



HISTORICAL PRESENCE IN VISUAL CULTURE

# Contemporaneity

Vol 10, No 1 (2025) | ISSN 2153-5914 (online) | DOI 10.5195/contemp/2025.344  
<http://contemporaneity.pitt.edu>

## **Occupied Monument**

Forte Prenestino and the Creative Rewriting of Ruins

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### **About the Author**

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# Occupied Monument

## Forte Prenestino and the Creative Rewriting of Ruins

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### Abstract

Forte Prenestino, located on the outskirts of Rome, is a former military fort reappropriated as an occupied social center and a vibrant node of activism, creativity, and cultural production. Constructed in the late nineteenth century as part of Italy's post-unification defensive infrastructure, the fort was eventually abandoned and fell into disrepair. Its occupation by local collectives in 1986 marked a radical intervention that departed from both state-led restoration frameworks and

conventional heritage frameworks.

This article examines the reappropriation of Forte Prenestino as a case of adaptive reuse driven by anarchists, punks, artists, students, community activists, and radical leftist movements. These groups transformed a symbol of militarism and neglect into a space of communal life, artistic expression, and political resistance. Their reactivation of the Forte Prenestino site challenges traditional preservation models, which often reinforce dominant cultural narratives and the aesthetic values imposed by hegemonic culture. Here, inclusion entails not merely access to the site for marginalized groups but the active participation of marginalized identities in shaping spatial and cultural meaning. Resistance is enacted through practices of occupation, horizontal governance, and anti-capitalist cultural production—graffiti, murals, and ephemeral installations—that resist commodification and institutional control.

By foregrounding collective action and creative transformation, this study calls for more inclusive, dynamic approaches to preservation—approaches that embrace decay as a generative condition, rather than as failure. Forte Prenestino stands as a compelling example of how historical ruins can become laboratories of collective creativity where space is continuously rewritten through cultural production, resistance, and everyday use.

### Introduction

Conservation practices centered on the preservation and safeguarding of architectural heritage often involve adaptive reuses of historic buildings that reinforce the cultural values and aesthetic preferences of hegemonic narratives. These interventions frequently align with processes of tourism development, gentrification, and the commodification of heritage within historic urban environments. They ultimately contribute to the marginalization or displacement of communities whose identities, collective histories, and cultural practices diverge from hegemonic narratives.

In this context, subcultural groups such as anarchists, punks, anti-fascists, queer collectives, and autonomist political organizations have emerged as active agents of resistance. At sites like Forte Prenestino, their occupation of space itself becomes a critical aesthetic and political statement; through graffiti, murals, ephemeral installations, and everyday practices of self-governance and care, they challenge the aforementioned conventional restoration paradigms and reimagine the ruin as a living site of struggle, solidarity, and counter-memory.

Drawing on Henri Lefebvre's theorization of the titular concepts in his works *The Production of Space* and *The Right to the City*, this article highlights how forms of resistance

at Forte Prenestino rely on two key principles: *appropriation* and *autogestion*.<sup>1</sup> The latter refers to self-management or grassroots governance, wherein communities collectively organize to manage space without relying on hierarchical or state structures. These practices allow marginalized actors to reclaim agency within the urban fabric, transforming space through collective use and everyday negotiation. Although Lefebvre's ideas have sometimes been dismissed as utopian or impractical within institutional planning discourse, real-world examples such as squatted social centers in Italy demonstrate that collective action can activate neglected or decaying sites in transformative and durable ways.<sup>2</sup> These cases show that Lefebvre's vision is not merely theoretical; it has real-world applications under the specific sociopolitical conditions that allow self-organized urbanism to thrive.

Within this context, Daniela Sandler's concept of *counterpreservation* offers a critical lens through which to interpret the intentional embrace of architectural decay as both a material condition and a political act. Sandler defines counterpreservation not as passive neglect or abandonment, but as a deliberate strategy that frames decay as a desirable and legible feature.<sup>3</sup> Rather than erasing traces of time and use, counterpreservation elevates them, often recontextualizing them through ephemeral interventions such as graffiti, murals, temporary installations, or collective inhabitation. In doing so, it opens space for alternative narratives, affordable living, and creative expression that operate outside the frameworks permitted by traditional conservation and heritage policy. Counterpreservation, then, reveals the potential of ruins and derelict spaces not as symbols of failure or loss, but as canvases for cultural subversion and urban reinvention. These practices reclaim decay as a source of meaning and agency, exemplifying Lefebvre's vision of urban space as a contested terrain that is shaped as much by grassroots desire and collective memory as it is by formal governance or capital investment.

Forte Prenestino, located in the suburbs of Rome, offers an effective case study for exploring these ideas. This former military structure, built in the late nineteenth century as part of a broader defensive system after Italian unification and the designation of Rome as the national capital, remained abandoned for decades. Neglected, and slowly overtaken by the passage of time, the site became a symbol of exclusion at the edges of the city.

In 1986, local collectives occupied and reactivated the site. Among them were punks, anarchists, feminists, artists, and members of Italy's autonomist movement. Rather than pursuing institutional restoration, their intervention marked a radical reappropriation of space. The fort was no longer a relic of military power; instead, it became a living experiment in cultural resistance and self-organization.

What makes Forte Prenestino particularly significant is not only its longevity and scale but also its continuous resistance to commodification and its embodiment of counterpreservation as an ongoing political practice. It is situated within a broader European trend of squatted social centers while retaining its distinct Roman identity.

<sup>1</sup> Henri Lefebvre discusses autogestion as a form of collective self-management that resists hierarchical control and enables the appropriation and production of space by its users. Lefebvre's comments reflect a broader critique of institutional power and the commodification of urban life. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 422–423. See also Henri Lefebvre, *The Right to the City* (Verso, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> For instance, Susan Fainstein critiques Lefebvre's radical democratic ideals as lacking implementable frameworks within real-world governance structures. Susan S. Fainstein, *The Just City* (Cornell University Press, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> Daniela Sandler, *Counterpreservation: Architectural Decay in Berlin since 1989* (Cornell University Press, 2016). See also Daniela Sandler, "Counterpreservation: Decrepitude and Memory in Post-Unification Berlin," *Third Text* 25, no. 6 (2011): 687–697.

Forte Prenestino serves as both a paradigmatic case and a singular case within the broader network of self-managed social centers in Italy and beyond. On the one hand, it exemplifies a model of occupation and autonomous organization that has been replicated across numerous contexts, all of which are grounded in shared ideological commitments to anti-capitalism, horizontal governance, and cultural production. On the other hand, Forte Prenestino is distinguished by its unique architectural, historical, and urban context.

The transformation of Forte Prenestino speaks to the possibility of a reparative history of architecture—one that does not restore buildings to a static past, but instead creatively rewrites their meaning through collective use. Rather than erasing signs of damage or decay, the occupiers embraced these conditions as generative, allowing new forms of social life and memory to emerge. In doing so, they enacted a form of (dis)repair that challenges inherited narratives of preservation and cultural legitimacy. While some historical harms may remain irreparable, the transformation of the fort affirmed the potential of experimental, collective practices to enact alternative forms of reparation through space, culture, and community.

### **Forte Prenestina: Urban and Historical Context**

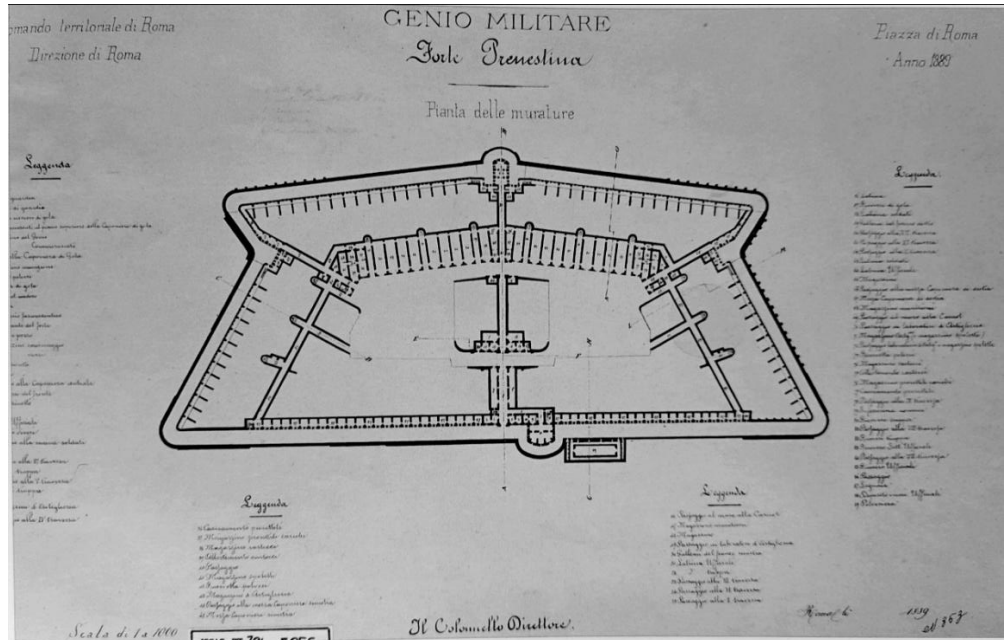
After the Kingdom of Italy was established in 1861—following the *Risorgimento* [Revival], the nineteenth-century movement for Italian political unity, and the subsequent annexation of Rome from the Papal States—it began an ambitious project to fortify its new capital. In response to geopolitical instability and the perceived threat of foreign invasion, the *Regio Decreto* [Royal Decree] was enacted to authorize the construction of a comprehensive defensive system surrounding Rome, to replace the outdated and ineffective bastion system.<sup>4</sup>

The new system, conceived to align with the city's circular urban form, consisted of a ring of fifteen forts, built in the Prussian typology. This polygonal fortification system originated in France and was further developed in Germany in the mid-nineteenth century. Its fortifications were distributed radially, forming a protective ring around the area they aimed to secure. These forts were strategically positioned to protect key access points and were placed at specific distances from each other. The entire perimeter, conceived as a defensive belt encircling the city, stretched roughly 37 kilometers. Similar fortification systems were implemented elsewhere in Italy during the mid-nineteenth century, including in Verona, Peschiera, Mestre, Bologna, Ancona, and Piacenza—each reflecting a broader military logic of territorial control.

Forte Prenestina, constructed between 1880 and 1884 during the second phase of fortification, was one of these defensive structures.<sup>5</sup> Situated along the *Via Prenestina* in the eastern quadrant of Rome, it occupied a strategic position between the *Tiburtina* and *Casilina* routes. As seen in figure 1, the fort featured a pentagonal layout with a symmetrical façade facing the city, Carnot walls along its retreating flanks, and angular outer walls oriented toward the countryside. It was originally equipped with artillery on its northern flank.

<sup>4</sup> The Regio Decreto was a legal act issued by the monarch in the Kingdom of Italy, carrying the force of law. In this context, it authorized the development of military infrastructure to defend Rome as the new capital.

<sup>5</sup> The term *Forte Prenestina* is used throughout this text to refer specifically to Forte Prenestino in the period when it functioned as part of Rome's nineteenth-century military defense system, prior to its occupation in 1986.



**Figure 1**

Plan of the masonry at the level of the bastion of Forte Prenestino. The Prussian typology is evident in the pentagonal shape. Architectural drawing, 1889. Forti di Roma Collection, SCAG (Istituto Storico e Cultura dell'Arma del Genio).

As a royal military asset, Forte Prenestina served its intended purpose for several decades. After the fall of the monarchy in 1946, the ownership of the fort was transferred to the state. In the early twentieth century, the fort was repurposed as military barracks; later, it was used as an artillery storage facility. During World War II, it briefly housed a refugee camp and served as a detention center for residents of the *Centocelle* and *Quarticciole* neighborhoods during the Nazi occupation. Following the liberation of Rome in 1944, the fort, along with other military buildings, was occupied by Allied forces before returning to Italian control.

However, by the 1930s, the larger fortification system that included Forte Prenestina began to lose its strategic value. Urban expansion rapidly encroached upon the defensive ring, and by the 1960s, the forts were gradually incorporated into new residential neighborhoods. This integration rendered the forts obsolete for military purposes, and maintenance of the structures became increasingly difficult due to their size and their state ownership. While some forts were repurposed as museums or institutional spaces, many others fell into neglect and disrepair, including Forte Prenestina. In 1977, a failed expropriation attempt by the Municipality of Rome left the fort in a prolonged state of abandonment. It was not until 1986, after nearly a decade of deterioration, that the fort was occupied by a collective of local activists. Although the building suffered damage throughout its layered and complex history, it had remained largely preserved due to its occupation by these groups. In 2008, it was officially recognized as a site of cultural heritage under the Italian Code of Cultural Heritage.<sup>6</sup> As noted by architectural historian Elvira Cajano, "It is somehow curious that throughout its history, Forte Prenestino seems to have always offered shelter to marginal figures rather than serving the military purpose it was originally made for."<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the fort's trajectory—from a

<sup>6</sup> Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali, "D.M. 28/04/2008," *Gazzetta Ufficiale* no. 112, May 16, 2008.

<sup>7</sup> Elvira Cajano, ed., *Il Sistema dei Forti Militari a Roma* [The system of military forts in Rome] (Rome: Gangemi Editore, 2006).

symbol of national defense to a neglected ruin, and eventually to a thriving space of autonomous culture—reveals how architecture can outlive its intended function and be reimagined by those it was never meant to serve.

### **Reclaiming the Right to the City: Subcultural Resistance and the Appropriation of Forte Prenestino in Rome**

The occupation of Forte Prenestino in 1986 was preceded by an earlier, unsuccessful attempt by activists in the mid-1970s, which was suppressed by police intervention. At that time, the fort was located within *Quartiere Prenestino-Centocelle*, a rapidly developing yet infrastructurally underserved neighborhood lacking cultural facilities, schools, and public services. Officially established as a district in 1961, Prenestino-Centocelle became a site of social and political experimentation during the subsequent decades. *Piazza dei Gerani*, a central square within the neighborhood, emerged as a hub for diverse groups, including communist assemblies and groups with subcultural identities, such as punks and skinheads. These interactions gave rise to creative initiatives.

One of the most notable interventions originating from these grassroots movements was the *Giorno del non-Lavoro* (Non-Labor Day), conceived as an alternative to traditional Labor Day celebrations and organized by the *Associazione Culturale Adesso Basta* (ACAB), or *Adesso Basta* [Stop Now]. The event criticized exploitative labor conditions and the marginalization of unemployed and precarious workers. Initiated on May 1, 1983, the first *Giorno del non-Lavoro* took place in front of Forte Prenestino, outside the closed fort, with official authorization permitting festivities until midnight. As part of this event, *Vuoto a Perdere* was founded as an independent publication that merged elements of traditional magazines and underground fanzines.<sup>9</sup> This hybrid format was significant because it allowed the publication to bridge the gap between formal editorial structures and the raw, DIY ethos of underground culture—creating a platform that was both accessible and politically charged. *Vuoto a Perdere* provided space for alternative voices, dissenting opinions, and cultural experimentation at a time when mainstream media often ignored or misrepresented these communities.

Two years later, *Adesso Basta* occupied Forte Prenestino for one week in December of 1985, offering free concerts and exhibitions.<sup>10</sup> This was a symbolic occupation,<sup>11</sup> with the objective of proving that the association could be in charge of the abandoned space, and that it could offer a cultural agenda to the benefit of a *Quartiere* that did not have cultural spaces. This event launched a petition to open the fort to the neighborhood. The groundwork for the occupation to come had now been laid. However, the events of 1986 marked a significant departure from previous years, setting the stage for a radical reappropriation of the fort space.

In March of 1986, Leonardo Rinaldi, the leader of *Adesso Basta*, wrote to the municipality to ask for access to the fort building. It is important to note that Forte Prenestina was state property at the time (and still remains state property as of 2025); it was not under the city's jurisdiction, and the municipality officially deemed it uninhabitable. Rinaldi asked for access to the fort in exchange for offering cultural events and workshops to the public. He also demanded

<sup>9</sup> Archivio dei Movimenti Roma, "Vuoto a Perdere," accessed May 14, 2025, <https://www.armoroma.org/rivista/vuoto-a-perdere/>.

<sup>10</sup> *Adesso Basta* was a cultural association that defended the right to the access of green spaces. CSOA Forte Prenestino, *Fortopia: Storie d'Amore e d'Autogestione* [*Fortopia: stories of love and autogestion*] (Rome: Forte Pressa, 2016), 13.

<sup>11</sup> To call this a symbolic occupation implies a distinction from more confrontational or militant models of squatting, those rooted in tactical resistance or aesthetic reappropriation.

the renovation of the fort and the installation of electric power—an audacious request, given the circumstances. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the municipality rejected the proposal.

Following that refusal, the *Giorno del non-Lavoro* took place as usual on May 1, 1986—outside the fort, and this time under radioactive rain. The Chernobyl disaster had occurred just five days earlier, and the resulting fallout reached the Italian peninsula, manifesting as radioactive rainfall during the event. The party continued as usual, with performances by local bands such as the Roman punk band *Bloody Riot*. But this time, when the clock struck midnight, the party did not stop. A banner was hung in front of the stage that stated, “The party continues.” Immediately, someone broke the chain to gain entry to the closed fort. The stage was then reset inside the fort, where the party went on all night. From that night on, Forte Prenestina became *Centro Sociale Occupato e Autogestito* (CSOA) *Forte Prenestino* [Occupied Social Center Forte Prenestino], or simply Forte Prenestino. Around forty people were part of the occupation. They were soon joined by *Collettivo Fuori di Sede* [*Off-Campus Collective*], a collective of foreign students from the south of Italy, as well as a diverse collection of activists interested in occupying the space, such as punks, student associations, and feminist groups.

Following the occupation, Forte Prenestino was rapidly reimagined as a space of autonomous cultural and social production. The transformation of this former military structure into a vibrant community hub was neither incidental nor purely utilitarian; rather, it was a deliberate act of reclaiming public space for collective life. The occupiers implemented a diverse range of initiatives, illustrating how cultural production could be used to reweave the social fabric of a neighborhood marginalized by the city’s formal institutions.

One of the first projects was the establishment of a communal kitchen, which provided meals while also serving as a site of solidarity and economic self-sufficiency. Educational activities soon followed, including lessons in music, theatre, and visual arts—opportunities that were otherwise inaccessible to many residents of the surrounding area. Music studios were made available for local bands to rehearse, and the fort began to host regular film screenings and weekly concerts, featuring both local and international performers. These events not only brought cultural life to a largely underserved district but also attracted wider publics, positioning the fort as a dynamic node in Rome’s underground scene.

In parallel with these initiatives, the occupants of the fort curated spaces for memory and knowledge-building, including a music library and a reading room with books, journals, and zines from activist and subcultural networks. Crucially, these activities were sustained through regular open meetings that enabled collective decision-making and reinforced the participatory ethos of the space. What emerged was not merely a venue for events but an infrastructure for living otherwise—an experiment in self-management, cultural autonomy, and spatial resistance.

As Forte Prenestino grew in popularity and attendance during the late 1980s, negotiations with the municipality continued, primarily concerning access to basic infrastructure such as clean water and electricity. Local district authorities expressed support for the occupation, often mediating between the occupants and the municipal government. Their advocacy was grounded in the argument that the Occupied Social Center was fulfilling a cultural and social role otherwise absent in the *Quartiere*. However, the legal status of the occupation remained precarious. Although the district supported the project, Forte Prenestino remained state property under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of the Interior, beyond the administrative reach of both the municipality and the district. This legal ambiguity placed the occupants in a position of constant vulnerability in which they were tolerated in practice and were never formally sanctioned.

By the early 1990s, despite its initial alliance with the neighborhood, the fort became increasingly detached from the *Quartiere* and the broader fabric of the city. This detachment was complex and paradoxical: even though local authorities once advocated for the fort’s

activities, the lack of legal recognition limited their ability to secure its integration into official urban planning or infrastructure schemes. The fort's uncertain legal position produced a form of spatial isolation, even as its cultural relevance expanded.

In response to this marginalization, Forte Prenestino deepened its connections with the wider Italian network of social centers, forming a particularly strong alliance with the Leoncavallo Center in Milan. This move toward inter-city solidarity allowed the fort to overcome its detachment and reframe its position by showing that it was not peripheral; in fact, it was part of a decentralized cultural and political movement.

By the mid-1990s, Forte Prenestino had gained considerable national and international visibility, namely by hosting major concerts and other public events. Yet the threat of eviction persisted. In 1990, the fort joined other Roman collectives to demand an amnesty for all occupied social centers in Italy, rallying under the slogan: "Yes to private property, only if it is self-governed." These efforts were part of a broader campaign to establish a new legal framework for occupations rooted in community self-management. In 1994, another initiative—this one supported by then-mayor Francesco Rutelli—proposed legalizing the occupation through the payment of a symbolic rent. Despite these overtures, the unresolved ownership of the building remained an obstacle. In 1995, Forte Prenestino was included in a list of properties slated for public auction by the Ministry of the Interior, further underlining the enduring fragility of its legal status.

The city of Rome could never afford to purchase the building from the state, and as of this writing in 2025, CSOA Forte Prenestino remains an illegal occupation. Nevertheless, the fort continues to offer wide cultural programming that closely resembles the original vision proposed at the time of occupation. Main spaces within the complex include a cinema, a library, an *enoteca*, a pub, a *taverna*, and facilities dedicated to musical production. In addition to its regular programming, the fort hosts major cultural events such as *Crack! Fumetti Dirimpenti*, a festival of drawn and printed art, and *BaBeL*, the independent biennale dedicated to critical discussions on housing.

### **Appropriation through Graffiti and the Architectural Program**

Spatial characteristics play a significant role in processes of appropriation by subcultural groups, particularly when the original function or meaning of a site has been lost or transformed. Forte Prenestino's occupation can be understood as the result of multiple interrelated factors. The fort is situated within a relatively recent, informally developed urban area of Rome that is characterized by inadequate infrastructure and weak connections to the broader city fabric. This context fostered the emergence of a diverse social environment comprising subcultural groups, collectives, and communist organizations who frequently utilized the neighborhood's central square as a site of assembly.

At the time of its occupation, Forte Prenestino was no longer fulfilling its initial military purpose and was now abandoned, neglected, and in a state of structural decline. Nevertheless, its architectural configuration offered a degree of flexibility by accommodating a wide range of uses and activities. This functional adaptability distinguished it from other iconic Roman ruins. The decay of sites such as the Colosseum or the Roman Forum is often valorized; it is seen as sublime, emblematic of historical continuity. In contrast, Forte Prenestino's ruination evoked a markedly different semiotic register. Because it was a former military fortification designed for defence and conflict, its deterioration was associated with trauma and violence, which imparted a negative symbolic charge that was subsequently challenged and reinterpreted through its occupation.

Hence, the state of decay of Forte Prenestino at the time of its occupation, its architectural layout, and its location were determinant factors for its occupation. Moreover, another possible factor was its visibility within the Prenestino-Centocelle area. Forte Prenestino is, after all, a heritage site and a monument.

Following the categories explored by Alois Riegl in his seminal work *The Modern Cult of Monuments*,<sup>12</sup> Forte Prenestino is an unintentional monument with both *historical value* and *use value*. Forte Prenestino has historical value in that it represents a distinct moment in the evolution of a defensive architectural style. Additionally, it possesses use value in that it followed the natural cycle of construction, deterioration, and decay, though it was subsequently altered through human intervention following its occupation. Finally, its status as a monument also gives it value and relevance inside the urban space. Due to these multiple types of value, the activities and initiatives of the Occupied Social Center gained more visibility among the neighbors, the inhabitants of the city of Rome, the media, and the authorities. Most importantly, they drew the attention of individuals and groups who share the ideals that Forte Prenestino promotes.

Subcultural groups express their ideals and affiliations through a system of objects, signs, and symbols that communicate political and artistic messages. A well-known example is the punk movement, which utilizes DIY aesthetics, safety pins, anarchist symbols, and band patches not only as fashion statements but also as visual tools of dissent against mainstream culture and authority. In a similar way, the occupants of spaces like Forte Prenestino mobilize graffiti, murals, and architectural interventions to articulate their collective identity and political stance. A notable example of the ideology behind these interventions is the phrase “Ornament is not a crime,” which serves as a critique of traditional architectural views on ornamentation, particularly within the context of graffiti as a countercultural practice.<sup>13</sup>

Graffiti, when understood as ornamentation, becomes an additive process rather than a reductive one. It engages with existing surfaces, often obscuring or concealing what lies beneath, transforming the space in ways that reflect a form of resistance. This act of appropriation aligns graffiti with broader cultural movements that resist dominant societal norms. As a form of ornamentation, graffiti serves as a direct challenge to architectural ideologies, particularly those articulated by Adolf Loos. In his 1908 essay “Ornament and Crime,” Loos condemns ornamentation as a degenerate practice, advocating instead for a pure, unadorned materiality.<sup>14</sup> In stark contrast, graffiti as ornamentation asserts a defiant position, using the very concept of decoration to resist dominant aesthetic and cultural standards.

To fully understand graffiti’s role as ornamentation, it is necessary to contextualize it within a broader historical and ideological framework that recognizes the political and social functions of ornamentation. While ornamentation has historically been viewed as either decorative or degenerate, depending on the ideological perspective, graffiti complicates this binary by utilizing ornamentation as a form of resistance. This resistance extends beyond the aesthetic realm; it engages with the built environment and critiques the cultural and architectural hierarchies that define what is deemed acceptable. In this way, graffiti reimagines the space it occupies and challenges traditional notions of public and private space, ownership, and artistic expression.

<sup>12</sup> In *The Modern Cult of Monuments* (1903), Alois Riegl introduced categories such as “age value” (the appreciation of an object due to its age) and “historical value” (the value attributed to an object due to its historical significance). These concepts have influenced contemporary preservation theory by highlighting the dynamic nature of historical sites, where both physical decay and new interventions contribute to the evolving meaning of the site. See Alois Riegl, “The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Its Origin,” trans. Kurt W. Forster and Diane Ghirardo, *Oppositions* 25 (1982): 21–51. Originally published in *Der moderne Denkmalkultus: Sein Wesen und seine Entstehung* [The modern cult of monuments] (Vienna: Braumüller, 1903).

<sup>13</sup> Jonathan Hill, *Immaterial Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>14</sup> Adolf Loos, “Ornament and Crime (1908),” in *Ornament and Crime: Selected Essays* (Ariadne Press, 1998).

Hence, just as subcultures appropriate ornamental elements, subcultural spaces also embody a bricolage of elements, with graffiti as the main form of ornamentation. In addition, graffiti adds a human touch to the depersonalized urban landscape, providing a sense of place and belonging to subcultures, groups, and collectives.

According to scholars Myra F. Taylor, Julie Ann Pooley, and Georgia Carragher, a person's sense of belonging within society emerges from a convergence of cognitive processes, behavioral patterns, emotional responses, and environmental experiences—from a dynamic interaction between the individual and their sociocultural context.<sup>15</sup> The subcultural sense of place is activated by the collective occupation of a shared physical space, in an act of claiming temporary ownership that reinforces the feeling of being connected, included, and supported within a subculture, group, collective, or community. This sense of belonging is particularly evident in the case of Forte Prenestino, where the space has become a hub for various countercultural and activist groups. These groups come together to share not only physical space but also ideologies and social practices. The collective nature of the occupation fosters collaboration and solidarity across diverse subcultural groups, creating an environment in which individuals feel they can contribute to something larger than themselves. This shared experience of occupation enables the formation of deep social bonds, thereby reinforcing the sense of belonging and inclusion among the participants. The cognitive and emotional experiences triggered by the fort's occupation are further amplified by its role as a platform for artistic and political expression, strengthening the participants' sense of community within the broader social context.

As scholar Valeria Federici notes, "The use of graffiti art inside the Fort speaks to the process of appropriation and adaptation that this building went through since 1986."<sup>16</sup> From the early stages of its occupation, graffiti became a defining visual element of Forte Prenestino, symbolizing both resistance and identity. During the 1980s, this visual language was relatively modest, consisting mostly of tags and throw-ups that marked the space as claimed but still in transition. However, as the fort solidified its role not only as a political and social hub but also as a platform for artistic expression, graffiti evolved into a central medium of its cultural production.

This transformation became especially evident in the early 1990s, when the fort began hosting a wider range of artists, performers, and sculptors. A pivotal moment occurred during a 1991 festival that featured a graffiti jam session, bringing together several renowned street artists. One of the most prominent interventions from this event is a large-scale mural by Blu<sup>17</sup> (see figure 2), which exemplifies the fort's shift from textual graffiti toward complex visual narratives. The mural depicts a hybrid creature composed of mechanical and organic parts, multiple eyes, and distorted limbs—an allegorical figure that critiques systems of power, surveillance, and capitalist machinery. Rather than delivering a literal political message, the

<sup>15</sup> Myra F. Taylor, Julie Ann Pooley, and Georgia Carragher, "Sense of Belonging and Well-Being: A Review of the Literature," *Psychology of Well-Being: Theory, Research, and Practice* 6, no. 1 (2016): 20.

<sup>16</sup> Valeria Federici, "Network Culture in Italy in the 1990s and the Making of a Place for Art and Activism," PhD diss., Brown University, 2019.

<sup>17</sup> Blu's street art focuses on topics that express social inequality, injustice, societal insurrection, capitalism, and consumerism.

piece engages viewers through metaphor and visual provocation, reflecting the broader evolution of graffiti at the fort into a more nuanced and figurative form of expression.



**Figure 2**

One of Blu's most representative murals inside the walls of Forte Prenestino. The piece portrays a pair of wealthy, corpulent figures feeding off the common people, offering a critique of social and economic exploitation. Photo by the author.

Other examples further illustrate the broader evolution of graffiti at the fort. In figure 3, the surrounding graffiti acts as a layered visual archive of protest, satire, and cultural critique. A prominent banner displayed at the entrance reads "Free Women in Free Palestine," conveying both feminist and anti-colonial solidarity, and reaffirming the fort's role as a space for activism and collective struggle.



**Figure 3**

The entrance to one of the tunnels at Forte Prenestino provides a vivid illustration of the site's current state of decay and the interventions made by its occupants. The banners displayed at the entrance convey ideological perspectives and political statements, reflecting the fort's role as a space for activism. Photo by

the author.

Figure 4 depicts a figure on a unicycle, playing the accordion, sprouting a tree from their head—an almost carnivalesque embodiment of creative resistance—while facing a phalanx of riot police. This surreal juxtaposition highlights the contrast between state control and anarchic imagination. The repetition of anti-fascist symbols, stylized lettering, and references to other global struggles (such as Genova 2001, recalling the violent suppression of the G8 protests) further inscribes the fort's walls with a shared counter-narrative. Here, graffiti is not vandalism but a deliberate reappropriation of space—a way to inscribe political memory and communal identity onto the architecture itself.



**Figure 4**

Mural by Genova, one of the artists invited to decorate Forte Prenestino. This work depicts freedom and artistic expression in opposition to police forces, which are symbolized as animals. Photo by the author.

Both individual and collective identities are articulated through the murals and graffiti that adorn Forte Prenestino's walls. These visual interventions serve not only as personal expressions but also as markers of the diverse collectives and subcultural groups that cohabit at the site. The revolution Lefebvre envisioned—a transformation in the production and appropriation of urban space—is materially and symbolically enacted here through graffiti, banners, and the self-managed occupation of architecture. The fort's tunnels, vaulted ceilings, and subdivided rooms function as relational spaces: spatial configurations that both reflect and shape the social dynamics within. These architectural features not only accommodate but also actively sustain community-building practices, collective organization, and a strong sense of belonging among occupants.

Forte Prenestino announces its presence well before its physical threshold can be reached. As one approaches from the surrounding streets, the urban landscape gradually transforms: the façades of nearby residential buildings and commercial establishments become increasingly adorned with street art, posters, and banners. These visual interventions serve both as navigational cues and as symbolic extensions of the cultural and political identity of the Occupied Social Center into the public realm. This gradual visual unfolding not only marks the spatial reach of the center's influence but also underscores the integration of its aesthetic and ideological presence within the everyday life of the neighborhood. In this way, the physical approach toward Forte Prenestino becomes an immersive prelude to the values and practices

it embodies—affirming the site’s role as both a landmark and an active agent in reshaping the urban environment.

### Conclusions

In her book *Counterpreservation* and her theory of the same name, Daniela Sandler proposes the appropriation of decay for social practices and activism, as an alternative to orthodox preservation practices. Sandler’s framework centers on the reappropriation of decayed buildings as a means to provide affordable housing and create spaces for alternative ways of living that resist gentrification and promote the rewriting of dominant historical narratives. “This reappropriation is not only concrete, but also symbolic,” she argues, “infusing decay with positive associations of social inclusiveness, freedom, and creativity.”<sup>18</sup>

This dual process—both material and symbolic—is clearly exemplified by the case of Forte Prenestino. Symbolically, the reappropriation of this building involved reclaiming an abandoned and historically significant site on the outskirts of Rome and recontextualizing its original function. Once associated with militarism, defense, and authoritarian control, the fort was newly infused with values of creativity, autonomy, and collective belonging. Its transformation represents a deliberate re-signification of space, the shift from a symbol of exclusion to one of inclusion and cultural production.

Materially, this recontextualization was achieved through a rejection of conventional, state-sanctioned restoration practices. Instead, the interventions at Forte Prenestino were carried out manually by the individuals and collectives who inhabit the space. This do-it-yourself ethos manifests in the adaptive reuse of the architectural structure and the graffiti, murals, banners, and sculptures that adorn activate it. Each intervention functions not only as a physical modification but also as a signifier of the presence, identity, and activities of the occupying community. By giving new purpose to every room, tunnel, and courtyard, the occupation sustains a living architecture that evolves alongside its users, thereby supporting diverse political, social, and cultural practices.

Hence, Forte Prenestino serves both the collective and the individual dimensions of social practice. The collective or socio-political dimension concerns the ability to create networks, community, a sense of belonging, and the power to change or resist outdated structures. The individual dimension is more concerned with the personal aesthetic experience of the symbolic and the material, leading to self-reflection, self-growth, the transformative experience of the sublime, and creative freedom.

Forte Prenestino, as described by its occupiers, is not a utopian project but a heterotopia: a real space where individual experiences and frameworks intersect to create community.<sup>19</sup> According to Michel Foucault, heterotopias are physical spaces that exist outside the conventional order of society but still maintain connections to it in complex ways.<sup>20</sup> They serve as counter-sites, often holding multiple conflicting meanings and functions, and can be places of resistance, transformation, and alternative practices. In the Foucauldian sense, then, Forte Prenestino exemplifies a successfully occupied space that meets the needs of groups outside the mainstream. Through self-management and appropriation, these groups practically apply Lefebvre’s theory of the right to the city.

<sup>18</sup> Sandler, *Counterpreservation*, 45.

<sup>19</sup> “Fortopia is not a utopia, something that drifts ever farther away. Fortopia is a *Heterotopia*: a place that, once you cross the bridge and pass through the gate, is real, present, and vibrant, with its own rules that are valid here and nowhere else. A place where the possible expands into the potential without drifting from the real, becoming concrete and practicable.” CSOA Forte Prenestino, *Fortopia*, 5.

<sup>20</sup> Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (Spring 1986): 22–27.

Despite its long-standing cultural and social relevance, Forte Prenestino continues to exist in a state of legal precarity—its occupation is still classified as illegal, yet is tolerated by the municipality. This ambivalence is significant: it reveals the tensions between institutional authority and grassroots urban practices and reflects broader contradictions in how cities negotiate informal appropriations of space. The tolerance extended to Forte Prenestino may be interpreted as an implicit recognition of its value but also underscores the fragility of its status, leaving it vulnerable to political shifts, redevelopment pressures, and regulatory crackdowns.

Finally, while Forte Prenestino is distinctive in its architectural form and its local context, it shares affinities with other squatted or re-appropriated heritage sites across Europe, such as the Christiania Free Town in Copenhagen or the Rote Flora in Hamburg—spaces where cultural production, political resistance, and communal self-management intersect.<sup>21</sup> These cases collectively challenge conventional notions of heritage, ownership, and urban governance. Within Forte Prenestino, feminist and queer collectives have played an integral role in shaping both discourse and practice by organizing events, workshops, and assemblies that center non-normative identities and bodies.<sup>22</sup> These interventions resist heteropatriarchal norms and affirm the fort as a plural, inclusive space—what some have described as a “queer commons.”<sup>23</sup> Future research, involving a more sustained engagement with how gender and sexuality circulate through the fort’s social and symbolic life, would further enrich understandings of its subcultural milieu and radical potential.


This study invites a rethinking of mainstream restoration and preservation practices, which often prioritize aesthetic uniformity, historical authenticity, and the idea of completeness as favorable traits. These practices typically reflect dominant cultural values and tend to overlook or marginalize spaces that do not conform to the accepted historical narrative. Instead, this article proposes an alternative approach to heritage buildings, one that serves diverse groups or individuals who resist mainstream norms and wish to shape their own narratives. It also challenges the conventional view of architectural decay, encouraging the reappropriation of decay as a symbol of social inclusion, creative freedom, and resistance, rather than an imperfection to be erased through restoration. In this light, decay becomes not a failure to be repaired, but a visible record of rupture and reclamation—a form of (dis)repair that opens space for new ways of belonging. The story of Forte Prenestino suggests that while some histories may be irreparable, their fragments can still be reassembled into forms that resist, persist, and imagine otherwise. Moreover, it aligns with the urgent call to consider whether a reparative history of art and architecture is possible—and if so, for whom, and by what means.

<sup>21</sup> Miguel A. Martínez, *Squatters in the Capitalist City: Housing, Justice, and Urban Politics* (London: Routledge, 2020), 75–102.

<sup>22</sup> Cristina Morini and Emanuela Bove, “Feminist Practices in Self-Managed Social Centres in Italy: Between Autonomy and Precarity,” *Journal of Resistance Studies* 4, no. 2 (2018): 78–99.

<sup>23</sup> Gavin Brown, “Mutinous Eruptions: Autonomous Spaces of Radical Queer Activism,” *Environment and Planning A* 39, no. 11 (2007): 2685–2698.

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