

## Practices of Re-Appropriation and “Liberation” of Urban Commons. The Case of Naples

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# *Practices of Re-Appropriation and “Liberation” of Urban Commons. The Case of Naples*

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## **Abstract**

For decades, commons and related management practices have been at the center of a broader academic, political and public debate. There have been many attempts to recognize, categorize and analyse this type of goods, that are, by definition, other than State and Market. In the urban context, there are many experiences that show how the citizens, in order to reclaim abandoned and/or disused public spaces and places, act informal practices as a response to collective requests that try to resist and contain processes of commodification of space (Lefebvre, 1976). Starting from these reflections, the article engages with the debate on the practices of re-appropriation of urban commons put into action by the local community. Preferring an ethnographic research approach, the article presents the results of a case study concerned the building of Santa Maria della Fede “Liberata”. An abandoned public building, located in the historic area of Naples, at the center of a commoning and liberation process.

Keywords: urban commons, commoning, informal practices.

## **1. Introduction**

The phenomena of associated life in the city emerge from the practices and relationships carried out in the various urban spaces, even when these same spaces are subject to borders, fences, limits and / or appropriations by both private and state interests. To the extent that cities have been places of conflict and class struggle, urban governments have been forced to provide public goods (such as affordable public housing, health care, education, roads, water...) to the worst off classes. Public spaces and services contribute to the

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development of common goods, a set of resources for collective action that represents a rich mix of both public and private tools (Harvey, 2008). Since not all forms of the common goods have free access, political action on the part of citizens is necessary to appropriate them or to make them really common through “the right to change them according to the desire of their heart” (Harvey, 2003: 939). A statement that emphasizes the right to ‘not be excluded’ from the use of common goods (Blomley, 2008: 320; Bergamaschi, Castrignanò, Landi, 2014).

Historically, this paradigm has been explored by two groups of scholars: the first group is interested in how social organizations collectively manage common resources by paying attention to the external imperatives of both the market and the state (Ostrom, 1990); a second group analyzes capitalism and its effects, focusing on common goods as a broader experience of life and collective politics, and as a way out of state and market (Linebaugh, 2008). The paradigm focused on the local government of metropolitan areas in the United States between the 1960s and 1970s emphasizes the polycentric mode of governance in the management of shared natural assets to address global issues such as climate change (Ostrom, 2009). Particularly important is the participatory role of the community: ‘effective networking between local communities and city government. (...) Diverse approaches can be envisaged to support increased downward accountability, including the provisioning of increased incentives for local officials who engage with communities such as through the incorporation of community feedback in performance reviews’ (Nagendra, Ostrom, 2014: 10-11).

This feature turns out to be all the more emphasised if we link the dimension of informality to it (Haddock, Moulaert, 2009). In the urban domain, common goods are closely linked to the informal sphere of action in those territories where public institutions use mandatory control systems, but also where the action of public institutions is rather “porous”, and informal practices represent important levers that local governments use in the management of common goods (Le Galès, 2016).

According to Borch and Kornberger (2015: 17): The urban functions as a prism to scrutinize how the logic of capital and state power seeps into the various experiences and tactics for coping with day-to-day life? In these cases, the actors act on the territory by creating collaborative networks which spontaneously, and not necessarily following logics of action regulated from above, make it possible to write new (informal) rules guiding the re-appropriation of spaces (Jacobs, 1961; Ascher, 1998), through which the community tries to subtract small urban portions from the logic of capitalist development and to “free” spaces outside the range of public intervention, left in a shadow or, simply, “abandoned”(Harvey, 1982, 2003, 2005).

In Italian cities, the conceptualization of the urban common good first appeared after the establishment of the "Commissione Rodotà" (*Committee headed by the Deputy Rodotà*) for the reform of the Italian civil code and subsequently developed with the season of occupations of urban cultural spaces connected to identity, culture and traditions of the territory (Mattei, Reviglio, Rodotà, 2007). The cases of the "Teatro Valle" in Rome, of the "Colorificio" in Pisa and the occupations of "Laneria" and "Asilo Filangieri" in Naples, are examples that go in this direction, with different results also in terms of urban policies. In Naples, the city has decided to legitimize the occupations of these spaces by taking into account the social value produced through the experience of occupying abandoned places and by adopting a series of city regulations that frame the processes of occupation of an urban common good (Mattei, Quarta, 2015). Bologna, on the other hand, has interpreted the urban common good as an incremental model of policy making (Linebaugh, 2008) through which to experiment innovative participatory policies and collaborative economies.

From this angle, the re-appropriation of abandoned spaces takes on a specific meaning, suggesting the idea that collective mobilizations aimed at defending the places of "everyday life" show a concrete, tangible way that can lead citizens to (re) write – even if in a partial and limited way – a shared urban development project. The physical space of the city thus reveals itself in an unusual way to the point of creating sociological neologisms such as "third space" (Soja, 1996), "in-between space" (Bhabha, 1994) or "borderlands" (Sassen, 2002). Through informal use practices, urban facilities acquire new meaning, overcoming their own predefined character or their own patrimonial nature; such practices are characterized by a strong push from below that sees citizens as protagonists in forms of self-organization and self-management of public areas. Moving in this perspective involves fostering the creative tension of the communities established in an interaction – sometimes conflicting and intermittent – with the public administration which possesses a design expertise (Caridi, 2016; Putini, 2019) not only for its operational capacity, but above all for its function as a representative of a community. In short, it means giving centrality to the proximity relations between inhabitants and territorial assets, emphasizing the ethical value of social relations and solidarity, working to reaffirm a culture of the public sphere. Hence, letting a collective planning settle, capable to redefine the future of the city (Harvey, 2008; Schmid, 2012).

These experiences often question the work of the local administration, emphasizing its absence, inefficiency, and lack of attention to the maintenance and recovery of abandoned places. An aspect of "disclosure" that accounts for the complexity of the relationship between citizenship and local administration on various fronts: with respect to the role and the ways in which the networks of local actors (citizens, non-profit organizations, committees ...) carry out the

demands of the community (Corbisiero, 2019), altering citizens' practices, rooting, habits and lifestyles (Paba, 2010).

In the case of Naples, these dynamics have emerged through various experiences, with meanings that open up different levels for developing the debate on common goods in an urban context, both complex and diversified, such as the ancient city center. Starting from terminological issues themselves: the frequent recourse to the concept of "liberation" and not of "occupation" emphasizes the underlying premise from which the practices of re-appropriation of abandoned places start, that is the idea of giving back to citizens, and very often to the weakest social groups, spaces in which to recover a sense of community and create moments of open confrontation, based on culture and solidarity.

This article offers a contribution to the analysis of the processes and practices of informality implemented as a device to resist the commodification of the city and to foster the liberation of abandoned spaces, in an attempt to counter the commodification of public goods. It includes four parts: the first part (par. 1) is dedicated to the conceptualization of the urban common good, read in terms of the leading role of citizens in the practices of self-organization; the second (par. 2) presents the empirical research about the "Complex of Santa Maria della Fede", an abandoned former convent, located in the ancient center of Naples, which reconstructs forms and methods of collective action, which allowed the constitution of a new urban reality from below; the third part (par. 3) presents the territorial context in which the research takes place and continues with an exploration of experiences on the subject of common goods, with an emphasis on commoning practices aimed at re-using and re-appropriating public goods abandoned (par. 3.1). The relationship between the city of Naples and the common goods is the background to the narration of the case of Santa Fede which traces back, with some historical notes, the transformation of the building up to its "liberation" (par. 3.2), explores the modalities of management and organization of spaces, practices and forms of use of the common goods and reflects on the cultural and identity traits that characterize the social body animating, from its "liberation" until today, the spaces of Santa Fede (par. 3.3). Finally, the final part of the paragraph explores the relationship between the public (local) entity and the actors called to manage the property, highlighting the disconnection between the prescriptive dimension – which reflects the approach adopted by the municipal administration – and the management and organization practices that this research has revealed (par. 3.4). The fourth and last part of the article (par. 4) includes final reflections that formalize what has emerged from the ethnographic analysis, through suggestions regarding the very use of the concept of the urban common good. A concept, as will be seen, behind (and

within) which conflicts are hidden and (in part) resolved by recognizing and legitimizing the "spontaneous" use of public space.

## **2. From "commons" to urban commons**

Starting from the nineties of the last century, the interest of sociological analysis towards the concept of the urban common good, understood as a further facet of the more general concept linked to the definition of "commons", has grown (Ostrom, 1990). The specific aspect of this interest focuses on the dimensions of privatization and deregulation of urban public services, as well as on the dismantling of the communities traditionally resident in the city due to the progressive process of urbanization. As cities become denser due to large-scale urban development projects, urban commons are privatized or abandoned, limiting access to privileged groups and excluding others. In a ruthlessly neoliberal climate, the urban commons propose an alternative to the fractures between public and private in terms of democratic identification of non-commodifiable spaces. Seen from this point of view, the process of re-appropriation of abandoned spaces in some Italian cities represents a phenomenon that, while on the one hand characterizing a new administrative approach to city government (Haddock, Moulaert, 2009), on the other hand sees spontaneous self-organization and self-management practices as its main actors (Krumholz, Scandurra, 1999). Processes from below activate the social body and involve citizens into actions aimed at recovering marginal or minor spaces, and, despite the presence of frictional elements, act upon the management and organization of urban common goods (Ostrom, 2000). Some important evidence of this is offered by resistant practices (Cellamare, Scandurra, 2016) taking place in Naples, a city whose social body has taken action on several occasions giving life to commoning processes for the recovery of abandoned urban commons and thus creating social and spatial conditions in which to feed processes of social and cultural integration (Chase, Crawford, Kaliski, 2008). The formal vs. informal pair becomes a combination of two legitimate and simultaneous ways of managing Naples. 'Poles, connected to the will of the social forces [...] of the city' (Ascher, 1998; Chamoiseau, 1994: 227) which undermine the idea of the right to the city as a coherent whole.

## **3. A "liberated" ethnography**

The case of the "Santa Fede Liberata" (literally "Holy Faith set free") architectural complex in Naples is one of the emblems of the relationship between the regulated spaces of the planned city and the informal ones of the

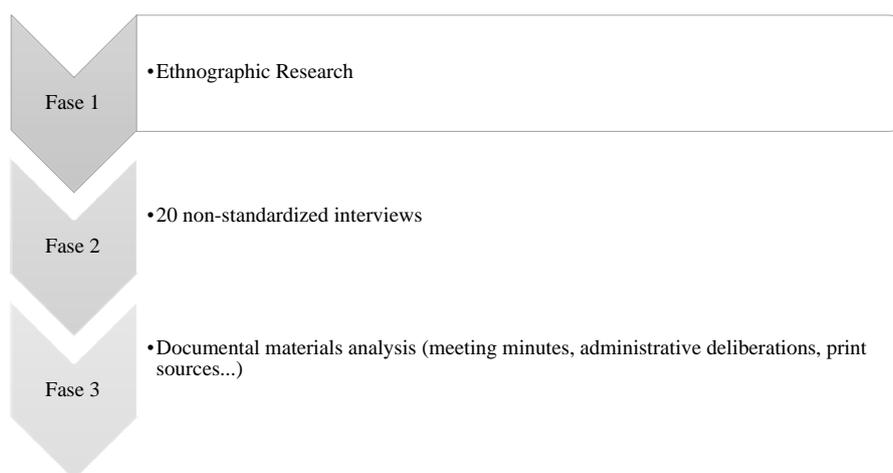
anarchist reality. It actually is a “heterotopic space” (Foucault, 2001), organised on alternative forms of administrative rules and regulations, based on which a group of inhabitants of Naples has re-appropriated and made free a common good. The case study presented in this article is the specific outcome of a broader qualitative research that the “Gruppo Territorio Napoli” (GTN) of the Department of Social Sciences of the University of Naples “Federico II” has been conducting since 2017 on the ancient center of city. The results we propose in this essay emerge from a year of field research carried out in the Santa Fede complex thanks to an initial “covered participation” in discussion groups on the themes of commodification and tourism held by the SET Network (Southern Europe in front of the tourism), which has been the key to entering the universe of the Holy Faith. This preliminary period gave us the opportunity to explore spaces and social dynamics with great continuity, for an overall observation of ten months (from April 2019 to January 2020), during which the research on the structure developed along three phases (fig. 1).

The first was devoted to an ethnographic exploration (Marzano, 2006) in which we also observed the structure from the outside, in its relationship with the neighborhood. This phase also gave us the opportunity to establish direct relationships with two members of the local committee, a group of members of a former communist party local club, the first promoter of the reopening of Santa Fede Liberata and still a territorial reference point in the management, also in a political sense, of this structure. This was a first functional contact, aimed at building and consolidating a trust relationship with the members of the group, which allowed us to read some micro-sociological dynamics between the insiders and the territory. The observations and reflections emerged in this phase of the research took place in an “uncovered” way, which allowed us to take notes, carry out informal interviews, take photographs on the daily life of the place showing the type of activities carried out, the division of spaces, the elements of conflict and/or collaboration between discussion groups, the management methods of the structure, with the aim of tracing a first socio-spatial profile of Santa Fede Liberata.

The empirical basis on which the second phase of the survey was defined is linked to the carrying out of non-standard interviews with 20 privileged witnesses, identified, together with some residents of the neighborhood during the ethnographic exploration phase, among the visitors of the structure available for an interview. These are subjects that have common elements if we look at the experience of self-government they lived during the conquest of the common good. They are different, though, as to the role played in the use of the asset. These features allowed us to distinguish three groups of interviewees, among those who are indiscriminately referred to as “inhabitants” of SCL: “founding nucleus”, “management committee”, “habitual users”. We stratified

the group by gender (10 men and 10 women) and ethnicity (12 Italians and 8 foreigners). The interview outline includes: the history of the context, the role of the actors in the process of liberation of the property, the identity of the place and of the social groups that inhabit it, the relationship with the municipal administration.

FIGURE 1. *Phases of ethnographic research.*



In the third phase, conducted between 2018 and 2019, we resorted to a documentary analysis, which allowed us to collect, from the platform of the municipal administration and those of informal collectives, acts of political-administrative direction (municipal directives), management acts (administrative acts and measures), municipal regulations and manifestations of will (regulations, programs and reports, minutes of assemblies, etc.). We also used newspaper articles relating to the same period of the survey from “Il Mattino” and “la Repubblica”. The intersection with the data from the interviews allowed us to investigate the discrepancies that the very concept of common good shows, highlighting a non coincidence between the formal plan and the substantial plan as to what the management and self-governance practices of the structure bring to light, and considering the regulatory requirements contained in administrative resolutions. In contrast to the neo-liberal forms of urban living, Santa Fede symbolizes a device for rethinking the relaunch of the ancient center of Naples as a place for experimentation with non-standard spatiality. A huge potentiality for urban life in general.

#### **4. The context of the research**

The historic center of the city of Naples is limited by the hillside of the Vomero hill and the districts of Mercato-Pendino and San Lorenzo, and the city's general plan of 2004 has extended it to include an area of about 1,700 hectares. In the perimeter of this area, crossed by the three Decumani (upper, main and lower) and consisting of a network of orthogonal streets that intercept some of the historic squares of Naples, a large part of the historic real estate assets of the Municipality is allocated: dozens of historic buildings and blocks, with four or five floors above ground, in several cases mono-condominium, which have historically been an aristocrat or church heritage. Many people (usually the most fragile categories) live in the hundreds of typically Neapolitan *bassi* (ground floor homes with one or two rooms and small services) mixed among hundreds of bars, restaurants and artisan shops, the most famous of which are the crib artisans in Via San Gregorio Armeno. Over the years the reuse of the building heritage has been very intense, both for the widespread restoration and maintenance works of entire buildings after the 1980 earthquake, and for a massive process of micro-division of the interiors of aristocrat and church palaces, with the aim of improving the living conditions of pre-existing households, of hosting new categories of inhabitants (university students in the first place) and to give new impetus to the neo-commercialization and tourism processes of the area. These were in turn due to the new paradigms of mobility (Sheller, Urry, 2006), which see in the privatization of urban space and tourism the way to the economic development of the city (Varriale, 2015). As we will see, in this area are located two of the eight urban commons present in the city, more precisely along two of the *cardines* (north-south streets) that cross the Decumani (east-west) in Naples' old town.

##### ***4.1 Naples and the emerging commons***

The relationship between the city of Naples and the management of common goods represents a very particular case in the national panorama, if not a real exception. The regulatory process followed by the municipal administration has sanctioned a path of opening towards the participatory dimension of citizens on public issues of collective importance. Suffice it to think of what happened to the “Azienda Risorse Idriche Napoletane SpA” (the local water company), transformed by the municipality of Naples – based on the results of the 2011 referendum - into a company subject to public law, which was given a name with a strong symbolic value: Water Common Good (Acqua Bene Comune or ABC) (Briganti, 2012). More generally, the establishment of a

"Department of Common Goods, Computerization and Participatory Democracy" was significant, which was established in 2011 and has since given rise, in addition to ABC, to various initiatives such as the campaign named "A Napoli il bene è Comune" (lit. the good is common in Naples), as well as various resolutions aimed at the legal recognition, at the definition and at methods and practices of civic use of "emerging common goods"<sup>1</sup> as a form of direct and non-exclusive management by the territorial communities capable of generating forms of shared participation (Micciarelli, 2014, 2017).

Thus defined, the category of emerging common goods has been the object of particular attention by the various councils that alternated during the mayoralty of Luigi De Magistris, which have registered, within this concept, all those experiences present in the municipal area with committees and groups of citizens as main actors in the experimentation of forms of self-government and self-management of public spaces. This step, contained in resolution no. 400 of 25 May 2012, presupposes mechanisms for self-management of public places through actions that lead to a participatory and shared use of the spaces, with repercussions for the benefit of the local community.

The analysis of the municipal resolutions focuses on a process of institutional regulation and legitimation of spontaneous socially stratified practices that the neighborhood communities have initiated, triggering processes of regeneration and recovery of publicly owned buildings that were abandoned or belonged to minor assets, for civic and social purposes. Such conditions are not so rare in the urban landscape of Naples, also as a consequence of the structural damage to buildings caused by the 1980 earthquake. In the gradual process of institutional recognition of common goods by the Municipality, a fundamental role was certainly played by the experience carried out starting from March 2012 in the spaces of the former Asilo Filangieri<sup>2</sup> by artists, operators, researchers, students, workers in the cultural sector and free citizens committed to giving identity to a huge empty space. This community experience, first of all, seeks to interpret, by occupying urban spaces, anti-ownership feelings and a need for self-representation, meant as a way to overcome the political mediation entrusted to the institutions. The critical emphasis is on the methods and responsibilities by which decisions

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<sup>1</sup> D.G.C. n. 740 of 16/06/2011, D.G.C. n. 400 of 25/05/2012 and ss.

<sup>2</sup> The spaces of the Ex-Asilo Filangieri are spread over three floors with many rooms and large halls and are located in the historic center of Naples. These spaces had been restructured by the Municipality in view of the "Forum of Cultures" then remained underutilized due to the failure to implement the initiative.

within these communities are reached and attributed (Aiello, Paura, 2020; Micciarelli, 2017).<sup>3</sup>

The case of the former Filangieri Asylum laid the foundations for the institutional recognition of the practices of civic use of publicly owned structures as common goods. The subsequent resolutions have, in fact, led to the recognition on the same basis of seven other self-managed spaces spread in this segment of the Neapolitan territory. These are practices of use of space that differ in size and gender, but sharing the fact of having reopened for citizens underused, degraded and/or abandoned spaces, often of historical, cultural and landscape importance and almost always at risk of being sold off. Suffice it to think of the immense spaces of the structure that previously housed the Judicial Psychiatric Hospital, located in via Imbriani, or the historic structures that housed the Filangieri juvenile prison in Salita Pontecorvo. Also the common good of Santa Maria della Fede certainly counts as a structure of historical and cultural importance, and it is the only one, together with the former Filangieri Asylum, to be located in the heart of the old town.

#### ***4.2 The “liberation” of the Oratory of Santa Maria della Fede***

Not far from the former Filangieri Asylum, we find the former Oratory or Conservatory of Santa Maria della Fede, in via San Giovanni Maggiore Pignatelli.

It is a building with a centuries-old history: built in the sixteenth century according to the will of Ferrante D’Avalos (1503), the history of the building emerges clearly from the words of a resident in the neighborhood, a regular visitor to Santa Fede:

“Some floors of this building used to host the so-called “repented women”, that is former prostitutes, younger or older, or also women from rich families who had fallen in love with lower-class men and whose families didn’t accept this and kicked them out.[...] Until 1944 there still lived some nuns together with the repented, but in 1945, after the end of the war, the building was declared unfit for use because of bomb damage and the nuns moved to another convent, while here arrived some war refugees from the neighborhoods of Mergellina and Santa Lucia. The 1980 earthquake completed the damage and the building was declared unusable by the city

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<sup>3</sup> With the Council Resolution no. 446 of 01/06/2016, the Municipality of Naples strengthens the regulatory process aimed at recognizing those places, as stated in the resolution, “generative of social and relational capital, which began with what was already formalized with resolution no. 893/2015 relating to the recognition of the former Filangieri Asylum”.

police and the government, and the war refugees were kicked out” (Gaetano, 60 years old approx., SFL inhabitant).

FIGURE 2. *The geographical position of the two emerging commons in the historic center of Naples.*



Often the ‘inhabitants’<sup>4</sup> interviewed referred to the historical importance of the building – once “all-female” and communitarian *ante litteram* – recalling in particular the phase from 1945 to 1980 when many families lived here after losing their homes during the second world war. These families shared the spaces of the Oratory (three floors and courtyard, including bathrooms and kitchens) and supported each other, organizing, among other things, a popular nursery called *‘a scola d’o ntrattienu* (“the entertaining school”) or carrying out political actions (here the fight against the rise in the bread price started in 1973),

<sup>4</sup> The appellation of ‘inhabitants’ is attributed to the habitual users, about 40 on a daily average, of SFL by the people of the neighborhood. An aspect that denotes a strong sense of belonging to the place and refers to the image of a structure that on a socio-spatial level recovers the features of a community dimension. In the rest of the article, the noun ‘inhabitant’ will be used with the meaning indicated here.

and contributing to the weaving of the Neapolitan social solidarity fabric of that era (Aiello, Paura, 2020).

In 1980 the building was evacuated and declared unusable and was abandoned in a structurally dilapidated state; bulky and harmful debris and waste began to accumulate. In the same year the building was donated by the Croce family to the Municipality of Naples, imposing a destination restriction for social uses. The Municipality took some partial safety measures in 1992, without ever using the building though, which has since been abandoned again (Del Giudice, 2015) until 2014<sup>5</sup>, the year of the liberation of Santa Fede (henceforth SFL) through the initial act of re-appropriation of the space, with the removal of debris, waste and with the renovation of some areas inside the building, adorned with plants, furniture and over time with murals, but also with photos and documents that testify to the past history of the building. A process of implementation of common goods based on free and open use and access for all citizens (Council Resolution no.446 of 2016). The initial recovery of the space, a path to this day still in progress, was implemented by subjects belonging to the Historic Center Committee, which since before the ‘liberation’ of SFL used to meet for a certain period in a parish and in some self-managed spaces in the neighborhood<sup>6</sup>. With the liberation of the former Oratory of Santa Maria della Fede, the so-called “Assembly of the inhabitants of Santa Fede Liberata” was established shortly after, whose assembly declarations testify to the direct connection between the claim of space, the liveability of the neighbourhood and the well-being of the residents.

In summary, the purpose for which the former Oratory of Santa Maria della Fede was freed emerges: to counter the neoliberal commodification through the aggregative ‘battleship’ of Santa Fede. To understand how deeply rooted the fear of further commodification of the public and private space of the historic center is, let’s just have a look at a passage from a press release by the Assembly of Holy Faith:

“ [...] little or nothing is left of the former articulated and multilayered functions of the ancient city, because all the space of yards, cloisters, and the

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<sup>5</sup> Several spaces recognized in Naples as emerging common goods have given rise to an original rhetorical strategy, adopting names that contain a semantic claim to the use of space through the concept of “liberation”, rather than through the more common one of “occupation” (Micciarelli, 2014). This is, for example, the case of “Scugnizzo Liberato”, “Giardino Liberato di Materdei”, in addition to the one treated here of “Santa Fede Liberata”.

<sup>6</sup> Document signed “Assembly of and of the inhabitants of Santa Fede Liberata”, January 2018.

huge monastic complexes is now either privately owned or totally abandoned and all community life is pushed into the narrow lanes of Naples 'belly' [...].<sup>7</sup>

Or again, from the statements of an elderly lady, who has lived for many decades in a street parallel to the one where Santa Fede Liberata stands:

"I don't like the Old town anymore, all these novelties are coming up... just food and holiday homes, but our community spirit is lost [...] this neighborhood is not the same anymore, it has no identity, no benchmarks ... no more gathering places, we all used to be acquainted with one another in the area." (Anna, 78 y.o., resident in the Old town).

Also significant is what was stated by a man living near the building of Santa Fede, who, referring to the former Convent, says:

"I guess they are trying to restore the building. I'm sure that before anyone notices that building will turn into a bed and breakfast!" (Enzo, 47, resident in the Old town).

The reference to this specific type of accommodation is not accidental. This area represents a historically popular urban portion characterized by a high concentration of universities, as well as being dotted with small artisan shops, commercial businesses of daily household goods, student houses, bars for residents. An area that in recent years was suddenly transformed into a sort of fairground, devoted to tourist *loisir*, where the real masters are pizzerias, street-food shops, souvenir shops, bed & breakfasts created from former student houses or from the *bassi*<sup>8</sup>, often rented through online platforms. A process of touristification and commodification of the territory that also significantly impacts on the dynamics of use of public space, currently "leisure class-oriented" (MacCannell, 1976). These aspects seem to be well summarized in the words of an inhabitant of SFL:

"the wealth created is for just few people. We are not against tourism, just against this particular kind of tourism [...] and we try to embody the

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<sup>7</sup> Document signed "Assembly of and of the inhabitants of Santa Fede Liberata", January 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Also called *vasci* in Neapolitan. They are typically Neapolitan popular dwellings located on the ground floor (hence the name inspired by their 'low' location), with a direct access from the street, often at the same time the only source of natural light and air. Most of them consist of a single room and are occupied by large families. Today some of them are visited during organized tours or are transformed into accommodation facilities.

contradiction, the opposition to this kind of development. (Giovanni, 35, inhabitant of SFL).

As a matter of fact, the management methods and the activities carried out within Santa Fede suggest the idea of a project that seems to oppose the values underlying the planning that guides the development of some urban recovery of the historic center of Naples<sup>9</sup>, and which at the same time cannot be understood except in relation to larger processes that produce urban space but are governed from outside.

### ***4.3 Inhabiting the liberated places***

Among the most frequent visitors of the SFL spaces, we cannot fail to mention the group of individuals who have been involved in its management and renovation since the ‘liberation’ of the venue. The group is made up of people whose average age ranges between 45 and 50 (but some reach over 70), including some already active in the Centro Storico Committee, in associations or informal solidarity networks present in the neighborhood and in the rest of the city.

To date, not only residents of the neighborhood attend the spaces of Santa Fede Liberata, but, as one of the interviewees tells us,

“also people who have always been around the area during daytime, former residents who used to have their main relationships here and who find only here their conscience and identity” (Mario, 61 years old, resident of SFL).

This reflects the characteristics of the place, in line with what is defined by the municipal resolution no. 446 of 2016, as one “widely owned asset” not assigned to any individual or body corporate (not entrusted to the neighborhood committee, for example) and in the case of SFL the users actually represent a heterogeneous population. Among this population we can identify, in addition to those already listed above, various other types of users: elderly gentlemen (called “card-players”), musicians, non-resident students, street

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<sup>9</sup> The way in which the municipal property building that stands directly in front of the entrance to the Santa Fede complex was renovated and re-functionalized is an example that goes in this direction. This is the so-called “Ecumano” multifunctional center, which houses a car park, a swimming pool, a gym and a hotel. To fulfil the obligation of “public use” imposed on Ecumano by the Municipality (Legislative Decree no. 464 of 2011), the center offers free swimming and gymnastic lessons to children living in disadvantaged families. The center guarantees free access to disabled people and access at a reduced rate for young adolescents residing in the neighborhood.

artists, homeless people or traditional shop-owners and craftsmen of the area who seek to oppose the 'touch and go' logic dictated by the privatization of urban space. Carlo, one of our interviewees, declared:

"we have free access here. We host people of many different categories. Sometimes we have some problems with some of them but this is exactly our challenge: how to overcome difficulties, how to put together so many different identities. We don't choose people, they just arrive spontaneously and adapt to common rules with the same spontaneity" (Carlo, 45, inhabitant of SFL).

In fact, unlike what happens in one of the other common goods (Ex-Asilo Filangieri), whose door is almost always closed, with an intercom and a doorman hired by the Municipality of Naples, the entrance door of the SFL building SFL is mostly open (even if only a few have its keys) and there are barriers or other forms of control. In fact, according to some of the inhabitants interviewed, Santa Fede Liberata acts as the Agora of the Old town, reminding somehow the Greek Agora of ancient Neapolis which used to lie not far away:

"[...] this is a place where space and relationships are lived and not consumed, as it happens elsewhere in town" (Olena, 25, inhabitant of SFL).

If you observe the space, it almost looks like an enclosed square which can give rise to "possibilities" and challenges the ability of the individuals to (re)-construct their own biographies once they enter the building. An inner space of resources where subjectivities marginalized by an outer space of vulnerability find a shelter: elderly people who no longer have their places for socializing, now invaded by café tables; activists and collectives who do not have any squares to occupy; musicians who cannot find rehearsal rooms and venues for concerts; homeless expelled from the elegant areas of the city who find shelter and accommodation in SFL (even during the lockdown period for the COVID-19 pandemic); students or long-time residents of the neighborhood "emigrated" elsewhere because they can no longer afford the few and expensive flats that have not been transformed into b&b's. It therefore seems that different subjectivities converge and coexist within SFL, united by the fact that they cannot find a public space ready to welcome them outside that structure.

FIGURE 3. *Three distinct assemblies take place simultaneously in the courtyard of Santa Fede Liberata.*



The organized activities include theatrical performances, courses in sports disciplines, presentations of books and debates, assemblies (including the management one, which we will further explore later), a social health desk that owns an ultrasound machine, purchased (as many other things) with resources from donations or income from screenings, concerts or parties, during which a small bar is also active. As an elderly woman inside the management committee tells us<sup>10</sup>:

“we are not a political group, we are only interested in social work, for us politics only means doing things in practice, in everyday life” (Sonia, 73, inhabitant of SFL).

In fact, among the fundamental activities there is a weekly social lunch meant to take place on Tuesdays, but actually organized almost every day. This is a moment of confrontation for the community, in which new relationships can be created or existing ones can be strengthened, as one of the regular users tells us:

“cooking is our heart nearly, its the primary form of relationship, there is a relationship through food. Ours is a solidarity dinner, not a soup kitchen for

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<sup>10</sup> Group within the structure made up of all senior members with respect to the permanence in the structure

the poor, we don't love charity. We all eat on a same-level basis. Also because if you help the poor, you help them stay poor, you just give them a nice evening or a Christmas meal; we think of everyday problems instead, also in order to help people change." (Enzo, 40, inhabitant of SFL).

Once again, the relationships already established or those still to be established play a core role in the practices implemented by the inhabitants of SFL. In the case of solidarity meals, the relationship extends to some restaurants owners in the area (who collaborate by preparing meals), sharing a critical vision towards the dynamics of privatization and touristification<sup>11</sup>, which is why they approached SFL. But many more have approached Santa Fede over the years, perhaps initially out of necessity, as can be clearly seen from the following excerpt from an interview:

"here come homeless people, drug addicts, outcasts from anywhere. Or groups who ask to use the venue. For a year we have hosted some gay guys who needed to stay because they had been kicked out by their families. Such meetings produce relationships and collaborations that grow in time and are the real asset of this place". (Anna, 46, inhabitant of SFL).

One of the cases most emphasized by the interviewees concerned the music band "Bagaria", who needed a rehearsal room and with which a connection was born that led to the organization of various concerts and self-financing events. Even if it is almost impossible to make a complete list of the activities and subjectivities that cross the SFL space, it seems that this place is able to welcome and integrate, as a kind of "defensive enclave" (Enright, Rossi, 2018), many of those who no longer find a home in the surrounding urban space, generating new social capital resources in the neighborhood:

"our aim, our path, our goal is inclusion, is relationships [...] we try to create new forms of relationships, resistant relationships, necessary to produce a synergy for opposing the death of public spaces. If you just go out you'll realize immediately: this part of the Old town is a river, a touristic tsunami. Shops, cafés, bakeries, restaurants... all i strade and the buildings are full of b&b's. Tourists and clowns. And what has been done for us Neapolitans? What places have been given back to citizens? Perhaps this is one of the reasons why many people come to Santa Fede, to find a physical space where they feel socially included". (Vincenza, 35, inhabitant of SFL).

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<sup>11</sup> These are restaurateurs close to the SET network.

One of the most significant moments in which inclusion and participation practices take shape within SFL is certainly the weekly management meeting, during which, in addition to dealing with differences, proposals are accepted or rejected and ordinary or special maintenance activities are organized. The assembly is freely accessible to anyone, but it is difficult to assess whether it is an inclusion that occurs on an equal footing or rather a process of assimilation. The assembly is held on a regular basis, but is not attended with the same regularity and interest by all the inhabitants of SFL. As a member belonging to the “founding nucleus” told us, not everything passes through the assembly and even if this is “recognized as sovereign”, sometimes requests and proposals and problems are handled differently:

“[...] moreless we already know what it is possible to accept and what is not, and sometimes we do so outside of the assembly for time’s sake or for practical reasons... certainly always in agreement with... not the management committee, but with those who changed this place. Everybody’s home means we all share spaces, ideas, relationships, but everybody’s home doesn’t mean anyone comes here and they do what they want, for instance burn our plants”. (Carlo, 44, inhabitant of SFL).

The council recognized as formally legitimate is not the only tool to manage the processes developing within SFL; above all, what happens must be in line with the values and conceptions of those who have taken care of the space since its release. Therefore, as in the case of the Ex-Asilo Filangieri (Aiello, Paura, 2020), there seems to be a group of people who are more actively involved in decisions and space management than others. This also emerges if one looks at the SFL spaces and the ways they are used: if the activities take place mainly in the large porticoed courtyard on the ground floor (which also houses bathrooms, kitchens, a multipurpose room and a cycle workshop), also one of the three upper floors of the building (the first) has been made accessible and now houses various functions, as it comes out from the words of this interviewee:

“We renovated ten rooms; two of them host a playground for the children of the neighborhood, one has been devoted to a puppet workshop. Then we have a big hall for rehearsals, and also a room to keep second-hand clothes which anybody can give and where the homeless or people in need can take clothes.” (Enzo, 40, inhabitant of SFL).

The cloister, the arcades and the courtyard spaces present themselves as an “enclosed Agora” accessible to anybody, while the upper floors, less evident and less attended, are also used for activities that are not entirely visible. We are

referring here to meetings, which our research group came across during the field explorations, where mainly young people were intent on discussing about possible protest actions against what they defined a “neo-liberal drift” of the Old town. “Latent” activities, which do not take place in the main courtyard of the structure, as if to reiterate the need to limit participation in some initiatives and debates to a small group of individuals.

#### ***4.4 Institutional relations and urban conflict***

In this context, where the spaces of Santa Fede Liberata are physically and socially segmented for different activities and uses, the most controversial issues that emerged from the interviews concern, on the one hand, the relationship with the municipal institution and, on the other hand, the practical and symbolic values intrinsic to the institutional recognition of informal practices of self-management and production of space as common goods. The administrative legitimacy of self-managed spaces frees these places from the aura of informality: they are recognized as a collective value and as an advantage for the local community and have the right to use the venue; at the same time, controls and reports are requested, such as for example the preparation of monthly bulletins on activities carried out or future plans. In the case of SFL, relations with the municipal administration are almost nil and, according to the interviewees, the aforementioned reports have never been really drawn up and the municipality does not allocate any type of financial resources to the space for performing activities or for maintaining and renovating the building<sup>12</sup>. It therefore seems that the relationship between the municipal administration and the common goods is just a relationship of mutual tolerance, but it is not supported by a real commitment in terms of means and resources. According to the opinion of one of the interviewees, at the basis of the resolutions on common goods is the fact that

“some spaces had to make up for and replace the shortcomings of the Municipality, the lack of services” (Antonio, 37, resident of SFL).

Following this line of interpretation, the City would delegate the spaces recognized as common goods to provide welfare services for a general collective utility, but without assigning them simultaneously any economic resources or logistical support. Looking at the activities carried out in the “liberated

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<sup>12</sup> Some interviewees told of a fund allocated in 2000 by the Bassolino administration for the renovation of the building, which had remained unused for a long time. The fund was released in 2019: a test of usability was carried out and a partial safety of the portico with containment nets.

structures” around the city, it is easy to verify how they provide free services of high utility for social solidarity, such as legal protection in case of eviction or exploitation of undeclared work, hospitality for homeless, medical care, libraries, summer camps for children, sports and cultural activities.

In this sense, one widespread opinion among the interviewees is that the City resolution acts mainly on a symbolic level as a sort of pass to a whole array of activities, of the most different kinds, that were previously carried out by political groups, collectives and movements in an informal way. The idea is that the rhetoric of participation (Varriale, 2015) and the stability obtained by the movements thanks to the recognition of the use of self-managed spaces, allow the municipal administration to achieve the dual objective of making up for its own shortcomings in providing social services and of appeasing the conflicts that for years have accompanied the demands of political groups and movements, often critical of the development policies undertaken by the administration. In fact, for those involved in the management of the spaces in question, the resolution does not always represent a guarantee and is sometimes interpreted as an instrument of appropriation and co-optation, as also emerges from the words of one of the inhabitants of SFL:

“The City resolution for us is like a truce, a non-aggression agreement... I mean: we know we can continue our activities without being kicked out, but we also know the resolution is unclear and non-binding... you are in a way blackmailed, you are accepted but you can't start a conflict. By opening a dialogue with us, they tone it down. Once we had to fight to have a dialogue with them, now we have it but it's fake... and we know the resolution can be withdrawn at any time. So we have a choice: either we continue our projects in a small scale, or we start a conflict.” (Ciro, 40, inhabitant of SFL).

From this perspective, the resolution manages to channel the different conflictual paths present in the city within an institutional framework, changing the terrain on which the management of social conflict develops. If the different spaces are isomorphic for the purpose of social utility, it is equally clear that the concepts of “widespread ownership” and “common good” recognized by the institutions are then broadly interpretable concepts. The individual commons present in the city differ from one another for the practices carried out, collectives, management methods, objectives pursued and more or less formal relationships with municipal institutions. The focus varies from the cultural production of the “immaterial labourers” to the development of more or less institutionalized<sup>13</sup> and more or less inclusive political paths, so much so that for

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<sup>13</sup> The reference is to the political party ‘Power to the People’, founded in 2017 by groups active in the Ex-OPG Common Good.

Aiello and Paura (2020: 10) “when we talk about common goods we mean several different expressions that for a strange reason share a label, perhaps inadequate”.

## 5. Epilogue

Administrative regulation based on the concept of the emerging common good has only partially succeeded in combining the conflicting instances of the civic liberation movements present in the city, making them prone to political patronage (Roy, Al Sayyad, 2004) and continuous dialogue, in such a way as to avoid a confrontational conflict in practices. As already recognized by various authors (Varriale, 2015; Bollier, 2015; Gargiulo, Cirulli, 2016; Enright, Rossi, 2018; Bianchi, 2018; Aiello, Paura, 2020; Corbisiero, 2020) the theme of urban commons highlights some ambivalences related to urban space production, the policies that drive this process and the wider neoliberal society. In this context, “even post-capitalist transition social projects are incessantly integrated within processes of economic enhancement guided by the logic of profit” (Enright, Rossi, 2018, p. 44, own translation). In this sense, the regulatory framework of self-management practices and the legitimation of the occupation of public spaces is a legal “form” that does not conflict with the social practice of the occupation, but represents an equal and probably better equipped articulation. In the case of SFL, the space defined as a common good is configured as a sort of urban refuge to be occupied, in which many of the subjectivities marginalized by the dynamics of sale and capitalization of the ‘external’ space are concentrated; a place where participation and experimentation processes are activated, capable of generating social and cultural capital and contributing to an improvement in the living conditions of the “inhabitants” of SFL. In this way, the “taking care” of the common by groups of citizens is also justified, where local administrations do not or cannot do so. A condition that has given rise to institutionalized participatory managements such as “park conservancies” in the United States (Foster, 2011) or urban green spaces in Italy, usually in informal conditions. On the other hand, if in legal theory emerging common goods are defined as ‘goods with widespread ownership’ (Marella, 2017), it seems that in practice they are aimed at certain types of users (often very heterogeneous) – thus excluding, albeit indirectly – those citizens who fail to take an interest in the dynamics of management and use of the various spaces that have been created over the years. Taking this point of view entails the possibility that the occupation/liberation of a common good also generates enjoyment of subjects other than those who occupy/free it. Urban commons thus take a shape open to a much wider community than the one that

directly takes charge of them, therefore they are capable of redistributing utility, satisfying essential needs and creating social bonds beyond the walls of the good itself. In Italy this is what has been concretely experienced through over 200 commons experiences (Labsus, 2019), including those of the Teatro Valle Occupato in Rome, the Ex-Asilo Filangieri or Santa Fede Liberata itself in Naples. The desired result is not only to counter the spread of the dynamics of gentrification and commodification of spaces, but also to create an experience of “commonality” of these same spaces. This perspective, for the case of Naples, presents some critical and specific points: first of all, if the recognition of the “right to the city” à la Lefebvre and of cultural and political experimentation is present, this is reified in 'interstitial' places: urban voids, such as SFL or the Ex Asilo Filangieri, which the municipal administration has not been able to regenerate *motu proprio*; secondly, in addition to the regeneration of the buildings, even if not regulated by any plan, the subjects who manage the common goods are able to organize and deliver services that reinterpret welfare, and become the actors of a spontaneous welfare as well as of initiatives of cultural and artistic interest. Furthermore, these places are not always effectively 'under widespread ownership'. The testimonies show how the specific weight of some groups, bearers of well-marked political and cultural instances, was able to act on (and in) the structure by directly intervening on the sedimentation of cultural and political practices, that have made SFL an “open common good” to the territory, although not the entire community recognizes it as a field of common life. SFL hosts different political realities, which thanks to their institutional recognition have the ability to implement projects with relative stability and are therefore willing to adapt to new and ambiguous forms of relationship with the municipal administration. More than representing an alternative form of space management, the discussion on common goods seems to be used by the municipal administration as a functional pawn for maintaining a precarious social balance that vacillates between the difficulties of the public entity in dealing with critical issues and a territorial development focused on the commodification of public assets which, however, are not (yet) capable of producing collective well-being. The concept of ‘urban common good’ itself seems to be used as an “empty signifier” (Laclau, 2008): a sort of umbrella term under which struggles and instances of different kinds have been able to find a unitary synthesis, functional to absorb (partially) the urban conflict, recognizing and legitimizing the use of a public space (in this case a building) by citizen movements. The point of balance lies in the relationship with the institutions that allows the actors involved in the management of the spaces protected by the municipal resolution to self-determine and to enjoy a certain stability, encouraging the commitment to medium-long term projects (such creating a medical help desk and finding the necessary resources). This seems to be the

balance point that currently manages to balance the relationship between the municipal administration and many political movements active in the city. It is necessary that the common good identity be recognizable even beyond the walls of SFL. The actual risk is that otherwise there would be spaces for privatization by groups of people, rather than a shared good. This is in fact one of the risks of the management of open spaces by groups of citizens: that they lose their character of connective tissue and that they keep a high use value only for someone; in the communities, on the other hand, the use value is generalized thanks to their characteristics of openness and inclusion, thanks to the fact that they provide services to all inhabitants, not only to those directly involved in the management. Common goods must necessarily be shared, because they are meant to be used collectively by the community of reference (Donolo, 2012). It is the members of the community themselves who identify "their" common goods when they recognize that certain goods, resources and services are functional to their well-being and their expressive possibilities. With this conceptual extension, the case of Santa Fede Liberata produces an expansion of the definition of common good by including a good that becomes a quasi-institution and "cares for" the city, because it fosters the regeneration and requalification of urban elements and spaces otherwise at risk of degradation, but also because it welcomes and improves the living conditions of its "inhabitants".

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