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## SPATIAL PRACTICES, COMMONING AND THE PEER PRODUCTION OF CULTURE: STRUGGLES AND ASPIRATIONS OF GRASSROOTS GROUPS IN EASTERN MILAN

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*This paper reports on a case study of the Milan-based collective Macao to examine whether its commoning practices and governance model allow for processes of cultural peer production and their degree of engagement and inclusiveness on various scales. In 2012, Macao occupied iconic spaces in Milan and became rapidly a significant urban movement that gathered a large number of members and supporters. The activists eventually settled in the former Slaughterhouse Exchange Building in the Molise-Calvairate-Ponti neighbourhood, an area characterised by a large number of abandoned and underused sites, inadequate provision of affordable housing and issues around the social integration of immigrants and ethnic minorities (Milan City Council, 2010; Caffa, 2016, 2017). Drawing on foundational studies on urban movements and the role of the creative sector in urban struggles, the paper first contextualises Macao within the broader framework of grass-roots initiatives in Italy since the 1970s before investigating the controversial relationship between the collective and the local community. The gaps we note between them provide a better understanding of the complexity of the actual social, economic and political struggles in Milan, and how 'right-to-the-city' aspirations are differently interpreted. By analysing Macao's experience through the lens of the commons, the paper provides insights into whether its key features and governance aim at activating inclusive practices of cultural peer production. During two field work periods in February 2016 and April 2017, data were collected through mixed methods that included visual mapping, semi-structured interviews with representatives of Macao and local stakeholders and a multi-activity participatory session with a group of Molise-Calvairate-Ponti social housing tenants.*

**Keywords:**

urban movements, alter urbanisation, urban commons, cultural peer production, right to the city

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By **Nadia Bertolino and Ioanni Delsante**

### INTRODUCTION

In July 2011 an insurgent cultural movement called The Art Workers (Lavoratori dell'Arte, LdA below) officially began in Milan, Italy. The LdA manifesto (2011) originally focused on topics closely concerned with the creative sector, such as the provision of art spaces and their financial accessibility and a call for new communication channels and forms of expression. In 2012, however, the movement rapidly turned into a broader form of collective urban mobilisation, attracting new participants and sympathisers from around the city and beyond (D'Ovidio & Cossu, 2016) and eventually evolving into Macao, which described itself as a new centre for art, culture and research in Milan.

On 5 May 2012, hundreds of people occupied the Galfa Tower, a privately owned iconic skyscraper in the heart of Milan that had been abandoned since 1996. During ten days of occupation, the space hosted free events such as concerts, theatre pieces, workshops and training courses. According to Valli, Macao's process of identity formation occurred precisely through the implementation of creative and artistic activities: 'The process of forming a political subject passes through arts and creative expressions to impact and reconfigure the sensible domain' (2015, p. 643). In fact, thousands of people attended the public events in the Galfa Tower organised by the collective; even more joined Macao after its eviction, when events and a public assembly were held in the square at the entrance to the tower, which was renamed Piazza Macao.

As Braga makes clear, one purpose for occupying such a well-known building was to attract media attention (2017), so that by the time Macao moved from the square to occupy its second target, a valuable eighteenth-century palace in the Brera arts district, the Palazzo Citterio, it had grown enormously, and its activities had been widely reported by local and national media. The occupation of Palazzo Citterio drew the public's attention to a 40-year restoration effort initiated by the Municipality (i.e. City Council of Milan) that aimed to turn this empty, decaying aristocratic estate into a key space within the broader vision of a Great Brera Hub.

This effort began in the 1970s but was never completed due to a lack of funding and the ineffectiveness of the public administration's decision-making process (Stella, 2012). The attempted re-appropriation by Macao brought the Palazzo Citterio situation into the spotlight. On

22 May 2012, only three days after the occupation began, Macao activists were violently evicted from the building, along with several supporters.

A month of nomadic urban actions followed, during which activities and debate were constants. Although it was not possible to localise Macao's place physically, the collective and its supporters met throughout the city, calling for thematic focus groups and open assemblies through their Facebook page. These gatherings took place in subway and bus stations or in other public spaces in Milan, with the meeting places announced online just a few hours in advance. At that time, the hashtag #whereismacao went viral, quickly becoming the most popular one in the Milan area. This helped expand Macao's popularity and allowed the activists to continue the public discussion started in the Galfa Tower, defining the boundaries of their political and cultural manifesto and even fostering a reflection on the collective's structural model. The initial nomadic phase had the effect of reaching a critical mass, ensuring media coverage, shining a light on the need for radical change in urban policies and enabling bottom-up strategies for the re-use of Milan's massive patrimony of abandoned sites and buildings.

During this nomadic phase, Macao agreed to occupy what would become the stable location in which it remains today: the former Slaughterhouse Exchange Building (SEB). This paper focuses on analysing the stationary phase in the SEB and Macao's current agenda, including an enquiry into the relationships between the activists and the local community living in the Molise-Calvaire-Ponti neighbourhood.

We first introduce Macao's functioning in relation to the uses and organisation of SEB's spaces, questioning whether the notion of 'being settled' has allowed the collective to establish and develop P2P practices of cultural production. We discuss the inferences of the foundational principles behind Macao's horizontal management (Braga, 2017; Weisz, 2016) of the usage of production spaces and tools in the SEB and the way these are self-regulated and maintained by the peers. Furthermore, by analysing Macao through the lens of the commons, we aim to understand better the distinct governances of both physical space and cultural production.

The paper thus adopts a multi-scale perspective through which the Macao movement can be critically interpreted. We acknowledge that it has effectively influenced the political debate on the re-use of abandoned spaces in Milan for artistic purposes, and is now well established within a broader European network of activist-led movements for the peer production of culture. However, we aim to demonstrate that there remains significant but challenging room for further articulating Macao's social and political agenda. The results of our analysis of the controversial relationship between the collective and the neighbourhood highlight Macao's challenges and contradictions, along with the potential of establishing synergies and networks with other social groups and movements.

**Note on research methodology.** The paper is based on an ongoing study that began in February 2016, which involves collaboration with a group of Macao activists and the Tenants' Union (TU) in Molise-Calvaire-Ponti, represented by Ms. Franca Caffa.

In particular, this paper draws on data gathered during two main field work periods. The first session [1] in February 2016 was concerned primarily with understanding Macao's experience in its complexity and diversity and focused on its foundational principles, history and current political and cultural agenda. For the purposes of the study, we spent a one-week residency in the SEB, developing participant observation, mapping spaces and tools of production, conducting a round of non-structured interviews with the activists and taking part in an open assembly to achieve an initial understanding of Macao's governance model. Finally, we gathered open data in relation to the cultural activities hosted in the space through Macao Facebook page. During the second stage of field work [2] in April 2017, we finalised our data collection with a focus on Macao's governance and networks of peers through semi-structured interviews with activists and TU representatives. We also led a participatory session with TU members that aimed to reveal, through semi-structured interviews and an open questionnaire, the most highly visited and used urban spaces and the needs at both neighbourhood and city-wide scales. Some residents volunteered to carry out a cognitive mapping exercise that consisted of sketching the urban form and facilities in their neighbourhood, followed by the identification of regularly visited places and commonly walked routes on a city map provided by the facilitators. A cognitive map's function is to report the most significantly perceived buildings and spaces in a neighbourhood (Lynch, 1966); it contributes to defining spatial edges in everyday experience. Inspired by Robinson's exercise (1981), the making of a cognitive image serves to gain a spatial understanding of the place and the meaning that individuals attach to it (Bertolino, 2017) by recalling and decoding information 'about the relative locations and attributes of the phenomena in their everyday spatial environment' (Downs & Stea, 1977, p. 7).

The mixed methods approach allows us to examine a variety of multi-dimensional and contingent aspects tangled up in and relationally implicated by the main question. Hence, Macao's case study and the evolving relationships established by activists at various scales are investigated according to different lines of enquiry and through different perspectives to gain a comprehensive understanding of its spatiality, scales of operation and governance.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Since Castell's foundational works were published (1977, 1983), several scholars have looked at urban social movements from various perspectives, investigating the specificity of their urban struggles, their social or political aims, their links with local communities and their relationship with stakeholders or co-optation by political powers (Marcuse, 2009; Mayer, 2011; Nicholls, 2008). Castells (1983) mentions as a form of success their ability to influence the material means of production and reproduction of a system. However, Holloway (2002, 2010a) suggests looking at how these experiences stand within, against and beyond capitalism as a way of better analysing the means and mechanisms that enable their action and, eventually, their upscaling.

Given the broader panorama of experiences and movements developed in the new century and their shifting focus to the present day (Mayer, 2009), a number of scholars have identified specific features of urban movements as distinct from urban social movements (Pickvance, 2003). Among these are citizens' attempts to achieve control of urban environments (Prujit, 2007) and more specific claims on the city.

There is growing academic interest in the link between these experiences and the urban setting as the place and socio-political context in which these struggles take place (Smith, 2002). These are often interpreted as distinct from rural issues, even if there are significant similarities that can be further investigated (Zibechi, 2010; Holloway, 2010b). Starting from Lefebvre's (2003) notion of urban revolution, the

urban itself is being questioned in both its dynamics and its dimensions (Brenner, 2016), shedding light on the concept of planetary urbanisation and its link to processes of capitalist reproduction.

Some scholars argue that these movements are undertaking struggles for the 'right to the city' (Marcuse, 2010). This concept, originally outlined by Lefebvre (1968), has been criticised as vague and insufficiently grounded in grassroots movements' actions. However, there are initiatives that interpret the right-to-the-city concept in alternative ways (Mayer, 2009), such as by including spatial practices, uses and management rather than the mere occupation of vacant spaces (Petcou & Petrescu, 2015).

An important component of urban movements studies is referring to historical precedents and evolution (Castells, 1977). In terms of contemporary urban struggles, the closest precedents occurred largely in the 1970s and 1980s, typically in specific contexts or countries: the UK, Italy, and Spain, among others (Gray, 2017; Hodkinson & Chatterton, 2003; Martinez, 2007; Montagna, 2006). Overlaps between these and more recent waves of movements have been tracked and interpreted (Martinez and Garcia, 2015). As these studies are still limited when compared to the broad range of goals (squatting, no global movements, etc.), there is ground for further analysis in comparative terms.

Italian movements can be viewed in the broader panorama of the country's radical groups and urban movements, some of which date back to the 1970s in certain cities (Gray, 2017; Montagna, 2006). It is important to note how these specifically relate to the urban context itself. In fact, most of these groups (such as *Potere Operaio* and *Italian Autonomia*) advocated types of squatting as a right to housing and as different forms of re-appropriation (*Prendiamoci la Città*, 'Let's take back the City!') (Vasudevan, 2017). More specifically, it is worth considering the *Centri Sociali* (literally, 'Social Centres') experience, which began in the 1970s and has since evolved in different ways. Most of these *Centri Sociali* were initially unsanctioned; some then went through either evictions or processes of legalisation or institutionalisation that remain much debated by both activists and scholars, including in the Milanese context (Membretti, 2007).

Cultural and artistic practices and their critical role in or opposition to dominant forms of urban transformations have been approached from several perspectives (Miles, 2005), and the role of artists and art-based groups or collectives in social movements has been investigated quite recently (Novy & Colomb, 2013). Meanwhile, the notion of the creative city and the rise of the creative class (Landry, 2000; Florida, 2002) have been widely criticised (Miles, 2013; Peck, 2005; Pratt, 2015), including in relationship to the increasing mobilisation of cultural producers in oppositional movements (Harvey, 2002).

Since David Harvey's *Spaces of Hope*, there have been several attempts at interpreting urban transformations and movements through the lens of the commons (Ostrom, 1990). The notion of the commons has been recently investigated from different perspectives, focusing more on the theoretical framework than on social, economic and political dimensions (De Angelis, 2010; Hardt & Negri, 2009; Harvey, 2012). The most heavily debated matters relate to the essential elements of the commons, including resources, institutions and communities (Müller, Kip, Dellenbaugh, Bjenik, & Schwegmann, 2015). Different scholars have examined the malleable social relationships among members (Harvey, 2012) or the potential limitations in terms of excludability and competition over the use of resources (Bollier, 2009). Its peculiar forms of governance facilitate the functioning and sustainability of the commons over time (Bollier and Helfrich, 2012).

More recently, some scholars have focused on the relationship between the urban commons and the city (Ramos, 2016; Stavrides, 2014, 2016), demonstrating that its specific setting in urban environments is central to its definition (Müller et al., 2015), although the urban requires appropriate framing in terms of resources and interdependency with operational landscapes (Müller et al., 2015). As commoning practices reveal a relational attitude within urban spaces (Chatterton, 2010), they may actively contribute to redefining spatial entities like urban islands (Ungers & Vieths, 1999) or enclosures in the urban archipelago (Jeffrey et al., 2011), which features internal thresholds (Stavrides, 2010).

Moreover, creative practices and digital technologies enable a variety of new forms of commoning practices that are physical as well as digital resources. They have greatly facilitated the spreading of P2P practices (Bauwens & Iacomella, 2012) and the idea of a creative and digital commons (Bauwens, 2012). However, the way in which these co-exist or facilitate spatial appropriation and commoning remains largely unexplored. In fact, urban transformations interpreted through the lens of the commons reveal the role of social practices in modifying the spatial dimensions of the city. This connection exposes the potential for further investigation of the commons itself and similar commoning practices, through or in relation to disciplines like architecture, urban design and planning (Müller, 2015).

## CASE STUDY. THE SEB AND MOLISE-CALVAIRATE-PONTI NEIGHBOURHOOD

The SEB is a valuable Art Nouveau structure that is part of Milan's former communal market area, which today is one of the largest abandoned urban areas in Europe (Mazzitelli, 2016). The complex was built at the beginning of the twentieth century (between 1912 and 1929) as a food supply district for the entire city. Placed on the outskirts of what at the time was the city centre, it was strategically located near the Porta Vittoria railway yard so that trains could easily switch tracks and provide direct access to the market area (De Finetti et al., 2002).

On a wider scale, SEB building faces the north-south road axis of Viale Molise and is set at the border of the Calvaire neighbourhood. Calvaire was a historical village established outside the old town before being incorporated and largely transformed (1929–1931) according to a master plan that included extensive social housing complexes. Similar initiatives were realised in the adjoining neighbourhoods: Molise was built between 1933 and 1938 and included 700 housing units, while Ponti (Pagano, 1942) faces the extension of the general markets after World War II.

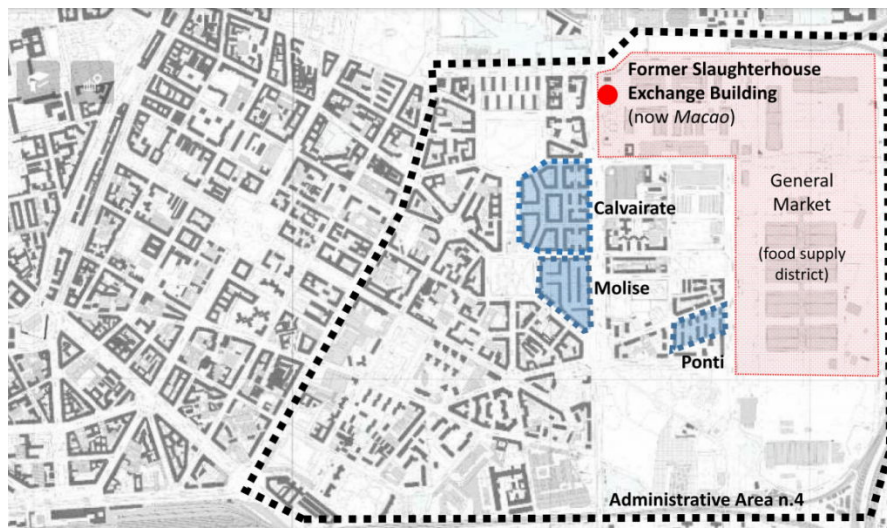


Figure 1. Macao, the former slaughterhouse area and the adjoining neighbourhoods Calvairate, Molise and Ponti. Source: <https://geoportale.comune.milano.it/>

Since the 1970s, a number of industrial activities in the city have been displaced or closed, so vast areas and railway yards were largely unused, including most of the former slaughterhouse complex and the adjacent railway.

Even though the Milan's City Council adopted consistently deregulatory planning policies over the years (Oliva, 2002), these areas did not experience urban regeneration or transformation, apart from some high-end housing complexes facing the northern railway yards. The list of grand unrealised projects includes the competition for the new European Culture Library and the post-Expo 2015 Cittadella del Gusto e della Salute ('Citadel for Taste and Health').

In this respect, the re-appropriation of the SEB by Macao highlighted the incapacity of the public administration to deal with urban transformations (Braga, 2017) in the light of the actual procedures used in planning and real estate development.

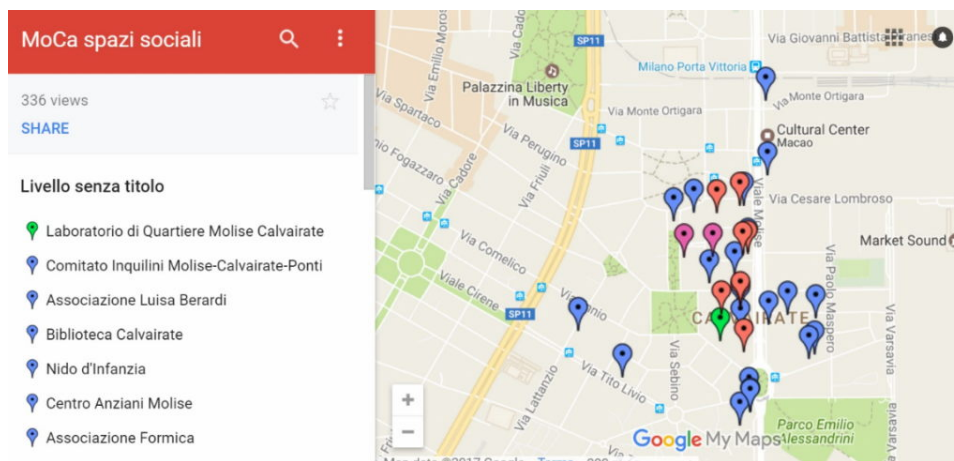
However, since the occupation began in 2012, several discussions have taken place between Macao, several stakeholders, political parties and the City Council. The very first mapping of both private and public vacant spaces on a city-wide scale (Comune di Milano, 2014; Temporioso, 2016) can be considered a positive outcome of those encounters. After the mapping, the municipality approved a resolution to allow administrative districts to temporarily assign the use of publicly owned vacant spaces in town to cultural agencies – whether public or private – or to non-profit organisations (NPOs) (Comune di Milano, 2012). Overcoming the principle of profitability, the municipality agreed to provide NPOs with space for free for up to three years, as long as the activities were creative or culturally focused and shared with local communities (Comune di Milano, 2012).

Following this political action, several actors and stakeholders have implemented a number of bottom-up, temporary initiatives. Temporioso, Fucine Vulcano and Associazione El Modernista are among examples that have developed artistic and cultural initiatives in different parts of the market area. However, as Macao's activists never agreed to organise themselves as a formal group or NPO, they could not engage with this process. Moreover, its activists did not accept the municipality's offer to use other vacant spaces in town.

As a consequence, Macao has been under the constant risk of eviction from the SEB: it is currently asking to sit at a negotiation table along with City Council representatives and the owner of the market area, both of which want to sell the entire market area to a private developer via a tender. In April 2017, the collective began the process of setting up an association (which today boasts nearly 2,000 subscriptions) to buy the space at a capped market price and thus reclaim its value as a common good.

It is worth noting that the whole market area and the surrounding housing estates (Molise-Calvairate-Ponti) are included within the same administrative district (Municipio 4), which has its own political and administrative bodies that offer guidance to the city council and deal with local services and communities such as citizen participation. Consequently, needs and local initiatives are usually developed and discussed at this level.

Focusing on the social housing estates and public services related to the tenants, for example, an important scheme worth €240 million was approved and funded in 2004. It is part of the Neighbourhood Contract (*Contratto di Quartiere*) initiative, led by public bodies and local stakeholders including the Politecnico of Milan as the leading research institution. During the bidding phase, a number of NPOs and volunteer groups joined the scheme; among them, the Laboratory for the Molise Calvairate Neighbourhood acts as the official networking agency and event organiser. In light of its role, it has mapped the network through the presence of the many NPOs and social spaces in the neighbourhood: significantly, Macao and Fucine Vulcano are among them.



**Figure 2. Map of social spaces in Molise-Calvaire (2013) by the Laboratory for the Molise Calvaire Neighbourhood. Source: <http://www.cdqmolisecalvaire.com/il-quartiere>**

The Neighbourhood Contract has delivered relevant research activities, including an extensive survey of social and housing conditions that collected a large number of questionnaires [3], (Comune di Milano, 2004). The evidence gathered at the time reflects not only the very poor conditions of housing units in terms of size, maintenance and technology, but also the needs expressed by local communities and tenants such as the poor maintenance of courtyards and public spaces and the lack of communal spaces for gathering and for micro-entrepreneurial activities like handcrafts (Comune di Milano, 2004).

Even though it began more than ten years ago, the scheme's implementation remains modest and has reached only 40% of its initial plans (Comune di Milano, 2017). The entire area has been facing rising social and economic challenges that are linked to the 2008 financial downturn and its implications for low-income people, the lack of public spending on services, an aging population especially in social housing and the increasing presence of immigrants, including undocumented immigrants who have settled in Milan.

## DISCUSSION

With specific reference to the Italian panorama, the Centri Sociali might be the closest antecedents of Macao; they too were mostly unsanctioned but were tolerated by the public authorities for several years. The authorities treated them in terms of public order principles, using administrative acts and police forces as tools. In this respect, we argue that there has been no difference in the reaction of the central state administration to building squatting and unsanctioned occupation of public spaces since the Centri Sociali days.

However, it is reductive to consider Macao's antecedents as limited solely to the Centri Sociali. To better frame the situation, it is worth highlighting Macao's actions as a form of reaction against two phenomena: the uneven nature of urban transformations in an era of real estate power and the lack of opportunities and exploitation of workers in the creative sector (Braga, 2017). The two phenomena find themselves connected at the beginning of twenty-first-century Milan, one of the international hubs of both creative industries and real estate investments. [4] It is also relevant to note that Macao is not an isolated case in the contemporary Italian context; it can be seen as part of a broader network of cultural mobilisation which includes *Teatro Valle Occupato* (Rome), *S.a.L.E Docks* (Venice), *Ex Asilo Filangeri* (Naples) and *Labas* (Bologna). These experiences have been initiated by workers in the fields of arts, theatre, media, cinema and music, along with academics and intellectuals.

The search for alternative forms of cultural production provides a significant parallel between Macao and the experience led by Dario Fo and other artists in Milan in 1974. Not only were the two initiatives undertaken in the same neighbourhood, but, more interestingly, they are related by their processes of acknowledgment and their consequent actions: 'We discovered the Columbus egg! That cities are plenty of unused public buildings and that cultural groups, associations and producers can take them' (Fo, 1974). The earlier artists chose their site (known as Palazzina Liberty) after a tentative mapping of unused public properties in the city, and then asked the permission to use and refurbish the location while paying a small rent and the bills.

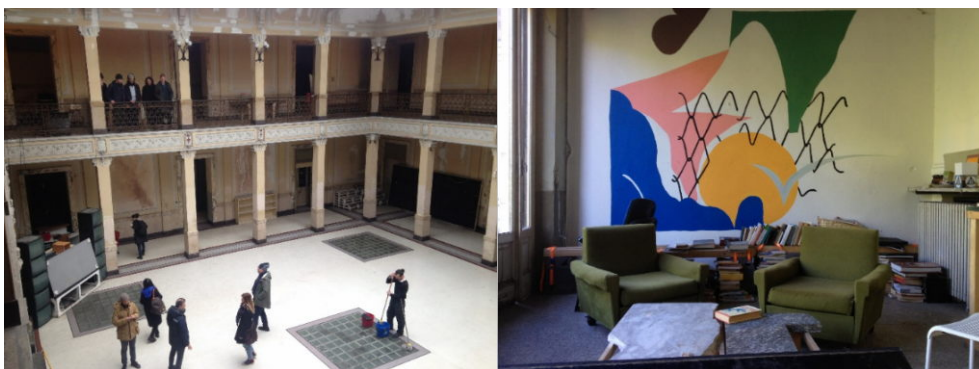
Given the range of precedents and the specificity of the Italian scenario, we argue that the very distinctive elements of Macao as an urban movement involve its artistic and cultural production, which serves as an alternative to Milan's mainstream creative sector. As such, the following sections investigate more deeply how these forms of cultural production unfold in and beyond the SEB.

### Macao's spatial organisation in the SEB

Our main purpose in this section is to map the SEB's spaces, drawing on the data collected in February 2016 with regard to the use of space and the forms of spatialized production of culture (Pratt, 2004). Since the end of June 2012, after intensive refurbishment and do-it-yourself work completed in several phases, the SEB was once again a habitable space. Over the last five years, Macao has been gradually implementing an articulated cultural agenda. In the SEB, Macao fulfils three main functions: 'it stages different kinds of artists; it is a crucial node in the artistic international network; and it offers a high-quality, avant-garde culture that otherwise would not be shown in Milan' (D'Ovidio & Cossu, 2016, p. 6). The space currently hosts a lively cross-sector programme of visual and performing arts, experimental theatre and cinema, photography, literature, new media and meetings of citizens committees, along with residency programmes for students of arts and the social sciences.

The large central court on the ground floor usually hosts major events, shows and concerts, large assemblies, conferences and exhibitions. Occasionally, it is used for temporary handicraft workshops. A cinema and a theatre for smaller performances are also located on the two opposite sides of ground floor. A small directional space is located near the entrance to this floor. This is not open to the public, as it is the place designated for coordinating activities and dealing with administrative duties, social media communication and organisational issues

The spaces more deeply dedicated to the practices of peer production are located in the basement and on the upper floor. The basement hosts *Officina*, an experimental laboratory for creative wood recycling, with woodworking tools and supplies made available to peers. It is a space for experienced artists and woodworkers, although free classes and workshops for beginners are regularly organised. The upper floor of the building hosts spaces dedicated to the cultural production such as a theatre rehearsal studio, two recording studios for musicians and radio speakers, along with the *Cafè Letterario*, used which is used for reading circles, poetry workshops and debates. The large open space under the roof, dubbed 'The Hangar', hosts the production of massive scenography and exhibition devices; it is also used as guest rooms for residency programmes.



**Figure 3. Left: The central court on the ground floor, which usually hosts major public events and the open assembly; right: The Cafè Letterario [Credits: Nadia Bertolino, 2017].**

Reading the SEB through the lens of Pratt's consumption- and production-based spaces (2004), we affirm that, on the one hand, the large central court on the ground floor that is largely intended for artist-public interaction represents the main place of consumption. On the other hand, the spaces in the basement and on the upper floor are designated for the practices of peer production and host artist-artist interactions. This suggests that the spatial organisation in the SEB – as established during the first days of occupation – has been implicitly conceived to enable forms of P2P cultural production.

When Macao recently moved towards a more stable institutional model (Valli, 2015), the use of the resources (spaces, tools, peer expertise, etc.) became more explicitly regulated. The governance model discussed below provides evidence of this evolution. In fact, drawing on Pratt's definition of cultural production and the assumption that the conditions under which creative ideas may be mobilised play a key role in the definition of the cultural object (Pratt, 2004), we argue that Macao's current spatial organisation effectively supports the initiation and development of practices of cultural peer production in the SEB.

### **Right to the city aspirations in the neighbourhood**

Novy and Colomb (2012) recall Harvey's position regarding the potential role of cultural producers in mobilisations for the construction of 'spaces of hope' to explain the possibilities and contradictions of contemporary 'culture-led' processes of urbanisation. The impact of such activist-led initiatives on local neighbourhoods and cities is much debated. This depends on a variety of factors, including their internal organisation and governance, how spaces are managed in terms of accessibility and whether their agendas are inclusive and rooted in the local community, especially at the neighbourhood scale.

Macao translated the right-to-the-city concept into practice by exercising the right to use vacant spaces and the concurrent right to produce or co-produce art. However, these are not the only right-to-the-city aspirations expressed within the neighbourhood, especially by disadvantaged groups such as low-income tenants. This becomes even more evident when analysing the diverse compositions of the two groups. As Valli has reported, Macao's members 'are not all materially marginalized' [5] (2015, p. 646), with most of them holding higher education degrees and being employed, if precariously. The TU, by vivid contrast, is representative of mostly deprived individuals, including low-income and unemployed tenants, and members of ethnic minorities. It brings forward examples of those living in the social housing estates, most of which suffer from poor maintenance and an overall state of neglect and the consequent issues of security and micro-criminality (Caffa, 2017). The TU thus expresses and legitimates its right-to-the-city aspirations by highlighting the inadequacy of the public in dealing with social housing and by supporting a diverse group of tenants who are otherwise without a meaningful voice.

Interviews with TU representatives and a participatory workshop with volunteering tenants provide evidence that, even if the housing units and communal spaces have been improved over time, most of the issues recognised by the initial municipal survey in 2004 (Comune di Milano, 2004) are still unresolved. Positive achievements can be attributed to the role of the TU; it regularly gathers in a community-managed space with an open-door policy that allows tenants to get in touch with their representatives. It also organises language classes for immigrant children and other social activities. However, the housing estate maintenance remains inadequate, and issues of squatting, safety and a lack of social cohesion are consistently reported by and very worrying for the tenants.



In terms of the neighbourhood, the tenants do appreciate the quality of public mobility and the easy commute to the city centre, the presence of green areas and communal orchards within walking distance and the weekly street market. Only a few of the study participants reported engaging with art and culture; they rarely go to cinemas, museums or cultural centres, whether within or beyond the neighbourhood. Moreover, even if most of the interviewees were actively engaged with the TU, none was active with other NPOs or creative agencies in the neighbourhood.

All of the above is shown on the cognitive maps sketched by the participants during a workshop led in April 2017. As expected, the cognitive maps resulted in distorted images of the physical urban space, based as they were on the participants' individual perceptions of it. Cognitive maps and their composition varied widely between interviewees and were shaped heavily by experiences, subjective perceptions and everyday lives.

The findings are consistent in showing the experience of the neighbourhood as a quite confined space centred on the housing estates. The areas represented include one or more squares (Piazzale Martini, Piazza Tito), public spaces and the main park (Giardini di Viale Insubria). The maps also show the relevance of basic public services such as public parks and gardens, of public bus transport and of independent or neighbourhood-based shops such as small supermarket, the street market and a pharmacy. Indeed, the findings are also consistent with the questionnaires in not mentioning any cultural provider or agency in the neighbourhood. Even though specific places and their spatial range varied significantly between interviewees, the SEB and the market area were never mapped by the tenants.

Therefore, we recognise a gap between the newly established neighbourhood-based offering of cultural and creative spaces and the perception of the local population, although we cannot assume that this gap applies to the entire neighbourhood, which hosts a variety of ethnic, religious and socially differentiated groups.

The activists do not fully engage with the TU, as that is not one of their stated aims (Braga, 2017). It is significant that the TU has only been involved three times in Macao-organised activities in the SEB; Caffa feels that the role of the TU has not been acknowledged sufficiently and that there have been no relevant outcomes or establishment of longer-term cooperation. Moreover, the TU does not entirely recognise the value or importance of the recently established bottom-up initiatives for cultural peer production in its neighbourhood (Caffa, 2017).

In conclusion, there is evidence that the gap between activists and the TU is perceived not only on an individual basis but also at a higher, institutionalised level.

### **Macao as an urban common: site-specific resources provider and Peer to Peer enabler**

We acknowledge that Macao has implemented practices of commoning in different parts of Milan (D'Ovidio and Cossu, 2016) by reclaiming vacant buildings for the benefit of a wider urban community. However, the five-year period it has spent in the SEB reveals specific commoning features that require further analysis. The urban movement found for the very first time a physical place in which to gather regularly and saw a significant increase in the number of people involved. This circumstance challenged the existing organisation of the movement in two different ways: the first is the management on a long-term basis of an asset (the building and its spatial dimension) that demands care and maintenance. The second is the governance of the collective and its cultural production, as the core group of activists found themselves 'surrounded by many new people who simply did not know each other' (Braga, 2017).

These considerations reveal the existence of two separate but interwoven layers concerning Macao in the SEB. One is related to the use of space, its governance and regulations, including accessibility, and the other is focused on the creative commons and its management, including forms of peer-to-peer (P2P) production, as 'Macao is not simply a space' (Braga, 2017). Both are worth analysing through the lens of the commons [6], especially through the essential and constitutional elements of the commons as described by Ostrom, Harvey and Bollier, among others.

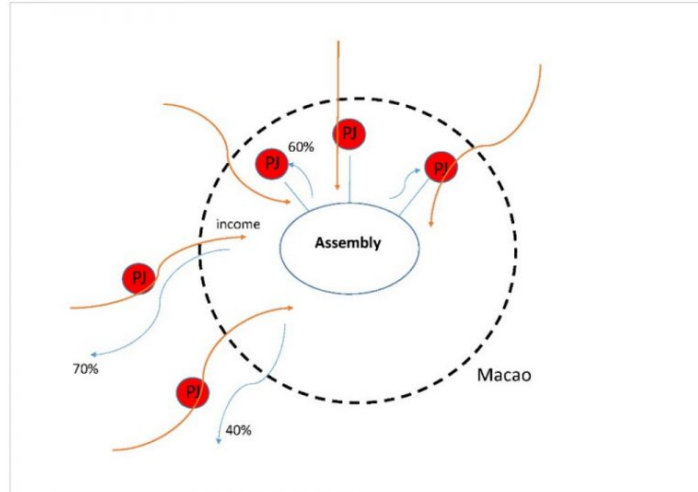
With reference to the SEB and its space, we argue that it is as an incomplete form of site-specific urban commons (Delsante and Bertolino, 2017). The resource of this commons is meant to be the building with its physical boundaries: the entrance is its threshold, making inside and outside clearly identifiable. However, the governance of the space is not clearly stated, which poses challenges in terms of access to and the very definition of the community and its members. Indeed, the activists restricted access to the building to avoid unexpected evictions in light of ongoing frictions with the owner and the municipality; by so doing, access became limited to members, leading in turn to restrictions in terms of excludability and competition over the use of resources. Communities can define for themselves the set of rules through which they access and use space (De Angelis, 2010), and Macao does have an open-door policy during its weekly assembly and still hosts a number of residency programmes with external partners and stakeholders. However, its set of rules to use and access spaces are not published or otherwise accessible to the wider public. It is not clear who owns the rule-making rights or whether those affected by the rules can participate in modifying them.

With reference to artistic and cultural production, the collective has established specific governance to enable P2P production and commoning. This is translated into practice through two separate schemes: one deals with the open assembly mechanism, the other focuses specifically on peer production. With reference to the former, the core principles are open and horizontal governance, free access to the means of production, promotion of interactions, socialisation of costs and sharing of profits.

Macao is intended to be a 'decentralised autonomous organisation based on a political assembly' (Braga, 2017) that is held weekly and employs an open-door policy. The recently established Comeln initiative allows not only members but also others to propose specific events and activities. The assembly discusses and votes on each proposal and decides how best to manage and/or produce each approved project.

The assembly scheme does not vote on any members' rights; rather, it manages projects in terms of what resources to share, such as space, technical infrastructure and human resources. It also clarifies what support core members can provide to each ongoing project. While each project is unique, there are two main categories: those proposed and produced by members, and those proposed by externals (see Fig. 4). In

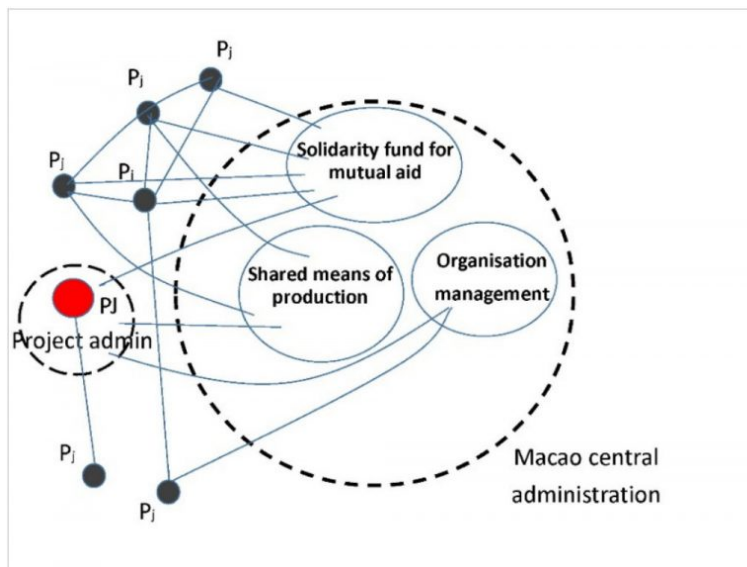
any case, the ComelIn initiative demonstrates Macao's commitment to engage the community beyond its own members: individuals, NPOs and even private companies can propose the production of creative activities and cultural events in the SEB.



**Figure 4. ComelIn: Open assembly scheme and project management** Source: Authors' original work, based on information gathered from Braga (2017)

In addition to the open assembly, peer production governance is based on three interconnected tools: sharing the means of production, organisation and management and a solidarity fund for mutual aid. As P2P governance is open and horizontal, the community that contributes to cultural peer production is malleable and varies over time. As a consequence, any given project could be developed exclusively by Macao's members or peer-produced with others. Sharing the means of production refers to technical infrastructure, the physical space and the web space. Most of these projects take place in the SEB, but they can also be staged in other places in the city.

The organisation and management of each project is usually shared between peers, with various specific arrangements available, including the possibility that organisation is carried out entirely by the project's promoters. Peers will have to look after cleaning the space, ensuring good maintenance of the building and releasing any cultural outputs produced within the SEB under a Creative Commons license. Macao strives to share profits, which are then redistributed to those who were actively engaged with the project's organisation; if members are involved, this is independent of the time committed to one individual project but is intended to be a minimum wage. It is paid in Bitcoin, which can be easily reinvested into Macao's activities.



**Figure 5. Macao's P2P governance.** Source: Authors' original work, based on information gathered from Braga, 2017

We can hence conclude that Macao, through its open and horizontal forms of governance, can accommodate audiences and peers from the local neighbourhood and the city as a whole. This reinforces the idea Macao is not deeply focused on promoting locally rooted or community-led initiatives on the neighbourhood scale, although there is no evidence that any have been rejected.

## CONCLUSIONS

This paper has sought to analyse how Macao operates in relation to the uses and organisation of the SEB's spaces; it concludes that being settled has allowed the collective to establish and develop P2P practices of cultural production. Moreover, the degree of interaction with local inhabitants and groups allows us to identify gaps due to different needs and agendas, along with diverging right-to-the-city aspirations.

By analysing Macao through the lens of the commons, we acknowledge the distinct governance practices of both physical space and cultural production. Even if we argue that the SEB is as an incomplete form of site-specific urban commons, Macao has established a governance approach that enables P2P production and creative commoning. The ComeIn initiative demonstrates Macao's determination to engage peers beyond its community members: through its open and horizontal form of governance, the collective can also accommodate audiences and peers from a much wider pool. It also provides opportunities to artists and cultural practices who are generally excluded from the mainstream creative sector.

Since 2012, Macao has not only highlighted the inability of the municipality to manage vacant spaces, but also actively contributed to the definition of a new set of policies for accessing and using vacant public buildings and municipal spaces by NPOs and locally rooted groups and communities. However, being mostly unsanctioned and barely tolerated by the municipality, Macao stands as an independent cultural provider that has not been co-opted into any official procedure or officially supported by the local government and agencies. This is also witnessed by its refusal to adhere in the past to any official procedures or tenders to obtain spaces legally from the municipality. In a partial contradiction of this attitude, Macao has recently opened up subscriptions for a new association that aims to buy the SEB and keep it out of the real estate market. We argue that, to further this goal, the collective has been acting from within the system but constantly challenging it, advocating for change by proactively delivering actions and an alternative cultural agenda. This is not meant to undermine either the efforts or the outcomes of Macao, but to put specific means of acting into context.

Nevertheless, the paper highlights the significant challenges built into the collective's current locations, physical and otherwise, and potential for further development. Even if Macao is a one-off experience, the collective is already a relevant node in a much broader network of cultural and artistic initiatives in Italy and Europe. Expanded arrangements and more structured coalitions could provide the collective with a platform for advocating changes from trans-local perspectives or entering discussions with a wide range of stakeholders. At the same time, there is room for Macao to develop a more neighbourhood-based socio-political agenda so as to become inclusive of more locally rooted groups and aspirations. By doing so, opportunities might arise that would ensure better accessibility to and governance of the common resources that are used, shared and peer produced.

Further investigations of this kind, along with comparative studies, may represent fruitful research into the relationships between commoning practices, peer cultural production and alter forms of urbanisation in cities.

## END NOTES

[1] This field work session was conducted in compliance with the Research Ethics policy in place at The University of Sheffield. Research participants have been informed and agreed on the use of the information provided for academic purposes.

[2] These field work activities have been supported by Huddersfield University. Research data have been gathered in compliance with the Research Ethics policy in place at the institution. Research participants have been informed and agreed on the use of the information provided for academic purposes.

[3] 962 questionnaires were collected out of 2717 housing units, with a participation rate of 35.4%.

[4] Some of the largest masterplans in Europe like Bicocca, Santa Giulia, Garibaldi-Repubblica have been developed since the '80s, even if there are still large vacant areas close to the city centre including the railyards.

[5] Valli (2015, p. 650) goes into significant detail on this important point:

'In November 2012 the Macao activists conducted an internal survey of their professions, housing, and economic conditions. The data collected from a sample of seventy-five individuals depict a group of people with a relatively balanced gender distribution, mostly in their late twenties and thirties, 75% of whom hold a university degree or higher. The group is economically heterogeneous, with 13% of interviewees earning less than €500 per month, but also 18% earning more than €2000 monthly. All in all the group appears to be composed of highly educated people of both sexes with a variety of incomes and professional situations, the majority of which are characterized as temporary, precarious, or freelance working contracts. [...] Many of them hold a university degree, often in the fields of arts, design, architecture, or videography. Only a small minority has ever participated in traditional political militancy, although quite a few, particularly those who were members of LDA, have taken part in antigentrification campaigns in Milan or elsewhere in Italy'

[6] This also matches with the intended and separate aims of the movement: fight against real estate power and reclaiming the importance of workers in the creative sector (Braga, 2017).

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