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## OUR LADY OF SQUATTERS: HOUSING AND RELIGION

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### ABSTRACT

This photo essay documents the religious celebration of *Madonna dell'Arco*—one of the many representations of Virgin Mary in south Italy— during the Easter Triduum. Celebrations involve dancing and singing performances that devotees put in place in order to expiate their sins. This project comprises a series of color photographs taken in the De Gasperi neighbourhood, eastern periphery of Naples, aiming to unveil the peculiar meaning that the rituals of *Madonna dell'Arco* assumes in the area. The district is a public housing complex where almost half of inhabitants illegally occupy the house where they live. It is a case of squatting that takes place outside any political framework. In the De Gasperi neighbourhood, *Madonna dell'Arco* has become the most important religious icon for squatters that long for being recognized as the legal recipient of their houses. The project contributes to the international debate on squatting: it highlights the immaterial meaning of squatting through focusing on the religious dimension of squatters' everyday life.

### KEYWORDS

Squatting, rituals, public housing, housing informality, ethnography

### BIO

I am an urban ethnographer and a PhD candidate in Urban Studies at Gran Sasso Science Institute (Italy). My doctoral thesis focuses on urban informality related to individualistic informal strategies to access to housing in Naples (south Italy). The investigation conceptualizes housing informality as a structural element of Mediterranean housing welfare systems among which we can considerate the Italian one.

My work bases on qualitative methods of research among which I use photographic camera. On the one hand, it allows me to create a trust-based relationships with the 'subjects/objects' of my research. On the other hand, photography can highlight the set of feelings and emotions that characterize the everyday experience of individualistic squatting.

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During the Easter Triduum, in Naples (Italy) inhabitants celebrate *Madonna dell'Arco*, one of the many representations that Virgin Mary takes in Italy. Myth describes her as a vindictive Virgin Mary. She punished a blasphemer who had lost a bocce match causing him huge pain. Nowadays celebrations remember the myth: teams of devotees (*fujenti*, literally meaning fleeing men) dance carrying on their shoulders heavy floats upon which Virgin Mary's statue stands. Physical sufferance is the way through which devotees expiate their sins. Every district of Naples has its own team.

In the eastern part of Naples, in De Gasperi' neighborhood this celebration has a peculiar meaning. The district is a public housing complex where almost half of inhabitants illegally occupy the house where they live. 'Individualistic' squatting is a deeply rooted phenomenon in the area and it bases on several mechanism of squatting, such as traditional occupation through breaking the door of empty flats and informal inheritance of public housing units. Illegal occupation in De Gasperi district takes place outside any political or countercultural framework. It does not aim to build an alternative lifestyle or claim political ideals. Rather individualistic squatting can be considered as a 'familistic' way to access to housing within which 'extended families' (made of relatives and friends) provide housing solutions for their members. De Gasperi district's team is mostly made of squatters due to their relevant presence.

Public debate usually focuses on the economic dimension of squatting highlighting its function of tool to access to housing for weaker inhabitants. However, squatting has an immaterial dimension. Affiliation, aggregation, affectivity and sense of belonging contribute to define everyday life of squatters. Religious rituals constitute are important elements in the everyday life of De Gasperi neighborhood's

inhabitants. Especially, ceremony of *Madonna dell'Arco* plays an important role feeding inhabitants' sense of belonging to the district. This work highlights the immaterial meaning of squatting through focusing on the religious dimension of squatters' everyday life.



**FIGURE 1:** The shrine of *Madonna dell'Arco* is a roman Catholic shrine in Sant'Anastasia, a town about ten km from Naples. Thousands of devotees go on pilgrimage to the shrine of *Madonna dell'Arco* to pray Virgin Mary's statue. Some devotees tell that a state of trance comes over their body at entering in the shrine.



**FIGURE 2:** A very common ritual is to wave holy flags representing saints or Virgin Mary. Richer families finance flags that will be used during celebrations in order to guarantee blessing for their members.



**FIGURE 3:** Every team has his own uniform. Red, blue and white are the usual colors of rituals. Uniforms' sale contributes to finance the organization of celebrations.



**FIGURE 4:** Ground floors of district's residential buildings are used as spaces where devotees can rest. Those inhabitants that do not take part to the rituals contribute serving food and drinks for *fujenti*.



**FIGURE 5:** Usually men carry the floats. However, in De Gasperi neighborhood women have a central role. It is up to them to arrange the holy statue of Virgin Mary upon the float.



**FIGURE 6:** A child is praying one of the many Virgin Mary's portraits that decorate the district.



**FIGURE 7:** A devotee smoking a cigarette while the holy float is carrying through the city.



**FIGURE 8:** Sometimes team's women carry the holy float during the road to the shrine.



**FIGURE 9:** Many devotees decide to walk until the shrine. Some of them prefer to go barefoot as symbol of penance.



**FIGURE 10:** A young boy standing with holy flag close to one of the many De Gasperi district's closed public housing units.



**FIGURE 11:** A nun handing a child to the altar within *Madonna dell'Arco's* shrine.