Inhabiting Liminality: The Temporal, Spatial and Experiential Assemblage of Emancipatory Practices in the Lives of Housing Squatters in Rome, Italy

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– INHABITING LIMINALITY: The Temporal, Spatial and Experiential Assemblage of Emancipatory Practices in the Lives of Housing Squatters in Rome, Italy

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Abstract

In this article I question notions of urban liminality by foregrounding the temporal, spatial and experiential dimensions underpinning their formations. I focus on liminal practices of inhabitation in the context of a housing squat in Rome, Italy, by investigating how a permanent housing deprivation condition, once politically organized in a squatted building, can anchor processes of empowerment and political mobilization. To do so, I put forward a rereading of liminality, not necessarily as a temporary state but rather as a more comprehensive spatial–temporal assemblage, by offering a tripartite reading of liminal conditions in their spatial, temporal and experiential dimensions. My goal is to offer an analysis of urban and housing liminality that transcends totalizing narratives of exceptionality, temporariness or straightforward annihilation, advancing instead a more nuanced reading—where liminality can be seen either as a vehicle for social depotentiation or as the grounds for collective forms of emancipatory practices.

Introduction

In a conventional sense, a 'liminal' condition can either be understood as a matter of 'being marginal' with regard to a supposed 'centre', or as 'being in a temporary state'. These are the ways in which notions of liminality have often been mobilized in the fields of urban geography and anthropology. What these views (which I will discuss later in the article) have in common, is the tendency to essentialize liminality either as a spatial or a temporal state and then to use the term as a mere descriptor of experiences unfolding in either of these—predefined—states. Moreover, even when these debates intersect with housing studies and inhabitation practices and experiences, it is still rare to find empirical groundings and mobilizations of the liminality concept related to informal and politically organized squats, which still tend to be described as 'marginal' sites.

Although squatting can indeed be defined as the outcome of a condition of material deprivation and dispossession, in this article I aim to transcend and go beyond these readings by contributing to a refined understanding of the term 'liminal' in relation to politically organized experiences of inhabitation. I suggest reading these experiences as a tripartite assemblage of spatial, temporal and experiential dimensions, constituting forms of in-betweenness charged with political significance. While I aim to offer a conceptual contribution to the understanding of the 'housing liminal', my reading emerges from situated, empirical grounds at the nexus of urban and housing issues. More specifically, my thinking is inspired by a long-term ethnographic project I have undertaken in a housing squat (Santa Croce/Spin Time) located in Rome, Italy. I encountered a complex political situation that emerged within conditions of living that were considered both 'marginal' and 'temporary'. These living situations are mostly

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viewed by authorities as precarious dwellings with inhabitants waiting to be displaced. In this context, I am interested in exploring what arises when these elements intersect, by examining their transformation within the realm of presumed spatial marginalization, temporary transience and experiential deprivation.

Through this article I therefore aim to add to an understanding of the processes that shape precarious living situations by examining how they come into existence. I highlight that these processes are not only informative of situated practices within a given context but also indicative of a politics of inhabitation in-the-making. As Lancione and Simone state, such a view is interested in 'how things are reworked and adjusted rather than solved' (Lancione and Simone, 2021: 970) because attention to the processual makeshift nature of dwelling (see Vasudevan, 2015) can tell us a lot about its political significance for the city and its housing future. The article is inspired by studies that illustrate how liminality exists in a variety of potentially revolutionary conditions (Thomassen, 2014; Horvath *et al*., 2015; Clough Marinaro, 2022) and by research that investigates conditions of housing precarity in a procedural and situated way (Baxter and Brickell, 2014; Vasudevan, 2015). What these two bodies of literature have in common is their exploration of the concepts of the 'liminal' and the 'marginal'. However, it is important to note that they do not solely view these concepts as processes of transition or social exclusion, although this perspective may be implicit at times (Thomassen, 2014). Furthermore, as this literature suggests, it is not enough to merely consider the element of time when examining the emerging importance of precarious housing conditions within spatial analysis. Instead, it is necessary to return to a comprehensive understanding of space that emphasizes the intricate relationships between various elements. As Doreen Massey's work shows, this approach focuses on how power dynamics shape these relationships, influencing not only the structure of experiences but also the underlying political implications that arise from them (Massey, 2005). In this article I suggest bringing the concept of liminality to the forefront of literature that explores housing politics within the context of grassroots urban action. Specifically, I focus on examining the in-between forms of inhabitation found in an organized squat in the city of Rome, Italy. In doing so, I aim to move beyond interpretations of liminality that often diminish its significance as a means of disempowerment (see discussion by Wilhelm-Solomon, 2021). Instead, I seek to emphasize that a more nuanced approach to the study of liminality reveals how liminality can also undergo transformation into a collective form of emancipatory praxis to present its own politics of inhabitation.

In the section that follows, I present spatial, temporal and experiential re-readings of housing precarity and liminality by analysing anthropological and geographical studies that have dealt with them. In the two subsequent sections, I briefly introduce the housing scenarios of Italy and Rome, before moving on to describe my fieldwork and a specific episode from 2019, when the power supply to the squat was cut off and the Pope's almsgiver decided to restore it himself, which led to extensive international media coverage. This event unfolded in a manner that was far from accidental, representing the culmination of prolonged politics of inhabitation that had been evolving over time and of a range of squatter experiences, which I will examine in relation to their connection with the Catholic Church. In the two closing sections, I delve further into and broaden my analysis by presenting a threefold interpretation of the liminal conditions squatters experience in terms of spatial, temporal and experiential dimensions.

Urban geographies of liminality

My aim with this article is to contribute to the two sets of literature mentioned earlier. The first set deals with anthropological and geographical conceptualizations of the 'liminal' and explores how liminal conditions can be revolutionary. The second

set focuses on housing precarity and its political dimension. I connect these two sets to make an incremental contribution to this literature by examining the specific condition of being a squatter in Rome and by emphasizing the relationship between liminality and inhabitation practices, as well as the political empowerment and mobilization that can emerge from them.

To achieve this, it is relevant to mention bell hooks's notion of 'margins' as a potential space of both radical openness and deprivation (hooks, 1989)—a conceptualization that resonates far more with the reading of liminality presented here than with more conventional definitions of margins and marginality, usually related to extreme conditions of social exclusion or dispossession. Through the use of the concept of margins, hooks aimed to avoid romanticizing such conditions, instead acknowledging that they are 'both sites of oppression and sites of resistance' (*ibid*.: 21). To be in the margin means to be part of the whole and at the same time outside the main body. It represents a condition and a place that is inherently unsafe and can only be addressed through a collective community of resistance (*ibid*.: 19). Along this epistemological line, many scholars have explored liminality as a distinct concept separate from marginality and exclusion. Horvath *et al*. (2015) view liminality as an analytical concept with transformative potential for understanding contemporary social and political contexts. The Routledge Contemporary Liminality series and works by Hoppen (2021) and o'Connor (2018) delve into the versatility of liminality, often in conjunction with mainstream notions such as 'system', 'structure' and 'institution'. Hoppen (2021) advocates for a 'philosophy of presence' to explore in-betweenness and to question the limits of the political order and theory, while o'Connor (2018) examines the contradictions of modernity, which entail both spiralling liminality and a search for belonging to challenge the notion of home as a stable centre.

Clough Marinaro (2022) specifically addresses the inhabiting practices in liminal spaces in Rome. Through four local case studies—including public housing, street trade, credit relations and waste management—the author highlights the connections between space, temporality, experience and the agency individuals express in situations of prolonged liminality. In terms of inhabitation, the author focuses on the case of Corviale (*ibid*.: 60), a public housing building in Rome in which officially assigned council flats and illegally occupied spaces coexist, including some shops and the association headquarters on the ground floor. While Clough Marinaro also mentions organized squatting of abandoned buildings, the empirical emphasis lies on Corviale and the significant presence of mutual support within its context. However, this case differs from the one discussed in subsequent paragraphs. In the first case, the complex experiences of spatial, temporal and experiential liminality have the potential to lead to a politically transformative process. By contrast, squats organized by housing rights movements require a political commitment and a communal desire to collectively transcend the liminal condition as a *prerequisite* for acceptance. Housing rights movements implicitly demand that potential squatters engage in an 'educational site of resistance' (Caciagli, 2019), where they participate in housing struggles and contribute to the community's wellbeing through political involvement in both internal and external activities. These include joining and organizing demonstrations, picketing, and participants utilizing their skills and expertise to support the community itself. In this case, the 'political' aspect becomes a precondition and the starting point for a politics of inhabitation that is in the process of formation. Therefore, it is crucial to explicitly address the unique spatial, temporal and experiential aspects of being part of a squat organized by a housing rights movement, which served as inspiration for this article.

A second body of literature explores housing precarity and squatting for housing, although the term 'liminality' is not explicitly used. Authors such as Holm and Kuhn (2011), Bouillon (2011), Pruijt (2013), Squatting Europe Kollective (2014),

Martínez (2014), Anders and Sedlmaier (2017) and Chattopadhyay and Mudu (2017) have examined housing struggles and the occupation of buildings in various geographical contexts. These authors investigated the spatial aspects of squatting and often framed these within broader urban resistance practices or as sites of ongoing political contestation (Vasudevan, 2015). Within this body of work, various scholars specifically focused on housing squats in Rome, mapping their organizational configurations (Vereni, 2013; Mugnani, 2017), exploring their sociopolitical contexts (Grazioli, 2017; Dadusc *et al*., 2019) and examining how squats employ strategies to transform spatial structures (Caciagli, 2019). Other studies have explored how squatting experiences, although not explicitly labelled 'liminal', give rise to forms of political action. Milligan (2016) challenges the dichotomy of 'deprivation' and 'political' squatters, arguing that all squatters are political agents, as they confront the state. This binary division is too simplistic, even within the context of Rome, where squats organized by housing rights movements are viewed not only as survival tactics or forms of grassroots support, but also as experiences that encompass aspects of both deprivation and political engagement (Caciagli, 2019).

These works have all emphasized strategic thinking based on the contingent and situated knowledge produced within specific spatial contexts (Davies, 2016). They highlight the importance of understanding the situated spatialities and the forms of knowledge that squatters develop through their daily experiences. Another group of scholars who have primarily focused on homelessness has instead explored housing precarity from a broader experiential perspective (see Gowan, 2010; Lancione, 2017; McCarthy, 2019). Among the authors are Baxter and Brickell (2014), who introduced the concept of 'home unmaking' and 'remaking', highlighting the fluidity and constant transformation of the notion of 'home'. Other geographers have been involved in discussions on time and temporality (see Buttimer, 1976; Hanson and Johnston, 1985; Massey, 1992; Ho, 2021). And o'Neill's (2014) work on homelessness in Bucharest, for instance, explores the everyday effect of boredom among homeless individuals. Here, boredom is not simply seen as a lack of consumption but as a sense of being marginalized in the neoliberal era, resulting in a feeling of endless waiting and persistent social suffering.

Despite the valuable contributions of existing research, we continue to live in a neoliberal and globalized era that emphasizes 'speed' as a universal condition, as Sharma (2014) has remarked. This perception, however, obscures the reality that 'many have long been temporally precarious' and that 'running out of time is largely felt and imagined to be an individual problem, even when the critique is aimed at society' (*ibid*.: 6). While time and temporality remain integral to conceptualizations of modernity and capitalism (see Harvey, 1989; Low and Barnett, 2000; Raghuram, 2009), globalization tends to oversimplify temporal heterogeneity into linear time (Massey, 1992; Low and Barnett, 2000), neglecting the complexity of lived time and the multiple temporalities that emerge under global capitalism (Sharma, 2014). Specifically, reflections about the variety of existing housing temporalities are increasingly present in contemporary studies that have conceptualized homelessness and unstable housing as a cyclical and recurrent event rather than as single episodes, and therefore as part of a continuum of precarious housing (Herbert, 2018b). These experiences can be defined as examples of permanent housing liminalities that should include considerations of life in contemporary squats in Rome, where people sometimes live for decades while actively and daily transforming that in-betweenness into forms of political action.

To understand the subjective experiences of time in situations such as living in a squat for an extended period while awaiting council housing, it is crucial to acknowledge that these diverse and continuing temporalities are largely shaped and controlled by both the institutional arrangements individuals find themselves in and the dominant neoliberal and hegemonic temporalities. In Rome, from an administrative

and bureaucratic perspective, low-income residents, squatters and migrants are caught in an in-between period after submitting their applications for council housing—the average wait time being up to 18 years (Puccini, 2019). Referring to individuals residing in squats as being in a housing emergency can be deceptive, since it suggests that the concept of 'crisis' and 'emergency' pertains to temporary disruptions or deviations from the norm. However, emergency is fundamentally a discourse that privileges certain populations while disregarding others and also upholding normative conceptions of time (Sharma, 2014). To avoid these pitfalls, it is essential to capture the 'uneven expressions of time' (Holdsworth, 2020: 2) and examine how intimate or situated space–times are negotiated within broader structural power relations (Ho, 2021). Understanding these dynamics can shed light on how liminality continues to be a useful concept for studying events or situations that involve the dissolution of order while also contributing to the formation of institutions and structures (Szakolczai, 2009). By considering the negotiation of temporalities within power relations, researchers can gain insights into the multifaceted nature of time in housing liminalities. While various structural processes, such as economic, cultural, societal and racial dispossession, contribute to the expansion of housing-liminal experiences, it is crucial to acknowledge that individuals and groups still retain agency, although it may be constrained and influenced by larger conditions beyond their control (Grosz, 2005). Therefore, sometimes liminal subjects can collectively find ways to resist economic and social disempowerment through inventive and experimental politics that prioritize processes over predetermined results (*ibid*.).

In this article I ground these literatures by discussing a specific case, the Roman squat of Santa Croce/Spin Time, as an empirical example of housing liminality. Before proceeding, I briefly introduce the housing scenario in Italy and in Rome to provide context for the case study and highlight its relevance to the conceptual framework.

Housing in Italy, Rome, and Santa Croce/Spin Time: an endless wait

Low-income individuals in Rome have been experiencing a long-term housing crisis, which has become normalized since soon after the end of the second world war. Although availability of housing units has increased at the national level over the past six decades, there has been a simultaneous decline in overall population (Aureli and Mudu, 2017: 501). This seemingly contradictory process has been accompanied by a rise in policies promoting homeownership and the sale of public assets to the private sector. These policies peaked in the late 1990s with 'cartolarizzazione'—a financial arrangement aimed at selling public assets, including buildings owned by public bodies, such as the State Social Security Systems. Despite Italy's shrinking population, private housing units have increased throughout southern European countries and cities during periods of economic crisis and austerity. However, there is still a massive shortage of low-income housing, which has resulted in heightened activism and an increase in policy reforms, although at a lower level than in other countries and cities in Europe (Tulumello and Caruso, 2021).

As a result of this process in Rome, housing policies for low-income people are currently not prioritized on the political agenda. Rome's history has always been characterized by a desire to strengthen class differences based on productivity, resulting in the exclusion of many citizens—particularly those most in need—from these policies (Vereni, 2015). Informal housing movements emerged to address this deficiency—particularly from the late 1980s onwards, when Rome became a destination for non-EU migrants. These movements decided to occupy abandoned public or private buildings, such as former schools or offices, and transform them into multicultural contexts in which both locals and migrants could find a solution for their homelessness (Mudu, 2014; Vereni, 2015; Mugnani, 2017). These occupations were also aimed at establishing ongoing self-governance processes within the buildings and at organizing political claims to reclaim and repurpose urban spaces and infrastructure for housing rights and the 'right

to the city' (Squatting Europe Kollective, 2014; di Feliciantonio, 2017; Montagna and Grazioli, 2019; Chiodelli and Grazioli, 2021). Squatting has become a permanent feature of Rome's housing landscape over the past 30 years, giving rise to grassroots squatting movements such as the Citizens' Committee for the Fight for Housing (founded in 1988), Action (created in 2002 from the previous Right to Housing movement) and Precarious Metropolitan Blocks (which emerged in 2007).

The squat discussed here was occupied in 2013 by the Action housing movement. It is located in the central Esquilino district,[1] close to the main railway station, and is perceived as socially problematic because of the presence of homeless people. The building, which previously housed the offices of Inpdap, a social security agency, was sold to a private real estate fund (Investire SGR) in 2010 after the agency moved to another district. Since 2013, squatters have converted the former offices into small flats, with shared kitchens and bathrooms on each floor. The building comprises seven floors for residential use (Santa Croce) and two below-ground floors dedicated to Spin Time Labs, a cultural and social centre established one year after the building's occupation. At present, the squat is home to 139 families (270 adults and 92 minors) of 26 different nationalities, which include both unemployed individuals and those with precarious jobs. The precarious housing situations these residents face have frequently resulted in their eviction from squats without provision of a stable or permanent alternative housing option. The building is also home to 24 organizations and cultural associations,[2] the composition of activists varying over time. Although none of the activists live in the building permanently, each association has at least two or three individuals participating in Spin Time's assembly, representing their respective organizations weekly to discuss internal issues and coordinate activities.

My fieldwork, involving observation and attendance at internal assemblies, officially began in December 2018. I then moved into the building from March to November 2019, although my status as a temporary guest exempted me from certain obligations (such as picketing or cleaning common areas). Since I did not have a background in housing activism, I was initially perceived as an outsider. Local activists then tried to involve me more in political activities, aiming to shift my presence from an 'academic' role to a more 'militant' one. As I became more personally involved through my residency there, my political awareness of housing issues grew, although I maintained a critical stance and continued questioning my social positionality in terms of class, gender and nationality. Ironically, I was liminal too: my positionality gradually transitioned from ongoing attempts to remain in a 'space of betweenness' (Katz, 1994) to a more militant and involved one, which became the norm after I finished my fieldwork, at which time I 'officially' became seen and started to define myself as an activist. I gradually realized that ethnographic tools such as participation and 'impregnation' (Olivier de Sardan, 2015: 28) were the most relevant heuristic and epistemological instruments for me.[3] Moreover, I realized that participatory engagement

1 It is important to note that the majority of housing squats in Rome are situated on the outskirts of the city; therefore, Santa Croce/Spin Time is one of the closest squats to the city centre. However, as I discuss later in the article, the point here is to analyse their liminal condition as an assemblage of temporal, experiential and spatial dimensions, so that the latter is not intended as a synonym for 'location' but as an indicator of the spatial and then social and political dynamics that emerge from the appropriation and use of spaces (hooks, 1989: 23). As a result, despite the advantage of the squat being geographically situated in a central area, which improved the daily lives of its inhabitants (a deliberate political objective of the movement when it took over the building in 2013), the squat's location on the city map has not automatically resulted in social acceptance of squatters' experiences. This implies that there is a risk of downplaying and 'naturalizing' the richness and complexity of their political mobilization over the years.

2 These data were collected in 2022 from Open Impact, a University of Bicocca (Milan) research spin-off (see https://www.openimpact.it).

3 Most data were collected using participant observation and by conducting 11 semi-structured interviews, understood as 'consultancy and experience' (Olivier de Sardan, 2015: 30) and therefore aimed at soliciting participants' 'competence' and personal experience on the local community or their knowledge of one of its segments.

and immersion in the community were essential for a deeper understanding of events and to reciprocate the community's hospitality.

Despite my relatively long stay, the most significant week during my fieldwork began on 6 May 2019, when the power supply to the building was cut off. Five days later, the Pope's almsgiver restored the power in person—an intervention that resulted in extensive international media coverage and a political dispute between the Pope and the former right-wing Minister of the Interior, Matteo Salvini. The episode, which received significant attention, was not coincidental but rather the culmination of a longer, complex story that resulted from stretching the 'liminal' condition of Spin Time in spatial, temporal and experiential dimensions. It serves as an example of how political resources utilized during an emergency are grounded in a process of dialogue and emancipatory practices that evolved over the course of several years.

We cannot live without light!

On 6 May 2019, around 7 p.m., I found a group of squatters gathered at the entrance of the building, visibly concerned. It turned out that earlier that morning, two workers from Areti, the company responsible for electricity grid infrastructure, had come to the building and, without notifying the squatters, had disconnected the building's power by accessing the power station outside. The squatters, initially believing that routine maintenance was in progress, began collecting testimonies and decided to hold an emergency assembly.

During the assembly, the idea of pursuing institutional mediation before resorting to radical protest gained unanimous support. Certain squatters suggested seeking a flat rate contract for social rent through the local government, operating under the assumption that the power disconnection was a result of unpaid bills. However, the Lupi Decree[4] prevented them, as squatters, from acquiring any form of utilities registration, thereby preventing them from accessing essential services. Valerio,[5] a squatter, feared that without electricity, there would soon be sewer problems that could result in an overflow that could lead to eviction based on sanitary reasons. Paolo, the president of Spin Time, suggested taking another half day to consider how to establish an institutional solution to the problem, with the intention of resorting to a confrontational approach only if all other attempts were unsuccessful: 'If it does not work, let's move everything we were doing in here out here onto the streets, as we did during the hunger strike'.[6]

The next day, the then deputy mayor of Rome, Luca Bergamo, promised to find a solution with the board of directors of Hera Comm, the private company supplying electricity to the building. However, the day after it was revealed that a debt of over 300,000 euros was owed by the building owner, who had neglected to pay three bills dating back to 2018. The possibility of self-eviction[7] began worrying the squatters, as this would render any attempt at mediation futile. Mariya, a Ukrainian squatter, confessed to me that she had already packed her bags and documents and was ready to return to

4 Legislative Decree no. 47/2014 (the Lupi Decree) denies anyone who squats the right to apply for residency. This makes it harder for people in squats to access basic social services, such as a family doctor, and impossible for them to pay utility bills. However, the efforts and protests of Roman housing movements against this measure led to a directive signed by Rome's current mayor, Roberto Gualtieri, in November 2022. The directive provides a waiver to Article 5 of the Lupi Decree and recognizes the right of squatters to apply for residency, but only if they fall into one of four categories of vulnerable subjects deserving protection.

5 Pseudonyms have been used in all cases where I refer to individual squatters, but the real names of the leaders of the Action movement have been retained, as they are well known in Roman politics. All statements in this paragraph are transcriptions and reconstructions from my field notes.

6 As I discuss later in the article, the hunger strike coincided with the internal initiative Vite da Scarto (Throwaway Lives) in 2016. During those 21 days, Santa Croce's squatters and activists organized several demonstrations and activities outside the building to protest against Tronca's eviction plan and to elicit engagement and solidarity from neighbours and local organizations.

7 By 'self-eviction' they meant a voluntary departure from the squat, which would have compromised the unity and political effectiveness of the protest against the power supply disconnection.

the Ukraine if the situation could not be resolved. The squatters and activists then attempted to use the event as an opportunity to engage with municipal and regional representatives to discuss the Roman housing issue as a whole and not only this specific case.

If this attempt proved unsuccessful, all activities within the squat would be relocated to the outside of the building. The squatters' aim with this approach was to assert their rights without inconveniencing the neighbourhood, while continuing to provide their community with the same range of activities as those that had been available within the building. 'They want to switch us off inside? Then we bring the light outside!' was the motto with which every assembly ended. In the days that followed, there were more meetings and initiatives in support of the squat, as well as various attempts at dialogue and mediation with institutions at municipal and regional levels. Unfortunately, none managed to resolve the issue that approximately 400 people had by then been without electricity for nearly a week.

On 11 May 2019, Cardinal Konrad Krajewski, in his position as the Pope's almsgiver, arrived at the building after receiving a phone call from a lay nun, Sister Agnes, who was residing there. The Cardinal was already familiar with the building and had met Sister Agnes when he had previously visited the building to provide necessities. He was known for his proactive approach to supporting the poor and homeless in the Esquilino neighbourhood and the entire city, earning him the nickname 'the cardinal of the poor people' in the local media (Degl'Innocenti, 2018; Benignetti, 2019). After assessing the situation, Krajewski called the prefecture of Rome and promised to return in the evening if the power was not restored. True to his word, he came back with a group of assistants just before 8 p.m. He instructed some of the squatters to open a utility hole and descended into it himself. Within a few minutes, the lights came back on, sparking immense enthusiasm among the residents. Messages flooded the building's WhatsApp groups: 'The light has come on!', 'A miracle just happened in Santa Croce!' Before leaving, the Cardinal gave his business card to the activists, advising them to show it to the police and Areti workers who might come to disconnect the power again. He even expressed his willingness to take legal responsibility for the reconnection. Paolo, taken aback, timidly asked: 'Eminence, shall we take a selfie?'

The squatters then proceeded to guard the utility hole, welded it shut and placed chairs over it. When Areti workers arrived with a police escort to cut off the power again, the squatters protested, emphasizing their inability to live without electricity by repeatedly shouting 'we cannot live without light!' Throughout the events, I engaged with activists and police officers, trying to understand the situation and providing support by making coffee for everyone. The Areti workers appeared considerably more agitated and irritated than the police officers, who made repeated attempts to calm them down, but subsequently declared that they had to take down the name and details of a representative of the squatters, given the squatters' insistence that the electricity supply may not be cut off again. Michela, a squatter, together with Sister Agnes, approached them and handed them Cardinal Krajewski's business card. From then on, the police officers focused on persuading the Areti workers to leave.

Liminality as a threefold spatial-temporal-existential assemblage

Santa Croce/Spin Time's squatters are experiencing a housing condition 'in-between' homelessness and a permanent and secure shelter. However, it is important to note that this condition, which had been ongoing since 2013, is far from temporary or sporadic. But while their state of liminality had become chronic, it did not serve as a means of social disempowerment (Wilhelm-Solomon, 2021) that prevented them from breaking free from their stagnant and precarious housing situation. This was evident in this particular case, where they collaborated with the Catholic Church to restore their access to electricity. Therefore, it is crucial to perceive their experience

of inhabitation not merely as that of vulnerable dwellers anticipating displacement, but rather as a dynamic and context-specific process (Baxter and Brickell, 2014; Vasudevan, 2015).

The analysis presented here thus progressively expands on the current nuanced and politically oriented understandings of liminality within the context of inhabitation. My aim with focusing on the specific case of a squat organized by a housing rights movement is to expand the empirical and conceptual understanding of what can be considered liminal. It is worth noting that politically organized squats are often described as marginal sites without explicitly mobilizing the concept of liminality or emphasizing the temporal and experiential dimensions that their condition may involve. In this study, I interpreted the episode involving the almsgiver as a manifestation of the housing liminality the community was experiencing. This liminality is understood as a complex assemblage encompassing spatial, temporal and experiential dimensions, which I discuss further in this section.

The restoration of electricity was not merely a charitable gesture or a stroke of luck, but rather a product of the intricate relationships emerging from the squatters' in-between condition. It resulted from their ongoing efforts to transform their long-term liminal dwelling experience into an emancipatory practice. While various actors contributed to this process, in this article I focus specifically on the role of the Catholic Church, which acted as a catalyst for internal political change. Unlike other housing rights movement squats in Rome, which mainly barricaded themselves spatially to resist eviction attempts (Caciagli, 2019), Spin Time adopted a different approach by maintaining an open main gate 24 hours a day and offering cultural activities and grassroots welfare initiatives for everyone, not only squatters.

I will now delve into the origins of their openness towards the Catholic Church and analyse why this process can be seen as an example of political reaction towards a stretched or permanent liminality (Szakolczai, 2000; 2017). Two significant decisions played a crucial role in this process. The first was when in 2013 the squatters allowed Sister Agnes to enter the squat for the first time. The second took place in 2016, when the Action housing movement decided to expand its scope by revising its internal policies to move away from a defensive stance to a more proactive approach from 2016 onwards.

The decision to involve a representative of the Catholic Church in the building was not an easy one. Housing movements in Rome are typically associated with anarchism and the left wing (Mudu, 2014) and therefore tend to be sceptical of religious institutions, especially the Vatican and its clergy. The process of collaboration began in 2013, when Sister Agnes expressed interest in the Santa Croce squat. However, her entrance and integration into the community were not immediate and required several months of negotiations. Eventually, she became a permanent resident of the squat and started providing food and welfare support to its inhabitants. Her presence played a crucial role in the subsequent decision to open up the building and engage with the territory:

> *Sister Agnes*: I entered here gradually. I came one day; then I came again. Then I started coming during the morning, coming back home during the evening … Then I started being here on Thursdays, and so it was for months. Then, finally, after the first year like that, I just started to stay … We also organized a lot of parties, I used to bring people here from the outside … after that, we started organizing workshops. I said to them 'you have to learn how to do new activities, even for the kids … we have to bring people from outside: let them go out, not you'. And so we started organizing labs, other cultural activities, getting food supplies from Catholic associations … everything …

> *Interviewer*: And that's when you realized that the kids were ashamed to share with their peers where they lived?
>
> *Sister Agnes*: Of course! I told them, 'Let's open the building right now! We have to open our doors!' 'No, we are afraid' … No, we have to let people in here (interview with the author, 11 October 2019).

Sister Agnes's initial focus was to work with the children living in the squat. She recognized that many of them felt ashamed of their housing situation and struggled to share it with others, including classmates and teachers. This realization became the catalyst for allowing her to stay permanently within the squat and move the squat towards opening up spatially and relationally to the outside world. The initiatives and parties she organized within the building helped transform perceptions of the squat as a source of shame to a place of life and community engagement.

The story of Sister Agnes in the building exemplifies how individuals outside of the squatter group, such as Sister Agnes, have played a role in their collective experience, aiding them in transcending their perceived marginality. Her involvement, particularly in organizing initiatives for the children and fostering connections with the surrounding neighbourhood, highlights the potential for change and the active engagement of the squatters in shaping their political collective experience. Therefore, the almsgiver incident was not an isolated event, but rather the outcome of a deliberate effort to broaden the squat's network and alliances. Following the events of 11 May 2019, the connection between Spin Time and ecclesiastical organizations grew stronger, attracting international attention and media coverage. The Pope publicly supported the almsgiver's actions and declared solidarity with the squatters. Hence, the electricity restoration carried out by the almsgiver, who had been contacted directly by Sister Agnes, proved instrumental in overcoming the impasse caused by the squatters' illegal and precarious status. In subsequent assemblies and plenary sessions, the squatters recognized the political importance of this event and sought to give it meaning:

> What does this story tell us? That if we relied only on the other squats and housing movements, on our old tools, right now we would still be without electricity. Do you know when we broke the deadlock, even if unconsciously? When we decided to let the Church enter here, years ago … Here the Pope has shown that there are no more political parties: none of our institutional and political relationships managed to get us out of this situation … Without light, we rediscovered what it means to be together. All the squatters here have figured this out, and so have all the activists from Spin Time. This has to be formative for everyone. We must be aware of the fact that we are a force within a single family that will expand more and more (Paolo, interview with the author, 15 May 2019).

The second event that moved the squat towards openness took place in 2016, when the Tronca resolution (no. 50 of 12 April 2016) was released, which outlined a comprehensive eviction plan for the city of Rome, and when the Action housing movement, in response, launched a collective hunger strike as a form of protest. This initiative, known as Vite da Scarto (Throwaway Lives), lasted for 21 days. During this period, the movement organized cultural activities and assemblies outside the building, attracting the attention and support of the local community, including various Catholic associations. The hunger strike served as a platform to raise awareness of the evictions plan and fostered engagement and solidarity with neighbouring residents and organizations.

Consequently, the hunger strike became the second 'big' opportunity (after Sister Agnes's entrance) to experience the benefits of an open strategy and of gaining visibility within the city. The squatters, instead of limiting themselves to asking for support from other housing rights movements, during these days moved all the activities to the street in front of their building to raise awareness and involve new people, including 'ordinary' citizens and civil and Catholic organizations. In this sense, the hunger strike went beyond its initial objectives to mark a turning point for the movement, which prompted a re-evaluation of the entire movement and its strategies and led to the adoption of a new approach, termed 'cantiere di rigenerazione urbana', a self-initiated urban and political regeneration process. Squatters thus shifted their focus towards fostering a collective 'ethos of care' (Herbert, 2018a). Instead of strictly adhering to the law, neighbours embraced Spin Time's community norms and accepted their unconventional use of the property. This approach led to an informal legitimacy (Herbert, 2018b) and its gradual acceptance by the neighbourhood and created a sense of tolerance towards squatters' experience of inhabitation.

Although this strategy of openness today includes a richness of grassroots welfare forms and many secular sociopolitical actors (such as youth organizations, NGOs and local associations), this article focuses explicitly on Spin Time's relationship with the Catholic Church and how the Church's involvement in the squat led to a widening of its social and political base.

The earlier decision to allow Sister Agnes to enter the building in 2013 and engage with the children and the neighbourhood, which preceded the establishment of Spin Time in 2014, played a crucial role in shaping the conditions for the subsequent hunger strike's openness towards the sidewalk. Additionally, when I asked Patrick, a squatter, how he would define the hunger strike experience, he compared that moment to 'a city square that did not exist for us before' (interview with the author, 15 June 2019). By that, he did not mean the squares where housing rights movements historically gathered to protest (usually close to the palaces of power), but one that had never been crossed before and metaphorically and politically stood between those squares and the squat: 'To talk about our right to housing, we went to the *sidewalk*, outside the door, invading the public space where meaning, imagination and habits are formed' (Patrick, interview with the author, 19 March 2019). He subsequently interpreted those days as an unprecedented expansion of their living and activism space, from the squat to the sidewalk—the sidewalk ultimately becoming a prominent area where encounters with 'strangers' could take place. During the hunger strike, the squatters managed to widen their social base from that sidewalk, enabling them to come in contact with and meet new social actors who had decided to go there to show their solidarity. As a result, once the demonstration ended, the squatters revised some of their approaches and made some internal organizational changes. One of these involved the decision to enhance the process of openness initiated by the activities of Sister Agnes by deciding to make keeping the squat's main gate open 24 hours a day standard practice.

As Paolo mentioned in the quotation in the previous paragraph, in the week leading up to the squatters' electricity being restored, a similar process occurred. The squatters relocated all their activities to the street, in a way reminiscent of their actions during the hunger strike. Two months later I had an opportunity to ask Michela, an inhabitant of Santa Croce, how she interpreted their everyday life before and after these two events—the hunger strike and the Cardinal's act—since they were constantly being mentioned and described during assemblies as two fundamental political milestones in Action's history. She replied by specifying how both episodes matched the new overall political views of the movement perfectly:

> Are you familiar with Action's logo? What's written underneath? 'Diritti in movimento' [Rights in movement]. It's not just about housing, not anymore. Nowadays, we join the movement also because we lack many other rights: healthcare, work … even the internal cultural activities and the low-cost or free theatre performances. In other words, our requirements extend beyond just needing shelter. In this situation, we have not only reclaimed our right to housing, but also all the rights that were previously withheld from us (Michela, interview with the author, 3 July 2019).

The decision to open up Spin Time's project to other social and political struggles was driven by both defensive and propositional politics (Lancione, 2019a). The squatters' goal became to increase their support network in the case of eviction, while simultaneously striving to establish a more inclusive and comprehensive approach that could address both their housing and social issues. This expansion in relationships and physical space was influenced by the implementation of the Lupi Decree in 2014, which had made it more difficult for squatters in Rome to consider squatting as a temporary experience. Among other restrictions, its legal provisions made it impossible for squatters to apply for public housing for at least five years. As a result, the liminal housing condition of squatters became permanent (Szakolczai, 2000), in contrast to the previous practice of inhabitants leaving squats once they had secured a council house through their struggle.

Within this framework, the almsgiver's act can be seen as a significant achievement of Spin Time's openness process. The incident quickly gained national and international attention, as the media transformed its social implications into a broader issue concerning domestic policy, particularly the disagreement between the Pope and the former Minister of the Interior, Matteo Salvini, regarding migrants. Consequently, the visibility the squatters gained through the electricity incident had significant political implications, such as overcoming the challenge posed by Article 5 of the Lupi Decree. Cardinal Krajewski's intervention resolved the electricity stalemate, but Spin Time decided to use the incident to advocate for other squats in similar situations. The word 'light' thus became a buzzword, a meaningful concept to describe what had happened that night and to indicate Spin Time's ideal political horizon. To amplify the squatters' cause, Spin Time established a political platform called 'Facciamo luce!' (Let's shed light!), which was aimed at uniting movements, housing unions and local political leaders against Article 5 of the Lupi Decree, which also prevented squatters from accessing utilities and living in dignity. The platform's concrete proposal entailed collecting signatures to request a derogation from Article 5 and leveraging the opportunities granted by the decree for minors or individuals deserving protection who resided in the Santa Croce and similar squats. Nevertheless, there were dissenting voices within the platform who disagreed with the suggested derogation, asserting that a complete revocation of the decree was essential. Initially, this disagreement prevented the successful execution of the proposed derogation. Yet, Spin Time continued engaging in collective discussions with other housing rights movements and sought to involve various actors in the transformation of the occupied space into a place where different stakeholders could participate in the decision-making process. After numerous demonstrations and confrontations with institutional representatives, the new centre-left municipal council established in 2021 eventually granted the waiver to Article 5 in 2022. This allowed squatters to start applying for residency, but only if they fell into one of four categories of vulnerable subjects deserving protection.

This political triumph resulted in a more recent accomplishment too: the incorporation of Spin Time into the municipal housing plan of 2023 as a noteworthy endeavour that warrants acquisition by the local government and conversion into conventional public housing. Besides Metropoliz-MAAM (organized by the Precarious Metropolitan Blocks movement), Spin Time is the only squat that has been included in

the resolution with the specific intention of using it as an example of transformation and recovery of existing building stock without displacing the inhabitants or ending the sociocultural activities inside it. While it is premature to analyse the results of this ongoing process, the fact that the only two squatting experiences cited in the 2023 housing plan are 'open' squats that have made their housing struggle intersectional with other sociopolitical subjects and have created an 'informal legitimacy' around them[8] (Herbert, 2018b), is far from an irrelevant detail.

Conclusions

For Spin Time, the experiential aspect of liminality aligns with acknowledging its political nature within a process that often relies on celebratory narratives of the urban poor's resilience (Lancione, 2019b: 2). The relational and ethnographic interpretation of the response of all the actors in the building to the power disconnection presented in this article goes beyond rigid understandings of liminal urban and housing conditions, which often simplify these complex situations into binary frameworks of 'social integration' and 'extreme marginalization'—especially if we consider these two poles only as top-down processes, thus ignoring the efforts and struggles that come 'from below' and that can transform crises into political activation. In this article I do not intend to claim that only the alliance between Spin Time and the Catholic Church contributed to achieving specific political outcomes. Rather, my aim is to highlight a particular political trajectory among many others that have effectively turned a liminal stalemate into a catalyst for political mobilization and social change. As described, while Roman squats have historically adopted defensive strategies involving closures and barricades (Caciagli, 2019), Spin Time's decision to open up has expanded its informal legitimacy (Herbert, 2018b). This shift has led to several pivotal political achievements, including the restoration of electricity, its dispute with and subsequent derogation from Article 5, alongside other housing movements, and the inclusion of Spin Time in the 2023 municipal housing plan (see Table 1).

There is a risk in perceiving liminalities solely as temporary disruptions in the normal course of events, or as synonymous with marginality and exclusion, as this narrow understanding limits its heuristic and interdisciplinary applicability. Particularly in the context of housing liminality, the alleged transient nature and volatility of certain housing struggles often lead to their dismissal as non-political. However, progressive housing activists worldwide recognize that the 'housing struggle' extends beyond mere resistance or resilience. Their efforts are directed towards leveraging housing as a means to challenge systemic forms of violence, including patriarchy, racism, class exploitation and denial of shelter. They attribute political significance to how housing is framed, experienced and embodied, as it becomes a struggle to affirm an alternative way of existing in the world (Lancione, 2019b). The issue at hand may not be solely centred on utilizing urban and housing liminality for wider struggles, but also on questioning 'what counts as politics and how' (Rolnik and Lancione, 2020: 143). Squatters in Rome, unlike homeless individuals or those experiencing severe marginalization, find themselves in a state of political and housing in-betweenness. They are often seen as outsiders and unconventional citizens. However, they do have a roof over their heads, albeit precarious, within a collective and organized inhabitation experience that can serve as a foundation for a broader political demand concerning the urban and social fabric. Their political claim and their fight for housing extend beyond the mere absence of permanent shelter. They view housing as a means to access underutilized parts of the city that should be reclaimed for the entire population, including the internal residents

8 Metropoliz-MAAM, located in the eastern quadrant of the Italian capital, is another squat that, like Spin Time, transformed itself into more than just a housing squat: it has also become an open-air contemporary art museum, using art as political defence of squatters' experiences (Boni and de Finis, 2016; Grazioli, 2021).

TABLE 1 Liminality's three dimensions and how they can be applied to the Santa Croce/Spin Time case

Dimensions of Liminality	Characteristics	Santa Croce/Spin Time
Spatial	Geographically and spatially situated. More specifically, 'spatial' here is not intended as synonymous with 'location', but as the spatial and then social and political dynamics that emerge from the appropriation and use of spaces (hooks, 1989: 23).	Specifically situated in the context of Rome, where housing emergency for low-income people has become the norm. Also, the local abundance of informality (including squats) shows how such abundance of informality should not be interpreted as synonymous with anarchy or lack of systematicity, but rather as 'historically rooted practices' and 'behaviours that shape and reflect social and power relations today' (Clough Marinaro, 2022: 1).
Temporal	Housing temporalities encompass diverse durations and continuities, highlighting the presence of specific temporalities distinct from the universalized speed of globalization and neoliberalism (Sharma, 2014). These include recognizing permanent liminalities and understanding unstable housing as cyclical and recurrent rather than episodic (Szakolczai, 2017; Herbert, 2018b).	Santa Croce's inhabitants have lived in the building since 2013, some having moved there from previous squats that were evicted. In this way, they have configured their squatting experience as anything but a temporary condition.
Experiential	The focus is on individuals and social groups' agency and responses to prolonged experiences of precarity, particularly on how they navigate and engage with protracted housing liminality as an opportunity for change rather than an inevitable fate (Thomassen, 2014; Clough Marinaro, 2022).	The squatters decided to involve other social actors to advocate for their political experience and seek a solution to their housing liminality. In this article I explicitly focus on the squatters' relationship with the Catholic Church and how this collaboration is helping squatters move towards an exit from their ongoing in-between condition. I highlight the episode of electricity disconnection and restoration as a paradigmatic event that is the result of earlier actions, including the entry of the lay nun, Sister Agnes, into the squat, and the hunger strike. These actions paved the way for subsequent political initiatives, such as the opposition to Article 5 of the Lupi Decree and the involvement of Spin Time in the local municipality's housing plan.

SOURCE: Author's fieldwork

of Santa Croce. By highlighting this perspective, squatters in Rome assert their right to housing as a pathway towards reinstating unused urban spaces for the benefit of the community as a whole.

From this perspective, the most interesting and innovative aspect of the Spin Time case has been that of inhabiting this in-betweenness by advancing an immediate and experiential political dimension that goes beyond the canonical separation of different political arenas—as demonstrated by the unusual link between the Action housing movement and the Catholic Church. This incident demonstrates that housing in Rome is restructuring itself from below: when liminality becomes a permanent condition, people who are experiencing it can find collective and political solutions to achieve a goal and try to exit a crisis, showing 'how things are reworked and adjusted rather than solved' (Lancione and Simone, 2021: 970). Hence, to better understand these practices, as scholars we should encourage more nuanced definitions of liminal conditions in our times and in the homing processes themselves. Critiques of the Eurocentric notion of 'home' have emerged from various researchers, especially within feminist studies. They challenge the limited understanding of home as an individual matter, particularly in relation to violent households, and the rigid dichotomy between 'settled' and 'unsettled' homes, which assumes stability (Ling, 2007). Housing liminalities, by contrast, highlight the complexity of the concept of home and emphasize the need to challenge it in terms of social justice (Davies, 2016).

Any investigation into 'the possibility of homing the city, even within conditions that seem to announce its impossibility' (Lancione, 2019a: 4) will need to take liminality and its temporal complexity seriously. Since time and temporality contribute to and reflect the spatial exercise of power and the outcomes of intersectional identities (Ho, 2021), what happens in the in-between and the interstices is crucial to understanding social life.

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