



# Gaining/regaining housing stability through collective action: Individual uses and social functions of a migrants' collective residence

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## **Abstract**

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This article is based on research carried out at La Salette, a former squat in the city of Turin, Italy. The building has undergone a progressive process of legalization and has become a 'collective transitory residence' (*residenza transitoria collettiva*) for migrants. It is now run by a team formed by members of a cooperative organization, architects and volunteers. The internal regulations do not limit the number of months of permanence, in contrast to the rigidity of a refugees reception system that is rarely tailored to the subjectivity and personal trajectories. In this paper I look at how migrants make use of this safe and legal shelter. I rely on observation as well as interviews with inhabitants, social workers and volunteers. Migrants arrive at this accommodation after having experienced institutional reception centers, informal settlements, ghettos and other temporary housing solutions. For many of them, La Salette is their first 'home' in Italy. The fact that there is no institution that determines when they must leave the building allowed me to observe the uses migrants make of this house. Although many migrants are facing a housing crisis due to the effective lack of housing alternatives, through ethnographic methods I deconstruct the mainstream idea of 'home' as the goal of each and every migrant, and propose to re-build notions of housing alternatives starting from the observation of how actual uses of this collective residence.

## **Keywords**

Housing occupation, migrants' occupation, housing alternatives, migrants' temporalities, collective residence, transnational mobility, precarious work

## **1. Introduction**

Migrants' homing is a relatively young field for social theory and research that is becoming more and more relevant in different disciplines (Boccagni, 2017b; Boccagni et al. 2018; Cieraad, 2010; Markowitz & Stefansson, 2004; Massey, 1992; Sirriyeh, 2010). Many of these contributions show that very often migrants' everyday life is characterized by a gap between the real and the desired home, and marked by the friction between mostly unhomely living conditions, and the yearning, or the search, for new and more home-like circumstances (Dovey, 1985). While acknowledging the existence of this desire, I also put into question the mainstream idea of 'home' as the goal of each and every migrant at every moment of his/her migration process. Pushing back against convenient understandings of 'home' in relation to migration is also a way to undermine a widespread idea in the literature that considers the achievement of an independent house as a sign of 'integration' (Agostoni, 2013). To work in this direction, I introduce the concepts of 'practical use' and 'social functions'—inherently linked in my understanding—to scrutinize the potential functions of a place of residence that challenges the normative idea of 'home' and the value placed on private space that it often entails. I take as my case study La Salette, a legalized former squat in Turin, Italy.

Understanding La Salette first requires understanding the historical and political context in which the squat emerged as well as the process that brought it to legalization and its current principles. The fact that there is no outside institution determining how or for how long migrants live there allowed me to observe how the inhabitants themselves create and make a practical use of this place. I describe this building as a 'lived space' (Dovey, 1985) and try to answer the question: how do the inhabitants of La Salette appropriate it? Drawing on ethnography and interviews carried out with the inhabitants and the social workers involved in the life of this residence, I found La Salette used as a home, but also as a shelter, a place to find stability, a temporary or intermittent home and a place allowing economic saving, the development of informal economic strategies and the enhancement of formal and informal social networks.

In the conclusions, I reflect on the fact that acknowledging the 'processuality' of migration pushes us to think about how housing needs can change throughout the different phases of migration. Some of the individual and collective needs that find an answer in the collective home of La Salette would not find a suitable answer in other housing solutions—a private or a shared flat, for example. As the needs of a migrant can change throughout the migration process, so there is a need for changes in suitable housing solutions, making the creation of housing alternatives more and more urgent.

## **2. Historical and political context**

'Not only shelter. Houses and rights for all!' states a big sign hanging from the balcony of a recently squatted building at the beginning of 2014. 'We will renovate together the squatted building' reads a headline in a national newspaper, quoting the words of the archbishop Nosiglia at the end of the same year. Both statements refer to a building in the

northern Italian city of Turin. Located on the western side of the city, very close to the hinterland, it remains well connected to the city centre and the rest of the city thanks to the nearby metro station. The five-floor building is owned by a religious congregation and was a care home for the elderly until it failed to meet legal safety requirements in 2008. It was squatted on 17 January 2014 by two ‘collective subjects’: a group of migrants and a group of activists. In order to characterize them, I need to give some background about the city of Turin and beyond.

On 5 April 2011, recognizing the exceptional political situation in North Africa during the ‘Arab Spring’, the government adopted temporary humanitarian protection measures known as *Emergenza Nord Africa* (ENA) for refugees proceeding from North Africa. The ENA measures temporarily relaxed immigration policies. Migrants who fled from North Africa (Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia) to Italy between 1 January and 5 April 2011 were moved to institutional reception centers and automatically granted a temporary permit of stay for humanitarian reasons. On 3 August 2011, due to the persistent political instability in North Africa, this measure was extended until 28 February 2013. Most migrants who reached Italy in that period were citizens from different African and Asian countries who had been temporarily working in Libya when the civil war started.

Many criticized the ENA measures and recognized the ways in which they demonstrated the many shortfalls of the Italian reception system<sup>1</sup> (Campomori, 2016, p. 6). Even more problematic and questionable has been the way the ENA measures ended.<sup>2</sup> After almost two years, ENA centers suddenly closed their doors. Beneficiaries had to choose between assisted voluntary return to their country of origin or a 500 euros monetary compensation. Activists and volunteers who met the migrants in those days explained: ‘at that time we were giving Italian language classes in an association. Many of the migrants came to us with papers they could not understand...the paper they had signed, where it was written that they had chosen

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<sup>1</sup> In 2002, an official system for asylum seekers and refugees reception was created under the name ‘Protection system for asylum seekers and refugees as well as for migrants with humanitarian status’ (*Sistema di protezione per richiedenti asilo e rifugiati nonché per stranieri destinatari di altre forme di protezione umanitaria*, SPRAR). In the years witnessing the arrival of the great part of the inhabitants of La Salette, the reception of asylum seekers was organized as follow: a) Centres of first assistance and reception (*Centri di primo soccorso e accoglienza*, CPSA) to be used in case of large inflows for providing first assistance and medical aid; b) Reception Centres (*Centri di accoglienza*, CDA) where migrants received first assistance, were identified and could express their will to claim asylum; and c) Reception Centres for Asylum Seekers (*Centri di accoglienza per richiedenti asilo*, CARA) where asylum seekers stayed while waiting for a decision on their asylum application. People granted some form of international protection were then transferred to a SPRAR. Each SPRAR was managed at the local level through the Municipalities and local organizations (such as NGOs and the third sector) selected every year on the basis of a call launched by the Ministry of Interior. Since the SPRARs were unable to meet the high number of arrivals, the Ministry of Interior started asking the Prefectures to set up temporary governmental reception centres—extraordinary Reception Centres (*Centri di accoglienza straordinaria*, CAS)—throughout the country. Their management was assigned by the Prefectures to a very heterogeneous assemblage of public entities, non-profit organizations and for-profit companies such as hotels. Most of the inhabitants of La Salette experienced reception in CAS or centres with the same characteristics. SPRAR centres and CAS retained differences in terms of quality of services provided, with different standards of reception among different CAS. For a more extensive description see: Giannetto et al. (2019).

<sup>2</sup> For critical readings of this measure, see Del Zotto (2016) and Marchetti (2016).

to leave the centers within a certain date and that they would receive 500 euros.<sup>3</sup> By the end of February 2013, all refugees and asylum seekers hosted at ENA reception centers had to leave. Around a thousand were living in the city of Turin (Stopani & Pampuro, 2018).

Predictably, many migrants found themselves without anywhere to stay (Giannetto et al., 2019). On 30 March 2013, they occupied one of the buildings erected as part of the 'Olympic village' (Ex-MOI), for the 2006 Olympic Winter Games (Romeo, 2017). Within just a few days the squatting of a second and a third building made evident this otherwise hidden housing crisis. Shortly after, a fourth building was occupied by a group of Somalis and—due to the scarcity of other formal or informal solutions—the basement of one of the buildings was very quickly converted to shelter homeless migrants.<sup>4</sup>

Migrants were not alone in these actions. They were supported by volunteers together with activists of the two main squatted social centers in Turin, who constantly monitored the situation, organizing meetings and planning the occupation. Immediately after successfully occupying the buildings, the volunteers who chose to remain involved and active in the life of the occupation created the *Comitato di solidarietà Rifugiati e Migranti*, the Committee of Solidarity with Refugees and Migrants, from this point on referred to as *Comitato*. Neither of the 'collective subjects' I briefly described above—migrants who faced a housing emergency on one side and *Comitato* on the other side—were totally new actors on the urban scene. While made more visible by emergency, it is relevant to stress the lines of continuity with personal or collective stories pre-existing the emergence itself. The group of migrants that expressed its collective housing need through occupation was in fact mostly made up of refugees and asylum seekers who had experienced the ENA. Yet Ex-MOI very quickly attracted many other 'migrants' suffering from a number of housing vulnerabilities. After a short period, it became clear that the population who inhabited Ex-MOI was not as homogeneous as it initially appeared. Ex-MOI would become home to economic migrants who had lost their jobs, migrants moving from city to city—or even from country to country—following the seasonal job market, refugees who had been in Italy for years and migrants who were not satisfied with their living situation (shared overcrowded flats), among others.

In the same way, the existence and the birth of the *Comitato* can be historicized too. Even if not explicitly, the *Comitato* continued the fight and the actions promoted by another informal group active between 2007-2009, when the first occupations by migrants and refugees appeared in the city of Turin and its hinterland, and a 'first *Comitato*' was created. This too had gathered activists from the two main occupied social centers of the city, as well as volunteers and people involved with the cause. Situating the 'collective subjects' of this occupation within the history of similar actions carried out in the city (Manocchi, 2012) is as important as understanding the particular historical and political moment that shaped it.

<sup>3</sup> Words of a volunteer during a conference held at Turin University under the title 'Adapting to exclusion', 11 December 2018.

<sup>4</sup> It is difficult to estimate how many people lived or found a temporary shelter at Ex-MOI, an experience that came to an end in July 2019, but it is thought that since its beginning it hosted more than 1,000 people (Stopani & Pampuro, 2018), making it one of the largest housing occupation by migrants in Europe.

### **3. La Salette**

Waheed<sup>5</sup>—who had lived at La Salette since it was a squat—is a young man from Bangladesh working in Libya. When the civil war started there, he was robbed and forced to leave the country. Initially hosted in a Turin reception centre, he experienced the crisis caused by ENA's sudden end:

In 2013 a new law came out which granted legal papers to everyone [who was in ENA]. The boss [the manager of the reception center] told us: “Within the end of March you have to leave. If not, we will call the police” [...] We were around 200 people in the project and we were all told the same thing. We were eight men from Bangladesh and we all decided to ask for help from a fellow countryman. He has been in Italy for years, we all went to his place. [...] The house was stuffed...too many things inside, and there was a bad smell. It wasn't nice. We were always at home: we had no work and we didn't know what to do and where to go.[...] After a month I thought: “Where can I go?” I heard about Ex-MOI and I went there...Oh my God, how many people! There were more than ten people in a room and many people slept on the floor.

As Waheed found, when Ex-MOI became overcrowded and unable to host new people in the small flats inside the buildings, newcomers started living in the basements in precarious, unsafe and unclean conditions. That was when a new occupation began to be planned—La Salette, the focus of this article—with a very different story, as the people who occupied it are today its legal residents.

Picture 1 shows the facade of the building after the occupation. The religious congregation who owned the building—Our Lady of La Salette—chose not to evict the migrants. Together with the Italian Caritas and a pastoral office which works to help migrants

**Figure 1**

The building after the occupation. Source: Facebook (from the page “Salette Occupato”)



<sup>5</sup> All the names used in this article are pseudonyms.

in their integration process (UPM, Ufficio Pastorale Migranti), they started to negotiate a slow process of legalization with the occupants and the *Comitato*. A first important formal step in this negotiation took place in May 2015 with the creation of a non-profit association for the building's management. The association received the building on a rent-free lease for ten years and became responsible for the creation of a multidisciplinary *team* of architects expert in social planning and social workers to create a new kind of housing. This needed to be inclusive—with both migrants and the *Comitato* included in every step of the process of imagining, creating, implementing and managing the building, which continues to this day—and tailored around the needs of the migrant population. A few examples can serve to represent elements of innovation and show how the whole process placed the housing needs of the occupants at the core of the planning and much needed renovation.

Funds for this renovation—which cost almost a million euros—came from the local diocese, mainly thanks to private donations. The building became a construction site, and as such had to be compliant with safety regulations. Studying and strategically using the regulations in force, the architects sought to allow people to live in the building during the renovation works. The renovation was phased, with one floor being renovated while the other floors and the basement remained untouched. During the five-week renovation of each floor, the inhabitants temporarily moved to the basement. The security plan of the workplace thus divided the building into ‘populated areas’ and ‘working areas’ (Cottino et al., 2019).

When the work finished, the building was registered as a ‘private service of public utility’ under the label *residenza transitoria collettiva* (collective transitory residence). This legal category was created *ad hoc* for La Salette, and does not stipulate a maximum number of months of permanent residence. Studying the regulations to find an interstice in which to create an alternative was key to success here. This category represents the convergence of the many interests among the occupants and the *Comitato*: no evictions; no limitations to the length of residence; and decision-making power for the inhabitants over the building’s future.

On the other side, it is clear that these inalienable points found favor with the association and the team of professionals. As subjects, they had their own agency and critical position toward the standardized reception system. Together they found a way to not only experiment with new housing solutions, but also to develop new professional tools to work with migrants (Ferrero et al., 2019). As with other spaces born as a consequence of the limits of the reception centers, La Salette—even now that it is legalized—still bases its functioning on norms founded on the idea of subverting the rules of humanitarian assistance (Fassin, 2007).

Picture 2 shows the facade of the building after the renovation works. Today, La Salette is internally organized as follows: on the ground floor there are four rooms, a common hall and a small office. The other floors all have nine or ten rooms (each hosting one or two, rarely three persons), along with a minimum of four bathrooms and a large communal kitchen. Two team members and four habitants (one for each floor) meet on a weekly basis to discuss the management of the house. In addition to this, one or two monthly meetings are held per floor and a general assembly is called as needed.

## **Figure 2**

The building after the renovation work. Photo credit: ASF - Architetti Senza Frontiere



At the time of writing, there is only one family, made up of an elderly woman from Ethiopia and her daughter. The rest of the building is populated by men of different ages and different countries of origin.<sup>6</sup> Most reached Italy in the past ten years and have applied for international protection. Some received it, some didn't. The same space is hence shared by people with different backgrounds, nationalities and migration stories. A great part of the residents has experienced the Italian reception system, and share a similar condition of marginality and vulnerability. Unfortunately, this brief categorization of the status of the inhabitants of La Salette makes evident what others have already stated: political status—even when recognized—does not mean access to substantial rights (Pinelli & Ciabbarri, 2017).

Today La Salette is framed as a collective transitory residence for those in need, primarily refugees and migrants. La Salette does not limit the period of residence, because it is based on the assumption that people will find another place when they are ready, freeing a place to be offered to others. Each inhabitant signs a ‘adhesion pact’ which sets the pillars of coexistence in the building. These include co-management (choices are taken by the *team*, volunteers and inhabitants), a financial contribution (not rent, but a payment for the expenses necessary to maintain the house and its technical equipment) and participation (for instance, participating in the cleaning roster).

While the internal functioning of La Salette is not the focus here, it is important to recognize that—coherently with its origin—management is not based on coercive power. The absence of a top-down power is the key element that opens up the space for both subjectification and collective responsibility, while also creating a space in which contradictions and conflicts can emerge.

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<sup>6</sup> These include Bangladesh, Chad, Ivory Coast, Ethiopia, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea Bissau, Guinea Conakry, Liberia, Mali, Morocco and Senegal.

#### **4. From housing needs to housing uses: theoretical perspectives**

Anthropological and sociological interest in the ‘home dimension’ in migration has increased since the early 2000s, with the domestic sphere emerging as a key site for the study of transnational migration (Gielis, 2011; Welsh, 2011). The concept of home has been discussed from an emotional point of view (Al-Ali & Koser, 2002), as a symbolic space and as a place which allows inhabitants to express the interdependence of mobility and belonging (Ahmed et al., 2004). Many studies locate themselves in the home to investigate the everyday lives of migrants and observe both local and translocal practices. Another way to attend to the domestic is to consider the house/home in terms of its materiality. My approach follows this interest in material conditions—here framed as the bare access to housing—and it is based on the concepts of ‘social functions’ and ‘housing uses’. Describing the practical uses of La Salette, I investigate how the access to a specific form of housing allows the satisfaction of certain needs, both individual and collective.

In Italy, migrants’ access to the rental and real estate market has been described by some authors in relation to the ‘economic migrants’ who reached the country in the past decades (Golinelli, 2008; Ponzo, 2009; Tosi, 2017). Very often renting and, even more buying a property have been read as a sign of integration (Agustoni, 2013). The experience of ‘economic migrants’ is often contrasted with those of more recent refugees and asylum seekers in terms of permanence in Italy, lack of access to the job market and lack of social capital (Perino & Eve, 2017). Many such studies have concentrated on people’s permanence in the reception centers (Accorinti & Wislocki, 2016; Altin & Minca, 2017; Campesi, 2015; Casati, 2018; Sorgoni, 2011; Van Aken, 2008) even as the question ‘What happens after the reception centers?’ becomes more and more urgent as refugees and asylum seekers move into occupations or informal camps (Belloni, 2016; Bolzoni et al., 2015; MSF, 2016, 2018; Stopani & Pampuro, 2018). Still little is known about refugee’s housing conditions after their years in the reception centers, and this cannot be studied in isolation. Migration scholars have criticized any sharp dichotomy between economic and forced migration (Crawley & Skleparis, 2018) and such a rigid dichotomy is not useful to talk about La Salette. Its inhabitants do not fit in a single category nor share a single status. Instead, they share the same housing conditions, showing how multifaceted and multilayered the experience of housing deprivation as well as migration can be.

The reports *Fuori campo* (Outside the camps) released by Médecins Sans Frontières in 2016 and 2018 estimated that in those years almost 10,000 refugees and asylum seekers lived in informal camps, with limited or no access to basic services. In the list of the informal camps, MSF also included squats and occupations, which they considered attempts to answer the need for a house. Squatting configurations differ in respect to the characteristics of the people involved, type of buildings, framing, demands made by activists, mobilization and organization patterns (Prujit, 2012). Prujit (2012) identifies five basic configurations: deprivation-based squatting; squatting as an alternative housing strategy; entrepreneurial squatting; conservational squatting; and political squatting. La Salette falls into the category of the deprivation-based squatting, undertaken by poor and working class people distressed due to severe housing deprivation. This term means more than having a need for housing; it

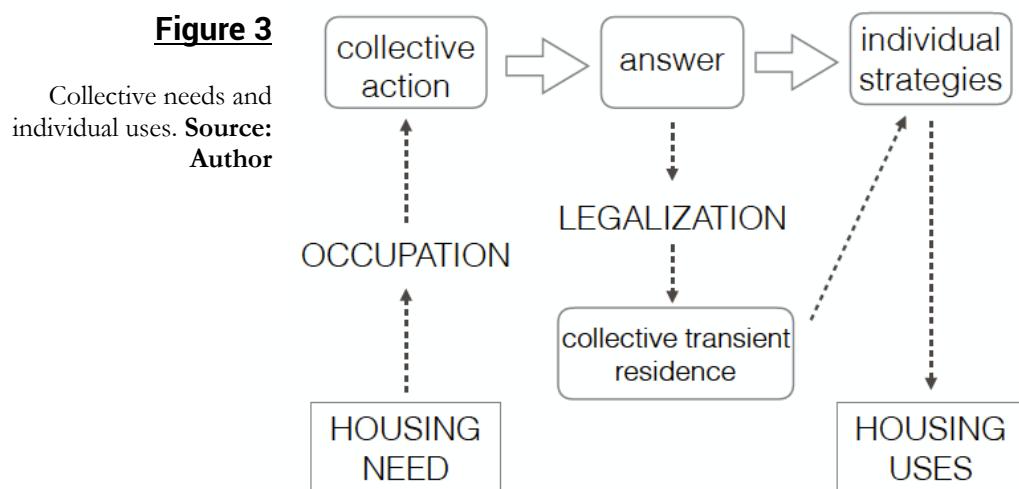
implies that such people have virtually no other options (Prujit, 2012, p. 25). Prujit is not the only author who makes a distinction between squatting for political ends and squatting for shelter (Aguilera, 2013; Bouillon, 2017; Pechu, 2010). Occupants' residential trajectories (Bouillon, 2009) are eloquent in this regard: the life stories of many of the actual residents of La Salette—analyzed elsewhere (Ferrero et al., 2019)—clearly show that since their arrival many had never lived in a proper house, but rather alternated periods in reception centers with periods in informal camps. Seasonal jobs require many to constantly move from one place to another, somehow 'freeing' them from the need/problem of having a house somewhere. This is true both for migrants without papers and for those who have a regular permit to stay.

The presence of squatting migrants is often linked to an individual state of need and of extreme social and economic vulnerability rather than some ideological adherence to political principles (Mugnani, 2017). This raises questions around the relationships between migrants and militants or activists who support them (Mudu & Chattopadhyay, 2017). From my perspective, the absence of a political will in most of the migrants does not remove the political meaning of those occupations. I see this kind of occupations as having an inherent political meaning, because they express a collective need and a collective marginality (Bouillon, 2017; Mudu & Chattopadhyay, 2017). They often mirror institutional failure (Ciabbarri, 2016) as in the case of Ex-MOI and La Salette, which directly resulted from the ENA closure. An idea that echoes Lefebvre (1968) and Harvey's (2012) reinterpretation of the 'right to the city' as a wider political claim by the subaltern population and that highlights the profound difference between 'home as ownership' and 'home as appropriation' (Dovey, 1985).

In line with the above considerations, not all the occupants of my case study were activists or aware of the ideology behind the activists' idea of squatting. This 'gap' between migrants and activists still has consequences today, even now that La Salette has become a legal 'collective residence'. Co-management and participation are not imposed, which creates a wide range of possible involvement from very active inhabitants to those who seem detached from the house's day-to-day workings. The 'gap' also opens the possibility for observing both internal contradictions and migrants' uses and agency.

I see squatting as a collective act that gives voice to housing needs that would remain otherwise unheard. The collective act of squatting not only made these needs visible, but also created a collective subject who became an interlocutor and, as such, received an institutional answer that none of them would have received as individuals. Thanks to this process it is today possible to observe how this marginal and vulnerable category makes practical use of a space that has been made available to them (see figure 3).

What I call 'individual uses' have an evident social and intersubjective aspect and are deeply rooted in wider social and political frameworks. If I choose to frame them as 'individual' is to shed light on the difference between the inhabitants conceived as a 'group' and the inhabitants conceived as individuals with their own trajectories and their own agency. Observing La Salette as a lived space urges me to describe a few concrete experiences of this space. These experiences are internally very much differentiated: some migrants are



documented, while others are not; some work under contract while others work in the informal market; some have strong social ties while others don't. Each inhabitant—because of these and other characteristics—makes a different use of this common place.

After months of observation, participation, collection of housing narratives and formal and informal exchanges with the residents, workers and volunteers, I sketched out a map of what I called the ‘social functions’ of La Salette, grouped into six categories. ‘Housing uses’ and ‘social functions’ are, from my perspective, deeply linked. The ‘uses’ are the ways in which migrants use and organize themselves in a place which allows them to reside with minimum expenses and without a predetermined exit time; each one of these uses answers a need and hence shows the ‘functions’ of this house, that is ultimately the social meaning of a collective residence. I therefore propose to ‘zoom out’ from the collective to the individual level to analyze how the stability offered by a safe and legal shelter like La Salette impacts on practical life: how do migrants use this space? What are the subjective strategies they have implemented? These questions are made urgent by a growing housing crisis whose responses need to be plural. There is a need to shed light on the plurality and heterogeneity of ‘houses’ and on the heterogeneity of the social relations and individual strategies that are developed in such contexts (Fravega, 2018). In Doron’s words, ‘transgressive zones are [...] suspension of new plans [...] This suspension opens [...] a new time-space’ (2000, pp. 260–1). These are the spaces that can be filled by marginalized communities and become examples of what he calls an ‘architecture of transgressions’: that is, a space that enables new social configurations. In the interstices of societies and actual norms are found opportunities to create new housing models and new social relations (Staid, 2017).

My perspective gives relevance to ‘processuality’, autonomy and stability. By ‘processuality’ I mean to expand on the temporal dimension, looking beyond the functioning of the reception system to observe what happens when people are excluded from it or when projects come to an end. With the concept of ‘autonomy’ I mean to stress the relevance of La Salette as a rare space of collective residence that can guarantee migrants a certain degree

of independence in contrast to the reception system, often perceived as a period of desubjectification and dependence based on the control of their bodies and conduct (Mezzadra & Ricciardi, 2013). Finally, by ‘stability’ I contrast La Salette—as a safe and legal shelter with no predetermined leaving date—with the experience of other migrant housing projects that—for their own purposes—are often based on the program’s temporalities more than on the beneficiaries’ life trajectories. My perspective is then situated between the analysis of the politics of housing and the analysis of the individual relation with the spaces and of the emotive appropriation and it endorses the definition Boccagni provides of a home as a multidimensional entity, *subjectively* and *politically* relevant (emphasis added, 2017a, p. 64).

## **5. From ‘housing needs’ to ‘housing uses’: empirical insights on the social functions of a residential space**

La Salette is used as a home, as a shelter, as a place to find stability, as a temporary or intermittent home and as a place that allows economic saving, the development of informal economic strategies and the enhancement of the formal and informal social network. Each one of these uses mirrors a social function that the building plays for one or more of its residents. The social functions identified at La Salette go in different directions because—as Boccagni suggests—home is understood as both a material environment and a set of meaningful relationships (Boccagni, 2017b, p. xxi).

### **5.1. La Salette as a home/shelter: a path toward social security**

Qualifying La Salette as a ‘home/shelter’ can seem tautological, but unpacking this category and characterizing it with some adjectives helps show that the residence is more than ‘a roof over the head’: it is an organized, affordable, safe and legal space. La Salette maintains its organization because the team, co-management group and volunteers help inhabitants with the building’s management and all the difficulties of organizing a building with around 80 residents. The low monthly contribution makes it affordable, thanks to the lease arranged with the property owner. People who live here are not afraid of being evicted because they can normally afford this contribution, even in the absence of formal and continuous employment.

La Salette is safe and legal because it has been registered as a public service. Its legal status directly impacts on residents, making them ‘visible’ to the Municipality. The so-called Decree on Security and Migration (Legislative Decree 113/2018 adopted on 5 October 2018 and converted into Law 132/2018) calls for greater severity against those living in squats: having a formal residence safeguards inhabitants from legal and pecuniary sanctions. No longer just an occupation, La Salette’s residents can officially be registered in the Municipality, which gives them additional rights, such as easier access to health services and access to the process needed to renew the residency permits (Gargiulo, 2013, p. 143).

Many scholars emphasize how migrants’ lives have increasingly shifted from experiences of mobility to conditions of immobility that can confine them in a temporal

condition of indefinite waiting and liminality. In this growing uncertainty, there is a need for safe places in which to live, maybe to wait. At a time when we witness an increase of the number of undocumented migrants, La Salette becomes a place where people are allowed to live in forced immobility with dignity. In the following sections, I draw on personal life trajectories to better illustrate these issues.

### **5.2. Housing stability as a mean to reach personal goals**

Sissoko is a 24-year-old man from Gambia who reached Italy in 2013. He lived in a reception center for around a year, but his stay ended as soon as he received humanitarian protection. One year was not long enough to develop a personal strategy of ‘integration’, which here simply means any number of things such as the need to learn a language, to obtain an educational qualification recognized and valid in Italy, to find a job and a place to stay in a selective rental market. Sissoko experienced a period of homelessness at the end of the reception project. He told me:

When my project finished [meaning that he had to leave the reception centre, because he received his permission to stay in the country], I found myself without a place to stay. All the people I knew were in centers too and they couldn’t host me. Only one of them could help me. He said, “You can come and stay here, but if they know I am hosting someone, they will throw me out.” [...] In that period, I used to go to his place around 10, 10.30 pm and leave at 6 am in order not to meet his boss [the manager of the reception center]. I didn’t know where I would spend the day. When I had some coins, I used to go to a coffee bar or to the park... although the park can be dangerous because there is a lot of police control [...] Then I found a place to stay and everything changed, [...] I started to fight for my future. I started to go to school. I used to go to CTP [public schools for adults where migrants learn Italian] in the morning and to a professional school in the afternoon. If you want to learn... if you want to change your life... how can you do it if you don’t have a home? If you don’t know where to sleep, how can you study?

Sissoko’s words demonstrate why migrants need a home. This is particularly evident for refugees and asylum seekers who reached Italy from 2000 onwards—and especially after 2010—who did not have access to consolidated migration chains linking country of origin and country of destination as many previous migrants did. Migration chains can be made up of individuals from the same family or from the same area of a country. These connections have facilitated the integration process for many, often the means through which newcomers could find a job and at least temporary accommodation. This is not to juxtapose too strongly the two groups or downplay the networks more recent migrants have developed, but to understand the challenges that too often exist. Sissoko did have friends in Italy when he found himself on the street, but those friends could not help him because they were living in the reception system themselves. It is useful to draw on Putnam’s differentiation between ‘bonding’ social capital (ties to people who are *like* you in some important way) and ‘bridging’ social capital (ties to people who are *unlike* you in some important way)’ (Putnam, 2007, p.

143). Refugees are often depicted as people without social capital, but often they do have networks even if formed only of people who are *like* them. In the case of Sissoko, having friends who lived in other reception centers did not offer him a solution. Sissoko's experience also helps overturn any simple idea that 'having a job is fundamental to finding a house'. For him, having a house was fundamental to developing any personal, professional and familiar project in a new city and country, an assumption that resonates with approaches to fight homelessness like housing first. Sissoko describes the moment when he found a place at La Salette as the start/re-start of personal projects that are the only means to gain, one day, housing independence.

### **5.3. La Salette as a transitory/temporary/intermittent home: a flexible house for precarious workers**

Having a roof over one's head can also support the ability to refuse low-wage and illegal jobs, as in the experience of Ibrahim, an Ivorian man. After a series of internships, he was able to reject any further internship positions, seeing them as a simple way to exploit migrants. This refusal allowed him to eventually obtain a proper contract. His stability at La Salette gave him the security he needed to build a strategy of negotiation with his employer, which would have been impossible without an affordable place to live.

Temporary, safe and cheap shelter was also essential to those seeking to reunite with their families. Family reunion is an expensive and complicated bureaucratic process that requires money and a home and that many migrants can only afford after years of savings. For many of the men, time and the support of the *team* at La Salette were essential. As a social worker stated:

The time at La Salette has been necessary for many to understand the bureaucracy, to collect information, money, and everything the family needed... and gave them emotional security: they knew that if something went wrong, they still had their room.

The fluidity and the flexibility of a context like La Salette allows them to make plans.

Since reaching Italy in 2011, Ibrahim had only worked in the fruit harvest in the Saluzzo area, an agricultural district which every year temporarily employs a large number of migrants. He usually works from May to October. In the last two years he has rented a room in a house with fellow countrymen; before then, he had slept in the streets or in informal camps. When there is no work in the countryside, he prefers to live in the city: 'I want to find a job here. In the countryside there is nothing to do in wintertime and nobody is there. All my friends are in Turin, so I prefer to stay here.'

For Ibrahim and others, La Salette is used as an 'intermittent home' for those with temporary jobs elsewhere but who need nonetheless to be based somewhere. In this house, he has the chance to maintain contact with his networks in Turin and to find a different job. La Salette's low rent has allowed him to rent a room close to where he works, avoiding the crowded and difficult conditions of formal or informal camps. This example is eloquent in demonstrating the link between housing paths and integration in the job market (Fravega, 2018), as well as the need to look at how specific job niches create specific living conditions.

In the case of seasonal jobs, permanence in a certain place is strictly linked with the temporality of the job rather than with a desire or a real possibility to settle down in that area. Thus the harvest season sees a flourishing of formal and informal camps in certain areas that attempt to respond to a housing need that is itself as temporary as the job. So, if the living conditions of the workers are an issue, where do they live when agriculture does not need their labor?

The idea of transitory/temporary/intermittent home also describes the importance of La Salette for the large number of inhabitants' friends who find a place to stay when they need to come to Turin for a period of time. The internal rules consider both the figure of the 'guest' (defined as someone who is temporarily hosted by a friend/relative) and of the 'substitute' (defined as someone who temporarily takes the place of an absent inhabitant, paying the contribution instead of them). Very commonly we see people who are living abroad return to Italy to renew their documents, a process that can last several months due to long waiting lists; this period can be often characterized by uncertainty and economic deprivation. Migrants do not just travel within Italy for work, but take advantage of transnational networks, as studied by Vereni (2015) and Buttino (2019). Similarly, I found this transitory/temporary/intermittent home as a need both for persons and objects or personal belongings; for examples, it is common in La Salette to find suitcases belonging to migrants working in the harvest in Spain or in Malta. This example, again, highlights the need for storage and shelter for those trapped in national or international mobility due to conditions of marginality (Wyss, 2019).

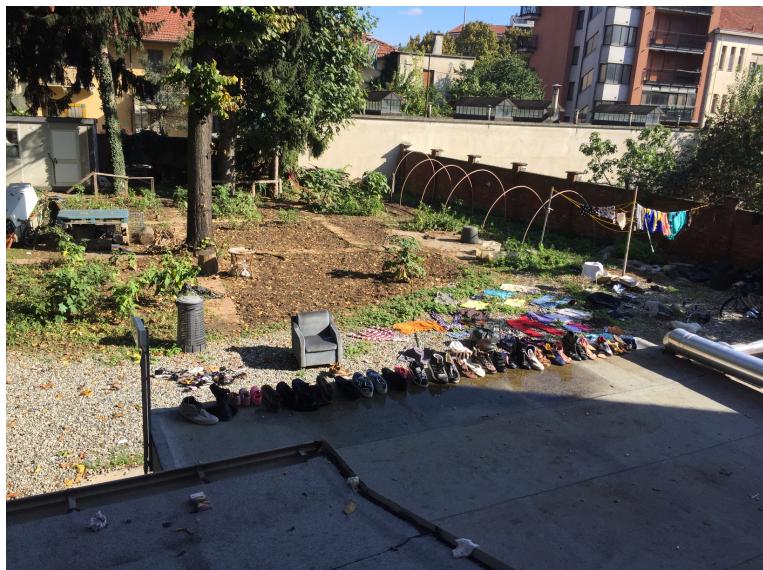
#### **5.4. The space as a resource: the development of informal economic strategies**

Beyond the link between housing paths and integration into the job market, there exists a further relationship between the space itself and informal economic strategies. Many of the refugees who arrived in Italy in the last ten years have faced significant challenges to entering the job market (Perino & Eve, 2017). Seasonal jobs in Italy and elsewhere in Europe

**Figure 4**

The yard is often used as a place to store objects..

Source: Author



represent a second choice for many. Others rely on informal jobs, or combine a number of activities (i.e. informal economies during the winter and fruit harvest in the spring and summer; informal economies in addition to badly paid jobs or short contracts, or in combination with work for food delivery companies such as Deliveroo and Just Eat).

We can observe a dynamism among many migrant strategies to survive a hostile setting. I focus here on the ‘circular economy’ i.e. the recycling of second-hand goods at a local scale (collection of scraps and other goods, such as second-hand clothes and shoes in order to sell them at local informal markets) or at an international scale (collection of material goods in order to send them to Africa; there is also a market for large second-hand goods such as cars and equipment) (Buttino, 2019).

Bernard, an engineer from Ivory Coast, once told me:

When I lost my job, during the 2009 economic crisis, I started selling used stuff at Porta Palazzo [a popular market in Turin]. I used to look for stuff in the garbage in the richest areas of the city. It’s unbelievable how many almost new things you can find in the garbage! If I find something and it’s broken, I keep it, I repair it and I either use it or I send it to my family in Africa.

La Salette’s big yard is important to those who practice this kind of activity. It is a place where inhabitants can stock materials and goods for international commerce or second-hand local markets. Meeting people here is relatively easy, and for this reason this is also a place where people can acquire useful skills with which to survive in the informal economy. One afternoon a few months ago, I met a man from Ghana I had never met before. I saw him in the distance, trying to pull iron wire out of an electric cable. He told me he was working in Germany (without contract, because his documents do not allow him to work outside Italy) and living in a shared flat with other friends. He came to Italy to renew his residency permit and he remained stuck here because of the long waiting time. Hosted by a friend at La Salette, he ran out of savings after two months. Not wanting to rely only on his friend, one day he sat in the yard close to Amada—an inhabitant of La Salette who for many years relied on a mix of seasonal work and informal jobs—to learn from him how to collect and sell iron. This example introduces the next category of social function of La Salette: networks.

### **5.5. The space as a social resource: the development of formal and informal networks**

Each of the stories above demonstrate the role La Salette plays in strengthening social networks, thus contributing to enriching both migrants’ ‘bonding’ and ‘bridging’ social capital (Putnam, 2007). La Salette is a concentration of people who speak different languages: some migrants speak very little Italian, while others master it and can informally help others. Those inhabitants with a low level of education can find help to book appointments in offices or read letters, among other things. La Salette is also made up of people who, at different stages of their lives, have all experienced what it’s like to live without a job. This has created different forms of internal solidarity that might not be extended to all inhabitants, but are distributed within smaller groups based on common origin, age, kin or affinity. People with no financial means can normally find some form of support within these small affinity

groups. This can be as simple as a hot meal twice a day. The circulation of objects and goods also means the presence of internal entrepreneurship. The second-hand fridges located in each room were often brought to La Salette by residents active in informal markets who have sold them on to others, providing a service to inhabitants who had to furnish their own room after renovation.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, the presence of a multidisciplinary *team* and the presence of volunteers make La Salette a place that connects migrants to others who are ‘unlike’ them (Putnam, 2007, p. 143), and this is very important too. These people are not inhabitants, but professionals or volunteers who chose to dedicate time, energy and resources to this project. An eloquent example of this is Lamin, a man from Ivory Coast who has been living at La Salette for three years after taking the place of a friend who found a job in another city in Italy. He is highly skilled and has a good job. When I met him, he had already started looking for accommodation, partly out of the desire for a private space and partly of a desire to be reunited with his family, but had not found anywhere yet. It is clear that the housing market is not accessible to those who have the necessary credentials, and much less so those who do not. After sharing with the social workers his intention to leave La Salette, they put him in contact with a non-profit organization that supports economically fragile people towards housing independence. Eventually, a volunteer who had often visited La Salette put Lamin in contact with a homeowner who agreed to rent him a flat.

La Salette demonstrates the importance of living in a place that facilitates encounters between migrants and locals who can help them in various ways or direct them to local services. All such formal and informal ties contribute to enriching the social capital of migrants and refugees. Through its shared spaces, La Salette becomes a place where information and connections to local professionals and volunteers are made accessible, while also facilitating both strong and weak ties between migrants from different backgrounds.

### **5.6. Cheap and safe remittances and investments in the home country**

Ali is a middle-aged man from Bangladesh. He fled to Italy from Libya in 2011, when the civil war erupted and the airports closed, forcing him and many others to try to cross the Mediterranean. He lives on the third floor, where eight of the ten men from Bangladesh who live at La Salette have their own room. They form a special group because of all they share beyond their language and nationality. First, their migration is not due to political problems in their country of origin. Second, they each have created their own private business (small food shops or a license to sell household products at the open-air market) or they have a legal job with a contract (several work as assistant chefs or dishwashers in restaurants). Those who are married do not plan to be reunited with their family still in Bangladesh, while younger ones have organized, or seek to organize, transnational marriages with girls back in Bangladesh (Della Puppa, 2014). In Ali’s case, his sons and daughters have all grown up. Some have already formed their own families, others are enrolled in secondary schools and

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<sup>7</sup> The only spaces furnished at expenses of the project were the communal spaces: the common rooms, the bathrooms and the kitchens.

universities. Reunification is not part of his migration plans at all, he is rather one of those who imagine their life in Italy as a temporary means to earn and save money in order to realize projects in their home country.

Similar to other such migrations characterized by an almost uniquely male mobility and imagined as temporary, this kind of migration is characterized by scarce investment in housing (Arbaci, 2008; Riccio, 2002). Investment remains centered in one's country of origin. La Salette's affordability meets this need and allows migrants to invest somewhere else. While not one of La Salette's formal goals, it clearly offers a space of great importance to migrants working towards such goals. It certainly leads many to remain here rather than look for other accommodation. This can represent an obstacle for the team of people working at La Salette because it makes the rotation of people more difficult, but it is important to look at it from the point of view of the migrants, who would not describe this as an opportunistic use, but as coherent with the wider aim of the place. This helps to describe and take into consideration the different migrants' needs and think about housing alternatives that can resonate with these needs.

## **6. Conclusions**

As Boccagni states, home is a multidimensional entity, *subjectively* and *politically* relevant (2017a, p. 64). Following this insight, this paper discusses both. The political value of La Salette emerged in its initial squatting, evident in the appropriation of a building to answer the housing needs of a large number of migrants, which can be seen in itself an experience of welfare from below. In the second phase—during the negotiations that created the legal framework that defines La Salette's role today and during the renovation work—political values were made evident through the will to put the inhabitants and their housing needs at the core of the whole process. In its third and current phase, the political value of La Salette is evident in the constant effort made by the team to enhance the active participation of the inhabitants in the management of the building itself.

The subjective and individual level enabled me to focus on how migrants live and use this space. I identified some of the 'individual uses' of this shelter to analyze the 'social functions' fulfilled by a space like La Salette. In opposition to what often happens in reception centers, La Salette allows migrants to have their own autonomy and stability. Its study sheds light on the processuality of migration, a rare reflection on migrant housing needs after leaving the reception facilities while still lacking housing and secure job.

It's clear that a number of individual and collective needs met by the collective transitory residence would not find a suitable answers elsewhere—a private or a shared flat, for example. This makes La Salette what Belloni calls a 'desirable accommodation' (2016, p. 518) for some migrants in a certain stage of their migration process. Deconstructing the mainstream idea of 'home' as the goal of each and every migrant at each stage of their migration process should push us to think about housing alternatives that provide an answer to different needs. As Tosi suggests, we are in need of housing politics built *ad hoc* around the needs of marginalized and economically disadvantaged populations, especially in those

countries where social welfare is lacking (Tosi, 2017). I hope that this contribution is a step towards this goal.

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