

### **Three theses on informal housing in Europe**

In the final scene of Vittoria De Sica's 1956 film, *The Roof (Il tetto)*, a young newlywed couple in Rome are forced to construct a one-room shack on unused land next to the railway lines. Natale, an apprentice bricklayer, and his pregnant wife, Luisa, were homeless, struggling to find somewhere to live in a post-war city undergoing a major construction boom. While illegal shacks were routinely demolished by the authorities and their occupants dispersed, it was commonly believed that the squatters could stay if they were able to put up the residence in one night. Natale and Luisa's own efforts to assemble a makeshift home were foiled, however, by the police though the couple were able to find a second site and erect a half-finished structure before the police intervened. The film ends as a sympathetic officer fines the couple. He allows them to stay and complete their new home.

Widely praised as a return to his neo-realist roots, De Sica's *The Roof* is one of many film's shot in Rome's informal settlements in the post-war period including De Sica's *Ladri di biciclette* (1948), Rossellini's *Europa '51* (1952) and, perhaps most famously, Pasolini's *Accattone* (1961). Informal housing was commonplace

in Rome throughout the period. This included small clusters of makeshift jerry-built dwellings known as *borgate*, and *baracche*, simple shacks that were constructed using found materials such as loose bricks, planks, and corrugated iron. The *baracche* were often grouped together to form small informal settlements or shanty towns known as *baraccopoli* (cities of shacks) (Vasudevan, 2023; see also Forgacs, 2014)

These developments were, by no means, limited to Rome. The history of housing insecurity across Europe during the 20<sup>th</sup> century was, in many ways, marked by informal practices that were commonplace though often overlooked – and even forgotten – in wider accounts of the ‘housing question’ (Hirschhorn, 1989; Leontidou, 1990; Rosello, 1997; Urban, 2013). At the same time, the study of urban informality itself became increasingly associated with the highly precarious forms of endurance and survival developed by the millions of squatters living in the cities and towns of the Global South (AlSayyad, 2004; Davis, 2004; Lombard and Meth, 2016; McFarlane, 2011; Roy, 2005). An expansive and well-established body of scholarship has, in this context, drawn attention to the unjust structures of dispossession, exclusion and violence experienced by the ‘urban majority’; as well as their efforts to eke out a viable – if precarious and often

temporary – life in settings of pervasive marginality (Banks, Lombard, and Mitlin, 2019; Benjamin, 2008; McFarlane, 2011; Simone, 2004, 2018, 2021). Much of this work centred on the emergence of informal labour markets in cities across the global South as well as the incremental (Hart, 1973; Moser, 1978), ‘self-build’ approaches to housing adopted by vulnerable populations in the same fast-growing cities (Perlman, 1976; Turner, 1976).

And yet, in recent years, the study of informality in putatively ‘Northern’ settings as has also gained increasing currency. A new wave of research has zoomed in on certain forms of housing informality (political squatting or Roma camps) (Grazioli, 2022; Maestri, 2019; Martinez, 2020; SqEk, 2013, 2014; Vasudevan, 2015, 2023) complemented, in turn, by studies of other equally significant declinations of informal housing (Esposito and Chiodelli, 2020, Esposito, 2022; Herbert, 2022). Some of these declinations are ‘new’ and closely linked to the emergence of a ‘sharing economy’ rooted in wider processes of financialisation and new forms of platform capitalism characterised by short term rental housing, hyper-touristification, and gentrification (see Colomb and Moreira de Souza in this special issue; see also Ferreri and Sanyal, 2018); other declinations, such as the alternative infrastructures of care and survival assembled by migrants in the

face of restrictive and often violent border regimes, although certainly not unknown in the past, have taken on a new centrality (and urgency) and assumed a specific phenomenology in the light of the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ in Europe (Kapsali, 2020; Jordan and Minca, 2023; Tsavdaroglou and Kaika, 2022); others still are rooted in often overlooked trajectories of informality that shed further critical light on everyday forms of inhabitation in the face of an increasingly unaffordable housing system (Galuzska, 2024; Hilbrandt, 2021; Lombard, 2019).

It is within this framework that informal habitation, in its variety, must be seen today as a key *structural* feature of European cities. While we recognize the differential and uneven histories of informal housing and property across Europe, we also seek to remain alert to the possibilities of thinking with urban informality as a more expansive ‘site of critical analysis’ (Banks, Lombard and Mitlin, 2019).

At stake here, as the papers in this Special Issue show, is a shared understanding of housing precarity in Europe and the uneven geographies of informality and formality that it has come to produce. Against this background, we argue for a more holistic interpretation to housing informality in Europe as a critical heuristic for re-thinking the dynamics of informality in the global North. In so doing, we offer three modest theses – argued concisely for reasons of space – which,

although distinguishable from an analytical and communicative point of view, are inextricably co-constitutive of our interpretative hypothesis.

**First thesis: housing informality is endogenous to European cities**

On first inspection, the evolution of the international academic debate on urban informality points to the idea of a ‘transplantation process’ of informality in the so-called Global North. Since the 1970s, scholarly research has focused heavily on informal habitation in the Global South only to retrospectively ‘discover’ it in economically advanced countries of the North. Such ‘discovery’ coincided with a new body of scholarship that highlighted the relationship between the urbanisation of capital and an intensifying crisis in housing provision (Harvey 1985, 2008; see also: Aalbers and Christophers 2014; Fernandez and Aalbers 2017). This may suggest the existence of converging trajectories between different cities worldwide and, therefore, indicate that Southern informal modes of dwelling have found new shape and form in Northern cities (often, so it is argued for instance by conservative political leaders, as a result of new waves of migration) – thus reinforcing the automatic and necessary association between informality and the South of the world.

This argument belies, however, a colonial framing of informality (Schiller and Raco, 2021). Housing informality, in fact, is, as we argue, an endogenous phenomenon in the development of European cities, closely connected to the logics of capitalist modernity. Indeed, informal and precarious housing was not a temporary and accidental occurrence – resolved by economic development, social struggles, and public reforms in the early twentieth century – but has run throughout the urban history of Europe in the 20th century and, in particular, after World War II (see Noel Manzano’s piece for this special issue). But more than this, it has remained a mass practice, while changing its physiognomy over time; as it is the case in many southern European countries (Chiodelli et al, 2021). In other instances, while fading in terms of magnitude, it has nevertheless persisted as an *ever-present possibility*, mobilised when needed according to specific purposes; for example, to house migrant workers in post-World War II Switzerland and, in more recent times, to provide accommodation for asylum seekers, as illustrated in Felder and Pattaroni’s article for this special issue (see also Mennatullah Hendawy and Ahmed Rezk’s article on the autochthonous matrix of informality in Berlin). In other words, despite the widespread rhetoric on progress and modernization, urban informality has endured as a structural feature of contemporary European urban development and governance, both as a

presence and as an opportunity (see among others: Aguilera 2024; Hilbrandt 2021; Krammer and Hauer 2024; Patton and Sophoulis 1989; Ward 2002).

Within this framework, and in recent years, informality in Europe has increasingly – though not exclusively – been located at the intersection of new patterns of *forced migration* and an ever-intensifying *housing crisis*. Forced migration is currently the main driver of informal housing in its most extreme and fragmentary forms, as in case of the Calais Jungle and its subsequent fracturing into an archipelago of informal camps (Ansaloni 2020) or the ‘shantytowns’ of seasonal workers in the new ‘plantations’ of southern Europe (Caruso 2018; Perrotta and Raeymaekers 2023). At stake here are the macroscopic shortcomings of (failed) reception and integration policies that produce processes of illegalization, marginalization, and exploitation of migrants (Geddes and Scholten 2016; Picker 2017; Tazzioli 2023). The housing crisis – especially in large urban areas, where skyrocketing prices and dwindling housing supply are fuelled by financialization and touristification (see the contribution of Claire Colomb and Tatiana Moreira de Souza to this special issue) – is the other major driver of current European informal housing. In this case, the informal production of dwelling space takes on more mimetic and scattered forms: the occupation of abandoned buildings; the

renting out of technically uninhabitable places; extreme forms of overcrowding within the established urban fabric (Clough Marinaro 2021; Lombard 2019; Esposito and Chiodelli 2021). All in all, contemporary informality in Europe remains a significant component of the housing system, situated at the crossroad of global processes and (historical, institutional, and social) local specificities.

**Second thesis: housing informality is (also) a product of the State**

Research on informality in the Global South has long highlighted how the formal and the informal should not be considered as ontologically opposed entities, but as extremes of a continuum (Payne 2002), that is characterized by the steady presence, albeit in different forms and intensities, of the State (Roy 2005).

A similar understanding of the enduring role of public institutions in the production of the informal space, on the contrary, has remained ancillary to the debate on housing informality in Europe until a decade ago, when the picture started to change. The ‘discovery’ of the multiplicity of contemporary informal housing practices in Europe was accompanied by the recognition of the informality-state nexus (Haid and Hilbrandt 2019). This nexus is particularly evident in southern European regions (e.g., Italy, Spain, Greece, or Portugal),

where the spread of informal housing by the middle class (mainly in the form of both second homes for recreational use and irregular extensions to family homes) is the explicit result of deliberate public practices, policies, and laws. The latter, in particular, have not served as instruments for challenging and proscribing the proliferation of informal practices, but have, if anything, knowingly encouraged them; for example, through recurrent amnesty laws (Calor and Alterman 2017; Chiodelli 2019; Potsiou 2014).

This often took place as a process of legitimization for the homeowner class and the construction sector, seen as fundamental pillars of the socio-economic sphere and, more specifically, of the housing system (Allen et al. 2004). Such a legitimization process was (and still is) a powerful tool to build electoral consensus in favour of right and centre-right political parties. The individualist mobilization and anti-statist attitude that this type of informality implies, in fact, fit perfectly with the neoliberal leanings of these parties (Chiodelli 2023).

Public toleration for middle class housing irregularities has often been accompanied, especially in the last two decades, by a simultaneous trajectory of stigmatization, blaming, and repression of the precarious and irregular dwelling

practices adopted by marginal subjects (e.g., Roma people and migrants). Such revanchist approaches did not eliminate housing insecurity and have, if anything, accentuated the fragility and vulnerability of these individuals and groups (Arbaci 2019; Dotsey and Chiodelli 2021; Mudu and Chattopadhyay 2017). In so doing, they have also consciously ensured the survival and reproduction of such precarious dwelling practices. Set against this backdrop, the irregular housing of marginal communities should be seen as a form of *calculated informality* and, as such, the outcome of strategic public (in)action on questions that the State does not want to address in any other (i.e. more effective, more structural, more costly) way (see Gurrán, Shrestha and Gilbert's article in this special issue).<sup>1</sup>

In sum, it is possible to conceptualize informality not only as a byproduct of direct forms of public support, toleration, and legitimation, but also as the result of deliberate (in)action by the State.<sup>2</sup> Hence, a clear *public politics* of informal space

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<sup>1</sup> Gurrán, Shrestha and Gilbert's article deals with the case of Australia. However, similar strategies of allowing the spread of informality in response of housing shortage can be detected in several European cases as well (see for instance: Esposito and Chiodelli 2023; Lombard 2019; Zanfi 2013).

<sup>2</sup> As in the case of Covo da Moura neighbourhood in Lisbon, analysed by Allegra and Colombo in this special issue, which was never the object of rehousing operations that instead affected tens of thousands of other *barracas* in the city.

in Europe can be detected, in the framework of which informal housing is an instrument of governmentality in the hands of ruling elites, who exploit it for their political, economic, and electoral purposes.

**Third thesis: housing informality is normatively ambiguous.**

Over the past 50 years, a growing body of academic literature has pointed to the liberatory and emancipatory potential of informality in the face of marginalising, sectarian, and classist forces at the urban scale (Jabareen and Switat 2019; Ranganathan 2014). The subversive character of urbanites' everyday practices has been interpreted through groundbreaking conceptualisations, such as Asef Bayat's *quiet encroachment*, intended as

A silent, patient, protracted, and pervasive advancement of ordinary people on the propertied and powerful in order to survive hardships and better their lives. They are marked by quiet, atomised and prolonged mobilisation with episodic collective action – an open and fleeting struggle without clear leadership, ideology or structured organisation, one which makes significant gains for the actors, eventually placing them as a counterpoint vis-a-vis the state (Bayat 1997: 57)

These observations share a critical problem space with James Holston's notion of insurgent citizenship understood, in this context, as a key vector for reclaiming the right to the city for the urban poor:

Insurgent citizenship [...] destabilized the differentiated, as the urban poor gained political rights by becoming functionally literate, established claims to property through house building, established rights to urban infrastructure, made law an asset through their struggles with eviction, became modern consumers, and achieved personal competence through their experience of the city (Holston 2009: 256).

This progressive approach to informality emerged in the context of – and in contrast to – regressive policies, narratives, and approaches that view informal settlements as grimy and disease-ridden shantytowns that ‘manifest all the symptoms of social disorganisation’ (Perlman, 1976: 2). They dominated policy and political circles in many countries especially in the 1970s and, despite being radically opposed by academic research and activism, they are still present today, constituting the background of many redevelopment, rehabilitation, and modernization urban projects (Bhan 2016).

Although we believe that it is fundamental to think with the emancipatory and liberating potential of informal inhabitation, a comprehensive reading of

informality in Europe highlights its structural and normative ambiguity. As this Special Issue shows, informal dwelling practices create an *archipelago of institutional micro-geographies* at the city scale, that generate, in turn, *heterogeneous spheres of urban citizenship rights*. In other words, informality is linked to the making of spaces of autonomy where ordinary practices and rules are suspended or reshaped, thus allowing the emergence of unconventional forms of coexistence and interaction.

Two opposing trajectories can take place in these spaces of autonomy. On the one hand, as mentioned before, informal inhabitation can trigger processes of empowerment of the marginalized that reclaim fundamental rights otherwise denied (such as the right to housing for undocumented migrants, that in ‘fortress Europe’ can often be secured only through informal housing practices). In this framework, informality contributes to nurture ‘an urban citizenship that is emancipated from imperatives of national sovereignty and homogeneity, [thus becoming] a homebase for cosmopolitan democracy’ (Bauböck 2003: 197).

However, examples also abound that highlight the degree to which informality serves as an opportunity for ruling subjects to accentuate and reinforce existing

processes of neoliberal marginalization and exploitation. This is the case, for example, of informal rental practices, where any legal form of tenant protections is absent (see Emily Kelling's contribution on London's incremental house extension). But also emblematic are the instances in which the notion of (in)formality becomes a powerful tool for discrimination and subjugation of Roma (Picker 2017) or migrant communities (Fravega 2023). Here, rather than fostering local processes of bottom-up inclusion or expansion of rights, informal housing practices reinforce vertical subordination to the logics of capital and to the exclusionary boundaries of national citizenship.

In essence, housing informality is, in our view, a source of selective spatial autonomy that can be inhabited as much by processes of rights expansion, emancipation, and solidarity as well as by practices of right-restriction, exploitation, and precarisation. Rather than a concept which can be univocally connoted from a normative viewpoint, informal dwelling is a structurally slippery notion, a critical site of analysis whose ethical and political interpretation must be necessarily situated in time and space.

## **Conclusion**

At the heart of this Special Issue is a response to Banks et al.'s (2019) recent call for a 'renewed under-standing of informality, not as a distinct category, sector, or outcome, but as a site of critical analysis, drawing on and extending political economic analysis in specific urban contexts' (233). While such re-framing has revived and recalibrated our understanding of urban informality and its 'historical and ongoing centrality in shaping urban development across the Global South' (224), we seek to recognise the cardinal significance of the informal as an enduring *structural* feature of European cities through three modest propositions.

The papers in this collection thus advance an approach to urban informality that foregrounds the complex historical evolution of informal practices across Europe and their uneven relationship to the logics of capitalist urbanisation. At the same time, these are practices marked by the imprimatur of the state whose role in generating and policing informal dwelling practices is a major touchstone of this collection. But more than this, these are ultimately practices that highlight the ambiguous nature of urban informality as both a source of resistance and subversion as well as a tool for exclusion and repression.

And yet, we wish to conclude by holding onto the promise of the informal as a site and source of political action. We turn, in this context, to another film, Jean-Luc Godard's 1967 *La Chinoise*, whose famous tracking shot juxtaposes the informal shacks housing thousands of predominantly North African workers on the outskirts of Paris with the newly built modernist campus in Nanterre. If

Godard's film followed the actions of young student revolutionaries in Paris, it was a largely forgotten book by the French urbanist and sociologist, Henri Lefebvre that brought the circumstances of post-war uneven development into sharp relief. *L'irruption de Nanterre au sommet (The Irruption: From Nanterre to the Summit, 1968)* was published in the same year as Lefebvre's *Le Droit à la ville (The Right to the City)* and offered a series of short essays that reflected on the events that culminated in the protests of May 1968. Lefebvre had recently joined the sociology faculty in Nanterre and it was the district's marginal status that, in his eyes, served as a major catalyst for the wave of occupations and strikes that exploded across France (McDonough, 2008).

Such expressions of political defiance and resistance may seem a long way from a collection dedicated to re-thinking our conceptual and empirical understanding of urban informality in Europe. As Achille Mbembe (2024) reminds us, however, this is world of increasingly precarious inhabitation marked by new modes of detention and deportation and sustained by practices of erasure, sorting and enclosing (93). To document the contemporary condition of informal housing across Europe is to therefore recognise the stakes involved in re-imagining the city as a space of dwelling and endurance.

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