

Tourism-driven displacement in Naples, Italy

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ABSTRACT

The contribution examines the case of Naples and the impacts of mass tourism on its historical centre. Naples is the third largest city in Italy and the first in the south. The case is presented within the framework of critical urban studies that have delved into the rise of displacement and overtourism in Southern European cities. The paper aims to contribute to the debate, deepening the case of a city that has been less considered, although it has been severely affected by tourism-driven displacement in recent times. The case is presented through quantitative data, maps and short interview excerpts. The findings suggest the need for urgent urban planning intervention in order to avoid the expulsion of inhabitants. In particular, it argues the importance of addressing the issue through land use policy.

1. Definitions

The term ‘touristification’ is used to refer to the consequences of increased tourism in the urban context, while the term ‘overtourism’ “deals with the resulting scenario” related to the concentration of tourist pressure in specific urban areas once their carrying capacity is exceeded (Jover and Díaz-Parra, 2020, 13). ‘Short-term rentals’ (STR) refers to the offer of tourist accommodations mediated by platforms, in particular by Airbnb, which is the most used one in Naples. The term ‘displacement’ is meant “as a process of un-homing that severs the links between residents and the communities to which they belong, something registered through a range of modalities, including experiential, financial, social, familial and ecological” (Elliott-Cooper et al., 2019, 494).

2. Methodology

The proposed description of the case of Naples is based on the representation of two main data families: on the one hand, the socio-economic and demographic indicators provided by the Institute of National Statistics, on the other hand, the scrapings of the Airbnb platform. The latter were collected by the author for the years prior to 2018, thanks to a python code analogous to the one used by Murray Cox in the Inside Airbnb project and shared by Tom Slee in its first version; for the years from 2018 onwards, thanks to the addition of Naples to the cities monitored by the project, the data are those of Inside Airbnb. The two categories of data were then mapped by the author using the opensource software Qgis, and georeferenced to the territory divided by district. In addition to these mappings, the contribution refers to 25 interviews

conducted with inhabitants and corporate hosts, collected between 2018 and 2020.

3. Framework and scope

In the 2000s, many European cities had to deal with two phenomena of great impact: the increase in mass urban tourism (Peeters et al., 2018) and the rise in housing prices (Filandri and Olagnero, 2014, Ryan-Collins, 2018, Eurostat, 2021). The influence of the former on the latter was explored by several studies, taking into account territorial specificities in a path-dependent perspective. It was found that, especially in Southern Europe, the rise of tourism and platform mediated short-term rentals has led to an increase in displacement and overtourism (Pleumarom, 2015; Yrigoy, 2019; Cocola-Gant et al., 2020; Morales-Pérez et al., 2020; Amore et al., 2020a,2020b). Political decisions and economic agendas have largely contributed to this phenomenon (Castaneda, 2012): investments, deregulations and incentives in favour of the tourism economy have been adopted in all the southern countries, especially in Spain in the aftermath of the real estate bubble (García, 2010; González, 2011; Yrigoy, 2016; Russo and Scarnato, 2018), in Portugal following the 2011 crisis (Mendes, 2018; Lestegás, 2019; Cocola-Gant and Gago, 2019) and in Greece following the bankruptcy of 2008 (Balampanidisa et al., 2019). These policies were introduced on the assumption that tourism is the best way out of the economic crisis, a “spatial fix” strategy meant to produce tourist spaces (Yrigoy, 2014). During the same years, the Italian economy was indeed affected by the international instability following the subprime bubble in the United States and the subsequent European debt crisis, but a specific moment of rupture was not reached, as

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happened for example in Spain and Greece (Baldini and Poggio, 2013). The effects of the crisis have been lingering to this day making themselves evident in the unemployment trend and the decline in per capita income. This scenario has been exacerbated by the continuous withdrawal of public policies on social welfare and housing. In the meantime, tourism growth policies have never been lacking; they have always been among the most important for all the political parties and governments that have followed one another in the last 50 years, according to the narrative of the country with ‘the highest concentration of UNESCO heritage sites’ (D’Eramo, 2017), which must be economically exploited. The idea that tourism is the best anti-crisis prescription that can be given to the economy is just as hegemonic in Italy as in the rest of Southern Europe, and was also reiterated in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic. This political direction is in continuity with that assumed by western countries in the last decades of the 20th century, to cope with the crisis of the Fordist model and the urban decay through the ‘tourist regeneration’, despite its environmental and social unsustainability, as already criticised in the past (Urry, 1995; Fainstein and Judd, 1999). In the twenty-first century, however, the impact of tourism on cities and on the living conditions within them became even more aggressive thanks to the emergence of digital platforms for booking flights, accommodation and experiences. Specifically, scholars have demonstrated that platforms such as Airbnb support the flexibilisation, internationalisation and financialization of the housing market, and that this is in direct correlation with the increase in evictions and displacement (Cocola-Gant, 2016; Wachsmuth and Weisler, 2018). Coming to the Italian context, many cases have been addressed in the literature, among the main ones are: Venice, Florence, Rome, Milan and Turin (Picascia et al., 2017; Celata et al., 2018; Zanardi, 2020; Salerno, 2022; Celata and Romano, 2020, Semi and Tonetta, 2020); but also inland mountainous areas and small villages (Attili, 2020; Barbera et al., 2022). Nevertheless displacement and overtourism affects many other cities and territories still little researched. Southern Italy in particular has long been designated by national policies as the area in which tourist flows must grow and deseasonalize in order to establish the tourism sector as the driving force for the local economy (PST, 2007–2022; Franceschini, 2019).¹ For these reasons more Italian cases, with their specificities, should be investigated to contribute to the international debate. To do so this paper suggests the use of two general concepts that can give a common framework to cases in Italy, and at the same time place them in dialogue with other international cases, in which these concepts are equally valid. The first is the “housing market rentierisation” introduced by Ryan-Collins and Murray (2021) to interpret the current housing issue in countries where national policies tried to establish “a homeownership democracy” in the second half of the 20th century. The main reason why this concept is useful here is that it also allows us to approach cases in which global finance players are less present, as in Southern Italy cities for example, and where housing speculation still leads to damage due to fiscal regimes, lack of rent control and privatisation of the housing market. By ‘housing market rentierization’ Ryan-Collins and Murray mean that housing returns have become a “dominant income source”, more substantial than wages in many cases, as result of three main condition: a) “the dominance of private landed home ownership as the preferred form of tenure”; b) the “liberalized financial system where a large proportion (if not a majority) of bank lending supports the purchase of existing property”; c) “a tax regime that favour landed property both as a form of tenure and as a financial asset” (Ryan-Collins and Murray, 2021, p. 6). Here I argue that these conditions are also valid in Italy where, especially in the tourist cities, “homes earn more than jobs”, as they demonstrate for the Australian case. Moreover, this feeds housing speculation and the spread of short-term rentals also in Southern Italy, under a completely deregulated regime (Colomb and Moreira de Souza, 2021), which is a consequence of the

“homeownership ideology” disseminated by the Italian state in previous decades (Filandri, 2015).

The second concept is the “touristification of the residential” (Esposito, 2023), introduced by this paper in order to: a) underline that the massive housing conversion in tourist accommodation is a peculiar aspect of 21th century, which also involves small localities unknown to international tourist flows; b) adopt a concept broader enough to describe a commercial and speculative rather than inhabitative use of housing in several contexts, both ones with a predominance of “marginal hosts” or local corporate host (Tonetta, 2020; Semi and Tonetta, 2020), and those where corporate hosts recruited by global finance players are in the majority and have been for a long time (Cocola-Gant et al., 2021; Jover and Cocola-Gant, 2023); c) refer to a category - the *residential* - which is a specific formal use in urban plans, that is often changed without any regulatory step in tourist cities; d) emphasise that “residential is political” (Madden & Marcuse 2016) and public policies cannot allow this sector to be governed by the logic of private rent accumulation.

Within these interpretative categories, the purpose of the contribution is to bring attention to a case that has been considered marginal but is instead experiencing radical transformations. The scope is to demonstrate that the touristification of the neapolitan historic centre, and specifically the touristification of the residential stock, is having alarming consequences in Naples, despite the fact that it has become a tourist city very recently and its real estate market has not been equally exposed to international financial interests as occurred elsewhere in Southern Europe.

4. Introduction to the case

Naples cannot be defined as a global city (Sassen, 1991) and has not hosted international events in recent years that have influenced its urban space,² as happened for example in Barcelona with the 1992 Olympics and in Milan with EXPO 2015. The city has received very little attention from critical urban studies and no consideration from studies on gentrification, which in the European context have mostly focused on London, Berlin, Paris and Amsterdam (Kadi, 2019). However, Naples is the third city in Italy for population (after Rome and Milan), the first in Southern Italy and has undergone very significant transformations in recent years.

Since the city has a Greek foundation (470 BC.),³ its urban structure is organised around three main *plateai* (*decumani*, for the Romans) and twenty *stenopoi* (or *cardi* for the Romans), forming a very dense orthogonal grid of narrow streets which took the name of *Neapolis* (New-city, Napoli), still clearly visible. Around and above this ancient core, the historical neighbourhoods have progressively developed during the centuries, with various additions and transformations, into the largest historical city centre in Italy (17 km², followed by Rome with its 14 km²) and one of the largest in Europe (De Seta, 1973; Di Mauro and Vitolo, 2006). In 1861, with the proclamation of Italy as a Nation State, Naples lost the role of capital city of the former “Regno delle Due Sicilie” (Kingdom of the Two Sicilies), and with it much of its international political power, although “it was one of the most populous cities in Europe and the biggest in Italy (484,000 population in 1861)” (Mazzeo, 2009, 364). In 1995, the historic centre was listed as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO since “Naples is one of the most ancient cities in Europe, whose contemporary urban fabric preserves the elements of its long and eventful history”.⁴ Nevertheless, a public program of recovery and restoration of its immense heritage never started. So far, the conditions

² The city hosted the America’s Cup World Series in 2012, which is, however, a less important and smaller race than the America’s Cup proper.

³ The first nucleus dates back to the foundation of *Parthenope* or *Palaepolis* in the 9th century BC., later re-established as *Neapolis* (New Town) in 470 BC.

⁴ Dossier UNESCO 726bis, Criteria for World Heritage recognition.

¹ At the time Minister for Cultural Heritage and Tourism.

of the building stock are largely that of decay. However, in those same central areas we can find high population density and the permanence of a widespread residentiality and small-scale retail activities. Before 2015 there was no tourist pressure on the city centre and the role of Naples in the international tourist geography was mainly that of a bridge for other best-known destinations such as Pompei, Capri and the coast of Sorrento and Amalfi. In 2015, the number of hotel rooms per thousand inhabitants was only 11,4 (in Venice 58,3, in Rimini 223,2) and very few of them were in the inner part of the city. Here low-income inhabitants live in precarious housing conditions that have proved chronic over the XX century (*Officina Urbana*, 2016). In the nineties the internationalisation plan of the city airport, Capodichino, was launched ending in 2015 with the first case of privatisation of an airport in Italy.⁵ Since 2015 it has maintained the highest rate of increase in flows in Italy, reaching more than 10 million passengers in 2019, the double if compared to 2014. The connectivity index, measured by ACI Europe,⁶ registered a growth of 20% between 2018 and 2019, six times higher than the average of European airports. In 2019, the 71.4% of the traffic in Capodichino was due to the low-cost flights (mainly EasyJet and Ryanair),⁷ but the offer of intercontinental flights and national airlines is also increasing.

The increase in arrivals also comes from the sea. In the last twenty years the Port Authority has revived Naples as a destination for major cruise lines (405.639 cruise passengers in 2000, 1.144.246 in 2022) (*AdSP*, 2022). The Authority held also, in 2004, an international competition to restore the historic (passenger) port area in front of the Maschio Angioino castle, near the Royal Palace and San Giacomo Palace, seat of the Town Hall (*Mazzeo*, 2009).

Over the same years, the central station was renovated too and, with the inauguration of high-speed lines in 2005 and the increase of connections, particularly with northern cities, Naples' rail connectivity also grew significantly. Since 2012, a private high-speed train company has joined the national railway company in offering connections to Naples' central station, and a new line to other regions in the south-east has almost been completed. Thanks to this new infrastructure network, travel opportunities to visit several Italian cities in a few days have become very popular and Naples has become one of the most visited Italian cities in recent years. Overnight stay increased from 1.7 million in 2010 to over 3.7 million in 2019, arrivals from 720.000 to 1.4 million in the same period.⁸ In addition, the city is growing rapidly in terms of supply on Airbnb to the extent that in June 2023 accommodation offers in Naples (8.973) exceed those in Venice on the platform (7.642), and do not stray too far from other cities well known to international tourism such as Florence (11.799) and Berlin (12.472). This transformation of Naples into a tourist city has attracted the attention of the international press,⁹ and three famous hotel chains will soon open their first locations in the city (Marriott in the former Bank of Rome building, Radisson in the historic headquarters of a local newspaper, and Rocco Forte Luxury Hotels in the *Caravita di Sirignano* Palace).

⁵ GE.S.A.C. S.p.A. budget reports, 2014–2020.

⁶ Connectivity is a composite measure of the number of destinations, the frequency of services and the quality of the connections. (ACI EUROPE Airport Industry Connectivity Report 2019).

⁷ GE.S.A.C. S.p.A. budget reports 2019.

⁸ Arrivals: the number of international visitors who arrive during a given year in a given country and who are staying at least one night; overnight stay: each night a guest / tourist (resident or non-resident) actually spends (sleeps or stays) in a tourist accommodation establishment or non-rented accommodation (Eurostat definition). Data source: *Movimento dei clienti negli esercizi ricettivi*, Istituto Nazionale di Statistica (Istat).

⁹ “36 Hours in Naples, Italy. The allure of this storied seaside city — the Baroque excess, the indulgent cuisine, the mesmerizing fugue state of it all — now beckons as it did in the city's Grand Tour days”, Laura Rysman, New York Times, 11 July 2019 - “Naples craint de devenir une “deuxième Barcelone””, Par Allan Kaval, Le Monde, 17 June 2023.

The next paragraphs will detail how the increase in tourist arrivals brought an additional load to the already overcrowded centre, generating a growing demand for accommodations and a rapid conversion of the residential stock into short-term tourist rentals, thus bringing to the displacement of inhabitants.

5. Social context and housing problem

In Naples social polarisation tends to reproduce static patterns of spatial segregation. Both quantitative and qualitative analyses show a deeply divided urban society in terms of educational levels, employment, incomes and housing conditions (Becchi 1980, *Istat*, 2020). As summarised by *Mazzeo* (2009, p. 363), “differences derive from urban stratifications laid down in the course of time with the concentration of particular social classes in fixed urban areas”. Taking as references an imaginary axis that divides the city into two segments facing the sea (*Fig. 1*), the neighbourhoods on the west, along the waterfront of Mergellina and Posillipo with a privileged position on the hills, are inhabited by an older population, with higher level of education, for the most part permanently employed and residing in buildings with a better conservation state compared to the east's ones (*Istat*, 2011). On the contrary in the ancient city, on the east side of the line, people deal daily with socio-economic hardship, school dropout, unemployment, and worse housing conditions (*Istat*, 2011). On the east side the population is younger and has a much lower average income: in the neighbourhoods of Chiaia and Posillipo, on the west, the average income in 2020 was around 45 thousand euro while in San Lorenzo, Vicaria and Forcella it was 13 thousand euro per year¹⁰ (*Agenzie delle Entrate*, 2020).

The current inequality gaps between the ancient core and the middle-class neighbourhoods are comparable to those that occur in Rome and Milan between the urban peripheries and the high-bourgeois historic centre (*Lelo et al.*, 2019). According to historians, this social polarisation has been inherited by the time in which Naples was the capital of the Regno delle Due Sicilie, a city inhabited on the one hand by a privileged and unproductive elite, who has now lost its power, and on the other, by a mass of poor people packed in unhealthy neighbourhoods (*Braudel*, 1976; *Becchi*, 1984). The dilapidated condition of the centre's architectural heritage contributes to an imagery of decadence. A large-scale recovery programme has never been initiated, not even in the post-earthquake period. In fact, in 1980 a severe earthquake hits Naples: many housing buildings in the centre resulted as seriously damaged, thus part of the population had to move to the suburbs, some in public housing districts built *ex-novo* and poorly connected (*Noble*, 1985; *Vitellio*, 2011; *Di Costanzo*, 2016), but many decided to stay or return in the houses of the centre. The housing overcrowding rate was already significant at the time and is still the worst among large Italian cities, despite improvements (*Officina Urbana*, 2016). With the exception of Chiaia, Posillipo, Vomero and San Giuseppe, where the resident population is, on average, wealthier, all the other neighbourhoods, and in the old city centre particularly, show a ratio of square metres per inhabitant below the national average (*Fig. 2*).

Moreover, a significant part of the population (40.000 people according to some estimates of local social services) lives in one-room flats on the ground floor in narrow alleys (called ‘vasci’ in dialect). These rooms are classified as non-residential and formally cannot be inhabited according to building regulations, because they do not have enough air exchange and sunlight.

These inner neighbourhoods have also inherited from the previous century the social stigma of unsafe places, which made them less attractive for middle-class investments. Until a few years ago, and to a less extent still today, people from other neighbourhoods declare to

¹⁰ The average income in the city was 21.685 euro in 2020, down from previous years: it was 22.434 euro in 2016, 4.13% less than in 2008 (source Agenzia delle Entrate).

Social polarisation and its spatial distribution. Istat data 2011

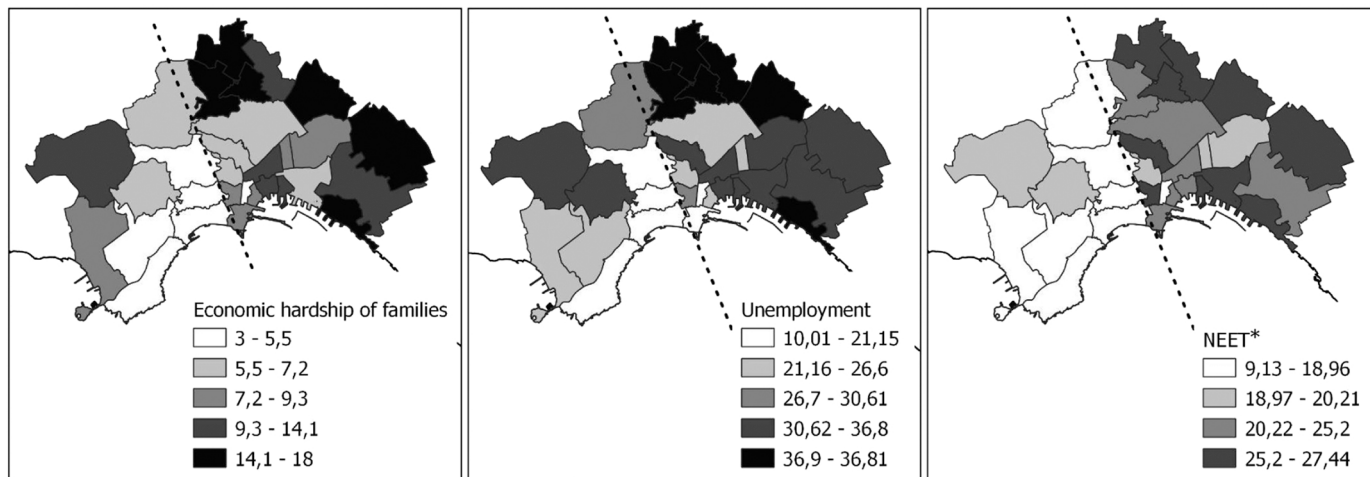


Fig. 1. Social polarisation and its spatial distribution. Data Source: Istat (2011). *NEET: Not in Education, Employment or Training.

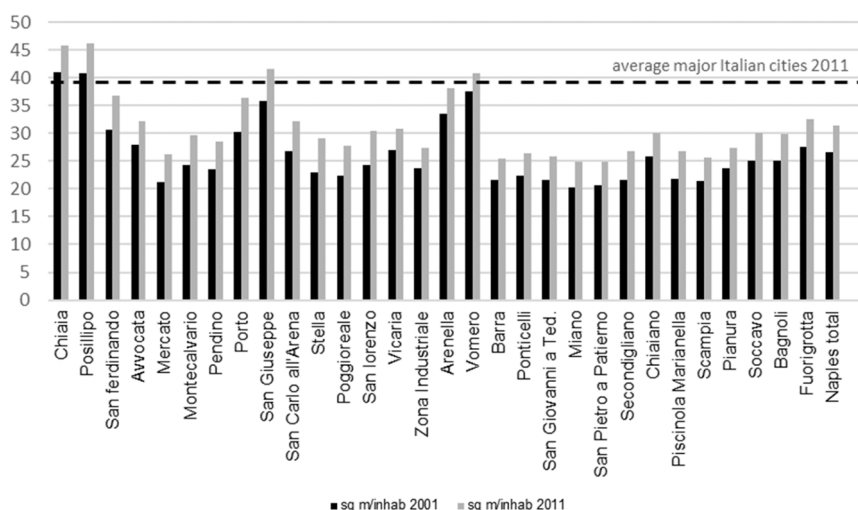


Fig. 2. Overcrowding in homes: square metres of the housing stock per inhabitant in Naples' neighbourhoods compared to the average for large Italian cities (2011 Istat census data).[#5 Fig. 2 media is in italian and not indicated if referred to 2001 or 2011 > "average major Italian cities 2011" in the picture].

avoid this part of the city because of the fear of being robbed on the streets. The high concentration of low-income population, the stigma of unsafe neighbourhoods and the preference of the middle class for the western hills as shown on the maps, made the property market in these areas more accessible. The housing prices, especially those for rent, remained significantly lower in the ancient neighbourhoods compared to the increases experienced by the western areas between '90 and the early 2000 s. According to official statistics (Istat, 2011), market values per square metre are around 2350 euros and more in Chiaia, Posillipo and Vomero neighbourhoods, while in the old town centre they drop to about 1500 per square metre. In brief, the average market value of the houses in the oldest part of the city tends to be lower than the municipal average, a very rare condition in the Italian context (Fig. 3).

Moreover, in the core of the ancient city the housing stock for rent has not shrunk as drastically as it did in the middleclass neighbourhoods (Fig. 4): in 1991 less than 34% of the houses were owner-occupied in the neighbourhoods of San Lorenzo, Porto, Pendino and Mercato and in 2011 the percentage of owners did not exceed 59%, while it reached up to 70 in the hills of the west side (Istat censuses 1991, 2001 2011). In general, homeownership had increased significantly in the last decades, as occurred in many other Italian cities (Filandri, 2015) and European

ones (Arundel, Hochstenbach, 2020), but in Naples far more in wealthy neighbourhoods. The neighbourhoods to the north-east, where the percentage of tenants is still very high, are those built as public housing starting from the 1960 s.

In general, renting is the most common form of access to housing for low-income inhabitants in Italy, and tenants in Southern Italy show incidence of absolute poverty at 22.4%, compared to 17.6% in the North and 15.4% in the Centre (Istat, 2022). As in other southern European countries, the spread of home ownership in Italy, the very low percentage of social housing (4% of the housing stock) and the marked housing inequality are the result of national housing policies that have strongly discouraged the rental market and favoured private ownership and rent speculation from the mid-20th century onwards (Allen et al., 2004; Filandri, 2015; Filandri et al., 2020). Within this scenario, which has seen a significant increase in evictions over the last ten years in all Italian cities (MINT 2020, Esposito, 2022a), Naples has the highest housing deprivation indexes among major Italian cities (Officina Urbana, 2016). As mentioned before, what is unusual and worth to be considered is that this condition concerns the more ancient part of the historic city, protected by UNESCO. This is probably due to the high degree of deterioration of the buildings (Istat, 2011), the lack of public

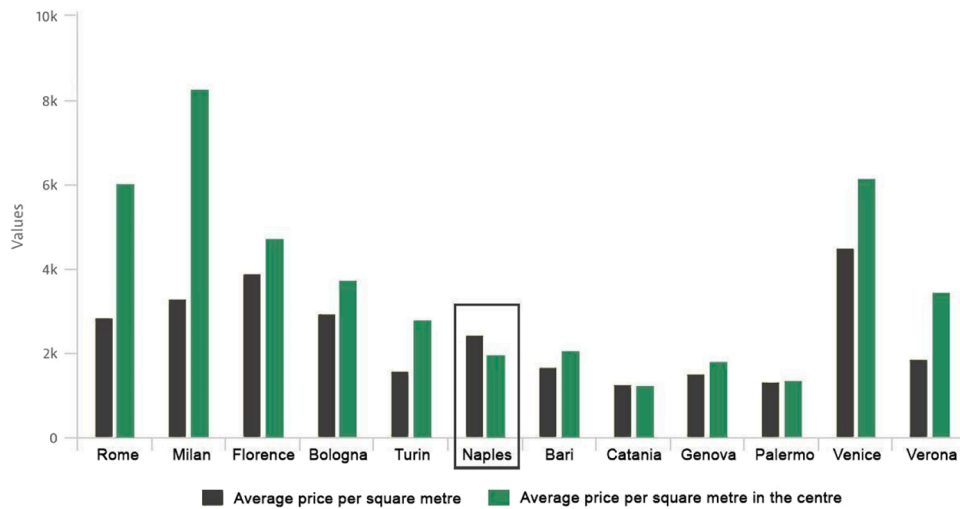


Fig. 3. Value per square metre of houses according to data from the Idealista 2017 Residential Report.

Incidence of owner-occupied dwellings by neighbourhood (%)

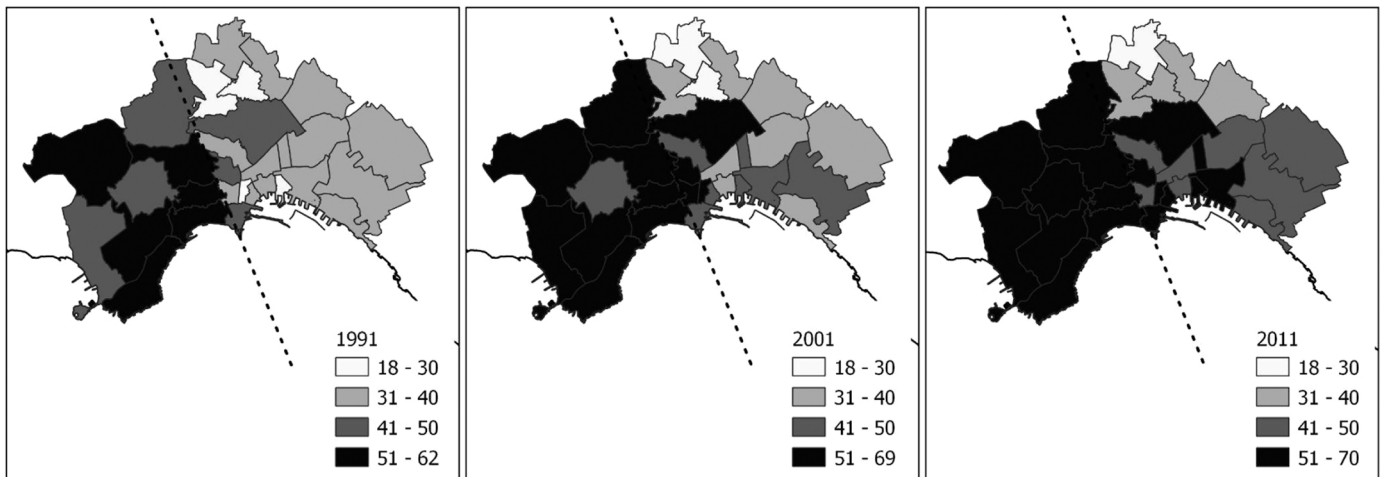


Fig. 4. Incidence of owner-occupied dwellings by neighbourhood (Istat censuses 1991, 2001, 2011). In black neighbourhoods where the incidence is more than 50%.

incentives in renewing them (Orefice, 2009), the historical-archaeological ties existing for the oldest centre urban fabric and its reputation as a rough place. But at the same time this has somehow allowed the ancient neighbourhoods to respond to the rental demand of the urban underclass who cannot afford to buy property. According to national statistics, the demand for rental homes in Italy is increasing in all cities, since low-income inhabitants and young people of the working class cannot afford the purchase costs and are often not eligible for mortgages (Bank of Italy, 2019). Due to the high cost of renting in the centre, this type of population is usually relegated to the urban margins, but in the case of Naples the historic centre is a sort of ‘inner margin’, which allowed the low-income population to stay until today. This part of the city is also culturally vibrant and is home to numerous formal and informal cultural spaces, which have played a leading role in many of the social claims of recent years (Cirillo and De Tullio, 2021). In addition, the centre also houses historic university buildings and research institutes, generating housing demand for young students and researchers.

What now has changed, compared to the early 2000 s, is that the scarcity of the housing supply for low-income inhabitants in the historic centre, which before was mainly due to the high concentration of demand for rental houses in this area and the lack of adequate living space within the dilapidated residential stock, is now increased by the

subtraction of living space for non-residential purposes. Nowadays low-income inhabitants must compete with tourists for access to the same housing stock. As happened elsewhere, the conversion of the houses into touristic accommodation is driven by the significant rent-gaps that tourist rents can provide in a short time to homeowners.

6. The touristification process

Instead of being at the centre of the public and political debate, the persistence of high inequalities to the present day in terms of education, employment and housing status within the central neighbourhoods of the city has unfortunately fed the touristic marketing strategies over the last decade. In fact, the city’s tourism development plan¹¹ focuses on branding Naples as an ‘authentic, non-gentrified city’. In addition to institutional policy addresses, the combination of physical decay and great social vitality in the centre of Naples has been highly exploited by the tourist market itself, doped by the so-called ‘experiential tourism’ (Paulauskaite et al., 2017), which seeks for ‘authentic experiences’ and produces cultural consumption in the urban context (Zukin, 2008). At

¹¹ Strategic marketing plan for the development of tourism in the city of Naples (PST 2017–2022).

the same time, short-term accommodations spread rapidly: between 2015 and 2019 the Airbnb listings in Naples increased by 553%. Airbnb is the most used platform in the city (81% of the whole supply according to Airdna). Interviewed hosts affirmed that Airbnb is the platform that assures the greatest visibility to private apartments.¹² There are several controversial issues related to this phenomenon. Among the main ones, it emerges that about 6000 announcements, out of the 8000 counted in Naples before the pandemic, are located in the neighbourhoods with high overcrowding and housing deprivation rates (Officina Urbana, 2016; Istat 2017; Esposito, 2021). This is a considerable offer for a city that until recently was not considered touristic, as it is already comparable to Airbnb's current offer for the islands of the Venice lagoon (6.367 announcements in June 2023, excluding the mainland of Mestre, according to InsideAirbnb). Since more than a half of the municipal territory (the 68,70%) is classified by Istat as low-income areas with young families living as tenants (Openpolis 2018), the shift from ordinary rent to short-terms ones in those areas led to the rapid increase in the rent gap, the multiplication of evictions and the displacements from the inner city. In 2017, the year in which the increase in listings of short-term rentals has been most significant, formal requests for eviction in the city had been 69% higher than in 2010.¹³ Today, seven years after the beginning of the touristification, the architectural heritage is still in serious condition of decay, but house values increase, becoming affordable just by tourist and wealthy class, while the chance for inhabitants to stay becomes lower, in the absence of public rent control policies. The distribution of accommodation falls almost exclusively within the UNESCO perimeter, with a very high concentration in the oldest districts (Fig. 5).

Beyond the intentions of heritage protection, it has been pointed out that the logic of UNESCO perimeters closely resembles that of natural parks, but while in these the intention is to protect and reproduce the local fauna and flora, "in World Heritage cities" an exodus of inhabitants is generated instead "because it becomes practically impossible to live there, i.e. to carry out all those activities normally connected with living" (D'Eramo, 2017, p. 89) due to the emergence of a "tourist monoculture" (Agostini et al., 2022).

In neighbourhoods with the highest density of Airbnb accommodation, such as San Lorenzo, Pendino, Porto and Montecalvario, the economic hardship of families is quite high (Fig. 6).

Also significant in these neighbourhoods is the poor state of preservation of the housing stock (Fig. 7) and the high incidence of tenants, as already mentioned (Fig. 8).

Neighbourhoods where houses used to be cheaper on average than in the west areas (Fig. 9) are now affected by a considerable rent gap due to the concentration of Airbnb accommodation and the new locational advantages granted to houses in this part of the city. The neighbourhood of Lorenzo (only 0,63 square kilometres) is the most affected by the STR concentration: ca 1.450 listings of which 1.102 (83%) are available for the entire year as holiday homes. As seen above, San Lorenzo is also among the neighbourhoods with the lowest per capita income, the highest percentage of tenants and the worst housing deprivation indices. Moreover, it is one of the most densely populated areas with 34.000 inhabitants per square kilometer.

In short, the maps take a snapshot of the conditions that enable the rent-gap and the socio-economic conditions of the population from whom housing space is taken. A significant aspect in the evolution of the touristification process has been the rapid increase in multi-listings hosts and, in general, the rapid professionalisation of the STR management: in 2017 only 30% of the hosts had more than one online ad, whereas today 63.3% do. Studies on the functioning of Airbnb have already shown that

this segment of the market managed by professionals is the fastest growing in all cities, and consolidates the offer of what has been called the "triple threat", namely "short-term rental listings which are full-time, entire homes, and multi-listings" (Wachsmuth et al., 2017, 2). In fact, the accounts with the most online listings are flat management companies, so-called "corporate hosts" in literature (Cocola-Gant et al., 2021), some of which are present in several Italian cities. Among them in the Neapolitan case is Wonderful Italy, a company founded in Milan and backed by Oltre Impact, an Italian venture capital company. The greater concentration of professional management is in the historic centre, such as in the Montecalvario neighbourhood, in the Quartieri Spagnoli, where multi-listings hosts account for 73% on Airbnb and all the major companies have several listings. As in the case of San Lorenzo, also in Quartieri Spagnoli the population density is very high, as are the index of socio-economic deprivation and of the poor state of preservation of residential heritage (Istat, 2011). Both in the narrow alleys of San Lorenzo and in those of the Quartieri Spagnoli, Airbnb listings propose stays in 'authentic Naples houses', which sometimes means the aforementioned *vasci* on the ground floor. The latter are equipped with automatic self-check-in devices that are clearly visible along the alleys.

The pandemic period did not discourage the tourist rental market, the decrease in listings was small and temporary, and affected more significantly the districts west of the axis and the more peripheral ones, not those with a tourist monoculture's tendency (Esposito, 2021). In 2022, the supply returned to growth and exceeded pre-Covid 19 levels (Fig. 10):

The drawbacks of this process are as evident as it is who wins and who loses: the trend of evictions worsened during the years of increased STR supply, reaching a first standstill after years of growth with the government's eviction freeze in 2020 and 2021 due to the pandemic. Eviction data are not aggregated on a neighbourhood scale, but looking at new residential leases and property sales, the neighbourhoods where the housing market has been most dynamic in recent years are certainly those east of the axis (Fig. 11) (according to the zones classification of the national Real Estate Observatory, B8: Porto and Mercato, B15: Montecalvario, Quartieri Spagnoli, C26: San Lorenzo and Vicaria; B9 includes many not residential buildings, such as Universities venues and offices, so as Zone B13 which is an intermediate area with tertiary/commercial and residential sectors, corresponding to the San Giuseppe and San Ferdinando districts).

On 15 June 2018, at the presentation of the "Real Estate Report" by the Tecnocasa Study Centre, a leading real estate agency, the manager Davide Agretti stated: "In terms of buying and selling values the areas of the Centre, Via Toledo and Quartieri Spagnoli in Naples are growing and especially for tourist purposes".¹⁵ Indeed, similarly to what happened in other European cities, also in Naples the STR generated a 'buy-to-let' market (Paccoud, 2017), more dynamic in the neighbourhoods to the left of the axis (Fig. 12).

Many tenants pay the rent informally without a regular contract, which is not uncommon in Naples as in the rest of the country: "About 1.5 million rental contracts in Italy are illegal" and "dwellings without a registered contract are thought to be 950.000" (Gentili and Hoekstra, 2019, 434). Tenants in the black market testify to forced expulsions after intimidating actions perpetrated by the owners¹⁶: "utility meters were shared because it used to be one flat, later divided into smaller flats. The meters were outside at the entrance. One day the owner decided to disconnect all the utilities, as if the houses were empty, to force us to leave, you see? The utilities were registered in his name. A year later I passed by there and on the balconies of the whole floor I saw the b&b

¹² Interviews were collected between 2018 and 2020 among the city's main hosts, with more flats located in the centre, identified thanks to datascraping.

¹³ Procedures for the release of residential property in Italy, aggregated data for capitals and provinces, Ministry of the Interior (2002–2021).

¹⁵ Presentation of the Real Estate Report of the Tecnocasa Study Centre on 15 June 2018 at the Confesercenti in Naples.

¹⁶ Interviews were collected between 2018 and 2020 among families under eviction.

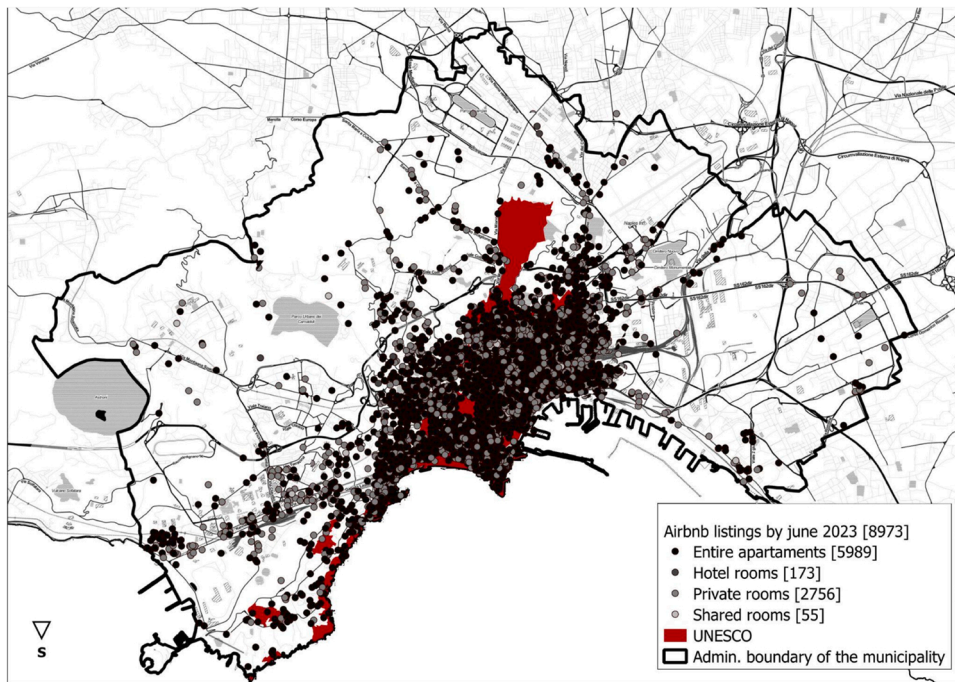


Fig. 5. Distribution of Airbnb listings in Naples (2021). Own elaboration from Inside Airbnb data. The red area not affected by STR corresponds to the Bosco di Capodimonte, an extensive unbuilt urban park protected by UNESCO.

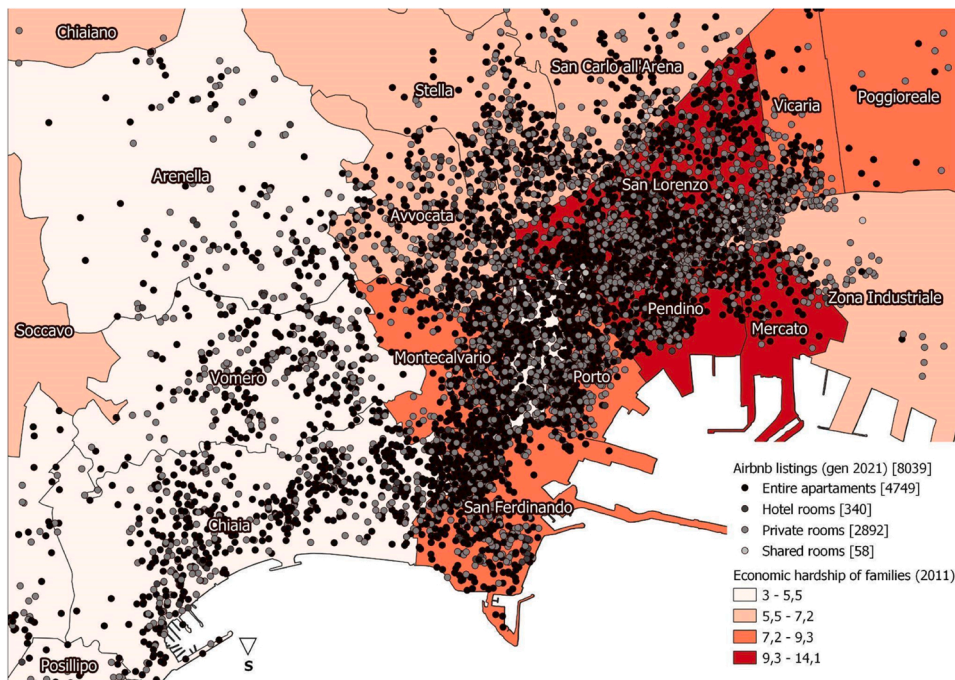


Fig. 6. Distribution of Airbnb listings in Naples (2021) and household economic hardship index by neighbourhood. Own elaboration from Inside Airbnb data and the 2011 Istat census.

small flags”.¹⁷ Another long-standing resident of the San Lorenzo neighbourhood specifies that: “Evictions are nothing new in the city, many families have gone through this due to economic insecurity, but now it has become impossible to find another home in the same

neighbourhood. People are forced to moving away”.¹⁸

The consequences of increased tourism are also visible on the commercial fabric: an unprecedented concentration of restaurants and street food activities is gradually replacing neighbourhood businesses. In shops that do not cater to tourists, shopkeepers complain of both the

¹⁷ AE, 42 years old, interview of 06/03/2018.

¹⁸ AC, 64 years old, interview of 15/11/2019.

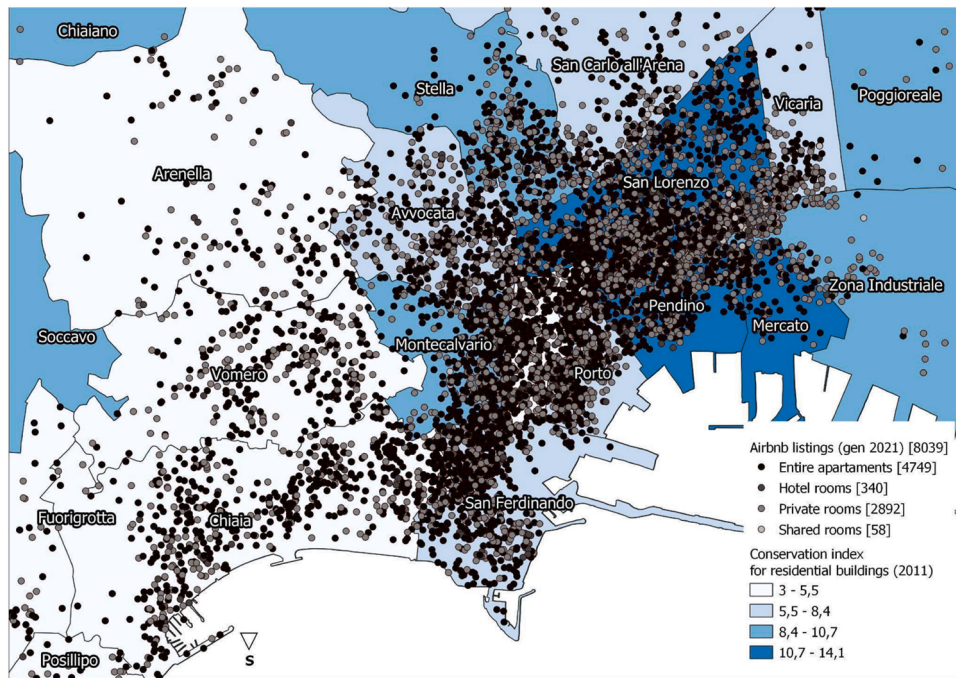


Fig. 7. Distribution of Airbnb listings in Naples (2021) and conservation index of residential buildings (Istat, 2011), i.e. percentage ratio of residential buildings in poor and mediocre state of preservation to total residential buildings. Own elaboration from Inside Airbnb data and the 2011 Istat census.

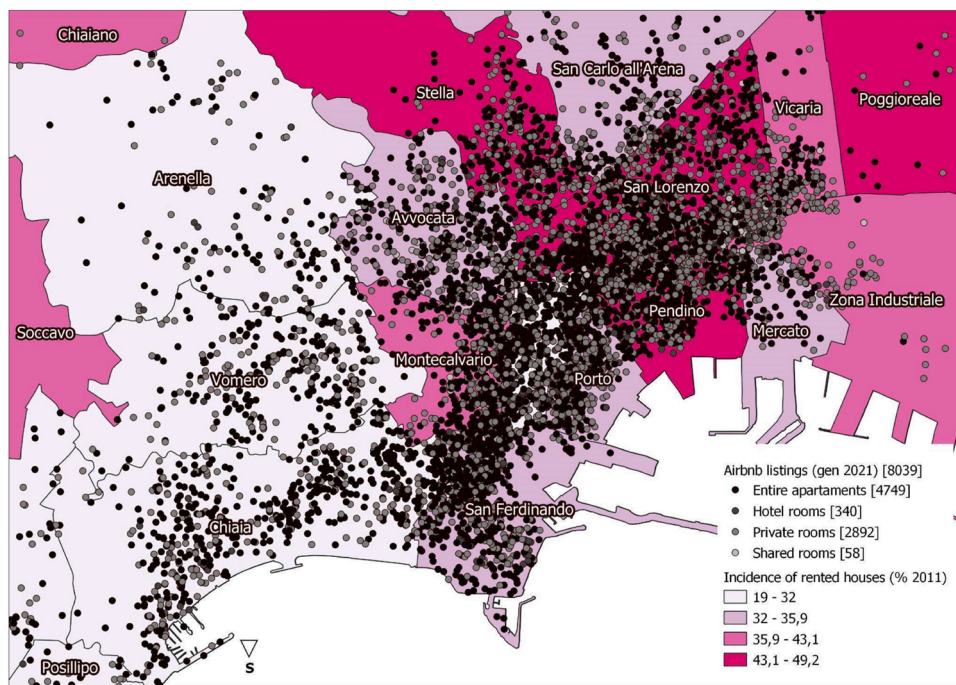


Fig. 8. Distribution of Airbnb listings in Naples (2021) and incidence of rented houses (Istat, 2011). Own elaboration from Inside Airbnb data and the 2011 Istat census.

displacement of the inhabitants who used to be their customers and the increase in the rent of premises for those on the main streets crossed by tourist flows. Again, the real estate market for commercial premises is proving to be much more dynamic in the neighbourhoods under touristification than in the others (Fig. 13).

Bookshops (as the 100-year-old Guida bookshop at Via Port'Alba), musical instrument shops (as Loveri at Via San Sebastiano, founded in 1880 near the Conservatory, closed in 2018 and replaced by a sandwich shop), the textile shop near Piazza del Gesù, blacksmiths, carpenters, grocery shops, are some of the commercial activities that have closed in

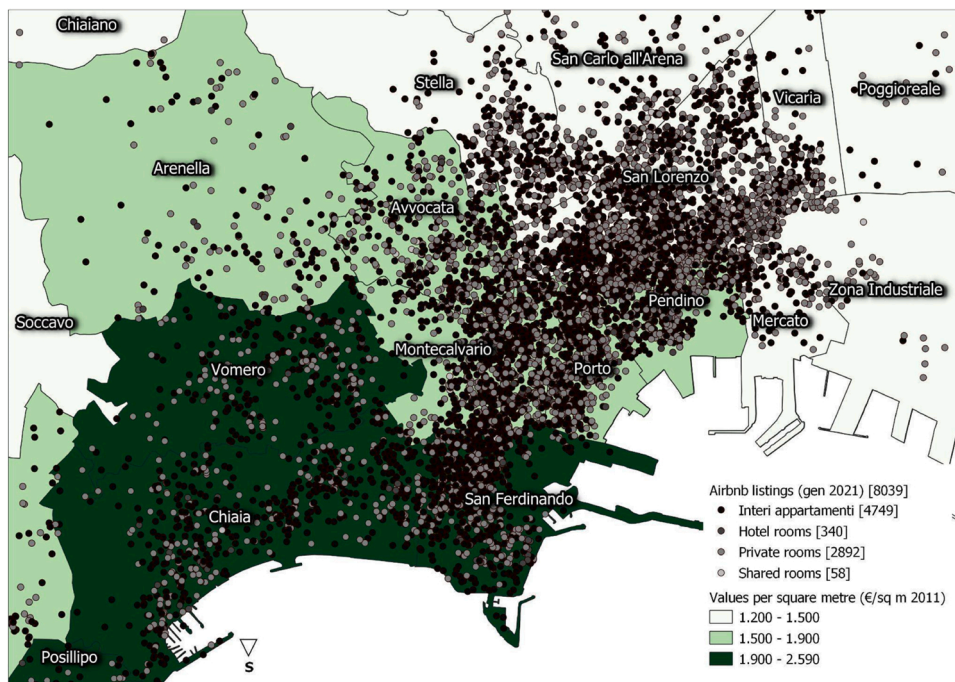


Fig. 9. Distribution of Airbnb listings in Naples (2021) and average values per square metre by neighbourhoods (Istat, 2011). Own elaboration from Inside Airbnb data and the 2011 Istat census.

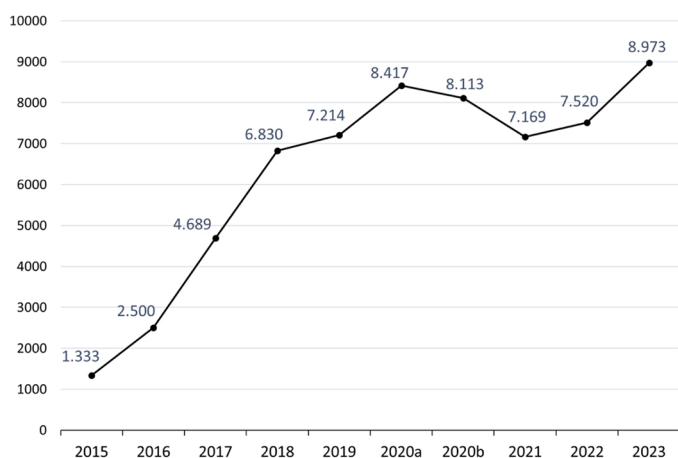


Fig. 10. Trends in Airbnb STR in the city of Naples. The 2020a refers to the pre-lockdown period and the 2020b to the first pandemic phase in Italy. [the graph has been updated].

recent years and been replaced by bars, restaurants and souvenir shops.

The tourist transformation of the centre has mostly generated wealth for landlords and investors in the tourism sector, but has not yet significantly improved the income conditions of the inhabitants. The neighbourhoods where incomes are lowest remains those in the heart of the tourist area: Mercato (12.664 euros per capita) and San Lorenzo (12.092 euros per capita), where there is the most significant growth in Airbnb accommodations and more than half of the inhabitants do not own the house they live in. In order for the wealth generated by tourism to be distributed among the population, public intervention is needed especially to manage the high rates of evictions and working poor recorded in the tourism sector.

Nevertheless, a positive social aspect of the tourist transformation can be found in the overcoming of the stigma that the poorer neighbourhoods of the centre have lived with, whose alleys are no longer

considered dangerous and impassable. In spite of this, the expulsion of the population remains a high price to pay for breaking a social stigma, also considering the fact that the result is an unsustainable condition of overcrowding due to overtourism.²⁰

7. Naples in the Southern European scenarios

As occurred in other southern European cities in recent years (Cocola-Gant and Gago, 2019; Carvalho et al., 2019; Diaz-Parra, Jover, 2019; Yrigoy, 2019; Balampanidisa et al., 2019; Cocola-Gant and Lopez-Gay, 2020; Amore et al., 2020a, 2020b; Celata and Romano, 2020; Urquiaga et al., 2020), the permanence of the inhabitants in the ancient centre of Naples is currently at risk due to the exponential growth of short-term rentals, the reduction in long-term rentals and to the increase in the cost of rent and of living overall. Neighbourhoods considered ill-famed at the end of the 20th century became of great interest for the tourism industry within a few years. Branded by tourist marketing as a “place to be” precisely because they lack the glossy aesthetics of gentrified neighbourhoods, which is often not functional to the processes of touristification (Maloutas, 2011), today these neighbourhoods face the commodification and spectacularization of the inhabitants’ living conditions rebranded as authentic locals life’ by Airbnb and tour operators. The ‘vasci tours’ are the emblematic example of this phenomenon: guided walks through the alleys to see the cramped, not formally habitable and often dilapidated ground-floor dwellings in which part of the population still lives today. The current scenario in Naples has some similar aspects to what Rubino describes as a “curious blend” referring to the co-existence of slums and working class houses next to restaurant and upscale shops in Brazilian cities (Rubino, 2005). Also in Naples, in fact, the conditions of extreme poverty persist alongside areas tamed by tourist consumption. The current phase is of transition from a non-tourist city to a city with low

²⁰ Italy (Naples) implements one-way foot traffic in ‘dangerously’ over-touristed street: Julia Buckley, CNN, December 7, 2022: <https://edition.cnn.com/travel/article/naples-san-gregorio-armeno-one-way/index.html>.

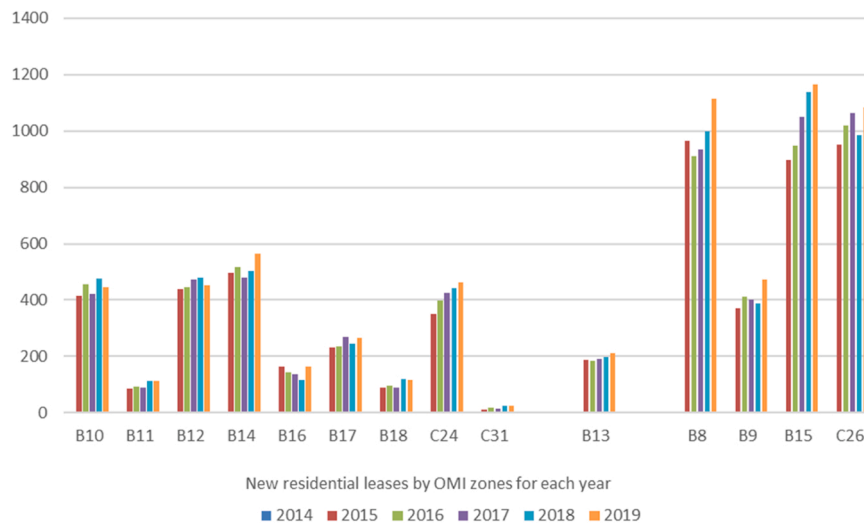


Fig. 11. New residential leases by OMI (homogeneous territorial zone from the point of view of the real estate market, established by the State Land Agency). On the left side of the graph ‘Prestige areas’ and hillside districts (west side of the polarisation axis), on the right the neighbourhoods of the old city centre (east side of the polarisation axis), in the centre Zone B13, an intermediate area with tertiary/commercial and residential sectors.

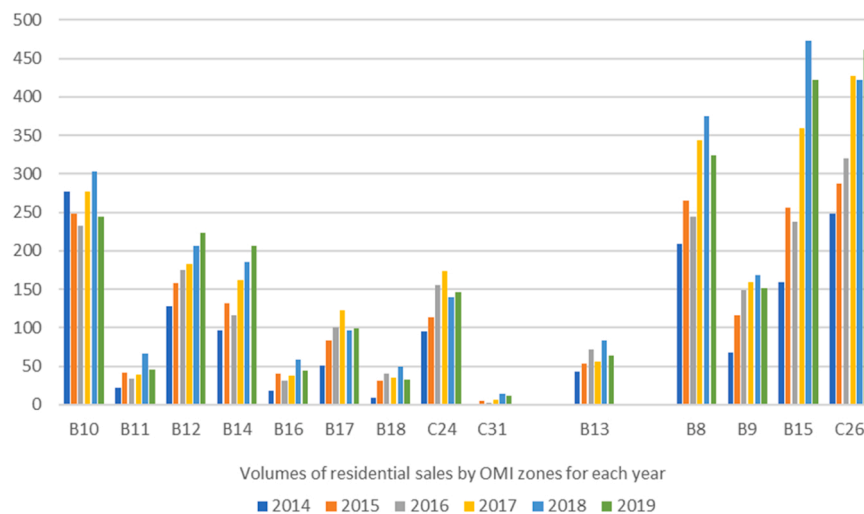


Fig. 12. Volume of residential sales each year by OMI (homogeneous territorial zone from the point of view of the real estate market, established by the State Land Agency).¹⁴ On the left side of the graph ‘Prestige areas’ and hillside districts (west side of the polarisation axis), on the right the neighbourhoods of the old city centre (east side of the polarisation axis), in the centre Zone B13, an intermediate area with tertiary/commercial and residential sectors.

income-neighbourhoods overcrowded by the concentration of visitors. As emphasised in studies on tourism gentrification (Gotham, 2005; Cocola-Gant, 2018), one of the most prominent impacts is the conversion of houses into tourist accommodations, a global phenomenon – peculiar to the 21st century cities – that can be define “touristification of the residential” to emphasise its political significance (Esposito, 2023), in reference to Madden and Marcuse and their “residential is political” (2016). The expression is also useful to point out that urban plans should intervene in the phenomenon, preventing the conversion of housing stock to uses other than residential.

Unlike cities such as Rome (Insolera, 2011) or Venice (Zanardi, 2020; Salerno, 2022), where the neighbourhoods in the historic centre had

long been experiencing a process of depopulation and an ageing resident population, the neighbourhoods undergoing touristification in Naples are densely populated and manly by young families living in precarious housing conditions. Inhabitants and tourists compete for the same housing stock, particularly in the San Lorenzo, Pendino, Porto and Montecalvario districts. Since tourists often come from the “wealthy side of the global rent gap” (Ardura Urquiaga et al., 2020, 3110) this competition is entirely in favour of the tourist market given the absence of public rent control policies and STR regulations. Tourists coming from the working class of Northern Italy and Northern European countries have a greater spending capacity than the population living in the centre of Naples. As Pettas et al. (2022) emphasise on the case of Athens: “the working class of a strong Northern European economy can have a high purchasing power, when compared with a Southern European country’s middle class” (Pettas et al., 2022, 37), whereby the comparison between social classes in the processes of touristification is strongly conditioned by the uneven development at international scale. Moreover, the fact that inhabitants are being squeezed out of neighbourhoods that keep being decaying and dilapidated is a common aspect in other cities where

¹⁴ Legend of OMI zones: B10 Vomero - Arenella, B1 Corso V. Emanuele and vigne di S. Martino, B12 Vomero, B14 Chiaia - San Ferdinando, B16 Chiaia, B17 Limite Chiaia-Vomero, B18 Santa Lucia, C24 Manzoni – Posillipo, C31 Casale di Posillipo, B13 S. Ferdinando - P. Municipio e P. Plebiscito, B8 Centro antico – Decumani, B9 Centro antico - Decumani e Via Marina, B15 Centro storico - Quartieri Spagnoli, C26 Centro storico - Rione Sanità e Materdei.

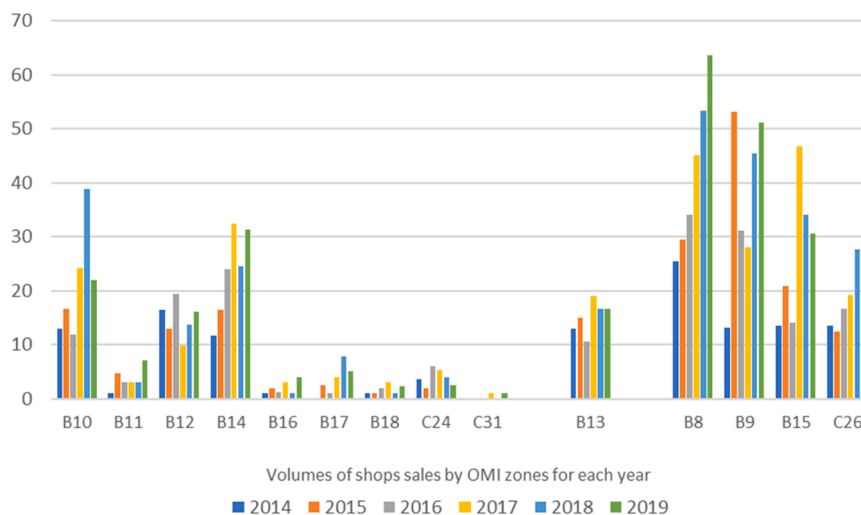


Fig. 13. Volume of shop sales each year by OMI (homogeneous territorial zone from the point of view of the real estate market, established by the State Land Agency). On the left side of the graph ‘Prestige areas’ and hillside districts (west side of the polarisation axis), on the right the neighbourhoods of the old city centre (east side of the polarisation axis), in the centre Zone B13, an intermediate area with tertiary/commercial and residential sectors.¹⁹

the real estate market has been drugged by the exponential growth of Airbnb accommodations in absence of significant urban transformation projects, a phenomenon defined “rent-gap without redevelopment” by Wachsmuth D. and Weisler (2018). But while, on the one hand, the increase in evictions, the rent gap, the buy-to-let market, and the daily stress due to overtourism bring the case of Naples closer to other southern European cities, on the other hand there are some differences regarding the actors in the process that are worth highlighting. Beyond the presence of the “marginal hosts” (Semi and Tonetta, 2020), the professionalisation in STR management is clearly visible in Naples as in other cities with a high concentration of Airbnb accommodation (for other cases, see: Katsinas, 2021; Gil and Sequera, 2020; Cocola-Gant et al., 2021), but in Naples foreign companies are scarcely present at the moment. The flat owners and corporate hosts are mainly Italians, albeit some of them are players present in many cities and with rather extensive property portfolios as in the case of Wonderful Italy. The main foreign corporate hosts active in other Italian cities, such as Venice, Florence, and Rome, manage few or zero flats in Naples. During the interview, the head of one of the long-standing international STR companies²¹ operating in the major Italian cities, regarding Naples said: “In Naples there are some flats that we rent but they are few, we are waiting for the international market to consolidate as in the Amalfi and Sorrento coasts”.²² The preference of foreign players for the coast and the islands of the gulf (Capri, Procida, Ischia) also emerged from interviews with hosts conducted by Marta Tonetta between 2018 and 2019 (Tonetta, 2020). Therefore, the STR market in Naples currently has a lower degree of internationalisation and financialisation than in other cities partly because the tourist transformation of the urban centre is recent. But it is also important to emphasise that in Italy there have been no public policies to incentivise the investment in houses by foreign capital, as happened instead in Spain, Portugal and Greece with the adoption of the

Residence Permit for Investment Activities (ARI) (or ‘golden visa’) and the consequent acceleration of the process of assetization and financialization of the housing stock (Aranda, 2018; Ampudia de Haro, Gaspar, 2019; Cocola-Gant e Gago, 2019, Balampanidisa et al., 2019).

Finally, as regards antagonist movements active in the city centre against the evictions and the overtourism, since 2018 in Naples local collectives have joined the SET-net (Southern European cities facing Touristification), active in more than 27 cities.²³ The Neapolitan node of the network has repeatedly asked local institutions to impose a time limit on Airbnb listings as in other European cities and also to adopt an urban plan to regulate the STR (Esposito, 2022b), including the issue of tourist accommodation in the city’s ordinary municipal land use plan - which is currently at the approval stage, or to draw up an extraordinary plan similar to the one of Barcelona (*Plan especial urbanístico de alojamientos turísticos*, PEUAT) (Zaar, 2017). Moreover, together with the nodes of other Italian cities, the activists have called for national legislation of the phenomenon, which is currently lacking in the Italian context (Colomb and Moreira de Souza, 2021). A proposal for action on the matter has been put forward by civil society, exasperated by the lack of political answers: drafted within the framework of the ATA campaign (*Alta Tensione Abitativa*: High Housing Tension) by the collective OCIO (*Osservatorio Civico indipendente sulla casa e sulla residenzialità*, an independent housing observatory in Venice), it has been discussed with representatives of local institutions of several cities over the last months.²⁴ It proposes the adoption of municipal regulations with limits for tourist beds based on the number of residents in specific areas (neighbourhoods or other forms of zoning) and qualitative criteria which can be specify by local authorities.²⁵ The regulation is guided by the principle ‘one host one permit’, to curb the growth of corporate hosts, but it is not meant as an urban planning instrument. In the case of Naples, this type of regulation with threshold-limits for tourist beds should be adopted with very restrictive criteria and be accompanied by a public housing plan in the historic city, based on the re-use of existing building stock and capable of guaranteeing access to housing for the

¹⁹ Legend of OMI zones: B10 Vomero - Arenella, B1 Corso V. Emanuele and vigna di S. Martino, B12 Vomero, B14 Chiaia - San Ferdinando, B16 Chiaia, B17 Limite Chiaia-Vomero, B18 Santa Lucia, C24 Manzoni - Posillipo, C31 Casale di Posillipo, B13 S. Ferdinando - P. Municipio e P. Plebiscito, B8 Centro antico - Decumani, B9 Centro antico - Decumani e Via Marina, B15 Centro storico - Quartieri Spagnoli, C26 Centro storico - Rione Sanità e Materdei.

²¹ The Interhome, owned by Hotel Plan, which is part of Migros, a large Swiss-based holding company that owns supermarkets, petrol stations and other businesses in addition to the tourism sector.

²² Interview on 2 March 2022 with an Interhome employee in Italy.

²³ SET Manifesto: <http://www.iut.nu/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/RED-SET-Manifesto-Ing%C3%A8s.pdf>.

²⁴ On 4 May 2022 in Rome at the Sapienza University of Rome at the conference ‘Riabitare il centro’, promoted by ATA, OCIO, the SET network and the PRIN Short Term City 2017, and on 18 March 2023 at the meeting ‘Invertire la rotta’ organised by OCIO and ATA at the Venetian Institute in Venice.

²⁵ The text of the law is available here: <https://altatensioneabitativa.it/>.

low-income population. This possibility is foreseen in a national law draft proposed to the government by the Bianchi-Bandinelli Association in 2018. The law, entitled “Proposed law on the protection of historical centres, cores and building complexes”,²⁶ points to public residential plans for inhabitants in the core of the Italian historic cities as a barrier to their depopulation. These types of measures could be realised, as suggested by the proposal, by using the many buildings owned by public institutions in historic centres and expropriating buildings abandoned by private individuals. Such an intervention would be desirable both to provide a concrete solution to the “Italian paradox” that Gentili and Hoekstra discuss in “Houses without people and people without houses” (2019), and to finally realise the limitation of private property and initiative that hinders access to housing, in accordance with the Italian Constitution (arts. 41 and 42). In order to act in the direction indicated by these proposals, however, a rethinking of the problem of overtourism in terms of land use policy seems imperative: the tourist use of houses, shops, public property, and entire neighbourhoods should be managed by urban planning tools and not left to tourism management.

8. Conclusion

The oldest core of the city of Naples is still densely populated, with very high overcrowding indices in housing. In the neighbourhoods of the old city centre, in a residential heritage in a very poor state of preservation, until the 2000s it was possible to find housing solutions that were more affordable than the average in Italy’s historic city centres, which have instead experienced phases of rediscovery and gentrification since the last decades of the twentieth century. In fact, the heart of the UNESCO area of Naples does not coincide with the so-called ‘areas of prestige’ of the real estate market, but today it absorbs the majority of tourist rentals and experiences a new wave of real estate valorisation. While the wealthier classes remain perched on the hills to the west of the old core, the low-income population living in the latter suffers from the touristification of the residential and commercial stock. The reduction of rents for residents and the rise of evictions are disrupting the social fabric in the neighbourhoods with the highest concentration of Airbnb accommodation. The criterion of ‘authenticity’, used by UNESCO in its dossiers to emphasise that: “The urban layout has a high level of authenticity, and has preserved considerable evidence of the Greco-Roman city and the chessboard layout of the 16th century ‘Spanish quarters’”, is used in marketing campaigns to promote tourist experiences in still-populated neighbourhoods. Both institutional development plans and market players, including corporate hosts, are pushing in this direction. Not having a gentrified historic centre has therefore become a form of branding that distinguishes the city of Naples from other historic cities in Italy, making it a ‘unique place to see’ according to promotional advertisements. This drives the further ‘housing market rentierisation’ and the expulsion of inhabitants from the centre. The worsening of the inequalities, already marked in Neapolitan society, have become even more evident and require urgent public policy intervention. The case of Naples shows that even in the absence of a highly financialised market, and transnational players and policies to attract them (such as the *golden visa*), the uncontrolled growth of the platform mediated short-term rentals can quickly generate a “place-based displacement” that drastically transform the environment (Cocola-Gant, 2023, 3). This is due to the fact that short-term rentals earn more than jobs in Naples and many are investing in the sector. One way out of the progressive touristification of the residential that is expelling inhabitants is the adoption, on a national scale, of two laws that have been put forward by civil society: one to limit short-term rentals in cities with severe housing

²⁶ Proposta di legge in materia di tutela dei centri storici, dei nuclei e dei complessi edilizi storici, the text of the law is available here: <https://bianchibandinelli.it/2018/11/19/proposta-di-legge-in-materia-di-tutela-dei-centri-storici-dei-nuclei-e-dei-complessi-edilizi-storici/>

problems (see the draft of the ATA campaign) and the other to realise public housing in historic city centres (see Bianchi-Bandinelli association’s law). However, in order to act in this direction, a reframing of the problem in terms of land use policy and land management, outside the logic of tourism promotion and land marketing, is necessary. Preventing the change of use from residential to tourist, from neighbourhood shops to street food and tourist catering, to avoid the concentration of these activities in neighbourhoods that thus become monofunctional, can be done through urban policies. The latter are particularly urgent in response to the increase in evictions and could effectively curb the ‘touristification of the residential’.

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.

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