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Rights and Fights. Urban Movements in Florence

The City of the Capitalistic Market

Florence is a city of contrasts, conflicts and contradictions. The social division of space is evident. A gentrification process has progressively expelled the working classes from the town centre, which has assumed a markedly bourgeois character: luxury housing, shops, hotels, banks, offices [1].



In Florence real estate values are among the highest and most speculative in Italy – the price of housing varies from 3,400 Euro per square metre in the most exclusive areas, to 2,650 in the centre and 1,700 in the outskirts. The absence of accessible prices in the rent market forces even those who can ill afford it to buy a flat, with the result that in 1991 60% of the population were owner-inhabitants and only 34,4% tenants. Needless to say, for those who cannot afford to buy a house, the situation is difficult indeed. The 12,000 publicly owned flats are all assigned, with 5,500 families on the waiting list, and there are 6,920 evictions of tenants pending. The price paid by Florence for being an important tourist and university town is a significant under-the-table rent market, with prices as high as 350 Euro for a place in a shared room. There are 30,000 out-of-town students but the "Agency for the Right to Study of the University of Florence" offers fewer than 1,000 places. The demand for public housing is also on the increase because of the growth in immigration - the Town Council of Florence calculates that in the year 2000 the number of legal plus illegal immigrants was 60,000.

Instead of devising and enforcing a collective public plan for the urban area and surrounding territory, the centre-left administration, who won the 1999 elections, has taken on board almost every proposal made by private real estate enterprises and construction companies (including FIAT, Baldassini & Tognozzi, Pontello), just as previous municipal councils had. In so doing, it actively favours the exploitation of space for economic interests, a process in continual expansion which also involves many decayed industrial areas close to the city centre, with the result that the "dangerous" working classes are pushed further and further outwards to the city's outskirts.

Memories

Nevertheless, Florence is something more than a bourgeois town or a shop window for tourists: it has deep-rooted anarchic and communist traditions, resistance to fascism and trade union and social strife. The widespread diffusion of "Case del Popolo [Recreation and Leisure Centres, run by the Italian Communist Party]" and Mutual Aid Societies, although still considerable, represents only a pale reflection of that past. Florence was a protagonist in the social and urban struggles of the seventies and the 1977 Movement: struggles in the workplace, for the right to housing, for social services, for a "quality of life" measured by the satisfaction of the right for everyone to have "not only bread but roses as well", and by the elimination of all discrimination and exploitation.

These memories explain the extension, maturity and lucidity of some of the urban movements present in the city today, and who also benefit from the high level of planning and organizational ability developed by the many of the participants in the movements of the seventies who have not lost their wish to contribute to building a fairer, more egalitarian and creative world, run through self-government.

As in the rest of Italy, Florence, too, saw a radical break at the end of the seventies: all the movements of the extreme, revolutionary left were hit by harsh political repression, with trials, inquisitions and imprisonment. This was not for any alleged connection with the armed struggle, but simply because of people's radical social and political aims: the pernicious "single thought" predominated inspired by Thatcher and Reagan-style liberalism. Despite this hostile institutional and political environment, the eighties were marked by the spread of the movement against nuclear power plants, which caused them to be shut down all over Italy in 1987.



2003. A "Housing Struggle Movement" demonstration against the privatization of Florence's social housing patrimony

One of the protagonists of this movement was the "Centre for Antagonistic Communication", an autonomous Communist group started up in 1982 and located in via di Mezzo, in the Santa Croce neighbourhood, the same location where, until 1981, "Lotta Continua [Communist Struggle]" had had its headquarters until it disbanded. It was inside this building that in 1985 Florence's the first social centre was born, the "Chirichua Tribe", at once pub and venue for social gatherings, concerts and theatre performances. Here some of the proposals of the 1977 "Movement of the Circles of proletarian youth" were taken up and re-elaborated once again - the struggle for the enjoyment and production of culture; the right to creativity; the spread of self-managed neighbourhood social centres fostering collective organization and decision-making, and the experimentation of new modes of social relations that do away with one-man leadership, sexism and in general all the destructive, dominant social and economic models of social interaction. The beginning of the eighties saw the growth of self-produced music and fan-zines outside the capitalistic market, as well as the birth of anarchist punk. The "Florentine Anarchic Movement" (MAF), that had its headquarters in a squat taken over in 1979, in via Panico behind the central Piazza della Repubblica, became a meeting place with a wine bar and meeting rooms. "Chirichua Tribe" and "MAF" were where some of the participants of the squatter's movement met and developed the "Self-Managed Social Centres": the "Indiano", located in the Cascine park (1987-1990); the "South Florence Self-Managed People's Centre" (1989 - present); the "Self-Managed ex-Emerson Social Centre" (1989 - present); the "Villa" (1994-2000). From the "Centre for Antagonistic Communication" (today called "the Tuscan Antagonistic Movement") were born the "Spartacus Self-Managed Sports Centre", the magazine "Antagonistic Communication" (1991 - present), the "Housing Struggle Movement" (1990 - present), the "Ex-Emerson Social Centre", and the "Social Trade Union" (1999 - present).

Urban Movements: Housing and Social Spaces

The Florentine urban movements represent the answer to the social contradictions and inequalities produced by the process of urbanisation that characterizes our times: shortage of housing at prices accessible to people with low incomes, functional and spatial social segregation, privatisation of public spaces and their transformation into commodities, lack of social and public services, destruction and pollution of the environment. How effective these movements are depends on their capacity to single out particular issues that tackle specific contradictions concretely and directly, at the same time as they keep in mind an awareness of the economic, social and institutional processes that are at the root of today's urban problems. These contradictions and social-spatial injustices are evident to all; what differentiates diverse interests and social/political groups are how they evaluate and conceptualize these injustices, and how they think they can be overcome. The methods of struggle chosen and the characteristics of the concrete, positive, emergent answers given depend directly on the analysis carried out and the prospects which manifest themselves, whether they be social transformation, no-future, or the search for a unique individual solution. The concrete practices located in the territory materialise, verify and modify the social and political hypotheses that produced them: the realisation here and now of an alternative to what already exists becomes a fragment of "new worlds under construction". As the Tuscan Antagonistic Movement maintains: "they make the prospect of a social alternative understandable and achievable".

"...material practices are the measuring point precisely because it is only in terms of the sensual interaction with the world that we can reconfigure what it means to 'be' in the world" [2]

"...Material practices are not the only leverage for change, but they are the moment upon which all other effects and forces (including those within material practices themselves) must converge in order for change to be registered as real (experiential and material) rather than remaining as imagined and fictitious" [3]



The "Housing Struggle Movement" was born in Florence in 1990, as a consequence of the increase in rents and the growth in real estate assessment and exploitation which dramatically worsened the housing problem. Its purpose is to guarantee the right to housing for everybody through direct action, self-organisation and self-management. Through its activity it aims to promote the social cohesion all those involved in the housing question and who want to link it to the struggle for a social alternative to the capitalist system. The practice of squatting unused empty buildings and defending tenants threatened by eviction is part of a comprehensive general struggle against those who are responsible for the housing problem; land and real estate owners, real estate entrepreneurs and state institutions. The demand made by the movement to the city administration and the state, is to requisition vacant houses, prosecute landlords who indulge in under-the-table rent practices, increase the supply of public housing and stop the process of privatization of state buildings and properties which, at the moment, even involves public housing. The movement has the aim of settling the construction of structures independent of the profit-dominated market rules, as the squatted houses are, within a struggle able to attack the comprehensive dynamics of social contradictions, so as to find shared, collective solutions instead of selective, individualistic ones.

Therefore, together with squatted houses there are demonstrations, symbolic squatting of places like the Cathedral, the Town Hall and Piazza della Signoria accusations and protests against real estate entrepreneurs; street performances about the right to housing. This is a way to draw the attention of the whole town to the aims and social practices of the movement, to gain solidarity and broaden citizens' support in the struggle for the right to the town.

Nowadays the movement counts some 400 people and it self-manages 11 squats, of which 3 are privately owned while the others are owned by state bodies and are in the process of privatisation, including houses, factories, schools and offices. It involves singles, couples, families, out-of-town students and immigrants, united by neither being able to afford housing at market prices nor to gain access to public housing. From 1994 the movement began to include immigrants in the squats, and they have since become the majority of squatters; they come from Somalia, Eritrea, the Maghreb: Libya, Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia, and Serbia, Rumania, Poland, Albania and China. Therefore, it is no coincidence that the movement is in the forefront of the struggle against "temporary detention centres" for immigrants and the Bossi-Fini law that links "stay permits" to work contracts, but favour free circulation for everybody.

To achieve its aims, the movement carries on a struggle against the capitalistic real estate market and urban land rent, but also against local public administrations that actively support the economic exploitation of the territory. It is a hard struggle, made up of evictions and court cases but also of the hopes, life-projects and aims of squatters and activists, the joy of finally having a roof above your head, a place you can organise in relation to your needs and where you can keep your things, a place for creative self-renewal, where you and your children can live your lives. The over ten-year history of the Housing Struggle Movement, is the history of decades of houses squatted and evicted of being clubbed by policemen; of suffering at having lost your home and of the anger provoked by eviction and by seeing your possessions thrown in a rubbish bin by armed men; of charges and trials for illegal squatting, street blocks, resistance to public officials in the course of the eviction of squats and defence of tenants from eviction.

The geography of squats is constantly changing, although some of them have lasted over time. At the beginning of the Nineties the squats were located in central areas and in privately-owned properties left vacant for speculation; later squats involved publicly-owned properties and decayed industrial areas located in more outlying parts of the city. Even if the movement has undergone a process of gentrification involving central areas, it has also been able to challenge the social division of space: the house in Via Aldini is in a high-value, quasi-central area, and the owner, the Local Health Administration, would like to sell it for financial reasons; the one in Via Incontrì, owned by the Army Red Cross, is in the hills of the Careggi area, among villas and medical buildings.[*ed. note: Careggi, Tuscany's main hospital, is named for the hillside it occupies*] Today the headquarters of the movement is in Via Palmieri, in the Santa Croce neighbourhood, and nearby, in Via Pandolfini (2002) an empty hotel has recently been squatted. And it is in the town's historical centre that in all these years the movement has defended hundreds of tenants threatened by eviction.

Since 1993, to guarantee squatters permanence in their homes, the movement has proposed to the Town Council to legalise home renovation done by the squatters themselves, so that they become tenants by contributing to the reconstruction of the non-structural parts of buildings, while the Town Council bears the cost of structural ones. For the movement this sort of autonomous renovation is a model solution to the housing problem, since it is rooted in inhabitants' participation in planning, building and management, and in the reutilization and "recycling" of territorial resources otherwise destined to be pulled down or to remain unused. Nevertheless, up to 1998 there was no real answer on the part of any of the local administrations that came and went over the years, whatever their political orientation.

After that year, negotiations have begun more than once, but have always collapsed. In spite of the high social value of the proposals and the achievements of the Housing Struggle Movement, the Town Council is very hostile towards it, and until now has not been at all receptive to the idea of taking advantage of the innovative planning capabilities existing in the vast social sector involved. Parties and dinners open to the citizenry are very often organized in squats to favour social interchange. The movement aims to create a "House of Culture" in the squat in Via Pergolesi, where it will be possible to exchange and produce culture, and where immigrants and other inhabitants of the town can meet and talk together.

"OMME, students and non-stable workers for the right to housing" (2001 - present) also adopts the practice of self-management and squatting, and collaborates with the Housing Struggle Movement, but it is aimed at a specific age group. In 2002 it consisted of four squat houses, but at the beginning of 2003 the only one left is the oldest "Cecco Rivolta" in Via Dazzi (2000 - present), located in the foothills of Monte Morello. It also acts as a meeting place and has a pergola, a view of Florence and an urban vegetable garden. The house "Soquadro", squatted on 13 April 2002 and evacuated on 3 December 2002, was located in the caretaker-house of an empty villa in the hills south of the River Arno, and defined itself as an "artistic/housing community" that aimed at "overcoming the housing problem and the lack of spaces for contemporary art and culture". Now it is looking for new spaces.

"OMME" was born out of the "Network Odyssey for spaces" (2000-2001), that also included secondary school students, but which split from it at the end of 2001. The Network had formulated proposals for teaching and communication, music, theatre, video and computer sciences. Its opposition to urban transformation led to demonstrations, and in March 2001 to the squat of a decayed industrial area in Via Maragliano, in the Novoli neighbourhood, called the "Bandone". Here the Network intended to practice social relations founded upon direct participation in responding to one's own needs, against "the transformation of body and mind into commodities".

Evacuation took place after only three months. In November 2001 the Network squatted what had been the "Cherubini Conservatory of Music" located in the heart of the town centre in Via Bufalini, behind the Cathedral. They wanted to create an Info-shop, but were evicted on 10th January 2002 with significant recourse to "the forces of law and order". At this point the Network broke up because of divergent views among its members regarding the kind of relations to be held with the local administration and on social/political priorities. "OMME" went on with its activities, while others started to take up temporary, symbolic squatting: in December 2001 they occupied the empty National Theatre, located in the centre, for two days, and in the Spring of 2002 for three days they occupied a sector of the Cascine Park, giving concerts and performances.

Today there are two squatted Social Centres in Florence: the "Self-Managed South Florence People's Centre" (CPA) and the "Self-Managed Ex-Emerson Social Centre", which offer meeting places free from the logic of profit and consumerism. Both were born in 1989, during the spread of Social Centres all over Italy, and both have occupied decayed industrial areas, taking an active part in the debate on their re-utilization that was then under way, affirming the necessity and the right to use them as urban social resources to be treasured and exploited instead of earning land rent and promoting real estate exploitation. The factory sheds proved wide enough for many uses and adequate to host new activities when the need emerged over time. The squatters have set in motion a process that has given new interpretation and new meaning to a space formerly used for financial exploitation; they have turned it into a place of encounter, cultural and artistic expression, and social and political initiative. This is a collective production: self-renewal happens by following transformations that occur in layers over time which aims at creating new places for encounters and social activity. Murals cover part of the outside walls and a large part of those inside. By claiming the right to use spaces outwith the philosophy of capitalism, such "illegal" occupations rescue them from speculation, at least temporarily.



The possibility of not being evacuated then depends on the strength of the pressure put on the municipality by the owner to regain his property and redevelop it; on the political choices of the Town Council and the Police Force/Ministry of Interior; and on the social power that the squatters are able to exert.

The (CPA) "Self-Managed People's Centre" started as a place for neighbourhood encounters, to establish collective practices and explore new processes, and share the social spaces. The two main interests are, on the one hand, cultural and artistic production - music, cinema, video, theatre; on the other, political activity, which mainly takes the form of internationalist solidarity. Its history has been dogged from the beginning by having to defend itself from the evacuation requested by the owner, the Coop supermarket chain, to develop a new shopping centre. The CPA held out until its eviction on 28 November 2001; today its old headquarters have been pulled down for redevelopment. After a few weeks its activists squatted an empty school in Via Villamagna, where their activities could start up again. There, it hosts dinners, concerts, theatre performances, films, book presentations, meetings and assemblies. It has a library and a documentation centre.

The "Ex Emerson" squat, occupied by activists of the "Centre for Antagonistic Communication", was born as a place in the territory "where the chain of dominion is broken and we once again set out to overcome social, architectural, racial and economic barriers". In 1993 it was evacuated from its first headquarters, not far from the FIAT decayed area in Novoli, and immediately occupied its present site, also a decayed industrial area. Nowadays it houses the weekly meetings of the social centre, meetings of the "Tuscany Antagonistic Movement" and of the "Town and Territory Monitoring Body"; there are the headquarters of the "COBAS", an independent, grass-roots trade union, as well as of the "Social Trade Union" a library, an exhibition room, a sports hall and a rehearsal room for musical groups. It organizes concerts, performances, readings, parties and self-financing dinners, as well as projections of movies on social and historical issues.

Together with the "Tuscany Antagonistic Movement", it organises meetings and assemblies about issues like "the Endless War", the urbanisation process, the Porto Alegre Social Forum, social movements, and the conflict between capital and labour. The "Tuscany Antagonistic Movement" and "ex-Emerson" have promoted and participated in committees against refuse incinerators, electronic pollution by mobile phone antennas, genetically modified food and against the environmentally destructive infrastructures for the new national High Speed Train line. Together with the "Housing Struggle Movement" they participate in "no-Global" demonstrations and encounters.

These are all fragments of new worlds under construction...

References

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Comune Network, *Progettare Firenze. Materiali per il piano strategico dell'area metropolitana fiorentina*, Firenze: Edizioni Comune Network, ottobre 2001.

Endnotes

[1] The Florence area population is 600,000: 378,000 in Greater Florence and 224,000 in outlying municipalities.

[2] Harvey, D. *op.cit.*, p.93.

[3] *Ibid.*, p.94