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The presence of LabSU in a 'Temporary' Housing Assistance Centre. From an institutional collaboration to some interdisciplinary reflections

Mario Marasco
Sapienza University of Rome
mario.marasco@uniroma1.it

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Abstract

The research paper details the collaborative effort of the LabSU (Laboratory of Urban Studies-DICEA, Sapienza University of Rome) with the City of Rome to address urban, housing and social issues through interdisciplinary research. The field of investigation is the Roman area of Bastogi, a complex that serves as a Public Temporary Housing Assistance Centre (CAAT). Over the years, Bastogi's inhabitants have become increasingly marginalized, with a mix of authorized 'temporary' residents, squatters with residency, and squatters without residency. This, combined with a chronic housing crisis and segregating management of the city's poorest, has led to social fragmentation, various forms of vulnerability and territorial stigma. The paper illustrates the involvement of the LabSU research group in mapping local stakeholders and providing recommendations for urban and social regeneration of the area. Finally, the author, starting from an anthropological perspective, reflects on his contribution within an interdisciplinary group in both methodological and epistemological terms.

Keywords: Urban anthropology; interdisciplinary research; urban regeneration; institutional collaboration; housing precariousness

1. Introduction

Located in the 13th Municipality of Rome[1] (Fig. 1), Bastogi consists of six four-storey apartment buildings with a complex history and genesis, ultimately becoming a Temporary Housing Assistance Centre (CAAT)[2] owned by the City of Rome (Fig. 2). It was intended to address the temporary housing needs of vulnerable and homeless individuals while they awaited public housing. However, many have been residing there for over thirty years. My involvement as a field researcher began with an initial investigation in Bastogi in 2017, during my PhD studies. That research, which ended in 2019, focused mainly on processes of territorial stigmatization (Wacquant, 2007) and the subjectification of youth marginality. My return to Bastogi in 2023 primarily

[1] Rome is administratively divided into 15 sub-areas known as 'municipalities'. In this text, the terms 'Main Municipality', 'City of Rome', 'city government' or 'city administration' will be used to refer to the highest administration level.
[2] See: Rome City Council Resolution No. 110 of 23 May 2005.

centered around housing issues and involved collaboration with an interdisciplinary research group, the LabSU - Laboratory of Urban Studies 'Dwelling Territories' (DICEA, Sapienza University of Rome). The LabSU aims to engage with institutions, primarily the Rome Main Municipality, and the communities in order to support existing or potential urban regeneration projects. It also fosters local networks from a participatory urban regeneration perspective (Brignone et al., 2022).

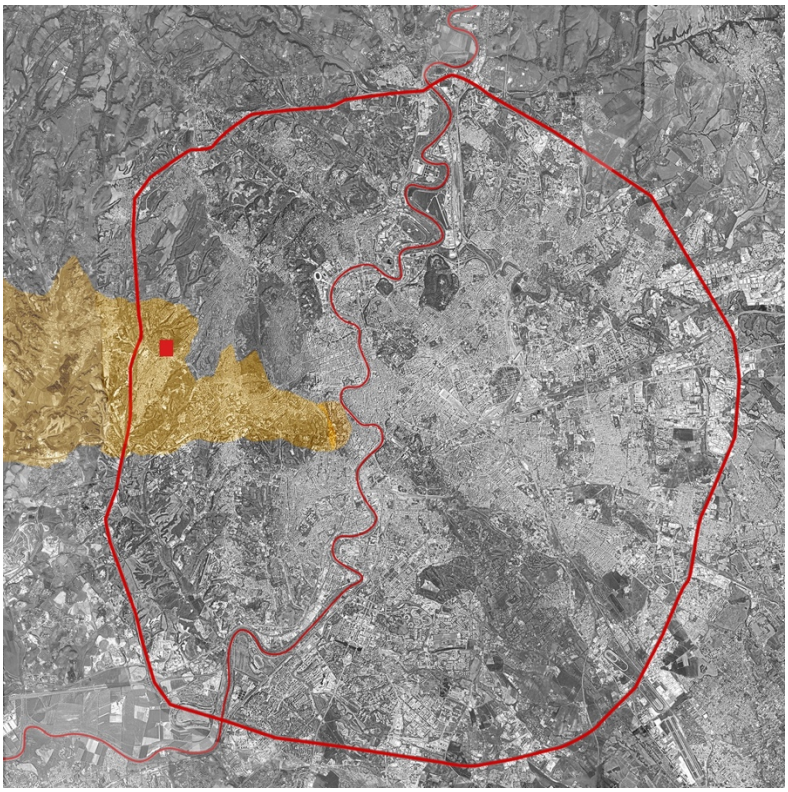

Fig. 1 - Location of Bastogi in the Rome metropolitan area within the main ring road.

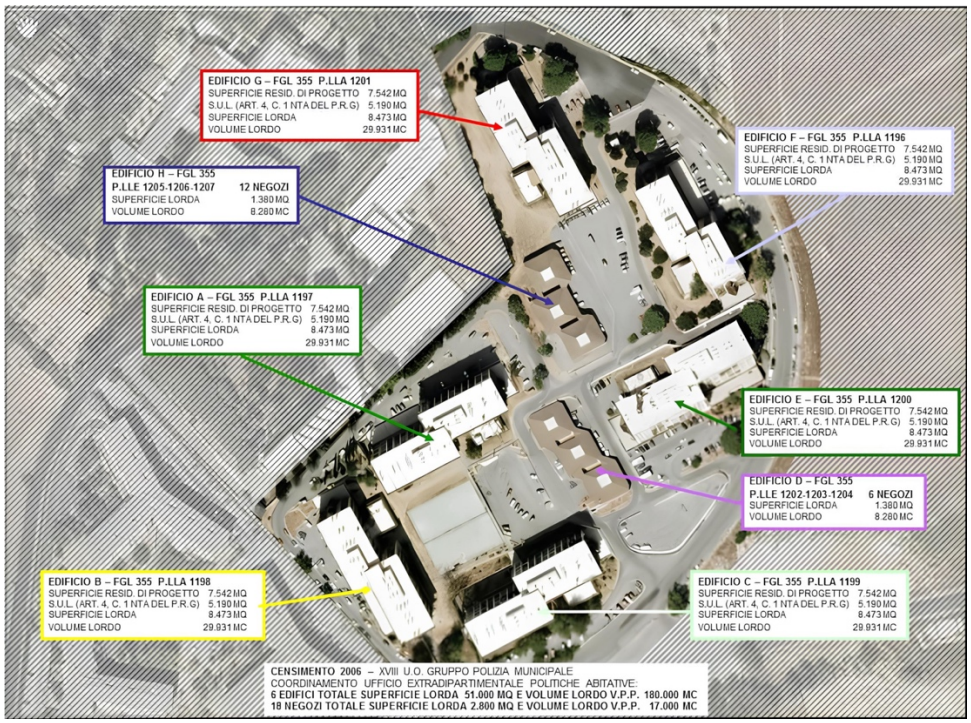

Fig. 2 - The Bastogi CAAT (elaborated by *Dipartimento del Patrimonio e della Casa*, 2011)

This article is based on a preliminary ethnographic reconnaissance conducted between November 2022 and November 2023, as a preliminary step toward activating bottom-up participatory strategies and establishing an urban laboratory in the Bastogi housing complex. The reconnaissance was carried out within the framework of a cooperation agreement between LabSU and the City of Rome (see Section 5). Although the institutional process that could have led to a more structured intervention was eventually interrupted—due to the non-renewal of the agreement—this initial phase constituted a concrete experiment in interdisciplinary, situated urban research.

2. Epistemological position and methodology

LabSU is composed of urban planners as well as scholars from other branches of the social sciences who share a commitment to situated knowledge and a collaborative engagement with urban peripheries. The group operates within the paradigm of "integrated urban development", which aims to combine physical regeneration with social inclusion, participatory governance, and spatial justice (Cellamare, 2025). The approach is marked by close attention to the lived dimensions of urban marginality and the relational conditions that sustain or impede processes of territorial regeneration. Within this framework, the contribution of anthropology is neither subordinate nor ancillary, but rather epistemologically distinctive. It is through this disciplinary lens that I approached the field, mobilizing a conceptual and methodological repertoire grounded in urban ethnography, institutional interaction, and the interpretive reading of spatial practices and symbolic orders (Geertz, 1974; Low, 2017).

While urban planning analyzes social space through the dialectic of policy frameworks, built form, and governance practices, anthropological inquiry focuses primarily on the tacit logics of everyday dwelling, the moral economies that underpin household resilience, and the informal sovereignties negotiated in zones of institutional retreat. These perspectives do not clash, but rather operate in productive tension (see Section 9).

The fieldwork in Bastogi was supported by LabSU researchers who had previously conducted technical surveys of structural vulnerabilities and infrastructural decay in the area. My ethnographic focus was on the social and symbolic dimensions of inhabiting—a relational and spatial mode of inquiry that aimed to capture how residents negotiated belonging, dignity, and permanence in a space that institutional actors continued to frame as temporary and exceptional.

The methodological approach did not rely on structured workshops or participatory planning sessions. Instead, it aligned with what Grassi (2023) has termed an "inquiring" mode of action-research. This inquiring layer—alongside the operational and strategic layers—aims to open situated, dialogic spaces of knowledge co-production, attentive to ambiguity, contradiction, and latent imaginaries[3].

At Bastogi, these dialogic encounters took place primarily in the spaces of the *Fraternità dell'Incarnazione*, a lay religious community present in the complex since the 1990s and composed of two women deeply embedded in the local social fabric (see Section 6.3). Their premises, located between two of the six buildings, served as the relational base for reaching a broad spectrum of residents. Approximately two families per

[3] This classification is drawn from Grassi's ethnographic account of the *Mapping San Siro* group, based at the Department of Architecture and Urban Studies of the Polytechnic University of Milan. Alongside the inquiring dimension, Grassi (2023) identifies three further layers of action-research: "*situating*", which refers to embeddedness in the urban and social context; "*networking*", which concerns the creation of alliances and institutional interactions; and "*acting*", referring to the implementation of concrete transformations. These modes were not fully activated in Bastogi, but could have been progressively implemented had the project continued (see Section 8).

landing were reached, across four floors per building, resulting in a preliminary mapping of the social composition of the complex.

This phase of the research had two central objectives: first, to explore the discrepancy between the institutional narrative of Bastogi (in terms of registered tenants and policy legibility) and the lived experience of its inhabitants; second, to identify any embryonic visions of regeneration emerging from within the community. Special attention was given to the co-existence of multiple vulnerabilities—legal, economic, generational—and to the moral grammars by which residents defined legitimacy, priority, and reciprocity.

The set of methods employed included participant observation, semi-structured interviews, genealogical reconstructions of housing trajectories, fieldnotes, and spatial annotations. These tools served not only to quantify conditions, but more importantly to reconstruct the everyday geographies of marginality and how they intersect with administrative ambiguities, personal biographies, and spatial practices rooted in long-term housing precarity.

3. Urban context and housing composition

3.1 An island of permanent temporariness

The chronic housing shortage in Rome is not a recent outcome of neoliberal retrenchment alone, but the product of a long-standing exclusionary logic embedded in the very foundations of the Italian public housing system. As Cacciotti (2023) notes, the moral and racialized framing of housing as a "social award" emerged as early as the 1920s, producing structural mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion that continue to shape housing access today (p. 166). Historically, public housing has primarily served those perceived as "productive" and socially conforming—namely, workers with stable incomes and nuclear families—while systematically excluding migrants, the unhoused, and individuals considered economically precarious or otherwise marginal (Tosi, 2009; Salsano, 2008).

Historically, public housing has primarily served those deemed "productive" and compliant—namely, workers with stable incomes and nuclear families—while systematically excluding migrants, the unhoused, and individuals considered economically precarious or otherwise socially marginal (Tosi, 2009; Salsano, 2008).This selective vision of deservingness has contributed to the creation of what Cacciotti (2023) calls *housing otherness*, a category that encompasses all those persistently excluded from stable, market-mediated and state-recognized forms of dwelling (pp. 167-169).

As a political response to this regime of exclusion, Roman housing movements have historically developed practices of occupation that should not be reduced to "illegal squatting," but seen instead as acts of collective citizenship and spatial justice. These movements have reclaimed abandoned buildings, established forms of self-managed welfare, and articulated a radical critique of the commodification of housing and the culturalization of poverty (Vereni, 2015; Mudu, 2014). Institutional responses have often reinforced exclusion through differential treatment and temporary, low-quality solutions that deny permanence and rights, thereby reproducing the moral hierarchy that underpins "housing otherness" (Cacciotti 2023, pp. 173-176). Within this framework, housing occupations in Rome function not only as material solutions to immediate need, but as enduring political practices that challenge the spatialized denial of full urban citizenship.

Bastogi is a complex of six four-storey buildings made up of mini-apartments (25-45 square meters), originally built between the late 1970s and early 1980s by Bastogi S.p.A. and a connected development company[4].

The complex was initially designed to serve short-term residential needs, targeting mobile workers linked to Fiumicino airport and students of a university hub that was planned—but never realised—in that part of the

[4] Edil Laurenthia 72 S.p.A. Cf. https://www.lombardiabeniculturali.it/archivi/complessi-archivistici/MIBA00510F/ (05/25).

city. The original project was designed to include, for each building, 68 one-bedroom flats and 32 studio apartments, amounting to a total of approximately 600 housing units across the entire complex.
After the entrepreneurial project failed, the developer began pressuring the municipality to convert the zoning status from tourist-receptive to permanent residential use—an unresolved issue still under negotiation today.
Meanwhile, the buildings remained partly incomplete and uninhabited. Between 1985 and 1986, a coordinated housing rights movement (*Lista di Lotta*) organized an occupation of the complex. These early occupants—many of whom were families awaiting public housing allocation—took on the task of completing the basic infrastructure themselves, connecting the buildings to water and sewage networks and making them inhabitable.
Meanwhile, the broader urban context was shifting: throughout the 1980s and 1990s, national housing policy experienced a significant rollback, with the state largely withdrawing from residential construction and social housing programs. This retraction coincided with the emergence of neoliberal urban governance in Italy (see Storto, 2018; Fregolent, Torri, 2018).
In 1989, the Municipality of Rome officially purchased the Bastogi complex and began using it as a transitional housing facility (later defined as a *Centro di Assistenza Alloggiativa Temporanea*, or CAAT). By the 2000s, however, the area had become increasingly stigmatised in public discourse, often represented in media as a hub for petty crime and drug dealing. Police operations and forced evictions intensified during this period—even under progressive or center-left municipal administrations, which, despite their political orientation, often prioritized policies centered on 'urban decorum'. Bastogi also featured in a docudrama broadcast by national television (RAI)[5], contributing to its negative public image. Some residents were forcibly displaced and offered housing solutions in the Lazio hinterland, up to 70 km from the capital, a move experienced by many families as a form of violent uprooting.
Although they formed a committee, the remaining inhabitants of Bastogi did not have equal standing as before. The municipal administration chose to allow this committee to independently supervise the merging of the inhabited mini-apartments with the vacated ones. Ultimately, the commitment to transform the merged apartments into 'standard' public housing (ERP[6]) in return for a modest rent and secure allocation was not upheld. Since the merging of apartments, there has been a marked inequality in terms of livability among the flats in Bastogi. Those who were able to do so at the time of the mergings have occupied as much space as possible. Those who could not be heard or moved in late, live, for example, with a family of five or more in 45 square metres (or even 25 square metres).
Over time, the social space of Bastogi became increasingly fragmented and racialised. Among the first groups assigned transitional housing were Italian Roma *Napoletani* (Napulengre)[7], previously evicted from makeshift camps along the Tiber. Although Italian citizens, they were perceived by long-standing 'Romans' as outsiders—especially after some Napulengre families, upon arrival, temporarily rented out their newly assigned flats while settling in caravans outside the buildings. This generated open conflict, which was eventually "resolved"—as one resident put it—through confrontation and the assertion of local hierarchies rooted in prior occupation struggles (see Marasco, 2023). Over the years, however, the arrival of Romanian Roma, North Africans, Eastern Europeans, Bangladeshis and South Americans redefined local boundaries. In this shifting landscape, former rivals sometimes cooperated—albeit selectively—to protect their shared

[5] *Il mestiere di vivere - Residence Bastoggi* (8 episodes). Documentary series directed by Claudio Canepari and Maurizio Iannelli. Available on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9FPnlIiGOU8 (05/2025).
[6] Acronym for *Edilizia residenziale pubblica*, the Italian expression for public housing.
[7] See: Strati, 2011, pp. 34-39.

territory from what they perceived as more 'disturbing' presences. Through intermarriage and generational ties, tenuous forms of mutual recognition and pragmatic coexistence gradually emerged.

From the outset, following its acquisition in 1989, the City of Rome used the Bastogi complex to house individuals and families in emergency housing situations—often those displaced from privately managed 'residence' facilities that were being progressively closed, yet entailed high costs for the public administration. Over time, however, the municipal authority lost track of who actually inhabited the buildings, in part due to its failure to systematically refurbish the mini-apartments or monitor transitions.

Many of those who had initially been allocated units eventually left—moving into public housing (ERP) outside the city or finding other arrangements—without any formal reassignment or turnover procedure. Their apartments were often informally absorbed by neighbouring families who had remained in Bastogi, or by newly arrived kin, sometimes through informal 'sales' of access by departing residents. In other cases, flats were occupied by unrelated individuals or small groups, often precariously housed urban poor with no other options.

The result is a condition of institutional standstill, in which Bastogi has become a *de facto* terminal housing zone—a physical manifestation of the broader retreat from public housing provision in Rome. In this spatial and bureaucratic limbo, new marginalities have layered onto the old ones, and the absence of coordinated policy has left the field open to informal dynamics, opaque tenancy chains, and micro-conflicts.

3.2 Demographic opacity and informal inhabiting

For the reasons outlined above, it is no longer possible to provide definitive data on the number of residents, their origin, or the proportion of squatters versus assigned occupants. The last official census dates back to 2019[8] and already appeared inadequate. In 2023, a research team from LabSU attempted a partial demographic reconstruction by conducting interviews and compiling field data on roughly two residents per landing (see following sub-section), yet this effort—though valuable—cannot be considered statistically representative of the current and constantly shifting population.

However, the sampling strategy—two households per floor across all six buildings—allowed for the inclusion of 48 interlocutors. Approximately half of these were long-term residents (over twenty years), enabling a preliminary estimation of demographic dynamics within the complex, including the circulation and turnover of individuals, whether formally authorized by the City of Rome or not. During the research period, the most recent available estimates outlined the following composition of the housing stock: 480 apartments in total, comprising 78 studios, 312 one-bedroom units, 51 two-bedroom units, 33 three-bedroom units, and 6 units with five or more rooms. Furthermore, approximately 115 of the original 600 units were modified through internal restructuring—such as the removal of dividing walls—to create enlarged or combined dwellings.

As for household composition, 432 family units were estimated to inhabit the complex, including 48 in conditions of severe overcrowding (e.g., four to eight individuals in a one-bedroom unit). Of these, 165 were registered as official assignees with a formal residence, 147 were non-assignee occupants with official residency, and 120 were squatters without any registered address at the municipal registry. This stratified housing condition—ranging from formally assigned tenancies to undocumented and precarious occupations—is the result of a fragmented political and institutional framework. The implications of this differentiated residential status will be further analyzed in Section 6.1.

[8] The census was carried out by the City of Rome and granted for viewing to LabSU researchers. The data were treated with respect for privacy in order to compare them with the ethnographic observations and annotations. The results were returned in aggregate form for the same reason.

4. Starting point

Before LabSU's involvement (see next section), the City of Rome had already commissioned a technical assessment concerning the future of the CAAT complex. Commissioned by the *Dipartimento del Patrimonio e della Casa*[9] in 2011, the study was marked by institutional vagueness and procedural impasse. It provided a brief history of the area, emphasized the urgency of "regularizing" the CAAT, and recommended changing the land use designation from "tourist accommodation" to "residential". It also called for a census of residents and proposed rent calibration based on housing conditions and household income. However, the study (Dipartimento del Patrimonio e della Casa, 2011) homogenized the diverse population under the term "squatters", overlooking the fact that many were officially assisted by the City under temporary housing programmes.

This 2011 document reiterated the contents of Resolution No. 501/2004[10] which had formally endorsed a transition to ERP housing but had stalled due to bureaucratic difficulties in implementing the necessary zoning change. It outlined three intervention hypotheses: (1) renovation of the existing complex, estimated at over €45 million and four years of work, involving phased temporary relocation within the complex; (2) demolition and reconstruction on site, projected to cost more than €100 million and take six and a half years, also relying on temporary prefab housing; and (3) a land swap agreement with private actors, whereby the city would exchange Bastogi for already existing or convertible residential units to be reassigned to current residents.

This third option was described as the most cost-effective and quickest to implement (approximately two and a half years), with a zero-cost burden for the City of Rome. The condition, however, was the controversial transfer of the social housing designation to the new properties while preserving residential zoning for Bastogi. This implied that the main beneficiary of the zoning change would be the private actor acquiring over 31,000 square meters of gross floor area, 28,200 of which is residential. The plan did not clarify the type of housing or where the new units would be located, raising concerns about potential social dispersion and loss of community ties. The study merely suggested that dispersion could help mitigate "social risks".

Crucially, no participatory processes or resident consultations were foreseen. Instead, the enhancement logic embedded in the third hypothesis risked privileging real estate returns over the rights and aspirations of current residents. Ten years later, when I joined the LabSU researchers in 2022, the City had renewed its interest in Bastogi. A new collaboration was established in 2023 to reassess the situation, but no significant institutional actions have since followed.

5. Institutional agreement and initial objectives

The municipal government, through resolution no. 25 of February 3, 2022, had approved an agreement protocol of understanding to facilitate collaborative initiatives with the Metropolitan City and the Universities of Lazio Region. These initiatives were aimed at implementing European (EU), national, and local strategies in urban regeneration, ecological transition, digital transition, and social inclusion. Within this framework, an executive agreement was then signed between the City of Rome and Sapienza University of Rome– Department of Civil, Building, and Environmental Engineering (DICEA). The LabSU, within the DICEA, would operate according to the agreement for the following general purposes:

- urban regeneration;
- administrative strengthening;
- projects for social inclusion, local development, and democratic participation.

[9] Department of Public Property and Housing. The study was commissioned to *Risorse per Roma S.p.a.*, an in-house company of the Main Municipality.

[10] Approved by the Executive Committee (*Giunta comunale*) of the City of Rome.

The above mentioned objectives would also concern the neighborhoods of Quarticciolo and Centocelle, where the LabSU has been working independently for years. In these areas and also in the larger district of Tor Bella Monaca[11], the LabSU has concentrated on the conditions preceding collective transformative actions. It has also focused on the construction processes of 'lived spaces' (physical or digital), aiming to foster relationships and collaborations in both knowledge production and design (Brignone et al., 2022, 231). For the Bastogi area, the content of the agreement with the Municipality of Rome consisted of developing a research-action path with the following specific objectives:

- identify local issues starting from urban, environmental, social, and economic problems;
- map out active forms of local associations and civil society in the territory;
- provide indications for planning and design policies, actions, and interventions for urban and social regeneration.

6. Findings from the investigation field

6.1 Social fragilities

The data presented in section 3.2 provide a quantitative snapshot of Bastogi's residential configuration, detailing the coexistence of three main groups: officially authorized tenants, squatters who have obtained registered residence, and occupants without any formal registration. A strict division into these three types of 'housing status' emerged with the enactment of a national law, commonly referred to as the *Piano casa* or Renzi-Lupi decree[12]. This law punishes squatters by preventing them from registering their residence (cf. Gargiulo, 2023). Consequently, they are unable to vote, receive assigned family doctors, or enter into contracts for electricity and gas utilities.

Fig.3 - The complex with the private single-storey buildings in the center

[11] Built in the early 1980s, Tor Bella Monaca is the last large public residential housing (ERP) district built in Rome, and is populated by nearly 30,000 people (cf. Cellamare and Montillo, 2020).

[12] Law Decree No. 47 of 2014, or Renzi-Lupi Decree, later converted into Law No. 80/2014 with amendments.

10% of the residential units in the district are occupied by families who were already residing there and chose to stay in Bastogi while waiting for the Municipality to transform these homes into ERP (Public Housing). These include children, grandchildren, separated spouses, and other family members who, unable to expand their living space, moved within Bastogi to vacant apartments obtained through informal agreements with departing residents (who had been there on the Municipality's concession).

The presence of young people in Bastogi is significant, but their opportunities for education, social mobility, and employment remain severely limited. As noted by Tomassi and Puccini (2018), the Social Distress Index (ISD)—based on unemployment, employment, youth concentration, and schooling rates—places Bastogi at 16.7, well above the ERP district average of 12.6 and among the highest in Rome's peripheral public housing areas[13].

The calculation of the ISD is significantly influenced by differences in education levels, considered a crucial factor in people's social and economic opportunities, as well as one of the indicators distributed most unequally in the urban area.

During 2023 field research, out of a sample of 30 interviewees aged between 18 and 28 years, the school dropout or failure to obtain a high school diploma rate is approximately 70%. Among those who obtained a diploma, only 15% attempted to pursue a university degree; of this 15%, more than a half abandoned their university studies shortly after starting.

Regarding employment in Bastogi, the research has led to the following estimates: an unemployment rate of over 25%, which is more than triple the metropolitan average of 7.4%[14]. Employment opportunities represent the counterpart to educational ones: being employed means not only having the opportunity to generate income, but also and above all, being part of a community, self-realization, and feeling a sense of belonging (Tomassi, Puccini, 2018). Another contributing factor to persistent unemployment or inactivity is the limited presence of "weak social ties"—informal connections beyond close-knit circles—which are crucial for accessing job opportunities and information (Granovetter, 1973). Territorial stigma also plays a role: some residents report concealing their address during job interviews. Employment, when present, is often precarious and concentrated in day-labour positions within the construction sector.

Finally, a critical aspect to consider relates to the dimension of health, highlighting a vulnerability in access to healthcare. Bastogi records excess hospitalizations, emergency room admissions, and mortality rates, respectively +60%, +150%, and +140% of the Roman average (Paglione et al., 2020). From interviews with social workers and volunteers, as well as discussions with representatives of the Local Health Authority (ASL), it emerges that hospitalisation is almost always due to the worsening of easily treatable (with good follow-up care) or monitorable conditions, such as heart disease, diabetes and thyroid problems. Unfortunately, there is a general ignorance of the bureaucratic and health procedures to be followed, especially for the most vulnerable age and social groups: unemployed people over 50, the elderly and people under house arrest.

[13] The researchers included the Bastogi area in their study, even though it is not ERP. The index of distress is calculated based on national rates (ISTAT) of unemployment, employment, youth concentration (population under 25 years), and schooling. If all the above rates have a value equal to the national data, then the Index of Social Distress in the area of interest is equal to 0. A value greater than 0 essentially implies that the Index of Social Distress in the area under consideration is higher than the corresponding national average (Comune di Roma, 2011).

[14] ISTAT data reworked by Rome Chamber of Commerce, <https://www.rm.camcom.it/archivio59_comunicati - print_0_1194.html#:~:text=Le%20persons%20in%20search%20of,9%2C8%25%20of%202021> (05/25).

Fig. 4 - A side of building A

Fig. 5 - Building A and football field

6.2 Structural fragility and building weaknesses

The physical assessment of the six buildings was conducted by LabSU researchers with expertise in architecture and engineering. Their investigation revealed significant architectural and structural vulnerabilities. These buildings, consisting of four above-ground floors and an underground garage, share issues related to plumbing, electrical systems, structural elements, external roofing, and fire escape stairs

(Fig. 4-5). Specifically, the assessment identified severe issues with the plumbing system, including pipe blockages preventing hot water supply, extensive corrosion causing frequent leaks and even flooding in the apartments, and degradation of sewage pipes leading to regular seepage in the underground garages. Additionally, electrical overloads due to a single electrical panel serving multiple apartments resulted in fires, irreversible damage, and structural risks. Beams, pillars, balconies, and cornices showed signs of deterioration, posing a danger of collapse and compromising structural integrity over time. Furthermore, inadequate insulation on most roofs led to excessively high temperatures, exceeding 40 degrees Celsius on the top floors during the summer. Poor maintenance of the fire escape stairs resulted in breakages and subsequent instability, rendering them unusable. These findings underscore the urgent need for a comprehensive building rehabilitation strategy to ensure the safety and quality of living conditions.

6.3 Local actors and stakeholders

As specified in the collaboration agreement with the Main Municipality, a mapping of associations and civil society initiatives was conducted, followed by direct encounters with all social actors operating in the Bastogi area. Many of them play a pivotal role in bottom-up welfare. The following list is ordered based on the degree of interaction established during the fieldwork: the first actors played a key role in facilitating initial ethnographic access and community engagement (see Section 2).

- *The Fraternity of the Incarnation*[15], also present in two other vulnerable neighborhoods, comprises two missionaries locally known as the 'sisters', although they are actually consecrated laywomen. They have resided in Bastogi since 1997 and have become an entrenched institution. They live on the ground floor of building B, in the premises entrusted by the municipal administration to the local Catholic parish. Their activities range from crafting products for self-subsistence to serving as a center for promoting community well-being. It currently houses a health desk and, more recently, a Popular Outpatient Care Centre, activated by the association *Aurelio in Comune* (AiC, see below). The two missionary 'sisters' carefully and systematically manage their time, emphasizing the importance of social connection and hospitality through their dedicated efforts to build meaningful relationships.
- *The Bastogi Committee*[16], located in a ground-floor room of building A, is a small, informal group with no legal status. It is composed of long-standing residents who resisted relocation outside of Rome and often benefited from housing mergers. While fully embedded in the neighborhood, the committee represents only a specific segment of the local population and is not inclusive of the area's full social diversity—particularly the growing number of recently arrived families, often from migrant backgrounds, who live in poverty and are awaiting public housing allocation. The committee maintains close ties with *Amici dei Bimbi Onlus* (see below) and provides space for some activities promoted by *Aurelio in Comune* (AiC).
- *Aurelio in Comune* (AiC)[17], self-described as a civic and progressive organization in the 13th Municipality of Rome, is a political entity. The organization's primary aim is to initiate social projects that residents can leverage to gain visibility and to influence the institutions. Simultaneously, the organization aims to gather consensus. Beyond this, AiC has spearheaded significant initiatives that deeply impact the material lives of the inhabitants:
    - a housing help desk, responsible for handling bureaucratic requests from the population (primarily residency issues);

[15] https://www.fraternitadellincarnazione.it/ (05/2025).
[16] https://www.facebook.com/groups/517685265261978/?locale=ml_IN (05/2025).
[17] https://www.aurelioincomune.it/ (05/2025).

- a social market, operated in collaboration with *Nonna Roma*[18] (a third-sector association), providing monthly allocation (for those in need) of non-perishable food and goods through a card points system;
- the 'Santa Maradona' initiative, backed by the *Charlemagne Foundation*[19], which formed a soccer team consisting of local youths aged fifteen to twenty-five; it plays in amateur leagues and it practices at a soccer field refurbished by a charity organization;
- a health desk, held at the premises of the local Parish and managed by the missionaries of the *Fraternity of the Incarnation* (Fig. 6); two volunteers actively guide and assist residents, especially as facilitators, who need access to healthcare and face bureaucratic or logistical challenges;
- a Popular Outpatient Care Centre, the most recent initiative; it aims to complement the local healthcare services without replacing primary care physicians and the local health authority (ASL); retired general practitioners, two psychologists, and ECG operators offer volunteer services;
- a job assistance center, which initially struggled to take shape; it was born out of a trade union initiative to facilitate networking and recruitment in the construction sector.

- *Amici dei Bimbi Onlus*[20], which manages the after-school program near to the Fraternity missionaries. The after-school program has been in place in Bastogi for over twenty years, but only with this association has it found stability, especially in terms of continuous support from educators. This association is also attempting to expand its activities into the healthcare sector. However, it does not cooperate with AiC, deemed overly politicized. Conversely, Amici dei Bimbi is regarded by AiC as a paternalistic welfare association, not concerned with the development of local empowerment. This non-profit organization is very active in fundraising, organizing events outside the community and mobilizing (private and public) institutions.

Fig. 6 - Multifunctional hall run by the Fraternity of the Incarnation

[18] http://www.nonnaroma.it/ (05/2025).
[19] https://www.fondazionecharlemagne.org/ (05/2025).
[20] https://amicideibimbionlus.eu/ (05/2025).

- A social cooperative (*Coop. soc. Psico Socio Sanitario*[21]), which runs a semi-residential facility for disabled adolescents and adults in one of the central buildings in the area (a private building[22]). Many of the cognitively disabled people in Bastogi are accommodated here during the day. The same cooperative runs the *nursery school*, which is located in another (private) building; the nursery school is open to users from outside Bastogi, but it does not operate at full capacity.
- The *Eben-Ezer Evangelical Church*[23], which acquired one of the central buildings within the complex, remains relatively marginal in terms of local social integration and community engagement. Nonetheless, during the COVID-19 emergency, it was the first actor to mobilize in Bastogi by distributing face masks, hand sanitizer, and other essential supplies for preventing viral transmission. At present, the church rents part of its premises to AiC for the organization of the social market.
- The *ASL in Camper*[24] is an itinerant public health initiative promoted by the Local Health Authority (ASL-Azienda Sanitaria Locale), which reaches the area two times per year using a medical van. It offers general medical and pediatric care, issues STP cards (for Temporarily Present Foreigners)[25], and provides bureaucratic support. It also conducts screenings, vaccinations, referrals, and basic veterinary services. While helpful, this service remains insufficient for the needs of residents with chronic conditions, such as diabetes or cancer, requiring continuous follow-up (see Section 6.1).
- *A.S.D. DNA Boxe*[26], a boxing gym offering combat sports training, is located on the ground floor of building E, a municipal property not under formal lease. It attracts both external users and local youth, who can train for free or at low cost. It operates under an informal agreement: in exchange for use of the space, the manager maintains the surrounding area and provides occasional support (e.g. electricity sharing) to local households.

7. How the objectives were addressed

7.1 A partial evaluation

Of the three specific objectives included in the agreement between LabSU and the municipal administration of Rome—identifying local needs based on urban, environmental, social, and economic issues; mapping local associations and active civil society; providing indications for planning regeneration policies, actions, and interventions—the second has been fully achieved, while the first and third objectives were partially addressed, scaled down in response to the limited forms of local mobilization encountered.

With the exception of the *Fraternity of the Incarnation* and the *Bastogi Committee*—both composed of individuals who have lived in the complex for over three decades—the majority of actors operating in the area come from outside the immediate community. As detailed in Section 6.3, these actors intervene in Bastogi according to distinct logics—political, religious, welfare-oriented, or entrepreneurial. Although they provide valuable services, they do not foster an inclusive framework for political representation or civic participation. Residents' mobilization is minimal, and collective forms of demand-making remain rare. Bastogi tends to function as a marginal "heterotopia" (Foucault, 1994), disconnected from wider political processes.

Aurelio in Comune (AiC) illustrates this dynamic well. It is one of the most active organizations in the area, with a clear political project and a goal to encourage participation. However, its members do not live in Bastogi

[21] https://www.storie.confcooperative.it/servizio-psico-socio-sanitario-onlus/ (05/2025).
[22] The one-storey buildings in Bastogi (Fig. 3) were never purchased by the City of Rome. Today they are owned by entrepreneurs and other private subjects. Pictures 3 to 6 were provided to the author by photo-reporter Emanuele Artenio.
[23] https://www.chiesapostolica.it/comunita/roma-bastogi-ebeneze/ (05/2025).
[24] https://www.aslroma1.it/news/riparte-la-asl-in-camper (05/2025).
[25] Regional Health Service (SSR) for non-EU citizens who do not comply with regulations concerning entry and stay in Italy.
[26] https://www.facebook.com/DnaBoxe/?locale=it_IT (05/2025).

and act strategically from a broader territorial base within the 13th Municipality, which stretches from the complex's outskirts to the walls of the Vatican. Their intention is to extend the radius of action and build a network of solidarity initiatives. While many of their projects are meaningful, and occasionally effective, local residents rarely attend AiC assemblies, and only two women from Bastogi have become consistent activists. The organisation tends to gain visibility during emergencies. One such instance occurred during the fieldwork, when a fire—caused by human error—broke out in one of the apartments. Although no one was injured, the incident rendered that flat and two adjacent units uninhabitable. Events like this exemplify the kind of dramatic emergencies that can trigger heightened attention and spur participation in AiC's initiatives. These types of incidents, often linked to infrastructure decay and unauthorized electrical connections, tend to happen frequently in a neighbourhood of this size.

As for the *Fraternity of the Incarnation*, while they have lived in Bastogi for over two decades and are deeply involved in community care, their role is not one of political mobilization, but of moral and relational accompaniment. Their religious vocation fosters solidarity and trust, but not civic organization. As explored elsewhere (Marasco, 2024), their practice draws on the ethics of presence and listening, which provides an essential yet distinct form of engagement—not aimed at representing collective claims, but rather at sustaining personal and household resilience.

More complex was the objective of providing some guidelines for planning and policy design, and for regeneration actions and interventions. Within this scope, LabSU first worked ethnographically, reconstructing the housing histories of current inhabitants to assess their potential involvement in regeneration processes.

Bastogi is characterised by persistent socio-cultural tensions rooted in the mismanagement of housing emergencies, which have long contributed to the precarious living conditions and marginal status of its residents. Drawing from 48 narrative interviews conducted across all six buildings—following a sampling strategy of two interlocutors per floor (see Section 3.2)—the research identified key trends in housing aspirations. Although the sample reflects an ethnographic rather than statistical logic, it provides valuable insights into prevalent orientations within the community. The majority of interlocutors (approximately 70%) expressed a clear preference for relocation to public residential housing (ERP) to improve their living conditions. Around 20% were satisfied with their current arrangements, while a further 10% remained undecided. However, nearly all rejected the idea of a further temporary relocation, especially if outside Rome or far from their current networks. These findings were shared with the city administration through reports highlighting the most pressing challenges in terms of housing and public services.

7.2 Operational proposals

After thirty years of housing emergency, the population of Bastogi demonstrates a growing need for public intervention to address marginalizations and structural and social distress. In the short term, it was suggested to the city administration to initiate immediate intervention to address structural and urban planning issues, involving the Department of Public Property, the Department of Urban Planning, and the 13th Municipality. The institutions should cooperate to address the most serious problems concerning sewage systems, public lighting, worn-out electrical systems, and other critical situations. This is not only about restoring services and housing dignity to a population in extreme social difficulty. It is also about reinforcing a sense of trust in those very institutions that will have to commit resources and engage the inhabitants in a medium- to long-term requalification project.

Looking to the medium-to-long term, the research team (LabSU) advised exploring structural alternatives to the chronic use of emergency housing (CAAT). Rather than rejecting temporary accommodation *per se*, the critique focuses on their long-term institutionalization, which has prolonged uncertainty and reinforced

exclusion. An effective alternative strategy could include, initially, the acquisition of housing units by the Main Municipality within the broader city quadrant, while remaining close to Bastogi. This would not only support participation in redevelopment programs and reduce the demographic density of the CAAT, but also help prevent the consolidation of a markedly marginal urban enclave.

In line with the second hypothesis discussed in the 2011 technical assessment concerning the future of the CAAT complex (see Section 4), LabSU research pointed to the progressive demolition (total or partial) of existing housing as the only viable option for full regeneration. Such interventions would need to be offset by reconstruction, either on-site or in a nearby area. The rehabilitation of existing structures is made complex first by their physical degradation. In many cases, radical interventions would be required, which would be difficult to manage with the presence of the current inhabitants. Moreover, the existing flats are often of unsuitable size, further complicating refurbishment efforts.

Nonetheless, LabSU's approach diverges significantly from the 2011 assessment in two key respects. First, it recognises that any regeneration project must be grounded in the active involvement of Bastogi's inhabitants—particularly the one-third of residents who have lived in the complex for over thirty years and who perceive it as their neighbourhood, despite the lack of spontaneous mobilisation or effective representation. Second, it addresses the limitations of the 2011 document, which failed to propose concrete legal or administrative tools to manage long-term informal residence. These weaknesses could be overcome through special allocation schemes, similar to the one developed for Rome's Corviale complex in 2016, enabling long-term residents to transition into regularised housing (see Caudo, 2022)[27]. Only such targeted instruments can transform chronic emergency into structured, inclusive regeneration.

8. Rethinking objectives

The suggestions provided to the city administration definitely differ from the way LabSU operates in other areas of Rome—for example, in Tor Bella Monaca and Quarticciolo neighborhoods. In these neighborhoods, LabSU initiatives are groundbreaking because they channel existing territorial projects into public policies and programs. The latter usually involve two different scenarios: one where the local administration initiates projects without engaging the territories, and the other where the same administration acts independently with limited input from the territories. Carlo Cellamare (2025, p. 75) refers to this as an "inversion of flow". However, this inversion is currently unfeasible in Bastogi due to the lack of endogenous planning. Although the area attracts social, religious, political actors and some welfare entrepreneurs, their presence has not led to bottom-up regeneration—unlike, other LabSU contexts, where grassroots initiatives enabled participatory experimentation. This disparity will form the basis for future reconsiderations and it can be summarized in at least two questions: how can we implement an urban laboratory if there are no spontaneous forms of regeneration? How can we prepare for research-action (cf. Greenwood and Levin, 1998) in a fragmented context that has always been influenced by policies leading to permanent temporariness[28]?

While waiting to find practical answers to these questions, it is essential to address the urgent issue of material existence for Bastogi's inhabitants. This is necessary before proceeding to any regeneration and co-planning efforts.

The operational framework must be paired with a long-term vision aimed at dismantling the informal systems of dependency and mistrust that have developed over decades in the absence of public governance. As noted in Section 7.2, regeneration cannot proceed without acknowledging the specific position of those residents

[27] Also see: https://laboratoriocorviale.it/attivita/accompagnamento-sociale/piano-libero/ (5/2025).

[28] See Marasco (2023). For the effects of uncertainty and the long-term nature of temporary housing on individuals' choices and social outlook, see Clough Marinaro (2022) and Cacciotti (2023) for Rome.

who have lived in Bastogi for over thirty years. Despite the lack of forms of collective representation or structured civic participation, they identify strongly with the area and view it as their neighborhood. This reality requires a political and methodological shift.

The executive agreement between the City of Rome and Sapienza University–DICEA (within which LabSU operates), discussed in Section 5, was not renewed. Although the city administration expressed interest in resolving Bastogi's administrative limbo, its focus has shifted to PNRR-funded[29] projects in officially designated ERP areas such as Tor Bella Monaca. In that neighborhood, LabSU is currently engaged in the *Spazio Cantiere* initiative, which provides support for participatory regeneration and works alongside institutional actors in designing policies that integrate social services, education, and urban planning (see Cellamare, Montillo, 2025).

In contrast, Bastogi remains suspended in a condition of structural invisibility. The housing precarity of its residents—tied to a radicalized form of exceptionalism and the historical failure to reclassify the area as ERP—continues to reproduce cycles of marginalization. This institutional ambiguity effectively displaces political responsibility and delays meaningful interventions, reinforcing the very temporariness that was meant to be provisional.

9. Interdisciplinary reflections and conclusions

During my year of collaboration with LabSU researchers (urban planners, sociologists, historians), I have engaged with scientific categories and analytical frameworks outside my specific discipline, anthropology. I agree with their critical reading on the opacity of the term 'regeneration', especially when it is used as a synonym for physical redevelopment or even as a pretext for property speculation (Ostanel, 2017; Cellamare, 2020). The political decision-maker seldom associates 'regeneration' with holistic policies that integrate both tangible and intangible interventions, customized to address the actual needs expressed by the communities through ongoing dialogue with those directly involved (Brignone et al., 2022, 241). In other words, it is rarely a bottom-up regeneration.

Engaging with these issues has enriched me both personally and epistemologically through my involvement in an interdisciplinary research setting. I am still seeking to fully grasp the specific contribution anthropology can offer to a research-action project shaped by the goals outlined above. A crucial challenge lies in the attempt to activate transformative processes—by learning from local contexts and fostering learning among their inhabitants. As an anthropologist, I am more accustomed to research grounded in the translation of "local moral worlds" (Kleinman and Kleinman, 1991)[30]. Anthropological studies have in fact taken shape from a certain point onwards (cf. Gertz, 1974, 28) as an incessant movement between "experience-near" and "experience-distant" concepts. The experience referred to is that of the individuals we encounter in our research field (the *emic* perspective[31]). It is an interpretative and oscillatory movement that is certainly based on (not only participant) observation but also, and above all, on listening.

Ferdinando Fava (2023) recently reaffirmed the epistemological centrality of listening as a core practice in anthropology. It is practiced between individuals who interact with each other for a shared purpose, not as

[29] PNRR stands for *Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza* (National Recovery and Resilience Plan), Italy's implementation of the EU's Next Generation plan for post-Covid recovery through infrastructure, sustainability, and social inclusion.

[30] The expression, which originated in the field of medical anthropology in the early 1990s, can be effectively applied to comprehend the agency of individuals experiencing social and housing distress, an agency that can never be fully apprehended. Indeed, the authors (Kleinman and Kleinman, 1991, p. 277) write: "the ethnographer's descriptions are always about a local moral world that can only be known incompletely, and for which the relative validity of observations must be regularly re-calibrated. Moreover, what the ethnographer experiences matches how individuals encounter the flow of experience [Dewey, 1957, p. 269]".

[31] For a more detailed discussion, see Harris (1976).

objects from which to extract data. This involves a radical listening to the experience of 'others' but also a listening 'alongside them', in the pursuit of a "common critical interpretation"[32] (Fava 2023, 272).

Bringing these considerations back to the fieldwork context, we cannot refrain from thinking about anthropology's ability to address, for example, the micro-power relations described above (between strong and fragile residents within the CAAT). Simply observing the phenomenon and confronting the parties could crystallize polarization and lead to irreversible exclusions in the planning of regeneration strategies. On the other hand, a participant observation would bring out other questions. Firstly, in Bastogi, it would be *overt*—that is, explicitly declared and transparent about its aims and institutional affiliations (in this case, with the City of Rome). This can lead the study group to establish significant limitations to the researcher's work. Even overcoming these limitations, once accepted by the studied social group, the researcher should permanently assume a role within it. However, in a permanently fragmented and conflictual situation between official residents and 'other' housing statuses (as seen in Section 6.1), this would result in an unproductive alignment of the researcher. Instead, seeking a common critical interpretation with those being listened to could be the key to unlocking opposing interests and supporting bottom-up demands.

Perhaps it is walking alongside urban planners and other social researchers who act on a territory, especially a complex and fragile arena like Bastogi, that gives a sense of interdisciplinarity in action. In fact, the relationship between anthropology and urban planning must mediate between the urgency of understanding "what to do" and the possibility of remaining outside the dimension of action; "between a technical approach linked to space and an hermeneutic approach linked to practices"[33] (Cognetti and Fava, 2017, 127-128).

To be *alongside* means engaging with colleagues in a space of reflective proximity—where disciplinary boundaries blur and shared action becomes possible. The intention to foster processes through which citizens can inhabit their "right to the city" (Lefebvre, 1968) is both challenging and one of the most commendable ways for academia to go beyond itself and engage with places and people. As an anthropologist, I feel the need to add something to this ambition. Tullio Seppilli wrote, speaking to anthropologists involved in institutions (especially medical ones), that it was crucial to position oneself within the essential dynamic processes of society, as it would be impossible to understand their functioning from the outside (Seppilli, 1994, 35-36).

Doubts remain about the potential dangers of action-research in a fragile context like Bastogi. For example, there is a risk of depoliticizing the context and its conflicting aspirations if we act as catalysts of resident demands and mediators between inhabitants and the municipal institution. The latter, moreover, is directly responsible for the permanent housing distress, which makes the issue more delicate. This concern is well expressed by Serena Olcuire (2023, 39-41), who raises the question of whether the University's presence could act as a "placebo, ensuring participation and shared processes that do not necessarily prove to be generative"[34]. Remaining within the medical semantic field, in addition to the risk of serving as a placebo, it is necessary to consider the potential *iatrogenic effect* of our actions. In other words, when we think of administering a cure, we should always be careful not to cause harm. Territories like Bastogi are lived in by people who have had enough bad medicines. Personally, I have chosen to carry with me (as a risk compass) two questions addressed by a woman from the CAAT during an AiC meeting: "why does the Main Municipality study us when they know perfectly well how we are? Why do they need you when we are exactly where they put us and in the conditions in which they placed us?".

[32] Our translation.
[33] Our translation.
[34] Our translation.

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