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**A RESISTANT COMMUNITY,
HIS LAKE AND HIS FACTORY
ROME, THE NEIGHBORHOOD OF PIGNETO-
PRENESTINO AND THE RIGHT TO THE CITY**

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Rome, the neighbourhood of Pigneto-Prenestino and the right to the city

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we tried to talk about the city we live in, Rome, analysing a case study: the struggles of the resistant community of Pigneto-Prenestino, a 20th century neighbourhood characterized by an uninterrupted history of urban conflicts, for the re-appropriation of the dismissed area of the factory Snia Viscosa.

We described the involvement of our team in these struggles, trying to summarize a process that has been going on since the Nineties, involving both grass-roots movements and institutions. In particular, in the last three years, we participated to (and studied) these movements.

In the article, we illustrated some characteristics of the process, simply describing and explaining it chronologically and highlighting some aspects.

At last, we tried to find some temporary conclusions (about contested cities, network and horizons, invisible forces), that maybe could be useful to similar experiences.

KEYWORDS: right to the city, no sprawl, environment, participation, Rome

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1. ROME AND ONE OF ITS REBEL NEIGHBORHOODS: PIGNETO- PRENESTINO

Since the beginning of the last century, the city of Rome has hugely increased its dimensions, growing year after year with streets, buildings, pollution (Insolera 2011¹). This trend, which exploded after the II World War and was related to several causes (increase in population due to migrations from other Italian areas, low housing standards, economic growth, etc.), characterized also the last two decades, although resident population has remained almost the same since the early Eighties (Berdini 2008²).

The present dynamics of growth of the urbanized area should be related to the increasing importance of the construction sector in the economic system of the city and, in conclusion, to a neoliberal model of urban development. Yet a lot of recent local struggles have insisted on the “right to the city”, especially regarding the preservation of green areas and the activation of public services, related to the life quality of the inhabitants.

In this context, we found an interesting case study: the area of Pigneto-Preneestino, a 20th century neighbourhood characterized by a continuous substitution of population³, due to different phenomena (migrations of poor people and recent trends of gentrification), and by an uninterrupted history of urban conflicts.

The neighborhood of Pigneto-Preneestino is located in the east side of Rome, immediately outside the walls that for centuries have delimited the city, in an area that in the last century hosted important factories such as Cisa Viscosa⁴. Its urban structure is not so clear: it's very hard to detect it, mainly because it has grown in different phases as a consequence of a spread-out fragmented, stratified and often spontaneous development. Its population, characterized by a combination of working class and middle class, has always been fighting to obtain better living conditions. Since the first decades of the 20th century, both in ordinary life and during extraordinary episodes (i.e. the seasons of big strikes and the rise of social movements)⁵, the issues related to the “right to the city” have often met the demands of the

¹ In this essay, published in its first version in 1962 and recently revised and enlarged with the collaboration of Paolo Berdini, Italo Insolera summarised the history of Rome in the last two centuries, connecting its urbanistic, social, politic and cultural aspects.

² In this essay, Paolo Berdini analyzed the neoliberal turn and its effects on the city of Rome in the 1990s and 2000s, the period of *incubation* of the new plan for the city, adopted in 2003 and definitely approved in 2008.

³ About this issue, see also Priori (2014), about the migratory genius loci of Torpignattara, a neighborhood next to Pigneto-Preneestino.

⁴ In this text it will be called SNIA Viscosa, the name used by the inhabitants .

⁵ For further details, an in-depth analysis of the history of this area was written by Severino (2005).

workers' struggles. This is why, according to some recent literature, emphasizing the political value of such kind of connections (Harvey 2012), we have defined this area as “one of the Roman rebel neighborhoods”.

2. THE GRASS-ROOTS PROCESS AND OUR TEAM

In this context, grass-roots processes have been very important in so many ways: struggling against speculative processes, discussing the different visions of the territory, explaining the needs of its inhabitants, creating the occasions for public participation, and so on. Today, it is the same: these activities play a part in building the future of the area, both following autonomous paths and pushing institutions to do “the right thing”.

The four authors of this paper are members of Dauhaus, a team of young engineers and designers founded after the big social movement called Onda⁶, which spread in Italy in the years 2008-2010. Five years later, with a larger experience and after a lot of individual and collective changes, this team continues to be interested in the existing city and its environmental issues and social dynamics, and has mainly pursued one of its original aims: to develop and apply techniques of regeneration and reuse based on the participation of the inhabitants and the activation of DIY processes.

Our⁷ relationship with the resistant community of Pigneto-Preneestino has started at the end of 2013, when we joined the struggle for the re-appropriation for public use of the big area of Snia Viscosa⁸, with its green area and its lake, against a huge speculative project.

The occasion to pursue our aims, and to “learn from the streets”, arose during the autumn of 2013, when the team was involved in the organization of Logos festival⁹. In this occasion, our contribution regarded the organization of the “participatory ~~design~~ imagination laboratory”, a design process organised with the children of the neighbourhood. On the same occasion, we participated in the first public entering into the area, which took place on the 12th of October.

Through the participation in the everyday political activity of this area during the last three years, we have had the possibility to contribute to (and at the same time, to study) some processes of resistance against the logic of urban development based on maximizing profits from land property.

⁶ Literally, the *wave*. This social movement, present in many Italian universities, challenged the acts produced by Silvio Berlusconi's government, which applied neoliberal recipes to public universities, with a linear reduction of budgets (2008) and a comprehensive reform of the system (2010).

⁷ In this paragraph, the meaning of the words “our” and “we” is larger than what it seems (the four people signing this paper), obviously involving at least all the people belonging to the Dauhaus team.

⁸ See footnote 4.

⁹ Logos – Festa della Parola (literally, The festival of the word) is an international festival organized by CSOA Ex SNIA, every year around a different word or topic. The 2013 word / topic was “city”.

In this context, we participated to gatherings, demonstrations, study groups and a lot of other activities, with our time and competences, doing the best we could. We also actively promoted, in co-operation with others, some of this activities, and in particular: workshops with the schools of the area (2013, 2014, 2015); an international open call for the design of the park furniture¹⁰ (2014); a workshop of self-construction of some park furniture (2014). In general meetings, in specific study-groups and in two meetings in the Spring of 2015, we contributed to the “collective writing” of the guide-lines for the park, finalized to preserve all the values that have emerged studying the area from different disciplinary perspectives (urbanistic, naturalistic, geological, hydrologic, architectonic and so on)¹¹.

Today, since the park was autonomously opened in April 2016, we have been helping to draw an open project for the area, including both the previous guide-lines and the new actions and ideas, expressed in the meanwhile.

To describe such activities, we could use the expression “advocative planning” or evoke other techniques of engagement by the so-called experts, technicians or similar expressions. Actually, during these years, we didn’t feel the necessity to define exactly the typology of our engagement. As we have just showed, this engagement was not only about our professional knowledge and skills (planning, design, etc.), but also in other ways related to our passions and possibilities. Above all, we have decided with the other people involved, what could be useful to do, and then we did it. If someone is really interested in defining what we have done in these three years, we can answer in this way: merely, we have participated.

In this period, we have been a part of a resistant community. A community that day after day expresses its opinions and directly acts in the territory, carrying on processes that sometimes catch the attention of the government, of local administrations and of mass media, but more often proceed autonomously on their way. So many people, everyone with his/her own knowledge, have acted practically, or studied every aspect of the issues, contributing to realize a part of an alternative development, or to create a collective image of it.

3. METER BY METER: HISTORY OF A STRUGGLE FOR THE “RIGHT TO THE CITY” (1992-2014)

In the last 25 years, the area of the Snia Viscosa factory, abandoned in 1955, was the focus of a struggle between the speculative designs of the owner, a big construction enterprise which acquired it in the 1990s, and the wishes of the population who wanted to preserve it. The development purposes of the property were various, focused on different uses (from a

¹⁰ This call had the aim to involve new “design-experts” into the process. Not so many of the studios and single professionals which answered the call were involved in the following process. Anyway, the call partly contributed to subsequent actions and it was useful in a communicative way, showing how to self-construct the furniture, and make the park more comfortable.

¹¹ These guide-lines, which were asked by the city administration, were useful to fix some aspects emerged during the previous years. They are also part of the documentation given to the regional government, with the request to declare all the factory area “Monumento Naturale” (literally, Natural Monument). We think that this “institutional” process of writing will have its natural conclusion with the formalization of the public and participated management of the area.

shopping centre in the early 1990s to four residential towers in 2013). The aims of the population, clearly expressed by its various committees, have always been the same: the preservation of the former factory for its historical value for the neighbourhood, the activation of public services, the preservation of green areas and their opening as a public park, in an area characterized by a high density urbanization¹².

In this period, each time a new profit-oriented (speculative) project was presented by the property, local associations and individuals managed to stop it, obtaining green areas or buildings for public use. In this context, historical and environmental studies have had a big role, supporting the aims of the population. The history of this struggle is documented in the pages of websites¹³ that have been directly created during the years by the activists, in some texts and academic papers (i.e. Forum Territoriale Permanente 2013; Rossini 2014; Maggioli&Tabusi 2014), in the lyrics of the songs that accompanied the recent struggle for the lake¹⁴, in newspapers articles and other sources. Here we will only try to give a brief resume of such a rich history.

In 1992, a natural lake emerged in the area, due to the attempt of the property to create a big shopping centre. During the work, they excavated more than 10 metres deep, intercepting the aquifer. This event generated the lake in the big groundwork that should have been the parking area of the mall.

In 1995, the occupation of an abandoned building next to the Snia Viscosa factory was the beginning of the development of a social centre, CSOA¹⁵ Ex Snia, which started to reclaim the opening to the public of the nearby green areas and of the lake. Thanks to a great social struggle, they achieved this goal for a part of the area, which is now is the largest green public space of the neighbourhood.

In 1997, in fact, the municipality opened the green area of “Parco delle Energie”, expropriated for public use. In 2003 the project for the renovation and reuse of the factory kindergarten was approved. The work started in 2005 and was completed in 2009. The building, now called Casa del Parco, was restored in order to use it for public services, managed by the local government. Because of the local administration’s lack of interest, in 2011 people started to use the Casa del Parco unofficially and today it hosts various self-managed activities, in addition to the cultural and sport activities developed by the Social center. During the years, Ludofficina Mompracem (which organises kindergarten activities) and the Centro di Documentazione Territoriale Maria Baccante (with the historical factory archive) have consolidated their activities, and a lot of interesting events were hosted in the building.

¹² The data of city registry, at the end of the year 2014, indicate a population density of more than 20.000 inhabitants per square kilometer in Torpignattara (*zona urbanistica 06a*), an area encompassing Pigneto-Prenestino (Roma Capitale 2016).

¹³ In particular, see: <http://lagoexsnia.wordpress.org>

¹⁴ Assalti Frontali & Muro del Canto, *Il lago che combatte*, 2014 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dcb_Thrq2P8). Assalti Frontali feat. Sista Awa, *In fondo al lago (il lago che combatte pt.2)*, 2015 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FnTuDTM6lY>)

¹⁵ Centro Sociale Occupato ed Autogestito, literally: Occupied (squatted) and Selfmanaged Social Center.

In 2004, the municipality decided the expropriation of the area around the lake. This act had at first no real consequences. The area was included in a project to build a swimming centre for the 2009 World Swimming Championships in Rome¹⁶. When this attempt failed, once more because of the protests of the inhabitants, another project was presented in 2012, this too without success: the building of a student residence for the Sapienza University.

Meanwhile, between the years 2005 and 2011, the Quadrato¹⁷, an open multipurpose theatrical space, was built in the Parco delle Energie. This space today hosts cultural and sports events and festivals. In order to coordinate the activities taking place in the Quadrato and in the Casa de Parco, in 2008 the Forum Territoriale Permanente del Parco delle Energie was established. Today the members of the Forum are the many different people participating in the management of the park and taking care of its different areas. They meet once a month to discuss the various activities and make collective decisions.

A lot of other information should be added to this short summary. Rather than explaining the evidence of how this process is related to the “right to the city” (Lefebvre 1968), we want to highlight once more the same point: the importance of grass-roots processes and their everchanging and adaptable organization. Moreover, we want to clarify why the history of this struggle shows a simple lesson, often forgotten in theoretical discussions, and which has been validated in recent years: the action of local government, on some occasions¹⁸, has been helped by the strengthening of social struggle and the obviously decisive boost by grass-roots movements. In a sentence: real processes are often more complex than theories.

4. THE “FIGHTING LAKE” AGAINST THE BIG SPECULATOR (2013-2016)

In 2013, a new speculative project was launched in the area: the construction of four 30-story skyscrapers (more or less, three times the height of the tallest building in the neighbourhood), near the historical centre of Rome, just in the space occupied by the Snia Viscosa factory and the lake. This offensive attempt, consequent to an announcement¹⁹ released by the right-wing city administration provoked once more the reaction of the inhabitants, leading to massive demonstrations, academic conferences, different meetings, participatory planning activities, self-construction workshops and other events. As for the previous period, we will try to summarize the events, without claiming to exhaustiveness.

¹⁶ The construction of swimming centers for this event was a great scandal for the local and national politics, because of the transfer of a lot of public funds to private sector. In addition, many of this centers were uncompleted at the beginning of the world championship and some of that are still unfinished (the Città dello Sport, designed by Santiago Calatrava, is the most famous one).

¹⁷ Literally, the Square.

¹⁸ I.e. the expropriation procedures for public use, the decision to reuse the buildings of the Casa del Parco, the construction of the Quadrato, the official institution of the Forum Territoriale Permanente Parco delle Energie, involved insitutional offices, people, funds and tools from the local to the European level.

¹⁹ “Bando relitti urbani” (2013), which allowed to build in abandoned areas irrespective of the rules determined by the new strategic plan of the city (2008).

In October 2013 the activities started with a primary school and the participatory design process, followed by a demonstrative access to the lake area by a group of people. At the beginning of December 2013, a conference with academics for the safeguard of the area took place, fixing some fundamental argumentations for the preservation of the lake ecosystem. In the same month, the new city administration²⁰ cancelled the announcement of the previous one and, consequently, the project of the four skyscrapers was officially stopped.

During the first months of 2015, the battle for the opening of the lake area was ever present in the everyday activities of the territory. The periodic demonstration entering into the area were fundamental, since they gave the people the chance to see the place with their eyes and explore its potentiality. In the spring, there were other activities with the children of the local schools. On the 25th of April, during the traditional demonstration for the 68th anniversary of the liberation of Italy, about five thousand people forced the gates and entered the area of the factory.

With other demonstrations, the viral diffusion of the song and the videoclip of “Il lago che combatte” (literally, “The fighting lake”), and the declared aim of the people to take the destiny of the park into their hands (in July, the slogan “Let’s make the park furniture” launched an international design contest), the inhabitants obtained their goal. The 6th of August, 2014, will be remembered as the day of the “Breccia di Portonaccio”²¹: in the presence of the deputy mayor, an entrance to the park was created breaking a part of the wall surrounding the factory area. With this act, just a few days before the expiring of the maximum legal terms for the validity of the expropriation (ten years since its declaration in 2004), the administration finally formalized the expropriation of the area around the lake.

At the same time, the administration financed the first works to open the park to the people, and agreed to a participatory process to define the guide-lines for the design of the area²². At that time, the grass-roots process became more and more conscious, with experts (or simply lovers) of different topics who studied every aspect of their own field of interest, connecting with the others to create a big comprehensive picture. The quality of the water of the lake was analysed, and an accurate study was made of the flora and fauna²³. Following the results of the design contest, a first project for the furniture of the park was produced and some pieces were made in a two-day workshop. The monthly openings of the park, with some extraordinary events (i.e. the by now traditional workshops with the neighbourhood schools; the guided tour of the lake and the factory), were useful to increase the number of people who know and love the place.

²⁰ The inhabitants were able to establish a dialogue with the city administration, while they met with the opposition of the local one.

²¹ The “Breach of Portonaccio” (via di Portonaccio is the road that runs along the area on the east side), an evocative expression remembering the entrance of the Italian army in Rome with the Breccia di Porta Pia (20th September 1870).

²² This process was realized between the end of 2014 and the summer of 2015, with some formal meetings and two all-day long assemblies, using new ideas together with the ones that had developed during the struggle. See also paragraph 2.

²³ A great contribution in this phase was given by the local section of World Wildlife Fund (WWF Pigneto-Preneestino, founded in 2011), which released a booklet with the results of its monitoring activity of the fauna of the area.

Recently, after waiting for almost two years for the beginning of the work²⁴ (and twelve years after the expropriation for public use), in the April 2016 monthly meeting the Forum decided to take autonomously the responsibility to open and equip the park. In these two months, some furniture (i.e. tables and benches) two open cabins, information plaques) were produced day by day, to make the park more comfortable, a new system was organized by some teacher to manage workshops with the schools and, above all, the area was opened and enjoyed by the people.

5. (TEMPORARY) CONCLUSIONS

The process that we illustrated is not finished: all the factory area is still private property. In 2015 the Monumento Naturale (“Natural Monument”) campaign was launched, with the aim to create a unique historical and naturalistic park near the center of Rome, consisting of the Parco delle Energie, the now opened park around the lake and the factory area. What conclusions can we reach? In this paragraph, we will try to focus on some themes, searching for something useful for other similar processes.

5.1 Contested Pigneto-Pretestino, a little part of contested Rome.

The current austerity policies are only the latest episode of a long-term process, directly related to the neoliberal dogma and accelerated after the beginning of the global economic and financial crisis. This social and economic process, supported rather than contrasted by public policies, has produced huge urban injustices (Berdini 2015). In Rome, during the years, it has led to: the alienation of important public properties (buildings and areas); a progressive destruction of the existing urban welfare facilities, with a huge reduction in quality and quantity of public services; the transformation of historic centers in places for tourists only and the gentrification of previous working class neighbourhood; the transformation of public spaces, now mainly oriented towards shopping and consumerism. Most of these changes have clearly appeared during the last years in Pigneto-Pretestino.

In the neighbourhood that we analysed, a strong popular resistance grew up in opposition to these processes: a grass-roots movement based on the defence of public needs and on the opposition to profit-oriented urban transformations. This phenomenon is taking place in a neighbourhood characterized by a melting-pot of nationalities, cultures, languages and religions. A place like this could be the kind of place where nationalistic and racist parties and organizations would like to make their propaganda, attributing the responsibility of the economic collapse to migrant people, probably some of the most damaged by the system we live in, and not only by its collapse. In the case we examined, the grass-roots processes going on constitute a dam for such attempts.

Pigneto-Pretestino nowadays can be considered as a real contested space between capitalism and the “right to the city”, where economic interests are contrasted by people reclaiming their role and their rights as residents inhabiting the places, directly transforming them and designing their future, according to their basic needs and desires.

5.2 Networks and horizons. New urban alternatives?

²⁴ In this time, the only work that was realized by the administration was the delimitation of public area.

While inhabitants were fighting to obtain their results, many times they tried to expand this process and connect it with other struggles in their district and around the city. For example in 2015, during the definition of the guide-lines for the park, there was a round table with people self-managing other green areas, with the aim to create an “ecological network” starting from the basis, the people who are interested and involved in its single nodes. Moreover, since 2015, the struggle against the construction of a new supermarket of a multinational enterprise, not far from the lake, was the occasion to connect other energies present in the neighbourhood and to start spreading the idea of an archeological and naturalistic area (Parco Ad Dues Lauros) connecting more neighborhoods and comprising the Monumento Naturale Ex-Snia.

The attempts to connect struggles, starting from resistance, recognizing affinities and trying to imagine a better future, is probably a good idea. As the paper showed, it is not so easy to obtain correct relationships between social movements and local governments. This is a part of a history of a grass-roots resistant community, which in the course of the years has had to fight against government and administrations, but also to co-operate with them to obtain results. Simply, the world is not only black and white. For the emerging new urban policies it is the same: for example, policies that encourage public-private partnerships could be viewed as something useful to expand the role of local communities, but a lot of time they reveal themselves as being only a tool in the hands of great economic powers.

5.3 The invisible forces are as important as the visible ones.

Relationships are a fundamental invisible force acting in this process, which during the years has involved a lot of people. Some of them participated regularly, other ones only sometimes, others only once. The active participation of the inhabitants has many implications, improving the people's daily life and creating a sense of relationship among people and between them and the places where they live. This has also effects on the uses of the public spaces, and on the sense of responsibility. The existence of a space of discussion like the Forum Territoriale Permanente del Parco delle Energie, and the fact that this group of people guarantees the self-management of the park and its facilities, is something fundamental in the creation of a common sense; the same is true for every single self-organized activity. The main characteristic of these spaces, is the variety of its members: such different people and their related histories, which day by day have created (and continue to create) a “different way of acting”. The only rules that they have decided to write down are very simple, like the one saying that it is not allowed to have economic profit from the activities that take place in the park.

Other invisible forces are the ones of imagination and creativity: above all, we think about the fundamental involvement of the children in the participatory design process at the end of 2013. Furthermore, another important support to the struggle, was the contribution of artists. The most famous ones, like the cartoonist Zerocalcare who produced some posters or Assalti Frontali who composed their song about the “fighting lake” in a decisive moment of the struggle²⁵, and the mass of photographers, painters, musicians and other artists contributing to the diffusion of the struggle, both in the real streets and in the virtual places. These forces and their means were crucial in the communication of every single step of the process, underscored by significant communicative action.

²⁵ See also footnote 14.

Last but not least, the role of the nature and of its development was incredible. The emergence of the lake and all the consequences that the availability of so much water has on the diffusion and diversification of the flora and fauna in the area, make this place an extraordinary refuge for biodiversity. The aim to maintain such an important ecosystem, which is now a stage on the routes of migratory birds and a place of reproduction of many species, has been very important in the discussion for the future uses of the park. The force and the beauty of nature, and especially of nature growing in spaces not controlled and organized by humans (Clement 2005), could that be another lesson for us?

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