sup>13</sup> The mayor previously worked in finance, for some years for Juventus football club, owned by the historical proprietors of FIAT; the two council members we interviewed are a known professional close to the left bourgeoisie and an expert in social policies that had been working for some of the most important foundations in the city.

## 6. Discussion and conclusions

This article set out to explore the reasons that kept Italy apart from the recent trajectory of the politicization of housing in Southern Europe. We focused on the case of Turin, a city paradigmatic of the coexistence of housing problems and activism, and at the same time critical for testing the capacity of housing policy to stem social conflict. We have discussed three themes that emerged from our fieldwork as the possible reasons why the politicization of housing remained limited to conflictual actors and practices. In line with our goal, we will now reconsider our findings *vis-à-vis* the trajectories of other Southern European countries, at the same time as we discuss the extent to which the case of Turin may be generalized on the Italian scale. Importantly, because of the exploratory nature of our study and of the limits of the case of Turin for generalization, the following arguments are preliminary explanations that need to be further tested, including taking a look at other case studies. For instance, further research should query the different relative ‘weight’ that the three arguments would have in different cases.

We started, first, with housing policies. In general, we should remember that, residual as it is, the Italian social housing stock (~5% of the total) is substantially bigger than the ones in Portugal (~2%), Spain (~2%) and Greece (0%) (Goudis 2015). And yet, we have also seen that public housing is insufficient to deal with the overall scale of housing problems in Turin and throughout Italy. In Turin, housing policies address effectively, if temporarily, those problems (in particular, households on the verge of losing their shelter) that

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<sup>13</sup> In Italian municipalities, the mayor, directly elected, appoints the executive city council (*giunta comunale*), which has large autonomy from the elected city assembly (*consiglio comunale*). Different is the composition of M5S in the assembly, where most members are party activists involved in the aforementioned No TAV movement (Biancalana 2017). In fact, several conflicts happened among the executive and its majority.

have been central engines of the creation of social conflict in other countries, with more evidence in Spain, where a wave of repossessions during the economic crisis gave birth to the crucial actor PAH. In fact, nothing similar to the network of policies we observed in Turin exists in Portugal, Spain or Greece. Back in Italy, however, let us remind that this complex housing policy is a peculiarity of Turin – because of the presence of civil officers capable of coordinating the scarcely available public funds and a rich network of non-profit actors – and few other (Northern and Central) cities (e.g. Milan: see Bricocoli and Coppola 2013). This suggests that the following two themes – contentious and party politics – could be more relevant in other Italian cities with less structured housing policies.

We have seen, second, that activists in Turin have not been interested in, or capable of, building up large mobilizations or coalitions with institutional actors – which, from their point of view, reject conflictual practices and are not interested in building these bridges. This is an evident difference when compared with other Southern European countries: in Spain and Greece, social movements have engaged in forms of dialogue and confrontation with newly emerged left-wing parties that ultimately reached power (de Weerd and Garcia 2016; Karaliotas 2019); in Portugal, social movements developed a mix of strategies – both confrontational and dialogic – to influence the centre-left majority in charge since 2015 (Tulumello 2019). Social movements, in Turin and Italy alike, did succeed in scaling up the topic of housing – and, in the exceptional case of Le Salette, in cooperating with institutional actors – where existing policies have almost completely failed (e.g. Camilli 2017; Ferrero 2020), that is, in meeting the housing needs of recent migrants and asylum seekers, and when the latter have been involved in, or have led, the struggle as activists and squatters. And yet, this scaling up happened at a cost: throughout Italy, only when it was framed as a matter of immigration, an extremely hot political topic (see, e.g., Colombo 2018), did housing take the centre of the political agenda (e.g. Camilli 2017; Annunziata 2020). This form of politicization is a double-edged sword: it gives visibility to housing needs in the mainstream political arena, but at the cost that those needs are not perceived as matters of housing policy, but are rather understood as matters of immigration – which, recently, has itself been above all understood as a matter of security (see Tulumello 2017, 31-33; Sigona 2018; Annunziata 2020). Inevitably then, policy solutions have been drawn from the repertoire of either public order (e.g., squat clearing), or humanitarianism and inclusion (e.g. cultural mediation, training; cf. Camilli 2019). In other words, not only does the discursive shift toward the field of migrations imply that, when politicized, housing has often been appropriated by right-wing agendas; but this politicization has failed to build up pressure for, and popular support to, prioritizing housing policy.

Finally, third, we discussed the role of party politics, in particular of the ‘populist’ M5S that has been in power in Turin for the last five years. Turin’s M5S government may have played a role in stemming social conflict by, firstly, providing a political offer for the electorate that could have been more prone to contentious politics; and, then, keeping business as usual, through a double discursive shift: the admission of the effectiveness of existing policies in dealing with most pressing problems and arguments on fiscal responsibility. This is also explained by the fact that the city council was largely made up of local elites,

many of whom had been close to the previously ruling centre-left. In summary, in Turin, a political force that was born out of resentment with established politics ended up constituting a force of continuity, at the very least in the field of housing. Our findings do not allow us to straightforwardly expand this reasoning to the national level, where M5S has governed since 2019, being a powerful actor at the very least since 2013 (when it was the second most voted party). Indeed, M5S has undergone a similar process at the national level: a party born of explicit aversion to traditional politics, M5S has, between 2019 and 2021, participated in three governmental coalitions with all parties, from the centre-left to the far-right. Our findings therefore resonate with, and provide some empirical substance to, the suggestion, by writers' collective Wu Ming (2013), that M5S may have occupied the political space left open by the 'third way' transformation of the Italian left, where conflictual coalitions may have emerged in post-crisis Italy. Granted, this discussion should be complemented by a more in-depth investigation of the role of the centre-left, in Turin and at the national level; and yet it suggests questioning the analytical power of the 'populist' label, which, if anything, does not help to explain the role of M5S in stemming social conflict in Turin in the field of housing. At any rate, our findings show yet another important difference with other Southern European countries. In Portugal, up until 2019, when right-wing 'populist' party Chega elected a representative for the first time, the only news in party politics has been the entrance of traditional left-wing parties (Bloco de Esquerda and Partido Comunista Português) into a coalition with centre-left Partido Socialista – indeed, the left-wing parties were crucial in pushing the national government toward launching new housing policies. In Spain and Greece, as we have seen, parties defined as 'populist' in mainstream political science (Podemos and Syriza) have reached power, but they are explicitly left-wing parties and have embraced the housing agenda; while right-wing 'populist' parties (Vox and Χρυσή Αυγή – Golden Dawn) have not reached power – and the latter was criminalized in 2020.

In conclusion, our main goal was to open some pathways towards an explanation of the dynamics through which housing has been differently (re-)politicized in Southern Europe, by focusing on its absent politicization in Italy – an absence that becomes particularly explicit when housing is reframed through other lenses (migration, security...) and ultimately marginalized. Our three arguments are still exploratory and call for further comparative research within Southern Europe, whose internal differences, long neglected by urban theory, can offer fresh material to build more global and context-attentive urban, housing and political studies. In line with our secondary goal, this discussion has also contributed to further deconstructing the tendency, in comparative housing studies, to set Southern European countries apart from the rest of Europe, and put them within a unique 'box' regarding their housing and welfare dynamics/paradigms (Allen et al. 2004; Tulumello et al. 2018; Arbaci 2019). Our findings contribute to this endeavour in two ways. On the one hand, they show that complex articulations among political, social and institutional conditions at multiple levels (local, national, supra-national) are at the core of extant dynamics of politicization of housing. And, on the other, they suggest the importance of linking housing studies – which have traditionally been overly interested in institutional and policy dimensions (see Vilenica et al. 2019) – with empirical

explorations of contentious urban politics, as the latter, in turn, are crucial to explaining changing housing policies.

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