

## Sandra, her research and “doing together”

### ETICity – Exploring Territories, Imaging the City

**ETICity – Exploring Territories, Imaging the City** is an association formed by a group of independent researchers in urban studies. It is a shared space where individuals with different expertise converge to develop projects in which the research outputs can be used as a working tool for cities and territories.  
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#### **Abstract**

The contribution aims at presenting the publication “Staying put! An anti-gentrification handbook for Southern European cities”, as one of the latest output of the work of Sandra Annunziata. Sandra was an Italian researcher in the field of urban studies, who left us in January 2019 after completing a large research project on housing rights in Madrid, Athens and Rome, which had international relevance in the field of gentrification studies. The paper illustrate Sandra’s work and research approach, defined as “doing together”, from the viewpoint of ETICity the association who Sandra contributed to found in 2012.

#### **Keywords**

Gentrification, Southern Europe, action-research, research methods, Sandra Annunziata

Sandra Annunziata was an Italian urban studies researcher, an urban planner and more than a friend. Sandra left us suddenly and unexpectedly in January 2019, after completing a large research project on housing rights in Madrid, Athens and Rome, thanks to a Marie Curie grant carried out at the Geography Department at Leicester University in the UK.<sup>1</sup> This research primarily resulted in an anti-gentrification toolkit, built together with different groups of European activists fighting for the right to housing. Sandra was able to complete her project but she could not see it published and disseminated. ETICity, the association for

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<sup>1</sup> Principal Investigator: Lees, L. Co-Investigator: Annunziata, S. FP7-PEOPLE-2013 Marie Curie Action Fellowship 2014-2016 ‘AGAPE: Exploring anti-gentrification practices and policies in Southern European Cities’.

urban studies that she contributed to and founded, worked with a group of researchers<sup>2</sup> coordinated by professor Loretta Lees to make the toolkit available. The toolkit<sup>3</sup> was presented in October 2020, during a very well-attended online meeting organised by ETICity.

With this short text, we want to express the meaning, according to us, of this anti-gentrification toolkit and more broadly to narrate Sandra's research experience. We do so as friends of Sandra and as a group of feminist grassroots urban researchers structured around the collective project (ETICity) that we shared with her. Our reflection does not aim to speak for others, and we hope instead more will be able to add to these reflections in the future. The starting point for us is a simple question: how can we, from our standpoint, summarise Sandra's research approach? In life and work, we realised, it could be simply stated as “doing together”, a quite unconventional approach to academia. Urban studies research looks at and feeds on the city: the city discloses itself in urban planning, in its phenomenology and in its organisation. The task of those who study it is to know how to respectively explore its limits and its potential, building space for the future of each and every one. The perspectives useful for this challenge must be diverse and interconnected, multidimensional as is urban complexity itself. The city, as our mentors taught us, must first be imagined and dreamed. The desires of those who did it, in the past and up to now, have been so strong that they were eventually able to generate experiences and physical places, spaces dense with inspiration.

We founded ETICity in 2012 after sharing a PhD course where we experienced academia's senseless competitiveness and mainly inward-looking approach. We decided to build a common space of reflection and research, able to work in an opposite way, based on collectiveness, cooperation, sharing a common interpretation and narration of the complex issues that the city makes visible. In this sense, ETICity explores territories and brings imagination to and for the city. By associating ourselves, we meant to shape our tiny manifesto for giving back the deserved respect to research and turning it back to the unconditional support of alternative knowledge, territories and people.

Sandra's research journey, together with ETICity, started from Rome's neighbourhoods. The practice of involvement and sharing became a building block of her research, which later landed on the housing issue. We cannot know where her energy would have brought her over the years, but certainly ongoing urban transformations and social practices always struck her interest. The quality of her analysis and the originality of her point of view were acknowledged throughout the development of her academic career. She substantially contributed to the development of the concept of gentrification in Southern Europe, quite a peculiar context, where gentrification is much less studied and develops differently from the Anglo-Saxon context, where the concept was originally conceived.

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<sup>2</sup> The group included (at least) Clara Rivas Alonso, Eduardo Ascensao, Giulia Barra, Ana Estevens, Philipp Katsinas, Stefano Portelli and Alvaro Ardura Urquiaga, who contributed to editing and translating the text in English, Spanish, Greek and Portuguese. For a complete list of contributors, see the credits in the various translations.

<sup>3</sup> English version available here: <http://www.eticity.it/w/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Toolkit-Staying-Put-English.pdf>

Sandra's research aimed to offer a contribution to Southern European anti-eviction and anti-gentrification networks, transposing the reflections and practices she studied in the UK to Spain, Italy and Greece. She contextualised and adapted gentrification concepts to the specific economic, political and social situation of Southern European countries, also to unfold the impacts of the unpopular 'austerity' measures imposed by the European Union on individual governments. The sale of public assets and building stock, together with the financialisation and privatisation of public credit institutions and the institutional bailout of private banks and credit institutions, in recent years amplified the accumulation of wealth, while condemning millions of individuals—already disadvantaged and discriminated—to deeper misery and expulsion. These policies and their effects are denounced with decision and courage by resistance movements from different countries, but often in a fragmented way. On the contrary, Sandra saw in the university a social force capable of weaving relationships of alliances and support between these networks, through a politically conscious use of knowledge. A force that is also able to interact with governments to induce them to review the most exclusionary and divisive policies, assessing and acknowledging their impact on the most vulnerable populations.

In her research, Sandra worked with and involved inhabitants, citizens, activists, friends and other researchers. She believed that dialogue and mutual listening could allow new interpretations of occurring phenomena, enabling new alternatives and new forms of resistance to social injustice. In her writings, stories about evictions, life struggles, the appropriation of new places, possible solutions and joint management emerge. Above all, her feminist approach and her respect for places and times are evident, together with her attitude of supporting communities in political and social action, working in a field that deals with people's emotionality and dignity. In this quest, Sandra never imposed herself, and she worked under the rules and conditions set by local contexts. Her research approach implied listening and putting herself at the disposal of communities.

The workshop she organised in Rome in October 2016, which brought together different European expertise and practices, can be seen as a clue of the potential of her approach. In the words of one of the participants, Philippe Katsinas, the workshop created a space for a real discussion on displacement and gentrification, bringing together scholars, activists and inhabitants of Southern European cities:

The array of activists who attended underlined the diversity of those fighting gentrification in Southern Europe, some were middle class, some were low income and marginalised, some identified as Gypsy and some of the latter had never been on a plane before. Hearing all the different practices used to fight gentrification in cities like Madrid, Lisbon, Athens and Rome, was an important learning experience for everyone. These were compared with tactics used in Northern European cities and elsewhere. The everyday experience of resistance was in the room, the difficulty of staying put was in the room, and

the need for much more detailed studies of resistance to gentrification and of alternatives was also in the room.<sup>4</sup>

The toolkit is the synthetic outcome of this long-lasting project of mutual discussion, and in this sense, it acts like a platform. Moreover, it is a guidance for resistance with simple and effective visuals. A pamphlet in a thousand languages and colours addressing anyone at risk of or experiencing expulsion and anyone who is looking for tools, relationships and frameworks to read the phenomenology of the housing emergency.

Sandra has been a master in transposing technical knowledge into shared action. As a teacher, she hugely spread this approach through laboratories, workshops, urban walks, shared writings and drawings. Under the amazed gazes of her students, whom she called her “winter flowers”, Sandra lectured, listened, provoked and encouraged them to express their points of views, step by step overcoming their reluctance. She asked students to sit in a circle, and read for them and with them important texts about the sense of urban design and planning, of urban space, and about the available tools for action. She shared interpretations, instilled doubts, demanded reflexive projects, based on the fieldwork she did with students.

Her (too short) teaching experience as a recent tenure track professor was based on listening, mirroring her research approach. It left us a perspective to reflect on the potential of a “productive Rome”, to relaunch the local economy of an inward-looking city as a means to counteract increasing urban speculation.

Sandra’s research, teaching and activism aimed at questioning and overturning dominant narratives. Her search for an *other* story, for an *other* way for the city based on a collective dimension will never leave us. It shapes our collective work today, not in her loving memory, but, still, with Sandra on our side.

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<sup>4</sup> Philipp Katsinas reviews anti-gentrification workshop, ‘Staying Put’ see <https://www.city-analysis.net/2017/02/10/philipp-katsinas-reviews-anti-gentrification-workshop-staying-put/>