



**Conversation series | Pursuing Tenant International:
Learning from struggles for home in Abya-Yala
Edited by Ana Vilenica**

Fighting time and dreaming time: Struggle for right to remain in LA

Martha Escudero

Reclaim our Homes

in conversation with

Ana Vilenica

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Martha Escudero is part of RECLAIM OUR HOMES, a movement that believes that no one should be homeless when homes are empty. **Ana Vilenica** is a member of the Beyond Inhabitation Lab, the Radical Housing Journal editorial collective and the Feminist Autonomous Centre for research (FAC research). **Contact:** ana.vilenica@polito.it

Abstract

In this conversation, Martha Escudero from the Reclaim our Homes is in dialogue with Ana Vilenica, sharing her experience of living in extreme housing precarity and her knowledge of tactics for occupying homes in LA, organizing against evictions and creating a community land trust. We also discussed the importance of learning from Indigenous movements across borders, and how they can inspire us to build different ways of organizing in our local communities.

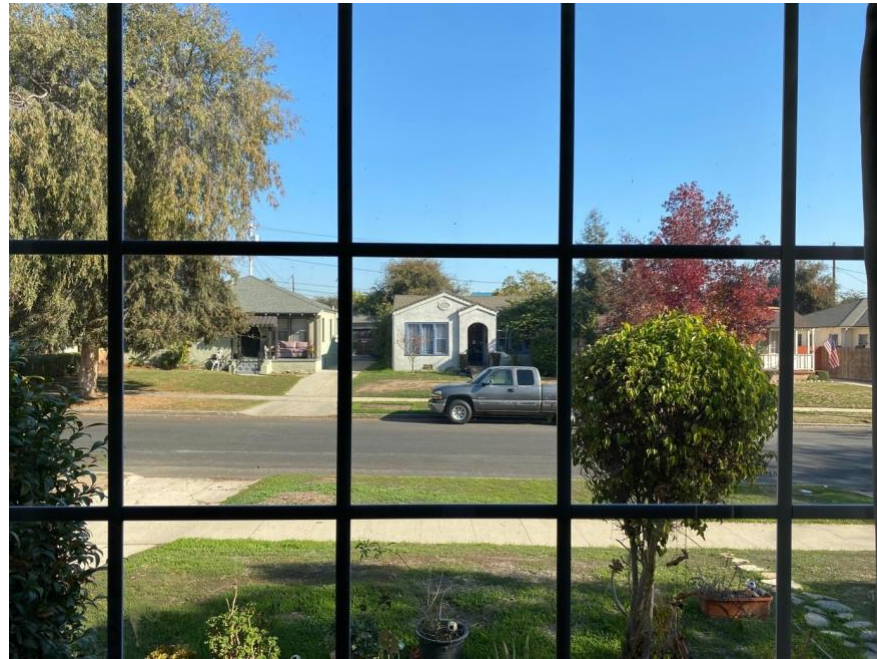
Keywords

Housing precarity, evictions, CLT, occupations, Los Angeles

During my visit to Los Angeles, California, I had the pleasure of meeting Martha Escudero from the Reclaim Our Homes, who lives with her two daughters. I learned that her daughters run an online radio show that discusses issues in their community and highlights struggles for home. During our conversation, Martha shared her experience of living in extreme housing precarity and her knowledge of tactics for occupying homes in LA, organizing against evictions and creating a community land trust. We also discussed the importance of learning from Indigenous movements across borders, and how they can inspire us to build different ways of organizing in our local communities.

Figure 1

View from the window. *Credits:*
Ana Vilenica



Ana: It's likely that many readers of the *Radical Housing Journal* are unfamiliar with your struggle and the events that have transpired. To provide some context for this conversation, it would be helpful if you could share a brief introduction about how you came to move into your current home during the pandemic. Additionally, I understand that there have been recent developments in your situation and you are once again facing the threat of eviction. It would be valuable to hear your perspective on this new development and how it relates to your ongoing struggle for home.

Martha: I was living abroad in southern Chile for two years in a rural area and when I came back to Los Angeles. I was living, well not under rent control, but my landlord didn't raise the rent for five years. At that time, I didn't personally feel the disparity of the housing crisis and how badly prices had gone up. I did notice it in the lives of my clients before I moved away to Chile. I was working with high-risk moms, so a lot of them were now sleeping in cars or in shelters or putting up with really abusive situations at home, because they were not able to find housing in other places. When I came back, I was in the same situation as a lot of my clients. I wasn't able to afford rent and I wasn't able to even get a job because I was having a hard time focusing. We were in a crowded space and I felt that our bodies and our nervous systems went into shock from coming from a rural area where we were in touch with nature to the situation of the great density of the city. We were having a lot of panic attacks and just a lot of anxiety and depression. We ended up couch surfing and sleeping in friends and families' homes. We were also using public transportation a lot. That was also very difficult. It was not good, especially for my daughters. That's one of the places where they would have the most panic attacks. There were a lot of mental health outbursts in these spaces and that were scary. Navigating all that was really difficult for me. And it was over a year that I was doing that. I was in desperate need. I knew how the shelter system was not very good. I knew this because

this is what I provided for clients. I knew it was going to be shitty and it's going to be lengthy and exhausting.

Then I saw the Moms for Housing¹ in Oakland and I was inspired by that. I started reaching out to the people trying to see if this was possible to do something similar in Los Angeles. Then Angela Flores from Eastside Cafe made a call out on Facebook about the availability of these houses so I reached out to her, and we started meeting in December 2019 on the phone and in person in January 2020. I also found out that there was another coalition of organizations that were already identifying vacant houses and trying to do something similar. Because of the history of Caltrans² occupation in these homes and being a slumlord and just leaving them vacant for so many years, we thought that was just inhumane and disgusting and really like how do you have empty homes just sitting there while people are suffering on the streets and dying. And then to top it off, COVID came and we really needed these houses. They could easily be fixed and provided for people. But the government has all this bureaucracy that's preventing them from being used. We took over these houses on March 14, 2020, right at the very start of the lockdown. This made it a bit easier for us to stay because it was a state of chaos going on. Then HACLA³ and PATH⁴ provided a temporary program for two years, which we hesitantly signed.

We signed that contract and it ends now. The two years are over. According to the program, we're supposed to get our life together in two years and be able to have affordable housing. What they have provided us is a lot of lotteries like affordable housing lotteries in very dense areas. Affordable housing, here in Los Angeles, is unfortunately not working. Here the affordable housing units are lottery based, so you're not guaranteed to get it. They're often in urban and very dense places, which is something that I don't want for my daughters because of their issues with density. They're just not what adequate housing would be for my family and they're outside my community. They're in really faraway places, so what I have requested is to have an ADA⁵ — friendly location where it meets my needs and my family's needs and to have it in terms of an ADA and in terms of geography. I'm a single mom and I have my resources, my family, my community in this area, it's hard for me to relocate. These agencies don't take into account our individual struggle and our individual needs and our humanity. I feel they're really disconnected from their humanity, because their answer is, well, you sign the contract, it's over. My response to that is, "the housing that I need for my family wasn't available, so you didn't provide the housing you promised in two years. What can we do about it?" There're always solutions. They amended the contracts they gave us and they provided this program last minute. They were able to break their rules once. They could do it again.

¹ The Moms for Housing are uniting mothers, neighbors and friends to reclaim housing for the Oakland community from the big banks and real estate speculators. See more at: <https://moms4housing.org>

² The California Department of Transportation (Caltrans).

³ Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles (HACLA).

⁴ People Assisting the Homeless (PATH).

⁵ The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities.

Ana: They may be concerned that promoting such actions could be seen as promoting squatting. In the US, there is a greater institutional push to avoid permanent informality, which is more common in Central and South America from what I observed.

Martha: Yes, exactly like promoting and breaking the law, and they don't want people to do that. If the system's not working for us and the laws and rules are not working for us then the problem is obedience to stuff that's not working. For me that's the problem, not being disobedient to the system that's continuously killing us and the whole planet. When are we going to say: no? I feel that as humans we have that ability to do something different. We don't have to adapt to something that's destroying us. The plants and the animals have no choice. They adapt or they die. But I feel like we have that choice as humans.

Okay, the two years contract is over. But you've created a community and you have a house, like why don't we create something where you could just stay there and transition in place? To me that makes sense. That makes logical sense and that's not rewarding us for breaking the rules. That's giving us the basic thing we need, and we've earned it. We worked really hard to keep these houses and to even get them. We've earned it because we had countless meetings where we weren't with our children and our families or they were in there being bored as hell. Sometimes I questioned it. I was wondering if it's worth it. But seeing what has been going on I was sure that we should fight as if our life depended on it, because that's really what's going on. We're dying, and children are being taken away just because their parents can't afford housing. That's constant violence, displacement, separation of families, punishment and criminalization for being poor. And that's not the world that I want to live in, or I want my daughters to live in.

And so that's why I'm here in Reclaim our Homes and trying to keep these homes and keep them in the hands and the power of community. Our plan is to transition in place and have them placed in the Community Land Trust. It's been really difficult. It seems

Figure 2

Protest sign.
Credits:
Ana Vilenica



like politicians are not listening and the nonprofit agencies that are working in housing are also not listening. And all these agencies really put profit over people because they want to keep people poor. I hope that other people realize this and open their eyes and they start breaking the rules because these rules are not helping us. I feel the laws and rules are the ones we should disobey because they're immoral and I think our values and our morality should go beyond what the government does.

Ana: Organizing strategies and tactics are crucial, and it would be valuable to learn about your approach. Can you share with us some insights into how you organize?

Martha: At first, yeah, we met a lot through phone calls and then we met in person at the Eastside café, and we strategized mostly on immediate needs: the way to turn on the water and the gas and finding people in the community that knew how to do these things. In the beginning it was also important to have lawyers and people that are going to navigate the legal system or liaisons with the police. Also having mental health support available especially for the children. Strategically we were making power maps who politically and ground based we could have as supporters. We have had some protests at the Caltrans office at different politicians' homes such as Douglas Guthrie, CEO of HACLA, the housing authority. We went to his home because he was ghosting us when we were requesting meetings. We go to their homes or places they like and organize community celebrations.

Ana: Can you tell us about other groups you've been connected to? I noticed that you're also involved with the LA Tenants Union, which is one of the largest tenant unions in the US.

Martha: Originally the main groups that were a part of Reclaiming our Homes were LACCLA⁶, LA Tenants Union, ACCE⁷ and DSA.⁸ Five groups. Now we have 13 Reclaiming our Homes families and a lot of individual supporters. Organizations that support us are also J-Town Action and Solidarity. A lot of the tenant unions as well and the other mutual aid groups in the community have also been very supportive.

Ana: I have read that there was a backlash by the police and that some people ended up being kicked out.

Martha: Yeah, that was another group that attempted to occupy homes. Some of them were unable to get home the first time, so they regrouped to see if they would be able to do it again. Some of them left their homes because the neighbors were harassing them and threatened to call immigration police or be really aggressive with them. In November 2020, they tried but the CHP, the California Highway Patrol, came and they were really violent. They dragged people out really badly and none of them from that group were able to keep a house. And that was demoralizing for all. Kevin De Leon, at the time the Council member, promised vouchers for them. A lot of them were living on the streets or in hotels with families. Often that's what happens, politicians promise you to provide

⁶ Los Angeles Center for Community Law and Action (LACCLA).

⁷ Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment (ACCE).

⁸ Democratic Socialists of America (DSA).

assistance and help, and they don't follow through. It is important to get everything in writing because they talk a lot, but they don't do much.

It's also been very difficult in this neighborhood. There's a lot of NIMBYs, not in my backyard type of people that are very conservative, they're brown folk, but they're like 3rd, 4th generation. And they're those people that think, I work hard, and I earn this much so everyone should work as hard as I did, a lot of my family members are like that as well. It's just really difficult to get people to open their minds. I think life is already hard as it is so difficult. I want to try to make it easier for everyone and for the next generation, if life was super, duper hard for me, I don't want them to suffer the same. I just feel it's horrible to be working 8 hours a day and the commute in LA. It is 10 hours that you don't see your family and then you come home all exhausted. It's hard for us to even enjoy each other when we come back home exhausted like that. People are giving up on life. I'd rather they break the rules, take houses and let the government know that this is not okay. Like we can't leave people on the streets dying. We can't just like put people in jail for using drugs, because they're alleviating their pain and because we can't provide proper healthcare and housing, that's wrong, and I don't think we should promote that.

Ana: I noticed the scarf on the fireplace promoting Indigenous women's rights. I admire the work you've been doing with Indigenous women, particularly those who are migrants facing significant housing hardships in LA.

Martha: I have worked with Indigenous women from Oaxaca and Guatemala, mostly Central America and Oaxaca. They're Indigenous women that are monolingual in their native tongue. For them it is very difficult to navigate the system. They come from rural areas. They don't even speak Spanish so it's even harder in LA. I think if you speak Spanish, you could navigate and be OK most of the time now. Now maybe, but when I was younger that was not the case. Often, they cope with alcohol issues because of mental health problems and just being in the city. I have noticed that in birth they have a high cesarean rate here. I had a client. She had ten children in Guatemala and they were all vaginal. She comes here and has a cesarean birth. They're not able to communicate with the doctors with anyone in the system. All they get is traumas, they get the shittiest service and they're not listened to. They all live in very dense places, downtown areas, sometimes on the streets or packed in studios with their families and their families are not small. I know that in reservations, indigenous people in general are super neglected. The media doesn't cover anything that goes on in those areas and they have the most police brutality in the area and people disappearing and nobody is doing anything about it.

Ana: The good thing I guess here is that the counter narrative about this situation is finally getting out there. The Indigenous people are becoming more vocal in demands to reclaim their land. Does that have any effect on the real life of people?

Martha: Yeah, I do agree. I feel there is a strong movement towards reclamation of land and I see that a lot of these movements are led by women in matriarchal nations, that's really important as well. Especially given the fact that this system is patriarchal and

Figure 3

No more stolen sisters. *Credits: Ana Vilenica*



heteronormative. That's been really good and also having conversations with Native folk. For myself as an immigrant, what does belonging mean in this land and what does land back really mean for me? What would it mean if it was given back to the Tongva people. If they had the same mentality as the oppressors then it wouldn't solve anything. We're having conversations with different folk on what land back means and who should be included in the land back idea. What I've been hearing from some Native folk is that you belong in this land if you are going to be committed to caretaking the land. The Tongvas are the original caretakers, that's what they did. They didn't exploit the land; they were caretakers of the land. Whatever you look like or whoever you are or wherever you came from, if you take on that role then you should be included in the land back movement. That's what it's all about. It's not about one person owning the land. It's never been about that. That's what we're against. And that's what the colonizers from Europe brought. It's about the relationship with the land and building relationships back with the land and the plants and the animals and bringing back and protecting the nature that was originally here. The land doesn't belong to us, we belong to the land mentality.

Ana: And do you feel then that the Reclaimers movement is a part of that process?

Martha: Exactly, yes, that's what our movement is trying to establish and trying to build. We want this land to be a part of community land trusts because El Sereno Community Land Trusts works directly with the Tongva people and also with other organizations that are working to restore the land like Koyo Masa Wali that's working to keep protecting the black wall mud and other native species. We work directly with building those relationships with the land and with the people or with the original caretakers and the people here.

Ana: You told me that there are a lot of issues with establishing a community land trust at this moment because there is a lot of resistance from the system and lots of bureaucratic issues that you're facing. But you are still trying to do it. Right?

Martha: Yeah, we're not going to take no for an answer. We didn't want to get to this point, we didn't want to start a war. We wanted to be able to peacefully transition in place. They're not letting us do this. They're basically just punishing us for breaking the law. They also have other families cause the plan is providing housing I believe for 22 families, not just the reclaimers. Their thing is those families are good and are gonna move out in two years, you all should too. That's what they're saying. I feel good for them if they're finding them adequate housing. The problem is that I know the majority are just settling for whatever scraps are given and they're going to continue to struggle in the housing crisis.

Ana: Do they have any plans with these houses? Or will they just board them up again?

Martha: Once I move out, they're going to sit empty for probably a few years again. Until Caltrans is able to bid them to another entity and have other people housed here. That just doesn't make sense. Why don't they just let me stay here? A few more years, just let us stay here a few more years. Until we figure out what to do. I'm okay to compromise too. Maybe they could move me to another house that's around here, if they're going to be utilizing this house. There's plenty of homes. We have surplus housing.

Ana: Precarious people are constantly in these short term arrangements.

Martha: It's like a revolving door to homelessness and that's the same thing with project Room Key and Tiny Homes. They're very inadequate. A lot of the unhoused people that live on the streets have a lot of trauma. But having a roof over your heads, that's not enough. They don't understand the complexity of people's trauma and what is adequate for them. They're not asking them. They're not giving a shit about what they want or need. It's about control and power. Like you're a piece of shit. You should be happy with this shitty thing because you're a piece of shit anyway. They don't care if you die. And then they have the audacity to get upset when we say no. And I'm just really frustrated and angered because that's just wrong. What happened to us, that we've become so desensitized and horrible to each other? I don't understand that and it just confuses me and I'm trying to understand where they're coming from and it doesn't make sense.

Ana: They are defending the privileges of the rich people and automatically their own position in that entire system that was built to gatekeep people. The system perpetuates itself constantly sucking the money instead of investing that money where we need it. And this is what we have seen over again. That is what is happening. They served you the eviction notice. Right?

Martha: They served me an eviction notice. I think right now we have four families with eviction notices.

Ana: It's a three-day eviction notice?

Martha: Yeah, and because I was given that in late October, they haven't followed up yet. We'll see what happens. We plan to fight it in court. That's the thing we didn't want to do because that's costly. But I mean we're willing to do whatever, so I think right now, that's more like we're trying to raise money for the lawyer fees in case that's necessary and just keep informing people about what's going on here. Building solidarity is really important. You are doing worldwide stuff and I feel like that's super important because we're not alone and sometimes we feel very disconnected and isolated from others, even in our community, and especially from other parts of the world. But I feel that gives me hope because I know that people are not taking it anymore all over the world there's uprisings and people saying no, this is not OK. I'm not going to take it anymore. You're not going to destroy my community. You're not going to destroy the forest that gives us food. They're having us think we live in scarcity, and we don't. We have abundance. Earth, Mother Earth gives us so much and especially privatizing water and stuff that's free and given to us, and we pay for it. No why do we keep doing this, why do we keep paying for stuff that's a gift for us? I think that's really wrong and also exploiting and destroying Mother Earth in the process while it keeps giving to us. But what gives me hope is that other parts of the world that are even worse than us, have that strength in the uprising. Now I am in the belly of the beast and that comes with a lot of privilege but also it takes extra courage to stand against it, so I'm trying to take on that responsibility because I know that whatever we do here affects the rest of the world, and so I need to use that privilege. And I do more. I feel like everyone in the US should be doing more, we get really comfortable in the system sometimes. I do too, I'll admit it. And then I forget that because of us, other people are suffering and that's why they hate us all over the world. And I don't blame them.

Ana: The US bombed Yugoslavia too.

Martha: I think that it is our responsibility not to be comfortable in capitalism here and just rest. I mean, we all deserve to rest sometimes, but I feel we do have to put in a lot more work. One of the good things is that when I lived in Chile, I built a lot of solidarity networks. A lot of Chileans and Mapuche people came in the summer and we showcased *Primera* film which is a film about the uprising in Chile in 2019. That was really good. They have housing occupation movements over there and they have land back movements as well. We're working together and promoting each other's work and uplifting our causes. So that was really awesome. That's what I think is really important also in building that solidarity and uplifting.

Ana: You are so right. Our problems are connected. If we think hard about the complexity of problems, we will see that we cannot resolve them within the borders of our countries.

Martha: In isolation, right? It needs to be looked at as a whole. I think so too. Especially when it comes to boycotts and stuff like that. I don't buy Chilean salmon on the West Coast. That was requested from the people there to boycott it because it's contaminating the rivers, it's not native to the ecosystem. And I would like to let other people know. Without relationship building and the solidarity we would not hear of them. Below the gaps, we need to build those relationships. In Chile, I learned a lot more than theory. It

was an indigenous community I lived in and I learned more than the theory of communism or socialism. They're more land based. Based on nature and the cosmos, and so it encompasses spirituality. For me that's more holistic and uplifts matriarchy. A lot of the movements there are led by the healers and not by the warriors, and the healers are the ones that have the last word. I feel that makes a lot more sense. I feel the movement here in the US is very male-centered and work-centered. I've been noticing the difference between movements in rural areas as opposed to urban areas. In rural areas they still have a lot of the land and so they're way more autonomous in their food sources and housing, and in terms of organizing how they are care based, they're relationship based, they have accountability circles. I'm not saying it's perfect, but it's so much better managed. Because at least they have the structure. And here I feel like we are in isolation and there's a lot of constant power struggles with organizations and lack of accountability.

Ana: Yeah, and these activist figures, the leaders you know, like that they want to take the scene.

Martha: A lot of it is male-based, a lot of it is not relationship-based, so if there's problems within the group, usually what happens is that the person that is less liked is kicked out even if they did nothing wrong sometimes.

Ana: I also feel it lacks an intergenerational aspect.

Martha: Yes, it also lacks intergenerational spaces. There's a lot of white supremacy that goes on in these groups, and even if they're people of color, they have white supremacist mentality and they are everywhere.

Ana: That's totally true. I mean in Europe it's mostly awful. I feel that we can learn so much from how you approach things here.

Martha: It is changing. I do see more hope in here too. Well, especially with the land back movements and indigenous movements have been key to that. I feel like they do have a lot more to offer ultimately because they have a stronger relationship with the land itself. And I learned a lot while living in Chile. They do everything seasonally. In the winters it's a dreaming time. They apply this principle in organizing too. In the winter when it's dream time, they do less work, and more reflection. We huddle around the fire and we talk about what we need to work on individually, how do we become better people and also collectively and then you share your dreams, because your dreams are a portal to your life. That's the first thing they do in the morning, you share your dreams and try to figure out what that meant for you and how that applies to you in your life. So, maybe here some people would think that's kind of whack or weird.

Ana: I love it.

Martha: I love it too. We are part of nature. We're not apart from it. Everything in nature rests in winter and we should do that. It doesn't make sense that we're working even harder.

Ana: Dream and reflection time could be space to envision our future and not to be completely indulged in now.

Martha: The dream time is a time you could dream without any limits and then take the small earth steps toward gaining that goal. That's the work you do, so you dream and then you work. You kind of set your individual and community intention and you present it to the community. Then in the summer you work. You work individually and collectively, and you make that harvest or you plant. In the fall it is usually the celebration time where you harvest, and you eat, and you enjoy and then they have this thing called *trueque*. Actually, *traffeinto* is the word in Mexico. It is like a bartering system, where everyone either forages or gives stuff from their garden. There's still a lot of foraging going on, which I love because I believe patriarchy started with mass agriculture and it happened before the white people came. The Aztecs and Mayas and the Incas were colonizers as well to other indigenous communities. I have a lot of conflict with a lot of Indigenous and brown people because I bring that up too and they're in denial.

Ana: That complicates the situation.

Martha: There're so many layers, I'm not saying that they were evil, they also exploited humans and had slaves. It wasn't to the extent of when the colonizers came. The Mapuche people did not have pyramids. They didn't need pyramids to worship. To them the forest itself was their pyramid. The sky, the earth, they worshiped whatever was around them and they didn't need to build these huge structures. They were built on the backs of slaves. I'm against identity politics. I just feel I have taught that to my daughters, just because they look like you, it doesn't mean they're like you or their values are like yours. I feel in order to build unity, we have to all fight against white supremacy itself, but also not divide ourselves based on our own color of our skin.

Ana: This is the logic of white supremacy.

Martha: That's what they're using. The capitalists are also using that to divide us. And I tell them not every brother is a brother, not every sister is a sister. We need to build relationships, get to know people, talk to people, and then figure out things.

Ana: Yes, I think self-reflection is very important too.

Martha: Yeah, improve things and be better people and build structures to sustain ourselves because that's what a lot of people are afraid of. They're like, we can't dismantle this because we'll fall apart, and we'll die. But look, we're dying right now so let's build instead of thinking negatively.

Ana: I feel like I learned so much from you in this conversation. Thank you so much for sharing all of this. I want to give you a hug. We'll stop recording now and we can continue talking.

About this Conversation's participants

RECLAIM OUR HOMES is a movement that believes that no one should be homeless when homes are empty. Housing is a Human Right. We have an abundance of homes and resources for all. We all deserve to be in our community. Everyone deserves safety and homes.

Ana Vilenica is a feminist, no border and urban activist and organiser from Serbia currently living in Italy. She is a Post-Doctoral Research Fellow with the ERC project *Inhabiting Radical Housing* at the Polytechnic of Turin's Inter-university Department of Regional & Urban Studies and Planning (DIST) and a core member of Beyond Inhabitation Lab. Ana is a member of the Radical Housing Journal Editorial collective and the Feminist Autonomous Centre for research (FAC research).

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