



'Batti il 5!': Grassroots strategies against the administrative invisibilisation of Rome's housing squatters before and during the pandemic

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Abstract

Since the 2008 financial crash, housing vulnerability has been acknowledged as a determinant in the erosion of the social and territorial cohesion that is jeopardising the existence of urban communities. However, this recognition departs from the reality of housing policies implemented by states, who largely prioritise the continuity of neoliberal urbanisation over the pursuit of spatialised justice. This approach is exemplified by Article 5 of the 2014 Italian National Housing Plan, which represents the core of governmental effort to repress grassroots responses to the habitation crisis that exploded post-2008. The law aims to discourage the phenomenon of squatting vacant urban space for dwelling by stripping the possibility of housing squatters to have a legally registered address, hence of the civil and social rights connected to formally reckoned urban citizenship. Drawing upon the ethnographic materials collected during my activist-research since 2015 inside the Blocchi Precari Metropolitani collective (as part of the larger Housing Rights Movements, hereby HRMs), the article discusses the practical, political and theoretical relevance of grassroots strategies and contentious politics adopted by the HRMs in Rome to contrast the effects of the law from 2014 onwards, focusing on the critical turning point of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic.

Keywords

Article 5, squatting, housing crisis, Housing Rights Movements, Rome

Introduction

Since the 2008 explosion of the subprime mortgage bubble, the housing crisis ravaging cities globally has become one of the pivotal topics in debates dealing with wealth



inequalities, the dismantling of the social welfare state, austerity politics, financialisation, and the new role of grassroots social movements. A burgeoning trend of interdisciplinary scholarship has analysed the surge in housing vulnerability, and the lack of decent and affordable dwellings, especially in Southern European countries disrupted by the austerity politics demanded by the ‘so-called’ Troika (see SqEK 2013, 2014; Stavrides, 2016). On a global scale, the attention paid to housing precarity and vulnerability has spurred in-depth inquiries about urban poverty through the lens provided by housing dispossession (Desmond, 2016; Madden & Marcuse, 2016), as well as the biopolitical underpinnings of indebtedness (García-Lamarca & Kaika, 2016). Related literature has shed light on how the global hyper-financialisation of housing (e.g., Aalbers, 2016) generates housing vulnerability, whilst other scholars have investigated place-based politics manifesting housing discontent (e.g., Vasudevan, 2017; Lancione, 2018).

The empirical evidence collected by the literature is validated by recent accounts about the structural character of housing vulnerability provided by transnational research centres and institutions like the OECD (2021), Eurofound (2020) and EuroStat (2021). These actors have longitudinally explored the surge in housing prices, rents and inflation in EU countries, confirming the post-2008 trend in the increase of the housing overburden rate, as well as the spike in the indicators of housing vulnerability (number of households in arrears on mortgage, rent and/or utility bills; eviction and foreclosure rates; homelessness rates). More recent data has also begun to shed light upon the escalation of the housing crisis caused by the socioeconomic repercussions of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. These institutions also acknowledge how the ‘housing crisis’ foments social and territorial disintegration as it fundamentally alters the metabolism of urban economies and everyday life. For instance, recent policy briefs and reports filed by transnational institutions like the OECD’s Housing Gateway, the Eurofound’s “Living, working and COVID-19” (2020), as well as the EURoma report on decent and affordable housing adopted by the EU Parliament in February 2021 (EURoma, 2021), have started to recognise the right to affordable and decent housing as one of the European Pillars of Social rights. They furthermore acknowledge how housing vulnerability affects the growth of socioeconomic inequalities, hence the depletion of social cohesion and increasing social polarization fomented by the erosion of the sense of citizenship.

Nevertheless, international scholarship and grey literature are still treating the different manifestations of housing vulnerability as the ‘special concerns’ of ‘people imagined as exceptional groups: chiefly the poor, the elderly, ethnic minorities, and single parent households, and seeks ways to integrate them into the existing housing market’ (Madden & Marcuse, 2016, p. 46). In other words, much scholarship adopts methodological individualism as a way to conceal the structural inequality of current housing systems, or to reduce them to a purely supply/demand problem (ibid.). Hence, they also pay little attention as to how single countries, who have formally endorsed these declarations, protocols and resolutions, systematically adopt measures that criminalise and militarise the consequences of the housing crisis—for instance treating foreclosures and evictions as a matter of broken law and order—instead of putting their structural causes into question. This ends up creating

further social polarisation and territorial disaggregation, while causing the destitution and the deepening of intersectional inequalities. Recent interdisciplinary, radical scholarship has begun to uncover this hypocrisy, showing the gross mismatch between what is formally legal and what creates (or undermines) spatialised justice in increasingly conflicted and strained cities.

For instance, Michele Lancione's ethnographic work on the eradication of the Roma community living in the central district of Vulturilor, in Bucharest (2018), has reconstructed the genealogy of institutional destitution, and spatial displacement, of the most vulnerable and stigmatised population that stems from the connivance between the real-estate mafia and the national government in Romania in furthering the privatisation of nearly all the Romanian housing stock. Innovative scholarship is shedding light on the existential threat to the urban (Rossi, 2021) posed by urbicidal patterns of neoliberal urbanisation (Lesutis, 2020) and hyper-commodification of housing (Aalbers, 2016; Tulumello et al., 2021) that deepen what I define here as the 'urban habitability crisis.' This novel concept is intended to represent the current, advanced stage of the housing crisis on a global scale, where the whole ecosystem of habitation, the everyday life of its inhabitants, their infrastructures and sociabilities are put in jeopardy. Since the socioeconomic and habitability repercussions of the pandemic make questioning these patterns of urbanity even more urgent, the article aligns with this trend of scholarship, discussing the grassroots strategies adopted by Housing Rights Movements (henceforth HRMs) in Rome to contrast the effects of Article 5 of the 2014 National Housing Plan.

The latter—infamously known within HRMs, housing squatters and their various solidarity networks just as 'Article 5' (l'articolo 5)—represents the core of the Italian strategy against squatting and repurposing of urban vacancies for housing (the phenomenon of the so-called 'occupazioni abitative', housing squats) that have grown in Italian cities like Rome during the post-financial crash recession and austerity. In fact, the gross mismatch between the mostly privatised housing stock and the growing post-2008 demand for public housing, coupled with the overabundance of urban vacancies (Mudu, 2014; Gentili & Hoekstra, 2018) led to a resurgence of the HRMs and tenants' union activism on a national scale. The latter has included the intensification of squatting actions in cities like Rome where squatting has formed part of consolidated urban social movements and a fundamental point of reference for destitute, marginalised, poorly housed populations since at least the 1970s (Vasudevan, 2017; Grazioli, 2021a; Caciagli, 2022). In a nutshell, the law prohibits local civil registries to accept a squatted home as a legally valid address, hence excluding squatters from all social welfare provisions, civil rights and essential facilities that are accessed through this mechanism. Furthermore, the lack of a registered home address substantially illegalises migrant squatters since they cannot apply for, renew or upgrade their visas, causing them to lose their status, or to make them unable to legally reunite with their family members (including children and partners). Regardless of the sheer contrast between the rhetoric of universal 'human rights' and the institutional discrimination introduced by this law, it has never received any formal censorship or contestation by institutional bodies, whilst grassroots movements and their networks have been mobilising and campaigning since 2014

to mitigate its effects and demand its withdraw. These actions and demands have become even more critical since the pandemic erupted, since Article 5 represents a concrete threat to the collective health and welfare of housing squatters, hence to the whole urban environment.

Against this backdrop, I propose to illuminate how HRMs, and housing squats affiliated with them, have coped in everyday life with the effects of Article 5, while working intensely to build a wide and heterogeneous coalition to demand its withdraw. These demands have become politically thicker since the beginning of the pandemic, the latter having visibilised the threat to general welfare caused by a piece of legislation that has weaponised social and civil rights against those who have been driven to cope with their housing vulnerability from below. For this purpose, my article analyses the efforts deployed by the movement since March 2020, alongside the politics deployed since the Article came into force in 2014. The first section briefly addresses the methodological and political implications of the activist ethnography I have been conducting inside the Blocchi Precari Metropolitan (hereby BPM) collective—part of the larger Movement for the Right to Habitation (Movimento per il Diritto all’Abitare) in Rome since early 2015 (Grazioli, 2017, 2018, 2021a). The following section then proceeds to elucidate the genealogy of Article 5 within the long-standing culture of administrative invisibilisation as a tool for disciplining and punishing the houseless and the poor which has characterised Italian (and Rome’s) urbanism at least since the Fascist regime, then the effects of Article 5 from 2014 to the turning point of the current Covid-19 pandemic. The latter unearths not only the noxious consequences of the law, but the crucial resilience of the actions, and coalitions, that HRMs have consolidated during the years. The conclusion summarises my main points and proposes future lines of inquiry about similar measures that can make radical, militant scholars effective allies in the struggle against the ‘habitability crisis’ affecting cities globally

The activist ethnographic methodology inside housing squats in Rome

Before delving into the analysis of the daily effects unleashed by Article 5, I first account for the activist-ethnographic methodology (Colectivo Situaciones, 2003; Graeber, 2009; Boni et al., 2020) from which my research stems. It emerges from a growing trend of ‘carnal’ methodologies that engage the researcher’s subjectivity and positionality to illuminate how individual and collective bodies situated within their daily micropolitics are affected by social structures and interact with space (Wacquant, 2006; Papadopoulos, 2014). The practice of activist ethnography radically challenges the assumption that social sciences could, and should, retain a distance from their study ‘object’ even in front of gross manifestations of racialised, gendered, spatialised, class injustice to produce meaningful research (Scheper-Hughes, 1995; Portelli & Tschoepe, 2021). On the other hand, activist scholars embrace ‘as minimal requirement [that] activist ethnographies must always stress the inseparability of knowledge and action, which impel them to be self-consciously interventionist in approach’ (Routledge, 2013, p. 267). This encompasses a shift from the objectification of their research to the subjectivation of their and others’ positionality, as the activist scholar puts their bodily and political commitment on the line to cooperate with others towards a political goal

(Lancione, 2016). The co-production of knowledge thus pursues the development, and dissemination, of radical struggles and conflicts against the intersectional, spatialised manifestations of injustice, exploitation and oppression, including housing vulnerability (Lancione, 2018; Grazioli, 2021a; Portelli & Tschoepe, 2021).

In my case, being an activist-scholar while inhabiting the housing squats ‘affiliated’ with the HRMs in Rome required experiencing, and participating in, the different forms of contentious politics and commoning of everyday life that housing squatters and movements create inside the city (Grazioli, 2021a; Caciagli, 2022). In terms of my own positionality towards the topic of this paper—Article 5’s implementation and the grassroots practices and contentious politics countering its multilevel effects—this law was already in effect when I moved into the first housing squat where I started my fieldwork in early 2015 (Grazioli, 2018, 2021a). I thus personally experienced a first layer of discrimination as I could not change my home address to the city and place where I was living. Besides, being an activist, housing squatter and scholar meant taking stock of, and countering, the daily effects of Article 5 on the everyday life of the people with whom I was living, participating in the ‘tireless practical work, not for this less politically committed, of relating with institutions’ (Boni et al., 2020, p. 84) to counter Article 5’s everyday effects.

The ethnographic materials presented in this paper—fieldwork observations, photographs, interview excerpts and transcriptions of informal interactions—thus reflects the different layers of the HRMs activism of which I form part. While I conducted 15 semi-structured, recorded interviews with the local administrations and social welfare workers who are involved in the municipal governance of housing (Grazioli, 2021b), squatters’ testimonies are drawn from unrecorded interactions occurring in daily life and activism inside housing squats. Archival research on policy briefs, documents, laws and literature is mobilised to provide a genealogical overview of Article 5 as one of the gross manifestations of the ‘urban habitability crisis’ that is jeopardising the right to inhabitation of the least affluent (and more discriminated) urban dwellers.

Disciplining and punishing the urban poor

The Italian state and the city of Rome bear a long tradition of weaponizing home address registration (the *residenza*) to curtail the right of the poor and precariously housed to stay put in the city (Grazioli & Caciagli, 2018). The first example in the contemporary era of this trend is represented by the so-called ‘measures against urbanism’ (*provvedimenti contro l’urbanesimo*) adopted by the Fascist regime in 1939. Their national goal was to curb the mobility and settlement of prospective urbanites moving to urban areas from rural and inner regions, while furthering real estate development (Campos Venuti, 1978; Villani, 2012). The core way to do this was the bureaucratic ban for new urbanites to indicate their home address in cities where they would move. The laws also included the removal of rent caps and the concession of large urban areas to real estate developers (Della Seta, 1954; Cederna, 1979, 2006; Grazioli, 2021a). It is relevant to note that these measures were repealed only in 1961, hence many years after the fall of the regime. As Gallo (2020) discusses, the later

‘democratic’ governments decided not only to keep this law package, but to implement it rigorously, as they acknowledged the link between freedom of movement and the nurturing of urban social movements demanding labour and welfare rights (Berlinguer & Della Seta, 1960; Vasudevan, 2017). During the following decades, this consideration has also informed the institutional responses against the globalised patterns of migration that have transformed the urban, its forms of habitation and governmentality, as transdisciplinary scholarship broadly acknowledges (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013; Dadusc et al., 2019).

Well before Article 5’s implementation, Gargiulo (2011) in fact observed that local administrators in different Italian areas have weaponised legal address registration since the so-called “migration emergency” had become a politically (and electorally sensitive) topic. The author then recalled the common logic that undergirds the panoply of locally restrictive access criteria to urban citizenship and facilities that target the undesirable populations of the moment: usually Roma people, migrants, homeless and urban dwellers who live their sociabilities in public, free spaces. Beyond the variety of local specificities, these measures inform that culture of ‘décor urbanism’ (Grazioli, 2020) that postulates the presence of undesired populations as a jeopardy to urban decency and safety, thus providing a justification for increasing enclosure, and gentrification, of public spaces and facilities (Pitch, 2013; Grazioli, 2020). Against this backdrop, a seemingly disproportionately punitive measure like Article 5 contained in the so-called 2014 ‘National Housing Plan’ (Law n. 80, 23 May 2014) appears in line with the Italian tradition to discipline and punish autonomous settlement and movement (Papadopoulos & Tsianos, 2013), as well as with the contemporary spirit of anti-migration and urban security packages (the so-called *pacchetti sicurezza*; see Gargiulo, 2020) that seek to restrict the mobility and settlement options of people in urban and non-urban settings (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013; Papadopoulos & Tsianos, 2013; Montagna & Grazioli, 2019).

Article 5 was designed by the Italian government to counter the housing-related social unrest that emerged in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crash, and that was epitomised by the contentious politics expressed by HRMs in Italy, and especially in Rome, with the so-called 2012-2013 ‘Tsunami Tours’. The latter were simultaneous rounds of squatting of vacant buildings that were realised in December 2012 and April 2013 in different parts of the city by households and individuals in a condition of housing vulnerability or sheer homelessness, supported logistically and politically by different groups concerned with the right to stay put in the city (Grazioli & Caciagli, 2018). The coalition featured *Blocchi Precari Metropolitan*i (hereby BPM), the *Coordinamento Cittadino di Lotta per la Casa* (City Coordination of the Housing Struggle) and other groups like *Comitato Obiettivo Casa* (Committee Objective Housing), *Action*, the grassroots tenants’ unions such as *A.S.i.A.-USB* and finally smaller collectives of precarious workers, students and artists (Armati, 2015; Nur & Sethman 2017).

This practice differed from the occupations in the 1970s. While the latter were mainly targeting unassigned council estates, the *Tsunami Tours* mostly involved the repurposing of urban vacancies and interstices (Brighenti, 2013; Parisi, 2019) that were not necessarily intended for residential uses (like former factories, administrative headquarters, abandoned

warehouses). Another point of distinction was the extremely mestiza composition of the new housing squatters, as the Italian housing squatters have been joined by migrants coming from Central and South America, Horn of Africa, Maghreb and Eastern Europe, in particular Romania and Ukraine (Grazioli, 2021a). Following these events, rather than changing the course of its planning and housing policies, the national government chose to respond to the visibility of the housing question by disciplining and punishing present and prospective housing squatters. Alongside extending the concessions for the sale of public assets (including houses) in Article 3, the Housing Plan aimed at ‘countering the illegal squatting of buildings’ stipulating that:

Whoever squats a building illegally [...] cannot apply for residency, nor service activation in the same building; every legal act and service activated in contravention of the provision of this law is to be considered invalid to all legal purposes [...]. The current legal framework allows those who have squatted illegally to register their residency there, even in the presence of penal felonies or convictions. This norm aims at restoring lawfulness where it is compromised by penally-relevant deeds. Through the ongoing regulation, the aim is also to decrease the phenomenon of squatting by 40 per cent. (Government of Italy, 2014)

As Gargiulo points out (2020, p. 13), a legally valid address should in principle only certify where one person actually lives, hence the interactions they establish, and the essential facilities they need to access as long as they reside in a specific place. In the long term, the endurance of this presence enables households to obtain progressive prerogatives (like, for instance, the allotment of a public house), whose fruition is subject to the recognised continuity of relation with the territory, its services and society. The formal recognition of this continuity, moreover, is critical for those migrants who wish to convert a temporary visa in a permanent one or apply for citizenship. On the other hand, Article 5 formally severs the tie of housing squatters with the place where they live by making their presence illegitimate, hence formally invisible while daily disciplined and punished (Gargiulo, 2020, p.131), transforming residency in a tool of differential inclusion after citizenship (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013; Dadusc et al., 2019).

Since the law’s entrance into force, it was evident how it was tailored to maximise the consequences on the major population of squatted dwellers (poor, migrant, precarious subjects), hoping to discourage prospective ones to take action and join HRMs in the future (Grazioli, 2021a, b). As already underlined, a legally valid address is necessary to access local social welfare provisions like education and healthcare, having an ID card, as well as to vote and be elected. Besides, the customary adoption of the ‘*ius domicili*’ for granting long and even short-term visas has made the possession of a legally valid address a threshold of differential inclusion for the vast majority of migrants, including recent EU citizens (especially from Central-Eastern Europe) (Caritas, 2019; Maestri, 2019). By this token, the lack of the residency may determine the impossibility to obtain— or the loss of—a visa, making people administratively invisible and at the same time especially visible to the threat of deportation (de Genova, 2010). Hence, not having a residence means being administrative ghosts—as graphically rendered during a demonstration in April 2021, see Figure 1—and

Figure 1

A demonstrator is dressed as a ghost to illustrate the administrative invisibilisation suffered by housing squatters since the application of Article 5 of the 2014 Housing Plan (April 2021). **Source: Author.**



being stripped of both civil and social rights in the moment of the occupation and also prospectively, as housing squatters are excluded from the allocation of public houses for the following five years and from every legalisation procedure while Article 5 is still operative. On top of these discriminations, it is forbidden for utility providers to provide contracts inside squatted abodes and they are authorised to cut even essential services like water at any time.

If the discriminatory target of Article 5 has been achieved, the deterrent effect for preventing and emptying housing squats has not worked, given the unresolved housing vulnerability affecting Rome. Hence, public authorities continue to resort to the spectacularisation of forcible evictions to enforce their deterrence, as exemplified by the brutal eradication of the Piazza Indipendenza housing squat, inhabited by hundreds of refugees and asylum seekers, whose snapshots have travelled across the world (Montagna & Grazioli, 2019). On the other hand, institutions like local municipalities, welfare services and healthcare agencies (Aziende Sanitarie Locali, henceforth ASL) have been substantially left alone to handle the essential demands of the invisible dwellers of their constituencies, and are the recipients of grassroots claims brought forward by HRMs.

'Batti il 5!'

How can you imply that we do not welcome children living in housing squats? We have plenty of them in the other classes. It is just that, with Covid, the bureaucratic problems have increased, and we do not have many spots left because of the required social distancing...

I received this reply during a quite spirited exchange I had in the school principal's office of a relatively affluent neighbourhood of Rome in September 2020. It condenses the issues that, as activists, we have been frequently confronted with, and the tactics with which we had to experiment, when intervening to remove the obstacles caused by Article 5 in terms of accessing essential rights, like public school education. On top of the stigma of being 'challenging children' due to their socioeconomic, ethnic and dwelling background, the kids living in housing squats have often risked being excluded from schooling since Article 5 was adopted. First of all, they cannot be enrolled through the 'regular' online application channels reserved for formally recognised local citizens. Hence, their parents or legal guardians would often go by themselves to the schools to ask to enrol their kids, often facing abrupt rejections. At that point, we as activists would often mobilise our contacts in the local municipalities, demanding them to explicitly ask the schools to bypass formal registration and enrol kids in their corresponding public school. If this step was ineffective, we would take the matter into our own hands through going with the families, kids and local social workers (if available) to talk directly to the schools' principals and administrators. Usually, this last step would do the trick.

This case exemplifies how frontline social workers and local municipalities are forced to mediate between the formal constraints imposed by Article 5, and the necessity to devise informal protocols, street-level practices and forms of coordination with squatters and their grassroots representatives (Grazioli, 2021b) to enshrine fundamental—and in theory constitutionally protected—social needs like going to school, accessing healthcare and obtaining essential tools of social protection. Obviously, the degree of cooperation, or conflict, that develops during these interactions depends on different factors including the administrative continuity and the cultural-political alignment of the local politicians and administrators. Nevertheless, it can be said that the squatters' relation with HRMs usually facilitates the relation with local institutions, whilst other types of squatted dwellings (like temporary occupied areas, single squatted apartments, informal settlements and housing squats that are politically disconnected) that are less politically coordinated become more vulnerable to being neglected and/or forcibly evicted when the times comes (Montagna & Grazioli, 2019). Given this differentiation, HRMs, NGOs, associations, legal aid and solidarity groups have done their best since 2015 to campaign against Article 5's general effects. Despite the numerous and even radical protests carried out since its first year of application (Figures 2 and 3) and even declarations of intent made by some MPs and politicians, the changing governments since 2014 have refused to waive Article 5.



Figure 2

Housing squatters during the occupation of the Anagrafe of via Petroselli, Rome, January 2015.

Source: author.



Figure 3

Children and parents opening the #kidzbloc march against Article 5, October 2015.

Source: author.

In the meantime, the application of Article 5 has determined recurring loops of socioeconomic and housing vulnerability that also compound the already existing discriminations dictated by the current management of welfare and migration systems. This is well exemplified by the bureaucratic odyssey that S., a Moroccan woman, described in July 2021 when she came to the fortnightly infopoint at the Viale delle Province 198 housing squat. S. had been coming to the infopoint since its inauguration in March 2021, when she was striving to obtain a diagnosis, then adequate therapies, for her youngest child:

I am acutely aware that Article 5 is still active, yet I am in disbelief about how it is applied. As you all know, it has taken months to obtain a referral and a medical certificate verifying my son's condition. The certificate clearly states he needs home therapy as well as school and treatments' support. Yet my child needs to appear in my own visa and family certificate to obtain these things. Because of Article 5 I had to get the Modesta Valenti [fictional] address. It was no big deal for me as I have an indefinite leave to remain as I moved in Italy when I was a kid with my mom. Yet my child, who was born after 2014, never got to have a legally valid address. Yet I thought that with a diagnosis he would be exempted from Article 5. So I went two days ago by myself to the [Rome's] Immigration Office in via Patini. It was genuinely awful. As soon as I showed my own visa and address to the reception, they called an officer to the guardhouse. It was also embarrassing, all the other people in line were staring at me wondering what the hell did I do not to even get the waitlist ticket. They explained I cannot use the Modesta Valenti address for my kid as well, nor add him to my visa unless I forgo my indefinite leave to remain and trade it with a temporary, six month medical care visa where my child could be recorded even without an address. Of course, I refused and left. So here I am. What do you suggest? Can you help me reach out to a lawyer? What happened is inhumane, my kid needs the therapy as soon as possible. And is such a proposal even legal?

The discrepancy between Article 5's 'neoliberally punitive approach' (Peck, 2003; Dikeç, 2007) and the abstract tenets of legality are also epitomised by the fact that many housing squatters decide to circumvent this issue by buying fake residencies through different intermediaries, who also include crooked municipal officers. This issue has long been a point of protest by HRMs, NGOs and legal aid associations since Article 5 came into force; besides, this activity has also come to light through judicial investigations like the one that in 2020 involving some registrars' officers in one of Rome's administrative districts. Notwithstanding, the phenomenon is still thriving, as A. explained during the first day of the Viale delle Province infopoint in March 2021:

I know it is wrong, and that you [activists] advise against doing this. I know, you told me many times. Yet I thought it was my only option to try and get a visa. I bought the address just for myself. You know there is a pricelist for house addresses based on the number of members of the household? I paid 500 euros just for myself, and now this piece of shit does not answer the phone. I cannot collect the documents that are in his mailbox. To add salt to the wound, I became aware that the dude has declared I do not live there any longer, probably because he wants to sell the address

to someone else. My visa application was bounced back and I was also flagged for false declaration of address. So, I am basically back at the square one, I am fucked!

Given this phenomenon, in 2018 the national government allowed local municipalities to extend the application of the so-called ‘fictional residency’, an address in a non-existent location that had been originally designed to guarantee homeless people with the access to essential facilities like a mailbox and healthcare (Gargiulo, 2011, 2020). Nevertheless, the unfitness of this tool to tackle the problems generated by Article 5 was already shown through the interviews I conducted in 2019 with local administrators and social workers employed in five of Rome’s municipalities. First of all, the spike in the number of applications for fictional addresses has put a considerable strain on local registrars and municipalities that are structurally understaffed and that would need ‘more resources and personnel exclusively trained and dedicated to housing policies’, as underlined in April 2019 by the former president of Rome’s Fifth Municipality, Giovanni Boccuzzi. Secondly, peripheral municipalities like the Fifth and Sixth, where there is the higher concentration of housing squats and squatted public houses, have been unable to process the number of requests and have accumulated three- to six-month backlogs even before the pandemic, despite shortening the application procedure (for instance, collecting the applications via email; or reducing the interviews to 15 minutes each). Furthermore, the conflation between limited resources and the lack of adequately trained human resources (e.g., cultural mediators and interpreters) often caused very long queues, mutual misunderstandings and tensions between applicants and social workers, as I have had the chance to experience first-hand many times when going to administrative offices for interviews and queries. Another fundamental point is that the lack of a ‘regular’ home address becomes a fundamental obstacle when it comes to exploring potential relocation options in the case of eviction procedures. First of all, Article 5 formally prevents local administrators from allocating public housing stock to permanently resolve the housing deprivation experienced by those who are forcibly evicted from squatted buildings, apartments or informal settlements. Besides, Article 5 makes it very hard to prove eligibility for the eventual relocation options that local administrations could decide to put on the table. These problems are acknowledged from mirroring perspectives by C., a Peruvian woman living in a housing squat under eviction in 2022, and the former assessor to social and housing policies of Rome’s Sixth Municipality during an interview in 2019:

You know, in my country I used to be a nurse. When I came here, I had to forget everything about my previous job because converting my degrees seemed too complicated at the time. I have been working as a subway cleaner for the last 25 years. My income would be too low to afford a rent, but living into a squat I can make the ends meet. I could apply for a pension now, but I have the address issue. I got stuck with the address at a friend’s home, and I could not move it to here [the housing squat where she lives] after 2014. My partner offered me to change my address to his home many times. I know it seems illogical, but I did not want to depend on him, which is also the reason why I prefer to keep living on my own and fighting for a public house for myself. But now that the eviction procedure has

started, what do I do with my address? Will I get an alternative even though my registered address is in a different municipality? I am so scared, I do not know what to do at this point while time is running out. (C., informal interaction, March 2022)

We have been struggling with the regularisation of squatted buildings. Sometimes we have no other option than to proceed with forced evictions, that bear heavy consequences affecting people who are actually illegal squatters but are often in a condition of socioeconomic vulnerability. Another aspect is that, when there is an eviction of a squatted dwelling and we seek to rehouse these people, we know that the channel of public housing is closed by default, because Article 5 prohibits squatters to be recipients. This emergency is then compounded with the generalised socioeconomic poverty, and housing vulnerability, that characterise our Municipality. (Francesca Filipponi, recorded interview, April 2019)

These aspects also resurfaced in the beginning of 2020, when HRMs and grassroots tenant unions obtained by the Lazio Region the approval of a new regional law that reorganised the allocation of public houses dedicated to the ‘housing emergency’ (35 per cent of the available stock) and regularised people who occupied public houses yet could prove their condition of socioeconomic vulnerability. Nevertheless, Article 5 became once again a threshold of discrimination, since the Lazio Region could only accept the applications of those who had occupied council houses before Article 5 came into effect (May 2014). They are also brought into question every time eviction and relocation procedures are launched; in 2022, this is the case of the housing squats of Viale delle Province 198 and Via di Torrevicchia 156, that the prefect is willing to ‘evacuate’ by the summer.

Against this backdrop, the actions that have been undertaken by the housing squatters-activists since 2015 have been maintained and intensified since the early stages of the pandemic, when the more detrimental, and even paradoxical, effects of Article 5 came in full display, yet the national government decided to tank the proposal of abolishing (or at least suspending) it. Against this background, HRMs, grassroots tenants’ unions like A.S.i.A.-USB, the grassroots ‘Rent Strike’ campaign, NGOs and solidarity groups launched two parallel campaigns: *Batti il 5!* (Beat the 5!) and *Senza Casa Non C’è Salute!* (No Health without Housing). From complementary perspectives, they both advocate for the immediate repeal of Article 5 through a twofold gesture. First, exposing the long-standing damage it has caused while presenting public opinion and policymakers with its further repercussions on the general welfare during the pandemic. And second, demanding new multilevel planning and housing policies to counter the continuing housing (or again, habitability) crisis started during the 2000s, and compounded by the current pandemic. Since 2020, different demonstrations, marches and flash mobs were organised in different part of the city to support the campaign, reclaiming the right to take city centre streets (Grazioli, 2017) to bring the problems of the urban fringes to the forefront, while extending their platforms to old and new allies. In 2021, the HRMs called all the supporters of the *Batti il 5!* campaign to join in a press conference in front of the Central Registrar of via Petroselli (Figure 4). Besides, since 2020 numerous demonstrations have targeted the Minister of Infrastructures to propose a new public Housing Plan elaborated and petitioned by grassroots HRMs and tenants’ unions

on the national level, that combines different aspects, ranging from the reintroduction of rent control, to the reform of the public estates, to the abolition of Article 5. All these actions aimed at changing the national and local planning and housing agenda are still brought forward by the large Batti il 5! coalition at the local at national level at the time of writing (May 2022).

Figure 4

The Batti il 5! press conference banner (April 2021). **Source: Author.**



The demands presented during these actions and campaigns are substantiated by the evidence collected from HRMs' (and their allies') everyday streams of mutual aid and local activism, with a focus on new basic needs emerging since the first lockdown in March 2020. Since then, as BPM activists we have proceeded to screen the more urgent vulnerabilities that needed immediate food, drugs and income aid. A special focus has furthermore been dedicated to kids living in housing squats, who in many cases could benefit from the already-existing specific infrastructures like the laboratories in Porto Fluviale, the kids' library in Viale delle Province 198, the playrooms and football fields of Metropoliz (see Grazioli & Caciagli, 2017; Di Noto, 2020). In the places where these facilities were not present, communal spaces were often reconverted and equipped with donated devices and other materials that would enable children to attend remote schooling and also play safely. Concerning the local level of self-organisation and mutual aid, the connections between housing squats in the same neighbourhoods and districts have been networked to optimise the impact of some interventions. For instance, nearby housing squats would coordinate the distribution of food parcels to make sure they would reach everyone, while sharing information about Covid cases that could affect their spaces where squatters are often related by friendship, family, ethnic, kinship ties. Furthermore, neighbouring housing squatters attended the same self-managed courses featuring activists, ASL workers and NGOs like *Medicins Sans Frontiers* to understand how to deal with eventual Covid outbreaks, to take care of those who were

infected and to sanitise individual spaces and communal areas. Lastly, squatters and activists have been cooperating with health authorities in experimental informal tracking protocols that can bypass steps currently prevented by Article 5, such as the tracking and collective management of Covid infections.

While some of these practices were contingency-based, other were consolidated in regular protocols and relations. This is the case of the relation developed between the Viale delle Province 198 housing squat, the BPM collective and ASL Roma 1 social workers after a few Covid outbreaks during the first wave of the pandemic. In the first emergency stages, the ASL was called to plan experimental tracking and monitoring protocols with the inhabitants and activists to bypass Article 5's obstacles. As the outbreak was contained and resolved, they were also called to interface with schools and workplaces that, for instance, would not accept people whose condition was not certified by a family doctor. Dwelling upon the grassroots knowledge of the complexity of socioeconomic and sanitary needs related to the lack of a legal address (Gnolfo et al., 2021), in March 2021 BPM activists and ASL social workers started a fortnightly infopoint in the Viale delle Province 198 housing squat, thus adopting the format on in-situ intervention adopted by the same ASL in other housing squats and informal settlements (*ibid.*). Commonly known as Sportello Articolo 5, the infopoint has become a reference point for the inhabitants of the housing squats in and beyond the same municipality, where they can meet BPM activists and social workers from the local healthcare district to receive information and aid about how to tackle the problems caused by the lack of 'official' residency. Furthermore, in summer 2021 three open days were organised at Viale delle Province (see Figure 5) to vaccinate housing squatters who wanted to be vaccinated but were excluded from the official vaccination campaign due to not having a registered address and thus no sanitary card nor national security number that they could use to book an appointment at the official vaccination hubs (Grazioli, 2021b).



Figure 5

The first open vaccination day at Viale delle Province 198 housing squat, 8 July 2021. **Source:** Author.

Conclusions

The article has shed light on the theoretical and political relevance of the grassroots responses of housing squatters and HRMs against the application of Article 5 of the 2014 Italian National Housing Plan. Sparsely addressed by academic and grey literature, Article 5 represents the Italian government's main measure to attack the squatting of urban vacancies for housing purposes. It has deepened what I define as a 'urban habitability crisis' that—as we are learning in and through the pandemic—is broader than the housing crisis alone as it points out the intersection of multiple, neoliberal-driven crises that are jeopardising the endurance of the urban fabric.

Even though the lack of decent, safe housing is often formally reckoned even by transnational institutions to erode social cohesion and generate territorial disaggregation, the measures implemented by nation-states often reinforce the commodification of housing. Their measures furthermore criminalise subjects who tackle their housing deprivation from below, especially if done through politically organised platforms like those offered by consolidated urban social movements. Using the empirical and archival materials collected during my ongoing militant ethnography inside the BPM collective, which is part of the HRMs in Rome, I have discussed the grassroots strategies devised by movements since the law came into force in 2014. In order to contextualise the application of this seemingly

disproportionately punitive law, I have outlined how Article 5 aligns with a long tradition of administrative invisibilisation and displacement of the houseless and the poor that, since the Fascist regime, was applied in Rome to regiment the mobility and settlement of the poor and the precariously housed, hence their mobilisation capacity.

The description of Article 5's predicaments underpinned the discussion concerning how it has been compounding pre-existing socioeconomic vulnerabilities that led thousands of people in Rome to squat a vacancy in the first place. These aspects were illuminated by squatters' accounts of the invisibility, and uncertainty, they endure because of Article 5 during different stages of their settlement experience, as well as from the considerations of frontline local administrators whose governance is undermined by the direct and indirect repercussions of the law. The discussion about the coordinated campaigns, and grassroots actions, launched since the onset of the pandemic to counter the multiplication of the discriminations caused by Article 5 has illuminated the richness of the relational, political and practical knowledge that HRMs have consolidated and put in common during the past decades. Concerning the mobilisation and campaigns side, the Movimento per il Diritto all'Abitare and their allies are engaged in generalising their struggle to abolish Article 5 (Batti il 5!), while they keep demanding national and local governments to recognise housing not as a commodity, yet as a pillar of the general welfare and health (Senza Casa non c'è salute).

Whereby both the Batti il 5! and Senza Casa non c'è salute campaigns point towards achieving long-term goals (like a new national Housing Plan), movements have been addressing short-term needs and goals to cope with the urgency of accessing emergency provisions, basic healthcare and also of preventing and countering the outbreak of further Covid infections. In some contexts, contingency-based actions were consolidated into new autonomous infrastructures (like the infopoint opened in the Viale delle Province 198 housing squat in March 2021) that involve frontline social workers and local institutions that are willing to cooperate in restoring the access at least to essential social rights and facilities like education, healthcare and economic benefits. Besides, as of May 2022, the Mayor of Rome declared their willingness to take a step in this direction by allowing housing squatters considered as 'socially vulnerable' (i.e., single mothers with children; residents over 65; people with certified health conditions) to register their home address in the squatted abode where they live.

Yet the struggle for Article 5's full abolition is yet to be won, whilst the machine of forcible evictions is once again advancing the dissolution not only of housing squats, but of the autonomous infrastructures and urban commons they have generated. Against this backdrop, future research about radical housing should pay even greater attention to the forms of existence and resilience developed in the cracks of our cities by the formally invisibilised, destitute, criminalised urban dwellers (Lancione, 2020), whose uncanny forms of habitation and grassroots spatial transformation may represent essential bastions against the habitability crisis that keeps disaggregating the urban fabric before our eyes.

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