Abstract

This paper seeks to extend research on the role of informal place-making practices in spatial planning and community development through an examination of their role in accommodating alternative or innovative uses in contrast to profit-driven projects. The research does so through the study of unauthorized interventions in derelict army barracks, which have been the subject of little research to date in Italy. This work addresses this lack of knowledge by providing a taxonomy of barracks that have been subjected to informal placemaking, such as arts and cultural activities. The exploration of each of the categories resulting from the taxonomy can be crucial in triggering new insights into informal practices. Drawing on interviews with key actors, literature review, and fieldwork from the period 2019–2022, the research identifies key dynamics that may transform barracks into spaces for social reproduction, rever-sing original intentions to create new profit-driven spaces.

Introduction

The rent-seeking approach to the disposal of military land

The Armed Forces left innumerable gaps in the territories after the geopolitical changes related to the end of the Cold War in European countries and North America (BICC 1997). Among the various kinds of MoD sites, military barracks are generally placed in highly lucrative and desirable urban locations due to their role of quartering the soldiers near city centers since the mid-19th century (Storelli and Turri 2014). As claimed by Camerin and Gastaldi (2018) and Camerin (2021), empty barracks lie abandoned (for a time that has endured for two or even three decades) for several reasons. On the one hand, the intrinsic characteristics of barracks (usually large-sized pieces of land with a high expenditure for removing pollutants and adaptive reuse of listed buildings) and their current state (barracks are usually left underused for years before their official abandonment, with a decay of open and built spaces). On the other hand, extrinsic issues are the financial constraints tied to urban austerity policies; the relevant presence of other kinds of abandoned urban spaces (e.g. industries and railways) in the same municipality; conflicts between state

and local entities over the disposal (especially ownerships and new functions); and the drawn-out of official planning processes. In addition, the choices on the new uses lie in a perennial tension between the short-term budgetary exigencies of MoD selling land searching for generating much-needed income and the long-term needs of the local community (Dobson 2016). In Italy, these issues have been the cause of undesirable urban conditions (with most of the barracks still on-site but in a state of neglect, with the risk of being decommissioned, dismantled, deconstructed, or erased from the landscape), difficulties in channeling public and academic inquiries, and failing programs (Commissione IV Difesa 1999; Corte dei Conti 2017). Together, the aforementioned factors may encourage (or set the stage for) social activism in reactivating former barracks by placing informal contemporary art and cultural practices.

Since the launch of the first official disposal program for military sites in Italy in late 1996, 1,800 sites out of 6,700 (representing almost 27% of the total MoD estate) have been affected by disposal activities. A total of 1,146 properties out of 1,800 (approximately 64% of the assets to alienate) were found to be not easily placed on the real estate market (Corte dei Conti 2017, 13). Therefore, most of the military sites remained abandoned, rather than being repurposed for new uses and users, even when they were actually disposed of.

This is not a specific issue of the Italian case, but international scholars have recently recognized that the process of converting former military sites to new civilian uses is fraught with uncertainties, architectural, environmental, legal, financial, and planning challenges and complexities (Bagaeen and Clark 2016; Touchton and Ashley 2019). Despite growing interest by academics, there is little systematic analysis of the search for a sustainable future for this particular kind of publicly owned land that can be ascribed to the so-called "urban commons," «a shared resource that belongs to all of its inhabitants, and to the public more generally» (S. R. Foster and Iaione 2019, 235).

The disposal consists of the ownership transfer of a defense-owned property by means of a public procedure (e.g. public auction for the sale to the highest bidder), public-private negotiation, or other forms of agreements depending on specific circumstances (e.g. the free ownership transfer to City Councils in the frame of the state-property federalism in Italy). The disposal generally results in a change in land use, so local communities generally expect that it should provide public social, economic, and environmental benefits. However, such a scenario is not likely to happen due to the tendency of privatizing public land on the ground of "neoliberal approaches" to public policies and urban governance, «which privilege markets, empower self-serving economic actors, and reduce the public good to an aggregation of private interests» (Dahl and Soss 2014, 497). In Italy, this approach is demonstrated by the planning agreements' contents agreed upon by the public actors involved (signed usually by the MoD, State Property Agency, and City Councils) to determine the new uses of former military land. According to article no. 3(15) of the Decree Law no. 351/2001, these documents establish the allocation of a percentage between 5% and 15% of the monetary value derived from the selling in the real estate market to local administrations, encouraging them to opt for new profitable functions in order to improve revenues. The signatories of planning agreements, together with real estate funds, and other public or private stakeholders (e.g. banks, foundations, and universities) can

be appointed as the "technocratic and/or growth coalitions"[1] acting according to the need of the MoD to make profits from the disposal of its assets.

Theoretical stage

The functional lifespan of public-owned premises like military barracks coming to a halt validates the never-ending quest for greater and greater profitability (Abramson 2016). The future of such properties spans from the possible bias for demolition (Cairns and Jacobs 2017) to the repurposing of existing buildings and their open spaces for new uses and users (i.e. "adaptive reuse"). According to Lynch (2022, 4–7) the latter has been increasingly used for placemaking, with contrasting approaches and outcomes (i.e. privatization following neoliberalism and entrepreneurialism patterns or revalorization of the existing socio-spatial features and catalysts for supporting local communities' needs).

The current research agenda in geographical and urban studies claim that the comprehension of the complexities and challenges of adaptive reuse (especially in terms of experience, meaning, and emotion of space and place) can be found in the interrelation between the urbanization process and how the politics of abandonment shape spatial planning and governance decisions (O'Callaghan 2023; Safransky 2023, 15–19). In particular, as the politics of abandonment go by, neglected public-owned properties may become places of what Douglas (2014, 21) defined as "informal urban interventions" (i.e. illegal or without permission «actions directly impacting urban space itself without prejudging scope, temporality, or value» that creatively disrupt everyday life) that may take the form of temporary uses that prove access to space for those who are otherwise unable to obtain it (Madanipour 2018). Consequently, informal activities usually generate conflicts with actors forming technocratic and/or growth coalitions (Molotch 1976).

An emerging set of literature deals with issues surrounding contemporary informal urban placemaking and has offered interpretations and conceptualizations in terms of:

(a) Movements, from "squatting" (i.e. the occupation and use of property without the consent of its owner; Martinez, 2020) conceptualized in three nuances (as an informal set of spatial practices and tactics; as a makeshift approach to housing and shelter; and as a precarious form of inhabiting the city; Vasudevan 2015a) to "tactical urbanism" also known as "DIY practices" (i.e. the creation and installation of unauthorized small-scale design solutions meant to highlight and solve an urban problem without going through the traditional channels of planning procedure) (Mould 2014; Finn 2014, 382–4).

(b) Reasons behind them and outcomes. Reasons range from concerns related to the right to the city to civic-minded improvements to urban spaces (especially after the global financial crisis of 2008 and consequent austerity urbanism; Gordon, 2018), passing through the re-imagination of the city as a space of refuge, gathering, protest, and subversion that create new geographies varying from "pop-up" to "autonomous." While pop-up geographies regard places that occupy a site for an intentionally temporary amount of time enabling both precarious urban conditions and strategies of gentrification displacing vulnerable populations (Harris 2015), autonomous geographies produce an output in which informal practices are the

ground for generating radical urban infrastructures and a different sense of shared dwelling or inhabitance (Vasudevan 2015b).

(c) Actors promoting informal placemaking. "Right-to-the-city movements" comprise grassroots activism centered on socio-spatial rights and needs. Their aim is to reverse the impacts of profit-oriented logic on cities that tend to shape less livable and less adapted cities to the residents' needs (Domaradzka 2018) and fight for "social reproduction spaces" (i.e. citizen-centered spaces that allow them to satisfy their needs; Álvarez Mora, 2015: 15–18). Moreover, anti-authoritarian organizations named "self-managed social centers" (smsc) are anarchist self-organized centers outside state control that declare themselves against neoliberal approaches to public policy (Mudu 2004). They aim to occupy abandoned spaces to promote voluntary cultural, political, recreational, and social activities, such as concerts, libraries, bicycle workshops, independent cinema, open meetings, non-profit businesses, and even dedicated spaces to the unhoused (Mudu, 2018). Their activism in the attempt to revitalize urban voids, especially those suffering long-standing abandonment, can conduct them to influence the political local area and even become political actors (Morea and Sabatini 2023).

Research gaps, questions, and goals

The categorization of informal placemaking on a specific type of abandoned assets such as military barracks at the national level has not been spotlighted yet. International scholars have primarily focused on the informal activities of Copenhagen's Christiania barracks (Håkan, Washede, and Nilson 2011) and Italian academics on the most recognized cases of Porto Fluviale barracks in Rome (Grazioli and Caciagli 2017) and Cavallerizza Reale barracks in Turin (Bragaglia and Krähmer 2018). These works argued the relevance of bottom-up and tailor-made urban practices aimed at re-appropriating spaces and rights through occupations whose concerns are related to housing and urban commons questions. In these cases, informal art and cultural activities have been cornerstones for spatial planning and community development changes. However, as scholars centered the attention on particular cases of military barracks, they failed to provide an overview of these practices in other similar installations or, at least, a demonstration of whether informal placemaking alters, and even definitely overcomes, market-oriented paradigms. As stated by Campo (2020, 165), little is known about informal urban interventions implemented in large urban voids and the ways they impact official or longer-term land-use planning. Moreover, it can be particularly interesting to scrutinize informal placemaking in barracks as their primordial scope was soldiers quartering, whose morphology plays a role in turning these assets as places for these activities (Table 1). This character gave barracks the quality of large physical spaces that acted as proper "cities within a city" with all services needed by soldiers (e.g. accommodation, education, free time, leisure, and training). This is why barracks can be of interest for unauthorized activities to adaptive reuse. So, can unauthorized practices and their promoters be sustained boosters of more locally-oriented actions and thus overcome the profit-driven approach? Which are the factors enabling these actions to continue over time?

This paper tries to answer these questions by exploring whether informal placemaking activities performed in disused barracks in Italy shift the status of abandonment to

Table 1. Morphology characteristics of barracks in Italy.

Attributes	Characteristics	Examples/pictures
Age of the barracks*	Difference between époques	After 1850: construction of proper barracks and reuse of existing Church assets; after 1945: modern military system
Area	Range in sqm: 2,500 ÷ 100,000	Depending on military scopes; Del Fante b. (2,550); La Marmora b. (19,978); Salsa b. (61,487); Sani b. (105,540)
Edges/boundary characteristics	Style: various Materials: stone, wood, lead (before 1850); concrete, breaks (after 1850) Heights: 12 ÷ 15 m/16 ÷ 20 m. Access: many entrances on perimeter	Rationalist — Neo-Medieval — Liberty — Neo-Romanesque — Neo-Mannerism
Shape of Open Spaces	- Presence of a central parade ground - Shape: square or rectangle - Size: sides varying between 90 and 200 m - Orientation: for the healthiest exposure (depending on localization)	Central courtyards — Linear courtyards — Blocks along the square's sides — Functional blocks
Built Structures	No. of Stories: 2 ÷ 3 Linear structure Semi open spaces Ventilation and light provision	2 stories — 3 stories — Semi open spaces
Civic Amenities	Cinema, Dormitories, Garages, Infirmary, Kitchen, Mess hall, Public places, Shops, Street lights, Training field (including for sports), Warehouses	Offices — Cinema — Kitchen — Soccer field — Warehouses
Road form	- Mostly grid iron pattern instead of radial layout: vehicle circulation and military training - Road paths to connect buildings is complex because of the size, number, and type of buildings	Grid iron — Large street — Narrow street — Building distances — Exterior street

Source: elaboration by the Author (2024)

temporary or permanent new uses and users. The basic assumption of the research is that public ownership of the land through the City Councils can be the turnaround of the profit-driven approach assumed by the technocratic and/or growth coalitions, understanding thus whether and how informal actors/actions can sustain long-term change against the status quo. This key idea is investigated by outlining an inventory of barracks affected by informal placemaking practices with the main goal to propose a taxonomy to help clarify the effectiveness and limitations of informal placemaking in triggering the repurpose of these abandoned sites. The achievement of this goal leads to the discussion on informal placemaking as a driver for land use change and ownership policy. This will facilitate understanding the applicability of this taxonomy for future works.

Materials and methods

The choice to conduct a study on abandoned military barracks located in Italian capital cities and affected by informal placemaking activities driven by housing emergencies and/or demands for urban commons relies on easier access to information and better coverage by the local and national press. The research comprised two phases. The first was a national-level inventory of informal placemaking taking place in these kinds of spaces. The second was a proposal for a taxonomy of these practices that helps clarify the complexity of informal actions and the relationship between the notion of informal placemaking with spatial planning and community development.

The first phase (2019–20) regarded telephone and email interviews with officials from each of the 109 City Planning Departments of Italy's capital cities, as well as with spokespeople from the 17 territorial headquarters of the State Property Agency[2] and two national real estate investment funds.[3] The aim was to understand whether military barracks in a state of abandonment/obsolescence had been the objects of unauthorized actions, such as occupations, squatting, and DIY actions since the first disposal of 1996. This inquiry, supported by a search of national and local newspapers, revealed that 16 barracks located in 12 major cities have been affected by informal actions from the early 2000s until late 2019. This phase collected qualitative information on these barracks and kept the situation updated until late 2022.

The second phase (2020–22) comprised field visits,[4] interviews (online or in presence) with promoters, conventional urban development stakeholders (such as City Council's City Planning Department and real estate investment funds' spokespersons) involved with the management of the 16 barracks, and a member each of the 10 organizations that occupied the barracks (see Supplemental file). This phase also included a review of planning documents, initiatives, and media related to each site. The aim of this work was twofold. First, to specify the actions carried out by informal placemakers, which includes the informal appropriation of the space and the wide range of squatting and self-organization practices. Second, based on the criteria of the duration of unauthorized occupations, to provide a taxonomy of informal placemaking actions: "temporary occupations" (divided into immediate evictions, medium-term occupations, and long-term occupations) and "ongoing occupation" (occupants still in place). At this stage, each case's main features were indentified (see Tables 1, 2 , and 3):

- barracks' intrinsic characteristics (i.e. plot size; presence of listed buildings; year of abandonment by the military; ownership at the moment of the occupation – e.g. State, City Council, or private actors such as investment funds –; current state – abandoned or with new uses);
- basic characteristics of informal placemaking (i.e. names of placemakers, if any; dates of unauthorized occupations; and reasons for these actions – i.e. occupations for housing needs or for provisioning of urban commons);
- actions and effects of informal practices (i.e. renaming the barracks; creating a "barricade of art" by painting the walls; developing artistic, cultural, and recreational activities; engaging with the local community; attracting visitors; and gaining local, national, and international media attention);
- land-use planning affecting former military barracks (participatory planning; existence of planning agreements; the main scope/s of real estate development – e.g. residential, tertiary, public, university headquarters, or a mix of uses; preservation or demolition of existing buildings/morphology; and incorporation of placemaking in land-use planning).

Results

The taxonomy, with its identification of informal placemaking actions and placemakers, is a crucial element in distinguishing whether such practices imply relevant changes in approaching the new uses of the former barracks. It is evident that the use of the taxonomy is a simplification of intricate situations where many actors and dynamics interact and can lead to divergent views when viewed through the lens of the advocates or conventional urban development actors. Nevertheless, the attempt is not to chronicle and detail informal practices for all cases. The scope is instead twofold. First, to understand why informal placemaking failed or succeeded in creating long-term occupations of the barracks. Second, to comprehend whether these actions have partially or completely overturned the prevailing neoliberal order towards a wider societal shift in approaching the new uses of former military barracks (Figure 1).

Temporary occupations

Three nuances of unauthorized occupations that ended in evictions fall into this category: immediate evictions lasting a maximum of one week, medium-term occupations (more than one week but less than one year; section 3.1.1), and long-term occupations (more than one year; section 3.1.2).

Immediate evictions

Immediate evictions (Table 2) usually occurred when a reduced group of unhoused squatters occupied small spaces inside the barracks by using them as temporary homes. Regardless of the owners (public or private), the consequence of these actions is eviction by the police. This happened in the cases of Florence, Novara, Padua, and Vicenza. These are the less organized practices, but also the right-to-the-city movements and smsc have promoted occupations that lasted only a few days (Bialski et al. 2015). The Guido Reni, Salsa, and Borghesi barracks are embedded in this category.
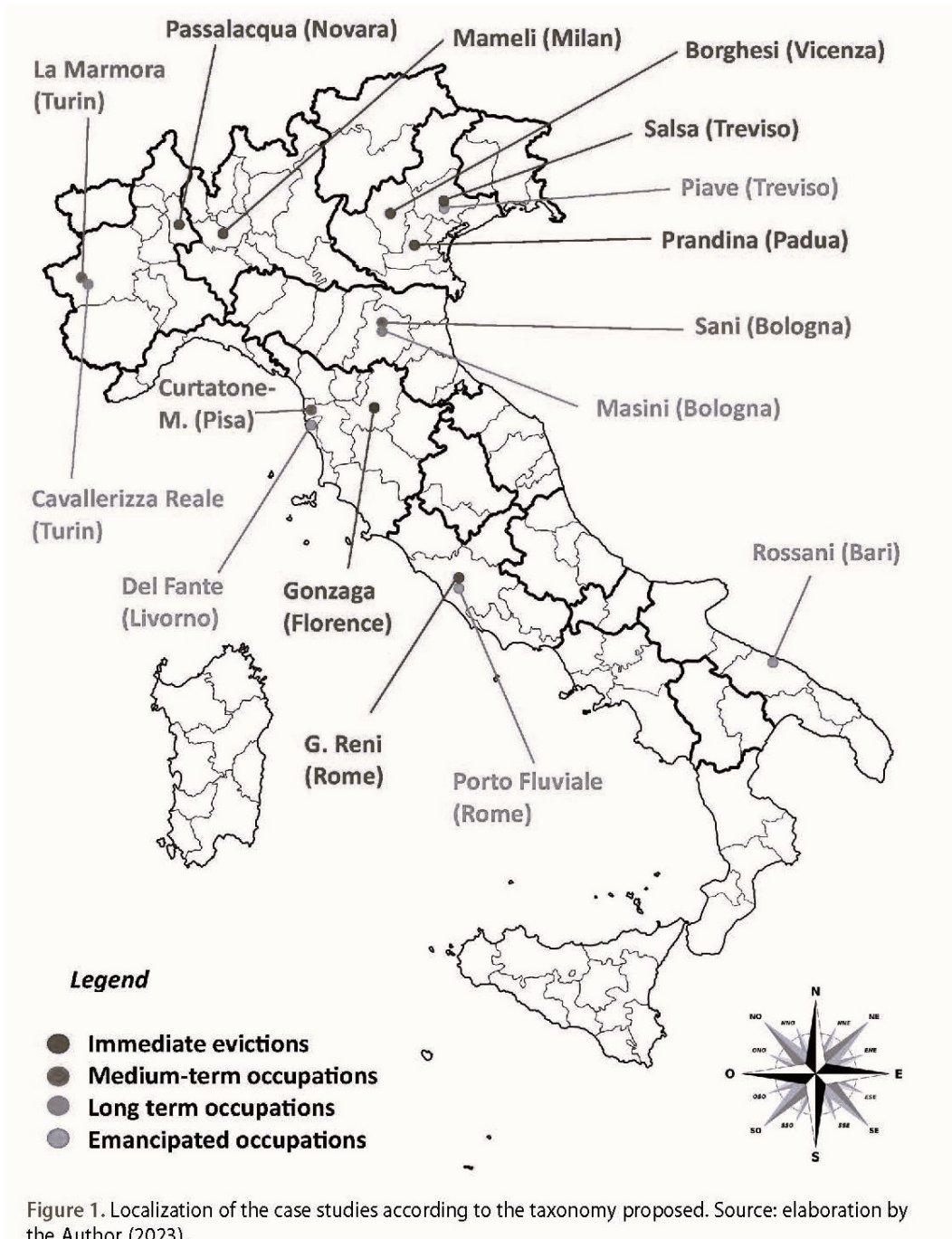
Figure 1. Localization of the case studies according to the taxonomy proposed. Source: elaboration by the Author (2023).

Rome's "Blocchi Precari Metropolitani" (a non-institutional and political organization focused on the housing emergency) occupied the Guido Reni barracks for a few hours as a form of protest against both evictions in the city and the privatization of this particular asset (Giannoli 2014). Unassociated citizens of Vicenza occupied Borghesi

Table 2. Data on immediate evictions.

Data		Gonzaga (Florence)	Mameli (Milan)	Passalacqua (Novara)	Prandina (Padua)	G. Reni (Rome)	Salsa (Treviso)	Borghesi (Vicenza)
Intrinsic barracks' characteristics	Plot size (sqm)	102,015	105,988	22,250	35,777	55,480	61,487	9,265
	Listed buildings	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
	Owner	City Council	Investment fund	State	State	Investment fund	State	Province
	Year of abandonment	2008	2003	2013	2000	1997	1996	1996
	Current situation	Abandoned	Abandoned	Abandoned	Abandoned	Abandoned	Abandoned	Abandoned
Informal placemaking's characteristics	Occupation	16–21/02/2018	14–20/03/2015	27/03–03/04/2019	30/06–04/07/2014	07/02/2014	23–25/03/2013	11–14/11/2012
	Informal placemakers	Unhoused squatters	Social center "Pirata Riot Club"	Unhoused squatters	Unhoused squatters	Right-to-the-city movement "Coordi-namento Cittadino di Lotta per la Casa"	Smsc "ZTL Wake Up"	Students and precarious workers
	Reason	Housing needs	Housing needs	Housing needs	Housing needs	Housing needs	Housing needs/ urban commons	Housing needs/ Urban commons
Actions and effects of informal practices	New name	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
	Barricade of art	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No
	Informal activities	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Engagement with citizens	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes
	Flows of visitors	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
	Media attention	Local	Local	Local	Local	National	Local	Local
Land-use planning	Participatory planning	Yes (2016)	No	No	Yes (2019)	Yes (2013)	No	No
	Planning agreement	2014	2009, 2014	2017	2017	2001, 2009, 2014	2009	2019
	Real estate development	Residential	Residential	Residential and public headquarters	University headquarters	Residential, City of Science	Public headquarters, tertiary uses	University headquarters
	Inclusion of informal placemaking in land-use planning	No	No	No	No	No	No	No

Source: elaboration by the Author (2024).

Figure 2. The graffiti "*Caserma Salsa Bene Comune*" (Salsa barracks as Common). Source: Author (2022).

barracks for three days in November 2012 to protest against the austerity policies of the Italian government. They organized several initiatives: the projection of the movie "Debtocracy" about the causes of the Greek debt and possible measures to counter austerity policies, art workshops, and a hip-hop festival with local underground groups (Global Project 2012). "ZTL Wake Up!" occupied Salsa barracks in Treviso for a few days to reclaim the space for local citizens (symbolized by graffiti on the entrance; Figure 2) and to highlight its state of serious decay, but without coming up with any concrete proposal.

The range of informal activities tied to this sub-category was limited. It usually included cultural practices and the demand to transform the barracks into "urban commons" (Martínez 2020) but without artistic actions (except the paintings in Salsa barracks). These actions constituted a symptom of the so-called "insurgent citizenship" (i.e. citizens' movements and everyday practices in urban space struggling for social and political change through urban planning and development; Holston 1998) that did not develop into "insurgent planning" (i.e. radical planning practices that respond to neoliberal specifics of dominance through inclusion, Miraftab 2009). As a result, informal placemaking was too weak to last, ineffective in addressing any of the concerns associated with the occupations, and incapable of influencing land-use changes.

Medium- and long-term occupations

Insurgent planning raised instead during more consistent occupations that lasted for months (i.e. medium-term occupations: Bologna's Sani barracks, Pisa's Curtatone-Montanara barracks, and Turin's La Marmora barracks, owned by CDP investment fund) or even up to five years (i.e. long-term occupations: Bologna's Masini barracks and Turin's

Table 3. Data on medium- and long-term occupations.

Data on barracks		Masini (Bologna)	Sani (Bologna)	Curtatone-Montanara (Pisa)	La Marmora (Turin)	Cavallerizza (Turin)
Intrinsic barracks' characteristics	Plot size (sqm)	7,490	105,540	16,850	19,978	20,200
	Listed buildings	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Owner	State (until 2016)/investment fund				City Council
	Year of abandonment	2003	2003	2005	1997	1997
	Current situation	Abandoned	Abandoned	Abandoned	Abandoned	Abandoned
Informal placemaking's characteristics	Occupation	13/11/2012–08/08/2017	15/11/2019–16/01/2020	15/02–22/04/2014	18/04–12/11/2015	29/05/2014 to 19/11/2019
	Informal placemakers	Smsc "Labàs"	Smsc "Xm24"	Political group "Municipio dei Beni Comuni"	Association "Terra del Fuoco"	Association "Assemblea Cavallerizza 14:45"
	Reason	Housing needs/urban commons				
Actions and effects of informal practices	New name	No	No	Yes	No	Yes
	Barricade of art	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
	Informal activities	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Engagement with citizens	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Flows of visitors	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Media attention	Local	Local	Local	Local	International
Land-use planning	Participatory planning	No	Yes (2016)	No	Yes	No
	Planning agreement	2007	2007	None	2009, 2014	None
	Real estate development	Residential	Residential	Residential	Residential	Museum
	Emancipation of informal placemaking in land-use planning	No	No	No	No	No

Source: elaboration by the Author (2024).

Cavallerizza barracks) (Table 3). These cases include diverse actions with greater impact in terms of collective development because they were embedded in a broader process of political organization and institutional engagement. The longer the unauthorized activities lasted, the more they engaged with the local community. However, informal placemaking did not result in any changes in land-use planning. The interview data suggest that regardless of the duration of the occupations, informal placemakers were unable to subvert the agenda of neoliberal urban governance. The various experiences ended due to the lack of agreement with City Councils and owners (MoD and real estate funds) on the barracks' long-term availability and the occupiers were eventually evicted through seizures ordered by Public Prosecutor's Offices.

Medium-term occupations. In November 2019, the smsc "XM 24" occupied the Sani barracks (Bolognina's neighborhood) to find a headquarters for its activities. This was due to a previous eviction and as a protest against the long-standing abandonment of a public-owned asset in a neighborhood affected by dozens of urban voids and the risk of gentrification and speculation (Sprega, Frixa, and Proto 2018). Informal activities included public meetings and workshops, communal meals, book presentations, concerts, and the painting of the façades of several buildings (Figure 3). Engagement with the local community was strengthened by weekend exploratory walks to raise awareness of the

Figure 3. Sani barracks' painted exterior walls. Source: Author (2022).

possibilities for transforming the barracks and to initiate a survey of community needs (Umanità Nova 2020). The owner, CDP, denounced this illegal occupation, which ended with the relocation of XM 24 to another abandoned building in the Bolognina neighborhood.

In Pisa, the left-wing political group "Municipio dei Beni Comuni-Legambiente Pisa" aimed at generating commons in abandoned spaces, such as the transformation of the Curtatone-Montanara barracks into a new social and cultural hub for citizens. The space was occupied for a few months in 2014 and named "*Distretto 42*" (Del Lungo 2014). The activities included guerrilla gardening, cataloging existing plants, and cultural actions (such as meetings, concerts, and communal meals based on a self-organized bar and kitchen). The occupants were evicted when the MoD was still the owner, and successively the CDP investment fund purchased the barracks in 2017. Currently, Municipio dei Beni Comuni-Legambiente Pisa still fights against the redevelopment due to its speculative nature (Martino 2022).

The self-organized association "*Terra del Fuoco*" occupied Turin's La Marmora barracks for seven months in 2015 to protest against the CDP profit-driven project and to reverse it for social and housing needs, along with a project to strengthen the barracks' historical memory of the WWII and the Italian Resistance (Versienti 2015). The association offered empty spaces to unhoused Roma families and organized exhibitions, concerts, performances, and meetings open to the public. From the beginning, however, the occupation provoked protests from local residents. The association never reached an agreement with the investment fund, despite the City Council's attempts to facilitate negotiations (G. Caracciolo 2015). After the eviction, CDP launched many temporary cultural and artistic activities while searching for a promoter able to finance the internationally-signed masterplan (Carlo Ratti

Associates 2017). The MoD eventually decided to temporarily revert the availability of the barracks for its institutional purposes (P. F. Caracciolo 2021).

Long-term occupations. The two most enduring temporary informal practices were Bologna's Masini barracks (2012–2017) and Turin's Cavallerizza Reale, renamed "*Cavallerizza Irreale*," Unreal Cavallerizza (2014–2019). These two experiences were proper examples of what Pruijt (2013) calls "entrepreneurial squatting" (i.e. small enterprises without the need for large resources or the risk of getting bogged down in bureaucracy) as they were a place for informal arts, culture (workshops for artists and children), social services (housing and Italian school for migrants), and self-production for an alternative economy (e.g. farmers' market and community garden).

The smsc "Labàs"[5] occupied Masini barracks after three failed attempts to sell it on the real estate market by the State Property Agency between 2010 and 2012. Labàs successfully engaged with local citizens through activities such as: the coworking-based training and professionalization project "Làbiopizza pizzeria" for the occupants using local products; a bicycle workshop to foster sustainable mobility; "Làbimbi" childcare center aimed at social values such as environmental sustainability; "Dignified reception" with the capacity to host 20 homeless per night; "Schiumarell" self-production brewery out of the large-scale retail trade; and weekly "Làbas's wednesdays" meetings. The relevance of Làbas's activities was so important that, despite the eviction in August 2017, a demonstration of 15,000 people in September 2017 to reopen Làbas resulted in the reallocation in a city-owned building (Giannini and Pirone 2019, 953–962).

The Cavallerizza barracks became the property of the City of Turin in 2007. (Figure 4) The intention was to sell it to private investors to install a museum. However, a citizens'

Figure 4. An image of the interior spaces of Cavallerizza barracks with the banner "*La Cavallerizza è per tutti*" (Cavallerizza is for everyone). Source: Author (2019).

movement named "Assemblea Cavallerizza 14:45"[6] occupied the site due to the uncertainties associated with this cultural project to create instead urban commons. In a context in which the City Council maintained its intention to sell the asset, many internationally-renowned artistic, cultural, and political activities took place over the next five years. Despite the insistence of citizens, intellectuals, politicians, and academics to maintain public ownership, the occupants were evicted in November 2019 after a fire and the property was sold to the bank Compagnia di San Paolo (CSP) and the University of Turin for €11,305,000 (Montanari 2021). In 2022, the CSP launched an international competition to develop a masterplan for the transformation of the barracks into a cultural center.[7] Currently, the asset hosts the activities of the contemporary art center "Paratissima."[8]

In summary, the informal placemaking practices of Bologna's Làbas and Turin's Assemblea Cavallerizza 14:45 have resulted in long-term alternative uses that have reshaped the environments of the barracks, including the way the spaces were used, received, and experienced (Bragaglia and Krähmer 2018, 114–119; Simone 2017). These experiences created informal networks at the neighborhood (Masini barracks) and international (Cavallerizza barracks) levels, but they were interrupted to make way for profit-driven projects, and no changes in land-use planning were registered. While the eviction of Làbas in Bologna resulted in the relocation of the association to another public asset, the experience of "Assemblea Cavallerizza 14:45" came to an end.

Table 4. Data on ongoing occupations.

Data on barracks		Rossani (Bari)	Del Fante (Livorno)	Porto Fluviale (Rome)	Piave (Treviso)
Intrinsic barracks' characteristics	Plot size (sqm)	30,000	2,550	5,100	25,820
	Listed buildings	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
	Owner	City Council	State (until 2016)/City Council	State (until 2022)/City Council	City Council
	Year of abandonment	1989	1995	1989	1989
	Current situation		Ongoing informal placemaking activities		
Informal placemaking's characteristics	Occupation	From 01/02/2014	From 19/10/2011	From 02/06/2003	From 25/10/2014
	Informal placemakers	Smsc "Ex caserma liberata"	Smsc "Ex caserma occupata"	Squatters and smsc "Coordinamento Cittadino di Lotta per la Casa"	Smsc "ZTL Wake Up"
	Reason		Housing needs/urban commons		
Actions and effects of informal practices	New name	No	No	No	No
	Barricade of art	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Informal activities	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Engagement with citizens	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Flows of visitors	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Media attention	Local	Yes	Yes	Yes
Land-use planning	Participatory planning	Yes (2014–15)	No	Yes (2020–21)	Yes (2015)
	Planning agreement	None	None	2001	None
	Real estate development	Cultural cluster	None	None	Residential, tertiary
	Inclusion of informal placemaking in land-use planning	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Source: elaboration by the Author (2024).

Ongoing occupations. Toward the emancipation of informal placemaking

It happens that informal placemaking may play a role in producing structural changes in the existing planned transformations of barracks and/or emancipating unauthorized activities. Various dynamics tied to the unauthorized occupations of Bari's Rossani, Livorno's Del Fante, Rome's Porto Fluviale, and Treviso's Piave barracks trigger structural changes (Table 4). First, these occupations aimed to provide social reproduction spaces and artistic/cultural events on a weekly or monthly basis in poorly equipped urban sectors. Second, the barracks' walls were painted without authorization by the occupiers or internationally known artists, thus creating a sort of "barricades of art" to protect informal practices. Third, the magnitude of these actions for the benefit of local communities was so significant that this factor called into question the otherwise planned or unplanned future of these sites (including the fact that all barracks were slated for privatization). Fourth, and consequently, informal placemaking contributed to establishing a collaborative dialogue between occupiers and institutional actors, especially local administrations, resulting in participatory planning processes or a City Council's decision to make agreements with all the parties involved. Eventually, a fundamental condition that propelled the structural change in the redevelopment processes was that City Councils owned the barracks or were close to owning them. The general tendency to privatize the assets by selling them off was the basic option in all cases, but the commitment of the City Councils prevented this.

To overcome the ambiguity of its future use since its abandonment in 1989, the smsc "*Ex Caserma Liberata*" illegally occupied Bari's Rossani barracks in 2014. The occupation resulted in the provision of a wide range of equipment (i.e. social library, study hall, popular gymnasium, gardening workshops, theater performances, film forums, urban garden, and rehearsal hall; Signorile 2014). The relevance of these activities for the local community led the City Council to launch a participatory planning project called "*Ri-Accordi Urbani*" ("New urban agreements with citizens and the social center;" Urban Center Bari 2015). Bari's City Council institutionalized informal activities inside the ancient barracks, such as guerrilla gardening with the creation of the new Gargasole park (Urban Center Bari 2018) and the unauthorized street art by the Spanish graphic artist Elías Taño (D'Acciò 2018). Other public facilities currently installed in the former barracks are the local urban center, sports facilities, an academy of fine arts, and the new regional library.

The smsc "*Ex caserma occupata*" is occupying Livorno's Del Fante barracks since 2011 (G. C. 2011) to fill it with self-financing artistic, cultural, and sports activities (e.g. cinema, gymnasium, skate park, social dinners, concerts, and workshops in carpentry, tailoring, and music therapy at low cost), as well as specific spaces to accommodate evicted people (Uni Info News 2013). The occupation took place at the same time that the City Council required the property transfer from the MoD in the frame of the so-called "state property federalism." The owner, i.e. the City Council, immediately agreed with the social center to keep informal placemaking activities on the basis of a weekly routine.[9]

Rome's Porto Fluviale barracks was occupied in 2003 by dozens of homeless families and members of the "*Coordinamento Cittadino di Lotta per la Casa*" that gradually organized artistic and cultural activities opened to the public. The experience of self-management has devoted the barracks' ground floor to various types of workshops (bicycle, goldsmithing, tailoring, leatherwork, circus, and dance training) and a tea room

Figure 5. The exterior wall of Porto Fluviale barracks. Source: photo by the Author (2022).

with recreational and cultural activities. In 2007 the site was given the "emergency housing status" to temporarily accept informal placemaking, while the MoD attempts to sell the site on the real estate market failed in 2010 and 2014. Meanwhile, the international artist "Blu" covered the exterior walls with 27 faces representing the ethnic diversity of the residents (September 2013-November 2014; Figure 5), catalyzing national and international media's attention (Grazioli and Caciagli 2017). Between April 2020 and February 2021, the City Council coordinated the participatory planning project "Porto Fluviale RecHouse" with residents and local universities of architecture to obtain the ownership transfer through the state property federalism and compete for the funding of the "2021 National innovation program for the quality of living."[10] The attempt succeeded and the project received a total of €11 million. (Ministero delle Infrastrutture e della Mobilità Sostenibili 2021, 118)

The smsc ZTL Wake Up! occupied Treviso's Piave barracks in October 2014 to develop community-centered activities in decaying publicly owned assets and to establish a dialogue with the City Council to find a feasible solution. To achieve this, the local administration supported the participatory planning project "OpenPiave" (February-December 2015)[11] in collaboration with a local University and the smsc. The result was a self-organized project aimed at developing arts and culture through a free loan agreement. The barracks now host seven thematic activities (i.e. welcoming, performance, conviviality, information, manual skills, motility, and interface) on a daily and weekly basis.

Discussion

The case study analysis shows that most of the practices did not achieve structural change, but at least they challenged, to varying degrees, the trajectory of technocratic

or growth coalition-dominated development practice established in the planning agreements (when existing). Today (January 2024), only four of the 16 occupations are ongoing while the others have been evicted. These successful cases reverted profit-driven approaches and influenced a sort of "institutional legitimation" by the involved authorities (i.e. by means of the inclusion/approval of informal activities in land-use planning and the permanence of occupants in the barracks).

The case studies show different grades of self-organization and long-term capacity. Short-term occupations based on unorganized squatting or isolated protests created weak disruptions without affecting spatial planning instruments or community development. On the contrary, informal practitioners became sustained agents that informed the failure (or temporarily interrupted the trajectory) of conventional urban development practices when unauthorized actions provided effective benefits to the local community (Bragaglia and Caruso 2020). Informal placemaking had an impact on community development when occupants (mostly in the form of smsc) placed a wide range of activities, engaged with citizens, and promoted events that attracted visitors and relevant media attention. Informal practices provoked changes in spatial planning when the local governments recognized their value to the community. However, public ownership of the land through the City Councils appears to be the real trigger of land-use planning changes.

Table 5. Matrix indicating different types of informal placemaking and the action approaches for barrack sites in Italy.

S. No.	Taxonomy Categories	Range of Informal Activities	Scope of Action Approaches based on case studies
1	Temporary occupations: : Immediate evictions	• Cultural practices • Urban Commons	Informal Placemaking - • too weak to last, ineffective in addressing any of the concerns associated with the occupations • and incapable of influencing land-use changes
	Temporary occupations: Medium- and long-term occupations	• Diverse actions • Greater impact • Collective development • Higher engagement with local community	Evicted through seizures ordered by Public Prosecutor's Offices
2	Medium-term occupations	• Protest against the profit-driven project and to reverse it for social and housing needs • Organized exhibitions, concerts, performances, and meetings open to the public	Temporarily revert orders for public use
3	Long-term occupations	• Activities evolved in small enterprises out of the main market • Internationalization	Reshaping of interior and open spaces of the barracks
	Ongoing occupations	• Most of activities and events open to the public on a weekly and monthly basis (even daily) • Barricades of informal art	• Strong benefits for local population • Recognition of the values of informal placemaking by City Council (owners) • Public ownership trigger participatory planning and land-use changes

Source: elaboration by the Author (2024).

The summary of outcomes as a matrix can indicate a feasible action approach for different categories in classification (Table 5). It is in this sense that several points deserve attention in relation to the existing literature in the field of study, fieldwork, and interviews.

First, "insurgent citizenship" triggered occupations and related informal activities in contrast to the current neoliberal planning dynamics, which are heavily influenced by the intertwining of the market, powerful elites, and bureaucracy in urban sectors that lack human scale and sensitivity (Douglas 2014, 11). As the interviewee belonging to Rome's *Coordinamento Cittadino di Lotta per la Casa* explained, the failed occupation of the Guido Reni barracks was meant to «protest against a speculative project aimed to create the new City of Science, but the planning agreement already settled and a fake participatory process did not embed any proposals for the 'right to housing'». This project, still unimplemented, is expected to cost €270 million, while the cost of selling the private areas for housing, commerce, offices, and tourism would be around €4,800–5,000/sqm, higher than the average real estate prices of the neighborhood (4,750 €/sqm) (Nartello, 2015).

Second, informal activities have maintained their insurgent character over time and have not been incorporated into the neoliberal development agenda, which has instead tried to stop them. This may be a novelty in the field of study as a significant body of academic discourse has shown that (a) institutionalization of informal practices outside the legal domain is growingly accepted as an appropriate tool for reactivating vacant spaces and generating flexibility in a rigid and formalized planning system (Hou, 2020: 118) and (b) criticism about informal placemaking as a vehicle for co-optation, depoliti-cization and their inclusion into the wider process of urban capitalism (Mould 2014, 532).

Third, and closely related to the previous point, the actions in former barracks repre-sent a form of resistance by the marginalized against the exploitation they suffer and the future risks associated with the mainstream approach to MoD assets, i.e. the commodi-fication of urban space, gentrification and displacement of non-conforming uses (Colomb 2012). The occupants sought confrontation with the authorities and owners to change the status quo and legitimize their actions, but economic interests usually prevail. As claimed by the CDP fund spokesperson, «we, as owners of the former barracks, have the right to pursue our goals. As defined by the Italian legislation on the disposal of public-owned assets, the objectives are mainly financial. Our projects have been discussed with the stakeholders, including in public meetings. The proposals are currently integrated in the planning system or are still under discussion and include a percentage of housing dedicated to low-income population. When one of our assets is illegally occupied, we must act».

Fourth, the temporary activities were stopped due to the owner's willingness to achieve financial goals with little attention to the provision of local services, as a member of Bologna's Làbas confirmed: «We managed to informally negotiate with City Council's spokespersons, but without ever having any real political capacity to address the issue of the former Masini barracks . . . The "Làbas issue" was even shelved by the politicians! They acknowledged the positive and unexpected outcomes of informal placemaking, but they did not plan any solutions other than the eviction to favor the project proposed by CDP investment fund. In fact, the local government had an agree-ment with the investment fund on which basis the City Council would collect €7,5 million

from the sale of several public assets owned by this speculative company, including the barracks … The owner also denied any confrontation with us, as one would expect from a corporation whose only goal is to maximize profits».

Ultimately, the political eagerness for keeping informal placemaking in place was the City Councils' ownership. This factor gave local politicians the authority to develop participatory planning as a vehicle to intersect stakeholders' goals, resulting in a formalized institution with granted rights for the occupants. As stated by ZTL Wake Up!'s member: «We understood the main reason for the unsuccessful occupation of the Salsa barracks. The State was still the owner and we did not propose nor any real solutions or new functions to deal with the abandonment. The subsequent attempt to occupy the Piave barracks in 2014 was carried out with clear ideas about the new uses. As a result, the left-wing administration was keen to revert the static situation affecting this barracks with us. Over the last 25 years, the selling of Piave barracks by Treviso's local administration failed up to three times until our occupation to reclaim it as a space for social reproduction. Then, we had the opportunity to participate in an innovative participatory planning funded by the local administration and run by experts from Università Iuav di Venezia. This experience changed the terms midway and involved hundreds of Treviso's citizens who understood the relevance of unauthorized practices oriented towards disadvantaged people».

Conclusion

According to Lefebvre (1970: 92), as urban space becomes progressively limited, it becomes costly and is a ground for those seeking to accumulate wealth and maximize profits. The critical engagement of dominant norms and assumptions through informal placemaking can be a way for individuals or communities to reclaim and transform urban space for other uses. Former military barracks offer fertile ground for exploring these dynamics as they constitute specific kinds of abandoned spaces that can enhance collective practices, divergent identities, and urban livability.

The inventory of unauthorized activities in abandoned and decaying barracks can provide a framework from which to build a pathway for triggering a change in the status quo of these assets and co-designing locally preferred uses. The informal actions presented in the case study analysis were not all successful in being transformative, but they suggested ideas that could lead to a change. Their legalization or normalization has made them certainly less insurgent, but the agreements between the parties involved have resulted in the freedom and power for the artistic and cultural expression of a minority group. City Councils acted as proper moderators with unauthorized placemakers in the condition of owners, but local administrations were less effective in the cases in which they were not owners and the transformations were already agreed with investment funds. The emerging institutional discourses seem to follow this tendency. For instance, the New Leipzig Charter emphasizes that good urban governance is fundamental to support cities in developing just, green, and productive urban systems (European Union 2020). This is in fact a manifesto to empower cities for the common good, such as it happened with the ongoing occupations.

The broader transformative impacts of informal practices in abandoned barracks have been limited as the owner flows back towards these places and well-established administrative procedures stymie or tame otherwise more insurgent or egalitarian concepts of urban development. In four cases, however, unauthorized actions have acted as catalysts, drawing attention to a problem and initiating a process of land-use change. As snapshots of specific cases of informal placemaking in one country, the findings are not at all universalizable. Further explanations are definitely thinkable over those shown here. Despite their limited scope, these findings reflect and underpin the arguments presented elsewhere in the current body of literature concerning the privatization of public-owned assets.

The small subset of data examined in this research was collected in two phases in an attempt to provide an initial snapshot of informal placemaking activities in ancient barracks. Future studies may benefit from a larger database including other types of voids (e.g. post-industrial facilities; Humphris and Rauws 2021) to confirm or refute the analysis presented here. Further research may focus the discourse on the involvement and role of technocratic and/or growth coalitions on a case-by-case analysis and how City Council decisions have completely transformed the informal practices and renegotiated this practice, perhaps even (re)formalized them. The enlargement of types of assets to analyze and a longer timeframe (i.e. before 1996) might also uncover general trends in the unauthorized practices occurring in Italy and their relationship with urban policy agendas. Moreover, an interesting angle can be the cross-over or collaboration as some level of official/unofficial coordination between groups and event is likely and important. To conclude, the relationship between informal placemaking and the complex decisions, processes, and practices responding to the dichotomous concepts of "reuse" of heritage and "decommission" (with consequent demolition) of ordinary buildings deserves attention. These dichotomies potentially impact in diverse ways the future of the barracks' morphology and surroundings.

Notes

1. Alliances of public and private actors' interests constituted on the ground of a shared economic and territorial growth agenda that has shaped territorial government and the production of space in Italy since the 1980s through real estate developments (Della Seta and Salzano 1993).
2. The State Property Agency (*Agenzia del Demanio*) is responsible for the management, rationalization and development of all the properties owned by the State, including military ones.
3. The real estate investment funds involved are "*Fondo Investimenti per Valorizzazioni-Comparto Extra*" (FIV) belonging to CDP (*Cassa Depositi e Prestiti* bank) and Invimit's "*Fondo Difesa*" (belonging to the Ministry of Economy and Finance), established respectively in 2012 and 2014. Both are private entities that purchase assets from the State in order to sell them on the real estate market or even to municipalities.
4. Carried out in Bologna, Rome, Turin, and Treviso.
5. The review of the local press on Labàs' activities is provided here: https://labasbo.org/hanno-detto-di-noi/
6. https://cavallerizzareale.wordpress.com/
7. https://www.cavallerizzarealetorino.concorrimi.it/

8. https://www.cavallerizza.to.it/
9. https://www.facebook.com/excasermaoccupata/
10. http://articiviche.blogspot.com/2021/03/porto-fluviale-rechouse.html
11. https://www.openpiave.net/

Acknowledgments

Disclosure statement

Funding

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