

**The conflict about the social meaning of housing in a  
neighbourhood subject to gentrification: representations and  
practices of space appropriation**

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## **ABSTRACT**

In this paper I tie in with the argument that the joint action of neoliberalism and economic crisis has had a significant impact on redefining the categories through which the social meanings of housing are expressed and represented. The structural changes that, starting from the eighties, have actively contributed to the redefinition of the cities in the economically advanced world and the close connections between economic crisis and housing crisis have fostered the growth of inequalities and the exclusionary mechanisms of certain social groups from the urban core. The housing question has now become a battleground for different representations, discourses and practices. Furthermore, this dispute is observable in many cities through an urban scale, but it appears to be more evident within neighbourhoods undergoing gentrification processes. Within these urban sections, the social meaning of housing is at the centre of a dispute between several stakeholders, and it has acquired a specific form of spatiality. The different perceptions of the players involved in gentrification are, indeed, materialized in practices of space appropriation, producing visible manifestations of their own housing representations and, in general, of what an ideal city is.

This work is based on the findings of a study carried out on the gentrification process of the Bolognina neighbourhood in the Italian city of Bologna. The research was executed through a set of qualitative interviews to institutional players, gentrifiers, long-term residents and social activists. The first part starts by highlighting the connections occurring between the structural changes produced by neoliberalism and economic crisis in the redefinition of housing. The social meaning of housing is analysed through the numerous representations arising from the interconnection between the definition of housing as a social good and its simultaneous integration into regimes of liberal market provision. At the same time, particular attention is paid to how some representations are strengthened by both political discourses and policies implemented at the national level (e.g. 2014 Government Housing Plan). Moreover, the re-appropriation practices that have spread nationwide as a radical response to the recent rampant housing crisis are taken into account. The second part of the work is focused on the research carried out

on Bolognina and intends to contextualize the conflict about housing within a boundary space, where different processes of spatial appropriation are contributing to reshape the features of the area. Therefore, the neighbourhood dimension has become a battleground for players that attribute different values to the gentrification process, as well as to the social meaning of housing. Within this context, practices to contrast displacement and exclusion of certain social groups are the means whereby both the neighbourhood gentrification and the inclusion of housing policies into market mechanisms are criticized. Thus, the spaces produced by housing occupations reinforce the image of a neighbourhood undergoing significant tensions concerning housing and its relation to the processes of enhancement and socio-spatial transformation of the urban space.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The deep changes brought about by neoliberalism on the spatial and social reality of contemporary cities appear as one of the main points for discussion within the current scientific debate. In recent decades, cities have emerged as the main areas of observation of worldwide structural transformations in terms of economy, politics, society, technology and demography (Beauregard & Body-Gendrot 1999; Castells 1996; Sassen 1994; Soja 2000). Several scholars have attempted to conceptualise the current connections between the new role of cities in the globalised economy and the gradual expansion of the neoliberal ideology and policies (Brenner & Theodore 2002; Peck & Tickell 2002). Recently, a flourishing literature has also interpreted cities as the main places where neoliberalism is contested, recognizing the urban phenomenon as the major area of questioning the negative effects produced by neoliberalism (Harvey 2012). Although the relationship between criticism of capitalism and cities has ancient roots and pervades much of the scientific and literary production of the Marxist tradition (see Harvey 2012; Castells 1974; Lefebvre 1968; Engels 1950), the changes brought about by economic globalisation in recent decades have fuelled a new shape of struggles and battles in urban areas, fostering the development of studies on the daily practices of

contestation in cities (Arampatzi & Nicholls 2012; Brenner & Keil 2006; Leitner et al. 2007; Stavrides 2010). Within this line of study, particular attention has been paid to the practices of housing re-appropriation fielded by political movements and self-organized groups (Holm & Kuhn, 2011; Martinez 2013; Pruijt 2013). The housing issue, in fact, takes on particular significance in this specific historical moment from the political and social point of view.

In southern European countries, the gradual redefinition of the Fordist-Keynesian welfare systems and the joint work of the recent economic crisis have produced new areas of dispute on housing. Indeed, the deterioration of the economic and social well-being of a growing part of population seems to have exacerbated several structural inequalities typically found in the wealth redistribution systems of these national contexts (Hong 2014). Consequently, several national housing crises have occurred and most affected medium-sized and large-sized cities. This situation has strengthened the mechanisms of exclusion of marginalized social groups from the centre of the urban space, producing expulsions of growing sectors of "humanity" (Sassen 2013). While the economic problems caused by the crisis have increased the number of people in need for social protection, the redefinition of welfare systems under the pressure of neoliberal policies has progressively transformed the Keynesian wealth redistribution systems. In this context, the housing issue has become a battleground between different social players, producing representations and practices fed by conflicting interests. If the housing crisis is evident from the supranational to the local scale, it is within specific urban sections that it assumes the most visible and direct characters. In particular, the dispute between divergent meanings associated with the house appears mainly observable within those neighbourhoods that are experiencing processes of gentrification. In these places, in fact, there is a divergent co-presence of social groups, political actions and space appropriation practices, which reflects some of those contrasting effects of what Brenner and Theodore (2002) defined as "urbanisation of neoliberalism". Moreover, certain neighbourhoods subject to gentrification show visible manifestations of the conflict that is currently revolving around the injustices produced by neoliberalism and of the "accumulation by dispossession" theorized by Harvey (2005).

While the arrival in a neighbourhood by new social groups often endowed with greater concentrations of cultural and economic capital than long-term residents finds significant connections with the reconfiguration of the globalised economic space (Hamnett 2003), the practices through which these groups take possession of the urban space appear to vary according to conditions determined by the local context. Gentrifiers usually settle in a neighbourhood through market mechanisms and tend to replace those who are affected by displacement. Conversely, those who see their stay in the neighbourhood threatened by gentrification try, in some cases, to preserve their residential location and social relation system through individual or collective ploys (Newman & Wyly 2006). Where there are few social guarantees to maintain one's location in a neighbourhood subject to gentrification, the population groups threatened by expulsion may gather their interests in order to regain possession of the urban space. Radical practices such as housing occupations are indeed spreading like wildfire in southern European countries where a social and housing emergency has gradually emerged alongside the economic crisis. In some specific cases, housing occupation may have a direct correlation with gentrification processes. In this case, the residential issue is the centre of tensions arising from different stakeholders: public administration, gentrifiers, private investors, long-term residents and the most marginalized social classes present in the neighbourhood. All players involved in gentrification have their own perceptions and representations of both the social meaning of the house and the neighbourhood transformation process. As a result, the practices put in place by the various players appear to differ substantially from each other, proving to be grounded on divergent ideologies.

Although a considerable part of the scientific debate on gentrification revolves around the residential discourse and its correlations with neoliberal urban policies (Smith 2002), only in few cases has the conflict about the housing issue been analysed for the connections that it may have with the perceptions and choices expressed by the different players involved in the process (Lees et al. 2008). The forms of resistance to gentrification and the practices implemented by those who are threatened by displacement to remain in their neighbourhood have been analysed even more rarely (Hartman 1984; Newman & Wyly 2006; Martin 2007; Slater 2008). Whilst this lack of

knowledge may find part of its causes within the mechanisms that tend to direct academic research (Slater 2006), it appears equally plausible to put forward a contextual explanation. On the one hand, this may be caused by researchers' lack of social positioning in relation to the investigated issues (Janoschka et al. 2014). On the other hand, most of the research produced on gentrification has been carried out within economic and political contexts (US-UK) where political opposition practices appear to be fragmented both in space and in time. Differently, within the countries of continental Europe and, more specifically of southern Europe, the considerable presence of locally based political movements stimulates a greater manifestation of radical political practices. Such radicalism sometimes flows into examples of urban space re-appropriation which can give rise to occupations of buildings with both social and political purposes (Martinez 2013). The recent spread of housing occupations in Italy highlights the extent of these phenomena in a country that has been particularly affected by both the effects of the economic crisis and the gradual introduction of neoliberal methods of welfare reconfiguration.

This paper is the outcome of an exploratory study on the different perceptions and practices revolving around housing and processes of socio-spatial transformation in neighbourhoods. Through a case study on the Bolognina neighbourhood of the city of Bologna, I intend to argue that re-appropriation practices by marginalised social groups can be a spatial manifestation of the tension revolving around the housing issue in contexts subject to gentrification. The various forms of space appropriation employed by the different players involved in gentrification also reflect more general perceptions and representations of the changes occurring in the neighbourhood.

The work is divided into two parts. The first part outlines the influences that neoliberalism and economic crisis have exerted on the redefinition of housing policies. Particular attention is paid to the representation of the housing problem and the emergence of social needs which do not find institutional responses in the short run, flowing into practices of re-appropriation of the physical and socio-political space of the city. In the second part, the debate on housing is contextualized to the neighbourhood, highlighting some of the connections between gentrification, neoliberal urban policies and housing representations. The housing occupations in the neighbourhood are

evaluated as everyday practices of resistance to the growing inequalities within the contemporary city. The final part analyses the relationship between gentrification and housing occupations, assuming that housing occupations, besides representing a particular example of practical space re-appropriation and the creation of social ties, may constitute a self-organized mechanism of direct contrast to displacement.

## **1. HOUSING BETWEEN CRISIS AND NEOLIBERALISM**

### **1.1 Neoliberalism and housing policies**

The Fordist crisis has often been interpreted as a crisis of profits in Keynesian economic and political systems, which has gradually favoured the introduction of new policies in order to reinvigorate capitalist accumulation (Harvey 2005). Indeed, it has long been argued that the crisis of the Fordist model has been accompanied by the rise of a new model of economic and social regulation (Harvey 1989; Brenner & Theodore 2002). Despite a heated debate on the conceptualization of this model among scholars (see Harvey 1989; Castells 1996; Hamnett 2003), many of them seem to agree on the influence exerted by the neoliberal ideas on its formation. What falls under the name of neoliberalism is the application of a wide range of principles drawn from classical liberal economists. During the twentieth century, Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman reevaluated some key ideas of economic liberalism, laying the groundwork for the establishment of the neoliberal ideology (Hayek 1960; Friedman 1962). Its cornerstone is the idea that an open, competitive and interference-free market can be an optimal mechanism of economic development and resource allocation (Brenner & Theodore 2002). Starting from the 70s and 80s, with different temporality and spatiality, these ideas have spread globally and have become guidelines for the economic and social policies in Western Europe and North America (Hackworth 2005). Although this expansion can be recognized today in many forms at the global level, its effects on the various institutional settings are diverse, depending on the scale of observation and the relationship between the institutional regulation context and the emergence of such

principles (Brenner & Theodore 2002). Indeed, several scholars agree on defining neoliberalism as a contingent and fragmented process (Mitchell 2001; Peck & Tickell 2002). Despite the existence of contextual differences, the advance of neoliberalism may be commonly associated with economic and social policies focused on innovation, competitiveness, decentralization, deregulation, changes in welfare system, privatization of economic sectors and public services (Leitner et al. 2007).

Several scholars have tried to conceptualize the processes of neoliberal restructuring of the institutional arrangements, interpreting them as a creative destruction of the economic and political space at different levels (Brenner & Theodore 2002; Harvey 2007). In Western Europe and North America, the neoliberal destruction has consisted in redefining the Keynesian regulative legacy in terms of artifacts (e.g. public housing), policies (e.g. redistributive welfare), institutions (e.g. trade unions) and employment contracts (e.g. Fordist labour arrangements) (Hackworth 2005). The creative stage has instead involved the establishment of new institutions, the transformation of existing ones and the emergence of new forms of institutional relationships and policies (e.g. governance). Although similarities can be found among the different national States, the articulation and the temporality of these changes differ from place to place, taking on quite non-linear trends (Peck & Tickell 2002). Consequently, the neoliberal political space looks rather segmented both geographically and socially.

Whereas in the Fordist-Keynesian configuration national States were the main geographical basis of accumulation and political-economic regulation (Jessop 1999), starting from the 90s the role of supranational, subnational and local players in this context has grown (Leitner et al. 2007; Kazepov 2010). In particular, cities are at the heart of the neoliberal creative destruction project (Peck & Tickell 2002), since it is within these areas that restructuring has taken place and is proceeding with particular intensity (Brenner & Theodore 2002). On the one hand, cities are called to compete for their economic success on the global scale (Sassen 1994) and to face social problems related to economic developments and the reorganization of national welfare. The economic success of the territory thus emerges more and more as the main basis of revenue at the local level and becomes, in the face of lower economic transfers from the central state, the primary means to ensure the wealth of the community (Kazepov 2010).



On the other hand, there has been a vigorous introduction of neoliberal plans of deregulation, privatization and fiscal austerity within cities. From this point of view, cities have become the testing grounds for a variety of urban policies ranging from practices of territorial marketing and economic valorisation of specific areas to reforms of economic redistribution and social control systems (Brenner & Theodore 2002). Several authors have reported the impacts that such policies have had both on the processes of socio-spatial transformation of the city (Hackworth & Smith 2001; Smith 1996; Smith 2002) and on the orientation of the debate on urban planning around the needs for an economic development of the urban space (Slater 2014). The centrality taken by cities in the propagation and reproduction of these policies thus seems to have given rise to what some have termed "neoliberal city" (Brenner & Theodore 2002; Leitner et al. 2007).

In this new urban configuration, some particularly influential elements can be observed within the transformation of the Keynesian social policies. In the first place, the administrative branches operating towards social development are progressively accompanied or replaced by private stakeholders or public-private partnerships in achieving their objectives. Secondly, decision-making tends to give priority to patterns of governance and economic analyses based on costs and benefits instead of following the ideal thread of social equity and redistribution of resources. Finally, the individualization of social risks has been increased among residents, who increasingly become the authors of their own social status (Leitner et al. 2007).

According to some authors, the impacts of neoliberalism on social reality have been so influential that it may well be considered a new meta-concept in social theory (Larner 2003; Peck & Tickell 2002). Although one may agree or disagree with this assumption, the importance of neoliberalism within the social policies and the contemporary political thought can hardly be denied (Hackworth 2005).

In particular, housing appears to be an interesting field for observing the institutional and political reconfiguration. The restructuring of housing policies over the neoliberal season decades has given rise to a complex reorganization of housing services in Europe, with important effects on the restriction of conventional forms of social housing, on the progressive introduction of new types of social housing supply (Tosi

2014) and on the accessibility of services and their management. The current configuration of housing and social policies in Europe looks like a diversified patchwork marked by the persistence of some facilities and modes of service supply that stem from the Fordist-Keynesian inheritance, while at the same time we are witnessing the introduction of new modes of service supply and organization. The coexistence of Keynesian resource reallocation modes and organizational aspects tending to follow more market-oriented criteria raises fundamental questions for service providers concerning the priorities of their work (Walters 2015). For example, should a public-private housing service supplier mainly aim to financial stability or investments, even unsecured, to alleviate the worst forms of poverty? Should a local government body limit its investments to reach economic breakeven or should it expand its spending to promote the social development of community? Although a differential trend regarding the allocation of these priorities can be observed, these questions tend to put a strain on the issue of housing policy, producing several forms of uncertainty whether to give priority to social needs or financial ones.

Despite the presence of a differential articulation in each country, the creative neoliberal destruction has also produced a substantial change in the ways of intending housing policies in Europe. Over the last thirty years, in fact, new discourses and representations of the housing problem have been developed. Jacobs and Manzi (1996) argued that the new linguistics revolving around housing policies is closely linked to the structural changes induced by neoliberalism. For example, the use of the term "social housing" to designate a wide range of housing supplies for social purposes appears as a clear sign of the political changes and the negative value judgments of Keynesian social policies. Indeed, this new term seeks to characterise a new social housing supply (Tosi 2014), promoting forms of economic sustainability of services and trying to untie the access to social welfare from the problem of social dependence. At the same time, words such as "flexibility" and "innovation" have appeared in opposition to the stiffness and conformation of traditional welfare, trying to provide a new conceptual framework of goals and practices in housing policies (Darcy 1999).

These linguistic changes have not just concerned the terminology used, but have been included both in the political context and in the ways of constructing the housing

problem. From this point of view, the language is far from being neutral and tends to reflect a different social construction of the reality and of the power relations established therein (Jacobs & Steers 1996). By stereotyping marginalized social classes, for example, media and political groups have fostered a growing representation of social problems focused on chronic dependency rather than on structural social inequalities. Consequently, housing policies have been interpreted and perceived less as a potential response to poverty and more as a part, often important, of its causes (Walters 2015). Therefore, the construction of the social housing problem reflects a more general view of the representation of poverty, whose triggers are increasingly less traced in the policies of national governments and ever more often found in the failure of individuals or communities (Jacobs et al. 2003). While housing policies and other areas of traditional welfare have been subjected to budget cuts and to a gradual individualisation of risks by national governments (Hong 2014), the public attention has progressively shifted to the economic sustainability of such policies and to the rules for gaining access to their benefits.

At the same time, some legislative measures have contributed to strengthen these representations and to redefine both the objectives and the ways in which housing policies are implemented. The Housing Plan introduced in 2014 by the Renzi government in Italy, for example, contributes to strengthen the neoliberal discourses and representations of the housing problem. In this legislative measure, housing policies financed by the central State seem indeed to allocate inadequate resources to the protection of the growing social fragility in the country (e.g. Guarantee Fund for innocent arrearage), and to pay particular attention to financing the structural efficiency of the existing public houses<sup>1</sup>. The individualisation of social risks thus appears to be particularly evident within the allocation of financial resources. Moreover, this measure forbids those who illegally occupy a building to apply for residence, utility connection and social housing for five years. The presence of such measures in a National Housing Plan introduces differentiation in citizenship rights related to residence (e.g., school, political participation, etc.) and the criminalisation of squatted houses within a national context where over 650,000 people are waiting for the assignment of social houses,

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<sup>1</sup> Housing Plan: definitive measure, Italian Government 2014, <http://goo.gl/XMA3Sa>

without receiving concrete responses from institutions (Pittini et al. 2015). With the crisis of the welfare state, the idea of a full and universalistic integration is no longer the horizon of social and housing policies and the hypothesis of "differential citizenship" for certain categories of poor people is developing (Tosi 2015).

## **1.2 Crisis and re-appropriation practices**

Although it may be noted that certain innovations in social policies (Kazepov 2010) and the recognition of the limitations of neoliberal policies have recently enabled the introduction of effective housing policies to counter poverty (Lawson & Milligan 2007), it could be argued that starting from the 80s the restriction policy on the conventional forms of social housing supply seems to be shared by most European countries (Whitehead & Scanlon 2007). While forms of assistance were transformed, social needs became greater and an increasingly marked housing crisis characterized by growing misalignment between the supply and the demand for social housing took shape in Europe (Tosi 2014). This quantitative and qualitative disparity between supply and demand has been exacerbated by the recent economic crisis which has particularly hit southern European countries (Hong 2014). Indeed, in the Euro-Mediterranean area the neoliberal welfare restructuring processes were compounded by the dramatic impact of the crisis on society. In these contexts, the growing needs for social protection have added to the structural inequalities due to the presence of familistic welfare (Kazepov 2010). The number of people at risk of poverty and social exclusion in southern European countries has increased substantially since the beginning of the economic crisis<sup>2</sup>. The countries where this situation is stronger are Greece (32.7%) and Italy (27.7%), where there has been a growth of social fragility closely related with the increase in unemployment rates<sup>3</sup>. Thus, the economic crisis has progressively turned into a crisis with multiple social implications, in which housing plays a very important role.

Over the past decades, housing costs have increased across Europe and since the

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2 People at risk of poverty or social exclusion by broad group of country of birth (population aged 18 and over), Eurostat, <http://goo.gl/yZqtPu>

3 Unemployment rate by sex and age groups (annual average), Eurostat, <http://goo.gl/OPbkM7>

beginning of the economic crisis there has been a significant loss of affordability (Pittini 2012). In several countries, increasing costs and difficulties associated with the labour market have fostered the emergence of increasing housing deprivation (see Pittini et al. 2015).

The most pronounced effects of this situation seem to have concerned the poorest segments of population (Pittini 2012) and the growing social composition affected by the economic problems induced by the crisis. This increased the number of people in need for social protection, to which welfare subsidiarization processes (Kazepov 2010) and the reduction of expenses for social protection (Hong 2014) have not always been able to provide adequate and effective responses.

The spatiality of these issues appears to be widespread in the various national contexts and is quite pronounced in the most densely populated areas. Indeed, in the main cities of southern European countries there has been a substantial growth in the number of people at risk of poverty and social exclusion<sup>4</sup>. Within these urban spaces, the loss of housing affordability has generated the most negative effects (Pittini et al. 2015), favouring a general increase in the number of people affected by material deprivation<sup>5</sup>. In spite of this framework which may change depending on the scope of observation, it could be argued that the joint increase in the number of people affected by economic problems and in housing-related costs has had substantial repercussions on the occurrence of national housing crises. This situation has outlined a series of growing housing difficulties especially in southern European countries (see Dewilde & DeDecker 2014). For example, Italy, Spain, Portugal and Greece have experienced a substantial increase in both housing deprivation and crisis. These problems have occurred alongside housing deprivation rates that were already quite high compared to the average of northern European countries (Pittini & Laino 2011), where the structural inequalities between social groups and the inadequate redistribution capacity of the welfare system (Kazepov 2010) have further aggravated the housing problem.

Thus, the spread of housing deprivation finds deep correlations in both the capitalist restructuring dynamics and the growing social weaknesses related to the economic crisis. At the same time, the combination between lower affordability, social

4 People at risk of poverty or social exclusion by degree of urbanisation, Eurostat, <http://goo.gl/Rc0jcR>

5 Severe material deprivation rate by degree of urbanisation, Eurostat, <http://goo.gl/IZxVP1>

repercussions of the economic crisis and neoliberal policies of socio-economic restructuring and valorisation of the urban space seems to outline new dynamics in the structure of migration between cities, suburbs and rural areas. Foukels & Newbold (2005) pointed out that the progressive loss of housing affordability in cities can be associated with considerable migration flows by poorer inhabitants towards marginal metropolitan or rural areas. In this case, the lower cost of housing and rent becomes a key factor in the explanation of the migration out of the city by part of the most marginal social classes. These considerations seem to be related to the idea that the current modes of capitalist development are producing a growing “expulsion” of certain segments of society in economically advanced countries. According to Sassen (2013), this outflow of “exceeding segments of humanity” is caused by the recurrence of the logics that were behind capitalism before the introduction of social protection systems. The emergence of a problematic social situation is, however, accompanied by a growing number of movements opposing social inequalities. According to Harvey (2012), the suffering endured by growing population strata in contemporary capitalism has given rise to both different manifestations of alienation within cities and new forms of dissent and resistance. The housing crisis in southern European countries seems indeed to have encouraged the spread of radical practices of re-appropriation of the urban space, based on the responses to the needs of the weakest social classes. The increase in the number of people suffering housing deprivation (e.g. under threat of eviction) has, therefore, contributed to the development of groups and associations that fight to counter the effects of the joint action economic-social crisis and neoliberal policies (Barbero 2015). House occupations have recently spread within contexts where welfare is not enough to meet the expansion of social needs. Although occupation for residential purposes is a phenomenon that first occurred as early as the 60s in Europe (Martinez 2013), these practices seem to have propagated again in recent years.

In contexts most affected by the crisis, the house seems to become the nerve centre of a number of representations that tend to attribute different values thereto. The social meaning of the house takes on conflicting aspects and tendencies, which often tend to reflect political ideologies, perceptions and practices belonging to specific social groups. Thus, the house becomes a catalyst for social, economic and political interests,

often conflicting with each other. This plurality of ways to perceive the house reflects the multiple roles taken by the house in modern societies: it is both a physical element that provides shelter and shapes the built space of cities and a social element that fosters integration in society and reproduction of social life, as well as an economic good that ensures the accumulation of wealth and social security. For these reasons, in contemporary society the house also becomes a particular political element, subject to growing tension between social rights and capitalist accumulation logics.

## **2. REPRESENTATIONS AND PRACTICES OF SPACE APPROPRIATION IN A NEIGHBOURHOOD SUBJECT TO GENTRIFICATION**

### **2.1 Scale, research methods and location**

The dispute on the different meanings attributed to the house can be described through different scales of observation and by highlighting the elements that emerge from the representations, discourses and practices of the various players who contribute to fuel it. However, using a scale that is based on specific parts of the city subject to transition seems to be a privileged point of observation. In neighbourhoods subject to gentrification, the housing issue seems indeed to be subject to evident tension, produced by individual, institutional, social and political players who attribute different and sometimes divergent meanings thereto. Therefore, the dimension of the neighbourhood becomes a battleground for players who attach different values to the gentrification process and, at the same time, to the social meaning of the house. The analysis of the practices and spaces produced by such different concepts of the house becomes a study of the social relationships underlying the continuous construction of the space, and its negotiation, within gentrification processes.

This work is the outcome of an exploratory study of house representations and urban space appropriation practices by the various social groups. The research has been carried out in a former working-class neighbourhood undergoing gentrification processes, where different values and spatiality are attributed to the housing issue.

Firstly, this work is intended to contextualise the housing issue and the displacement issue in the neighbourhood in question. Secondly, it sheds light on the connections between house representations and values judgments attributed to the transformation of the neighbourhood. Thus, the work analyses the way in which the various house representations result in divergent space appropriation practices. Finally, particular attention is paid to housing occupations, contextualised to the forms of protest against neoliberal urban policies and resistance to gentrification.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, direct observations and analyses of secondary data. More specifically, the semi-structured interviews were submitted to 4 new residents of the neighbourhood and 4 long-term residents, 3 public administrators, 2 scholars, the president of Bologna FIAIP<sup>6</sup>, a trade unionist and 3 political activists who deal with the issue of evictions in the neighbourhood. Direct observations concerned the physical space and were made in 10 places where aesthetic features have undergone changes in the last eight years. Data were collected in a field research period between October 2014 and April 2015. The various groups interviewed were asked to answer a set of various questions formulated on the basis of the information to be collected and by leaving ample room for analysis. For example, residents were asked questions about their residential life, the living environment and their perception of the changes in the neighbourhood. The interviews to scholars and public administrators helped to frame the urban transformations within the development of the city and the political choices. In particular, administrators were asked questions about the objectives of certain urban policies. The president of FIAIP was asked to answer about the trend of the real estate market and urban transformation processes in the neighbourhood. Finally, the trade unionist and the political activists answered questions about housing deprivation and its connection with urban transformation processes. In order to collect specific information, most of the people interviewed were selected on the basis of their knowledge of the issues to be analysed, then identified as key informers and contacted directly. On the other hand, the residents interviewed were

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6 Federazione Italiana Agenti Immobiliari Professionali (Italian Federation of Professional Real Estate Agents). It is the main Italian association of real estate professionals, with 10,106 real estate agents across Italy. It has 20 regional headquarters and 105 provincial districts. Every year it publishes provincial reports divided by cities and neighbourhoods, based on the trend of real estate prices.



selected through the “snowball sampling” method, whereby I took advantage of a pre-existing network of personal contacts. I tried to get in touch with two categories of residents: those who have lived in the neighbourhood for at least 20 years and those who arrived there in the last 7 years. 4 interlocutors considered representative of long-term residents and gentrifiers were selected for each category, on the basis of their professional position, the location and the type of their residence. Also, the areas with the greatest changes in the population of the neighbourhood were mapped to support the research results.

The research was carried out on the Bolognina neighbourhood (4,943 km<sup>2</sup>, 35,158 inhabitants), where I lived between 2005 and 2006 during my university studies. This urban context has been experiencing important territorial change processes for some years. The territorial structure of Bolognina is the result of the 1889 Urban Plan, which was aimed at redesigning the area outside the historic centre, through two different town planning forms: the garden city and the council house (Collettivo PianoB 2007). The Bolognina neighbourhood lies north of the railway station and is characterised by the strong prevalence of a densely populated orthogonal grid pattern (7112.6 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>). Council houses, still largely existing in the neighbourhood, were originally designed to serve the housing needs of the working class. Starting from the early twentieth century, several industries were built in this area, which actively contributed to define Bolognina as a working-class neighbourhood. This connotation inherited from the past, however, seems to have been redefined over time, following the gradual decline of factories and of the manufacturing and social world revolving around them. Between Eighties and the Nineties, the neighbourhood experienced a gradual outflow of the working class and of most of the commercial concerns structured around the balance between factory and neighbourhood. The consequent loss of population was part of the wider economic, urban and demographic trends that were affecting some cities of Northern Italy at that time, such as: industrial deconcentration, suburbanisation and second demographic transition (Mingione 1996). The demographic decline only underwent a turnaround between the two millenniums, thanks to the progressive arrival of new Italian and foreign migrants. The current distribution of the population records a

strong incidence of foreigners (24.3%)<sup>7</sup> compared to the city average (14.6%)<sup>8</sup>, established mainly over the past 20 years. At the same time, a progressive aging of the long-term population and the settlement of new Italian migrants with high education levels are being witnessed<sup>9</sup>. These dynamics make Bolognina a neighbourhood characterised by a strong turnover of the resident population<sup>10</sup>. Today the neighbourhood has taken on a new image and thanks to its strategic location in between the historic centre, the main communication routes and the new poles of economic development of the city it has acquired a central position in town planning choices and in the housing preferences of certain social groups.

“Bolognina is now a vibrant inner-city district, with numerous cultural, commercial, and environmental amenities, and thriving communities of both international immigrants and migrants from other parts of Italy” (Buzar et al. 2007:66)

The dynamics of change that are affecting both the physical space and the social components of the neighbourhood can be read from within the gentrification processes that have been going on for several years in the Mediterranean context (Petsimeris 2005). Despite the increasing number of studies on gentrification in these contexts, the conflict around housing and the phenomena of resistance to gentrification do not seem to be particularly investigated. The study of the various representations of the house and of the different space appropriation practices by the players involved in gentrification seems to be a fertile ground for analysis, in order to highlight the tensions developing around the housing issue within the processes of socio-spatial restructuring of neighbourhoods. The case study is an example of the geographical spread of gentrification processes and of their emergence in cities that occupy a secondary position in the global urban hierarchy (Lees 2000). This work is further intended to contribute to the poor scientific production regarding the resistance to gentrification processes (Lees et al. 2008).

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7 Summary sheet of the Navile neighbourhood, Municipality of Bologna 2014, <http://goo.gl/IQkaEd>

8 Foreign citizens in the province of Bologna, Province of Bologna, <http://goo.gl/SAOzEC>

9 For data, see Town Planning, Control and Statistics Department, Municipality of Bologna, <http://goo.gl/ISOXoq>

10 Migration flows to Bologna, Municipality of Bologna 2012, <http://goo.gl/fffKGB>

## 2.2 Gentrification, displacement and housing crisis

The Bolognina neighbourhood is nowadays at the centre of the change processes that are affecting the city of Bologna, both in terms of town planning and from the socio-economic point of view. Over the past few years, the neighbourhood has become a residential area privileged by a number of new inhabitants, who have been attracted mainly by its central location, its nature as a historic neighbourhood of Bologna and the progressive establishment of new services, functions and commercial concerns. Although between 1991 and 2014 the demographic structure of Bolognina underwent important changes related to the deindustrialisation of the central areas of the city, to the typical trends of the second demographic transition and to migration flows from other countries, it is interesting to note that the type of immigration in the neighbourhood has changed recently. Over the past five years, immigration from other countries has decreased in quantity, while migration trends from other parts of Italy and from the Province of Bologna have become consolidated (Figure 1). These flows mainly consist of well-educated people who settle in the city after a job offer or decide to stay in Bologna after completing their university studies there. These people are members of what Butler and Savage (1995) defined as the new middle class.

**Figure 1.** Immigrants residing in the Bolognina neighbourhood by place and year of immigration

	1991 - 1995	1996 - 2000	2001 - 2005	2006 - 2010	Dal 2011
1. Province of Bologna	371	542	657	1.162	1.270
2. Other Provinces of Emilia-Romagna Region	108	145	195	335	426
3. North-West Italy	52	65	100	164	240
4. North-East Italy	29	65	90	125	180
5. Middle Italy	71	121	172	290	304
6. South Italy and islands	327	508	844	1.043	1.104
7. Foreign countries	146	391	1.061	2.078	1.864
<b>Total</b>	<b>1.104</b>	<b>1.837</b>	<b>3.119</b>	<b>5.197</b>	<b>5.388</b>

**Source.** Population movements from 1991 to 2014, Municipality of Bologna, <http://goo.gl/3wm46z>

The structure of this immigration in the neighbourhood reflects the more general trend of the recent migration dynamics of the entire city of Bologna, where there is a

substantial inflow of office workers, managers, professionals and university students. The considerable migration inflows appear to be balanced by equally large outflows, albeit smaller, from the city. In 56.9% of cases, migration outflows follow short-distance dynamics whose destination is the territorial ring around the city of Bologna. An interesting aspect of this phenomenon is the consideration of the type of population moving out of the city: Italian citizens account for 83.4% and foreign citizens for the remaining part. When looking into these flows in terms of employment status, it can be noted that 47% of the Italian population moving out is made up of office workers, managers, entrepreneurs and self-employed workers, while 30.3% is unemployed and 14.2% occupies low-skilled labour positions. On the other hand, 57% of the foreign population moving out has low-skilled jobs and 18.4% is in non-working status<sup>11</sup>.

These centrifugal trends can be divided into two coexisting but rather divergent migration phenomena: the suburbanisation processes typical of the middle class and a migration towards the outer belts of the city by the most marginal population classes. While the middle class chooses to move out of the city and follow housing paths that can also be associated with a specific temporality of the life cycle (Bridge 2003), the poorest classes move towards suburban or rural areas mainly because of economic constraints (Foukels & Newbold 2005). Indeed, social groups with lower disposable income tend to move out of the city mainly because of factors related to the labour market and unaffordable housing costs. The lack of steady income and the cost of living appear to be prevailing factors in these people's search for a more affordable house. When analyzing the dynamics of emigration from Italian cities, Caruso (2001) pointed out that the cost of houses tend to become more sustainable when moving from the city centre to suburban areas, thus identifying this element as one of the main explanations of the emigration of the working class from the main cities of northern Italy during the Nineties. Recently, this phenomenon has been accompanied by the outflow of a significant portion of foreign population, who has moved to both outer suburbs and rural areas. In several cases, the occurrence of this dynamic has contributed to reshaping the spatiality of contemporary migrations and modifying Italian rural outskirts (Cancellieri et al. 2013).

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<sup>11</sup> Migration flows to Bologna, Municipality of Bologna 2012, <http://goo.gl/fffKGB>

Likewise, migration inflows of other populations segments occur in conjunction with the above emigration from the city. Such segments generally consist of social groups who have higher concentrations of cultural and economic capital than emigrants. According to Petsimeris (1998), the urban centres of northern Italian cities are progressively reoccupied by highly-professional workers, clerical workers and students. The presence of both outflows and inflows of different social groups tends to exert multiple effects on urban neighbourhoods, thus reshaping their spatial and social configuration.

In Bolognina, the arrival of new residents is producing substantial changes in specific portions of the neighbourhood. Despite the large presence of social houses that allow low-income people to stay in the neighbourhood, the transformation that is affecting Bolognina seems to produce a gradual turnover of the population, especially in the areas that are most attractive from the residential point of view. This dynamic is confirmed by several interviews to local public administrators who, while specifying that “the strong presence of public buildings is an element of rigidity against economic and social transformations”<sup>12</sup>, found that “some areas show several signs of this social turnover”<sup>13</sup>. According to the president of FIAIP, the areas most affected by this process “are those that have some housing quality and perhaps have undergone recent renovations [...], while the situation is quite different in other areas that are foreigners’ strongholds and are not attractive to an Italian family wishing to settle in the neighbourhood”<sup>14</sup>. The socio-spatial configuration of the neighbourhood takes on the form of a discontinuous and diversified mosaic, which houses different social groups that often clearly result from the aesthetic and architectural characteristics of streets and buildings (Bazzoli 2014). Therefore, there are areas in which the social renewal is more evident and others where considerable concentrations of low income persist.

While areas with a strong presence of public buildings register low levels of social turnover, several parts of the neighbourhood characterised by the prevalence of private market show a more regular occurrence of the social change. The analysis of the income

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12 December 10, 2014. F.'s interview. Town Planning Department Director, Municipality of Bologna.

13 December 9, 2014. D.'s interview. President of the Navile neighbourhood.

14 January 15, 2015. G.'s interview. President of the Bologna branch of the Italian Federation of Professional Real Estate Agents.

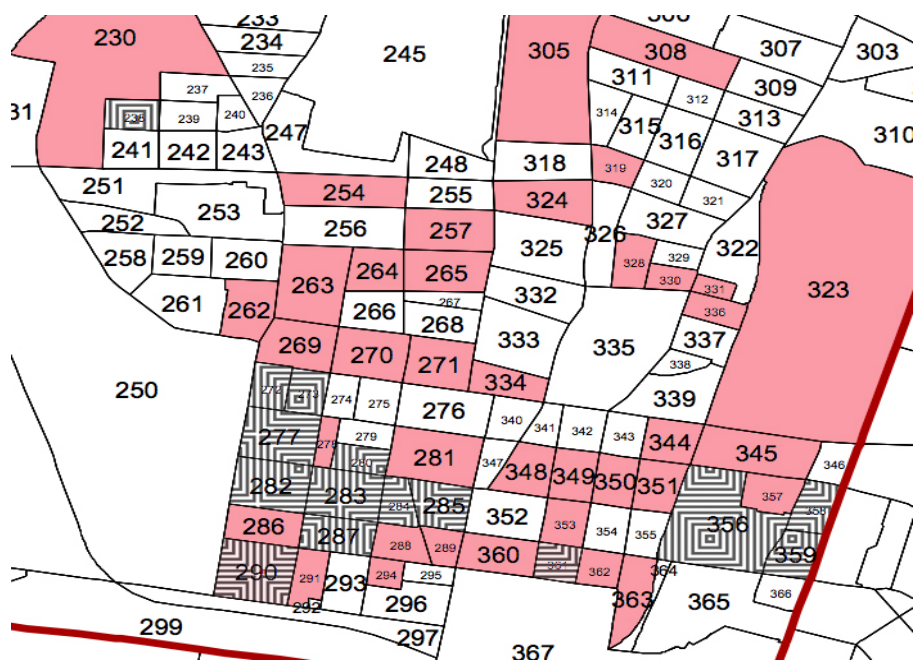
statements in each polling station of the neighbourhood<sup>15</sup> demonstrates that the concentration of public housing in specific areas establishes demarcation lines between social groups with rather different economic capital. At the same time, the observation of the income statements in the city of Bologna shows a correlation between foreign population and low disposable income. While the average annual income declared by the Italians in 2012 was 25,678 Euro and is slightly growing, the average income of foreign people is 9,862 Euro, decreasing compared to previous years<sup>16</sup>. This suggests that the foreign-born population represents a considerable portion of the social components concerned with outflows from specific parts of the neighbourhood due to economic reasons. This assumption is confirmed by the territorial variation of foreign residents of Bolognina and by the connections that can be established between the gentrification process and the expulsion of this social group. The analysis of the variation of immigrant residents by census section shows a rather fragmented geography of change in the neighbourhood, which is however closely related to the influence of gentrification on the physical and social components of the neighbourhood (Figure 2). The pink areas show census sections which, between 2011 and 2014, registered a reduction in the number of foreign residents and an increase in the population coming from other parts of Italy. These areas correspond to the neighbourhood areas where the most evident signs of spatial change can be observed, in relation to both building renovation and new constructions. The white areas represent the census sections in which the foreign population has remained stable or has increased slightly. In these areas there are sporadic signs of aesthetic change compared to the past and a prevalence of low-quality buildings. Finally, the areas highlighted with concentric squares are marked by strong concentrations of public buildings and a growing presence of foreign-born immigrants.

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15 Personal and income data relating to polling stations, Municipality of Bologna 2013, <http://goo.gl/LVxbL6>

16 Resident taxpayers and taxable income declared for the purposes of the municipal surtax on the income tax by citizenship in Bologna, Municipality of Bologna 2013, <http://goo.gl/ni1FbG>

**Figure 2.** Variation in the number of foreign-born residents by census section between 2011 and 2014 (the numbering refers to the census section)



**Source.** Processing of data about resident immigrants by census section, Municipality of Bologna 2015, <http://goo.gl/vbLjL4>

Although much of the literature on gentrification identifies the increase in the cost of living (e.g. rent rise) as one of the main causes of displacement of less affluent social groups (Marcuse 1985, Slater 2009), the reconfiguration of the social mix of Bolognina seems mainly related to economic crisis and welfare restructuring. Over the past few years, the structural economic changes have led to a new morphology of employment sectors in the metropolitan area of Bologna, bringing about a particular loss of employment positions in the building and industrial sector<sup>17</sup>. As this sector is one of the main areas of work for the foreign population<sup>18</sup>, a correlation is established between the loss of jobs and the economic problems of the portion of foreign workers who were working in that sector. This relationship is also confirmed by a political activist in the neighbourhood, who points out that “most evictions here occur in the private market

<sup>17</sup> 23,000 jobs in the industrial sector were lost in the metropolitan area of Bologna between 2008 and 2014, and 14,000 of these in the building sector. In the same period, the services sector experienced an increase of 22,000 jobs. Town Planning, Control and Statistics Department, Municipality of Bologna 2015, <http://goo.gl/ISOXoq>

<sup>18</sup> Province of Bologna, Istituto Carlo Cattaneo – Foreign citizens in the province of Bologna: characteristics and trends, <http://goo.gl/SAOzEC>

and mainly hit foreigners who have lost their job because of the crisis. [...] Many of them have been laid off building or manufacturing companies, or had their own business as electricians or plumbers which then went bankrupt”<sup>19</sup>. Thus, the economic crisis has contributed to increase unemployment in sectors where foreigners and Italians with low levels of education are employed.

In this situation, the progressive transformations of the Italian welfare occurring since the 90s have failed to provide adequate responses to the increasing social fragility caused by the economic crisis (Hong 2014). The resulting misalignment between demand and supply is evident when analyzing the applications for the allocation of social housing in the city of Bologna<sup>20</sup>. Between 2013 and 2014, 646 houses were assigned against 7,566 valid applications for the allocation of social or price-controlled housing<sup>21</sup>, with a presence of 6,920 outstanding applications in a context that has experienced an exponential increase in eviction measures for economic reasons since the beginning of the economic crisis (Figure 3). Thus, the house becomes the centre of the social problems in the context of Bologna and, at the same time, it is a central element in the dynamics of emigration of the least affluent social classes from the city. A considerable part of the eviction measures enacted in the city is “concentrated in such neighbourhoods as Bolognina, where the greatest concentration of crisis-related social problems is recorded”<sup>22</sup>. In this neighbourhood, housing problems seem to have particularly affected the low-income population and especially “the migrant portion of population that has no family welfare system”<sup>23</sup>. The neighbourhood gentrification process thus penetrates a social reality that has a number of problems in terms of housing. While economic difficulties push certain social groups out of the neighbourhood, a number of factors tend to attract new residents.

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19 December 10, 2014. L.'s interview, political activist and member of the housing rights organization Social Log

20 Policies for residence and housing crisis, Municipality of Bologna 2014, <http://goo.gl/RQOYV5>

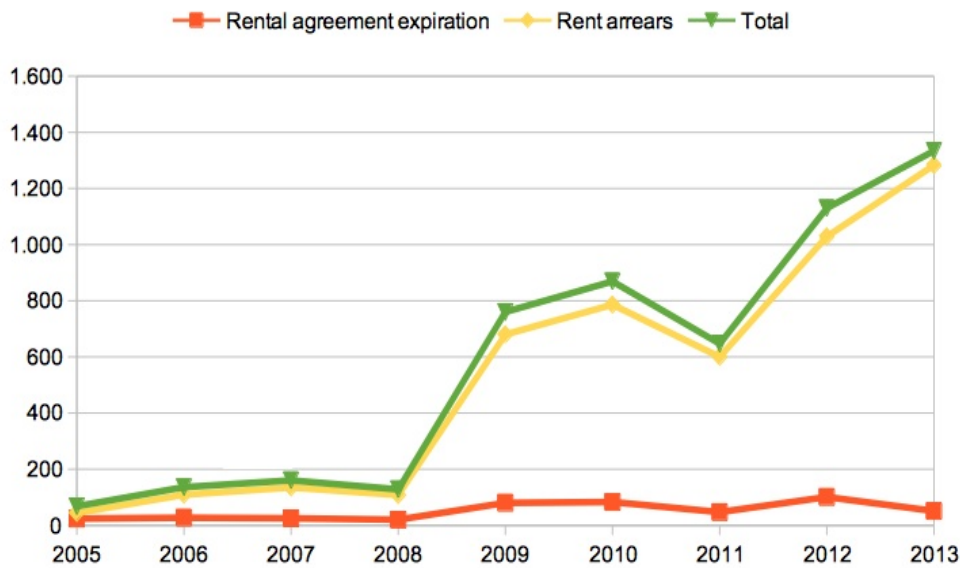
21 Allocation data refer to houses allocated until July 2014. However, it should be noted that the average 521.25 houses were allocated every year from 2010 to 2013. For further details, refer to “Policies for residence and housing crisis”, Municipality of Bologna 2014 <http://goo.gl/RQOYV5>

22 March 11, 2015. G.'s interview, union activist of the Association Tenants and Residents ASIA-USB

23 December 10, 2014. L.'s interview, political activist and member of the housing rights organization Social Log



**Figure 3.** Trend of eviction measures in the city of Bologna (number of measures enacted every year).



**Source.** Processing of Eviction measures enacted in the city of Bologna by reason, <http://goo.gl/v0wFQr>

This situation has generated the progressive emergence of a heated dispute about the housing issue. The house is the object of a series of different representations that seem to be closely related to social belonging and the role exerted by the various players in the gentrification process.

### **2.3 Representations and practices of space appropriation**

For some time, a vast literature has highlighted that for gentrifiers the house can be an element associated with the consumption preferences and the individual choices of the new middle class (Atkinson & Bridge 2005, Lees et al. 2008, Ley 1996). In this vision of the house as a consumption good, both the city location preferences of gentrifiers (Ley 1996) and the aesthetic characteristics of houses (Jager 1986) become rather important. Several research projects have indeed related the values of the middle class to the choice of the city as a place of residence. In some cases, urban space valorisation processes have been interpreted as the means whereby the cultural capital for gentrifiers is converted into economic capital (Bridge 2001b). For this social group, the characteristics of the house and the residential location seem to become distinctive

elements that tend to define the boundaries of its belonging (Bridge 2001a). However, the values attributed to the house by gentrifiers also concern the temporality of the life cycle and differ according to the time of reproduction of family life that is being experienced (Bridge 2003). This results in a representation of the house that may enhance both the quality of the central context for the reproduction of family life and its nature as a consumption good capable of ensuring a certain social status. One of the gentrifiers interviewed sees her house as a “very important place, because it is there that we spend most of our time with the children”, and “it is convenient as it is close to the school and my workplace, and it is beautiful as it is very large, new [...] and differs from the other house in the neighbourhood, which are a bit more crumbling”<sup>24</sup>. The interviews to gentrifiers also show some propensity to certain types of interior design that gives the house “a different touch from the greyness of certain buildings around here and the ugly layout of rooms in the classic houses of Bolognina”<sup>25</sup>. These statements appear to confirm Munt’s findings (1987) about the use of certain housing aesthetics as a means of social distinction by gentrifiers. Although the interviews show that the representation of the house is largely associated with these factors, economic aspects also emerge. Buying a house in Bolognina “seemed like a good investment as much was expected from redevelopment [...], then you buy now and might go to live in the country and sell the house in 15 years’ time if all your children leave home”<sup>26</sup>. Thus, the representations of the house emerging from the interviews seem to reflect the joint action of cultural and economic factors that has been considered central to the interpretation of gentrification for some years (Hamnett 1991).

While gentrifiers associate the house with a number of functions, real estate agents tend to privilege an economic vision. After all, their profession is based on the marketing of the house and on the analysis of costs and benefits of a certain residential location. According to the president of FIAIP Bologna, the house “is an important economic resource [...] and I know some people who have earned quite a lot of money in the past few years by renovating a house in Bolognina and then selling it”<sup>27</sup>. Neil Smith (1987)

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24 February 19, 2015. B.'s interview, new resident.

25 February 10, 2015. G.'s interview, new resident.

26 February 19, 2015. B.'s interview, new resident.

27 January 15, 2015. G.'s interview, president of FIAIP Bologna.

pointed out that gentrification processes are closely related to systems of capital movement in the urban space, and associated residential investments with the transformation of certain neighbourhoods. In this process, real estate agents can play a key role in managing to connect the cultural preferences expressed by gentrifiers with housing aesthetics that reflect their taste (Bridge 2001b).

The coexistence of various functions associated with the house clearly results even from the interviews to long-term residents of Bologna. However, the resulting representations seem to differ depending on their work position. While the gentrifiers interviewed can be classified as highly professional workers and form a rather homogeneous group from a social point of view, the group of long-term residents interviewed appears to be fragmented from both a social and working point of view. The owner of a restaurant sees his house as “a place where I just go to sleep and rest”<sup>28</sup>, giving it the instrumental meaning of rest place, closely linked to his work and to his lack of a family life. On the other hand, different representations emerge from those who have a precarious job or experience a problematic economic situation. A precarious worker referred to her house as the place where “I go every evening after work and rest [...] and chat with my fellow tenants and have dinners with friends”<sup>29</sup>, thus attributing it both an instrumental value in relation to work and a fundamental role in the development of her social relations. Those who are out of work and daily live some of the economic difficulties produced by the crisis always perceive the house as “a place where you have to live in the end”, and also “a right that must be guaranteed but seems instead more and more denied”<sup>30</sup>. These multiple meanings can be related to the working conditions of the people interviewed and prove that the economic factor can have influence on the attribution of meaning to the house. At the same time, it should be noted that in all cases the house is mainly associated with its physical structure as living place, confirming that social groups with limited disposable income find it difficult to extend their perception of the house beyond the practical needs of their life (Allen 2008). Moreover, the interpretation of the house as social right by one of the people interviewed might also be influenced by ideological positions related to this person’s

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28 February 11, 2015. K.'s interview, long-term resident.

29 February 20, 2015. M.'s interview, long-term resident.

30 February 12, 2015. E.'s interview, long-term resident.

being a member of a political collective. In fact, the concept of house as a social right pervades all the representations that concern the members of political movements operating in the neighbourhood.

The social value of the house seems to be a common element to the various debates on its representation within the local public apparatus. The institutional players interviewed perceive the house as an important right of the individual which, however, is now affected by several problems due to cuts in national funding for public housing and the reformulation of the welfare system. This general representation implies other attributions of meaning. The house is also perceived as an element of possible transformation of “a neighbourhood that needs to be regenerated from the social point of view” and as “a possible economic incentive”<sup>31</sup>. This ambivalence in the conception of the house as both a right and a factor of economic development and social turnover seems to reflect the contradiction between rights and market whereon many public housing policies are now based (Walters 2015).

The various representations of the house provided by the various players can also be related to divergent perceptions of the transformation processes that are going on in Bolognina. The different meanings attached to the house are confirmed by the attributions of judgment about gentrification in the neighbourhood. While gentrifiers and real estate operators consider the change processes as positive because they “bring people with higher income”<sup>32</sup> and can “improve life quality and urban security”<sup>33</sup>, long-term residents think that the change in their neighbourhood can be both “a positive modernization that produces better living”<sup>34</sup> and “a threat to the popular character of this part of Bologna”<sup>35</sup>. This differentiation in perceptions between new and old inhabitants and between the same long-term inhabitants can be explained through the role assigned by these social groups to the living space within the city. Gentrifiers see the housing market as positioning place for their economic achievements within the urban space (Allen 2008) and gentrification as a positive phenomenon because it allows them to correlate their cultural values and their residential preferences to a central location in the

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31 December 9, 2014. D.'s interview. President of the Navile neighbourhood.

32 January 15, 2015. G.'s interview, President of FIAIP Bologna.

33 February 19, 2015. B.'s interview, new resident

34 February 11, 2015. K.'s interview, long-term resident.

35 February 12, 2015. E.'s interview, long-term resident.

city (Butler 2007). Long-term residents, on the other hand, mostly do not see their residential location as a means of social positioning and perceive the transformation of the neighbourhood as a process that can result in a widespread improvement of living conditions (Doucet 2009). The negative perception of the transformation comes from the segment of residents who are affected by the potential negative effects of gentrification in the short term. The awareness of the social repercussions of gentrification seems indeed to become common perception only when the process directly threatens the possibility for considerable strata of population to stay in the neighbourhood (Newman & Wyly 2006).

Different perceptions of gentrification also concern public players and political activists who are socially committed in the neighbourhood. While according to the public administrators interviewed the transformation of the neighbourhood is both “an opportunity for improvement”<sup>36</sup> and “a potential risk if it is driven solely by market factors”<sup>37</sup>, political activists seem to agree on associating a negative vision with the process, considering it as an “embourgeoisement of the neighbourhood [...] connected to the income and speculation of property owners”<sup>38</sup>. In fact, the latter ones perceive the urban transformation as a speculative project that can only result in a limited impact on the improvement of the social welfare of long-term residents.

The emergence of distinct representations of both the house and gentrification processes turns into equally differentiated practices of appropriation of the urban space. Gentrifiers arrive in the neighbourhood either renting or buying a house, though an analysis of economic, locational and social benefits. The appropriation of the space of the neighbourhood occurs through an economic mechanism and experiences a geography that is closely related to the characteristics of specific areas of the neighbourhood. The areas which are most valuable according to the real estate market are those where gentrifiers tend to settle. The houses of the gentrifiers interviewed are located in those areas with the major signs of aesthetic redevelopment and where the general levels of life quality are higher (Bazzoli 2014). At the same time, these areas

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36 December 9, 2014. D.'s interview. President of the Navile neighbourhood.

37 December 10, 2014. F.'s interview. Town Planning Department Director, Municipality of Bologna.

38 December 10, 2014. L.'s interview, political activist and member of the housing rights organization Social Log

experience a gradual outflow of the least affluent classes and especially of foreigners (Figure 2). As well as a means for residential allocation, the real estate market appears to be a symbolic economy capable of positioning gentrifiers within the social space of the neighbourhood (Allen 2008). The housing localization in the neighbourhood and the aesthetic-structural characteristics of the house are thus interpreted as an output of one's own social status that can create symbolic demarcation lines between different life styles and social groups.

On the contrary, long-term residents adopt different practices of space appropriation according to their own economic-social status and tenure status of the house. Those who benefit from social mobility and decide to stay in the neighbourhood seem inclined to follow housing preferences similar to those of gentrifiers. In this case, the influence exerted by social mobility on residential choices seems to follow such mechanisms of progression towards new social groups as described by Wynne (1998). While this trend is true for a portion of long-term residents, the fragmentation within this group also reflects different practices of space appropriation. In particular, those who are in a state of economic insecurity and can hardly pay their house loan or rent seem to follow individual or collective strategies to remain in the neighbourhood. On the one hand, those who choose to follow individual strategies seek houses that require more sustainable expenses, thus often settling in less liveable areas of the neighbourhood or having to accept buildings with too high a number of tenants (Newman & Wyly 2006). This dynamic is confirmed by an interview to a local trade unionist, who points out that “where buildings are older and crumbling there are also problems of overcrowding, because there are people who went to live in those place as they could no longer pay for their previous house”<sup>39</sup>. On the other hand, collective strategies to stay in the neighbourhood are also followed. In this case, the political movements acquire a key role, since they can turn an individual need into a collective interest.

After the housing crisis that has affected the city of Bologna, the political activists in Bolognina have built a network of links and experimented with mechanisms to favour the permanence of the most marginal social classes in the neighbourhood. The main strategies used are “anti-eviction picketing” and housing occupations. On the one hand,

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<sup>39</sup> March 11, 2015. G.'s interview, union activist of the Association of Tenants and Residents ASIA-USB.

the aim of “anti-eviction picketing” is to favour the permanence of people threatened with eviction in their house, trying to mediate with the landlord or the bailiff who has to perform the procedure, exerting some direct pressure on his choice in proportion to the number of participants in the picket. On the other hand, unused buildings in the neighbourhood are occupied and used as houses, by both residents threatened with eviction and people who have already been evicted from the central areas of the city.

The phenomenon of occupation for residential purposes is a radical practice of space appropriation that exceeds the boundaries of legality, however increasing throughout the city of Bologna. The emergence of such practices in a neighbourhood subject to gentrification inevitably creates a conflict between the various representations of the house by the different players. The most heated dispute is between those who attributes a mainly economic and social positioning function to the house (gentrifiers, real estate investors) and those who substantially interpret it as an inalienable right of the person (political activists, some residents with economic problems). In this framework, public players seem to play a mediating role between the various interests at stake, by adopting a series of urban policies and approaches to social issues that respond in turn to the interests of both sides.

While cities experience processes of investment and socio-spatial reconfiguration of the urban space, the inequalities related to them foster the emergence of new forms of social opposition (Mayer 1999). The presence of different and even radical practices of space appropriation shows that the conflict around the house is of central importance in the interpretation of gentrification processes. The various spatial manifestations resulting from these practices highlight divergent visions and meanings of both the house and the gentrification process. Through the action of political activists and of certain members of the most marginal segments of the population, the housing issue also takes a particular political significance, which places it at the centre of the protests against neoliberal urban policies.

## **2.4 Resisting to gentrification**

The occupation of unused buildings by political collectives is a phenomenon that has

spread significantly in the Italian context since the 70s (Mudu 2013). Most occupations, especially between the 90s and the start of the new millennium, were aimed at creating social centres where to carry out cultural, social and political activities. In recent years, owing to the worsening of the economic and social conditions of a considerable part of the population resident in Italy, occupations for residential purposes have spread all over the country. This phenomenon has primarily concerned the largest urban areas, where there are growing housing problems (Pittini et al. 2015). While the welfare system was reconfigured by neoliberal policies, an increasingly higher number of people found themselves without adequate houses due to the economic crisis (Tosi 2014). This situation has contributed to the development of radical practices as forms of response to social needs that are not met by institutions.

In the city of Bologna, the number of housing occupations has grown over the past few years, especially in the areas where the growing social fragility is more evident. During 2014, Bolognina saw a particular ferment in terms of housing occupations. In particular, the political organization Social Log occupied two considerably large unused private properties in order to meet the housing need of the weaker part of the population (Figure 4).

**Figure 4.** Inner courtyard of former Telecom, one of the two occupations performed in Bolognina by the political organization Social Log in 2014.



**Source.** Photo taken on 10.12.2014



These occupied buildings housed about 350 foreign-born people who have been residing in Bologna for several years. Among them, about 90 people lived in Bolognina for 20 to 4 years and were the victims of evictions from the private market of houses. For these people, the occupation of a building where to live becomes a response to an objective need, as well as a mechanism to preserve the network of social links built over the years of permanence in the neighbourhood.

Social Log tries to identify the housing needs of the population through an information desk and then guides people in need towards becoming aware of and participating in the activities of the organization, with the potential result of an occupation for residential purposes. At the basis of these radical practices of appropriation is not the need of activists, but rather a social necessity that is found in the population and must be turned into a political issue. This aspect makes these types of occupations particularly interesting, as they do not arise from the individual need of activists but from the interpretation of a social necessity that must be the subject of political debate. In the first place, occupiers intend to criticise national housing policies (e.g. Housing Plan 2014, Renzi Government) and the effects that they are producing on the social exclusion of the weaker social classes. Secondly, by occupying private buildings, they want to bring to public attention the issue of property speculation in the city by major real estate groups. Finally, they try to put forth a political proposal for the solution of the housing crisis based on the reformulation of welfare management systems, the block of evictions, the refinancing of public housing and the development of practices to recover unused buildings to be used for residential purposes. The social issue thus becomes a political one. Martinez (2013) pointed out that occupations for residential purposes go beyond the requirements dictated by the state of necessity and emerge as political bodies within the urban space.

The localisation of the occupation shown in Figure 4 does not seem to be accidental: the building is in front of the headquarters of the new Bologna city hall. This way, the occupiers tried to give clear visibility to the issue in both the space of the neighbourhood and the political space of the city. The aim is to “make forms of extreme

social poverty visible”<sup>40</sup>, locating them in a neighbourhood where poverty is more and more marginalised and there is an ongoing gradual redevelopment of certain urban parts to let in more affluent classes. The spatialisation of the social emergency thus also becomes a means to counter the ongoing gentrification process. On the one hand, a housing solution is provided to those who are in a state of necessity and, on the other hand, the visibility of social issues is likely to discourage the arrival of both new residents and potential real estate investors.

Squatters seek to counterpose a different idea of neighbourhood development from the gentrification process which is not based on economic criteria but on cooperation, solidarity and mutualism of inhabitants. In this sense, occupations are seen as projects that are introduced in the neighbourhood, where the contact between different cultures and social positions favours the creation of new social relationships between the people involved. Thus, housing occupations are part of the forms of protest against neoliberal policies because they criticise the influence of these latter ones on the physical space of the city and on social components, putting forward radical political proposals based on different types of values. The squatting of unused buildings for residential purposes is not a mere logical response to social needs, but it can also become a significant political question (Mayer 2013).

The fundamental criticism that is being carried out at the political level can be related to the modes of managing and distributing public funds. Political movements such as Social Log contest the progressive transition of public investments from welfare to economic development strategies (Mayer 1999). The question of public spending is, therefore, at the centre of the action and proposals of this political movement. The urban regeneration and redevelopment policies that are affecting Bologna are also questioned. In these sectors of public spending, occupiers identify investments that should be targeted towards contributing to the social protection system. This criticism to the destination of public money was the central theme of a recent demonstration of Social Log in Bologna. The parade opening banner read: “urban regeneration is housing, income and dignity” (Figure 5). This issue seems to have a widespread consensus in the neighbourhood, which is proven by the participation of about 600

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40 December 10, 2014. L.'s interview, political activist and member of the housing rights organization Social Log

people in the demonstration. Thus, the gentrification process of Bolognina is questioned in terms of costs of the redevelopment and regeneration of certain areas by public bodies, these investments being considered as funds that could be used for the local welfare system.

The recent spread of the practices of housing occupation in Italy can be read within the contradictions that neoliberal urbanisation has created in cities (Brenner & Theodore 2002). In several cases, political movements base their protest on a new reading of the urban space, whereby social justice (Harvey 1973) is interpreted as the criterion that should govern the political-institutional management of the city. In this vision of the city, the effects produced by neoliberalism are not only criticized, but contested directly through the re-appropriation of certain spaces by the most marginal social groups.

**Figure 5.** Demonstration of the organisation Social Log (6.6.2015)



**Source.** Photo by Michele Lapini, freelance photographer, [michelelapini.net](http://michelelapini.net)

The occupations of the urban space take on their own spatiality and give a new significance to places (Leitner et al. 2007). An occupied building can become something more than a simple response to social needs: it can be a place where the existing social relations are overturned and new images are produced. In these places, the protest against neoliberalism becomes a daily practice that drops the temporariness marked by the

cyclical nature of political movements and tends to have a long-lasting effect within its relevant context. Therefore, these are places where the protest against neoliberalism becomes a daily practice; they are spaces where an alternative vision of society and cities is implemented.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

In the late 60s, Henry Lefebvre (1968) theorised the right to the city as a practice based on the re-appropriation of an urban space by inhabitants, which was experiencing growing commercialisation and depersonalisation processes. After all, the urbanisation of capitalism has experienced alternating phases but has always had considerable effects on both cities and the most marginal populations residing therein (Harvey 2012). The expulsions of segments of humanity related to these processes can find explanation in the cyclical nature of accumulation systems and forms of investment in the urban space. Smith (1987) analysed the strong connection between gentrification and movement of capital. Other scholar pointed out that these processes can affect the gradual outflow of the most marginal classes from certain neighbourhoods (Hartman 1984, Marcuse 1985, Newman, & Wyly 1996).

Although displacement is generally associated with a general increase in the cost of living at the local level, the case study carried out on Bolognina shows that both the reconfiguration of social policies and the socio-economic problems induced by the crisis can play a key role. Housing policies and social protection systems can indeed contribute actively to mitigate this phenomenon. At the same time, radical practices such as housing occupations are equally influential in countering displacement, ensuring a house for those people who, for different reasons, can no longer bear the cost of housing in their neighbourhood.

Thus, housing occupations acquire particular importance in the processes of resistance to gentrification. On the one hand, they respond to a housing need that cannot be adequately met in the neighbourhood market, allowing residents not to be expelled. On the other hand, they are a means of protest against the effects produced by neoliberal policies on the urban space. These practices become a means of political action, capable

of opening new scenarios in the fight against the structural inequalities present in contemporary society. Through housing occupations, the most marginal living conditions take on visibility and the political space of the city experiences a new balancing. Moreover, new social bonds are developed in these places, and alternative urban development ideas that privilege social welfare over economic development needs are consolidated. New spaces thus emerge, strengthening an idea of city that diverges from the characteristics associated with neoliberal cities. The social practices of political movements make it possible to directly counter the economic mechanisms that are currently dominating the management of urban spaces, opening new paths for cities to be still considered as a possible place of social integration.

Whereas this work investigates the role that is being played in Bologna by these occupations within a neighbourhood subject to gentrification, the effects of similar experiences in other places do not appear to be particularly studied. Obviously, the permanent practices of re-appropriation of the urban require further analysis. In particular, further studies capable of highlighting the role played by housing occupations in countering displacement and the neoliberal reconfiguration of the city might open new scenarios in the examination of the practices of resistance to gentrification. The struggle against the mechanisms of economic valorization of the city increasingly seems to be configured as both a criticism to the negative effects produced by these processes and a new political ground for the emergence of new political movements and new imagery.

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