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## 13. Just another roll of the dice: a socially creative initiative to assure Roma housing in North Western Italy

*Tommaso Vitale and Andrea Membretti*

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### 13.1 INTRODUCTION: A CASE OF SPACE PRODUCTION AND EMPOWERMENT

This chapter concerns how social innovation relates to the social production of space (MacCallum et al. 2009). Usually, the scholarly literature on local welfare, social work, and ‘social cohesion’ at the urban level mostly fails to consider the relevance of space (Bifulco and Vitale 2003; Ranci 2010; Andreotti et al. 2012). The spatial dimension of a socially creative strategy is constituted in physical and symbolic boundaries, in the built environment, in situated objects and relationships. Space can significantly contribute to stigma and exclusion, notably in segregated places. In fact, space performs: it has social effects on people’s opportunities and on their self-esteem (van Ham et al. 2012). Nonetheless the space is itself a social product; it is the object of strategies. Most social innovators invest in space, trying to shape it, to modify it, to make it more inclusive. They aim to use it as a lever for social innovation. Some such innovations use art as a tool to produce change in the spatial configuration for deprived groups.

In this chapter we observe a case of a socially creative strategy in which a particularly difficult housing problem was solved thanks to a holistic approach to the production of space. More specifically, we observed how a network of NGOs was able

to manage a situation of housing exclusion for some highly stigmatized Roma families. In the small town of Settimo Torinese (47,494 inhabitants), the network was able to satisfy the housing needs of 35 people, to open up a process of wide and inclusive democratic governance within the community, and to empower all the actors involved in the project, especially the beneficiaries. Yet the true character of this social innovation lay precisely at the level of the production of space. The main problem that the network sought to address was the issue of segregation that housing for Roma usually reproduces (Sigona 2005). Welfare provisions for Roma in Italy are traditionally part of the problem they are supposed to solve: they maintain segregation and fail to support Roma inclusion in broader urban life.

This network therefore decided to design a project and implement it in a very collaborative way. They did not provide a specialized shelter for evicted Roma people, or for Roma housing emergencies; rather, they invented a participative path within the Turin metropolitan area to produce a space that could *also*, but not exclusively, welcome Roma families, without labelling them and without separating them from the wider local community.



### 13.2 ROMA IN ITALY: A CRISIS OF TERRITORIAL EMBEDDEDNESS

Housing conditions for Roma groups in Italy are a particularly weighty and worrying problem. This is an alarming situation all over Europe, but there are some particular problems in the Italian case (FRA 2009). Here, local policies for Roma and Sinti groups are mostly based on a singular 'policy instrument' (Lascoumes and Le Galès 2007), the so called '*campo nomadi*' (Nomad Camp). This is a highly segregating public housing provision that forces very different Roma groups (we are not dealing with a *single* ethnic group when we speak of Roma) to live together in highly isolated areas, in poor prefabs, subject to special regulations and differential administrative treatment (Membretti 2009a). In the late 1970s, this policy instrument was developed as an adaptation of an earlier urban policy tool dedicated to 'carnies', with the idea that all the Roma groups were travellers, with a nomadic behaviour which requires only temporary settlements for caravans. It has been diffused in the absence of any kind of national legislative framework or regional policy coordination (Vitale 2009a). Thirty years later, the Nomad Camp remains the mainstream local policy for housing Roma and Sinti groups, with a lack of integration between housing policy and other social policies. The current estimated Roma 'population' living in Italy is between 170,000 and 200,000, but only a dozen or so towns in Italy have experimented with some form of social innovation to replace the Nomad Camps (Vitale 2009b).

In reality, the performative<sup>1</sup> outcomes of this policy instrument are profound in terms of decreasing Roma voices (Dean et al. 2005) and degrading both Roma identities and intergenerational relationships by

effectively criminalizing their traditional uses of space. What is at stake, and what forms the main point of crisis, is precisely relations between these groups and territory. It is a crisis of spatial embeddedness due to settlement segregation.

In Italy the contradictions presented by Roma and Sinti groups' presence fall on local authorities that lack adequate tools to face them;<sup>2</sup> besides, they are rarely backed by higher level public authorities. However, there is a degree of freedom to manoeuvre at the local level, allowing authorities to bend policies in many possible directions. Public policy choices that can be enacted at the local level strongly circumscribe opportunities for action regarding primary and secondary education, work placement, healthcare, sociability and, above all, housing. They can either favour or hinder the conditions of 'recognition' (Pizzorno 2007, pp. 275–95) of these communities in a 'necessarily complex and self-contradictory' social order (Jobert 1998, p. 25).<sup>3</sup>

Policies implemented at the local level are always the result of situated interaction between various actors with different interests, within common constraints. Despite the crucial role of policies and instrument inertia (especially the 'Nomad camp' device), it is nonetheless possible that social innovation can happen. What is at stake for scientific knowledge is to understand why and how socially creative strategies arise in such a constrained area, and what forms they take (Moulaert et al. 2010). The next two sections will consider these questions in relation to the 'Dice', an innovative housing project which reversed the effects of segregation in Settimo Torinese.

### 13.3 WHERE DOES SOCIAL INNOVATION COME FROM?

In the small town of Borgaro (13,000 inhabitants) near Turin, the presence of Roma newcomers from Romania was perceived as a threat to 'city security'. Some came in 1999, when the first Roma migration from Romania began. They built a shantytown on the land surrounding farmhouse called La Merla. After the summer floods of 2004 and 2005 in Romania, some other Roma groups arrived in Borgaro. The settlement was illegal, composed of wooden hovels and shacks, without sanitation, gas, electricity or a water supply. The housing conditions were ghastly. At the same time, the children of this community went to school, a very important element in the construction of broader social ties. School dynamics and urban space are closely intertwined and increasingly interact in producing or alleviating segregation (Oberti 2007). Parents of Roma children's classmates who had not before done so began to consider Roma as people worthy of respect, and formed relationships with them.

On 16 November 2006 the shantytown burned down, and 110 people lost everything they had. The municipality did not want to offer them shelter, but the friendly relationships that had developed between parents of classmates helped to mobilize two local NGOs – Acmos and Terra del Fuoco (TdF) – neither of which was involved in aid for the homeless, but both were able to welcome the victims in their ordinary offices. They remained there for only one week in what was certainly a heavy and exhausting situation. After that week they were moved to a Nomad Camp in Turin for 10 days, and then an emergency camp was organized in collaboration with the Red Cross until June 2007. Nevertheless, the experience of that first

week was a catalyst to activate these two NGOs, and especially TdF, to think about a better housing solution for this Roma group.

They mobilized their political resources and attracted the interest of the National Ministry of Social Affairs, who promised to sustain any housing solution found, on the condition that it could be considered 'innovative'. In fact the money from the Ministry financing never came, but its promise provided legitimacy to the issue raised by the two NGOs. It was a risky game: the two NGOs used the Ministry promise as leverage to mobilize other institutional and social actors; through positive use, they made it a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The process was long and thick with various dynamics. They asked for a building, or a field or an area to promote a project within the town of Borgaro, but the mayor was averse to the idea and opposed it. When the Municipality of Borgaro proved unwilling, the TdF association instead formed an alliance with the Province of Turin to try to find another town inclined to welcome at least a small number of Roma families. This they finally found in the Municipality of Settimo Torinese, a middle-sized town (57,000 inhabitants) with a large building previously used as social shelter. At the same time, the public and visible call for an open municipality produced a widespread consensus around the claim, and enlarged the network of organizations providing support: the large third sector association 'Gruppo Abele', the Milanese organization 'Architettura delle Convivenze' (AdC, or Architecture of Living Together), the Turin Catholic Pastoral Office for Migrants and, most importantly, the Regional Bank Foundation.

In brief, during this process two main mechanisms stand out as crucial: (1) the relevance of social ties built at the

most local level, thanks to social proximity through Roma school inclusion, and (2) the prominence of scaling up, finding alliances at higher levels. Both of them produce the multiplication of ties as a by-product.

Using the analysis of Vicari Haddock and Tornaghi in Chapter 19 of this Handbook, we can say that the relationship provided by the inclusion of Roma children in schools offered a source of visibility and motivation that countered political and moral indifference and nihilism. At the same time, the embeddedness of two local NGOs in solid and stable structures of governance allowed them to 'exploit' and mobilize previous political ties to claim and push for an innovative solution to empower Roma and to satisfy their housing needs.

### 13.4 THE DICE: SOCIALLY CREATIVE APPROACH TO PROVIDING HOUSING AND MORE

The municipality of Settimo Torinese offered the TdF association the use of a 700 square metre, two-floor building, a former gymnasium built in the 1970s and used, from 2003 on, by the social services as a shelter for people with social and mental diseases. The place was highly stigmatized in the neighbourhood because of its inhabitants, and, in recent years, progressively decayed, also due to squatting by homeless people and heroin addicts.

The network of organizations involved in the project was very aware of this stigma: a stigmatized population in a stigmatized building could make for an explosive situation.<sup>4</sup> Thanks to the impetus of AdC, they decided to implement a non-specialized project: a shelter devoted not only to Roma families, in which some Roma families

could find temporary reception (for three years at the most), but where non-Roma families could also find a warm welcome. It was also to be a housing shelter used for more than just shelter: the organizations decided to 'sacrifice' some Roma dwelling space in view of the urgent need to reduce the risk of segregation and isolation. They constructed apartments for 8 Roma families (17 children and 18 adults), but also apartments for non-Roma families, an office for 'social mediators' (educators skilled in managing neighbourhood conflicts), a temporary shelter for refugees, and a flat that could be rent to students and workers active in broader social and political initiatives throughout Turin's metropolitan area. At the same time, the large patio was allotted as an open space for the local community, with a conference room and a space designed for art exhibitions and other cultural activities for artists from the region.

The restoration of the building, carried out according to the project authored by the AdC, was financed by the Compagnia di S. Paolo bank foundation, with an initial budget of 150,000€ (later increased); the Province of Torino supported the restoration, offering several job-grants to the Roma people directly participating in the refurbishment. This process was organized by the AdC as a 'building site-school', in which the Roma involved (and to whom the project was addressed) could gain on-the-job training, thus obtaining a qualification useful in the labour market. This was a particularly important outcome: it encouraged the education of children. In fact, several studies (Alietti 2009; Vitale and Cousin 2011) have shown that education policies for underclass migrant Roma children only work if their parents are involved in vocational training projects too, with experiencing first-hand direct access to the labour market, and therefore

the relevance of education for their sons and daughters.

The entire project was 'interesting' in the peculiar sense that it attracted interest (Callon 1986). To name but a few, when the Ministry of Social Affairs finally decided not to finance the project, an influential local Bank Foundation stood alone in financing the 'Dice', 'interested' in the kind of innovation the 'Dice' was making.

Nevertheless, what seems more interesting is not the process of finding a good way of providing shelter for some of the Roma families, but the *way* in which the social housing intervention was provided. 'The way' is understood as the style and method through which the project was realised. The main question here is 'how?' and not only 'why?' or 'what?' Even the way in which the Dice was constructed contained an idea to contrast ghettoization effects.

First, the same Roma to be housed were engaged to restore and refurbish the building. They were hired by a social cooperative, and worked on building their own houses, but were paid and learning a job. The network of organizations involved provided a guarantee that the Roma builders would continue working after the end of the Dice project. The possibility for the Roma to demonstrate, through work, their capabilities and worth was a powerful means for them to gain a self-confident attitude (empowerment) with respect both to themselves and to 'outside' society: in fact, the concrete action of building their houses also promoted a positive public image of the Roma, usually suffering from the widely held prejudice that labels them as 'unable' to work, or unwilling to work.<sup>5</sup>

Second, at each step of the building's restoration an open party was organized involving the local community: schools, parishes, associations, sports teams, and so on. The result was to show the quality of the work, to permit the formation of new

ties, to incrementally reduce the stigma attached to the building, and to engage a larger population in the aims of the project, producing a feeling of community ownership. Indeed, the building provided very different services: housing requires that the privacy and intimacy of each family be retained, while the open space needed to allow for circulation and attraction for the local community. Celebrating each step in the building of the Dice was a way to manage the plurality of functions, discussing them cheerfully.<sup>6</sup>

Thirdly, the building yard was also conceived as open. The building yard simplified the processes of mutual acquaintance between Roma builders, social workers, citizens, neighbours, and other local agencies. We can find here a vision of space based on the 'introvert-extrovert' polarity (Membretti 2007): the tension between these two opposite poles that becomes the field of experimentation for an idea of society and of social relations, a space considered as a meeting point between community and society, and between several communities. In this sense – both symbolically and actually – the 'court' (communitarian place) and the 'square' (public space) tend to coexist in the building and interface continuously through the practices carried out there. Openness towards the outside and an inner 'protection' are therefore elements that coexist within the Dice project.

Fourth, the Dice project was not designed by some architects looking in from the outside, but was continuously discussed, co-planned, negotiated and revised together with each of the Roma families. In fact, following the participative methods of AdC, the construction period was intended as the centre of a process of building 'social fabric' in which all the people involved (inhabitants, members of associations, etc.) make their contribution

to the concrete realization of the spaces and, moreover, to their inter-subjective transformation in places. In this sense, the building activity nourishes, brick by brick, a sort of material public sphere, or, we may say, a very concrete and basic community of discourse.

Last but not least, the active role played by the Roma was very important in the process of consensus-building driven by the mayor and the TdF association. One of the main stereotypes against Roma is that they are idle and layabouts, ‘bumming around’ (Vitale and Claps 2010). The direct employment of Roma builders was a central point: they worked on a self-building project, therefore reducing costs and public expenditure; their work meant it was difficult to criticise the project as charity; what is more they worked to provide an exhibition space for the town.

### 13.5 THE ROLE OF ARTS IN CREATING A BRIDGE BETWEEN THE COMMUNITIES

The empowering approach to the restoration and rehabilitation of the building created a style that has been preserved by the TdF association in its daily work with the Roma people living in the **Dado**. Their social workers provide help in finding work, connect with parishes, theatre schools and sporting and musical associations, but also with informal groups of volunteers, to provide some educational support, to find economic opportunities in new niches (such as the ‘last minute market’), to support children with mental health problems, and mount public campaigns against racism and discrimination.<sup>7</sup> Schooling provides an excellent source of positive relationships to foster and encourage community embeddedness.

At the very heart of the Dice project, and a continuing part of its daily life, are arts and cultural activities. These work to maintain and foster community relationships and multiply social and economic opportunities for the people involved. In the Dice project, the housing exclusion problem of Roma and the possibilities for alternative modes of space production were expressed and addressed through creative arts. AdC pushed the Dice project to face the trial of (re)constructing identities that could be shared by many different groups. TdF has insisted on realising this difficult task in artistic performance and activities, provoking communication within communities and among groups, a key aspect of the project’s success as a social innovation (see also Tremblay and Pilati, Chapter 5, and André et al., Chapter 18).

Since 2007, AdC has been co-operating with the *Centro Studi Assenza* (Absence – Study and Research Centre), a scientific and cultural association founded in Milan in the 1970s by the psychologist and artist Paolo Ferrari. The *Centro Studi Assenza* has been promoting and hosting a dialogue between different cultures and disciplines of Social Sciences and Humanities, and a focus on neuro-sciences. The centre stresses activities and reflection on the relationship between art and science, developing and following a complex psychological and philosophical approach called *in-Absence*.<sup>8</sup>

The multi-disciplinary team of the centre is composed of several professionals from different disciplines such as psychiatric medicine, psychology, architecture, urban studies, and modern arts; the team is involved in artistic-scientific-architectural projects, developed in public and private spaces in metropolitan areas, often as symbolic elements of wider socio-territorial interventions aiming to respond to basic



Source: Archive of *Terra del Fuoco* association, Turin, Italy (reproduced with permission).

Figure 13.1 *The Dice*, main entrance, showing the *Wandering Knight*

needs, and usually expressed by ethnic minorities or populations with social problems.

In the *Dice* project, the artistic dimension plays a role of primary importance: the redecoration of the façade, focused on an artistic-scientific composition by Ferrari entitled *Il cavaliere errante* (the *Wandering Knight*; Figure 13.1), is the lever for the transformation of the building – in the perception of both its inhabitants and a wider public sphere – from a place characterized by marginality to a point of reference for the surroundings. The artistic installation is constituted by a sculpture in fibreglass, placed on a cement and iron base, made by people living in the *Dice*, with two big photographic prints on aluminium plates, placed on the façade of the building.

The artistic installation – promoting an aesthetic dimension of living – aims to dismantle the negative and stereotypical image usually associated with Roma housing as shantytowns or abandoned buildings. Art here is concerned as an element of opening towards the external – that is a communicational bridge between the several different groups populating the town – but, at the same time, as a support in the construction of new forms of identity and belonging, involving inhabitants of the *Dice* and other users of the building. So, arts may offer the basis for a territorial rooting, focused on a universalistic system of symbols, opposite to every defensive and residual form of closing, even of ethnic nature. And, as seen in the previous paragraph, the process of art making is relevant as a process, when it

is conducted as catalysts for a territory's broad opening-through.

Through the use of arts, the Dice project displays its intention of marking the post-industrial territory of the suburb in a positive way, giving it a new social and cultural form of recognition, and a new and 'invented' spatial centrality at local and metropolitan level. The character of the artistic intervention could therefore be considered as performative, as it promotes identity creation processes based on complexity that involve not only the inhabitants and other users of the Dice, but also – since it is not a specialized and segregated shelter – people living in the local and extra local environments. The Dice should be considered as socially innovative in this sense too: that in its structural and cultural constitution the artistic dimension is at the centre of a creative process, essentially intended as the social construction of spaces for mutual recognition between different communities, on the base of a common and shared place to live.

### 13.6 HOUSING (AND HOSTING) SOCIAL CREATIVITY: SOCIAL INNOVATION AND THE PRODUCTION OF SPACE

Roma and Sinti groups are very different and cannot be considered as a single homogeneous population. Hostility against these groups is higher in Italy than anywhere else in Western Europe (Vitale and Claps 2010). Prejudices against 'gypsies' are continuously fed by a highly segregating urban policy, which has confined these groups to special 'nomad camps' at the margins of urban life. This ethnically differentiated treatment has rarely been denounced by international institutions, and remains the dominant policy type in the country, espe-

cially in the north-western regions (Open Society Institute et al. 2008; Enwereuzor and Di Pasquale 2009).

It is precisely in this part of the country that the 'Dice' was born: as such, it not only faces contestation from xenophobic groups, but also has to struggle with politicians who seek electoral advantage by opposing Roma and Sinti settlements, despite having encouraged and approved of them before.

The social innovation promoted by the project is therefore noteworthy because it has been able to *differentiate* and personalize the housing offered to Roma groups, beginning from their wishes and projects rather than from previous stereotyped categorizations. It works on three elements of social innovation: (1) looking at each person in an empowerment perspective (especially in terms of labour market insertion); (2) taking care to mobilize private and public resources to build 'decent' customized housing; (3) strong engagement to promote inclusive governance and widen spaces for excluded voices, with a strong commitment from the Municipality.

The case of the Dice is also socially innovative because it demonstrates the incremental and intersubjective production of a space that is perceived, both by inhabitants and users, as a place of social inclusion and, thanks to its artistic dimension, as an inter-cultural expression of their life together. This was a very soft and tricky process: the housing needed to be conceived as a space for encounters, but could not become a completely 'public space' – it had to remain a space where families lived, with privacy, ownership, and invisibility for reasons of confidence and familiarity (Breviglieri 2006). At the same time it needed to be conceived to be used in an open way *also*, to attract and not detract from sociability. It was not a problem that could be fixed defining stable and

definitive public or private functions to each physical space of the building. As we observed in our research, it was a problem of planning and promoting a process of empowerment that allowed those involved to learn how to manage tensions.

In such dynamics of empowerment, physical space plays a significant role, moving from the articulation of a variety of spaces inside the building: spaces devoted to different, but not discrete, functions (living, exhibitions, hostel, offices . . .), producing important interactions between different needs and different people (Roma and non Roma people, inhabitants and users of the building, etc.).

The sustainability of the housing project was reinforced by a way of doing things based on mutual recognition of individual uniqueness, and reciprocal respect, in which the border between inhabiting and opening up to the local community could always be negotiated by the same beneficiaries. And, as we have seen, the arts played a special role in this sustainability. It helped to open the housing shelter to the outside world, but also qualified that opening and contributed to learning how to manage tensions between different logics and development directions. It allowed the ‘disgraceful’ image of a slummy, degraded place – as Roma settlements are usually stereotypically considered – to be reversed. Artistic elements modify relationships between the building, potential inhabitants, the territory, and citizens. Meanwhile, artistic facilities within the ‘Dice’ are considered – not only by the promoting organizations, but also by the Roma – as creating a new sort of identity. Roma are recognized not for their assumed criminal behaviour or their deprivation, hardship and begging but for their cultural production and capabilities. Arts sustain the memory of

long-term traditions and support voice, reducing fear of self-expression.

The ‘Dice’ is therefore a noteworthy case of social innovation because it has allowed Roma welfare to be addressed not only as the satisfaction of basic needs, but also as empowering them in their capacity to make a cultural contribution to urban life. Furthermore, this case study is very useful to highlight the relationship between social innovation and the production of the space. We saw that in this case, activists, artists and social workers join together in a coalition against Roma exclusion, to produce a space of ties that bind. The ‘Dice style’, has been a social innovation in the design *and* management of the boundaries of a welfare shelter. It is a creative mode of space production: the space allows identities to be expressed not in order to divide and close, but as a stimulus for encounters and urban dialogue. This socially-creative process had two aspects: first, providing housing and, second, integrating the housing and the Roma residents into the local community. Both of them concern the spatial dimension of social innovation. Activists were aware of this, and they designed the **Dado** to try to cope with some of the major problems other empowering agencies have faced. Problems have not all been solved for all time in the designing of the space of the **Dado**. But the artistic sensibility and the performing activities realized in the **Dado** contribute to open room for reflection on the social effects of space, and on how to produce inclusionary changes.

### 13.7 QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- In your country, are there any ethnic minorities that face problems similar to those of Roma in Italy? Why?

What do you think are the main mechanisms that prevent them from accessing housing?

- Why were arts and culture so important in the **Dado** case? More generally, how can arts and other sociocultural practices help to reduce the stigma of marginalized spaces?
- How is the production of space important to the social aims of an innovation for disadvantaged groups?
- Do you think that the 'celebratory style' of the **Dado** project is just a detail, or a necessary ingredient for community involvement? Are festivals and parties really policy instruments, or just a social work technique, not to be accounted for in policy design and implementation?
- What are the main tools and processes that are used in your town to build consensus around projects for socially unwanted groups? How do they differ or otherwise to those discussed in the **Dado** case?

## NOTES

1. About the performative power of images, see Membretti (2009b).
2. An innovative attempt to create social and technical tools – in a participative approach – to overcome the spatial segregation produced by the Nomad Camps was made in 2009 at the workshop 'I Sinti abitano Pavia' ('Sinti people live in Pavia'), held at the University of Pavia, Faculty of Engineering (Co-ordinator: Andrea Membretti). The results of the workshop, involving the local Sinti community, the Municipality, several NGOs and a large group of students and scholars, are published at: [www.sociability.it/sintiapavia](http://www.sociability.it/sintiapavia). Some interesting social innovation in local policies in Trento is described in Vitale (2012).
3. The reflections made by Ambrosini (2008, p. 212) are particularly interesting from this point of view. It is noted that, in the case of the Roma, conflicts surface within 'territorial mobility practices of transnational minorities and social benefits still regulated by bonds of affiliation to nation-states, whose result is to dig deep inequalities within the various groups that constitute Roma and Sinti complex'.
4. This is an issue highly discussed by contemporary urban movements, and by networks of innovation in mental healthcare; see Vitale (2010). But the high level of reflexivity on this point is not specific to the Italian context: see Duyvendak (2011, pp. 63–73).
5. It should be noted that Italy is the most racist country in the EU with respect to Roma: according to the European Values Survey, in 2008 62.8 per cent of the Italian population did not want Roma as neighbours (compared to 33.8 in UK and 25.5 in France; see Vitale et al. 2011).
6. Celebration remains a very important habit in daily life of **Dado**; for each child's birthday there is a party with schoolmates and their families.
7. In testimony to one anti-racist campaign 'No fear', one of the Roma children living in **Dado** was honoured by meeting the President of the Italian Republic, Giorgio Napolitano.
8. More details are available at: [www.in-absence.org](http://www.in-absence.org) (last accessed 10 January 2013).

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