



# Urban informality and users-led social innovation: Challenges and opportunities for the future human centred city

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## ABSTRACT

Urban informality characterises contemporary socio-spatial transformations and increasingly appears as a way of producing, organising, and managing the future city. The pervasiveness of the spontaneous dimension of urban life, with its various expressions, encourages the experimentation of new forms and alternative uses of spaces, spreads social practices, and suggests different city-making approaches, thus inspiring innovative urban development paths. Based on these assumptions, this paper focuses on social innovation as a process and strategy that valorises the social and cultural aspects of the community and promotes innovations in spatial planning. It investigates how the creative and often informal actions put in place by spontaneous groups and associations foster social cohesion. A comparative analysis of two case studies in Marseille and Rome offers a multidimensional approach to social innovation that includes collective action and local stakeholders empowerment, aiming at changing the world for the better. The results call for a critical reflection on the transformative power of innovation as a mechanism for social change. At the crossroads of spontaneous or rationally organised movements, one wonders to what extent innovation, by promoting creative and systemic solutions, can contribute to the design of the future city on a human scale.

## 1. Introduction

Urban informality is part of a broad multidisciplinary debate that calls for a good reflection on new ways of interpreting, designing, and managing contemporary cities and territories.

Urban informality is at the heart of socio-spatial, environmental, and economic transformations, so much so that it represents a mode of production, organization and operation of the contemporary world than a marginal subsystem in the urban system (Lussault, 2016). Informality, although at different levels and in various forms, represents a central theme even at the global level (Porter, 2011; Picker, 2019).

The pervasiveness of the spontaneous dimension of urban life, with its various expressions, encourages today the experimentation of new forms and alternative uses of spaces, spreads social practices, and suggests fresh city-making approaches, thus promoting innovative urban development paths. Creativity, industriousness, improvisation and sharing, transience and illegality define such practices.

Currently, cities are witnessing the proliferation of solutions promoted by residents, namely Do-It-Yourself actions (Douglas, 2014)

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often aimed at the common good, by, with and for the citizens. Spontaneous urban interventions refer, for example, to forms of squatting for housing, work, social or cultural purposes, guerrilla gardening and street art actions, and the spontaneous delivery of services involving more ephemeral and temporary initiatives such as artistic performances in public spaces. We identify this heterogeneous realm of unexpended, sometimes ephemeral, and not authorized experiences with “informal urban practices” designation. They are envisioned as collective actions of spatial and symbolic transformation with a high potential for social change. Nevertheless, another aspect that qualifies them is the blurriness of constantly negotiated and readjusted boundaries between the acceptable and the non-acceptable, legal and non-legal (Herrle & Fokdal, 2011). Due to this ambiguity, *informality* is provocatively defined by Tonkiss (2012) as a “non-concept” in urban theory, despite its power in redefining urban routes.

Starting from the bottom, these instances appear as the outcome of social-economic crises, the progressive weakening of the welfare state, and a consequence of the transformations of the production, cultural and value system of reference. In the age of *advanced marginality*, connected to recursive and extended periods of recession, austerity and privatization, new forms of poverty and a general sense of ongoing fragmentation emerge (Wacquant, 2007). As a multifaceted environment actively built by people, the city includes widespread social-spatial injustices (Soja, 2008). It also appears as a scene of struggles and conflicts (La Cecla, 2015) that critically challenge politics and planning strategies (Porter, 2011). Although implemented outside the framework of formal regulation, small-scale initiatives can contribute to urban design, promoting innovative paths of social and spatial development (Papamichail & Perić, 2019). Sometimes described as a heuristic tool (Roy, 2015), other times as a locus of critical analysis (Banks et al., 2020), informality takes on an increasingly strategic role in the in-depth analysis of contemporary scenarios (Galdini, 2017) presenting itself as a helpful tool to imagine a more equitable, inclusive, and sustainable city. Leontidou (2014) interprets this popular spontaneity and informality as a kind of structural readjustment, able to shape different urban futures.

Informality cannot be detached from the logic of the formal city in which daily experiences and social practices suggest a close relationship between the two dimensions (McFarlane & Waibel, 2012). In the city-making practice, the two spheres operate in a context of hybridization that Kreibich (2012) considers strictly connected to the action of public entities and that, under disruptive neoliberalism conditions, involves both state and non-state players (Picker, 2019). Generally, in the contemporary urban context, informal urban planning interacts, coexists, competes, and sometimes complements formal planning and design (Loukaitou-Sideris & Mukhija, 2016). The dialogue emerging between these dimensions constitutes an exciting field of study and analysis. This paper critically investigates how the creative and often informal actions put in place by residents, spontaneous groups, and associations contribute to social innovation (Grimm et al., 2013), understood as a transformative strategy aimed at (1) satisfying individual and collective needs disregarded by the market and institutions “generated by civil society rather than government, business or industry” (Bergman et al., 2010); (2) strengthening solidarity in social relations (Van Dyck & Van den Broeck, 2013; Moulaert et al., 2017) and (3) building new political relations on the territory (Moulaert et al., 2017).

Suppose the final goal is to attain social well-being and attempt to address the new urban issue and the crisis of the public sphere and traditional welfare. In that case, one wonders how it is possible to introduce changes in terms of process and results that lead to territorial development.

In the first part, the paper explores the potential of urban informality and community projects promoting social and spatial ties. It investigates the creation and use of community spaces and grassroots activity focusing on ‘place-making’ and other social processes. Then it discusses the implications of this process for social innovation. In the second part, the paper presents results from an empirical study, observing how informal user-led practices were implemented in Marseille and Rome. On the one hand, there is the French experience of L’Après M, which refers to a context in which the dialogue between formality and informality takes place through cooperation between institutional stakeholders and emerging social practices, highlighting the potential to influence the neighbourhood and the city positively.

On the other hand, the Italian case of Spin Time Labs is an example of spontaneous practices promoted by citizens and aimed at the common good. Though receiving social and collective approval, institutions must still recognize this case. This aspect strains their long-term sustainability and the added value they could bring to the territory. The analysis explores the ability of informal urban practices to build enabling spaces, defined as ecosystems driving social innovation in which values, shared meanings and “cultural artefacts” connected to new lifestyles and paradigms mature and settle (Peschl & Fundneider, 2014).

## 2. The relationship between formality and informality

From a theoretical point of view, a dichotomous approach to the study of informality is now considered outdated as it is believed to be simplistic, reductive and, therefore, unfit to interpret the complexity that the multidimensional reality of the informal city brings with it. Rather than drawing a comparison with the formal sphere, many scholars prefer to discuss the dialogic and dynamic relationship between the two dimensions (Sassen, 1994; Devas, 1999; Guha-Khasnobis et al., 2006). What Lipton (1984) defined as “misplaced dualism” is replaced by the idea of a *continuum* between formality and informality which, in the urban context, translates into a peculiar form of urbanization and an organizational logic in the framework of the processes of transformation of the territory (Roy, 2015). This line of research includes the contribution of Alsayyad (2004), who defines informality as a “*new way of life*” emerging from the paradigm of liberalization, which concerns every aspect of public and private life. Dovey (2020) suggests.

that considering the city as an *assemblage* where formality and informality intersect, brings about complex associations. He considers this “*philosophy of ‘becoming’ rather than a stable sense of ‘being’ or fixed identity*” as an anti-reductionist approach based on the dynamism of urban life.

The departure from hierarchical conceptions between formal and informal allows us to critically look at some fallacious representations of informality. In a first representation, informality tends to be described by using the rational categories of modern Western

thought that, according to Roy (2015), is inclined to criminalize informality relegating it to an underdevelopmental problem. Formality tends to be considered the norm in a second representation, linked to the studies conducted by Moser (1978). In contrast, informality is seen as an “anomaly”, where dialogical thinking underlines its intrinsic contradictions. *Informality* is defined here as a broad phenomenon in the shadow of regulation, poised between legitimate and illegitimate, legal and illegal. Therefore, some scholars wonder about the anomaly of self-government systems that attempt to challenge the logic of the “state of exception” (Roy, 2005) and re-establish principles of social-spatial justice aimed at correcting the distortions of a highly unequal formal city. A third representation, recognizable in the apocalyptic images conveyed by Davis (2006), associates informality with margins, poverty and subordination.

Although there is a general recognition of the relationship between formality and informality in the academic field, this issue remains at the heart of the public debate on the contemporary city.

Informal urban practices form a powerful new trend, which the planner needs to consider since that might be the most significant potential for urban development in the future (Bishop & Williams, 2012). As mentioned, spontaneous actions are interpreted in the paper as the expression of the vibrancy of the urban environment. They underline how unusual, unpredictable, and unexpected events are part of a new transformational practice of space. In general, often reminiscent of collaborative reuse, recycling and recovery tactics, the spontaneous city evokes the principles of sustainability (Dreifuss-Serrano, 2015; Di Raimo et al., 2021). Furthermore, it brings the individual with their needs, wishes, and expectations back to the heart of the urban project.

According to Lehmann (2020), informal spaces are often relegated to “residual” and disorderly spaces, despite contributing efficiently to the collective well-being. Spontaneous urban practices represent a heuristic tool that may contribute elements of innovation to the urban project. The hypothesis of *flexible urban planning* finds its way, a dynamic urban planning logic permeable to change (Burdett, 2018), open to indeterminacy and dialogue with informal components, outside the dualism that juxtaposes the two categories.

The idea of *informal urbanism* (Brillembourg et al., 2005) as a transformative and legitimate planning practice has increasingly become the object of multidisciplinary reflection and an opportunity for social and territorial rebalancing. The unplanned, the unpredictable, and the unusual can reveal new political, social, and economic possibilities where linear and fixed narratives about cities are rejected. A different angle, however, would allow us to grasp the fragility and complexity of today’s urban contexts more accurately. In this direction, this study investigates two experiences that, alongside the advantages of considering informality as a new architectural or urban model from which to draw inspiration, also offer a critical look at the processes of fragmentation, exclusion, marginalization, and polarization that informality often brings with it.

### 3. Informal urban practices and the social dimension of innovation

In the contemporary city, informal practices, collectively produced, translate into different innovative expressions of human activity. Urban reuse practices, for example, promote spatial interventions and community empowerment, positively affecting urban development. Small-scale informal and incremental projects pave the way for social innovation, promoting social cohesion and environmental values, supporting economic activities, valorizing heritage, and counteracting formal policies’ weaknesses and rigidity. Reusing spaces is a chance to test proposed projects, verify their effectiveness and make them permanent if users agree (Galdini & De Nardis, 2019).

When spontaneous practices occur in common areas, they often promote the spreading of spaces for collaborative knowledge creation, involving a dimension that is architectural, technological, social, cognitive, organizational, cultural, and emotional simultaneously (Peschl & Fundneider, 2014). These practices produce social innovation and concern a thriving field of investigation (Pellicer-Sifres et al., 2017), including informal urban practices. Social innovation is widely featured in contemporary urban theories (Moulaert et al., 2007; Nicholls et al., 2015), and its pervasiveness makes this concept often confusing, ambiguous and blurry (Weerakoon et al., 2016). To Edwards-Schachter and Wallace (2017), today, social innovation is traceable in social change processes, initiatives for sustainable development, or the social services sector. These authors assume innovation as a learning-based process that highlights the emphasis on social interactions as a form of relationality between an array of actors and social practices, as well as on the potential institutionalization and the role played by the latter in changing the rules and distributing resources. In their transformative nature, social innovation practices can contribute to a transition towards a more inclusive society.

Godin (2012) argues that the “newness” inherent to the recent use of the term lies in its function of *counter-concept*, as a reaction to the hegemony of technological innovation, or as an alternative response to social needs that traditional solutions are not able to satisfy. Social innovation is described as a transformative ambition to create long-lasting changes to solve societal problems (European Commission, 2014) that can drive sustainable urban development (Angelidou & Psaltoglou, 2017). Moulaert et al. (2013) include in the framework of social innovation the relationships of reciprocity, the empowerment of citizens and social ties that promote the cohesion of communities.

Although spontaneous urban practices develop in contexts characterized by a weak or absent institutional framework, they sometimes promote added value for the local area in economic, social, environmental, and cultural terms. In the current debate, a central role is played by the impact of informal practices, which, when it is particularly beneficial, recalls the idea of the “urban common good” (Foster, 2011; Iaione, 2013). Often, a connection between informal urban practices and the concept of well-being emerges. As Arena (2020) in his studies on the Italian context, many citizens who have been active over the past few years decided to mobilize for the sake of public and private property that was in a state of abandonment or decay. These, as well as other experiences, help build what the author defines as a “society of care”, promoting a renewed vision of people: in other words, it is the dawn of a “positive anthropology” that considers citizens not only as carriers of needs but also skills, intelligence, and creativity. Some successful

experiments in commoning show the value of negotiating, dialogical and relational processes among civil society and the public sector.

The opportunities emerging from urban informality concern, in particular, the fruitful interactions that the actors of the informal city sometimes have with the institutions that help bring the collective interest and rights back to the heart of the public sphere. The study of two urban informal experiences allows us to focus on the opportunities and challenges of specific actions carried out with the population's involvement which assign new functions and different meanings to obsolete spaces by implementing processes aimed at the sociocultural reactivation of spaces.

#### 4. Research approach and methods

The paper aims to analyze the development of socio-spatial innovation in collaborative and creative user-led experiences. Trying to reflect on the category of informality and the crucial new role of bottom-up practices in urban spaces, the research considers how such practices can be included in nowadays formal urban strategies. Specifically, the purpose of the study concerns - on the one hand - an analysis of the focal elements and drives underlying informal practices and - on the other hand - an attempt to identify the possible learnings that could be taken away from them. To this end, the paper explores and compares two unplanned, informal and temporary experiences in France and Italy. The research analyses these practices as co-production processes that turn anonymous spaces into places of social meaning. Moreover, they represent relational contexts in which negotiations with institutions occur.

Therefore, the paper aims to provide an analytical contribution to urban studies concerning the relationship between space and informality, providing food for thought to institutional actors and design disciplines on the possible integration of the informal dimension into the logic of the planned city.

The choice of these cases is not only due to their attempt to provide temporary responses to urgent needs. The high social value of these bottom-up practices has promoted valuable negotiation processes with the local institutions, even at different times, achieving concrete results in the French case and ongoing interaction processes in the Italian experience.

Regarding the methodology, this study was first conducted as a comprehensive, qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) to identify the conditions that lead to specific outcomes. It considers the effects of bottom-up initiatives in Marseille and Rome based on the engagement and empowerment of communities, investigating the differences caused in their relationship with the public sphere in these two countries. The analysis examines to what extent informal practices in Marseille and Rome promoted social capital creation and improved social and community development, three concepts based on people's well-being.

This study includes existing data or secondary analysis to gain both exploratory and deep knowledge; data analysis inductively builds from particulars to general themes and the researchers' interpretations of the meaning of the data, interviews, direct observation, and participant observation methods. The research complemented the analysis of bibliographic sources with online documents - websites and social-networking channels of the associations and groups involved, as well as newspaper articles. Finally, ten semi-structured interviews were conducted for each case study with witnesses directly involved in informal initiatives, including promoters, activists, volunteers, and users. Respondents were asked to focus on dimensions relating to the material and symbolic sphere connected with social practice.

The guiding themes concern the informal process, the relations with the formal counterpart, activities, tools, organizational methods, the target beneficiaries, the response of the neighbourhood, and the interactions with the local association network. At the same time, the study involved the motivations and vision underlying the interventions, the perceptions of the situation and prospects and, more generally, the idea of a city that drives individuals and groups to action. This study addressed some emerging questions:

- Is it possible to imagine a contextual and dialogical process between formality and informality that preserves the virtuous outcomes of informal practices?

- What is the relationship between urban informality and social innovation?

The hypotheses address these issues:

- whether and to what extent it is possible to include informal practices in formal planning, turning it into a flexible, dynamic urban planning open to indeterminacy and dialogue with informal components according to the paradigm of a flexible city (Galdini, 2022)

- whether these practices succeed in creating enabling spaces as connections between institutions and self-organized practices for a collaborative type of territorial planning.

The experiences in many European cities show that there is an opportunity to reflect on a planning model that includes principles of integration, adaptability and graduality. Although cities are excellent laboratories for social experimentation, urban disciplines still need to develop authentic learning on the issues of a spontaneous, unexpected, or unplanned city.

The discussion is based on social and spatial elements, relations between citizens and institutions, the social and economic impact of these practices, barriers and prospects. The final part focuses on the critical aspects and outlines pathways for future investigations. This paper is inspired by the theory of enabling (Peschl & Fundneider, 2014) as a new paradigm for innovation. In this framework, the concept of enabling implies the creation of a multidimensional space that is physical and symbolic simultaneously.

The research adopts the framework of the Grassroots Social Innovation for Human Development (GSIHD), which is featured in the social innovation literature and focuses on the understanding of specific elements identified to analyze the practices related to informality: agents, purposes, drivers and processes of social innovation (Edwards-Schachter et al., 2012; Grimm et al., 2013; Pellicer-Sifres et al., 2017). These categories refer to a form of bottom-up innovation attributable to the concept of "user-led innovation" (Von Hippel, 1988; Ornetzeder & Rohrer, 2006) and aim at social transformation. This study I focuses on analyzing these four critical dimensions of SI to compare our case studies to the idea of GSIHD. The aim is to highlight the transformative power of bottom-up social innovation processes. (Refer to Table 1). Analyzing these four dimensions, makes it possible to highlight these initiatives' complexities, their richness and potential (Pellicer-Sifres et al., 2017).

## 5. The case of L'Après M in Marseille

L'Après M is a social catering project that grew with the Covid-19 emergency during the first months of 2020. The key word of this project is solidarity. The experience was set in the premises of the former McDonald's restaurant in the Saint-Barthélémy district, on the northern outskirts of Marseille, an area where the poverty rate exceeds 40 %. Following the bankruptcy of the company that owns the franchise restaurant, which had been operating since 1992, the building was subjected to judicial liquidation in December 2019. In a short time, a group of former employees, activists, residents, and the Syndicate of the popular neighbourhoods of Marseille started a "réquisition populaire de l'établissement", a process to counter the unemployment, poverty and desertification of the territory that the closure would have caused. This issue led to a re-appropriation "from below" that transformed the former fast-food restaurant into a hub for food solidarity and local development.

In the spaces of L'Après M, producers, farmers, and citizens support a project that includes a solidarity canteen, a catering service, an organic vegetable garden, a food bank, a platform for the distribution of food and basic necessities, a training space for the employment of disadvantaged people. This was followed by creating a "Local des Initiatives d'Entraide Urbaine" consisting of modular bungalows where to implement the social functions of the project, in continuity with the social fast-food restaurant. In a short time, what activists call the "Village des Initiatives d'Entraide" was activated, an actual solidarity hub that saw the participation of more than thirty volunteers. Food supplies are distributed on Mondays to offer a social and employment support service in one of the city's most populated neighbourhoods. In addition, a volunteer home delivery service called "UBER Solidaire" provides food parcels to elderly, isolated, disabled or seriously ill people. A strong sensitivity to environmental issues characterizes the L'Après M project. Through the "Terre de Partage" initiative, fruit trees were planted to introduce proximity agriculture and raise the issue of organic and local farming.

As the empirical study highlights, this project has seen the participation of artists, volunteers and teachers helping revitalize the space through art, recycling, workshops for children and young people, and cultural events. In order to guarantee the sustainability of the project over time, in May 2021, "La part du peuple" Société Citoyenne Immobilière (SCI) was established. It is a non-profit association whose members participate jointly in the attempt to legally acquire the buildings, land and equipment formerly belonging to McDonald's. As the activist Fathi Bouara argues: "If we want the project to last, the place must belong to us. But if we want to avoid it being a concern of a few, it must be the property of all". The association aims to involve the city in the social reactivation of the spaces, obtaining a lease for at least eighteen years. Through an association fee of twenty-five euros, people can take an active part in the project, with the chance to voluntarily pay a higher fee which would allow even those who do not have the financial resources to become members. The idea of social inclusion, solidarity and sharing at all levels emerges. The idea of sharing emerges in the empirical analysis. As one of the volunteers affirms, "there is no victory if there is no sharing with the majority of the people". In July 2021, the municipality acquired the property and the land that once belonged to the former McDonald's restaurant to ensure that L'Après M's activities could continue.

Meanwhile, the idea of open and widespread ownership remains a long-term objective. It is, therefore, a project that needs further observation and with results still under development. Recently, through new technologies and crowdfunding, the collective has received over twenty thousand euros in donations that will allow better implementation of the solidarity village services.

Space thus becomes a symbolic place of a labour struggle in the multinational fast-food sector and a platform for the fight against discomfort and food insecurity. The "Après M team" has aided more than one hundred thousand people over a year, and more than two thousand families a week benefit from the supplies. This organization aims to create employment for people excluded from the labour market, while an "Agora of citizens' mutual aid" carries out solidarity actions. Experience is the driving force of a world view that looks to sustainability by promoting the value of food health.

As Sylvain - a L'Après M volunteer and member - argues, the social restaurant is an opportunity for a rebirth of people with complex needs, a response to the "need for solidarity" of the city, a place in which citizens can help others using their skills. In the group, everyone contributes their specific skills, according to a self-management model that Sylvain believes is based on the principle of "organizing by acting". In the volunteer's opinion, it is also a fight for the city against gentrification and degradation: "we do not want to be just another privileged association, but we want to allow people who need help". The vision of the future that the protagonists mention is linked to the creation of employment for all through self-organization as a response to inadequate policies in a neighbourhood that is now organized around the L'Après M building, which has become an attractive pole for the social life of the residents.

## 6. The case of Spin Time Labs in Rome

The second case study is Spin Time Labs, an informal reuse experience that concerns a squatted social space in Rome. In particular, it refers to the housing occupation in Santa Croce, the former Inpdap headquarters<sup>1</sup> in the Esquilino neighbourhood in the city's centre. The building fell into neglect in 2011 following the suppression of the state-run organization and the consequent closure of its offices, occupied in October 2013 by the "Action" group supporting the housing struggle. Following the closure, the building ownership was merged into the "Public real estate fund" of Investire SGR, a non-State entity responsible for managing national public and private assets with the Fintat banking group. It was a transaction defined by housing activists as "creative accounting", which would encourage further building speculation in Rome, which was also defined as the "capital of neglect".

The building accommodates 450 people (about 100 minors) from different geographical backgrounds but they are all driven by the

<sup>1</sup> Istituto Nazionale di Previdenza e Assistenza per i dipendenti dell'amministrazione pubblica (National Social Security Institute for Civil Servants).

same urgent need for a home. The original environment of the building was adapted to accommodate a multi-ethnic housing situation, a community centre and multi-purpose spaces. The management of the property and the activities organized there in is horizontal, based on an assembly approach as well as the collective contribution of the residents who have taken on an active role in the management of the building. The organization of the Spin Time initiatives represents an attempt to reconcile the life of the Santa Croce squatters with the services for the neighbourhood, to regenerate the spaces to return them to the city. The project's promoters define Spin Time Labs as a "common asset and an urban regeneration building site". Indeed, in a short time, a series of initiatives were developed in the occupied spaces to establish a dialogue with the neighbourhood, break into the territory, build a significant link with the residents, and provide social and cultural services. Today, the former Inpdap building is a tan exhibition space, a co-working area, a gym, a famous school, a counselling and legal protection service, a workshop for the restoration of sacred icons, and temporary cultural and artistic, and religious events. On the ground floor is the hotspot, with the Santa Croce church dealing with food distribution and interreligious dialogue. The property accommodates various activities and services, including the headquarters of the "Medicina Sociale" association, the editorial office of the magazine "Scomodo", and the musical events of the La Roboterie group. The former conference room was transformed into an auditorium that now hosts the performances of "Orchestra Notturna Clandestina", a symphonic band consisting of thirty members, and the Spin-Off theatre collective. Spin Time Labs' activities aim to restore dignity to a segment of the population deprived of primary means of support. As one of the members argues, the goal is "to get out of the immobility of the struggle for survival and raise awareness through cultural initiatives such as theatre performances or the newspaper 'Regener-action'" written and printed by the squatters themselves.

Informality and the unlawful appropriation by the residents put this experience in a condition of constant instability. As the building does not regularly pay utility bills, families, older people, and children risk losing access to essential services such as water and electricity. Although it wishes to manage the property in a lawful manner (an option made impossible by current legislation), Spin Time Labs, like other squatting situations in Rome, is self-organized through donations received from below, in a context in which associations, citizens and the Church often replace institutions. The outcomes emerging from the interviews reveal how the public opinion in Rome continues to focus on the contrast between the dimension of illegality and that of formality, hoping for more traditional solutions based on repression or eviction, thus fuelling a confrontational climate. In Spin Time Labs, the housing emergency intersects with the labour and social emergency because, as Adriana, a lay volunteer who has been active in the neighbourhood for years, says, "squatting has almost become the norm because there is no longer a chance of survival". Another Spin Time Labs volunteer defines the experience as "political training" and a place that, as director Sabina Guzzanti recounts in her documentary "Spin Time. Che fatica la democrazia!", allows citizens to reconstruct the public sphere by discussing issues of common interest, based on a pluralistic, egalitarian and participatory organizational model.

Recently, the current municipal administration has launched the proposal to include Spin Time in the new housing program for the city ("Piano Casa"), paving the way for the public acquisition of the palace. This aspect opens up a hypothesis of transition from a state of tolerance to one of gradual recognition of the practice by the institutions. Falcolini, a worker of the *Scomodo* magazine, points out the advantages that could arise from recognizing the civic and social value promoted by Spin Time Labs. According to this activist, being recognized means regaining space and certainty, establishing a dialogue with the administrations, and recognizing the mutual value in the cooperation between the parties. Legitimization would mean countering the rhetoric of degradation and a principle of legality that is only "formal but unconstitutional", reclaiming the social function of ownership.

## 7. Results and discussion

The selected case studies described above seem to support the idea of a "city of the people", in which the directions of urban

**Table 1**  
Users-led social innovation for urban development.

Social innovation analysis categories	General aspects of user-led social innovation	L'Après M case study	Spin Time Labs case study
Agents	Informal groups and civil society	Former employees, residents, merchants, activists, volunteers and artists	Squatting movement, activists, volunteers, people in housing emergency
Spatial and social objectives	To meet social needs, promote inclusion and social justice, fight against speculation, gentrification and degradation	Working and social needs, inclusive places and sustainable food industry	Housing, social needs, urban regeneration processes
Drivers	Demands that are not addressed by the public sector, business or industries	Weakness of the labour market and institutions	Weakness of the housing market and institutions
Processes	Collaborative and participatory self-organization, sharing and reciprocity with the inclusion of recipients in the process ( <i>user-led innovation</i> ), neighborhood involvement	Mutual aid and collegial decisions with the active involvement of users, associations, merchants, agricultural producers, artists, inhabitants	Collective decision-making in periodic assemblies with the active involvement of users, schools, associations, church, artists, inhabitants
Results	Socio-spatial practice, institutionalization, new relationships between public actors and citizens or permanency in the state of formal non-recognition, economic activities	Formalisation institutional agreements, collective and social recognition. Promoting employment, services and solidarity actions	Collective and social recognition, but outside formal regulatory frameworks. Creating housing opportunities, and collective spaces

transformation follow the needs, wishes, desires and expectations of those who live in the neighbourhoods, spaces, and places of the city.

The two case studies show as an element in common the ability to present themselves as potential models of social innovation, sustainability, inclusion, and community development, shining a light on new forms of interaction between the public and social sectors.

The analysis of these case studies shows how the relationship between urban informality and urban planning represents an exciting research field about the concrete possibility to promote social innovation. Urban informality, by now widely spread as an emerging kind of city-making, can offer innovative and creative suggestions to planning processes, which continue to refer to abstract theories and techniques, not sensitive to local, social and spatial dynamics. Informal practices often provide solutions to problems ignored by institutions, and they can often elude the official discourse but capture the know-how of what really works (Galdini, 2021).

To this aim adopting the categories used by Edwards-Schachter et al. (2012), Grimm et al. (2013), also recalled by Pellicer-Sifres et al. (2017), we explore and compare in both cases, *agents*, *objectives*, *drivers*, and *processes* focusing attention on the current *results* of these practices in the field of social innovation. Table 1 summarises our research results.

Table 1 (Authors' elaboration)

The case analysis suggests possible outcomes from which to learn.

**Social outcomes:** L'Après M arises as an experience born informally as a response to the assertion of the right to employment. It meets the wish of citizens to engage in a project of general utility for the neighbourhood well-being. Besides makes evident the local administration's intention to recognise the collective value of this experience. The project represents an attempt to include the most vulnerable in developing eco-sustainable alternatives with solid roots in the territory.

Despite its persisting condition of informality and unlawfulness, the social experiment of Santa Croce and Spin Time Labs, located in a central area of the city, represents a good practices that directly impacts the residents' living conditions, creating social and economic solutions in local contexts. This experience has developed informal relationships of coexistence on a political level, achieving ideological neighbourhood support and institutional tolerance (Gigliani, 2017).

**Spatial outcomes:** the experiment of the interaction between Santa Croce and Spin Time Labs shows the ability to test housing solutions that are emerging, flexible, adaptable, temporary, potentially transferable, and repeatable with formal models (Tonelli & Montella, 2018). Such housing solutions respond to a new social demand. Space is at the heart of both collective re-appropriation initiatives: it is one of the cornerstones on which to focus the social and political struggle against the commodification of the city and the policies of disruptive neoliberalism. Furthermore, the cases focus on the temporary use of the buildings, which in the French case was formalised in agreement with the municipality. It represents a crucial node for the innovation of the city's management practices and will influence, as international studies highlight, future urban regeneration strategies.

**Environmental outcomes:** the common elements of the two informal urban experiences include promoting different ecological and sustainable solutions. The practice of urban farming integrated with social activities promoted in Marseille demonstrates an eco-sustainable vision for the city. In Rome, self-construction and self-recovery practices can develop a sense of belonging and common identity linked to the places and more respect for the environment.

**Economic outcomes:** both cases demonstrate the ability to implement collaborative and social economy forms. In the Italian case, they practically translate into the organisation of paid cultural initiatives, the revenues of which are reinvested in the building, in line with a circular economy principle. In the French case, they translate into a broader activity of collaborative creation of work and responsible and fair production. Indeed, L'Après M falls within the grassroots solidarity initiatives developed during the Covid-19 social-health emergency. These activities put themselves in the universe of *sharing economy* and reciprocity, according to an approach that is not simply charitable but supportive, collaborative, and cooperative (Galdini & De Nardis, 2021).

**Organisational outcomes:** both experiences refer to the dimension of the general interest. This is a recognised condition in L'Après M, while in the Italian case, recognising its civic value may be possible. Italian studies on commons highlight the possibility of legitimising informal practices through the available legal instruments and the innovation of procedures (Gigliani, 2018). It is also an area in which interest is growing in co-organisation and co-learning experiences that include perspectives also coming from non-institutional actors capable of influencing the public sphere and the decision-making process (Borén & Young, 2021).

**Cultural outcomes:** the squatters and the members of the movements of struggle are initially pushed by essential needs, such as housing or employment, that require a solution that public institutions did not provide. However, these "insurgent citizens" (Holston, 2009) voice a broader demand for a fair and inclusive city that is shared by the centre as well as the suburban areas. Likewise, the L'Après M activists not only fight for the right that they feel closer to them, but they organise themselves to support more general demands ranging from environmental protection to cultural access. The protagonists assert an "idea of city", which is based on principles of livability, accessibility, and inclusiveness. The cases reveal that social innovation, as a collaborative and open learning process, is a facilitator of enabling spaces understood as physical and symbolic transformative ecosystems producing new meanings and paradigms.

At the same time, the practices related to informality reflect a series of critical issues and risks that require a multidisciplinary approach. Such experiences are often found in a condition of constant precariousness related to the insecurity of property and the constant threat of eviction. When informal action persists in a condition of legal and economic uncertainty, conflicting actions can occur in the urban space, which risks increasing the levels of the fragility of populations who live and act in informal contexts. Both cases reveal a deep-rooted distrust of people towards the action of the institutions, underlining the need to mend the rifts between civil society and the public sector and between citizens and the State.

Informal urban practices that generate socio-spatial innovation open up a horizon of experimentation for urban planning based on people needs and aspirations and are strictly linked to the context and culture in which they are placed. As Banks et al. (2020) point out, the analytical interest usually lies in the interaction, negotiation, and compromise methods produced by institutional responses. At different degrees of recognition, the case studies analysed are placed in the frame of multilevel and multi-stakeholder relationships, showing exciting results regarding landing in the socio-political context of reference. Nevertheless, more attention needs to be paid to integrated, flexible and cooperative strategies to avoid the negative consequences of informal initiatives and enhance their positive impact. According to Porter (2011), this latter objective could be achieved by using the category of common property that affirms the “right to use” and creates more excellent social value than its traditional declination.

In this sense, the intention of the City of Rome to promote a housing plan also based on the protection of virtuous experiences such as Spin Time Labs creates enlightened scenarios for informal practices and their management. The same consideration can be advanced for the French case that, thanks to the support of the local administration today, can consolidate its practice of solidarity.

## 8. Conclusions

The examined cases highlight people’s ability to think of new solutions to address current and pressing social issues. However, they also experience more sustainable ways of living and different directions of urban development. The concept of an “innovative milieu” (Klein, 2009; MacCallum et al., 2009) describes this dynamic environment in which innovative capacity is implemented through community and place-based projects. In the collaborative and inclusive process that local actors spontaneously put into practice, the idea of solidarity and collective action acts at different scales towards the idea of a human-centred city (European Commission, 2019). It is a model in which social needs are at the heart of urban development and planning interventions.

The intangible dimension connected to informal practices, i.e. the sense of community, relationship and belonging that emerges from these experiences, represents one of the most exciting outcomes of the studies on the broader theme of the informal city. One aspect of particular interest concerns time: informal practices are often temporary, offering quick solutions to existing critical issues. Besides, “places of social innovation, that are both physical and social, are emerging in the urban landscape as a result of the co-production of space between multilevel stakeholders” (Ardill & Lemes de Oliveira, 2021). The transitory nature of these practices, which are bound to end in a short time, often triggers ongoing projects, as in the case of L’Après M, which has obtained the support of institutions and their formal recognition. On the contrary, the experience of Spin Time Labs in Rome has shown how, while succeeding in reinventing a forgotten space remains confined to an area of illegality that feeds discomfort, insecurity, and precariousness. In this sense, a flexible design practice open to the real needs of the population may contribute to alleviating today’s urban and territorial imbalance, contributing to innovation as a catalyst for social change: a collaborative process through which citizens can be directly involved in the design of initiatives that address the complex realities of urban sustainability (Camponeschi, 2010). Users-led social innovation appears as one of the alternative narratives that can contribute to the co-construction of a sustainable, solidarity-based and re-generative society (Van den Broeck et al., 2019).

## Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

## Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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