

Embracing Diversity: Ararat's Role in Inclusive Urban Development and Migration in Rome

Angelina Grelle

Affiliation: DIST-Polytechnic of Turin

Email: angelina.grelle@polito.it

Abstract

This paper aims to contribute by spotlighting an example of inclusive practices aligned with the principles of open city, specifically focusing on a migrant community who have established a socio-cultural centre in Rome, called Ararat. Ararat nestled in Testaccio neighbourhood with its enduring presence, stands as a testament to the resistance and vibrancy of the Kurdish community, particularly noteworthy as the neighbourhood undergoes development and renewal as part of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan. By examining Ararat's journey, this paper seeks to extract valuable insights and lessons that can inform urban planners and policymakers engaged in inclusive urban development projects. The longevity and vitality of Ararat underscore the importance of incorporating the unique perspectives and contributions of migrants communities in the urban renewal process.

Keywords: Migration, Rome, Participation, urban renewal

Introduction

Migrations are widely acknowledged to be the main vector of change in cities. Nicholas De Genova (2015) argues that transnational migrations are the primary drivers of the transformation of urban space and social production in contemporary cities. Italy, and particularly its capital Rome, has always been reshaped by migrations. The Shish Mahal, for instance, the first migrant occupation experience between 1990 and 1991, marked a significant moment in the city's migration history. In recent decades, the policies of the European Union and right-wing governments have forced migrants into precarious and dangerous urban situations. The structures meant to support and integrate migrants have proven inadequate, either unable or unwilling to address their recurrent problems (Ambrosini, 2011). Italy is significantly impacted by 'secondary movements' of migrants—those attempting to reach other parts of Europe but who are either stuck in Italy or forced to return because it is their initial point of entry and the place where they can process their documents. Often secondary migration is described as the act of individuals seeking improved conditions (Wagner et al. 2019) outside the confines of legal migration channels, contrary to the stipulations of EU migration and asylum laws.

According to the 2021 Migration Report by the Metropolitan City of Rome, the city has historically served as a destination for internal migration and currently serves as the primary departure point for illegalized migration in Italy. This influx of people has generated various informal spatializations as individuals seek shelter during their transition period in Rome—some more stable, others highly temporary.

This paper focuses on a community in Rome primarily composed of 'secondary movement' migrants who regularly gather at a socio-cultural centre: the Kurdish socio-cultural centre of Ararat, situated in Testaccio, a historic and central neighbourhood of Rome. Campo Boario, the section of the former slaughterhouse where Ararat is located, was a significant point of shelter for migrants from diverse backgrounds. Although it was unorganized and perceived as dangerous, Campo Boario was one of the most cosmopolitan places in the city, embodying the surreal urban imagination of Pasolini and Fellini (Careri and Romito, 2005). Today, it largely reflects the impacts of globalization. Ararat remains the only enduring 'migrant' entity and

legacy within Campo Boario, now threatened by various PNRR (National Recovery and Resilience Plan) plans and projects surrounding the entire area and neighbourhood, despite no official communication or eviction notice being issued to the centre.

This paper aims to reflect on the possibilities for Ararat to establish a participatory process with the administration of Rome, emphasizing the 'on the move' component of its community. Situating the discussion within the literature on planning and migration, it explores how a migrant community can assert the right to speak for themselves, protect their presence in the space, and affirm their right to the city, as a concept based more on urban presence than ownership (Allon, 2013; Purcell, 2002, 2013). This study highlights the potential for migrant experiences to inform urban renewal and integration practices, presenting Ararat as a model for creating inclusive and participatory urban spaces.

Migrations and Planning

In recent years, urban and migration studies have addressed the migration-city nexus from many perspectives. The 'local turn' has highlighted the centrality of cities in migration studies (Briata, 2014; Çağlar and Glick Schiller, 2018). Cities are widely acknowledged as fundamental nodes of planetary fluxes (Brenner, 2013; Sassen, 2008) and are central to bridging together transnational political movements and migrations. International migration can have different impacts on cities: they can serve as arrival points for migrant communities aiming to settle (Saunders, 2010) or function as spaces of transition and stopover points (Iranzo, 2021).

The literature, especially in critical geography, has extensively explored the forms of inhabitation of people on the move (Bonfanti et al., 2022), generating by temporary, 'liquid' migrations (Black et al., 2010). These processes are sometimes not temporary but become extended periods of waiting (Bernardie-Tahir and Schmoll, 2018), which can occur multiple times during the migration journey. Scholars have addressed the spatialization of migration processes such as makeshift camps (Katz, 2017; Oesch, 2017), informal settlements, humanitarian camps, and squatting practices (Raimondi, 2019). Katz (2023) highlights how the EU's bordering regime creates urban border zones where migrants, aiming to move but forced to stay due to restrictive policies, generate temporary urban realities. These policies aim to legalize migration, closing all legal avenues for individuals to move (Aru, 2022). Along with those explorations, scholars have highlighted how migrants and local activists create grassroots experiences to cope with the lack of an effective reception system (Caponio, 2005; Benson, 2019; Swerts & Nicholls, 2020; Tsavdaroglou et al., 2024). While informal formations in planning have gained significant relevance worldwide (Roy, 2005), attention to these informal practices is relatively recent in Western countries (Cremaschi et al., 2020). In planning studies about migration more research has been done on policy (Murillo, 2017), governance (Maptisa, 2019), and institutions (Landau, 2013; Barbarino et al., 2021). Another strand focuses on city-level policies that counteract national policies, creating grassroots solidarity experiences (Mitchell and Spake, 2018; Bauder, 2019; Bauder, 2021). Despite the growing interest in migration within urban planning (Bernt, 2019), migration is rarely addressed as a central strategic line or concrete policy in urban plans. Instead, it is often used as a demographic description tool (Skeldon, 2013). The literature provides few examples of how the participation of migrant communities can achieve long-term integration (Bessho et al., 2020). What remains highly underdeveloped is the participation of migrant communities in the planning process (Zhang et al., 2023), even less has been said concerning migrant communities that aren't settled but 'on the move' or about 'secondary movement'. This paper presents an experience of a migrant community that asserted their right to stay due to their continuative presence, as community not single members, in the space and acquired recognition opening a dialogue with the municipality members underling the potential of inclusivity in the urban landscape. In the next section, I will outline the methodology and present the early results of the research. This

includes contextualizing the presence of Ararat in Rome and reflecting on the possibilities this experience can add to the literature underlined above about 'people on the move' and planning.

Methodology

This study is based on ongoing ethnographic research in Rome. For this paper, a multi-methodological approach was employed, combining archive analysis, document analysis, and interviews to ensure a comprehensive examination of the research topic.

The archive analysis involved a systematic review of historical records and documents preserved in the archives of Stalker and Villaggio Globale. This allowed for the exploration of primary data that shed light on past events, organizational histories, and contextual backgrounds. The historical context provided by these archives is crucial for understanding the evolution and significance of spaces like Ararat in Rome's social and cultural landscape.

Document analysis complemented the archival work by critically examining various texts, including reports, memos, policy documents, plans, projects, newspaper articles, and other written materials. This method helped identify patterns, themes, and insights relevant to the research, facilitating an understanding of the formal and informal structures, processes, and communications within the studied context. Analysing these documents (with particular attention to resolution n104 and the subsequent regulation of the municipality of Rome) enabled a deeper insight into the policies and administrative decisions that have impacted the operation and existence of socio-cultural centres like Ararat.

Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants, providing firsthand insights and perspectives that enriched the data gathered from archival and document analyses. Twenty interviews were conducted with Kurds and Italians who engage with the space of Ararat, including municipality members. The interviews enabled the collection of nuanced, subjective experiences and interpretations that might not be evident in written records. These interviews were pivotal in capturing the perspectives of the Kurdish community and understanding their interactions with the broader urban environment of Rome.

Moreover, valuable information was gathered through participation in public events at Ararat, where members of the administration were involved. These events provided opportunities for informal conversations, which proved fundamental in gaining insights that might not surface in official meetings, interviews, or archival records. This informal dialogue helped fill in gaps and added depth to the understanding of the dynamics at play.

The triangulation of data from these various sources—archival records, document analysis, interviews, and participant observation—ensured a robust and comprehensive approach to the research. This method allowed for cross-verification of information, enhancing the reliability and validity of the findings. By relying on multiple data sources, the study could present a well-rounded narrative of Ararat's role in integrating migrant communities and its potential as a model for urban renewal and social inclusion in contemporary cities.

Ararat and Rome

Rome has traditionally been an immigrant city; throughout the entire 20th century, it welcomed a flux of people from southern Italy. In the 1970s, it recorded a growth in immigration from foreign countries mainly from the EU. By 2003, approximately 10% of all foreign residents in Italy lived in Rome. Today, Rome can be considered a departure city, according to Katz's definition: "a specific urban spatiotemporal typology emerging in particular geopolitical contexts of cities located just ahead of fortified and hostile border zones, where stranded migrants reluctantly remain while attempting to continue their journey" (Katz, 2023:2).

Due to the Dublin Regulation, many people are forced to stay in Italy to seek asylum, leading to a very complex and violent situation for those who must seek protection in Rome. The reception system is inadequate, involved in illegal practices, and run by a far-right government

that aims to prevent people from arriving in the country through exclusion, illegalization, and violence. This political situation makes life very difficult for people on the move in Rome. Throughout Italy today, migrants are often treated as intruders and threats to security due to anti-migration policies and political propaganda. Despite the presence of some non-governmental organizations and voluntary religious associations, there are not enough places in Rome that guarantee asylum and protection for refugees. The tragic news about the CPR (Repatriation Detention Centres) of Ponte Galeria in Rome perfectly describes the inhumane conditions that migrants face in the city.

In this complex landscape, a positive reality like Ararat emerges for the Kurdish migrant community. Despite Rome was never a settlement place for Kurds, the Kurdish migration it's relatively young in Italy. Until 1997, the influx of people from Kurdistan trying to reach families in Germany, France, and the Netherlands went almost unnoticed by the institutions. In 1997, the transit of Kurds was quite consistent for the time (4,500 between January and October 1997). The movement from southern regions of Italy towards those countries provoked the enforcement of the Dublin Convention. During this period, the so-called 'Kurdish emergency' erupted. Also, on December 27, 1997, 837 Kurdish refugees disembarked from the cargo boat named Ararat on the Calabrian coast - Ararat took its name from this boat and Mount Ararat, which, along with other mountains in Kurdistan, is considered the only safe place for Kurds, as in the famous novel *No Friends but the Mountain* by the Kurdish writer Behrouz Boochani.

With the arrival of Öcalan (the leader of the Kurdish freedom movement) seeking asylum in Europe and Rome, many Kurds came to the city. After Öcalan was arrested, the Kurds built a small village made of papers called "Cartonia" in Piazza Celio, which was later renamed Piazza Kurdistan. In 1999, with the support of associations, they occupied the building that is now Ararat. Even today, Rome, due to the lack of opportunities (work, housing, services), isn't the place where Kurds decide to settle. Currently, there are around 200 Kurds in Rome; a larger community can be found in the Grosseto area and in the industrial areas between Turin and Milan. The main occupation of Kurds in Rome is in restaurants, mainly kebab places. Despite this, Rome is a transit point in the movement within Italy and abroad; moreover, Ararat is the place where the community, including those from outside Rome, gathers for traditional events. According to Kurds in Rome, Newroz (the annual celebration of the spring equinox meaning freedom and liberation) celebrated in Ararat is the biggest and most beautiful celebration among other celebrations in Europe. Ararat is a relatively small building with an outdoor area. Ararat today serves as the 'cultural home' for Kurds in Italy. Kurds who have just arrived in Italy find shelter, support, and help there, along with Kurds coming from all over Europe who have no place to stay in Rome. It's a place where the community can share food, be together, and be in contact with political movements and cultural traditions.

Ararat in the "City of Arts" context

Testaccio, like many other neighbourhoods in Rome, is undergoing a significant renewal process. Known for being one of the most working-class districts in Rome, today it is undergoing profound change due to the influx of tourists and students. The neighbourhood hosts one of the biggest industrial archaeologies in the city, the ex-Mattatoio (former slaughterhouse) of Rome. It covers 107 square meters and is divided into two main areas: the Campo Boario, an open part consisting of stables for animals, and another section for the actual slaughtering. From an architectural perspective, the composition of the two spaces differs: the first is a vast open space surrounded by buildings, while the second consists of a series of parallel industrial sheds. Today, the entire complex is recognized as an industrial archaeological site and is under the protection of the Soprintendenza, the institution that manages and controls all historic sites in Italy, while the property remains under the Municipality of Rome, which can assign the space with the Soprintendenza's approval.

The complex is situated at the border of the neighbourhood near the Tiber River, the Monte dei Cocci (a small hill made of ancient amphorae thrown away during the Augustan period), and the Aurelian ancient city wall (272 BC – 279 BC).

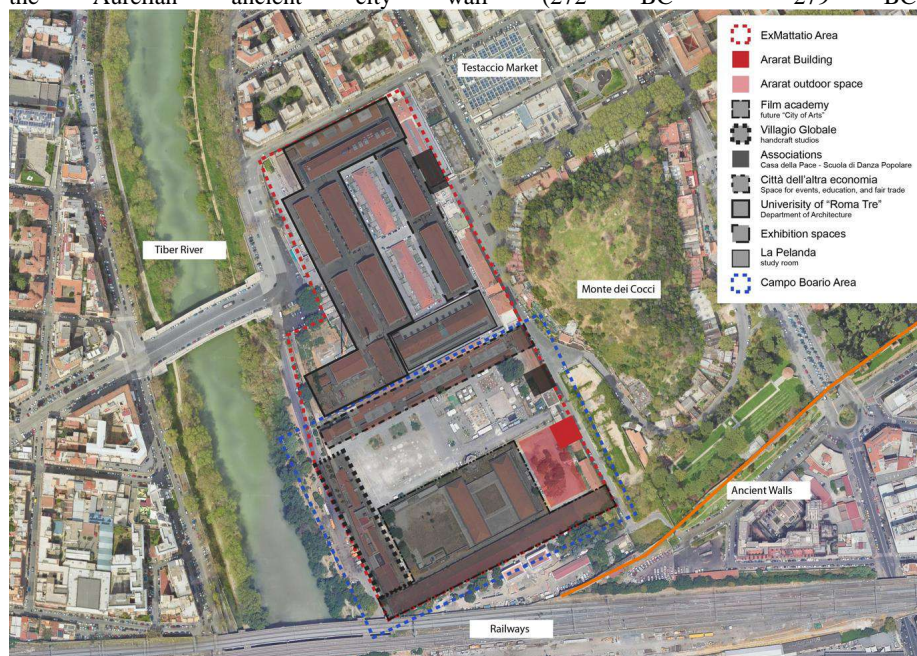


Figure 1. Ararat's location inside the Mattatoio.

Since the Mattatoio ceased operations as a slaughterhouse in 1975, the community has mobilized to prevent its acquisition by private companies. This space was left without any designated use in Rome's city plan until 2000 when the first comprehensive plan to keep the ex-Mattatoio public was presented. The first public institution to occupy the Mattatoio was the University of Roma Tre with its architecture department, followed by the Modern Art Museum of Rome (Macro). While these transformations began in the Mattatoio, a parallel spontaneous use of the space was going on in the Campo Boario side, the area of the complex more hidden from the neighbourhood that allowed various occupations to settle there. The space allowed migrants to find shelter as the issue of hospitality gained prominence in public debate. During the '90s, the Campo Boario was inhabited by different migrant communities, including the Kalderash (a nomad community skilled in working with raw iron), a Senegalese community, and other groups, especially from North Africa. These communities received support from one of Rome's longest-standing occupations in the Mattatoio, Villaggio Globale, which this year celebrates 34 years of activities. Villaggio Globale is one of the oldest occupations in Rome, established in 1990. Since then, it has played a pivotal role in the city's history of manifestations, integration, arts, and underground culture. By organizing events and concerts for cultural integration, it served as a sort of 'keeper' of Campo Boario at the time, according to activists and Municipality representatives.

The socio-cultural centre of Ararat is also situated on the Campo Boario side. In 1999, the building where Ararat stands today was reclaimed and occupied by the association Azad, Stalker, and Villaggio Globale in a collective endeavour. This collaboration marked the beginning of the socio-cultural activities that continue to shape the identity and use of the

Campo Boario area today. That year, the Biennale of Young Artists was taking place on the other side of the Mattatoio. The artist association Stalker was invited to the Biennale, and as a performative act, they decided to reclaim a space for Kurdish migrants who had recently arrived in Rome, within the already multicultural landscape of the Campo Boario. The workshop "From Cartonia to Piazza Kurdistan" saw the participation of architecture students, Kurds, and artists. During this time, they freed and took control of the space, which at the time was occupied by drug dealers and users, at the time the space was dangerous and decaying. Initially, Ararat was a space for Kurds and artists living together until the habitation needs of the Kurds became more crucial. The artists decided to leave the space to the Kurds seeking a place to stay in Rome, but over the years, this legacy and collaboration have remained.

Campo Boario began to change between 2004 and 2007 when the migrants communities were evicted to make space for the opening of the *Città dell'altra Economia* (CAE). CAE was supposed to be a space for the circular economy, grassroots initiatives, and sustainable economy. However, according to several activists and association members, it has lost its primary aim and now hosts events every weekend, such as food fairs and concerts, but has strayed from its initial goal of promoting a circular economy and fair market. Following CAE, the Academy of Arts opened in 2011, spaces for students in two pavilions in the area and built a wall to enclose the space. Today, the Academy is the main actor in the renewal of the Campo Boario, and much of the future of the space will be decided by their interventions. The Municipality's aim is to create the City of Arts, following the example of the *Matadero* in Madrid, an ex-slaughterhouse that became a multidisciplinary space for art creation. This will be implemented with the work of the Academy, the University of Roma Tre, and *Macro* (contemporary museum of Rome). Recently, May 2024, the open space of *La Pelanda* opened, it is a huge multifunctional study room that aims to be an aggregation point for students. Along with the projects that have seen the collaboration of the municipality and institutions and were already programmed, we must add the new projects financed by the PNRR general program *Roma Caput Mundi*. This program includes various projects around the entire metropolitan area, with five of the 335 projects planned just for the Mattatoio. These projects mainly focus on restoration and functionalisation, and one directly affects the space of Ararat – the perimetral walls. What's unclear right now is the destination that these spaces will have once restored. An informal process of participation has already started to ensure the permanence of Ararat in the building. The activists have repeatedly inquired with the Academy and the administration for an official statement on the safety of Ararat, but this hasn't happened yet.

Adding another level of complexity to the process are the requirements of Resolution n104 of the Municipality of Rome, approved in 2015. This resolution stated the total reconfiguration of any autonomously occupied space by associations and organizations situated on municipal property. The resolution suspended all previous concessions that need to apply according to regulations to be reassigned. It also stated that to reapply for the concession of municipal spaces, the occupants must continue to pay rent to maintain the advantage of reapplying. The regulation referred to in the resolution was published only in January 2023, leaving Ararat and many other associations in a state of limbo. In this regard Ararat holds a privileged position since, between 2006 and 2015, they signed an official concession with the administration, and when it wasn't renewed due to Resolution n104, they kept paying rent to not lose any privileged on the space. Moreover, during its 25 years of presence, Ararat has proved to be one of the most recognized and longstanding presences in the Mattatoio and in Rome by municipal members. While the call for assigning the spaces is open to the public, no participatory processes have been initiated to determine the use of the unassigned spaces in the city. An informal dialogue has started since the regulations and projects were presented, but no official communication has been given regarding the stay or eviction.

What's important to take into account along with political activism and its role in the migratory process of the Kurdish community, is that Ararat is the last 'open space' in the Mattatoio. Ararat is open every hour for everyone, maintaining a continuous presence during the day and night, even when there aren't events, recently in collaboration with the architects of *ARCHa* they set-up an open space for study inside Ararat garden always open. Ararat has been able to reclaim its presence in the space forcefully through activism and collaboration, opening a dialogue with the administration of the city of Rome. Representatives were also involved in public events at the anniversary of the centre on May 17-18 2024, to discuss its future and hopefully to reinforce the dialogue in order to find a solution beneficial for both the Ararat community and the Municipality.

Since its opening, the centre has maintained all collaborative solutions with the neighbourhood of Testaccio. Initiatives like "Noialtri Kurdi di Testaccio" in the Mercato Testaccio, a very famous and popular market in the neighbourhood, have strengthened their presence in the area. Additionally, architecture students from Roma Tre, under the Civic Arts program by Professor Francesco Careri, come back to Ararat every year to help set up the manifestation of Newroz (the Kurdish celebration of the spring equinox), which brings together the dispersed Kurdish community living outside Rome. According to Ararat's members, the 2024 event gathered around 3000 people.

To keep the connection with other realities around the city, Ararat often serves food at events as a way to both collect money and spread information about the Kurdish cause, creating points of connection with other freedom struggles and revolutionary forces.

What future for Ararat?

What is certain is that the Ararat centre is far from being a marginalized, closed circuit; it actively engages in collaboration with a broad network within the city of Rome. The work of local activists is crucial for the centre's functioning and success. Since the Kurdish community is not permanently settled in Rome, these activists serve as mediators and custodians of the centre's legacy, facilitating its operations and outreach efforts.

It remains unclear whether an actual participatory process will take place with the Municipality to ensure the continuous presence of Ararat. This uncertainty presents significant challenges, particularly concerning the sustainability of the centre's operations. In all the possibilities presented by the new regulation for Ararat, a compromise must be reached. One major problem they may face is the increase in rent, which could force them to vacate the premises. The regulation outlines several possibilities for Ararat to remain, but the most attractive solution, which would also ensure a high level of autonomy, appears to be finding a collaborative partner. An institution like a university or an academy could serve as a guarantor and help reduce the rent.

Despite the uncertain future of Ararat, the experience of migrants engaging in a process with institutions offers valuable insights. This can help us rethink how we conceive migration in contemporary cities. Migrants are not the problem; they can be the solution. The space of Ararat represents a potential model for the entire Mattatoio renewal, exemplifying the concept of an 'open city' and integration. This is not with a settled community of individuals, but with a community that is continually remade over time by people who stay in Ararat for varying periods, and that make the experience more interesting. During their waiting period for documents (which can sometimes last over a year), these individuals have the opportunity to engage with a thriving environment, connect with their culture, and participate in collective political mobilization. This helps them overcome the marginalization that illegalized migrants systematically face during their stopover process from one city to another. These achievements are largely due to the strong involvement and support of a group of dedicated activists who, for various reasons, find solidarity with the Kurdish community.

Ararat's experience demonstrates that migrants can be integrated into the urban renewal process in meaningful ways. By involving migrants in the planning and decision-making processes, cities can create more inclusive and dynamic urban environments. The ongoing informal dialogue between Ararat, the Academy, and the administration highlights the potential for collaborative solutions that respect the needs and contributions of migrant communities. The future of Ararat, while uncertain, is a testament to the resistance and adaptability of migrant communities. Their ability to form alliances with local institutions and activists underscores the importance of grassroots initiatives in shaping urban policies. As we observe the developments in Ararat, we can learn valuable lessons about the role of migrant communities in urban renewal and the creation of inclusive cities.

Ararat's integration efforts go beyond mere coexistence; they actively contribute to the cultural and social fabric of the city. As underlined by Homi Bhabha in his work *The Location of Culture* (1994), these efforts create spaces where cultural translation occurs, allowing for the negotiation of meanings, the creation of new cultural forms, and the navigation of power dynamics. The Kurdish socio-cultural centre shows that migrant communities, when given the opportunity, can significantly contribute to the vibrancy and inclusivity of urban spaces.

In conclusion, the Ararat centre's journey illustrates the potential of integrating migrant communities into urban renewal projects. Through collaboration with local institutions and activists, migrants can help create more inclusive and dynamic cities. As cities around the world face increasing migration, the lessons learned from Ararat's experience can guide the development of more effective and humane urban policies. The ongoing efforts to secure Ararat's future highlight the importance of participatory processes and the need for flexible, supportive frameworks that recognize the contributions of all community members.

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