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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Student movements' commons practices across time and space: A historical analysis of Hotel Squatting in Milan and Florence.

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ABSTRACT: The paper contributes to the understanding of the Italian student movement of the 1960s and 1970s by examining a specific practice: the occupation of abandoned, centrally located hotels. The authors focus on two case studies: the occupation of the former *Hotel del Commercio* in Piazza Fontana, Milan (1968-69), and the squat of abandoned hotels in *Via dei Calzaioli*, Florence (1977). Drawing on archival research and in-depth interviews, the study reconstructs the origins and characteristics of these two experiences. Despite notable similarities—both squats were driven by comparable material grievances and occurred in the frame of student movements—each developed along different trajectories in key aspects: the relationship between occupations and territories, the social and biographical profile of the squatters, internal organization, interaction with broader mobilizations, and relationship with institutions. We argue that these experiences can be analyzed as examples of *early forms of* “urban commons”, with their differences shaped by changes, both within the social movement landscape and in institutional politics. The paper contributes to a deeper understanding of the urban practices enacted by student movements across different waves of mobilization; and to a more nuanced conceptualization of “urban commons” in light of their historical, political, and spatial specificities.

KEYWORDS: Abandoned hotels, historical research, squatting, student movements, urban commons.

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1. Introduction

The student movement of the Italian “long 1968”, that with the “hot autumn of 1969” reached the factories, in 1977 erupted in an albeit short-lived second wave of mobilization (Falciola 2015; Crainz 2003). This paper contributes to ongoing debates on the characteristics of these two waves and the underlying practice of “commoning” by focusing on a specific actor and form of action: the squatting of abandoned, centrally located hotels—a tactic adopted by student collectives in both periods. By analyzing hotel squats as situated expressions of “urban commons”, the article investigates how different phases of the student movement took shape through practices of occupation revealing diverse interpretations of collective use and reappropriation of urban space contrasting capitalist developments that would become even more apparent in the neoliberal age. Drawing on archival research, newspaper analysis and in-depth interviews, the paper compares two emblematic cases: the occupation of the former *Hotel del Commercio* (hereafter *Commercio*) in Piazza Fontana, Milan, in 1968–69; and the occupation of an abandoned hotel complex in *Via dei Calzaioli*, Florence, in 1977. In less than a decade, the objectives of the occupiers shifted from the attempt to build a political and organizational center for movement mobilizations to efforts to create, beyond such collective moments, also personalized spaces.

The squat of the *Commercio* – a big, abandoned building in Piazza Fontana, in the Milan city centre, property of the city and earmarked for demolition – started on 28 November 1968. It was preceded by a mobilization of the students housed in the *Casa dello studente* (*House of the student*), the university dormitory for out-of-town students, that had developed since 1967 (Natale 1969). The occupation came to an end after 9 months, with the eviction on 19 August 1969. In retrospect, the *Commercio* has been defined “the biggest urban commune’ of the city and probably of Europe” (Balestrini and Moroni 2003, 259).

The complex of three abandoned hotels in the central *Via dei Calzaioli* of Florence, occupied on 24 February 1977, was a property of the INA-National Assurance Institute, i.e. of semi-public ownership. The occupation was preceded by an initiative of the grassroots tenant union *Unione Inquilini* (*UI*) that led a group of out-of-town students, mobilized around their specific grievances, forming the *Comitato studenti fuori sede senza casa* (*Committee of out-of-town students without a shelter*). After 5 months, with negotiations with INA, the Opera Universitaria (*OU* – University Welfare Office) and the local political authorities about the future of the squat still going on, police evicted the occupiers on 31 July 1977.

Their geographical location did have an impact on the two experiences. Florence, in fact, was less central for movement mobilizations in Italy than Milan. In particular, in 1977 violence – defined as the “most significant” difference between 1968 and 1977 (Falciola 2015, 196) – in Florence did not reach unprecedented levels until the autumn of 1977 (Tanturli 2018). In fact, the squatters of *via Calzaioli* have been characterized as the more moderate part of the movement (*ibid.*). Nevertheless, the two cases reflect the shifting political and cultural movement landscape across that decade. As Van der Steen *et al.* (2014) noted, the meaning and function of occupations evolve with each protest cycle. Particularly relevant for our cases is that by the late 1970s, as observed for various countries, political groups shifted focus from grand revolutionary ideals to creating small, liberated zones for experimenting with autonomy and self-management (*ibid.*).

In addition, the changes between 1968/69 and 1977 are evident not only in the transformation of the Italian student movement—from the unified mobilization of 1968/69 to the more fragmented and radicalized movement of ’77—but also in broader political developments: from the optimism and reformist momentum of the late 1960s to the economic crisis of the 1970s, marked by rising youth unemployment; from center-left governments to the historic compromise between the Christian Democrats (*DC*) and the communists promoted by Enrico Berlinguer, the leader of the Italian Communist Party (*PCI*), and the era of the governments of abstention (with the *PCI* tolerating a *DC*-government) and the governments of national solidarity (with the *PCI* within the parliamentary majority but without representation in the government) (Crainz 2003).

Even if placed in different historical and political contexts, our two cases share several similarities. First, in both cases the catalyst for the occupations were the unmet needs of out-of-town students, a specific segment of the student population. Second, the type of property occupied was the same: large, abandoned hotels in public or semi-public ownership. Third, both occupations took place in the historic centres of cities marked by processes of tertiarization and progressive depopulation. Despite these similarities, different features can be observed on the five dimensions commonly used for analysing contemporary urban movements: the relationship between squat and surrounding territory, the social and biographical characteristics of the squatters, the internal organization and decision-making mechanisms, the role played by the squatted space in the broad student movement and the relationship with institutions.

By analyzing the five dimensions, the paper examines the divergent trajectories of the two cases and explores how these differences gave rise to distinct practices of “commoning,” through which variations across broader waves of mobilization become manifest. The argument of this paper is twofold. First, we argue that focusing on hotel squatting practices provides a valuable lens through which to understand the distinct characteristics of the two waves of student mobilization in 1960s and 1970s Italy. Second, we contend that interpreting these squatting experiences as early forms of “urban commons” offers a productive analytical framework not only for examining the social and spatial practices of student movements, but also for expanding the conceptual scope of “urban commons” beyond its usual application to urban movements in neoliberal contexts.

The article is structured as follows. In the next section, we outline the analytical framework, with the notion of squatting and commons at its core. In the third section, we present the methods used for data collection. The fourth section traces the origins of the two experiences, highlighting their common features. In the fifth section, we examine the differing trajectories of the two squats, focusing on the relationship between the squats and their surrounding territories, the social and biographical profile of squatters, internal organization, the role of the squats within the broader student movement, and their interactions with institutions. We emphasize the influence of waves of mobilization in shaping these differences. The final section is dedicated to some conclusive remarks.

2. Student squatting and urban commons: going beyond the neo-liberal framework

The concept of “urban commons” has been widely employed to describe a variety of political and social practices carried out by diverse collective actors. However, its broad and often heterogeneous application has, at times, turned it into an umbrella term—highly evocative, yet with limited explanatory power. Indeed, characteristics and challenges of “urban commons” vary significantly across time and space leading to complex trajectories that resist encapsulation under a single definition (Caciagli and Milan 2021). In its most general sense, the notion refers to resources that are collectively owned and/or managed by citizens, and valued not for their monetary or exchange value, but for their everyday use and horizontally organized governance (Nonini 2007). At the core of the concept there is the prefigurative politics dimension, which involves activists realizing the societal changes they seek within their own practices. This logic underpins many experiences of squatting and reclaiming abandoned buildings, creating urban gardens, and establishing self-managed spaces—practices through which alternative ways of living, producing, and organizing are tested and enacted in the present.

Scholars have approached this concept from different angles: some emphasize the social processes and collective actions through which commons are produced (Linebaugh 2008), while others highlight their spatial

and territorial dimensions (Federici 2010). Indeed, while early theories of “commons” focused on community-based resource management and institutional forms of collective governance (Ostrom 1990), more recent interpretations have set the framework on urban settings, portraying commons as contested spaces shaped by political struggles over access, use, and transformation of the city (Harvey 2012). Despite its widespread use, there are two main analytical limitations in the way the concept of “urban commons” is often employed.

The first limitation concerns its predominant association with the neoliberal era. Indeed, the concept of “urban commons” is frequently conceptualized as a reaction to neoliberal urbanism, austerity policies, and the privatization of public goods (Huron 2015). According to most scholars, with the emergence of neoliberalism—and even more so during times of crisis—direct social actions gained ground, offering a meaningful horizon that traditional political participation was no longer able to provide (Bosi and Zamponi 2019). These studies collectively suggest that while “urban commons” may have historical precedents, such as the Italian social centers of the 1970s (Mudu 2004) or feminist squats to create safe spaces for women (Massey 1994), their current theoretical and practical manifestations are fundamentally shaped by neoliberal urban processes (Enright and Rossi, 2018).

This tendency to closely bind the notion of “urban commons” to the neoliberal era has significantly limited its use in historical analysis, foregoing the explanatory potential of the commons framework for understanding protests, movements, and mobilizations prior to the 1990s. However, several key features of the concept—such as collective governance, spatial reappropriation, and prefigurative experimentation—were already present in earlier struggles (Soborski 2019). Indeed, also movements after 1968 have been characterized by participative democracy, horizontality, inclusiveness, and direct action aiming at uniting means with ends. Moreover, the attempt—and slogan—to reclaim the city and its spaces was, even before neoliberalism, a cause championed by the extra-parliamentary left, for instance by *Lotta Continua*. By neglecting these continuities, much of the current literature risks producing a historically flattened view that disconnects present-day commons from a broader genealogy of urban struggles and self-managed practices.

The second analytical limitation concerns the types of movements that are typically analyzed through the lens of “urban commons”. Most studies tend to focus on the practices and spaces associated with urban or squatting movements—understood as mobilizations that emerge at the city scale and articulate claims to “the right to the city” (Martinez 2018). These movements are often at the forefront of reappropriating urban resources and reshaping them through collective, horizontal practices. In the current use of the term, the urban dimension is often treated as both the context and the goal of commoning practices, reinforcing a narrow identification between “urban commons” and explicitly urban movements. Yet, this focus tends to obscure the fact that other movements—while not fully aligned with the analytical category of urban movements—have also operated at the urban scale employing practices that can be meaningfully interpreted as “urban commons” and that articulated similar claims—such as the call to “take back the cities” and the denunciation of the proletariat’s expulsion from urban centers—typical of the extra-parliamentary left and of movements already active in 1968.

These continuities—and the relevance of the “urban commons” framework beyond urban movements—are exemplified by the student movement. For instance, student movements have historically activated processes of collective self-organization, reclaimed and repurposed urban spaces, and experimented with horizontal governance models that resonate strongly with the logic of commoning. Recently Schwittay (2024) has demonstrated how UK students establish housing cooperatives as “actually existing urban housing commons”, using prefigurative activism to create alternative governance structures that put students in control of their accommodations, practices closely resonating with our cases. This connects to broader patterns where social movements create shared physical and digital spaces that prefigure democratic alternatives (Rovira Sancho 2014).

As the example of student movements illustrates, the “urban commons” perspective is valuable not only for understanding how movements engage in direct social action, but also for analyzing their evolving relationships with institutions and the broader political environment—highlighting how they negotiate power, legitimacy, and autonomy. To this extent, a comparative analysis of practices—both across movements and across time—can illuminate significant shifts in political orientation, strategic repertoires, and modes of engagement. This aligns with the understanding of prefigurative politics not merely as a symbolic stance, but as a dynamic mode of action through which movements embed desired future social relations in the present, often adapting these relations in response to changing contexts (Yates 2015; Maeckelbergh 2011).

This expanded understanding of “urban commons”—beyond the narrow frame of urban movements in the neo-liberal era and through the lens of prefigurative politics—proves particularly useful for analyzing the scope and meaning of student mobilizations carried out on the urban scale. Specifically, it allows for a more nuanced interpretation of the occupation of abandoned hotels as a form of “commoning”. Framing these actions as “urban commons” helps to uncover aspects of their political and spatial significance, while also offering insight into the internal evolution of the student movement itself. In particular, it sheds light on the reasons behind the differences observed across distinct phases of the movement, highlighting how shifts in practices reflect broader changes in strategy, context, and relations with institutions.

3. Methods

Our research is based on three types of materials: in-depth interviews, archival research and newspaper analysis. We conducted eleven in-depth interviews with key informants and former activists who were involved in student movements during the period under analysis. Six of these interviews took place in Florence, while the remaining five were conducted in Milan. Some of the interviewees were directly involved in the two squats, others were part of the broader movements. The interview questions delved into various aspects of the squatting experience, covering topics such as the origins of the squats, internal dynamics, and interactions with institutions and broader movements. The article includes excerpts from one group interviews and an in-depth interview selected for their relevance to the argument being developed.

Secondly, we conducted archival research, in particular in movement archives in Florence and in Milan. For the *Via dei Calzaioli* squat, the archive of the *Unione Inquilini* proved to be particularly useful. Concerning the *Commercio* we relied especially on the personal archives of former militants. Movement archives and private collections of militants provided self-produced documents from various movement organizations active in the two squats, including assembly reports, leaflets, and flyers. These materials offered crucial insights into the internal practices and dynamics of the two squats.

Thirdly, we consulted contemporary newspaper reports, in particular the main locally based mainstream newspapers, the Milan *Corriere della Sera* (*CdS*) and the Florentine *La Nazione*, but also *L'Unità*, the daily of the PCI, as representative of the old left, and the movement newspaper *Lotta Continua* (*LC*). The analysis of newspapers was particularly useful for understanding the significance of the occupation in the urban context and for reconstructing the positions of institutional actors. Additional background information, in particular on the relationships between institutions and movements, was provided by material retrieved in the national archives in Rome.

4. The genesis of the squats of the *Commercio* and of the hotels in *Via Calzaioli*

As mentioned above, both the *Commercio* in Milan and the hotels in *Via dei Calzaioli* in Florence were housing occupations with similar features: they were carried out by out-of-town students and articulated claims not only around the right to housing, but also around the right to education and the right to establish a political and cultural center. Nevertheless, important differences emerged between them, starting from their origins. Examining these differences allows us to better grasp the contrast between two distinct phases of the movement, that of 1969 and that of 1977, and the ways the two “urban commons” developed.

The *Commercio* was occupied in the aftermath of a street demonstration in Milan, on November 28, 1968, during a period of full student mobilization. Located in the central Piazza Fontana, abandoned and slated for demolition, the hotel had been in municipal ownership since 1966. The students justified the occupation as a response to the growing housing need among out-of-town students, a need neglected by the institutions. According to a flyer distributed on November 28, there were 2,300 beds, only 900 of which were provided by public bodies, for over 20,000 out-of-town students (Natale 1969). However, quickly the claims of the occupants moved beyond the housing issue. A few weeks later, in another flyer produced by the students, the occupation was described as a “dagger in the heart of the capitalist city” (Natale 1969, 111). Initially called the *New Student House*, the squat soon became the *House of the Student and the Worker*, a “centre for organization and counter-information” (Natale 2009). The experience of the *Commercio* lasted until 19 August 1969, when the occupants were evicted by the police, followed by the immediate demolition of the building.

From the perspective of the local press and institutional political actors, the former *Commercio* was increasingly seen as one of the political hubs of the student movement. The initial openness of Mayor Aldo Aniasi (*PSI*²)—a former partisan commander, leading a centre-left coalition (*DC-PSI-PSDI*³)—gradually turned into resistance as the ambitions of the *House of the Student and the Worker* to function as a “centre for organization and counter-information” became clear. Following the bombings at the Milan Trade Fair on April 25, 1969, some of the occupiers of the *Commercio* came under police scrutiny. This climate, culminating in neofascist attacks on the squat, was condemned by the PCI, the main party of the traditional left, as an assault on the entire left. *L'Unità* (20/8/69) described the eviction as a “serious repressive operation” and dismissed police claims about the presence of weapons and explosives as “an unconvincing fabrication.”

Differently from the Milan case, the occupation of the hotels in Florence was preceded by a long period of preparation. When the '77 Movement erupted, the out-of-town student activists were already organized, following a specific appeal of an external actor, the *Unione inquilini*, rooted in the 1968 mobilization, that had also individuated the hotels as a target. On 20 February 1977, these students occupied the complex of three hotels on the central *Via dei Calzaioli*, which had long been abandoned. In this case as well, the declared motivation was the housing need among out-of-town students, with only 900 beds provided by the *OU* for about 26,000 out-of-town students. Contrary to the Milan case, the Florentine students also emphasised the authoritarian organization of official student residencies. After one hundred days of occupation, *Lotta Continua* (5-6/6/77) described the hotels as “a collectively self-managed centre, a place for gathering, organizing, and fighting, a tool in the hands of the entire movement”. Expanding the prefigurative aims of the squat further, the occupiers themselves stated that they had “partially achieved those goals, difficult to define, that stemmed from the strong desire among young people for a new quality of life”⁴. On 31 July 1977, despite

² PSI stands for *Partito Socialista Italiano* (Italian Socialist Party).

³ PSDI stands for *Partito Socialista Democratico Italiano* (Italian Democratic Socialist Party).

⁴ Archivio Unione Inquilini Firenze (AUI FI), folder ‘Archivio storico anni '80’, envelop ‘Studenti fuori sede e occupazione di via Calzaioli’, Comitato d’occupazione di via Calzaioli alla giunta comunale / consiglio di quartiere n° 1 / comitato di quartiere di S. Maria Novella / comitato di quartiere di S. Croce / organizzazioni sindacali / consiglio d’amministrazione dell’opera universitaria, 3/6/77.

ongoing negotiations between the property owner, the *OU*, and the municipality to transform the building into a self-managed student residence, authorities proceeded with the eviction of the occupiers. Throughout the summer, the activists continued to pressure the *OU* and the city government on the future of the hotels. On 29 September, the students attempted to re-occupy the site, but the eviction was immediate.

In Florence, the 1975 election of a communist mayor, Elio Gabbuggiani, leading a left-wing administration (*PCI/PSI*), had raised hopes of support for housing struggles in general and for out-of-town students in particular. However, the policy of the historic compromise at the national level distanced the movements and the New Left from the traditional left, especially after the *PCI* started to sustain the national government, entering, in the perception of activists, a law and order coalition (Rossi 2018; della Porta 1999). Even without direct police action against the occupation, the growing sense of repression perceived and denounced by the movements—but increasingly less so by the traditional left of the *PCI*—fuelled a siege mentality among the occupiers. If *L'Unità* (20/8/69) denounced the eviction of the occupiers of the *Commercio* as a “serious repressive action”, after the eviction of the occupiers of the hotels in *Via Calzaioli* the Communist daily (9/8/77) found itself compelled to defend the mayor against an “unjustifiable provocation” by the local newspaper *La Nazione* (8/8/77), which claimed that the city administration had given its 'tacit consent' to the police intervention.

5. Shared Practices, Shifting Dynamics: Key Differences Between *Commercio* and *Via Calzaioli*

The differences between our two cases are not only the result of broader contextual changes, but also stem from the distinct ways in which these occupations developed as forms of “urban commons”. These differences are clearly reflected across the five key dimensions set out in the introduction.

5.1. Relationship between squats and surrounding territory

The relationship between an occupied space and its surrounding territory is a fundamental dimension of urban commons (Blomley 2020). In both occupations, this relationship was central to their actions, although it took on different forms in each case. Both the *Commercio* in Milan and the hotel in *Via Calzaioli* in Florence were located in historic city centers undergoing tertiarization, where the surrounding public was largely made up of shopkeepers and passers-by rather than residents. Nevertheless, in the case of the *Commercio*, solidarity of citizens was a key in transforming the abandoned building into a residential space. As reported by the *Corriere della Sera* (5/11/69), partly due to the students' open behaviour, the public initially viewed “this peaceful and justified ‘occupation’ with sympathy.” Indeed, the mattresses on which the occupants slept were “provided by the compassion of passers-by” (*CdS*, 12/20/68). Workers, communist cooperatives and some internal committees of tram workers contributed to the efforts to make the building habitable; additional contributions were collected at the universities (Natale 1969, 110). In this early phase, the typical “barricading process” seen in most housing squats (Caciagli 2019, 7) was absent: the students deliberately left windows and doors open so that everyone could see what was happening inside, thereby configuring the space as a genuine *common*, accessible and permeable to those outside.

With the shift from the *New Student House* to the *House of the Student and Worker*, this type of openness faded. The occupation began to face growing hostility in the population and local politics, in reaction to which the squatters organized a security service. The changing external appearance of the *Commercio*—with posters, flags, and portraits of communist leaders—sparked protests (*La Stampa*, 22/5/69). Even moderate student

groups called for the eviction of the squatters (*CdS*, 24/6/69). The far right, however, was the most aggressive, launching a Molotov attack in April 1969 that seriously injured two passers-by. The August eviction was largely met with indifference: delegations of the PCI expressed solidarity, but (also due to the immediate demolition of the building) no movement mobilizations are reported, except for a small group of former occupants handing out protest leaflets (*La Stampa*, 26/8/69).

The occupiers of the hotels in *Via Calzaioli* also could count on the solidarity of Florentine citizens, who, according to *Lotta Continua* (5-6/6/77), contributed “materially to the struggle, donating beds, chairs, mattresses, and furniture, and those who could, also some money. In one month, nearly one and a half million lire were collected, along with 5,000 signatures of solidarity.” The centre of Florence, even at that time, was more touristy and commercial than residential, but it seems that even some local merchants sympathized with the occupation, in the hope that a restoration of the large vacant building and its designation as a student residence would prevent it from continuing to be a refuge for thieves and burglars (*L'Unità*, 25/2/77). In general, however, in the late 1970s the relationship of movement activists with local residents and merchants was characterized by tensions caused by the prevalent direct social action strategies, in particular the “proletarian shopping” quite common also in Florence (Cervelli and Paladini 2007). After the eviction, movement activists, in particular from the UI, joined the squatters in protests, occupying Palazzo Vecchio, the seat of the local government.

Differently from the Milan case, for Florence there are no reports of far-right violence against the occupation. However, an incident after the eviction suggests that hostility toward the occupation, which could escalate into violence, did exist. The evicted students had stored personal belongings in the basement of a house occupied by families organized by the UI. On the evening of 12 September 1977, unknown individuals broke in, set fire to the place, and destroyed some belongings. The next morning, they returned and threw incendiary materials into the basement, causing even more damage.

5.2. Social and biographical profiles of squatters

The literature has highlighted how urban commons can vary significantly depending on the social profiles of the people they attract, those who manage them, or those they aim to engage (Caciagli and Milan 2020; Prujit 2013). Along this dimension, notable differences emerge between the two cases under analysis. Both cases reveal a shared aspiration to transcend the student domain and connect with wider social actors—an aim consistent with the spirit of the urban commons. Nevertheless, the extent to which this ambition was realized varied substantially between the two.

In the Milan case, the transition from the *New Student House* to the *House of the Student and Worker* marked a shift in how the squatters defined themselves. The central figure was no longer “the student”, but “the student-worker and worker-student”—a new subject seen as bridging the divide between study and labor (Natale 1969, 111). While full-time students experienced primarily cultural alienation, this new figure encountered both educational and workplace alienation and exploitation. This shift in self-definition was reflected in the actual social composition of the squatters, with students gradually becoming a minority.

According to data provided by the squatters themselves during a press conference, by mid-May 1969 there were 103 occupiers, of whom less than half (45) were students or student-workers, the others immigrant workers, some of them unemployed (*CdS* 18/5/69), but also exponents of the counterculture area (Balestrini and Moroni 2003). As emerged during an interview, there were also many 19-20 year olds who had run away from home “because the family was too tight for them. There were minors who risked ending up in reformatory who found hospitality (at the time you were of age at 21)” (I1). People also stayed at the *Commercio* for short periods, determining a high turn-over.

This heterogeneity seems to have been even more evident in the final phase of the occupation. As reported by the *Corriere della sera* (20/8/1969), during the eviction on 19 August 1969, only 14 of the 58 squatters were university students. According to Giampaolo Pansa's report for *La Stampa* (20/8/69), almost all of the 58 occupants were in their 20s, many from the South, two-thirds were workers, and seven were minors. The heterogeneity was not only about being students or not and emerged from the description of the rooms provided by Pansa: stones and bricks wrapped in sheets of paper in many rooms, but in one, inhabited by a couple with a little girl, a small picture of the Madonna with an olive branch; newspapers, magazines, political books, the instructions for preparing Molotov cocktails, incendiary slogans on many walls, but also comic book albums, records of Italian mainstream pop singers, school texts, and the game of Monopoly.

Also striking is the very pronounced male dominance: of the 103 occupants in May 1969 only five were women (*La Stampa*, 22/5/69) and of the 58 (plus two children) at the time of the eviction only four; two of them, the two mothers of the children, both pregnant, were not politically engaged. In 1968/69 family and social control over young women evidently was still so strong that for many it prevented full participation in an occupation such as the *Commercio*. It can be assumed that the number of women who frequented the squat during the day was higher. In fact, one of the four women inside the building during the eviction, an 18-year-old typist, had been frequenting the *Commercio* since the beginning of the occupation, but had only recently decided to sleep there as well, taking advantage of the fact that her parents were absent from Milan (*CdS* 20/8/1969).

Initially, also for the Florentine activists, the central protagonist of the occupation was the student—defined, however, as “non-guaranteed” and thus aligned with other segments of the proletariat. Later leaflets opened the audience to be addressed to homeless young workers or youths in general. As far as numbers are concerned, the squatters of the Florentine hotels were (slightly) fewer than those of the *Commercio* in Milan, but the group of occupants seems to have been more stable and cohesive, with a clear dominance among them of university students. Of the more than 300 students who had registered for the Florentine Committee's ‘list of occupation’, only a small portion took part in the occupation.⁵ *Paese sera* (25/2/77) speaks of about fifty occupiers, other sources of only about thirty.⁶ Moreover, the number of occupiers never reached the number of rooms made habitable. According to a leaflet of the *Comitato d'occupazione studenti fuori sede senza casa*, dated 16 April 1977, after 50 days of the occupation, there were 80 comrades living in the hotels and 30 rooms were still available.⁷ The highest number is reported by *Lotta Continua* (5-6-/6/77) which mentions 92 occupants. At the time of the eviction, which took place at 4:30 a.m. on July 31, 1977, a Sunday, there were 40 occupants inside the buildings.

Regarding the characteristics of the occupants of the *Via Calzaioli*, a contemporary witness, echoing sentiments prevalent in the '77 movement, advanced the hypothesis that dominant were students who had not completed their exams in the set period and who were becoming misaligned from the university. They still maintained a university status, they were not yet workers, but “they were in this situation typical of '77, when the figure of the non-guaranteed appeared” (12). Data on the characteristics of the occupants partially cast doubt on this hypothesis: a group of four women had administered questionnaires to the 82 occupants staying

⁵ Starting January 1977, the activists had collected signatures at the university for their ‘list of occupation’. AUI FI, Cartella “Archivio storico anni 80”, busta “Studenti fuori sede e occupazione di Via Calzaioli”, letter of the Comitato Studenti Fuori Sede Senza Casa – Firenze Via Calzaioli 8 to the Consiglio d'amministrazione dell'Opera Universitaria di Firenze, 27/2/77.

⁶ See AUI FI, Folder ‘Ricerche’, report ‘Via Pier Capponi - Palazzo Vegni – Alberghi Via Calzaioli’ (presented by four women at the UI national seminar in June 1977 in Florence), p. 53.

⁷ AUI FI, Folder ‘Archivio storico anni ‘80’, envelop ‘Studenti fuori sede e occupazione di Via Calzaioli’, Comitato d'occupazione studenti fuori-sede senza casa, leaflet ‘Assemblea dei senza-casa agli stabili occupati di Via Calzaioli’, 16/4/77.

in the hotels at the time of their survey (May/June 1977).⁸ Of the 43 occupants who had at least partially answered the questionnaire, the age for the male activists was between 19 and 26 and for the female ones between 20 and 29. Eight of the squatters claimed to be totally maintained by their families, 10 to be partially maintained, and 14 to be self-sufficient (10 gave no answer).

From the 33 questionnaires conserved in the Florentine *UI* archives, it appears likely that most of the respondents were students: only three, in fact, did not have a high school diploma. It also emerged that at least a good portion of the occupants were in the early stages of their university studies and of their experience in the city of Florence: six were up to 21 years old and 21 between 21 and 25 years old; 12 had been in Florence for no more than a year and another 10 for no more than two years. In addition, six of the respondents received a student grant. Among the occupants of the *Via Calzaioli*, men formed a clear majority, but their dominance was not as marked as in the case of the *Commercio*: of the 82 occupants in May/June 1977, 59 were men and 23 were women. Clearly, the feminist movement had broken through the familial and social control over young women that was being felt more strongly ten years earlier. Indeed, statements of women made in the questionnaires emphasize the desire to create closer relationships with other women and to “develop more, in here, my woman dimension.”⁹

5.3. Internal organization

“Urban commons” differ significantly in their internal organizational structures (Caciagli and Milan 2021; Ostrom, 1990). These differences are particularly important, as they greatly shape the role that each “commons” can play both within the urban context and in relation to social movements (Müller and Köpper 2023). Although *Commercio* and *Via dei Calzaioli* share similar organizational models, we can observe distinct organizational practices.

The squatters of *Commercio* followed the typical model of Italy’s new left groups in the 1960s and 1970s. To address practical issues, internal rules were established, including floor-level assemblies for managing daily life in the occupied building (e.g., cleaning, picketing). This practice still characterizes many housing commons today (Grazioli 2021). A general assembly, held weekly, decided on the House’s social and political activities and was open to outsiders involved in these activities. Additional committees dealt with specific political or territorial matters, such as anti-eviction efforts and propaganda. In the assemblies, decisions were taken by majority vote and a system of delegation was practiced. To manage logistics regarding all squatters (i.e., financial matters) a house council was elected. For political issues, the general assembly elected a directorate which also seems to have had a voice in decisions about who to accept as guests in the *House*. Elections, however, were not conducted through the nomination of candidates but, at least in an early period, following the model of the *factory councils*, through the direct expression of preferences, as emerged from the interview II.

The functioning of this organizational model grew more complex toward the end of 1968, as various political groups established their headquarters in *the House of the Student and the Worker*: the (Maoist) *PCd’I* (“red” line) and its youth wing, the Marxist-Leninist Revolutionary Party, groups from the *Movimento studentesco*, other minor leftist formations, and a significant though less structured anarchist component. This heterogeneity, combined with high turnover, led to frequent shifts in the squat’s political orientation. These dynamics reflected broader transformations in the Italian movements of 1969, marked by the rise of the various groups of the “revolutionary left”, whereas the broad student movement of the previous year was “in full crisis”

⁸ See in AUI FI, Folder ‘Research’, report ‘Via Pier Capponi - Palazzo Vegni - Hotels Via Calzaioli’, pp. 48ff.; 33 of the questionnaires are conserved in the same folder.

⁹ AUI FI, Folder ‘Ricerche’, Questionnaire 4.

(Natale 1969, 112). Particular for the *Commercio* was the importance of the anarchist component, that in June 1969 gained the majority in the general assembly electing the directorate (II; *CdS*, 11/5/69).

In Florence, the out-of-town students meeting at the offices of the *UI* also adopted the typical organizational model of the revolutionary left, centered on an assembly that elected the *Comitato studenti fuori sede senza casa*. This model was also followed during the occupation. However, the importance attached by the Calzaioli squatters to the creation of an alternative living space impacted on organizational dynamics. The Florence squatters, in fact, did not establish two separate levels—one for internal matters and one for broader political participation. Instead, the general assembly remained internal, while the ground floor of the hotels was opened to host assemblies and events linked to the wider movement. Once all spaces made habitable could be occupied, floors were assigned by lot to pre-formed groups. Each floor was self-organized—with its own kitchen, common area, and assembly—whose decisions, including political ones, were supposed to be reported to the general assembly¹⁰.

In addition, committees were created: the internal committee (for cleaning, assignment of room, security service and internal problems); the negotiations committee (for negotiations with the City Council, the *OU*, *INA* and the *UI*); the press and propaganda committee (for exhibitions, newspapers, ta-tse-bao, films, audiovisuals, leaflets, etc.); and the committee for relations with the movement, for interventions in assemblies.¹¹ The very creation of this last committee indicates that squatters saw themselves as a distinct entity. Decisions made by the general assembly were to be verified in practice by the commissions. According to the occupiers, this meant the realization of “a practice of non-delegation of politics and of control, revocation, of organizational delegation”¹².

Initially, the small group of about 30 activists made the single general assembly model effective. As numbers grew, however, the system struggled. Floor assemblies were meant to address both internal and political issues, but in practice the general assembly remained the only space for political deliberation and decision-making. According to criticism voiced in the questionnaires mentioned above, the large active membership stifled individual participation, and practices like majority voting and delegation—originally meant to be avoided—began to resurface.

5.4. Connection with the broader movement

Although forms of “urban commons” emerge across different movements, the extent to which these movements contribute to their creation and maintenance differs substantially. In some cases, the movement acts as a primary engine of the commons; in others, its role is more peripheral. Differences in the relationship between squats and the broader movement are also evident in the two cases examined.

In its early phase, the squatters of the *Commercio* framed their protest as a student movement focused on housing and the right to education, remaining within the terms of an “advanced reformism” (Balestrini and Moroni 2003, 258), with references also to the Italian constitution (*CdS* 29/11/1968). With the development into a *House of the student and the workers*, “the struggle extended itself” (Natale 1969, 112), first regarding the goal of housing: an inscription on an interior wall of the *Commercio* stated, “the house of the student and the worker fights for the right to a roof for all exploited people”¹³. Participating in picketing actions against

¹⁰ AUI FI, folder ‘Ricerche’, report ‘Via Pier Capponi - Palazzo Vegni – Alberghi di Via Calzaioli,’ p.53. Three alternatives had been discussed at length: a) priority of choice to first-comers; b) drawing of lots; c) already aggregated groups choosing floors; in the end, a mix of c) and b) was adopted.

¹¹ AUI FI, folder ‘Ricerche’ report ‘Via Pier Capponi - Palazzo Vegni – Alberghi di Via Calzaioli,’ p. 47.

¹² AUI FI, folder ‘Ricerche’, report ‘Situazioni ed iniziative di lotta’, presented by the Committee of out-of-town students at the UI national seminar in June 1977 in Florence, p. 15.

¹³ See the photograph published by *L'Espresso*, 6/22/69, p. 13.

evictions (*La Stampa*, 22/5/69; I1), the squatters got involved in activities spearheaded by *UI*, which in Milan since 1968 had been organizing, against rent increases in social housing, a rent strike (Daolio 1974). They also sought to connect with various other social movements, including an immigrant cooperative addressing southern Italian immigration, and grassroots factory committees in industrial areas.

Increasingly, the squatters of *Commercio* were being perceived as an important actor in the Milan social movement field. Among the many actions linked by the press to the *House of the Student and the Worker* are: the protests over the events at the disco club *Bussola* (*La Stampa*, 3/1/69); a blockade of the department store *Rinascence* in solidarity with striking clerks, but also in protest against a consumerist Christmas (*La Stampa* 22 and 23/12/68; *CdS* 11/5/69); protests against President Nixon's visit to Italy (*L'Unità*, 28/2/69; *La Stampa* 28/2/69; *CdS* 11/5/69); clashes over the Battipaglia events (*CdS* 13/4/69; 11/5/69); demonstrations by middle school and high school students (*CdS*, 25/5/69). The broad scope of *Commercio* is also evident in its relationship with the Dioniso theatre group, led by Giancarlo Celli, who took refuge in the building due to financial difficulties. The group engaged in the squat's activities, holding assemblies on the role of theatre in a pre-revolutionary context. They staged *Mass Man*, based on Ernst Toller, and *The Great Official*, a street performance supporting the rent strike, in which an actor posed as an official urging tenants to pay rent—provoking strong reactions from residents.¹⁴ In the long run, however, growing competition and hostility between the various groups present within the *House of the student and the worker* weakened the action of the squatters (Balestrini and Moroni 2003). For these reasons, in the summer of 1969 Natale (1969) saw the political action of the *House* in a period of reflux.

Unlike the 1968–69 occupation of *Commercio*—marked by the presence of clearly defined, though competing, political groups—the squat in the hotels of *Via Calzaioli* lacked a distinct “political colour,” with no alignment along political lines (I2). As noted above, the occupation took place during a moment of relative quiet in the universities, and the new left groups that had dominated in 1968–69 were experiencing a profound crisis, especially after their poor performances in the 1975 local and 1976 national elections¹⁵. When, in 1976, the meetings of the out-of-town students at the Florentine headquarters of the *UI* decided to organize autonomously, one of the motivations stemmed precisely from a “hostility toward the membership card ..., that is, from the label attached to the *UI* as the *longa manus* of *Avanguardia Operaia*”.¹⁶ Distrust had grown toward the New Left groups dominant within the universities, criticized for their decision to participate in elections. This sentiment, which would erupt in February '77, argued that the New Left was following the path of revisionism by disconnecting politics from the masses.

The decision to organize autonomously was grounded also in the conviction that the slogan of the unity between workers and students, typical for the Italian 1968 in general and for the squat of the *Commercio* in particular, was old-fashioned and difficult to accept.¹⁷ They advocated for students as a category of the proletariat on par with other working-class groups. The out-of-town students saw the rise of student workers

¹⁴ Cf. wikipedia.it entry “Giancarlo Celli”; I1; Giuliano Scabia, *Appunti di rappresentazioni nei margini*, in: Balestrini and Moroni 2003, pp. 261.

¹⁵ In the 1976 national elections, *Democrazia Proletaria*, the electoral cartel of the new left, had come in at 1.52 percent, electing 6 deputies. *Lotta Continua* (22/6/76) called this result “decidedly lower than our expectations”, and an editorial (“To the Comrades of *Lotta Continua*”, 24/6/76) emphasized a “state of mind of disappointment and bewilderment at the result obtained”, noting a “very great error in political forecasting”. Already the results of the 1975 local elections had been disappointing. The New Left lists for the most part had remained under 2 percent, with the best result in Milan, where DP had come in at 3.73 percent, electing 3 city councilors. In Florence the PdUP had stopped at 1.94%, with 1 councilor elected.

¹⁶ AUI FI, folder 1977-78, loose documents, Internal document for the organizations of the Florence Housing Coordination, June 1977. *Avanguardia operaia* was one of the New Left groups emerging from the 1968 mobilizations. The activists founding the Florentine *UI*, to a large extent were members of this group.

¹⁷ AUI FI, cartella ‘ricerche’, relazione ‘Studenti fuori sede’, op. cit., p. 7. In fact, in *Via Calzaioli*, differently from the Milan case, references to international communism were absent.

in precarious, low-wage jobs as emblematic of a broader issue: a university system disconnected from the labor market (Guzzo 2019; Gagliaroli 2018). University studies were seen as a form of alienated labor. This perspective called for new goals and organizational forms, shared with other precarious workers. Compared to the Milan squatters, Florentine students more clearly identified other youth groups as allies, dedicating significant attention to developing new bottom-up strategies.¹⁸

Notwithstanding the organizational and ideological differences, *UI* remained the “guiding organization”¹⁹ for the out-of-town students, playing a key role in the preparation of the actual occupation of the hotels in *Via Calzaioli*. In the late 1970s, the Florentine *UI* conserved many characteristics of a social movement organization and their relationship with the out-of-town students is an example for the presence of older activists in the mobilizations of 1977 (Neri Sernerì 2018). The Florentine *UI* conducted its own campaign of occupations, denounced the expulsion of the proletariat from the city centre, and called for the requisitioning of empty houses. It had already individuated the hotels in *Via Calzaioli* as a target, picketing the premises and advocating for their use as housing for students and commuters. However, that the relationship between the occupying students and the older activists of the *UI* was partially strained, evident already in the decision of the students to organize autonomously, is confirmed by *Lotta Continua* (5-6/6/1977), according to which many harshly criticized the *UI*, among others of bureaucratism and sectarianism.

When the “movement of ‘77” exploded also at the University of Florence (Tanturli 2018), the *Comitato studenti fuori sede senza casa* connected its specific goals and activities with the new mobilization. On 10 February 1977, the occupation assembly of the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy unanimously approved a motion of the Committee, which presented its goals as a first step in a broader program of mobilization on the material needs of out-of-town students.²⁰ In the leaflet announcing the occupation of the hotels in *Via Calzaioli*, the Committee described itself as part, not of the housing struggle movement, but “of a broader movement of struggle that has exploded in recent weeks in the university”²¹

During the months of the occupation, however, among the committees created by the occupiers, the only one that did not work was precisely that dealing with the relations with the movement.²² This once again testifies to a perception of distance between the squatters and the movement. As *Lotta Continua* noted, although the occupiers sought to make the hotel a focal point for other organizations, emphasizing its “common” nature, conflicts arose between the movement members using the ground floor and the squatters. As the newspaper stated, “often relations with the movement resulted in the mere use of the premises by movement organizations that showed very little interest in knowing our situation”, in addition leaving the task of cleaning to the squatters (*LC* 5-6/6/1977). The squatters themselves noted that the movement activists using the ground floor “had no, or only partial and sporadic, relationships with the occupiers in a political sense. The

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 15f. For the students, of particular importance was the contribution of the roman theater group *Teatro emarginato*. The Florentine squatters did not make any reference to the occupation of the *Commercio*, neither in general nor as far as the theater group was concerned. For a street performance of the *Teatro emarginato*, ridiculing protests against the presence of the squatters on Ponte Vecchio, see *La Nazione* (26/7/1977).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

²⁰ AUI FI, Folder ‘Archivio storico anni ‘80, envelope ‘Studenti fuori sede e occupazione Via Calzaioli’, Comitato studenti fuori sede senza casa, leaflet ‘Mozione proposta dal Comitato studenti fuori-sede senza casa e approvata dall’assemblea d’occupazione di lettere e filosofia del 10/2/77’, 11/2/77. Stressing the autonomy of the movement as its fundamental content, the Committee also declared that it recognized and supported any initiative that developed inside the university from below.

²¹ AUI FI, Folder ‘Archivio storico anni ‘80, envelope ‘Studenti fuori sede e occupazione Via Calzaioli’, Comitato studenti fuori sede senza casa, Leaflet ‘Gli studenti fuori sede senza casa occupano in via Calzaioli centinaia di stanze in un albergo sfitto da anni’, 24/2/77. The address given for those responsible for the leaflet was not anymore, as for the leaflets up to that point, the *UI* office in Via Pilastri, but the occupied Faculty of literature and philosophy.

²² AUI FI, folder ‘Ricerche’, report ‘Via Pier Capponi, Palazzo Vegni, Via Calzaioli’, op. cit., p. 47.

other sections of the movement, often, have simply used the physical space to gather and organize."²³ Based on these observations, the occupiers noted a danger of “marginalization, of failing to coordinate with other realities of struggle”.²⁴

These conflicts can be read, as “issues of defending their occupation” (I2). However, also a distance/separation between the squat on one side and the movements on the other emerges, which was absent in the case of the *Commercio* ten years earlier. Partially explainable by the “appearance of individuality, the wish to live an experience” (I2), this distance is reflected in the clear division of spaces, with the ground floor allocated to the movements and the occupants' rooms on the other floors defended by a security service, also against movement visitors (*LC* 5-6/6/1977), thus establishing a unique model of “barricading process”. In fact, while the general assembly at *Commercio* welcomed outsiders, the squatters' assembly in *Via Calzaioli* did not.

5.5. Relationship with institutions

Initially, the squatters of the *Commercio* turned to municipal institutions with calls restricted to soliciting aid for making the rooms habitable. The first reactions of the mayor and the centre-left administration, in fact, were not negative, and they declared that they would tolerate the occupation until a better solution was found (*CdS* 30/11/1968). However, the occupiers received only minimal support from the municipality—five liters of cleaning supplies, accompanied by a note warning not to use them for food or drink (*CdS*, 20/12/68). On their part, though they didn't negotiate directly with authorities, the squatters attended city council meeting in February 1969, where the PCI proposed recognizing their right to establish a political and cultural center in Piazza Fontana—the city had designated the area for the establishment of such a center, “naturally bourgeois”, as one of the occupiers (Natale 1969, 112) observed. The motion, however, was neither discussed nor voted on (*L'Unità*, 20/8/1969).

With the development of the squat into the *House of the student and the worker*, attacks against what the *Corriere della sera* (19-20/3/1969) by then called a “Maoist headquarter” grew. By early March 1969, when pressure for relocation increased, the city promised housing for “all eligible students”, presumably by then a minority among the squatters (*CdS*, 6/3/69). Moreover, both the socialist Bettino Craxi and the Christian Democratic Party (DC) called for action against the squat at the *Commercio*, labelling the occupants as extremists and troublemakers posing as students (*CdS*, 19-20/3/1969; 4/5/1969). Despite this climate, the PCI-led traditional left—both locally and nationally—consistently expressed solidarity with the squat, framing attacks on the House of the Student and Worker as attacks on the broader left. When a fascist rally at the Ambassador cinema raised fears of attacks on leftist targets, PCI militants joined others in forming “a sort of sturdy cordon sanitaire” around likely targets, including the *House* (*L'Unità*, 17/3/69). Support from the PCI continued even after police linked some *Commercio* occupants to political violence following the 25 April 1969 Milan fairground bombings. *L'Unità* (29/4/69) condemned the “spiral of violence” and fear-mongering, placing the Molotov attack on the *Commercio* among a series of fascist actions and criticizing police repression in universities. At the same time, the PCI cautioned against provocations, indirectly criticizing the squatters (*L'Unità*, 13/4/69). The eviction, however, was denounced as a “serious repressive operation” and the immediate demolition of the building defined as a loss of a public asset. Claims that the squatters were stockpiling weapons were dismissed as “an unconvincing fabrication” (*L'Unità*, 20/8/69). However, the position of the *PCI* on the squat was limited to expressions of solidarity, and the role of the communist party remained restricted to that of a broker.

²³ AUI FI, folder ‘Ricerche’, report ‘Situazioni ed iniziative di lotta’, op. cit., p. 21.

²⁴ Ibid.

The Florentine squatters had much more direct and continuous relations with institutions than their Milanese counterparts a decade earlier. To transform the abandoned hotels into a “common” the squatters entered into negotiations with the owner of the buildings (the INA), the *OU* and the municipality, which were still ongoing at the time of the eviction. In the flyer announcing the occupation, the students outlined their objectives as follows:

First of all, we want a room per head paid for by the *Opera Universitaria* without subsidizing real estate speculation (currently the *OU* pays up to 200,000 lire a month for a three-bed room)²⁵. First and foremost, we want to impose the requisition of all unused housing property, against the expulsion of students and proletarians from the historic centre, we want more funding to meet our needs, we want to manage these funds and all existing facilities ourselves, against the marginalization and alienation of the lagers called "student houses."²⁶

However, by June 1977, the negotiations remained precarious “despite the movement's interest and popular solidarity”.²⁷ From the outset, students felt negotiations with INA were doomed, as the local representative deferred all decisions to the general management in Rome. The city administration's stance was not entirely unfavorable, but its main role was as a mediator. While the leftist local government publicly opposed squatting and requisition, positive signals came mainly from the *OU*, though it remained "uncertain" between rejecting full student self-management and being interested in the occupiers' organizational forms.²⁸

A key point of contention with the institutions was the spatial transformation of the hotels. The squatters opposed INA's plan to convert the building into mini-apartments and rejected the *OU*'s costly renovation proposal, which offered no guarantee they could stay in the building. Instead, they advocated for a “political” rent agreement and immediate, low-cost renovations based on a plan developed by architecture students, with the *OU* and public institutions funding the work. The movement would manage room allocation, and all squatters would remain during the renovations—a model now typical of “urban commons”.²⁹

As the student committee itself had to admit, no one was willing to accept these conditions. In addition, the general climate – with direct and indirect provocations of the state, a local press that sought to criminalize the occupation, and the Interior Ministry's provocation directed against the whole movement – was not favourable. Even at this point, however, the squatters reiterated their firm belief in the validity of their political proposal:

In *Via dei Calzaioli* we have seen how difficulties are faced collectively and at the same time do not sacrifice what is the human dimension. The same should be done in the neighbourhood, creating collective moments and personalized spaces, all without dogma and archetypes.³⁰

²⁵ For students who fulfilled the requirements for a room in the official student residences but because of overcrowding couldn't have assigned a place, the *OU* rented rooms in boarding houses.

²⁶ AUI FI, folder ‘Archivio storico anni ‘80’, envelope ‘Studenti fuori sede e occupazione Via Calzaioli’, Comitato student fuori sede senza casa, leaflet “Gli studenti fuori sede senza casa occupano in via Calzaioli centinaia di stanze in un albergo sfitto da anni”, 24/2/77

²⁷ AUI FI, folder ‘Ricerche’, report ‘Situazioni ed iniziative di lotta’, op. cit., p. 17. To gain support for their initiative, in the same month the squatters invited institutions and interested citizens to an “open day” at the hotels (cf. Ftn. 4; LC 5-6/6/77; *La Nazione*, 6/6/77).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

This reflection captures the core spirit of the *Calzaioli* experience and the main difference with *Commercio*: the pursuit of collective solutions that preserve human-scale relationships, the attempt to create not only collective moments but also personalized spaces.

6. Concluding remarks: movements trajectories between local practices and global influences

This article examined the occupations of the former *Hotel del Commercio* in Milan (1969) and of the hotels on *Via dei Calzaioli* in Florence (1977) through the analytical lens of “urban commons”. While the concept is typically applied to contemporary urban movements within the context of neoliberalism, the article argued that it can also be fruitfully employed in historical analyses of student movements. Doing so sheds light on key differences between two distinct waves of mobilization.

By the late 1970s, political groups across various countries shifted focus from grand revolutionary ideals to creating small, liberated zones for experimenting with autonomy and self-management (Van der Steen 2014). For the Milan activists, the *Commercio* was a center for gathering, organization, and struggle. Its residential function, however, remained fluctuating, and in many ways, the *Commercio* still operated as a hotel. The Florentine activists, on the other hand, were primarily seeking “a new quality of life,” aiming to overcome the division between the private and political spheres and to build a stable community within the hotels on *Via Calzaioli*. The particular importance placed on occupied spaces for constructing this community, in the Florentine case led, on the one hand, to a more pronounced separation from the outside world, including the broader movement, and on the other, to more interactions with institutions to preserve the experience. In the case of Milan, the activists seemed to have spent more energy on broader political objectives and to have placed less importance on the occupied space as a place for creating alternative relationships and ways of life. These broader differences shaped the two “urban commons” through distinct dynamics across the five dimensions typically used to analyze commoning practices.

Regarding the relationship with the surrounding territory—a key feature of any commoning process—we have shown how, in Milan, it emerged primarily through the permeability and openness of the space. In Florence, by contrast, due to the student movement’s latent phase, it developed through a more preparatory and less visible stage, in which close ties with other local actors (such as the *UI*) played a crucial role. The different degrees of openness also relate to differences in the second dimension: the profile of the occupants. In Milan, the group was marked by high turnover and considerable heterogeneity, while in Florence it was more homogeneous and stable. Although also devised as a political space for the movement, *Via Calzaioli*, in fact, was conceived above all as a space for experimenting alternative ways of living. In consequence, internal organization—the third dimension analyzed—while similar in terms of organizational models, shows significant differences in concrete practices: whereas the assembly of the squatters in Milan was open to external activists, in Florence it remained internal. Although both squats were important experiences in their respective periods, their connections to broader social movements—the fourth dimension—also differed. The *Commercio* was recognized as an actor in movement mobilizations, while the community of squatters in *Via Calzaioli* remained distinct from the movement activities organized in the rooms on the ground floor of the hotels. Finally, also the relationship with institutions—the fifth dimension—shows significant differences. In the case of the *Commercio*, as far as the future of the squat was concerned, it remained at best sporadic. The squatters of *Via Calzaioli*, in contrast, actively pursued negotiations with institutions, reflecting the nature of their core demand, the creation of an alternative, autonomously managed, *Casa dello Studente*, open also to other categories of homeless youth.

The comparison between the two squats offers a twofold contribution. Empirically, it allowed for a closer examination of the waves of student mobilization between 1969 and 1977—not by looking at the movements in general, but by focusing on the dynamics of production and reproduction of their key spatial nodes. Analytically, it aimed to show that the concept of “urban commons”, in its use often restricted to the analysis of experiences in the neoliberal era, can be applied with profit also earlier forms of collective practices, and that it can also serve as a useful lens for a better understanding of the specific features of mobilizations that go beyond what are usually classified as “urban movements”.

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I2. Interview with activist in 1977 in Florence. Florence, 13 February 2020

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