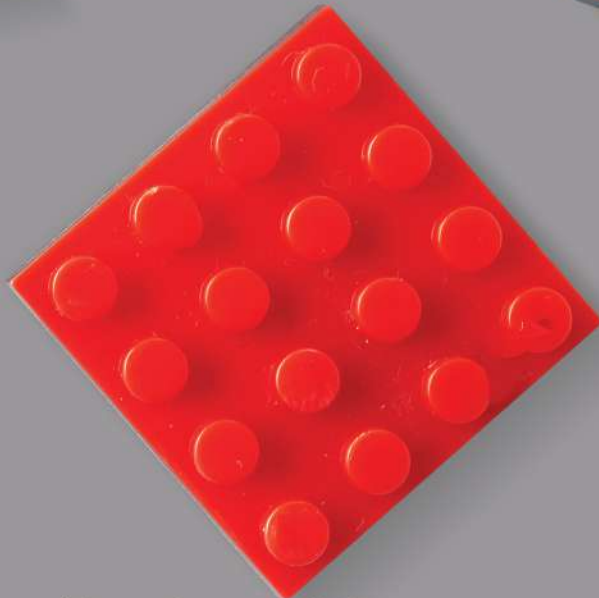


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spatial justice and housing activism

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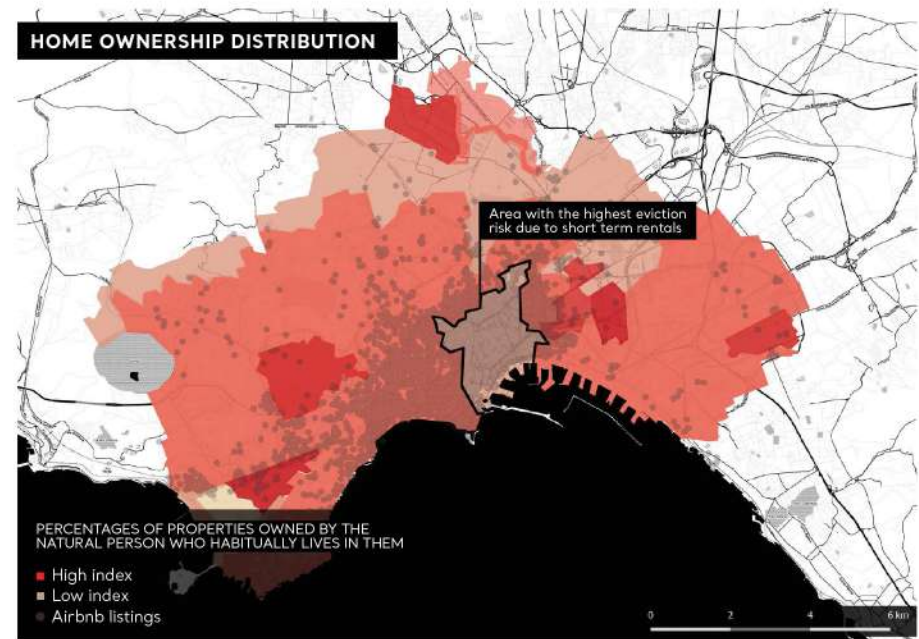
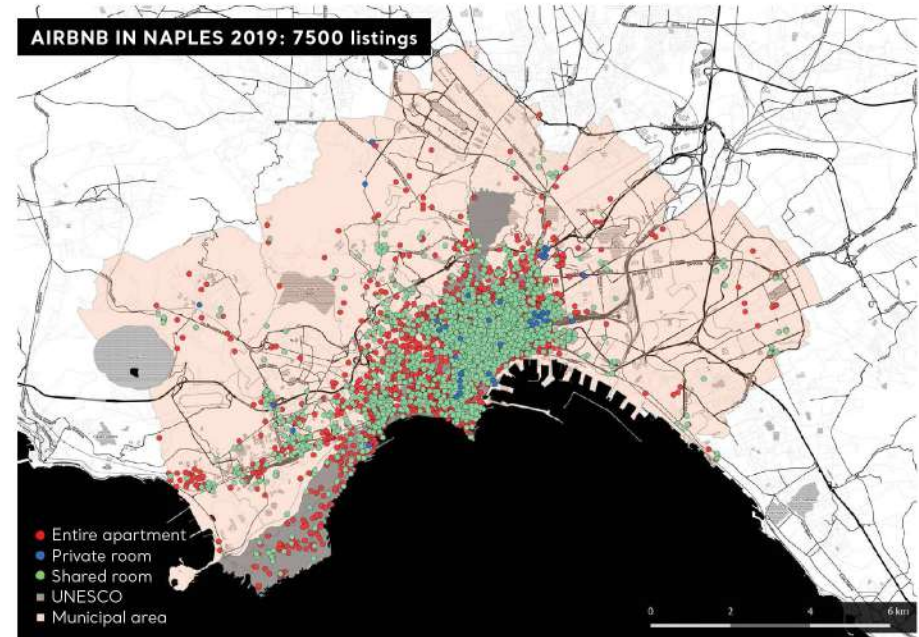
# Mapping Airbnb and the Rent Extraction in Naples, Italy: An Ongoing Fight for Affordable Houses

Alessandra Esposito

Naples is the third largest city in Italy by size and population, the main one in the south. Among the other historical Italian cities such as Venice and Florence, Naples is the city that has experienced the touristification process more lately. Until the first decade of the 2000s, Naples played its role within tourist geographies mainly as bridge-city to the nearby islands. It was nothing similar to an international destination but from 2010 to 2020, after the privatization and financialization of the city airport's management, the tourist arrivals increased by 107% together with the average overnight stays in the centre. The very tipping point was registered in 2018 when the Airbnb listing exceeded the average of 7500. The number of accommodations in itself could seem not alarming when compared to other European cities, but we must point out some peculiar characteristics related to the

context in order to describe the ongoing process of touristification.

All the short-term rentals offered through the platform are concentrated in the historical city, within the UNESCO perimeter defined in 1995 (the top right map). The involved neighbourhoods have a high social *mixité*. In particular, the very heart of this area—the ancient Greco-Roman city—still accommodates a majority of low-income inhabitants. Since several years, the heritage is in conditions of semi-abandonment in spite of being of great architectural and historical value. Despite the cultural and symbolic reasons that make this part of the city the most significant for contemporary tourism, this area has also a strategic location between the airport, the central station and the port. Unlike the centre, the upper-class neighbourhoods are mostly located on the



Maps: Alessandra Esposito

hills, in residential areas with a privileged view of the gulf. This social geography also corresponds to a clear diversification of the practices in the space, as well as in real estate values for houses. The city on the hills appears as an almost exclusively residential and car dependent area, with a preference for the private dimension and an average value per square meter higher than the rest of the city. Contrarily, the historical centre used to offer affordable rentals and to swarm with old crafts, small shopkeepers, long-time inhabitants, different migrant communities, universities, students and meeting spaces. The relationship between the inhabitants and the public space shapes the daily urban life strongly in the centre, underlying the use value of the surrounding heritage more than its monumentality. In these places, it is not exclusively the market to mediate the relational and social dimension of the space, as it happens elsewhere in other neighbourhoods (with bars, clubs, etc.). Many of the meeting places in the ancient centre are streets, squares, social and cultural centers, which are more or less informal. Until now, the long-time

inhabitants together with students from the rest of the region and from the south of Italy have resided here as tenants: a social fabric only economically fragile, but very strong from the point of view of social cohesion and place attachment. Until now, these inhabitants have faced precarious living conditions in crumbling houses but paying affordable rents (the majority unofficially outside the tax system) that allowed them to live in the heart of the city.

### Tourism and the city

With the tourist boom of the last few years, many property owners and entrepreneurs start to consider the permanence of an almost poor population in the centre one of the obstacles to the very "regeneration" of Naples. At the same time, the pressure of the racketeering on commercial activities (bars, pizzerias, etc.) increased with the rise in profits accumulated by dealers thanks to the tourist flow. This flow actually generates a considerable load both for public transport and waste-disposal system (already

insufficient for the resident population), as well as a general tendency to a tourist monoculture along the main streets with a consequent trivialization and commodification of the urban scene. Leaving aside the growing privatization of the public space (due to *dehors*), the militarization of the main squares (for "public order" reasons) and the high density of tourist flow in a very restricted and densely populated area, the greatest tension between daily life and tourist use seems to be growing on housing. In fact, with the entry of Airbnb into the local housing market, the short-term rental turns out to be the most profitable one for property owners: It allows them to exponentially increase the rent and still keep it out of the taxation regime. This has generated a significant alteration in the local real estate market, which became suddenly less stagnant, highly flexible and strongly competitive. Nevertheless, within the contemporary tourist paradigm and its preminent attention for "the authentic experience" (which is always platform-mediated), what permits the actual rent-gap is the high use value of these places fuelled up by citizenry. As David Harvey explains in the fourth chapter of *Rebel Cities*<sup>1</sup>, the collective symbolic capital attached to places is the very precondition for rent-extraction in urban context. In Naples as elsewhere, the ferment of social practices and the collective recognition of the centre as a common multicultural place created the perfect environment for the tourist conversion of the housing stock. Airbnb's motto "Live like a local" means actually to live in the "poor and authentic historical centre." As in many other cities, such as Athens and Lisbon, this has generated a growing interest in the residential stock and a strong pressure on tenants.

### A Southern Mediterranean city facing tourism

As mentioned before, the process of touristification in Naples is similar to the one



ongoing elsewhere: The tourists' spending capacity is influencing the cost of living, both for products and for houses. This has of course an impact on local life proportionally to the economic gap between the local context and the tourists' country of origin. Nevertheless, what is peculiar in the case of Naples is the preexisting high concentration of property in the centre and the high percentage of tenants living there with a free-market rental contract (which is the most used type of housing contract in the city, around 71%). In the last four years the short-term rentals mediated by Airbnb has exposed these tenants to a rapid reorganization of the local real estate market. The platform amplified the possibilities for rent-extraction and created a regime of strong competition through the opening of the local residential market to the international scale. Given the high concentration of property, this has reinforced the local class-monopoly rent producing wealth for few and social costs for many. In other words, the Airbnb spread (and rhetoric) bases itself on the local house's symbolic value, but the platform itself and few property

**Many property owners and entrepreneurs start to consider the permanence of an almost poor population in the center one of the obstacles to the very "regeneration" of Naples.**

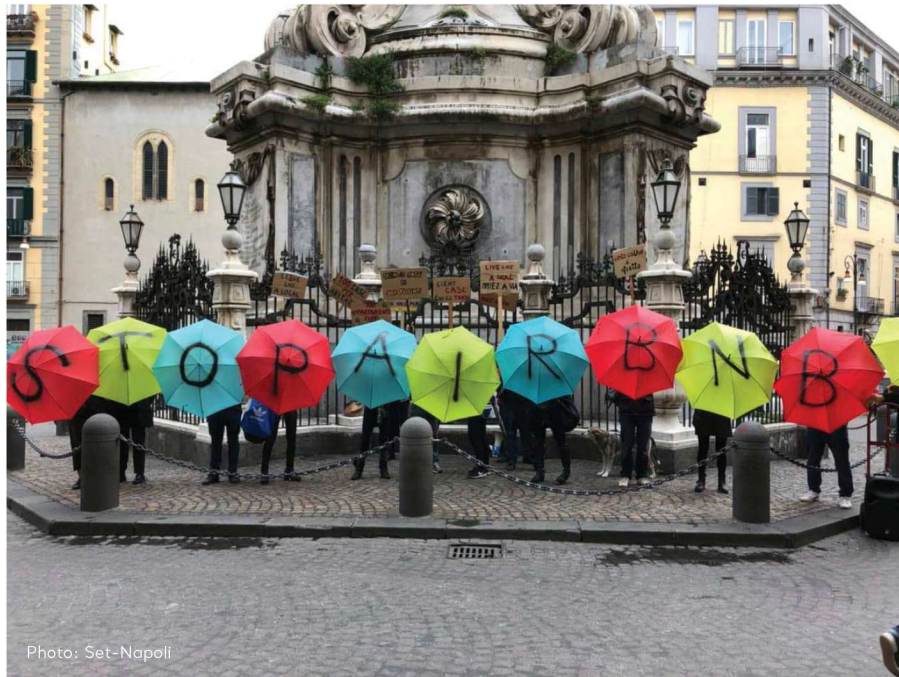


Photo: Set-Napoli

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owners systematically extract this value (collectively generated) in the form of increased rent. Some scholars refer to it as "value grabbing."<sup>2</sup> Some others claim for a new general theory of rent in order to clarify in a rigorous way (but accessible to all) the predominant and coordinating role played by the rent and by the real estate market in contemporary capitalism (see the work of Anne Haila). Meanwhile, it is difficult to raise awareness about this process, or at least in time to avoid the spreading of its negative consequences. In Southern Mediterranean cities, the tourism's arrival generates consensus and this is mainly due to the lack of job opportunities and the stagnant local economies. But the semi-monopolistic rent extraction driven by platforms has very little to do with the arrival of new job opportunities. Airbnb's sharing rhetoric has persuaded many of the redistributive nature of the short-term tourist rental. As the local node of the SET network (Southern European Cities Facing Touristification<sup>3</sup>) we

decide then to use maps as support to our explanations, both in public assemblies and during interviews with journalists. Our aim is to make clear in what kind of neighbourhoods the touristification driven by Airbnb is spreading and with what kind of risk: evictions in the first place.

## The use of maps to support the protest

Thanks to the work of Tom Slee and Murray Cox, we all are able to obtain data about the Airbnb listings in our cities using a python code. In 2017, we started scraping Airbnb with the spatial reference of Naples neighbourhoods, as Inside Airbnb was doing for several other cities worldwide. Since that moment, we monitor the trend of the short term rentals and their distribution. As mentioned before, the highest concentration keeps being in the heart of the ancient city, so we used maps to combine the Airbnb data with some other index such as the home ownership

and the economic-social disease in the area (Maps 2-3). The intent was to raise the alarm to the municipality and citizens about the risks of expulsion.

As the collective Oranotango remembered us with the amazing *This is Not an Atlas*<sup>4</sup>, maps can also be a counter-hegemonic instrument. But there must be no shadows in the building up of the map. After the first scraping of Airbnb I did in 2016, I discovered that several researchers were buying data from private commercial platforms. The Airbnb database is usually bought by Airdna with money coming from university research funds. This aspect is highly concerning since the selling of data set by private platforms should not be financed with public money (which could for example be used to build an independent non-commercial database). We cannot ignore the fact that platform capitalism is grounded on the monetization of data. Although other participants in the SET network and I are researchers, we never considered the possibility to finance this kind of digital platform to get information about the risks that the platform's activities entail for Naples. And we will keep avoiding this paradox.

## The protest

In 2017, we started a collective process of delving into the topic of touristification to understand what was happening in the city. In an open meeting organized by the housing movement at the office of the City Council, we showed for the first time the maps concerning the Airbnb listings in Naples and our interpretation of the phenomena. There were several city councillors, activists and inhabitants. Few months later, in Spring 2018, we joined the already mentioned SET, a growing network of European cities facing touristification. On July 12, 2018, we had the first public assembly with a specific focus on touristification and short-term rentals (Photo 1). It took place in one of the main

squares of the historical centre in the core of the area that was suffering the highest pressure. On this occasion we had the chance to share our worry with many inhabitants. From then on there have been many other initiatives, public assemblies, anti-eviction picket lines and demonstrations related to the impact of tourism on housing and living costs. Together with other social movements, we are trying to attract the public's attention on the negative effects of touristification. The focus of the struggle is the right for low-income inhabitants to remain in the city centre. Precisely because of this, on April 6, 2019, we marched along the central streets claiming for the stop of the evictions and the approval of a regulation of the Airbnb business (Photo 2). On November 16, simultaneously with an event organized by Airbnb Italy in different cities, the SET net demonstrated on the streets against the commodification of houses, in Naples as in other cities all around the country (Photo 3). However, so far there has been no significant effort by the institutions to act in favour of residents. The struggle is ongoing...

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