SQUATTED
INTERIORS

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Squatted Interiors:

Spatial Transformation and Political Re-imagination of Social Centres.

By

Melania Tugulea

"Quisieron Enterrarnos, Pero No Sabían que Éramos Semillas"

(They Tried to Bury Us, But They Didn't Know We Were Seeds)

-Dinos Christianopolus
In relation to the Zapatistas movement

Contents

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Empty structures that no one talks about, spaces that are mainly shaped by the conditions around them with the help of the people that inhabit them, and the impact of the neo-liberal inequalities on communities, are the subjects discussed in this dissertation.

Abandoned and empty buildings have become the norm in many Western cities in the 20th and 21st centuries due to speculation - the process of profiting on future increases in the value of a property. This has resulted in rising property values and displacement of communities that originally lived there. The new redevelopment schemes have mainly focused on generating commercial profit or creating neighbourhoods for wealthier people, a process known as gentrification. A term that was first introduced by Ruth Glass in *Aspects of Change* (1964) to describe how working-class neighbourhoods in London were being transformed by an influx of middle-class residents. Unfortunately, reserving spaces for community use or relocating existing locals to decent residences was not the priority, resulting in many radical political movements and activism rising in Western cities (Martínez, 2018).

First of all, it is important to explain the differences between some forms of activism in order to understand better the subject and these should not be confused with slums, which are informal settlements within cities that have inadequate housing conditions (Mohanty, 2019).
Therefore, in the literature used for this essay, there has been identified three types of activism: street protests, housing emergencies and squatted social centres.
Street protests are the most common type of activism which involve the occupation of streets and sometimes disruptive behaviour towards specific environments; housing emergency involves the occupation of buildings as a last resort due to financial and housing crises in the city; and finally squatted social centres are the unlawful practice of squatting vacant buildings without the owner's permission. Squatters from squatted social centres make political demands related to the occupied buildings, the urban areas where they operate and urban policies at large. In addition to their critique of mainstream urban politics and capitalism, squatters set up counter-cultural and political venues, they promote the preservation of threatened built heritage and urban areas, as well as the development of environmentally friendly and anti-capitalist lifestyles (Martínez, 2018, pp. 1-4).

Squatted Social Centres (SSC's)

Proactive squatting

LOCATION

Central

Outskirts or other neighbourhoods

Gentrification and public attention

Specific needs and challenges faced by the local community

ACTIVITIES

Radical, artistic, political, cultural, community

Lifestyle activities, community, artistic, cultural, radical

To make emphasis on unfair redevelopment and lack of public spaces

To make emphasis on lifestyle choices and institution management

SPACE

Tactical approach

Strategic approach

Inhabitation through installation due to more constrains

Inhabitation through re-appropriation and intervention due to long-term goals
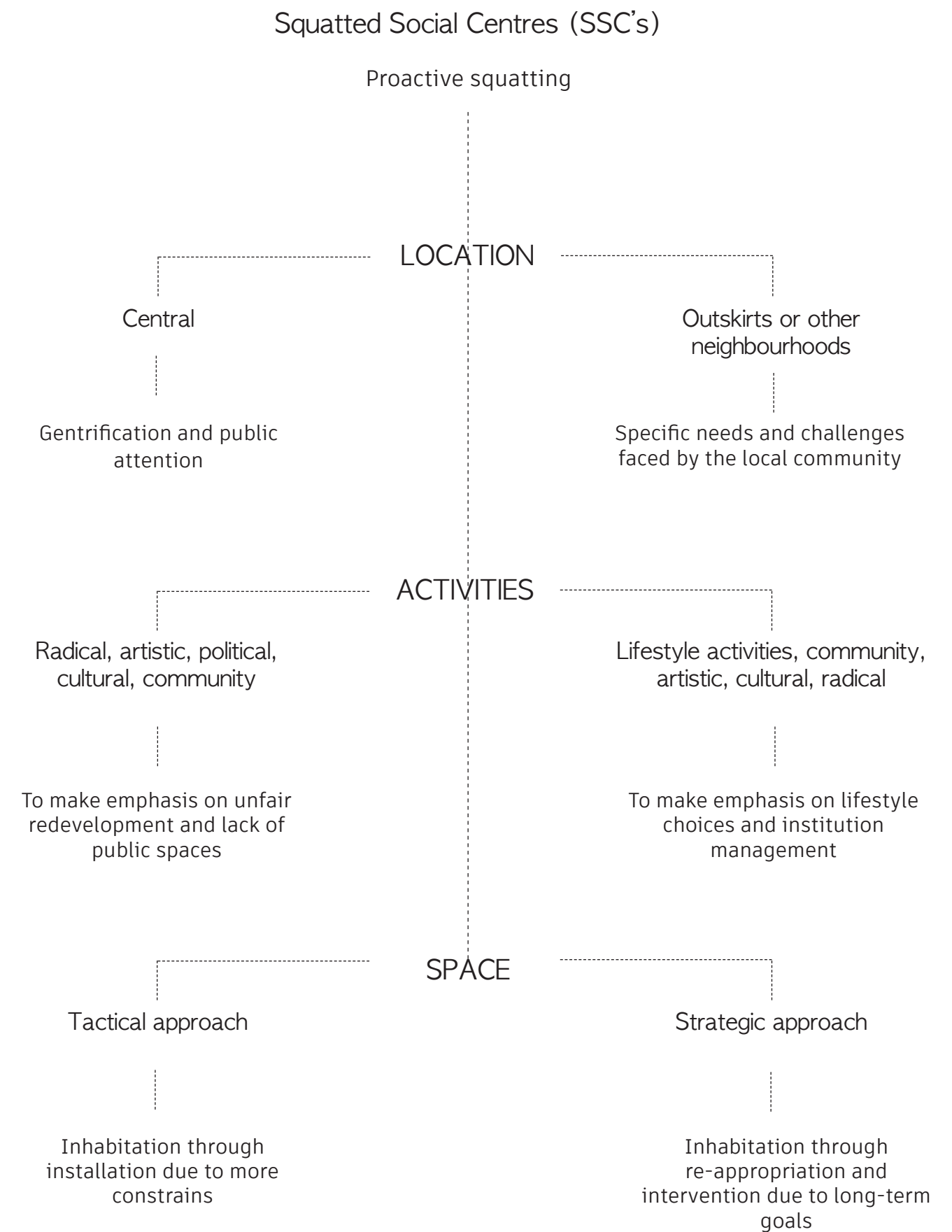
Fig. 1 Melania Tugulea, (2025), *Investigation parameters diagram*.

David Harvey (1996, p. 231) argues that "economic, political and cultural factors, including power relations, institutions and everyday human practice are a direct influence on how socio-spatial structures are designed, used and changed over time". And by socio-spacial structures, he means the entire built environment that has been shaped by these tangible and intangible aspects. Therefore, my proposition here is to analyse some of these squatted social centres from an architectural and legislative perspective and learn by comparing them. I will aim to identify how these places were used and shaped by their community and by external factors, as well as how these spaces themselves influenced the urban infrastructure. In addition, I will investigate whether or not these squatted social centres have a common style and if that style is related or not to the contemporary "Radical Chic". The style that celebrates out of order interventions and raw materials, that we see often nowadays.

For this essay, I will focus mainly on examples of squatted social centres from European countries, particularly Spain, Italy and the UK and the case studies will be from cities such as Madrid, Barcelona, Rome, Milano, Brighton and London where the squatting movement made a greater impact.

The investigation will start with political and historical background around squatted social centres from each country individually and then it will continue with case studies which will be assessed based on the three parameters seen in the diagram from fig. nr. 1. These parameters, the location, the activities and their goals and the space, are the main variables that will help me identify the differences or patterns of how squatted social centres were created and used.

Finally, the main reference used for this dissertation is the book titled *The Urban Politics of Squatters' Movements* edited by Miguel A. Martínez Lopez. This is a useful compilation of essays by different authors and activists who discuss social movements in European cities from a political, legislative and sociological point of view while also touching on the aspect of architectural and design intervention. It also helped me identify second references like the books *Justice, nature & the Geography of difference* by David Harvey and *The Right to the City* by Henri Lefebvre. It also inspired me to create the diagram with the parametres useful for analysing the case studies.

CHAPTER 2
Squatted Social Centres in Spain

Political and Legislative Context

The initial building occupation in Madrid and Barcelona was divided into the anarchist building occupation and the early political squatting, starting with the transitional time when Spain was shifting to liberal democracy. Between 1976 and 1978, a citizens' movement occupied about 500 houses, and anarchist trade unions reclaimed buildings confiscated during Franco's regime (1939–1975) (Alía,1978, cited in Martínez López, 2018). These groups, named "Ateneos Libertarios" (AL), created community spaces with a strong political focus, similar to later squatted social centres. However, ALs identified more with anarchism than squatting (Carmona 2012, pp. 479–489 and Seminario 2015, pp. 23–77, cited in Martínez López, 2018). After the dictatorship, Madrid's first social democratic government caused large disappoints among citizens, which started new political protests focusing on environmental activism, pacifism, women's rights, anti-gentrification, youth unemployment and the lack of affordable housing, and created a squatting movement "okupa", which emphasized the occupation of abandoned buildings as a form of protest while using them as social centres (Martínez López, 2018, pp. 25-47).

The first squat to name itself Squatted Social Centre (SSC) in Madrid emerged from the revolting workers of a former printing company that demanded compensation before the demolition of the factory and the houses attached to it. Meanwhile, one of the earliest known examples in Barcelona is from 1977 in Nou Barris, a working-class neighbourhood on the outskirts of Barcelona, who took action against a heavily polluting asphalt plant, occupying the site and transforming it into the Ateneu Popular de Nou Barris which remains a legal community hub today (Debelle et al., 2018, pp. 51-70). In the early years, squatters in Madrid had a more politically driven attitude, mainly occupying buildings in the city centre, especially industrial ones and abandoned schools (Martínez López, 2018, pp. 25-47).

Meanwhile, in Barcelona, squatters became deeply involved in the major protests of the time, showing solidarity with the Zapatista rebellion in Mexico and joining campaigns against the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the neoliberal policies of the European Union, and addressing (Debelle et al., 2018, pp. 51-70). Between 1991 and 1995, squatting

in Madrid and Barcelona benefited from a more favourable legal environment. At that time, squatting was considered a civil rather than a criminal matter (Seminario 2015, pp. 185–196, cited in Martínez López, 2018). This meant squatters could only be evicted through civil lawsuits or police action without facing jail time or fines (Martínez López, 2018, pp. 25-47).

The next wave of squatted social centres started in 1996 with the new Penal Code, which made squatting a crime punishable by jail. This criminalization helped protect private property and made evictions faster and more efficient. As a result, property owners were more likely to retain their properties and leaving them unused, so they could sell them later at higher prices rather than providing immediate housing or supporting cultural uses. This process, called speculation, was backed by the local government alongside the redevelopment of the city's outskirts, gentrification and urban tourism since both conservative and social democratic elites still agreed on turning Madrid into a major global city by 2004 (Martínez López, 2018, pp. 25-47). While this redevelopment of the city can bring improvements in infrastructure and services, it usually comes at the cost of pushing out longtime residents who can no longer afford to live there.

Despite these challenges, SSCs continued to thrive and received strong backing from the community, including support from legally rented social spaces, which were often linked to Catalan independentist groups (Debelle et al., 2018, pp. 51-70). In addition, Madrid became a hotspot for activism, particularly the Global Justice Movement (GJM), between the mid-1990s and mid-2000s. Some, like the feminist and autonomist squat Eskalera Karakola, successfully negotiated with authorities and they relocated to municipal spaces with affordable rents (Martínez López, 2018, pp. 25-47). Furthermore, in 2006, a new housing movement emerged, pushing for policies like affordable rents and more social housing, but in order to take away attention from it, the squatting movement was portrayed in a bad light in the media, and in the months that followed, this led to intense police crackdowns on protests and other activist actions (Debelle et al., 2018, pp. 51-70).

The third wave of squatting was triggered by the 2008 global financial crisis, which caused Spain's social democratic government to adopt even stronger neoliberal policies. They reformed labour laws, changed retirement systems, bailed out banks, and cut back essential public services, leading to widespread dissatisfaction and the 15M "Indignados" movement (Martínez López, 2018, pp. 25-47). The movement was supported by groups like the PAH (Platform for People Affected by Mortgages), which highlighted housing struggles. Unlike most squatters, housing activists were open to legal negotiations and working with local authorities to push for their goals. Because they were willing to negotiate and didn't have such a radical identity, the government often allowed these squatters to stay in the buildings they occupied and avoided harsh punishments (Martínez López, 2018, pp. 25-47).

However, in 2015, there were drastic changes to Spain's Penal Code. One such change, known as the "gag law," severely limited civil liberties, a point that has been criticized by NGOs, professional groups, the EU, and the UN (Debelle et al., 2018, pp. 51-70).
On the other hand, according to the Spanish current Criminal Code (Código Penal), squatting results in penalties such as fines or imprisonment if someone enters a property without permission, and the property is someone's habitual residence and when squatters prevent the rightful owner from accessing or using the habitual property. If the squatters occupy real estate (land or buildings) without the owner's consent, then it can result in

fines but not imprisonment unless violence or intimidation is used (Government of Spain, 2024).

While the national reforms apply across Spain, the process of gentrification, which had been transforming Madrid's centre for decades in order to create a global city, has continued unabated (Martínez López, 2018, pp. 25-47), whereas squatting in Barcelona has been somewhat more tolerated, particularly under leftist-led municipal governments and Catalonia introduced a housing law allowing regions to cap rents in stressed areas which has resulted in an increase in temporary and single-room rentals as landlords seek to circumvent regulations (Idealista, 2024).

Finally, now that we know that squatting emerges as a protest against state control over land and housing, from this perspective, many Catalans view Spanish rules as an external force that denies them total control over their own institutions, economy and cultural identity. This is why some SSCs have supported the Catalan independence movement, seeing it as a step towards breaking free from centralized power.

Architectural Analysis

Palacio Malaya

Location and Relevance

The Malaya Occupied Social Palace was located in the Malaya Palace in the centre of Madrid on Atocha Street 49. It was occupied in 2008, during the period of criminalization and growth of social centres in Spain, as a response to the globalization plan that was being carried out in the centre of Madrid with the support of the conservative government of the time and in 2013 it was terminally evicted due to the active Penal Code (Martínez López et al., 2018). Being in the city centre for this squatted social centre was key as it provided visibility and access to a wider public, which was crucial for challenging the city's unfair gentrification plans that caused displacement of communities. Rather than relying solely on physical protest, they used cultural production and radical discourse as tools for activism in the eyes of a broad public.

Fig. 2 Inthesitymad, (2008), *Palacio Malaya*

Activities

When occupied, the building served as a squatted social centre that hosted political events like talks and gatherings for anyone who wanted to participate, as a space for groups in need, bicycle repair workshops, yoga classes and a film club (Inthesity, 2008). Moreover, it hosted for a while the Squatting Office (Oficina de Okupación), which supported squatters by offering advice and publishing a handbook, the "Manual de Okupación," which provided legal guidance and technical advice for squatting (Martínez López et al., 2018). Even if the squatted social centre provided a non-capitalistic lifestyle and social spaces for the neighbourhood, its emphasis was on the creative and political talks produced there. This way, they infiltrated broader radical and alternative conversations into the city while maintaining an active resistance against capitalist urban transformation.
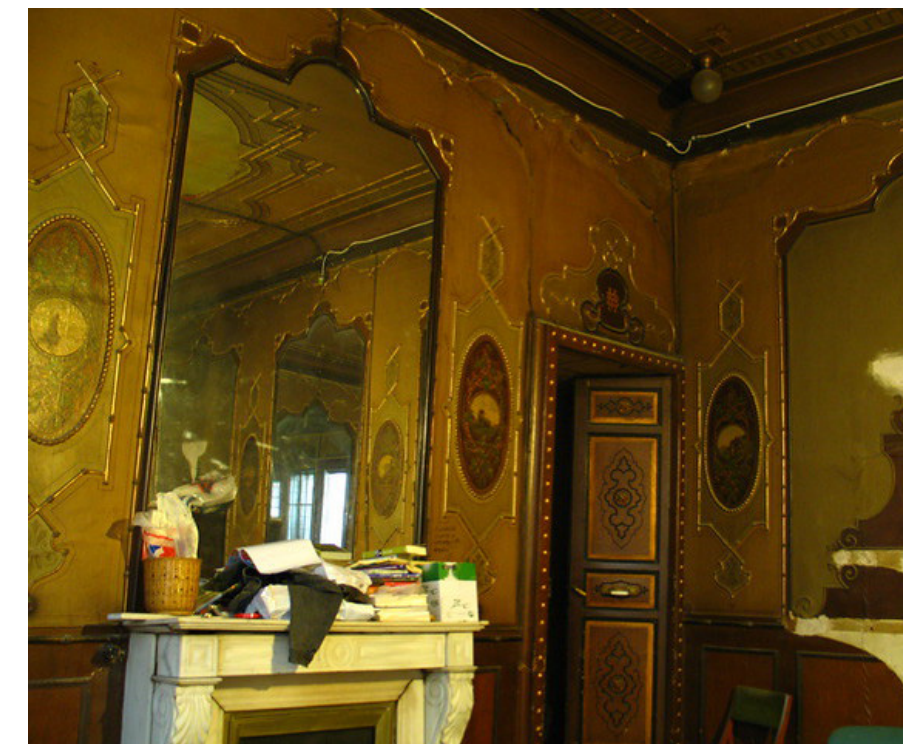

Fig. 3 Inthesitymad, (2008), *Palacio Malaya*

Space The building is a 19th-century Historic Tenement Building with cast-iron balconies and neoclassical brickwork. The interiors have a Parisian influence with larger rooms and high ceilings, and also a Neo-Baroque influence through ornate ceilings and walls with elaborate mouldings and stucco relief in conjunction with deep, rich colours like royal blue and bronze paired with gold (Inthesity, 2008). Before being occupied, the building was already in an abandoned state, which squatters unintentionally embraced through their tactical approach, relying on small-scale, ephemeral interventions rather than strategic restorations. They introduced temporary furniture based on the activities taking place while minimizing their physical impact. This allowed them to have a more flexible environment since it is more affordable and easy to make and does not require constant maintenance or community engagement, allowing for more time for being creative inside the space and not worrying how the space is completely managed. Moreover, the material deterioration of the space and the unintentional spatial disorder of the interiors, as seen in the figures 3 and 4, became an embodiment of the struggle, experimentation, and resistance that come with radical thinking.

Now, Malaya Palace has been transformed into a four-star hotel. While it has retained some of the existing elements, like the wooden flooring the elaborate mouldings, and stucco relief on the ceiling and walls and was rehabilitated to still have an effortless look (Google Maps, 2025), this representation reflects the broader urban trends in which grassroots interventions and informal reappropriations are often absorbed into the very systems they once resisted.

Fig. 4 Inthesitymad, (2008), *Palacio Malaya*

Fig. 5 Inthesitymad, (2008), *Palacio Malaya*

Can Batllo

Location and Relevance

L'Espai Comunitari i Veïnal Autogestionat de Can Batlló (The Self-Managed Community and Neighbourhood Centre of Can Batlló) is located in the old Can Batlló textile factory, the industrial area of Barcelona, Bordeta. It was occupied in 2011 by the platform "Can Batlló és pel barri" (Can Batlló belongs to the neighbourhood) (Can Batllò, 2025) with the support of the 15M movement to confront a proposed luxury redevelopment of the old textile factory encouraged by both conservatives and social democrats gentrification strategy (Debelle et al., 2018). Thanks to the strong neighbourhood connection, the City Council gave in one building in 2011, and until the present day, they managed to legalize the remaining 12 buildings of the factory, reaching a total of 13.000 m2 (Can Batllò, 2025). In this case, the location of the squat is not necessarily central, as its primary motivation is the specific needs and challenges faced by the local neighbourhood, which are themselves linked to broader national issues. Rather than using occupation as a means of drawing public or media attention to a nationwide crisis, this squat is focused on direct, tangible interventions within the neighbourhood itself.

Fig. 6 Arquitectura Viva, (n/d), *Can Batllo, Barcelona*

Activities

The Social Centre hosts a diverse range of activities, including mutual support networks, public community spaces, health, food, and sports facilities, local economic initiatives, educational workshops, cultural and training programs, and housing, spread throughout the entire campus. The highlights are nr.1 BLOC 11, which was the first legalized space, hosts the "Biblioteca Josep Pons", a bar, a music creation space, a sewing space, a local economic activity, and a climbing wall (Can Batlló, 2025); nr.4 Bloc4BCN ceded to the Bloc4 Association, which, after a respectful restoration by Emiliano López Mónica Rivera Architects, has become the largest hub in Europe for the promotion of cooperative projects (Info Barcelona, 2024); and nr. 8 which is the community gardens occupying 300 m2 (Can Batlló, 2025). Even if political, cultural, and artistic activities are a huge part of this centre, the way they are managed requires a lot of neighbourhood involvement and cooperative help, and they are part of the community's day-to-day lifestyle. Its goals extend beyond the inhabitation and radical culture production; instead, it seeks to reshape the built environment, the traditional capitalistic lifestyle choices and institution management by addressing the socio-economic struggles that define the area.

Fig. 7 Info Barcelona, (2024), *Bloc4BCN*

Space The textile factory was built in the 19th century, and the original fabric was made of wood, brick, and metal (Info Barcelona, 2024). When occupied, the conditions were unstable and precarious, and they remained the same for the majority of the campus. BLOC 11, la Borda and a few more spaces have been built and rehabilitated independently by the participants themselves with the help of the LACOL Architects, and la CantinaLab was fully rehabilitated by the Sants-Montjuïc district. The fully rehabilitated spaces have been equipped with the necessary installations, whereas the rest of the spaces are waiting for the pending renovations to be able to settle the installations in stable conditions (Can Batlló, 2025). Having in mind all the changes that have already been made and the ones that are still to be completed we can say that this squatted social centre has a more strategic approach to the re-appropriation of the factory and its surroundings. Its highlight is the involvement of future users throughout the entire process: design, construction, and use. The transformation is intended to be more long-term, and since it implies structural changes, it requires a formal design strategy, process and professional help. However, the user's participation shaped the project according to their needs in order to create an opportunity to collaborate and self-initiate future projects. Moreover, as we can see from the interior and exterior pictures, figs. 6, 7 and 9, there has been structural reinforcement and refurbishment done leaving to be seen unfinished architectural elements. The restoration done by people from the community has achieved this involuntary, due to high cost of materials and having a polished interior not being their main goal. On the other hand, the restoration done by professionals has continued in a way this style in order to further promote the occupant's radical values.

Fig. 8 LACOL, (2014), *La Borda habitatge cooperatiu.*

Fig. 9 Casas Barrachina, (2022), *Biblioteca Popular Josep Pons Can Batlló.*

CHAPTER 3
Squatted Social Centres in Italy

Political and Legislative Context

After World War II, the Italian Communist Party (PCI) supported squatting as a way to advocate for the rights of thousands of migrants and homeless people in Italian cities, which resulted in the government building subsidised housing for low- and middle-income families (Mudu and Rossini, 2018, p.100). However, by the late 1960s and early 1970s, the PCI moved away from this tactic and the university student movement, commonly known as "La Pantera" alongside a new type of squatting known as "Centri Sociali "(Social Centres) emerged, as people began occupying spaces to create hubs for alternative social and cultural activities, particularly in Milan, since public space started shrinking due to privatisation and the rising job insecurity and workforce fragmentation, along with cuts to education made it much harder to sustain solidarity networks (Mudu and Rossini, 2018, p.101).

Furthermore, in the 1980s, the redevelopment of peripheral areas and the concentration of resources in wealthier neighbourhoods led to unfair changes in the city since some areas benefited more than others (Mudu and Rossini, 2018, pp. 101–103). Consecutively, in March 1986, Rome saw the establishment of its first self-managed squatted social centre (Centro Sociale Occupato Autogestito, or CSOA) called "Hai Visto Quinto" (Mudu and Rossini, 2018, pp. 101–103).

Moreover, in 1998, the complete deregulation of the housing market and housing policies started when the centre-left government finalised the shift toward a free-market housing system with Law 431, which removed many remaining tenant protections, and in 2000, Decree No. 267/2000 allowed for the sale of public housing stock, meaning government-owned homes were gradually sold off or privatised, leading to rising rental costs, fewer affordable housing options, growing real estate speculation and gentrification in cities. In response, the squatting movement grew, creating hubs focused on independence and self-management, working together outside of the government's control, and improving local social life. According to the Italian Constitution, citizens can step in when the government fails to take care of public needs (Brenner and Theodore, 2002,

cited in Mudu and Rossini, 2018, p. 103-108). Consequently, the authorities developed specific narratives on the rebellious urban practices. The co-option approach manifests when governments and city planners take ideas from grassroots movements and use them for their benefit, like City branding to attract tourism or by legalising them only within official rules, keeping the city in control. The second approach is selective neglect, which means ignoring the latent problem or conflictual situation and confining it to a 'backstage' position. And finally, repressive strategies manifest when governments use security measures to control, repress, or even eliminate these movements (Mudu and Rossini, 2018, pp. 109-110).

Regarding legalisation, before the mid-1990s, the authorities dealt with SSCs through a mix of selective neglect and repression; however, in 1995, the "Delibera 26/1995" was approved, which allowed specific squatted spaces to be legalised only if they signed a temporary low-cost lease with the city. However, the spaces were still at risk of being sold for private development (Mudu and Rossini, 2018, p. 110). On the contrary, the legalisation of housing occupations has been a more controversial topic because, in Rome, real estate speculation is a major economic force, and allowing housing occupations would directly challenge the interests of powerful property developers and landlords. The only legal pathway to institutionalising housing occupations was through the 1998 regional law (Law No. 36/1998), which recognised mostly public buildings to be officially repurposed into self-managed housing through approaches like "autorecupero" (self-help renewal or (re)appropiation) and "autocostruzione" (self-construction). However, only very few housing occupations benefited from it (Mudu and Rossini, 2018, p. 113).

Moreover, in 2001, after the housing crisis protests, the government approved a protocol on emergency housing which allocated funds to purchase properties for public housing and squatters were recognised as people in urgent housing need and allowed them to be placed on waiting lists for public housing. However, the regulation was rarely enforced, and the waiting lists for public housing were extremely long; since there were far more applicants than available units, people often waited for years with little chance of getting housing (Lombardi-Diop, 2009, cited in Mudu and Rossini, 2018, p. 113-114).

The 2008 financial crisis deepened the housing crisis, leading to the fourth wave of squatting "Movimenti per il diritto all'abitare" (Movements for the Right to Inhabit). As a result of this, hey occupied public and abandoned facilities about to be privatised, for instance, Teatro Valle being the highlight in 2011, and the city government, under the "Patrimonio Bene Comune" initiative, managed city properties as common heritage but low-quality, peripheral properties were made available for social and cultural use, and high-quality, centrally located properties were reserved for privatisation, likely benefiting commercial interests. (Mudu and Rossini, 2018, pp. 111 - 115).

In recent years, Italy has continued implementing strict laws to address the issue of squatting, particularly concerning self-managed social centres. Within Giorgia Meloni's government, in 2023, the Italian Parliament implemented Law No. 199, which introduced significant penalties for unauthorised property occupation. This law was added to the Criminal Code, and it specifically targets individuals who organise or promote the occupation of land or buildings, whether public or private, resulting in penalties like fines and imprisonment, which led to numerous evictions (Library of Congress, 2023).

According to the above information, it can be said that the city needed redevelopment

after both World Wars to make it more accessible to the new evolving society. From one point of view, this new redevelopment has improved the city's infrastructure. It brought many benefits, such as more opportunities to create businesses, develop the economy, and create a more diverse and accessible job market. It also created a more favourable city image that attracted new citizens and promoted diversity. However, this redevelopment relied on the traditional capitalist framework, bringing profit only for capitalist growth and benefiting the elite classes and middle classes. In contrast, lower classes and marginalised people were being pushed aside and given false promises of future inclusion. When they tried to revolt, their radical ideas get absorbed into mainstream politics in a way that makes them less threatening. Referring to Antonio Gramsci's idea of "passive revolution" (Morton, 2024), the system adapted just enough to keep power while making sure real change didn't happen. As capitalism advances, inflation rises, and the gap between these two realities within the same city continues to widen.

Architectural Analysis

Angelo Mai

Location and Relevance

The squatted social centre Angelo Mai started in 2004 with the occupation of the abandoned Angelo Mai boarding school in the centre of Rome. The central location of this squat was intended to raise awareness of the systematic housing shortage happening in Italy at that time since its first occupants were families affected by the housing crisis and a group of artists trying to promote independent political and cultural spaces. Because of its political activity, the squat suffered three evictions and legal actions, and finally, in 2006, they were assigned a less public location, the former bowling alley in San Sebastiano Park, as part of the "Patrimonio Bene Comune" initiative in Rome (Angelo Mai, 2025). For a squat like this that had as an initial drive broader national issues, being central was key. This way, they could get in the way of everyday life attracting attention, and endanger the city's image, which could have possibly resulted in some changes from the authorities. The new location on the other hand, even if it still is a bit central, it is away from everyday life and the public, which could end up in a change of identity for the SSC.

Activities

Throughout the years after the relocation, the centre has connected more with its artistic roots. It hosts a vibrant community of politically active artists who create out-of-format creative projects which embedded ethical values into the city's urban fabric. The new alley is home to different open studios for diverse musical and theatrical shows, concerts and performances; they call themselves the "Laboratory of artistic experiments and political activism" (Angelo Mai, 2025). No matter all the tough situations in the past and the less favourable relocation, the self-managed centre reinvented itself and became a symbol of cultural resistance and production in Rome. Even though their first focus was advocating for the housing crisis and needed large audiences to raise awareness about the issue and relied on public attention and activism to highlight the problem, the relocation and the co-option appeal from the government probably pushed them to rethink their approach to activism. Now, they are trying to work on the problem from the inside out, creating change by integrating art into the city's fabric through the people who practice it and the people who interact with it.

Fig. 10 Aesse Studio Architetti, (n/d), *Ex instituto Angelo Mai.*

Fig. 11 Angelo Mai, (2018), *Fuori Posto. Festivali di Teatri al Limite.*

Space The lack of information about the alternative housing intention in the abandoned boarding school only reflects the powerful criminalisation of squatting, which has historically marginalised informal spatial and cultural practices. However, the emergence of the alley as a cultural space represents a radical "reappropriation" of spaces outside traditional models of culture in order to challenge existing power dynamics (Angelo Mai, 2025). In this case, the community chose a tactical approach driven by the physical and economic constraints of the pre-existing structure. Rather than altering its fundamental form, users engage with it primarily through inhabitation by adding necessary installations depending on the different activities taking place. They treat the built fabric as a framework since it disposes of open spaces that naturally facilitate public activities and social interactions, and they position adaptability in the space as a core approach to place-making, since the activities taking place are highly artistic and experimental, requiring frequent change. The resulting aesthetic, often perceived as an "effortless look" in combination with experimental art, is, in fact, a material expression of struggle, resistance, and creative autonomy. The space actively highlights the political and artistic processes that are happening in it and redefines the conventional modes of artistic production and engagement in space. In other words, the activity shapes the space.

Fig. 12 Angelo Mai, (2020), *Who we are.*

Fig. 13 Wanted In Rome, (2019), *Angelo Mai.*

Leoncavallo

Location and Relevance

The first occupation of the 3600 m2 warehouse was on Via Ruggero Leoncavallo in 1975 since there were speculative urban developments in the peripheral areas of Milan as a consequence of the economic policies of the Christian Democratic government. The occupants were a group of local extra-parliamentary militants coming from different experiences within the radical left autonomous movement happening in Italy at that time and, after being evicted from the historical building which was their head-quarter until 1994, they moved to a former printer's warehouse in via Antoine Watteau, also in the north-eastern outskirts of Milan. Over time, Leoncavallo established a certain level of communication and collaboration with local organisations and representatives of the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) (Leoncavallo, 2025) and the squatted social centre evolved into a critical hub for social and political engagement, directly addressing the specific needs and challenges of the local working-class community, while discussing broader issues.

Fig. 14 Abitare, (2015), *Murals by Orticanoodles, Ericalicane and Blu.*

Activities

Leoncavallo operates as a diverse social and cultural hub, deeply embedded in the local community while influencing broader societal structures. Establishing a nursery school, kindergarten, after-school programs, a soup kitchen, and a gynaecological clinic (Leoncavallo, 2025), Leoncavallo addresses immediate social needs for the day-to-day neighbourhood and marginalised groups. Simultaneously, its cultural and educational initiatives, ranging from concerts, photography and language courses to silk-screen printing, theatre workshops, a bicycle repair shop, and an independent radio station, serve as platforms for artistic experimentation and political discourse (Leoncavallo, 2025). It is also important to mention that the place is famous for its underground publishing, graphic design, and comic strips, representing the diversity, struggle, and experimental identity of the squat (Kuruvilla, 2015). The majority of these activities and the alternative management of the institution require a more engaged community participation and responsibility for the space, which are reshaping and challenging the traditional capitalist infrastructure from a local intervention.

Fig. 15 Buena Vista, (n/d), *Eight edition of the Hiu.*

Space   Leoncavallo's current location, a 10,000m2 former factory surrounding a green courtyard, required a more strategic approach to occupation, given the activities it now hosts and the community engagement. The squatters worked toghether to deep clean the site and to do restoration work (SQUIRT, 2021). Their aim was to create safe conditions, so that the community could add installations and use it daily, ensuring its long-term functionality. One example of this is the 1,000m2 print studio, shown in fig. nr. 16. Local occupants, in collaboration with American artist Chuck Sperry, produced this space to give people open access to printmaking so that people can have a medium for artistic and political expression (SQUIRT, 2021).

Despite having more spaces with a permanent use assigned to them in order to facilitate the creation of an alternative lifestyle, certain spaces within Leoncavallo remain flexible because of their large dimensions and the diverse needs of the community. In other words, keeping the flexibility of a space allows for more economic accessibility because you don't need more rooms and expensive permanent installations, and also, it allows for a quick change of scenery when the cultural, artistic and educative activities take place. As we can see in fig. nr. 17, these large spaces were inhabited with mobile installations that reshape the space with each new event or activity. Moreover, the street art seen around Leoncavallo's interior and exterior walls represents the centre's identity as a space of radical creativity and resistance (SQUIRT, 2021). There are no records of a new structure built at the current location, but after the eviction in 1994, half of the first historical building was demolished; the occupants then gathered and rebuilt by hand what had been destroyed, just for them to be evicted again (Membretti, 2007).

Fig. 16 Abitare, (2015), *Letterpress Workers*.

Fig. 17 Abitare, (2015), *La Terra Trema*.

CHAPTER 4
Squatted Social Centres in the UK

Political and Legislative Context

Squatting in the UK has mainly originated with the housing crisis after both World Wars. For instance, in Brighton, people took direct action to solve their own housing needs without any central authority, by occupying empty houses to provide homes for returning soldiers and their families (Dee, 2018, p. 210). Until 1980, squats were seen more as a lifestyle choice and as places to live rather than as hubs for activism or community events. Instead of gathering in organised social centres, squatters would connect through certain pubs and parties, forming an underground, alternative social scene, such as working men's clubs and punk autonomy centres. Furthermore, in some parts of London, people were also trying to solve the housing problem on their own and slum housing became the first widespread alternative. Meanwhile, many homes owned by the Council were left empty due to bureaucratic delays, and some were waiting to be demolished (Dee, 2013, p. 3). What's more, one of the most common crisis housing alternatives in the UK, which was registered in a lot of cities after both World Wars, was the occupation of empty army camps that were supposed to be torn down. These camps were repurposed into temporary housing, and some people continued living in them well into the 1950s (Needle Collective & Bash Street Kids 2014, p. 158, cited in Dee, 2018, p. 210).

However, with time, these occupations became more political. Squatters helped other people in need and began campaigning against housing issues in the city, such as property speculation, exploitative landlords, and a large number of vacant council-owned buildings (Dee, 2018, p. 210). The first radical left-wing squatted social centres were largely influenced by the self-managed occupied social centres in Italy and Spain since the idea of an anarchist social centre had not yet taken hold in the UK. Considering that Centro Ibérico in London was one of the most influential cases, squatted by Spanish anarchists in the early 1980s (Dee, 2018, p. 210).

In due course, social centres became a key part of autonomous protest movements in England despite often being short-lived. They were spaces of resistance and subversion, challenging capitalism and traditional ways of living, as described by Anita Lacey (2005,

p. 293). Some of these first radial social centres manifested themselves in North-East London. They took over buildings in Redbridge, including Ilford, Redbridge, and Wanstead, but some of these occupations ended in violent evictions by private bailiff companies since squatting at the time was a civil matter. However, despite these incidents and the Criminal Law Act 1977, which criminalised the violent entry and occupation of properties, the movement turned into a long-term victory with the help of public support and sympathetic coverage from mainstream media (Dee, 2013, p. 4).

Not long after this, Margaret Thatcher's government (1979–1990) implemented neoliberal economic policies, such as the privatisation of public assets, including housing and community spaces; cuts to public spending, leading to the closure of community centres and youth clubs; gentrification, which prioritised commercial interests over public or social needs; and privatisation of council housing (Dee, 2018, p. 212). Brighton, for instance, has become a commuter town for people working in London. Having this in mind, the city council has encouraged gentrification in the city centre, and it has adopted more capitalism-friendly policies that implemented big supermarkets moving in and local shops being replaced by boutique stores and fashionable bars, making it more attractive to the urban middle class looking for a place to live or to pass by (Lees et al. 2007, p. 132, cited in Dee, 2018, p. 212).

Therefore, the majority of these SSCs were in the city centre, and they were eager to draw attention to the abandoned buildings that could be repurposed for the existing community to use, some of the most significant examples being the occupation of the West Pier in the 1990s, and the Squatters Estate Agency (Dee, 2018, p. 216). However, most squatted projects lasted only three months or even weeks, this being the lifespan of the legal process when property owners took squatters to court to reclaim their places back. Due to this short time scale of the legal processes, few squatted projects became long-term or institutionalised, and the overall squatting culture in the UK was characterised as a scene of ephemeral constant movement (Dee, 2018, p. 217).

Furthermore, the squatter's movement started to decline since in 1994 the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act was enabled, which granted police enhanced powers to remove occupants when there was damage to property or abusive behaviour (Dee, 2018, p. 220). As a result, only a few squatted social centres remained active at that time but still were evicted in the end. In Brighton, for example, the Temporary Autonomous Arts, SPOR, and CRAB opened to the public as galleries, social centres, libraries, or community gardens. They presented a seamless blend of collaborative creativity and activism while reflecting the idea of "the right to the city", a concept from Henri Lefebvre (Burbridge and Coomasaru, 2012, cited in Dee, 2018, p. 219).

In the 2000's new squatted social centres appeared in Brighton, and these were the only legalised projects: Cowley Club, which is a unique phenomenon in the squatting world since the space originally squatted was legalised as a strategic move in order to maintain the infrastructure for activists; and Phoenix Gallery, which was also legalised as a strategic move but in comparison with Cowley Club it is no longer politically active (Dee, 2018, pp. 215-216). Moreover, some of London's most influential SSCs were RampART, Ratstar, Belgrade Road, OffMarket, the Bank of Ideas, Colorama, the Cheese Factory, House of Brag and the Cuts Café (Dee, 2013, p. 19). The things took a very dramatic turn in 2012 when the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act was enabled, witch criminalised squatting in residential properties, making it an offense punishable by prison or fines.

This legislation significantly affected the establishment of squats for housing and those intended for use as social centres in residential buildings (UK Government, 2012).

However, squatting in a non-residential building is only considered a crime if there have been damages to the property and if the squatters don't leave in case of eviction (Gov. uk, 2025). Since then, squatted social centres have faced consistently negative media portrayals, in contrast to the more favourable public perception they had in the 1970s when many saw it as a way for people to make use of the numerous vacant properties in the area. Now, the media created a moral panic, portraying squatters as criminals and foreigners who unfairly took over homes from law-abiding homeowners (Dee, 2013, p. 18).

Architectural Analysis

Cowley Club

Location and Relevance

Cowley Club had a unique approach to activism. Its representatives purchased the place in 2001 (The Cowley Club, 2025) so that they could benefit from stability and a long-term vision for the future, allowing them to focus on social change without the constant threat of eviction.

The building was located at 12 London Road in central Brighton. This central location was key since the city centre has undergone extensive gentrification after Brighton became a commuter city to London (Dee, 2018). According to that, Cowley Club decided to be part of the urban development and to make use of the central visibility in order to challenge the traditional way of thinking and creating instead of being displaced by the economic forces (Freedom, 2025). Taking into consideration that Cowley Club was bought, we can say that there were no negotiations with authorities, meaning that the term "passive revolution" explained earlier does not apply here. On the contrary, it is an example of how legal cooperation can sometimes slowly allow communities to make changes in the cities' infrastructure. Ever since, Cowley Club has been shaping the cultural and political discourse of the city through meaningful conversations and alternative education (Freedom, 2025).

Activities

Today, Cowley Club hosts a vegan cafe that provides affordable meals and earns financial support to sustain the centre; it also has a concert venue for music, performances of all kinds and social gatherings; and finally, it hosts a bookshop with a diversity of self-published books (The Cowley Club, 2025). Although the centre runs on self-management principles and requires active engagement from the community, it is mainly known for its cultural and artistic implications and the creation of active political talks (The Cowley Club, 2025). These cultural events create an alternative environment for different discussions and collective action; they encourage future generations to think critically and experiment. In other words, they are trying to make change through education and creativity.
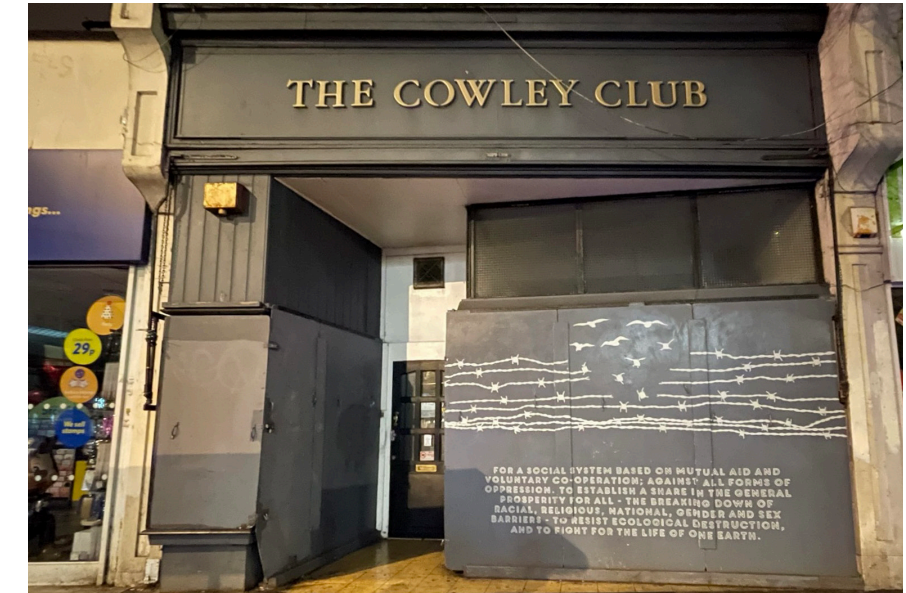
Fig. 18 Harry Rawding, (2020), *The Cowley Club.*

Fig. 19 Freedom, (n.d), *Cowley Club.*

Space The building is a two-story terraced structure with commercial frontage dating back over a century. After its purchase, it underwent major renovation because of the precarious conditions, and volunteers dedicated extensive time and effort to acquiring construction skills to restore the space, which officially opened in March 2003 (Freedom, 2025). Despite substantial reinforcements to its structural fabric, its approach to the space remains more tactical, probably due to the building constraints imposed by the city council, the lack of major help and the lack of finances. After the restoration, the space has been mainly inhabited by vintage furniture and other specific installations, and the resulting aesthetic exposes an unintentional disorder with a diverse collection of cultural artefacts, experimental art, and books. The final dynamic environment not only accommodates but also visually reflects the radical artistic and political activities that define the space.

Fig. 21 Freedom, (n.d), *Cowley Club*.

Fig. 20 Francesca Di Santo, (2022), *Cowley Club*.

Fig. 22 Freedom, (n.d), *Cowley Club*.

RampART

Location and Relevance

The abandoned Islamic girls' school at 15-17 Rampart Street in East End London was initially occupied in May 2004 to provide temporary accommodation for activists travelling to London for the 2004 European Social Forum. Beyond offering shelter, the occupation was also a political statement against real estate speculation in one of London's most desired neighbourhoods, resulting in property owners in the area often leaving buildings abandoned for years, waiting for market prices to rise before selling them for profit, despite the ongoing homelessness crisis in the city.

Once the European Social Forum ended, RampART evolved into a squatted social centre, which was organised by a politically engaged collective of both national and international activists until it was finally evicted in 2009 (Past Tense, 2018). The centre also functioned as a grassroots support network, engaging with immediate community needs, but mostly as a platform for political resistance advocating for wider structural change since it benefited from the proximity to the city centre to attract public attention and amplify awareness of systemic housing injustices on a national scale.

Fig. 23 RampART, (2007), *Otside rampART1.*

Activities

RampART operated for five years and offered space and resources to support various social and activist initiatives. It provided meeting rooms and computer workspaces, many of which were second-hand and repurposed for community use, along with workshops on media production, bookmaking, and banner creation. Moreover, a diverse range of creative projects thrived within RampART, including amateur theatre, art installations, acoustic concerts, and weekly film screenings such as the Indymedia London film festivals, "Caminos de Resistencia" (Paths of Resistance). The space also hosted poetry readings, photography exhibitions, and political discussions (Past Tense, 2018). These activities highlighted the lack of free social spaces outside paternalistic government agendas and emphasised the importance of such spaces for society's mental health, the creation of cultural alternatives independent of capitalist systems, and the promotion of political education.

Fig. 24 RampART, (2007), *Library.*

Space The building at 15-17 Rampart Street has undergone significant changes in order to adapt it to the needs of its users since the building was not historically preserved, and it provided great possibilities for change. The squatters' approach was strategic since it required a construction strategy and a lot of community involvement in order to make all the changes and keep it in function for some years. Some of the significant approaches included: removing a partition wall on the top floor to create a large space for activities like banner painting and social gatherings; bricking up the ground floor windows for soundproofing in order to obey the noise abatement notice; removing more partition walls on the first floor to improve lightening conditions and to make more spacious room for more activities; and finally after the risk and fire assessments they installed emergency lights, smoke alarms, extinguishers and a ney fire exit. Other changes focused on inhabiting the space by furnishing it with items salvaged from the streets, experimenting with space configurations to create a modular stage, and redesigning the kitchen with a dedicated serving area for better functionality. They also installed a wheelchair-accessible toilet and a removable entrance ramp (Past Tense, 2018). All the significant changes, the overall lack of professional and financial support, all the radical activities that took place in it and the insecurity caused by numerous evictions resulted in a distressed interior aspect, and the final eviction prevented the centre from becoming an enduring institution.

Fig. 25 RampART, (2007), *Breaking through wall.*
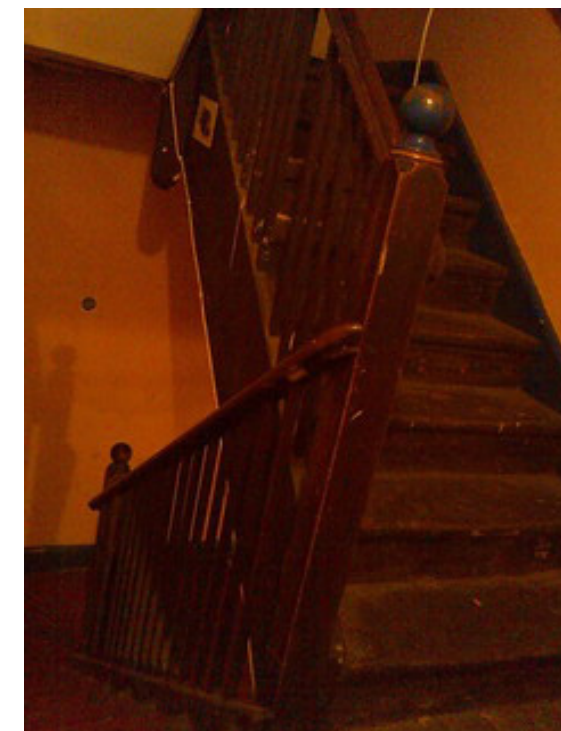
Fig. 26 RampART, (2007), *Stairs.*

CHAPTER 5
Conclusion

Now that we have almost reached the end I would like to conclude my observations throughout the executed case studies.

In the first place, we can notice that the only still existing squatted social centres that still promote radical change and influence the new generations have undergone some sort of legalisation or co-option, which suggests that sometimes collaborating with authorities in order to bring to the city what the government cannot provide for its citizens, like free social spaces, alternative culture and lifestyles; can be the only way in today's society to infiltrate aspects into the mainstream infrastructure that will generate actual change with time.

Moreover, it was noticeable that some squatted social centres like Palacio Malaya, Angelo Mai and Cowley Club concentrated more on showing resistance against capitalist redevelopment through hosting active political discussions that promote political education. Encouraging this way, independent cultural spaces that produce alternative ways of creating and experimenting with all kinds of art. Therefore, we can notice that the spaces that they inhabited had some similarities. They almost did not interfere with the structure at all by making big changes, apart from necessary renovations for health safety. They respected the existing space and inhabited it through specific installations and furniture, which allowed them to experiment more with materials and the arrangement of the space. This leads us to believe that when squatters focus on making a statement with their presence and focus on cultural production, having a more flexible space can facilitate their actions.

On the other hand, other squatted social centres like Can Batlló, Leoncavallo and rampART decided to fight against unfair gentrification in their neighbourhoods and traditional capitalist lifestyle by taking direct actions of reshaping the neighbourhood for the needs of the community. Converting it into a cooperative neighbourhood, meaning that it requires more collective engagement on a daily basis. Therefore, their spaces had other similarities. They performed more interventions within the buildings that they occupied and had more permanent installations that dictated permanent spaces. This leads us to believe that, when squatters are trying to create an alternative lifestyle and are experimenting with the management of a more complex institution, having more permanent and specific spaces facilitates the cooperative management lifestyle.

The overall look that the majority of the squatted social centres have is based on the

Fig. 27 Guilherme Pucci, (2023), *Francisco Leitão Apartment*

decay of the existing materials, the exposed architectural elements, some even unfinished because of the high costs and the imperfection and originality of the elements done by the squatters themselves, mainly because having a perfect interior was never their priority, they focused more on the activities and the people. The interior is also inhabited with vintage and second-hand furniture and with loads of produced cultural and artistic elements. The lack of support, resources and constant evictions have also contributed to a more distressed look, but the way it blends with the rest of the elements creates an intellectual and rebellious aesthetic, we can almost say that it could be some sort of unintentional "Downbeat Chic".

A similar term, "Radical Chic" was registered in 1992 in VOGUE magazine, giving reference to the experimental and rough fashion that was produced during the recession in the USA and Europe in the 80's and 90's. Designers like Anna Sui, Vivienne Westwood, Karl Lagerfeld and many others embraced a new streetwise approach which created a diversity of modern folklore styles (Betts, 1992), the influence of which we can still see in today's fashion industry for instance the Prada fall/winter 2025 collection that accentuated material experimentation and rough edges.

We can notice that the desire for self-expression and alternative art that is somehow influenced and impacted by external factors like politics or society has become a persistent style in the Western world in the last decades.

Today, the interior style version of Radical Chic can be seen in different contemporary cafes, apartments or public spaces and it would be difficult to track its direct origins in squatted social centres since it most probably originated simultaneously in more areas of the world with the abundance of decaying existing old buildings, the high cost of renovation and the desire for change and alternative art. However, the rebellious aesthetic sometimes is not chosen due to economic struggle or political views, but for its effortless and organic look that in combination with eclectic and sometimes high-end furniture and art selection or DIY and cultural interior elements, can create engaging spaces that promote cultural education and creativity and reject over polished interiors that promote perfectionism. However, if these elements are used superficially, they risk becoming just another aesthetic trend rather than an expression of cultural or political commitment. In reference to this, it is important to mention Tom Wolfe's article from 1970 in the New York magazine "Radical Chic: That Party at Lenny's" which was about the fundraiser hosted by the famous composer Leonard Bernstein in his luxurious Manhattan apartment, in the presence of his guests the Black Panther movement leaders and elite artists. Here the term "Radical Chic" is expressed as a satire in comparison to when it was used in VOGUE magazine, suggesting that the wealthy elites wanted to be associated with radical politics to appear fashionable or socially progressive but without genuinely engaging in their struggles (Yaxley, 2020).

Finally, even if squatted social centres may not be the prime influence for the Radical Chic style, they played an important role in the city and for its people by improving the infrastructure of the city and society through alternative political, educational, and cultural development. Some say that squatted social centres cause more damage to the buildings and the city, others say that squatted social centres are the embodiment of the right to the city, the right to experiment with what we have in order to evolve as human beings and educate ourselves in the process.

Fig. 28 Andrey Bezuglov, (2021), *MAO*

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