



Marginal urbanities in Rome – or how to revive urbanity through self-management

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Abstract. Under the pressures of global capitalism, cities are increasingly losing their “urbanity” – understood as the combination of social and spatial qualities that enable large numbers of individuals to coexist, collaborate, and thrive. This article explores how self-managed socio-cultural places (SMPs) in Rome counteract this process by fostering collaboration, offering essential services, and reimagining social relations. Drawing on empirical research conducted between 2017 and 2022, I argue that SMPs – though imperfect and often facing crises – function as sites where urbanity is actively produced from the margins. By occupying abandoned or neglected spaces, these initiatives contribute to their neighbourhoods’ vitality and challenge dominant models of urban development. Focusing on the evolution of SMPs, their key features, and their contradictions, this paper shows how these practices can inspire alternative ways of conceiving and living in the city. Finally, I interrogate the very concept of urbanity itself, proposing that these grassroots efforts offer valuable insights into resisting disurbanity and fostering more inclusive urban futures.

1 Introduction

Growing up in the car-oriented and lifeless outskirts of Rome, I struggled to find the urban qualities I associated with the word: density, diversity, and vibrancy. Of course, Rome has all of this but mostly in its historic core. My everyday Rome, however, was very different from my idealized vision, and this disparity was one of the factors that led me to study architecture and urban planning: I wanted to change this situation and make my own Rome truly urban. Yet, I quickly realized that this goal would frustrate me throughout my life as I felt that projects in Rome were too slow to materialize or, in some cases, never came to fruition – especially the good ones. However, I soon discovered that away from the spotlight – and, unfortunately, not in my neighbourhood – there were people working to make the city more liveable and, at least in the sense I intuitively understood, more urban. Their outcomes were less shiny and ambitious than what an architect or planner might dream of, but they were undoubtedly more tangible and immediate. These results were built day by day by individuals or groups who decided to take the fate of their local environment into their own hands. By illegally occupying abandoned parks or buildings to meet the needs of

the local community or to promote cultural and political activities, these urban self-management agents – whether political activists or retired people tired of seeing the park in front of their homes left abandoned – were, in my view, much more effective planners than I could ever be as an architect or urban planner. They were, in line with Lopes De Souza’s (de Souza, 2006) description of Brazilian urban social movements, “critical urban planning agents”. As a result, I left architecture and became involved with one of the collectives that, in my eyes, was actively practicing a right to the city. My shift toward social sciences was also a way to deepen my involvement in this alternative way of building urbanity, which also became my area of research. While many practices contribute to making Rome a “self-made city” (Cellamare, 2014), as an activist and researcher, I have primarily focused on one of them: self-managed socio-cultural places (SMPs).

In this article, I take these experiences as an entry point to explore a broader question: how can urbanity be reactivated from the margins in a context of growing disurbanity? By “urbanity” I mean the social ties that allow humans to live together in a relatively small and saturated space, a dimension that is closely related to liveability since such ties and

relations are what make urban life possible and support collective wellbeing (Berque, 2003; Dematteis, 2012). By contrast, I use the term “disurbanity” to describe their erosion under the combined effects of speculative expansion, uneven development and accessibility, and policies and technologies that foster social atomization (Berque, 2003; Dematteis, 2012; Graham and Marvin, 2001). These processes are particularly evident in contemporary Rome, albeit in peculiar ways. Against this background, I interpret self-managed socio-cultural places (SMPs) as situated responses: they not only compensate for institutional absences but also politicize them, reclaiming spaces of encounter, solidarity, and care.

In doing so, they contribute to a rethinking of urbanity that speaks beyond Rome. This article thus engages with current debates on the right to the city, squatting, and urban self-management – often discussed in the literature under labels such as alternative, self-made, or insurgent urbanisms or squatting (Canedo and da Andrade, 2024; Nédélec, 2017; Pruijt, 2013; de Souza, 2006; Tonkiss, 2013). At the same time, it speaks to broader discussions on margins as spaces of both deprivation and potential (Aceska et al., 2019; hooks, 1989; Simone, 2004, 2010) and on the alternative forms of living together (Kohn, 2003; Lussault, 2024). Finally, this paper also engages in dialogue with recent discussions on planetary urbanization (Brenner and Schmid, 2011; Katz, 2021; Knoop, 2020), though with a different emphasis: rather than concentrating on the global expansion of the *urbs*, it foregrounds the often-neglected dimension of the *civitas*. By exploring this dimension through the empirical case of SMPs, the article aims to contribute to ongoing debates on how the urban can be rethought today, particularly in relation to the meanings and values we associate with urbanity.

After presenting the context, object, and methods of my study, I will analyse the features of SMPs that show how urbanity can be produced from below. However, SMPs are far from perfect; they are full of contradictions and failures. The features I will focus on are not always present in every SMP or may have existed only in certain phases. Nevertheless, it is important to highlight them, even if they may seem overidealized to some, as they can inspire a different way of conceptualizing and living in the city. This is precisely what I will do in the final section, where I will draw generalizations from the empirical evidence I gathered through my study to examine these remarkable, yet imperfect, practices of building the city from below. In doing so, I also address what the editors of this issue call “marginal urbanities”, understood as forms of urbanity that emerge from positions often perceived as peripheral to or excluded from the dominant frameworks.

2 Urban self-management and SMPs: a review and contextual framework

Scholars have described urban self-management in many ways and in different contexts, describing them as explic-

itly militant forms of alternative urbanism or as being integrated in institutional frameworks (Nédélec, 2017; Tonkiss, 2013). In the so-called Global South, they are often portrayed as makeshift but effective and creative responses to the lacks that affect deprived areas (Aceska et al., 2019; Simone, 2004; Thieme et al., 2017) and, more rarely, as “insurgent” forms of urbanism and social movements (Canedo and da Andrade, 2024; de Souza, 2006).

Rome – and, more broadly, Italy – has a vibrant landscape of bottom-up urban initiatives, likely stemming from its rich history of social movements (Mudu, 2012a) and the fact that, compared to most western European capitals, Rome’s urban development has largely been unregulated (Insolera, 2011). This lack of regulation has shaped a fragmented and sprawling city that is difficult to govern, where densely populated areas – some deprived, others affluent – alternate with urban wastelands, abandoned buildings, and decaying infrastructure.

In this situation, self-organization has played a crucial role in sustaining urban life in Rome for decades, to the point that scholars have described it as a “*città autoprodotta*” [self-made city] (Cellamare, 2014). This term refers not only to the fact that 41 % of Rome’s urbanized area was built outside of any planning regulation (Cellamare, 2013) but also to its inhabitants’ and political collectives’ ability to autonomously respond to their needs through self-organization. Whether it be parks cleaned by groups of elderly residents, playgrounds maintained by parents, or socio-cultural centres run by political activists, bottom-up initiatives have long contributed to making Rome more liveable, inclusive, and accessible.

As Cellamare (2014) shows, urban self-production takes various forms. This article focuses on one: self-managed socio-cultural places (SMPs). I use this term to refer to spaces where collectives of residents or activists occupy abandoned or threatened buildings for self-managed social, cultural, and political activities. While some may also serve as temporary housing for marginalized groups (Piazza, 2012), that is not their primary purpose.

SMPs encompass a broader spectrum of experiences, including *centri sociali occupati e autogestiti* (CSOAs), Italy’s most known self-managed spaces. Scholars and activists have extensively studied them, often blurring roles through self-research and scholar activism. They have explored their characteristics, history, and evolutions (Frazzetta and Piazza, 2022; Mudu, 2004; Piazza, 2012; Ruggiero, 1999); political dimension (Archibugi, 2016; Membretti and Mudu, 2013; Mudu, 2012a); internal dynamics (Di Felicianantonio, 2018; Pecorelli, 2015; Piazza, 2013); and economic dimension (Moroni and Farina, 1995; Vittoria and Napolitano, 2017). Some describe them as a particular typology of squats (Pruijt, 2013). By contrast, the impact of SMPs on urban dynamics and their role in shaping urbanity have been addressed more rarely. After decades of activism, taking a step back allows for a broader perspective; this study contributes to that reflection.

CSOAs emerged in Italy in the 1970s–1980s during the crisis of Fordism, characterized by the loss of “traditional public spaces and meeting places, such as open squares, workplaces, and party offices” (Mudu, 2004:917). CSOAs arose from the political, social, and economic crises of the time, leveraging spatial transformations, such as abandoned factories, to innovate their actions. As stated by an historic activist from a Neapolitan CSOA, Giovanni Iozzoli, interviewed by Alia, at their peak, they had a “deep national and general political impact, between 1990 and 1995, [becoming] the focal points of the alternative left” (Alia, 2024:para. 5, author’s translation), and their links with left-wing parties even led to the election of some of their activists to municipal councils of major cities (Salvo, 2023). They also became prominent spaces of (counter)culture (Mudu, 2012b), “breaking out of the underground scene, drawing attention from the media and record labels” (Salvo, 2023: paras. 6 and 7). This popularity did not come without criticism from some media (Pecorelli, 2015) and politicians (ANSA, 2025). Perhaps it is for this reason that, from the 2000s onward, many new self-managed initiatives adopted different names (Mudu, 2012b). To capture this diversity, I define SMPs according to four criteria: illegal occupation or assignment for social purposes, self-management by an assembly, a socio-cultural and political vocation, and openness to all. If CSOAs were rooted in autonomy and anarchy (Mudu, 2012a), SMPs have heterogeneous political orientations or simply emphasize community engagement.

Despite the hopes of the early 2010s, characterized by important social movements and a wave of occupations, SMPs are now largely seen as being in crisis, with declining organizational capacity. Most of their events are still largely attended, but, as stated by Iozzoli, they continue to exist “only as a simulacrum of the past” (Alia, 2024:para. 20, author’s translation). According to independent researcher and activist Roggero, they have devolved into “the mere management of places that – having lost their social backbone of participation and thus their political potential – oscillate between group identity and the offering of marginal consumption” (Roggero, 2024:para. 3, author’s translation). In a period marked by the absence of large student mobilizations (Alia, 2024), which have historically fuelled SMPs, they no longer seem to be able to attract new generations of activists, with some collectives seeing the same faces from a decade ago, now with whiter hair. Despite these difficulties, however, SMPs continue to represent a significant phenomenon for understanding alternative ways of building the city.

3 Methods, case studies, and involvement

This paper builds upon a study that I conducted between 2017 and 2022 and which consisted of two phases.

In the first phase, I mapped out the 55 SMPs active in Rome at that moment in order to understand their mutual rela-

tionships, their features, and their relation to the areas where they are located.

In the main phase of the study (2018–2022), I spent 3 months per year in Rome visiting my case studies, participating in their activities, and interacting with their activists and former activists. I conducted in-depth interviews with 22 of them, aiming to better understand SMPs in light of their life courses. By focusing on activists’ feelings, emotions, and relationships, I developed an embodied analysis of how their meaning and framing processes shape both their practices and the essence of the spaces they create through everyday activism. Participants were chosen to represent the composition of each collective, varying their militant or biographical age, gender, etc. Some of them were interviewed more than once. Entering through life histories did not mean disregarding the structural or political dimensions of SMPs. Instead, it allowed for capturing these dimensions in a more embodied way.

During the first phase of the study, a quantitative analysis was conducted to identify five clusters within the Roman SMP landscape based on relationships and attractiveness. One case study was then selected from each cluster, ensuring that the set of five case studies collectively represents the diversity of SMPs revealed by the cartography. The selected case studies, as is the case for most SMPs (Fig. 1), are located in the eastern and southern parts of the city, which are historically working-class and left-wing. I will now present each of them.

The first SMP is CSOA Forte Prenestino (FP), a 19th-century fortress occupied nearly 40 years ago, which is considered to be Rome’s most emblematic CSOA. It was occupied in 1986 by a diverse collective, including former activists seeking new forms of action after the 1970s’ violence. Over the years, punks, artists, musicians, and others with different political views joined in, working hard to make the fortress liveable. While its counter-cultural and oppositional character has remained prominent, FP has also become a major cultural venue and a local hub, offering a wide range of events but also activities for the neighbourhood.

The second is Villaggio Globale (VG), a pavilion of the city’s former abattoir, occupied in 1990. Initially focused on intercultural activities, hosting people from all over the world, especially from Africa, it went on to become a major music centre in Rome. For a few years, it lived a “techno [music] phase” – as activists defined it – when it lost most of its previous audience. Today, it is a space that is open to artistic and craft activities, with a moderately marked social and political dimension.

The third is Casetta Rossa (CR), a small house located in a once-abandoned park and occupied in 2001. Its goal was to create an intergenerational space for encounter, discussion, and leisure. It offers a range of political, social, and cultural activities, as well as a daily restaurant operated by a cooperative. It is located in Garbatella, a formerly working-class garden-city neighbourhood that has become increasingly ex-



Figure 1. Map of the 55 SMPs of Rome. In orange are the five SMPs selected for the qualitative study. Size corresponds to their popularity (2020).

pensive but still remains a left-wing stronghold, with the district's mayor being linked to a local SMP.

The fourth is *Communia* (CO), a former garage that activists define as a “space for mutual aid”, which was occupied in 2013 by a collective of university students and has an affiliation with a branch of a former Trotskyist party. Even if, over time, its original composition changed, *Communia* still has a strong focus on students and neighbourhood life and is characterized by a strong political commitment. It offers a self-managed study room and various courses, together with political and cultural activities. It is in San Lorenzo, a working-class and student neighbourhood that, albeit being gentrified, is still left-wing.

The last case is *Casale Alba 2* (C2), a former country house that stands in a park on the northeastern and popular outskirts of Rome. It was occupied in 2013 by an assembly of residents to oppose the extension of the neighbouring prison onto the park. It offers various courses (music, herbalism, etc.) and cultural, political, and social events. The composition of its assembly is particularly heterogeneous in terms of both age and political stance.

Having been an activist in one of the SMPs examined as a case study, I had to critically address questions of positionality and involvement and the biases of “at-home” re-

search (Hasnain, 2014). My previous involvement shaped the research process in ambivalent ways. First, my status as a (former) activist in this well-known SMP granted me easy access to the field and fostered a sense of trust, even among participants I had not personally known before the research. Interviews with people from this SMP were often the richest as our longstanding relationships encouraged them to speak openly and at length. At the same time, it was sometimes difficult to detach myself from interpretative frames I had internalized while being politically active within such spaces. The price of adopting a more analytical stance was, in spite of myself, a gradual distancing from this militant experience and a reduction of my active involvement in it (Ranocchiari, 2018).

This close relationship with the field also contributed to heightening my awareness of the tension between theoretical frameworks and activists' own conceptualizations as SMP activists do not always share the same vocabulary as academic debaters. Rather than imposing external categories, this study explores how these practices intersect with broader urban transformations while remaining attentive to the specific language and framings used by participants. Recognizing this gap enables a more nuanced reading of SMPs, where

theoretical perspectives, militant discourses, and activists' lived experiences are seen as mutually enriching.

4 Empirical insights: how SMPs contribute to making the city more liveable

This section explores four key features of SMPs that, in my view, contribute to building the urbanity of their neighbourhoods through bottom-up action: care, community building, the provision of alternative solutions, and practices of resistance. These practices should not be understood in isolation but rather as grassroots responses to the broader urban transformations outlined in the Introduction, such as disinvestment, speculative and uneven social and urban dynamics, and social atomization. In some domains – such as community building, alternative solutions, and resistance – activists explicitly frame their actions as counterbalances to these dynamics. In others, such as care, the link to structural processes is less explicitly articulated by them even though these practices can nonetheless be read as situated responses to the same urban changes that have reshaped Rome over recent decades. Consistently with the inductive approach of this article, these observations will serve as the foundation for a broader reflection on the concepts of margins and urbanity, to be explored in the final section.

4.1 SMPs as spaces of care

One of the most surprising findings of my study was that SMPs emerged as spaces of care even though activists rarely conceptualize or explicitly name them this way. To them, these spaces are seen as places of resistance, autonomy, or mutual aid but rarely of care even though the term is present in their vocabulary, particularly in relation to feminist issues. However, recognizing that SMPs – as material urban spaces – can embody a dimension of care is crucial for understanding their role within the urban context. Their activities – and the very act of opening spaces accessible to all – can be interpreted as acts of care toward the territory they occupy, the community that inhabits it, and the activists themselves. This understanding of care aligns with the definition proposed by Tronto (1993:103): “everything that we do to maintain, continue and repair ‘our world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment”.

4.1.1 Caring for the territory

Even the most manual and practical activities involved in self-managing a place without remuneration cannot be considered to be merely acts of maintenance but rather are part of an affective relationship of care between the people who “inhabit” it – those who create it through their actions (Stock, 2004) – and the space itself. “I rebuilt that place, you see ... that place really has a part of me spread across its

walls ... it is as if it were a direct emanation of myself”, says Carla (CO)¹. It is almost obvious that transforming “an open-air dump” into “a mutual-aid space” – to cite the words used by CO's activists (Communia, 2015:para. 1) – in a completely self-managed way can be seen as an act of building the city from below or, as I will detail in the last section, of building urbanity from the margins. SMPs actively improve the materiality of the city. However, the activities carried out within those refurbished walls more strongly reflect this role.

4.1.2 Caring for the community

SMP activists use the buildings they occupy to provide services and facilities that are lacking in the surrounding area or that are not accessible to all – a situation common not only in many Roman districts but also, more broadly, within a neoliberal urban paradigm shaped by “regressive welfare reforms” (Peck and Tickell, 2002:395). Some of them support individuals facing specific challenges (e.g. legal and psychological assistance, applying for social aid, support in the case of violence against women, and aid against eviction or water or electricity cuts). Additionally, SMPs offer low-cost or free courses and cultural activities, such as in sports, music, language (e.g. Italian classes for migrants), and theatre. Finally, SMPs provide facilities not otherwise available in the territory (e.g. study rooms, recording studios, bicycle workshops, meeting rooms). These activities are particularly important not only in more deprived districts but also in those where gentrification is underway. An example is CO. This SMP is in San Lorenzo, an area close to the central station of Termini that has always been associated with a working-class population clearly sided on the left and, later, with a student population and alternative nightlife. The area has awakened the appetites of economic actors, as denounced for years by the local assembly made up of activists and long-term inhabitants, and the area has changed in recent years (Bisso, 2020). This is why the activities carried out by CO, as well as by other SMPs in the area that have not yet been evicted, are so important. In this sense, SMPs can function as spatial vehicles for the right to the city: despite battling against a Leviathan, CO and the other SMPs in the area provide a small yet crucial contribution to keeping San Lorenzo accessible to the broader community.

In other cases, SMPs can fail in their mission to care for a territory and its people. VG, for instance, after years of good relationships with residents, experienced a rapid decline due to changes in its collective's composition. For several years, this SMP offered almost exclusively rough techno parties, neglecting its once central social and political activities. VG reached such social and material conditions that it became repellent for many people: as an activist said, it was so “unlive-

¹ All interview excerpts have been translated from Italian by the author. Note that ellipses in this specific quotation denote the interviewee pausing rather than omitted words.

able ... that a child, a parent, a *sane* person would not have entered". This shift, in fact, eroded its connection with the local community, moving it from the centre to the periphery of the SMP network, as revealed by the social network analysis conducted in the first phase of this study. In recent years, they went through big changes that seem to have restored the accessibility of this place to a wider community.

4.1.3 Caring for *ourselves*

Finally, the experiences of SMP activists interviewed during my research show that these places, which foster the formation of strong ties, can become true havens and alternative homes for them. Indeed, in line with Tronto's (1993) definition, care also concerns "ourselves". This dimension also counteracts the increasing social atomization that characterizes contemporary urban societies (Berque, 2003). One activist I interviewed described how the ability to go to his SMP whenever he wants has an almost "therapeutic" effect on him: he feels good there, and this is even more important because of his difficult family situation. Another activist recounts how, following the death of his mother, he became deeply involved in his SMP because it was a second home for him, and his comrades were "a family ... where we fight and love each other, as we usually do in all families". Such testimonies allowed me to see that – when they function effectively – SMPs can become spaces of mutual care, serving as crucial human and geographic landmarks in the lives of activists, even more so because this concerns does not only concern those in difficult situations: most of the activists interviewed saw their SMPs as a "second home" and the comrades as an "alternative, chosen family". It is here that activists spend their days and find comfort or support because, as another said, "you know that there are always people you can count on". This dimension is important as the philosophy of care is grounded in the idea that care concerns everyone due to our interdependence rather than being limited to so-called "vulnerable" subjects (Lussault, 2024). The places of care can be different from those with which we usually associate these practices and also concern "third spaces", that is places, other than work or residence, capable of becoming, according to Oldenburg, "a home away from home" (Oldenburg, 1999:59). In this sense, this feature subtly challenges the rigid distinction between private and public space that structures the common understanding of urban space. This in itself is not a novelty that would only be possible in SMPs. Other collective places can replace or complete domestic space, as the Houses of the People of the 19th–20th century Labour movement did. In fact, because of the deficiencies specific to the domestic space of the working class at the time, these spaces embodied this function of shelter and became places of comfort and solace for workers (Kohn 2003). Nowadays, this dimension is relatively well known in identity spaces, where "groups often restrict membership to foster new interpersonal ties", like women-only spaces (Polletta, 1999:12) or the "houses"

of queer "ballroom culture" – social contexts where racialized queers "[perform] family in ways that reconstitute the home as a socially configured 'house'" (Bailey, 2014:491). However, its presence in mixed urban spaces has been less explored. While spaces specific to certain subjectivities remain essential, places open to all can also serve as a refuge, a characteristic that holds particular significance. The diversity of "porous" places fosters relationships that transcend a singular "community" identity, playing a crucial role in making the city liveable and countering the isolation that is becoming increasingly characteristic of modern societies, particularly in urban contexts. This perfectly aligns with the idea of care as being crucial for all human life and not just for specific subjects (Lussault, 2024).

Of course, SMPs are not exempt from power relations and conflicts. However, remembering the importance of the ethics of care in resolving them is perhaps the only way to ensure that they do not erode their potential.

Taken together, these three dimensions of care highlight how SMPs counteract processes that characterize not only Rome but also, in varied ways, many other contemporary cities: the uneven investment in the built environment, the retrenchment of welfare, the commodification of social life, and the increasing atomization of individuals. They do so in a way that resonates with Lussault's (2024) notion of *géo-care*: a spatial practice of inhabiting the ecumene that foregrounds interdependence and shared vulnerability.

4.2 SMPs as social catalysts

Rome's sprawling suburbs often lack public spaces and places for encounter, missing the richness of social interactions that have long characterized urban centres. As noted above, this is not an isolated phenomenon but part of a broader erosion of urban sociability noted by different authors (Berque, 2003; Graham and Marvin, 2001; Fezer, 2010). Compared to the social density of historic city centres, many contemporary urban environments follow a general trend of social atomization, where interactions are being increasingly limited to commercial relations and brief exchanges in supermarkets or traffic jams or simply reduced to digital interactions. With its car-oriented urban form, widespread malls, and pervasive e-commerce infrastructure (e.g. delivery lockers), Rome is particularly entrenched in this trend.

Within this context, SMPs function as spaces that counteract these dynamics by facilitating dense, diverse, and meaningful interactions. Even if not all SMPs always succeeded in doing so, many of them appear as sites that actively encourage people to connect, engage, and collaborate in substantial ways. As an activist of a Genoa CSOA, interviewed by journalist Massimiliano Salvo, put it, "The problem is that the right to meet has been reduced to a commercial matter, while social centres allow the exercise of this right and

act as incubators, producing a creative explosion” (Salvo, 2023:para. 15, author’s translation).

With regard to this capacity, two of my case studies – CR and C2 – stand out as particularly remarkable, and they could inspire others that have lost it. What stands out the most when attending C2 – a space that was occupied to prevent its transformation into a carceral facility – is its diversity, especially in terms of age, which is not always easy to achieve. Activists at C2 aim to appeal to the entire population of their working-class neighbourhood and, thus, to a broad, intergenerational audience. This aim translates into some choices that they have made concerning their programming (e.g. they organize events that can attract different targets, such as dance classes, film projections, activities for kids, and concerts), their activities (e.g. they have a music studio aimed especially – but not exclusively – at young people, as well as a herbal workshop, which is geared more toward an older audience), and the organization of their space. This last aspect is important although not always obvious. The same place can stimulate “topophobia” or “topophilia” – a predilection or dislike for a place, respectively (Lévy, 2006). This depends essentially on its “ambiance” (Thibaud, 2015), a concept that describes how each individual feels a space, understood in all its complexity. The way a material space is organized, used, or even decorated can influence who it will attract. The “*esthétique de la résistance*” (Carmo, 2020) that characterizes squats but also SMPs – with walls covered by tags and political writings – can be attractive to some but repulsive to others. That is why C2 activists have chosen to make their walls “quieter” by avoiding too-divisive writings: “if your goal is to catch as many people as possible ... and then promulgate your ideals, let us say that some writings may not allow you to do so because then you can only catch certain types of people.” If, instead, as in the case of C2, you want “to get a little more people together ... you have to understand the dynamics of the neighbourhood, of who is frequenting the place” (Michel, C2). Similarly, they have chosen – unlike most SMPs – not to allow people to smoke inside. As another activist, Cinzia, put it, this attitude might make them seem more “prude” [*bacchettoni*] than other SMPs, potentially making them less appealing to young people. Francesco, a younger activist, while acknowledging this risk, has no doubt that this is the right approach. As he puts it, “you can [easily] find other [SMPs] where you can do drugs or have a rave, but it is much more difficult to find spaces which, instead, create a dialogue between middle school and retired people”.

CR is another remarkable site of encounter for different people. Its cooperative restaurant, along with its cultural and political initiatives, attracts a heterogeneous audience (Fig. 2), from the elderly residents of the nearby social housing complex to people who cannot afford many of the area’s restaurants, as well as creative workers in their thirties. It is a matter not just of age but also of nationality – many of the restaurant’s workers originally come from Africa – and lifestyles. Once again, this was possible for their programming, activ-

ities, and ambiance. This “biodiversity”, as Gina, a CR activist who was once at FP, puts it, helps send “a different message to the outside, particularly in terms of the space’s usability” compared to more homogeneous SMPs. In fact, the people who frequent a place are both a result of and a contributor to its ambiance since there is a movement of mutual constitution of the built environment and social practices (Thibaud, 2015).

In both of these SMPs, people are not just passing by as they would in a supermarket; they actually relate to each other. They are (former) strangers working together. It is not just a matter of what Goffman called “co-location”, meaning that individuals simply share the same physical space. What is also important is “co-presence”, where they “also pay close attention to each other, ready to engage and be engaged, thereby making them ‘uniquely accessible, available, and subject to one another’” (Zhao and Elesh, 2008:570). These two examples clearly show that, when functioning effectively, SMPs can bring people together, placing even strangers side by side.

But as noted, not all SMPs succeed in doing so. As Gina ironically stated, referring to her former SMP, FP, sometimes self-managed places can seem like “a threat to biodiversity”. Albeit, this depends on the time one visits FP – going there for a techno party is completely different from attending the Sunday morning farmers’ market, which is frequented by people of all ages; Gina believes that, at least compared to CR, people at FP are much more “aesthetically homogenized”: “the clothes, ... the hair, ... the piercings, the tattoos” seemed to be the same for everybody, a factor that can have an impact on the “type of audience it attracts”. However, even if not all SMPs manage to always achieve this diversity, they can still be considered to be places where people who do not know each other work together to build something. As Gina puts it, “In this world where we are all compartmentalized, each person is busy with their own thing, even the ability to develop a common idea, to build it, to realize it, in my opinion, still provides a greater level of satisfaction, well-being, and quality of life.” It is marginal, of course, as Silvia (CR) states, “it won’t change the fate of this city, Rome, but you’ll help do something more”; this brings back a touch of urbanity, making the city a little more liveable.

4.3 SMPs as tangible alternatives

Urban self-management practices create spaces of direct and proximal democracy within a metropolis where decisions often seem distant, more endured than shaped by dwellers. These *marginal* practices place residents at the forefront, whether in assemblies to manage a small park or, as in the case of SMPs, in public meetings to discuss neighbourhood issues, building maintenance, or broader political matters. Yet, historically, cities have always been primary sites of political life and democracy. In ancient Greece, this dimension was so central that it shaped the very definition of a city (*po-*



Figure 2. People of different ages in discussion on a Tuesday morning at Casetta Rossa (2020).

lis) (Prato, 2015). This legacy persists in our vocabulary today as the term “citizens” means both inhabitant of a city and someone who – by being member of a country – “has rights” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024).

Urban self-management can thus be understood not only as a form of self-organization but also as a concrete way of reasserting this neglected urban feature. By fostering active participation and shared decision-making, these practices challenge the impacts of the neoliberal paradigm on the city. As Fezer (2010) observes, in this paradigm “[t]he law of supply and demand has become the primary force in urban development ... leading to a post-political situation, in which spaces of democratic engagement are swallowed up by an ongoing radical economization and de-politicization of social space” (Fezer, 2010:1). Rome is a peculiar yet coherent example of this condition, and SMPs emerge as counterforces. They embody not only political communities but also practices where collectively caring for the urban environment becomes an opportunity to experiment with a radical form of democracy. Despite their limitations, here, activists try to practice alternative – or even opposing – forms of togetherness and interaction, based on horizontality and direct democracy, in contrast to those dominant in society (the “external world”, as many interviewees put it). In this sense, SMPs – as the Houses of the People before them – are experimentations to build “real utopia[s]”, a term that Kohn (2003) borrows from Foucault. According to Kohn, in fact, “[b]y challenging the conventions of the dominant society, [the Houses of the People] were heterotopias of resistance, real spaces, countersites constructed to materialize an alternative reality” (Kohn, 2003:91) because the management of these places, their activities, and the modalities of

being together prefigured the society in which the activists wanted to live.

Self-management is the “identity trait” of every SMP despite the heterogeneity of their ideological orientations (Piazza, 2013). As stated by Piazza, SMPs “have always been characterized by direct democracy, the refusal of internal and external delegation, and the denial of formal representation” (Piazza, 2013:93). My study confirmed how central the assembly is to SMPs, contributing – when functioning well – to make people work as a true community, united despite differences.

Of course, the ideals of horizontality, direct democracy, and consensus can sometimes be blurred by the reality of internal power dynamics. Interviewees have pointed out the contradictions that see more experienced (or simply less shy) activists have more weight in the assembly. As stated by Matteo (CO), “in the end it is who is more charismatic that counts” since, as stated by Lorenzo (FP), “people who have very good ideas cannot make them count because they do not have the confidence to speak at the right time”. The fact that supposedly horizontal groups are not exempt from power relations is not new, as was already shown back in the 1970s by the feminist Jo Freeman (Freeman, 1972) in her *Tyranny of Structureless*. However, it is well known, as Giovanni from CR stated, that “democracy is something complex, slow, articulated, wonderful: it is a process.”

4.4 SMPs as sites of resistance

The final key aspect of how SMPs contribute to making the city more liveable is closely tied to the previous one: their role as spaces of resistance against urban and societal dynamics perceived as harmful. In itself, the oppositional nature of

SMPs might seem to have a less direct impact on the liveability and urbanity of a place. However, their role is crucial for two main reasons. Firstly, by identifying and opposing harmful practices, SMPs can ideally lead to deeper changes in the underlying causes of urban issues. Secondly, their approach often involves responding to concrete needs through mutual aid, which is oppositional in the sense that it not only addresses immediate problems but also fosters a struggle against their root causes.

Concerning the first point, SMPs have played a crucial role in organizing local, national, and transnational social movements (Frazzetta and Piazza, 2022) for decades – even if, now, their ability seems to have weakened (Alia, 2024) – and contributed to building and driving territorial networks that gather different entities (associations, local committees, groups of inhabitants) in their respective areas and that promote direct democracy. An example is the “Libera Repubblica di San Lorenzo” (the Free Republic of San Lorenzo), a network of “self-government” where CO – and other SMPs and local groups – plays an important role (Bisso, 2020; Ranocchiari, 2016). Even if their focus extends to many topics, many SMPs have a deep concern with the spatial and urban manifestations of contemporary capitalism. As I mentioned, they were born, in part, as a response to the social and urban crisis caused by deindustrialization. Over time, they adapted their analysis of urban dynamics and focused on processes such as gentrification, neoliberal urban policies, and social atomization. This focus is reflected in their vocabulary, which includes expressions such as “*diritto alla città*” [right to the city], “*beni comuni urbani*” [urban commons], and “*autogestione conflittuale*” [conflictual self-management] (Ranocchiari, 2016). While the terms margins and urbanity as used in this article are largely absent from their vocabulary, my use of these concepts aligns with activists’ framings in many ways, even if through different terminological lenses. Other SMPs, rather than explicitly embedding their practices in broader urban discourses, focus primarily on immediate, ground-level action. Yet, their activities – practices of care, sociality, and spatial reappropriation – are no less significant in countering dynamics perceived as harmful.

But SMPs also practice opposition through the activities they organize daily. In this sense, their “everyday activism” (Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010) is seen by some as part of a process leading to a revolution where – to quote Giovanni (CR) – “there is not a moment where all will change at once [but rather] a process where day by day you build a change”. SMPs do not assist people as charitable organizations do as their acts of care are also aimed at fostering empowerment and politicization. CO’s activists refer to this approach as “conflictual self-management”, a notion that highlights this aspect and resonates with the idea of “mutual aid” as described by Spade (2020). Rooted in the long history of the labour movement (Kohn, 2003), mutual aid can be defined as “a form of political participation in which people

take responsibility for caring for one another and changing political conditions, not just through symbolic acts or putting pressure on their representatives in government but by actually building new social relations that are more survivable” (Spade, 2020:136). In this way, mutual aid expresses a form of “solidarity” as opposed to the logic of “charity”. While both approaches address immediate needs, solidarity aims to raise awareness of oppression by identifying its root causes and those responsible for it in order to spark a reaction while fostering communal relationships.

Sharewood, a self-managed workroom and library located in CO, exemplifies this dual purpose of relieving a shortage while contributing to the struggle. By making this space available to everyone daily, the activists not only compensate for the chronic lack of workspaces at universities but also denounce this shortage and demand greater investment in the right to education. In so doing, they aim to make those responsible for the situation more visible and accountable to the users. Sharewood is more than a row of tables: it is a physical, material interface through which users seeking a place to study can engage with a collective of students and activists, learn about their demands, and potentially get involved. In this case, there is a tangible impact on the urban environment (i.e. providing a facility), but it is combined with the broader goal of addressing the root causes of the issue and building a community.

5 Rethinking urbanity from the margins: insights from SMPs

Looking back at the findings, it becomes clear that SMPs do more than fill local gaps: from the margins, they reactivate dimensions of urbanity, understood here as the social ties that make life in common possible, thereby contributing to a more liveable, just, and democratic city. This final section returns to the notions of urbanity and margins – briefly introduced at the beginning in an operational sense – to revisit and deepen them in light of the Roman case and to reflect on their broader theoretical implications.

In particular, I ask what the features of SMPs can tell us about “marginal urbanities”, the concept at the core of this special issue. Margins and urbanity, however, are not fixed categories but are open to multiple interpretations, as the editors of this issue (Mosè Cometta and Giulia Scotto) remind us in their introduction.

The notion of margins is plural, but – at least in common language – it is often perceived as the opposite of centrality and, consequently, is associated with exclusion, precariousness, and a lack of access to resources. However, as bell hooks (hooks, 1989) states, margins are not only sites of deprivation or periphery but also of central opportunities for building alternatives, places of potentialities (Aceska et al., 2019). Self-managed urban initiatives can be considered to be marginal as they operate at the edges of traditional urban

development frameworks, often without institutional recognition and outside legal norms. Yet, as we saw, they are not passive recipients of urban transformations but actively reshape the city by proposing new ways of inhabiting and organizing space. These initiatives are imperfect but tangible laboratories for reimagining urban life and urbanity. Margins become spaces of opportunity when, as Simone (2010:34) states “many of the so-called lacks . . . become occasions for residents to assemble ways of working together that would otherwise not be possible”. In the Roman case, abandoned or underused buildings, infrastructural voids, and disinvested areas provide the physical conditions that allow experimentation. At the same time, the retreat of public institutions and the absence of services generate needs that push inhabitants to invent solutions. It is precisely this combination of spatial availability and institutional neglect that makes margins fertile ground for self-organization and explains why they can become sites where urbanity is reconstituted. But, as we have seen, these practices do more than compensate for deficits: they politicize them, transforming needs into arenas of conflict and entry points for addressing their root causes.

Regarding urbanity, dictionaries link the term to the distinction between humans based on their living environment: “the fact or quality of being urbane (= confident, relaxed, and polite)” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024). In other words, it refers to “the feature[s] that distinguishes city life and culture from other types of space” (Knoop, 2020:575). However, I would instead stick to another definition – the one proposed by geographer Lussault, who uses the term “*urbanité*” to refer to the urban character of a space (Doceul and Bouron, 2021:para. 1). This raises the question of what truly lies behind the concept of the urban.

The urban has traditionally been associated with both the density and diversity of social objects found in the same space (Lussault, 2003). Concerning diversity, it comprises social diversity (the co-presence in urban space of all strata of society) and functional diversity (the concentration of various functions within the same space in cities) (Huron, 2015; Lussault, 2003). The archetypical space associated with urbanity, understood in this sense at least, is medieval European city centres (Doceul and Bouron, 2021), where narrow streets were concentrated with different activities and people. The promiscuity of this urban feature was criticized by modernist urbanists, who advocated for the separation and rationalization of human activities. While this approach was deemed to be essential for the productivity sought in the paradigm that finally fostered Lefebvre’s “urban revolution”, it proved to be highly reductive in fostering human interactions, leading Choay to describe the modernist ideal city as “a sort of human breeding centre (*centre d’élevage humain*)” (Choay, 2014:41). SMPs embody this concentration of diversity in terms of both people and activities, acting as multifunctional spaces that serve as sites of encounter for individuals from various backgrounds. This is one of the reasons why, in another work, I have interpreted them as “urban commons”

(Ranocchiari, 2025), in line with Huron’s (2015) emphasis on “working with strangers” as a key feature of urban commons, precisely because they unfold in “saturated” spaces. Saturated refers to the high population densities, mixed land uses, and financial investments in cities, where “a large number of humans on a relatively small amount of space” forces people to share or compete for resources (p. 968).

Just like Huron’s (2015) commons, SMPs are a good example showing that it is possible to gather diverse people in a saturated environment to work together on a common and communal project – even without financial returns. Urban self-management activists try – though not always successfully – to transform the marginal portions of the city they manage into sites of communality, discussion, exchange, and confrontation. In other words, they aim to create a political community through the reappropriation of urban space. This characteristic, too, is inherently urban if we consider the triad of terms that defined the city in the Greco-Roman tradition: *urbs*, *civitas*, and *polis*. The Latin term *urbs* describes the physical environment of the city; the Latin *civitas* and Greek *polis* describe the social body of the citizens that are united by the rights and duties associated with their status (Prato, 2015). Dematteis (2012), a geographer specializing in urban–mountain relations, interprets *urbs* and *civitas* as two interrelated but differently evolving dimensions. While the buildings and infrastructures that constitute the *urbs* are expanding everywhere, the *civitas* – defined as the set of social ties, institutions, and services that make civil life possible for citizens wherever they live, thus being deeply related to livability – is often contracting, even though it ideally should expand alongside the physical city.

But, for both Romans and Greeks, these terms did not express an exclusively social meaning but had rather a political value. For Aristotle, the *polis* was, first of all, a political community (Prato, 2015). Cities have been sites of democratic experimentation for centuries, from the already mentioned Greek *polis* to the Commune de Paris, passing through the *liberi comuni* of Italian late Middle Ages. Relatively recent intellectual and political production around “neomunicipalism” confirms this trend (Caccia, 2017). SMPs highlight the importance of reconnecting urbanity with its political significance: bringing people together for a common purpose is inherently political, and, in their own small way, SMPs contribute to shaping urban space into a political community, a *polis*.

As I have shown, SMPs are also spaces where communities are built around practices of care – or rather *géocare*, using Lussault’s notion – which should ideally be at the core of these spaces, though they are not always present. Furthermore, (*géocare*) – whether in self-management practices or not – is not only about addressing lacks and needs but about fostering awareness of our interdependence (Lussault, 2024). SMPs practice *géocare* not in what they offer in terms of services and facilities but in what they bring people together to do: foster community ties where people care for

each other and their living environment. This feature also recalls, once again, urbanity, which, as noted by philosopher Berque (2003), is not only shaped by “material collective goods” but also by those “social relationships ... enabling humans to live in large numbers in a common space (the city)” (Berque, 2003:30).

Yet this very fabric of collective life is threatened by what the philosopher calls “disurbanity”: “the dilapidation of the physical and moral capital” that sustains life in common – urbanity (Berque, 2003:30). He sees disurbanity as a process of economic, social, and cultural transformation, symbolized by – among others – the figures of the “Cottage” and the “Cyborg.” The “coupling of the Automobile and Cottage” had already caused cities to “explode”, but this process has been further amplified by e-urbanization and e-commerce (Berque, 2003:29). These phenomena enable “the faculty of ordering through the Internet any commodity at home, including adopted children ... mak[ing] retailers, cities, and even suburban malls useless” (Berque, 2003:29–30). As Berque explains, the mass consumption of individual goods tends to replace the “social overhead capital that cities used to exalt” (Berque, 2003:30), allowing capitalism to bypass the city as both a material and social entity. Rome is coherent with this description. In its ever-expanding outskirts, where, now, most of the population lives, Rome hardly embodies the features traditionally associated with urban life. The daily routine of many Romans is increasingly reduced to traffic jams, fleeting exchanges through car windows, and shopping malls replacing local shops – places where, at least, parking is guaranteed. The growing presence of Amazon lockers in public spaces marks another step toward social atomization, where even suburban malls become redundant – as in Berque’s (2003) e-urbanization or in Graham and Marvin (2001) “splintering urbanism”; this seems to be further amplified by Rome’s fragmented landscape and dysfunctional transportation system. By splintering urbanism, Graham and Marvin (2001) refer to the urban and social fragmentation that paradoxically emerges from contemporary cities’ hyper-connection through liberalized and privatized networked infrastructures (such as transport, water, energy, or communication). For them, the antidote to this fragmentation is precisely the urbanity that they see as being rooted in embodied presence and encounter.

In times of crisis, “urbanophic” discourses that oppose a corrupted and corrupting city in favour of a virtuous rurality often re-emerge (Lussault, 2024; Salomon-Cavin, 2005). I argue that we can see signs of this even in Brenner and Schmid’s (2011) work, when they frame under the label of “planetary urbanization” the reach of capitalism across the entire world, including some of the most remote territories. Although it is undeniable that urban growth is closely tied to capitalist processes that have contributed to today’s multiple crises, the following question remains: should we collapse everything under the umbrella of urbanization? In my reading, this theory tells us about the impressive expansion of the

urbs – a point on which Berque (2003), Dematteis (2012), Lussault (2024), or Graham and Marvin (2001) would agree as well – but little about the *civitas* – the dimension that should be expanding instead yet is being increasingly eroded (Dematteis, 2012).

Cities have much to teach us. Urbanity is not just about industrialization, global cities, or competitiveness: it is about lived environments shaped by social relations and contingent processes that continuously make, unmake, and remake them (Katz, 2021). Examples such as those of SMPs show that the urban can also be about small and marginal but nevertheless meaningful and inspiring ways of subverting these trends from within, from those sites where contradictions are most acute, leveraging the features that distinguish urban space.

Of course, the city is not a panacea, nor should it be idealized as the only locus of alternatives. Practices of resistance and reorganization also emerge outside urban contexts, from French ZADs to South American philosophies such as *Buen Vivir* (Lussault, 2024), but contradictions emerge there as well. In fact, as the very theorists of planetary urbanization tell us, if urban and non-urban spaces are governed by the same logics (Brenner and Schmid, 2011; Knoop, 2020), similar contradictions might appear in both – as Berque (2003) reminds us, consumerism thrives even more in suburban cottages than in metropolitan centres. If alternatives are not only about location then we should not exclude cities – and, I argue, especially their margins – as sources of inspiration.

6 Conclusion: hope amid contradictions

Global capitalism is transforming life across scales, altering both social relations and ways of inhabiting space. Some see this as “planetary urbanization”: the expansion of urban processes across all territories, eroding spatial specificities and blurring the distinction between urban and non-urban contexts (Knoop, 2020). Others speak of “disurbanity”, focusing instead on the erosion of urbanity itself: the very social and spatial conditions that once enabled coexistence (Berque, 2003). While these diagnoses focus on different dimensions, namely the planetary expansion of urban processes (Brenner and Schmid, 2011) and the erosion of urbanity as a mode of coexistence (Berque, 2003), both reflect a broader sense of crisis in how we inhabit space today. As Lussault argues, however, the way forward is “not about moving beyond the urban but, on the contrary, about reinventing an urbanity” as we should “accept the idea of thinking about the globalized urban as the fundamental premise from which we can begin to search for solutions” (Lussault, 2024:89, author’s translation). The inevitability of the urban is not the only reason to take it as a starting point: the margins of the urban world, I argue, also offer many examples of practices that attempt to do just that – cultivating a form of urbanity grounded in (*géo*-)care.



Figure 3. A portion of Forte Prenestino (2020).

SMPs in Rome exemplify this counter-process. Through the reactivation of abandoned buildings, the cultivation of alternative economies, and the construction of mutual-aid networks, they offer an alternative way of engaging with urban space. They embody, however imperfectly, a form of *géo-care* (Lussault, 2024) – a way of inhabiting and producing the city grounded in the awareness of mutual interdependence between humans, non-humans, and the environment.

Yet inspiration must be tempered with realism. Many SMPs face internal crises – declining participation, activist burnout, and uneven power dynamics – that raise questions about their “human sustainability”. Their reliance on unpaid labour can be energizing but also exhausting (Ranocchiari, 2024). Moreover, their oppositional stance is not immune to co-optation: as Bianchi et al. (2024) note, governments may instrumentalize grassroots initiatives to offload responsibilities within the frame of “roll-out neoliberalism” (Peck and Tickell, 2002).

Another key contradiction concerns gentrification. While urban self-management practices – such SMPs or squats – challenge speculative urbanism, they might also inadvertently enhance a district’s appeal, contributing to rising interest from economic actors, even if a direct causal link cannot be demonstrated (Holm and Kuhn, 2016). In Rome, the case of Centocelle is emblematic. This working-class and peripheral neighbourhood has become increasingly vibrant – and attractive – partly due to the decades-long presence of FP. With its unique spatiality (Fig. 3), cultural initiatives, and social energy, FP has contributed to local liveability but also to the district’s attractiveness. However, it is legitimate to ask whether it might also have played a role – even indirectly – in what Brignone (2024) calls Centocelle’s “*primav-*

era”: the multiplication of bars and trendy restaurants and the neighbourhood’s growing reputation as a “cool” district. This raises a crucial issue: the extent to which practices that produce alternative forms of urbanity can avoid being co-opted by the very dynamics they seek to counter.

As for the future, SMPs may no longer exist in their current form – or they may continue to adapt to change. However, one of the first and crucial contributions of this work lies precisely there: ensuring that their actions – flaws and merits alike – are not forgotten. Instead, they should serve as a legacy for future practices, whether as examples to follow or as lessons to avoid, just as past movements continue to inform action today. In this sense, the reflections presented here align with the work of scholars exploring self-management, innovation from the margins, and social infrastructure (Aceska et al., 2019; Latham and Layton, 2022; Simone, 2010; Thieme et al., 2017) who – as I sought to illustrate in this article – do not view these experiences as mere singularities or idealized practices but as sources of insight for rethinking broader urban, social, and political dynamics, including the very meaning behind the urban and the margins. At the same time, this study aims to contribute, with a timely and embodied perspective, to the literature about CSOAs and, more broadly, SMPs (Membretti and Mudu, 2013; Piazza, 2013). The work presented here adds another brick to the wall of these growing bodies of literature, contributing to the understanding of these phenomena even though, of course, much remains to be done.

Data availability. The underlying research data consist of confidential qualitative interviews involving human participants. Due to ethical considerations and the informed consent agreements, these data cannot be made publicly available. Anonymized excerpts of the interviews may be provided upon reasonable request to the corresponding author, subject to the necessary ethical approvals and in compliance with data protection regulations. No third-party data were used.

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