

# dpu summerLab 2012series rome occupation city

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# dpu summerLab 2012 series

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**acknowledgments** DPU summerLab must be grateful in the first place to the community of Porto Fluviale, for welcoming us and coping cheerfully with our presence for one week and even more: a special thanks to Roberto and Emilia for believing in the project, to Emanuela, Francesco and Antonella for their support, to Rosa for all her kindness and the delicious food always ready for us at lunchtime, to all the members of Coordinamento Cittadino Lotta per la Casa, who have shared with us their daily experiences and life stories. Our gratefulness goes also to Laboratorio Arti Civiche, to Francesco, Azzurra and Maria who for the second year in a row decided to accept this challenge. A final, warm, thanks to Margherita Pisano, who started long ago the interaction with this wonderful community and has kindly showed us how to knock at its door.

## rome

10-15 September

## occupat.

in collaboration with  
Laboratorio Arti Civiche  
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# ion city



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**forewords** For the second year DPUsummerLab had the privilege of being exposed to the rich political galaxy of squat-occupations spaces network in Rome. Guided by extremely committed activists, citizens and friends, the participants were exposed to the challenges and the potentialities of the “act of occupying”, from memorable personal narrative of inclusiveness to the making and remaking of anti-entropic and anti-obsolescing spaces. The result has been the appreciation of a different city - a city of difference - and the extreme urgent need to reframe design and design thinking in a “within and between” manner. What follows is a brief account of the DPUsummerLab experience at Porto Fluviale, a community with a complex past that is currently re-writing a different future: for its space, for its city. A new Porto Fluviale, the “piazza del Porto Fluviale” made possible to invert the processes that has formed the occupation - emptiness and obsolescence – through an act of opening and re-programming.

# Occupying & the New Monuments

Giorgio Talocci

The New Monuments, Smithson<sup>1</sup> says, are no longer for remembering and learning about the past but rather for helping to forget a future which is dissolving because of Entropy and Obsolescence. Rome is a city of Old and New (or renewed) Monuments whose role has always been to drive a trend, either visible or hidden, formal or informal, in the urban development of their time. We navigated through these Monuments and the city images they wanted to portray when built, and through what they

represent today: Corviale, the swan song of the Modernist utopia and its monumental re-signification through the informal occupation of its one kilometre long fifth floor; the banks and bridges of the Tiber River, and its population of gypsies in provisional shanty towns; the Roman Walls next to the Pyramid and the non-catholic cemetery which has colonised their back.; Campo Boario, neoclassic Monument to the industrial (meat) production, abandoned by the Municipality and become a living collection of people – now Kurdish and Italians but once also Palestinians, Gypsies, Ukrainians – and their stories. Campo Boario<sup>2</sup> and its open and multicultural square constituted a paradigmatic space for our investigation in Porto Fluviale, squat-occupation today striving to open up toward the surroundings exactly through the transformation of its central courtyard in a public square.

1. Smithson, R. (1997b) Entropy and the new monuments. In: Flam, J. (ed) Robert Smithson: The collected writings. Berkeley: University of California Press.

2. See also: Stalker (2005) Stalker and the big game of Campo Boario. In: Blundell Jones, P., Petrescu, D., Till, J. (eds) Architecture & Participation. London: Taylor & Francis.

The galaxy of squat-occupations is a network of New Monuments – buildings whose re-significations through the (anti-entropic and anti-obsolescing) act of occupying have become the spatial manifestations of the current housing crisis in Rome. Porto Fluviale is one of those. Abandoned many years ago after serving as deposit for weapons and then for uniforms for armed forces, the building – still property of the Ministry of Defence – has been occupied in 2003 by the Coordinamento Cittadino Lotta per la Casa (one of the Social Movements leading the Struggle for Housing in Rome), in its endeavour to concentrate the Struggle on the restitution of otherwise idle and abandoned publicly-owned fragments of the city to the use of the citizens. Both the word *use* and *citizen* though are at stake in the political vision of the Movement, and the project of the new piazza challenges both concepts.

Since the day 80 families (about 250 people from different nationalities, mainly Italian, Ecuadorian, Moroccan, Peruvian, but many more) broke into the building from one of its main gates, the courtyard has been the centre of the community life and the spatial element that more than anything else has helped fostering throughout the years a sense of collectiveness and everyday life sharing.

In spite of the constant risk of eviction (the building is part of a plan through which the Municipality is trying to sell out a number of former barracks to private developers), the community have recently voted to keep the main gate open during the day so to let the people from the surroundings feel free to enter. The process started a couple of years ago opening a tearoom on the ground floor, and went on converting former residential spaces in an assembly room, a bicycle workshop, guest rooms and new rooms for skill-sharing activities.

In an assembly, one of the leaders stated: “we don’t want to open all the gates and make the new square become simply a place of passage and circulation, since this would simply replicate the current experience of the city and of its public spaces consecrated to the capitalistic consumption”. The new square wants to set out of any capitalistic logic, to be the place where to experiment new activities and ways of exchanging and paying back the services that the community will offer. The place where new alternative lessons can be taught and more lessons have yet to be learnt, where pro-active citizens can meet and exchange their experiences, where the use-value of space takes again over the exchange one. The participants’ works helped unpacking and de-codifying such a neo-marxist vision. They highlighted hidden potentialities of the new square, possible ways of portraying its many identities and narratives, latent contradictions

intrinsic to a project of a piazza that is open to everyone but chiefly to whom is willing to enter: what if the space opens all its three main gates and its sides become totally permeable? How to open a gate toward something *other*, and not to lose this otherness? How does openness combine with the need for security expressed by many inhabitants?

In spite of these open questions, Porto Fluviale's piazza represents a re-use of a Monument that goes beyond the simple notions of renovation or retrofitting but is rather a completely new one, crafted outside the current logic of urban development. Although made possible through means of occupation, such use leads to question the appropriateness of the term *occupying* itself: the *raison d'être* of spaces such as Porto Fluviale today lies indeed in the even more political action of *producing* space and in the new common narratives it entails.

# An Urban Adventure and a New Idea of Piazza

Azzurra Muzzonigro for LAC

As Laboratorio Arti Civiche (LAC) we act as a multidisciplinary research group with a particular interest on elaborating, together with social groups and local communities, a collective and shared vision of urban space through the means of ‘Civic Arts’. The workshop was the opportunity to kick-start a process that was already in the air for a while.

The multi-cultural nature of the participants matched

that of the inhabitants of Porto, and their overnight stay<sup>1</sup> at the occupation intensified the relationship among them. The Tea Room became our office, acting as a meeting place between the inhabitants of Porto and the neighbourhood<sup>2</sup>. The students were divided into groups and were assigned the task to realise the Piazza from different entry points, with the idea to form proposals to be presented to the inhabitants and to the public. The final day, a Saturday, marked the opening of the gate to the city and the courtyard of Porto Fluviale become a new meeting place and stage for interaction with the neighbourhood. How does the occupation want to introduce itself to the neighbourhood? What is the proposal the inhabitants want to make to the outside? What vision do they want to share? Moreover, as a reflection on the quality of urban spaces and social

1. A group of students was kindly hosted by the community of Porto Fluviale, in two rooms that were renovated and equipped as 'bedrooms' in occasion of the summerLab.

2. The Tea Room is a space born in 2011 thanks to the work of Margherita Pisano, PhD student of La Sapienza University, along with the inhabitants of Porto Fluviale: a place where to share knowledge while drinking a cup of tea

dynamics, what would be the deeper implication of the very act of opening the gate to the notion of lived space that the courtyard represents in relation to the occupation and to the surrounding neighbourhood of Testaccio? The courtyard's meaning would still embed a substantial shift in the mainstream notion of *public space*, as it would still belong to an occupied site, thus translating the political narrative sustaining its existence into spatial relations and dynamics. This narrative is very keen in highlighting how the codified notion of public space results inappropriately, as it does not present any alternative to the dominant socio-economic perspective governing the use of the public spaces in the city. Perhaps it is more significant to think about the space of the courtyard in terms of *common space*, which would give account to the political narratives dwelling the



occupied buildings. The courtyard would then bring to life a new idea of Piazza, dwelled by the occupiers and shared with the wider local inhabitants of Testaccio on the basis of an encounter that eludes the consumer use of public space, thus opening it to the exchange value and cultural sharing of an occupied multicultural common space.

Several proposals were developed that the inhabitants found quite interesting and were thinking to realise soon, at least some of them: developing a 'monumental garden' in the courtyard to invite the passers-by to cross the threshold of the big gate of the occupation; realising a mural painting on the main façade, to attract attention while suggesting the creative use of space that is taking place behind the rigorous military image that the

building projects to the outside.

All the proposals were supported by the work that LAC was already carrying out within the occupation. Our idea, initially presented to the assembly some months earlier, was to recuperate the image of river port (Porto Fluviale)<sup>3</sup> that the occupation refers to, to create a welcoming and inclusive place - a secure port where the different cultures could moor, be received, and experiment in edited forms of inter-cultural dwelling. We wanted to metaphorically populate the piazza with many boats to build together a new proposal of city and citizenship. On the second last day of workshop the first boat, a yellow one, was brought from a nearby lake. The inhabitants started to envision different possibilities, children's adventures, a big flowerpot, a vegetable garden and so on. The boat soon became the object that

would encompass the different visions and aspirations of the inhabitants for the piazza. After several discussions, the boat was dedicated as a symbol and invitation to take part in this new urban adventure, standing proudly with the prow towards the future and climbing up against the wind, always straight ahead!

Given the enthusiasm of the first day of opening, we thought to go on with this idea, to build together this new urban proposal. From the internal courtyard of a housing occupation, to common space for the neighbourhood, Porto Fluviale becomes the place where migrants, other people that cannot access a house, and those individuals that simply believe in a different way of dwelling in urban space, can start to realise together, day by day, their own Utopia.

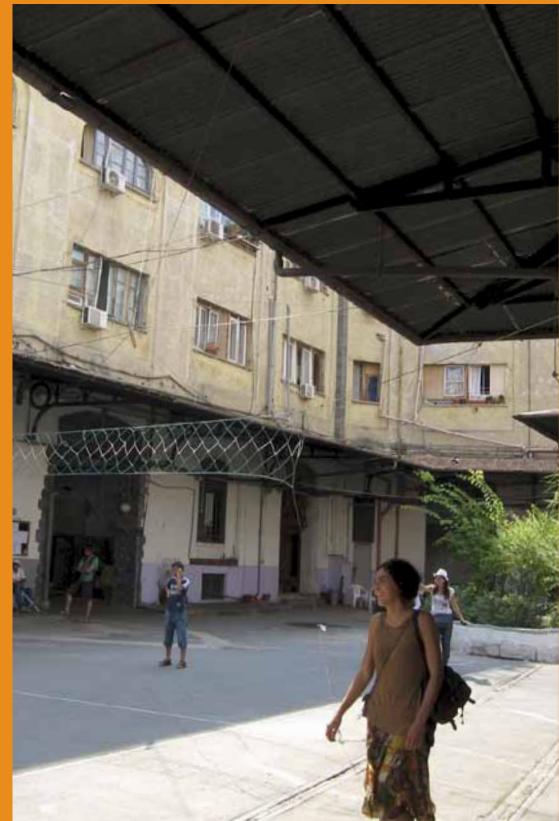
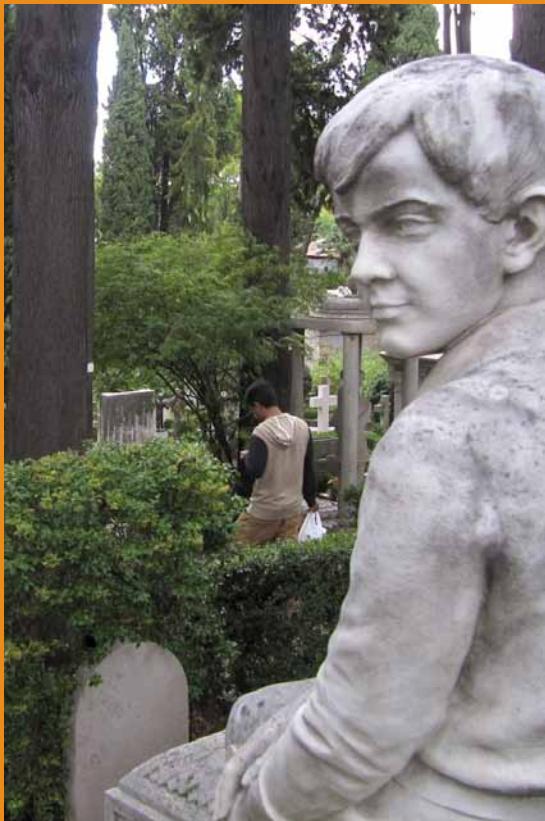
3. Porto Fluviale is named after the road where its main access is. Originally this one was leading to the river port (in Italian exactly 'porto fluviale') where the customs were.

# PLACES & WORKS

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We navigated between many realities of the contemporary 'periphery' of Rome, with its history of informal reappropriations: from the fourth floor of Corviale to the 'fence' of Campo Boario, from a recently squat-occupied space at La Rustica to the Acatholic Cemetery climbing up the ruins of ancient Roman Walls, finally to Porto Fluviale itself.





**Courtyard** The courtyard is the core of the community life in Porto Fluviale, the space where kids play and grown-ups meet, where the collective events take place, where to look at the train passing by and forget about the surrounding reality. Now that the community is committed to open up this space to the city, many issues come into being – questions of safety in the first place, but also divergent visions on how this space will look like, what it will represent for the community itself and for the city: a 'different' piazza, which has no model yet: we have tried to envision it together with the inhabitants, in six days of intense interaction (on the right: a plan we used as a means to understand the many possibilities of such spatiality).



**Archaeology** When about 80 families broke into one of the main gates of the building, this started undergoing a profound transformation, with many self-built housing units populating its three floors. Since then, the ground floor has been in a state of constant mutation, accommodating disparate functions: along with the inhabitants, we dug into its story, re-writing all the previous chapters to better understand the current one.



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**Life Stories** During the workshop the participants and the inhabitants have spoken continuously with each other, with mutual curiosity: "how have we all ended up in Rome?" Porto Fluviale is a collection of more than two hundreds life stories. We started writing some and placing them close to the front door, creating a living archive open to everybody, and at the same time an invitation to enter and get to know something more.

## RACHEL

Mi chiamo Rachel e vengo dall'Ecuador. Vivo in Italia da 9 anni, da quando ho avuto 19. Da quel momento l'Ecuador stava attraversando una crisi economica dovuta al passaggio dal Sucre al Dollar. Lavoro come donna della pulizie con un contratto continuativo, cosa che mi ha permesso di portare i miei genitori dall'Ecuador. Al momento viviamo tutti e tre nel mio piccolo appartamento nei miei genitori più avanti terremotato in Ecuador. Ma invece vorrei restare

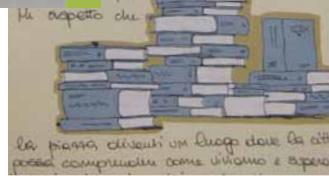


impermeabile.



## YUSSEf HAYAT

Siamo sposati e abbiamo due bellissimi figli. La verità non sono per far crescere facilmente i nostri figli e questo motivo per cui ci siamo uniti qui al Porto Fluviale. Una famiglia nata spalle che ti fa crescere i figli, è difficile a Doma in certe condizioni economiche. Vorremmo sposarci in una più grande un luogo che non permetterebbe rimaneremo qui. Vivere in questo posto vuol dire avere attenzione a quei che sono raccontiamo dove abitiamo



## eMANUELA

Io chiamo Emanuela e sono italiana. Ho due bambini piccoli e sono favolosa alla "fotolitografia" delle piante!

## BERTO

bato e vengo dal Perù, esco ogni sera a Sopramonte in Roma e assisto, dall'alto di una città, le spese della pista, vedo aperto sulle colline la nostra vita, per me è molto importante.

Porto Fluviale da quando c'è l'occupazione e da circa dieci anni la costruzione del treno tra gli abitanti, mi di occupazioni, abbiamo fatto da Te e adesso con delle prese mesce una per la città.



**Harbor** Porto Fluviale in Italian means 'River Harbor': in ten years, many 'boats' have moored to its piers, many identities have arrived and found a safe place where to stay and live together, sharing not only a space but also the commitment to partake in a struggle against the urban capitalistic development. Laboratorio Arti Civiche during the DPU summerLab built on the harbor metaphor and started realising its idea of a garden of boats, trying to spark off in the inhabitants a will to portray their immigrant identities with pride and at the same time in a ludic manner. The garden today is still under construction, the boats are still moored, one day some of them will maybe depart again.

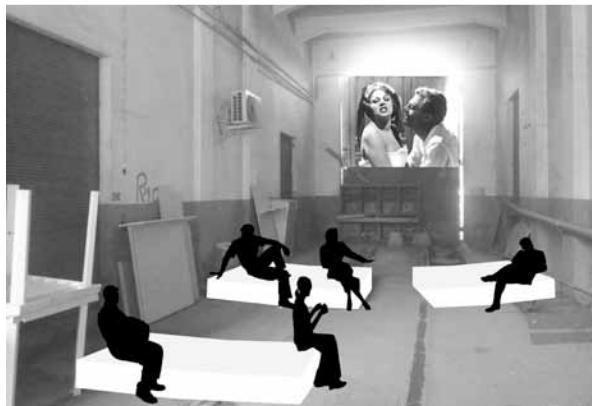
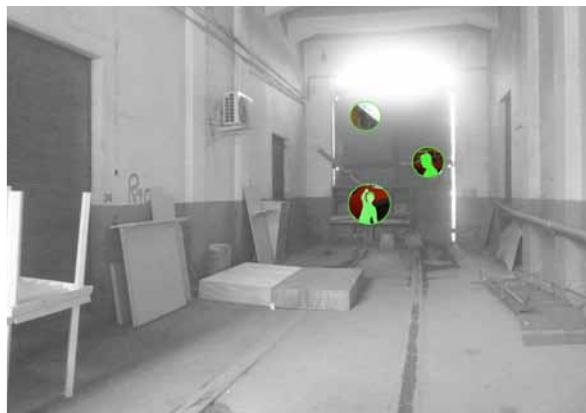




**Assembly** Taking part to the usual Tuesday's assembly, we exposed our ideas publicly, the inhabitants clarified theirs, and our different but not clashing visions started taking shape. The Assembly is a weekly event in the life of the squat-occupation, where decisions are made and negotiations between different positions take place – the first idea of opening up the courtyard toward the city was discussed precisely in an assembly, long before the summerLab landed in Rome, and still during our week. With us, the population decided to set up an event to ‘formally’ inaugurate the piazza: on the closing day of our workshop, a banquet would have celebrated the beginning of this new adventure (on the right: the flyers made by the participant with the invitations to the event and with the ‘menu’ of the new piazza, i.e. all the activities that a visitor could have found.



**Reuses** All the spaces of Porto Fluviale tell us about a creative reuse started because of (and thanks to) the mutating needs of the inhabitants. Some spaces though still look as remainders, and they do not take full advantage of their potential. The participants speculated on their possible futures, showing for instance (below) how a closed gate does not necessarily represent a barrier toward the external world.



**Gameboard** After all, what we did with the inhabitants has been playing a collective game, on a board that was the space of Porto Fluviale itself. With them we developed some tools, images and mechanisms to help to fully envision possible futures for their space. Again, such possibilities are not fixed and decided ones, but they will keep changing over time according to mutating needs and outside conditions. With this plan (on the right) we tried exactly to represent this, using a few elements whose continuous reshuffling represent the many 'performative' possibilities of Porto Fluviale.



**Garden** What to do to attract curiosity from the outside and at the same time 'recreate' places inside? A group of participants proposed to enlarge at the umpteenth level the small garden built a few years ago by the inhabitants at the centre of the courtyard. A new pole of attraction that is visible from the road and the railway, and extends until reappropriating the open spaces now living in a condition of leftovers.







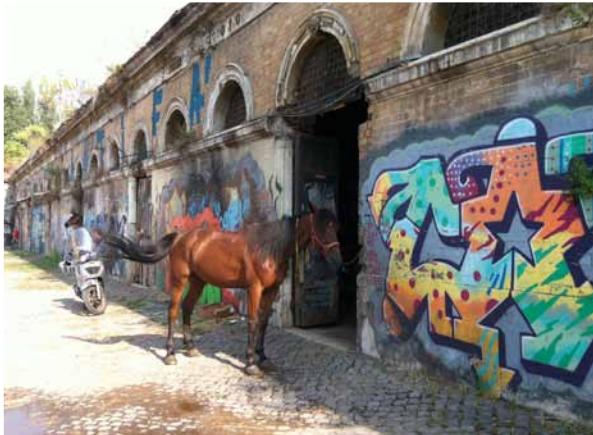
**Opening** Not only does Porto Fluviale want to open its gate, rather it aims to overcome the image of fortified space its architecture conveys, and to share its intercultural identity with pride. Why not to work on the façade then, its socle sublimating in rainbow colours, and a 'cut' alluding to an ever growing nature inside.



**Time, space** Walking through many spatialities, speaking with their people, listening to their life experiences and visions of the world, cooking and eating together with them, from Corviale's squats to Campo Boario and its Kurdish Community, from the 'big' and networked reality of the Struggle for Housing to the single 'small' events happened in Porto Fluviale, DPU summerLab has been a journey through space and time.



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# DPU summerLab as a way of defending architecture

## Camillo Boano

This text appears in both DPU summerLab 2012series pamphlets, and it draws on the experience of both Rome *Occupation City* and Zurich *Liminal Contours* workshops. Zurich's pamphlet is available at: [www.bartlett.ucl.ac.uk/dpu/programmes/summerlab](http://www.bartlett.ucl.ac.uk/dpu/programmes/summerlab)

A few years ago when we began to develop the initial idea of what would become later the DPUsummerLab series, we definitely arrived at a series of challenges. The first challenge was the task acritically engaging with the materiality of urban environments that could (re)interrogate design practice and design education. We thus viewed each 'lab' as an itinerant and flexible learning platform where all participants would broaden their viewpoint to question urban space in relation to

**Camillo Boano** is an architect, urbanist and educator with a MSc in Urban Development and a PhD in Planning. At the present is Senior Lecturer at the DPU where he directs the MSc in Building and Urban Design in Development. He is one of the Co-Directors of the UCL Urban Lab and has over 18 years of experiences in research, consultancies and development work in South America, Middle East, Eastern Europe and South East Asia.

**William Hunter** is an architect and Teaching Fellow at the DPU. He has held diverse professional affiliations in New York, Zurich, and London spanning high-profile residential, mixed-use commercial and cultural projects for Studio Daniel Libeskind, Foster + Partners, and Heatherwick Studio. His research and interests revolve around the complex processes of contested urbanism, Critical Regionalism methodology, and an overall championing of a critical design practice.

**Anna Schulenburg** is a Graduate Teaching Assistant at the DPU and an architect (RIBA) with several years of international experience as project architect and independent consultant in Burkina Faso, South Africa, UK, US, Germany and Hun

social and political issues. The intellectual and methodological dimensions of the ‘labs’ were to be seen as an expansion of the processes developed and experienced in the DPU studio modules where learning is a continuous path of discovering the dialectical nature of the material and the immaterial. The second challenge was to get away from a certain narrow vision of architectural and urban design, characterised by the mere provision of solutions. The labs then sought to adopt a more nuanced and critical approach of ‘within and between’, grounded in the historical attitude of progressive action-research and practice-led ethos of the DPU. The labs would become an open immersion into both object and social constructs in order to avoid any disciplinary construction of territorial fortresses while suggesting a ‘tactical’ hybrid process of design, both mutable and contextual in nature and undefinable by any particular scale.

Conducting workshops in Rome *Occupation City* and Zurich *Liminal Contours* have allowed us and the participants to test and elaborate on the fertile lines between mapping and interpreting sites through stories that are narrated in the becoming of spaces in their political allure, their potentials. This idea of the ‘tactical’ and the word ‘tactic’, introduced by Gramsci, was of great significance for the development of DPUsummerLab because it denotes ‘resistance’ within a given urban context allowing the participants to, unlike with the radical tools of modernist urbanism, depict and investigate resistance as an outcome of urban action. This not only dictates an overall transformation but also favors bits-and-pieces, incremental change in relation to the context within which it operates and so used for both ‘critical assessments’ and ‘the processes of spatial production’. The labs are thus productive platforms where participants quickly dive into complex matters, extract-

gary. Her work has focused on participatory design and building solutions with communities and users; social sustainability; education and heritage projects.

**Giorgio Talocci** is an architect, Teaching Fellow and PhD candidate at the DPU. His research questions the current boundaries of Urban Design, highlighting the possible relevance of Agamben's thought in a re-thinking of the discipline. He is co-founder, along with Francesco Careri and others, of Laboratorio Arti Civiche.

**Laboratorio Arti Civiche** is an interdisciplinary research group born inside the Department of Urban Studies, Roma Tre University, which aims to interact creatively with the citizens through action research and projects, looking for a collective and shared transformation of the built environment.

**Francesco Careri** is an architect and since 2005 Research Professor in the Department of Urban Studies of the University of Roma Tre. In 1995 he founded the urban art laboratory called Stalker/Osservatorio Nomade, and in 2009 Laboratorio Arti Civiche. His main focus is on informal urban settlements, exploring critically new possibilities of transformation in such contexts. Since 2006 he runs in the Faculty of Architecture the module Civic Arts, a peri-

ing suggestive information and always negotiating the delicate balance between ignorance and expertise. Guided by 'curiosity, refusal and innovation' urban territories are explored as a gesture of complex line of movements, a series of spatial storytelling along the edges of the spaces that contains it.

Inevitably, when we started the DPUsummerLab series we were deeply intrigued by the great experiment of rethinking design, both urban and architectural, as trans-disciplinary forms of encounter. For instance, witnessing the Corviale development in Rome, the clash of Modernist utopia and its monumental re-signification through the informal occupation paved the ways to renegotiate the multiple contradictions, discrepancies and hybridized way of thinking brought by the rich encounter of participant's variegated knowledge and the space. Or take the juxtaposition of the

commercial shipping containers and prostitution zones of peripheral Zurich as a result of the more organic evolution and acceptance of the Langstrasse quarter. Such encounters with urban extremes and the productive forces at stake force us to constantly rethink the role of architects, designers, and practitioners while displacing the centrality of design action into the margins, becoming more aware of the fundamental need of design-research processes that strategically inform tactical alternatives and options. The ferocity and poetic possibilities of places like the Corviale and Porto Fluviale in Rome or Altstetten and Langstrasse in Zurich and their antithetic use of urban idioms suggested the need to develop a trans-design-research that, despite its inherent forward-looking nature, does not fixate on elements, images and forms, but on their processes, their potentialities. This is the very lesson that Henry Lefebvre once taught us:

patic laboratory grounded in the walking exploration of neglected urban areas. His main publications are the books *Constant. New Babylon, una Città Nomade* (Testo & Immagine, Torino 2001) and *Walkscapes. Walking as an Aesthetic Practice* (Editorial Gustavo Gili, Barcelona 2002).

**Azzura Muzzonigro** is an architect, graduated from the faculty of Architecture of the Università degli Studi Roma Tre, co-founder of Laboratorio Arti Civiche. She is currently a PhD candidate in Urban Studies at the Università degli Studi Roma Tre and a visiting research student at the DPU with the research: "Dwell the Threshold: Spaces and Practices of Encounter." She is interested in the participation of communities, towards the collective active transformation of social relations and the urban spaces.

**Maria Rocco** is an architect, co-founder of Laboratorio Arti Civiche. She is interested in the informal practices of dwelling the urban space as an alternative to the actual model of urban development. Her works focus on the possibilities of artistic action on urban phenomena and with communities of dwellers as a way of critical interpretation and transformation of the cities' environment.

space is no longer the container, the frame or the context of social processes but a social process in itself.

Taking more deliberately, architecture conceived as a specific kind of activity but also a ‘particular frame of mind need to be protected from a critical violence and its derive to over-pragmatic trend’: “architecture must be defended” according to Hays, as “enabling condition and a restraint on thought and actions.” Therefore it is not a thing, not just a form, but also a more complex, contingent condition. It must be defended by creating a new critical project centred on architecture as social practice, on its political possibility. In this light, the DPUsummerLab is becoming the condition of possibility in which excess rudely intrudes into otherwise ontologically and politically stable orders, allowing what was previously invisible or unheeded to suddenly emerge within a societal and political realm.

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