

**The struggle to belong:**  
*Dealing with diversity in 21st century urban settings.*

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**The forgotten housing demand: the urban slums in Rome, Italy**

**Giulia Agostini**

Phd Student in Urban and Territorial Planning

Sapienza University of Rome

DATA – Dipartimento Design Tecnologia dell'Architettura Territorio e Ambiente

Via Flaminia n. 70 - 00196 Roma (RM), Italy

**Email:** giuliaagostini8@hotmail.com

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## 1. Introduction

Rome, the eternal city, is the most visited city of Italy and one of the most famous cities of the world. However, Rome is also a metropolis where a growing portion of people can not afford a house and has no other alternative than living in shacks, tents, disused buildings and factories.

The problem of slums is usually considered as a problem of Developing Countries, and when we think about slums we think about Brazilian *favelas* or African endless shantytowns.

Nevertheless, urban slums are present also in Italy, a so-called “Developed Country”. In Rome the lack of housing solutions for the urban poor has caused the formation of urban slums. Slums are the shelter of all the urban citizens excluded from the market and abandoned by the Welfare State.

However, in Rome this “forgotten” housing demand is very diversified and each segment of this demand has built slums with different characteristics.

The first part of the present paper will analyze the theoretical background of slums and the second part will focus on the housing situation of Rome and on the classification used to understand the different slums of Rome. Two brief case studies will also be presented in order to draw possible solutions to the problem of slums in Rome.

## 2. Theoretical and empirical background:

Nowadays, for the first time in human history, the world’s population is predominantly urban (UN-Habitat, 2006). On one hand, this could be a positive trend, because cities are considered the engine of economic growth and countries with higher GDP and income per capita are usually more urbanized (Tannerfeldt and Ljung, 2006). However, on the other hand, cities are also sites of extreme inequalities, and urbanization in many countries has not produced economic growth and human development (UN Millennium Project, 2005).

Actually, the absolute number of poor in urban areas is increasing and the location of poverty is moving to cities; this well documented phenomenon is defined the “urbanization of poverty” (UN-Habitat, 2006).

“Slums are the physical and spatial manifestation of urban poverty and intra-city inequalities” (UN-Habitat, 2003) and in 2001, 924 million people, or 31,6% of the world urban population, lived in slums (UN-Habitat, 2003). Slums are not anymore a marginalized part of the city and according to UN-Habitat (2003) the world slum population will reach 1.4 billion by 2020.

The early literature on slums and squatters areas was condemnatory and almost alarmist, slums were considered as a place of breakdown of morals, desegregation of family and community life. Invasion of public land was seen merely as a violation of law: slums were considered the problem and slum dwellers law-breakers (Laquian, 1983).

Thanks to the seminal work of Turner (1968) and other authors (Mangin 1970; Herbert and Van Huyck 1968), which observed the organizational capacities of slum dwellers, informal settlements were for the first time portrayed as a solution to the problem of scarcity of housing. Furthermore, these authors stressed the main underlying cause that brought to the creation of slums: the lack of government solutions to the fast growing needs of the urban population and especially of the poor. This topic was further developed

by De Soto (1989), which emphasized that slum dwellers should not be considered as the problem but as victims of the state, that forced them into the informal sector.

There is an extensive literature on slums of Developing Countries, that goes from UN-Habitat publications, to monographs on this issue (Davis 2006, Imparato and Ruster 2003, Durand-Lasserve and Royston 2002, Lari and Lari 1996, Neuwirth 2005, Aldrich e Sandhu 2005), and scientific papers (Du Plessis 2005, Hasan 2005, Payne 2005).

However very few researches have been carried out on slums in “Developed Countries”.

### **3. The housing situation of Rome**

The last decade in Italy has been characterized in one hand by the crisis of public housing and on the other hand by increasing difficulties to rent or buy a house in the market.

From 1984 to 2004 there has been a dramatic decrease in public housing production by the State. Until 1998 the Ex-Gescal Fund financed the construction of subsidized housing for 1,5 billions of Euros. When in 1998 this Fund was closed the consequence was that while in 1984 were built 34.000 subsidized houses in 2004 just 1.900 units were build in all Italy. Furthermore compared to the rest of Europe, Italy has a very low stock of public houses: just 4% of the total housing stock, but in Scandinavian countries the public housing stock is around 30% and in France is 17% (Dol and Haffner, 2010).

In addition, the disposal of public properties started in the '90 has contributed to the crisis of public housing in Italy: 155.000 houses were sold for a total of 3.665 billions of Euros, which means that each house was sold at less than 23.700 Euro. This was a lost of public moneys and public houses (Agostini et al 2011).

The lack of public housing is particularly critical in Rome where 32.000 citizens are in the waiting list for getting a public house (Municipality of Rome web site).

To this dramatic scenario, it must be added the growing difficulties to buy or rent a house in the Italian market.

In Italy 80% of the people have chosen to buy a house instead of renting it. As a consequence, the rental market is very small and it accounts only for the 18,8% of residential stock (Dol and Haffner, 2010), while in Germany the rental market is the 57,3%, in the Netherlands the 47,3% and in France the 40,7%.

In Italy the prize for renting a house is very similar to the prize of the rates of a bank loan, the only difference is that bank loans do not cover the full prize of a house and people that do not have significant savings can not obtain a housing loan.

In other words, in Italy the most vulnerable people are forced to find a house in the rental market. According to Nomisma (Berdini 2008) 71,6% of families that rent a house have an income below 2.000 Euros per month. In addition, a recent research of Cnel (2010) has calculated that in Rome family units that have a yearly income of 14.000 Euros have an incidence of housing expenses on income between 63% to 94%. An adequate incidence should be around 30% of the income, which means that low income families should pay a rent between 250 and 300 Euros per month: a rental prize that is currently impossible to find in the roman rental market. However, also for families with a yearly income of 30.000 Euro the rent has a burden on the income of 45% for houses in the suburbs and 77,8% for houses in the centre (Caritas, 2010).

Between 1999 and 2008 the already dysfunctional Italian rental market has experienced an increase in rental prizes between 130% and 145%; in particular in Rome there has been an exceptional increase and average rental prizes are higher than in any other Italian city (Caritas 2010).

It's clear that in Rome a part of the citizens are completely excluded from the real estate and the rental market.

This situation is also testified by the heavy increase in evictions for rent arrears. As highlighted by the Caritas report 2010 the dramatic increase in evictions due to rent arrears in Rome is becoming a “*social emergency of dramatic dimensions*” (206). In Rome the requests of forced eviction due to rent arrears in 2010, compared to 2007, have increased by 171,6% and in total they have been 52.699.

Moreover, as reported by the Report of the Joint Mission UN-Habitat/AGFE held in Rome from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> of February 2005: “*from the data provided by the Italian Ministry of Interior, it appears that from 1983 and 2003 there has been 212.473 forced evictions. Considering that in Rome live about 1.400.000 families, then about 15% of them have been evicted. Furthermore, the Municipality of Rome estimates that there are about 10.000 migrants, or political refugees, that do not have a house or a proper shelter...*”.

In Rome the housing crisis does not affect just a limited part of the citizens but about 40.000 families, about 100.000 people between migrants, evicted families, low income families, young people with temporary jobs and old people (Caudo and Sebastianelli, 2010). To this number, it must be added about 4.000 “invisibles” that live in shacks along the rivers Tibers and Aniene and in little tent cities (Il Messaggero 12 Settembre 2009).

However it is important to highlight that the housing crisis in Rome is not the consequence of a lack of houses, but of the lack of low price houses. In fact, in Rome according to Fedilter<sup>1</sup> (La Repubblica, 12 April 2011) there are 40.000 empty houses, which could house the 100.000 that are suffering the housing crisis. We can say that Rome is facing a paradoxical situation of “houses without people and people without houses”. As a consequence the most vulnerable parts of the population are forced to live in urban slums.

#### 4. The definition of urban slums in Rome

It's difficult to find a universal definition of slum, because slums are multi-dimensional phenomena and change according to the different contexts. Slums are also a relative concept and what is considered as a slum in one city will be regarded as an adequate shelter in another city, sometimes this happens even in the same country. Furthermore, the same nature of a slum is to be an unstable settlement that modify very fast.

The international definition of slum is the one created by UN-Habitat, according to which “*a slum household is a household that lacks any one of the following five elements: access to improved water; access to improved sanitation; security of tenure; durability of housing; sufficient living area*”. However the literal application of the UN-Habitat definition to the Roman context could bring to some inaccuracies. For example in Rome it is very common for students to rent a house without a legal tenancy contract and to pay the rent in the black market; this means that they do not have security of tenure. Then if we apply the UN definition we should consider all the students that do not have a regular tenancy contract as living in a slum. However, the housing situation of roman students is very far from the situation of people that cannot afford a house and are forced to live in a slum.

The UN-Habitat definition analyzes the problem of slums at a household level, but in the roman context it is more accurate to analyze the problem at a **settlement level**.

Moreover, another important characteristic to be included in the revised definition of slum for the roman context is **spontaneity**, or in other words the will to create an informal settlement. If we take into consideration spontaneity, all the regular Roma Camp created in Rome must not be considered as slums. In fact, Roma Camps are a different issue than

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<sup>1</sup> National Association for Commercial and Service Buildings.

slums because “*Roma people are victims of discriminatory urban policies that have created the “camps”, ethnic ghettos, where all the pathologies coming from exclusion and segregation can spread*” (Scandurra 2009: 162). Roma people do not choose to live in camps but they are forced to do so and the lack of will is a fundamental difference between regular Roma camps and urban slums.

As a consequence, to classify urban slums in Rome will be used the following definition: “*a slum is a **spontaneous settlement** that lacks any one of the following five elements: access to improved water; access to improved sanitation; security of tenure; durability of housing; sufficient living area*”.

## **5. Methodology**

In order to understand the differences of urban slums in Rome field researches has been carried out from March to September 2010 in the following places: Metropoliz (ex-factory), Via del Policlinico (a building squatted by around 100 family units), the “hole” of Afghans refugees in Ostiense Train Station, a squatters’ building in Via di Casal Demerode, Via Appia Nuova (small slum where 20 Romanian people live), the ex-Embassy of Somalia (occupied by Somali refugees), an informal settlement of Eritrean people in Ponte Mammolo, Campo Farnia, Casale delle Carrozze, small informal settlements along the rivers Tiber and Aniene, along Via Cristoforo Colombo and Via Prenestina.

During every field visit open qualitative interviews were made in order to understand the different characteristics of slums dwellers such as nationality, income level, typology of visa, intentions to stay in Rome in the future and housing conditions in the past years.

For each settlement a brief dossier has been realized, and two of them are briefly reported in this paper in order to better show the differences in roman slums.

## **6. The classification of slums in Rome**

The slums in Rome have been classified depending on:

- Type of settlement;
- Main characteristics of the dwellers (for example: refugees, migrants, organized groups for housing rights, etc);
- Regularity or irregularity of Visa (the majority of slums dwellers are migrants);
- Temporality: which has to be considered as the expected time of stay in the city of Rome and depends on the visa, the working conditions and the political situation of the home country. Temporality is considered a very important variable for understanding the different nature of slums in Rome, and for imagining housing solutions for slum dwellers in Rome.

TYPE OF SETTLEMENT	DWELLERS	TYPE OF VISA	TEMPORALITY	EXAMPLES
Squatted building or Factory	Housing Movements (Action, Coordinamento di Lotta per la Casa, BPM -Blocchi Precari Metropolitani) composed by Italians and migrants	Mainly regular	HIGH	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Via del Policlinico</li> <li>- Via del Porto Fluviale</li> <li>- Casal Demerode</li> <li>- Metropoliz (ex-factory)</li> <li>- Campo Farnia</li> </ul>
	Organized groups of migrants	Mainly regular	MEDIUM-HIGH	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ex-Embassy of Somalia</li> <li>- Hotel Salam in Romanina</li> <li>- Ex Hotel Africa in Tiburtina station</li> <li>- Casale delle Carrozze</li> </ul>
Shantytown	Political Refugees	Mainly regular	MEDIUM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- “The Hole” of Afghan Refugees in Ostiense Train Station</li> <li>- Informal settlement of Eritrean people in Ponte Mammolo</li> </ul>
	Migrants	Regular	MEDIUM	- Slums near Via Prenestina
		Not regular	LOW	- Slum in Via Appia Nuova
	Roma	Not sure	MEDIUM-HIGH	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Casilino 900</li> <li>- Via della Barbuta</li> </ul>

## 7. Case studies

In order to better understand the meaning of the classification, two case studies will be presented, one for each typology of settlement: squatted building or factory and shantytown.

### **The “hole” of Afghan Refugees<sup>2</sup>**

**Type of settlement:** Shantytown

**Number of dwellers:** Around 150 people

**Nationality:** Afghans

**Type of Visa:** They are all political refugees and the majority of them have a protection visa of 3 years.

**Temporality:** Medium-high

Since 2005 afghan refugees arriving in Rome would settle around Ostiense train station. For years they have lived in the so called “Hole”, the excavation of a construction site where they have built shacks and installed tents donated by humanitarian associations. However, on the 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2009 the owners of the construction site decided to evict the afghan refugees. Since then, they have reconstructed several times the initial informal settlement always near the same area (Ostiense train station), and every time they have been evicted.

All the original dwellers of the “Hole” now live in reception centres, however the situation in Ostiense Station has not changed, and afghan refugees continue to arrive because according to Eva Gilmore, of Yo Migro! Association: *“the refugees flow is not stopping in Ostiense station, because it has become an arrival and transit place for refugees coming from the eastern route (Kurdistan, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan, etc...). Ostiense train station is now a point of reference, where refugees just arrived in Italy can find primary help and information from other refugees in their same situation. Every day there are new arrivals of afghan refugees in Ostiense, this has happened for years and the situation is always the same: new refugees create a shantytown and after a few months they are evicted from it, but after some months it appears in the area a new settlement: it is a never changing situation.”*

### **Metropoliz<sup>3</sup>**

**Type of settlement:** Squatted factory

**Number of dwellers:** Around 250 people

**Nationality:** Italians, Moroccans, Roma, Eritrean, Peruvian, Albanian, Sudanese

**Type of Visa:** Depending of the nationality

**Temporality:** High

This ex-factory, know called Metropoliz, has been squatted the 27<sup>th</sup> of March 2009 by a Housing Movement call Blocchi Precari Metropolitan – BPM.

The ex-factory hasn’t been used for 20 years, and when the squatters entered the deterioration of the building was extreme. For the first six months the squatters lived all together en plain air in order to be ready in case of a police raid. After the first months the dwellers started to feel safe and decided to divide the area in small plots that has been assigned to each family unit. Afterwards each family unit has built his own house in the plot assigned.

Near to the main factory there is a big warehouse that has been squatted in November 2009 by a group of 100 Roma people evicted from the abusive camp of Via di Centocelle. The Roma community has build a small house for each family unit and community toilets.

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<sup>2</sup> Pictures of the “Hole” can be seen in ANNEX I.

<sup>3</sup> Pictures of Metropoliz can be seen in ANNEX II.

## 8. Conclusions

The classification of slums and the two case studies above mentioned testify the presence of a variegated demand of low cost houses that represent different socio-economic needs and characteristics of the inhabitants. Solutions to the problem of urban slums in Rome has to take into consideration the different characteristics of slums and the different needs of the slum dweller.

For example, the settlement of afghan refugees in Ostiense (the Hole) had a function of primary reception for the new arrivals, but this settlement was build in a construction site and for this reason it was impossible to think a about a solution of slum upgrading on site. However in Rome there is a consolidated settlement of Eritrean refugees in Ponte Mammolo in an unused land plot and with political will a project of slum upgrading involving the Eritrean people living there could be implemented.

For Metropoliz, Blocchi Precari Metropolitani, the housing movement that is currently squatting and managing the building, has made a renewal plan for the building that it should be approved and financed by the Municipality of Rome.

Urban slums are multi-dimensional issues that must be handled with a multi-sectoral approach in order to arrive to a real improvement of the quality of life of slum dwellers and not only to a physical renewal of houses and infrastructures. Furthermore, standard solutions for urban slums do not exist and every solution must necessarily be context-specific.

In spite of this, the condition *sine qua non* to find sustainable solutions to the problem of urban slums is political will, especially in a city like Rome where there is a paradoxical situation of “people without houses and houses without people”.

Political decisions could incentive the use of the 40.000 empty houses, that could be assigned for a subsidized prize to needy families. Furthermore, the Municipality of Rome spend every year 33 Billion Euros to pay the residence for the 3.300 people that have been evicted for their homes, which is around 2.137 Euros per family unit just for a temporary solution (Corriere della Sera, 6 Febbraio 2010).

These moneys should be used for long-term housing solutions instead of paying very expensive residences for evicted people. Even in this case the problem is the lack of political will to sustainably solve the housing problems of Rome and to elaborate a long-term housing strategy. Even if the Government and the local administrators are completely ignoring the problem of urban slums in Rome, the problem is growing and the housing crisis is becoming more serious every day.

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ANNEX I - The “Hole”

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One of the settlements built after the destruction of the “Hole”



The “Hole” of afgan refugees

## ANNEX II – Metropoliz

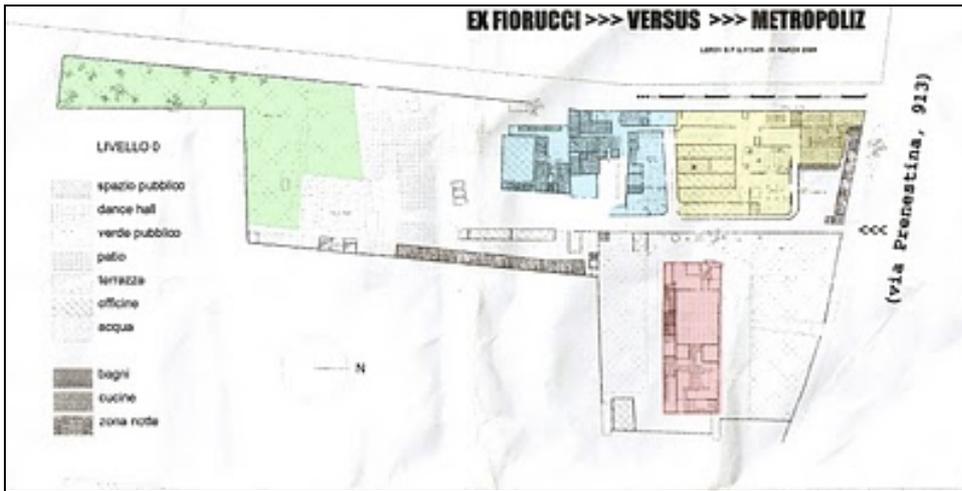
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The entrance of Metropoliz



One of the houses built by a family unit



Plan of Metropoliz