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Toward a fine-grained understanding of informality: Subjective meanings, perceptions, and expectations in informal housing trajectories

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Abstract

This article focuses on the role of subjective meanings in the production of informal housing. It argues that, although individual and family meanings, aspirations, perceptions, and expectations have usually been overlooked in studies on urban informality, their analysis is fundamental for a sophisticated understanding of the genesis, features, and developing trajectories of informal housing. To this end, the article investigates the informalization process of temporary self-promoted housing units (the so-called *casette*, i.e. "little houses") built in the aftermath of the 2009 earthquake in the city of L'Aquila, Italy. Although it is exceptional, the phenomenon of the *casette* illuminates several traits of other informal housing practices. Thus, it offers two interrelated conceptual insights for a deeper, fine-grained understanding of the varied ontologies of housing informality. First, it illustrates the concurrence of simultaneous drivers, differing in nature (e.g. subjective and objective, structural and agency-related, micro and macro) at the root of the production of informal space, where a key role is also played by inhabitants' meanings, aspirations, perceptions, and expectations. Second, it shows that informality is not a fixed and unambiguous state. On the contrary, it is a field traversed by intertwined forces in a perpetual state of tension, so that a housing unit can move through different shades of (il)legality entailing varied combinations of subjective and objective drivers.

Keywords

Earthquake, housing, illegality, informality, subjective meanings, urban development

Introduction: investigating the complexity of housing informality in the post-disaster

On April 6, 2009, the city of L'Aquila (Italy) was hit by a violent earthquake. Three hundred and nine people died, around 1600 were injured, and almost the entire population (approximately 70,000 people) was left homeless (Alexander, 2010). In the aftermath of the event, half of the total housing stock was

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deemed unfit for habitation, and public measures to temporarily host the evacuees were promptly deployed. The public authorities promoted various housing initiatives for this purpose, such as the nationally known C.A.S.E. project,[1] which consisted in the construction of 185 anti-seismic multistorey residential buildings designed to house approximately 17,000 people (Calandra, 2012). A lesser known post-disaster housing initiative was introduced by a municipal resolution which allowed residents whose dwellings were uninhabitable to build small temporary detached housing units, colloquially called *casette*, that is little houses. Around 3000–4000 *casette* were then built, both by and beyond the book. Although the resolution called for these units to be removed as soon as the emergency ended, today—14 years after the earthquake—almost all of them still stand and are now illegal. Thus, a publicly promoted temporary housing measure underwent a process of informalization, whose features, reasons, and consequences are still unclear, as is the future of these dwelling units.

Against this background, this article will shed light on the *casette* phenomenon, which is unknown to the public and academic audience beyond L'Aquila. However, this study's main goal is not simply to investigate the genesis and subsequent informalization of this particular kind of self-promoted housing. In fact, although very relevant for the city of L'Aquila, this phenomenon is nonetheless quite exceptional. Thus, the case of the *casette* is explored by considering its epistemic value to gain a better understanding of the complex nature of housing informality. In this regard, the post-disaster context in which the *casette* emerged is not significant *per se* (i.e. we do not aim to contribute mainly to the post-disaster literature), but is seen as an extreme environment in which some features at the core of the analysis are amplified, hence making their detection easier (Flyvbjerg, 2006). In particular, this case demonstrates that subjective meanings, perceptions, aspirations, and expectations can play an important part in the spread of informality. Although this does not mean underestimating structural factors as pivotal drivers of informal housing, it allows for a more nuanced reading of housing illegality, whose making and remaking are often rooted in the intimate assemblage of objective and subjective (macro and micro) factors.

To this end, this article is organized as follows. In the two following sections, we stress the need for a fine-grained analysis of informality that takes into careful account the causal role of subjective micro factors. In the subsequent section, we explain our research methods and then move to the illustration of the case study, starting from the regulatory context of the *casette* and their spatial features and, afterward, scrutinizing the subjective elements at the root of these units' birth and informalization. In the last section, we discuss two main epistemic insights that the case study offers for a deeper, understanding of housing informality.

For a nuanced analysis of urban informality

In the last decade, the academic debate on housing informality in the so-called "global North" has been expanding along two main lines. On the one hand, a growing number of studies has engaged with the phenomenological variety of informality beyond specific manifestations such as political squatting or precarious settlements by marginalized groups (see, among many others: Chiodelli, 2019; Durst and Wegmann, 2017; Hilbrandt, 2021; Iveson et al., 2019; Mendez and Quastel, 2015). On the other hand, scholars have started to construct conceptual frameworks that could account coherently for the plurality of (housing) informality's ontologies, thus avoiding the oversimplification of their drivers and dynamics which often takes the form of dichotomic interpretations (see: Roy, 2005 on "formal/informal"; Datta, 2012 on "legal/illegal"; Hilbrandt, 2021 on "state policies/residents' practices"; Simone, 2018 on "temporary/permanent"; Lombard, 2019 on "structure/agency"; Chiodelli, 2021 on "need/desire").

Despite the burgeoning literature on housing informality in the global North, most of this debate still tends to mainly emphasize its structural macro causes, while underestimating the plurality of less tangible drivers (Ærø, 2006; Zarrabi et al., 2022). Undoubtedly, there is a good reason for this: as structural macro causes predominate on many occasions, informality is often essentially the by-product of economic, institutional, and political forces beyond inhabitants' will and control (e.g. enduring

poverty and marginalization, public policies, urban planning regulations, and neoliberal arrangements). However, we believe that a sophisticated understanding of the complexity of housing informality also calls for focusing on the specific agency expressed by urban informality, which can be rooted in subjective perceptions and meanings associated with the informal home (Banks et al., 2020). Even without entering into the complex debate on the relationship between structure and agency, in fact, a focus on subjective issues can help add a further nuance to the debate on the varied ontologies of housing informality.

The subjective side of housing informality

The importance of seemingly mundane micro factors in shaping dwelling trajectories has been emphasized by research in both informality studies and housing studies.

The academic debate on informality in the global South has historically paid little attention to the role of subjective factors in the making of informal practices. This has been linked to the need to explore and highlight the macro-scale structural causes of informal urbanization, while at the same time counteracting regressive discourses that have been widespread in political and policy-making circles (especially in the 1970s, but also beyond).[2] Such regressive discourses, while viewing informal settlements as filthy and disease-ridden shantytowns that "manifest all the symptoms of social disorganization" (Perlman, 1976: 2), fingered the poor for their precarious living conditions—thus, simultaneously, absolving the dominant elites of their social and political responsibility (Renfrew, 2013). Nevertheless, the relevance of subjective factors in the production of informal space clearly emerged in the subset of the scholarly debate about security of tenure.[3] Several authors, in fact, have acknowledged that "[w]hatever the legal situation [. . .], it is the *perceived* tenure situation that forms the basis upon which the landholder can be expected to take decisions and to act" (Broegaard, 2005: 851 [emphasis added]; see also: Payne, 2004; Payne et al., 2009; Sjaastad and Bromley, 2000; Van Gelder, 2010; Van Gelder and Luciano, 2015). Indeed, when dwellers *feel* secure in their tenure arrangements—even without formal documents—their perception of legitimacy of land and housing possession increases exponentially and, consequently, so does their attitude toward investments, thus triggering processes of consolidation in informal settlements (Ward, 2015). In other words, perceptive and subjective factors are as important as *legal* tenure security (e.g. tenure recognized through property titles, building permits, and other public documents), as they "form fundamental inputs in the decision process and influence how we make choices" (Van Gelder and Luciano, 2015: 487). This is even more true when the perception of tenure security is experienced collectively, for instance at the neighborhood level (Murphy, 2015).

It should be stressed that the subjective status of tenure security does not mean it is completely arbitrary and endogenous. In fact, dwellers' perception of tenure is highly influenced by signals of support, practices of tolerance, recurring discourses, as well as the provision of services and infrastructures by public authorities (Flower, 2019; Varley, 1987). This was recognized in the seminal work of Turner (1967, 1976) and subsequently materialized in numerous upgrading policies and projects around the world (for a review, see Chiodelli, 2016). All in all, what is significant in this strand of research on informality is the emphasis on the role of psychological pathways, individual and collective feelings, and intuitions and perceptions in shaping dwelling consolidation processes, thus illuminating how subjective factors are pivotal ingredients of housing trajectories.

While the relevance of subjective factors is somewhat peripheral in research on urban informality, it is well established in housing studies. Indeed, the literature on housing behavior (Clark and Dieleman, 1996; Van Ham, 2012) has shed abundant light on the effects of subjective micro-elements on inhabitation trajectories (Preece et al., 2021; Soaita and Searle, 2016), thus moving away from studies of residential choice that focused exclusively on structural factors (see among others: Clark et al., 1984; Munro and Littlewood, 1997; Rossi, 1955). This stream of housing research shows that decisions about habitation cannot be reduced entirely to a matter of rational choice and clearly identifiable external

constraints (Ærø, 2006; Lawson, 2012). Crucially, they can be shaped by different realms, such as individual experiences, contingent events, culturally induced preferences, housing ideologies, and social relations (Bergene, 2007; Lawson, 2012). All in all, as Clapham (2002: 60) notes, when analyzing housing pathways it is necessary "to employ a framework which places the subjective nature of the meaning held by households at the centre of the analysis," thus focusing "on the actions of individuals in response to the changing situations they face" (Clapham et al., 2014: 2018). Consequently, we also need to make their subjective meanings, emotions, and preferences a key element for understanding the complexity of housing choices in contemporary societies.

The importance of subjective factors has also been emphasized by research on the concept of *homing* that, as Yapo and Boccagni (2020) underscore, has become a comprehensive signifier encompassing a multiplicity of forms of making home and creating emotional and practical attachments to the spatialities that are inhabited. As such, the concept of *homing* can be fruitfully deployed to enhance our understanding of the intertwined character of mobility and settlement, and of the complex entanglement of existential trajectories, desires, aspirations, and constraints that shape the everyday process of making "a socio-material setting home-like, along with people's ongoing motivations and efforts towards it, and the ensuing pathways of space appropriation" (Boccagni, 2022: 586; see also Dadusc et al., 2019; Papadopoulos and Tsianos, 2013).

Against this background, we can state that any home—be it formal or informal—is recast "as a hybrid of money, materials and emotions, a site of neoliberal governance and ideology" (Soaita and Searle, 2016: 1088) where the understandings of habitation as an asset, a shelter, and a home coexist and are mutually reinforced. Two circumstances complexify this picture in the case investigated in the present article. The first is the earthquake. In the context of a catastrophic event, individual trajectories of housing making and remaking are also carved by powerful objective and subjective variables related to the disaster, such as the magnitude of the catastrophic event, the public approach to post-disaster management, individual and collective levels of (dis)trust in public institutions, psychological trauma, and personal losses (Hayles, 2010; Oliver-Smith, 1990; Sou, 2017). The second circumstance reflects the specificities of the Southern European housing system (Allen et al., 2004; Arbaci, 2019; Gentili and Hoekstra, 2018), which has nurtured the cultural preference for homeownership and the centrality of family relations in favoring access to dwelling units. Moreover, housing self-provision, self-promotion, and self-building have played a pivotal role in Southern European countries (often sustained by an ideal of self-reliance), with Italy being an extreme case in this regard. In Italy, in fact, housing informality has become a structural feature of urban development since the aftermath of the Second World War (Coppola and Chiodelli, 2019; Zanfi, 2013). This took place in an institutional framework deeply marked by building amnesties and toleration as enduring components of the public approach to informal urbanization, in a spiral where economic, bureaucratic, political, and social rationalities overlapped and reinforced each other (Chiodelli, 2023). All these characteristics of the Italian housing system, as we will see, are mirrored in the *casette* phenomenon and, together with the earthquake, are the main ingredients of the structural environment in which *casette* emerged.

Against this wider background, we argue that the case of *casette* in L'Aquila exemplifies the complex ontology of dwelling informality and, in particular, the tangle "between the attitudes and behaviours of the actors and the constraints and opportunities which they face" (Clapham, 2002: 59) over time. Therefore, in the following sections, we will observe how the subjective meanings, desires, attitudes, and preferences held by households have combined with structural factors, shaping the distinctive informal housing trajectories entrenched in the *casette* phenomenon.

Self-providing a temporary house in post-earthquake L'Aquila

Research methods

The findings presented in this article are based on an in-depth case study conducted from 2018 to 2022,

complemented by follow-up data collection in 2023. Methodologically, the study was organized in three interrelated maneuvers.

The first concerns the analysis of the institutional, political, cultural, and regulatory context in which the *casette* phenomenon arose and developed. This maneuver included the collection and analysis of primary data in the form of official documents (e.g. municipal resolutions, self-certifications submitted by households to construct their *casette*, the local master plan) published between 2009 and 2023, together with media reports and online sources (e.g. Facebook groups of local inhabitants and associations). Document analysis was complemented by semi-structured and unstructured interviews (20 in total) of local residents, civil servants working in the local planning authority (e.g. the Senior Technical Project Officer and the Building Amnesty Coordinator of the Municipality of L'Aquila), local politicians (e.g. the former Councilor for Urban Planning (2017–2022), the current Councilor for Urban Planning (2022 onward), a member of the local council, the city's mayor from 2007 to 2017), the local representative of the environmental non-governmnetal organization (NGO) Legambiente, the Director of the Public Office for the Reconstruction of L'Aquila (USRA), and four researchers working on planning and environmental issues in L'Aquila. Data collection was completed with information gathered during planning and reconstruction group meetings and public hearings spanning the years the authors lived and worked in the area (2014–2022).

The second methodological maneuver involved investigating the morphology, location, design features, and current use of *casette*, as well as their magnitude and spatial outcomes. This was a particularly complicated phase, mainly because of the challenge of obtaining official data on the question, which public offices were particularly reluctant to disclose due to their political sensitivity. Gaining the confidence of the municipal offices and key actors holding these data was a lengthy process. Once the data had been acquired, they were georeferenced, both to create a map of the spatial articulation of the *casette* (see Figure 3) and to identify specific areas in which direct field observations should be carried out to understand the material configuration of the *casette* as well as their actual use and management. Direct observations took place in 12 sessions and covered approximately one fourth of all the authorized *casette* built in L'Aquila.

The third methodological maneuver concerns the investigation of the subjective meanings, motivations, and perceptions of the *casette* by their residents. It consisted of 10 semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted with the owners of authorized *casette* and supplemented by further interactions and encounters. The interviews covered several topics (e.g. the motivations and aspirations that drove the interviewees to opt for a *casetta*; the construction of, and everyday life in, the dwellings; the owners' residential prospects in the face of the current illegal nature of the *casette*). The interviewees included two active members of the *Comitato* 58, a grassroots group of *casette* owners set up to lobby public institutions into legalizing the *casette*. All the interview excerpts presented in the following sections are identified with numbers for privacy reasons.

The institutional genesis of casette, their features, and spatial outcomes

In the aftermath of the L'Aquila earthquake, there was a massive public response to provide emergency shelter and temporary housing. Despite the variety of public initiatives in this regard, the mediatization of the post-emergency operations boosted by Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi (Coppola et al., 2018) contributed to putting only the major housing initiative in the public and academic spotlight: this was the so-called C.A.S.E. project with its 4500 housing units (Calandra, 2012; Frisch, 2018; see Figure 1).

However, there is an array of post-disaster housing arrangements in addition to the C.A.S.E. buildings, including the installation of over 1100 prefabricated modules, the so-called M.A.P. (see Caramaschi and Coppola, 2021). Alongside these solutions promoted by the national government, one was initiated independently by the local administration. In May 2009 the city council approved Municipal Resolution No. 58/2009 (hereafter, *Delibera* 58) with the aim of "meeting the temporary housing needs of the dispossessed, defining

Figure 1. Some buildings of the C.A.S.E. project.
Source: Photo by Sara Caramaschi (2020).

criteria and procedures for the location, construction and subsequent removal of temporary shelter" (Municipal Resolution No. 58/2009, p. 1). This resolution allowed every citizen to self-provide a house not exceeding 95 m^2 in floor space and 6 m in height. This could be done on any private plot, regardless of its original land use and other restrictions (e.g. landscape and hydrogeological constraints). All this temporary shelter was to be dismantled "at the end of the state of emergency [. . .], as soon as the main property is declared practicable and habitable" (Municipal Resolution No. 58/2009, p. 2).

Self-provision of temporary housing units was an attractive alternative for the public authorities. In fact, on one hand, this measure would have decreased the number of households in need of public assistance for accommodation. At the same time, local politicians responded (and touted themselves as sensitive) to the pressures of several residents who wanted to leave emergency tents and collective shelters as soon as possible. It must be borne in mind that *Delibera* 58 was approved only 1 month after the earthquake, when the timing and effectiveness of national post-disaster housing recovery programs were still under discussion. Hence, in a climate of uncertainty, emotional strain, and distrust of the public authorities, many middle- and upper-income households embraced the opportunity to build their own anti-seismic refuge.

Delibera 58 was supposed to remain in force for 36 months. However, the risk of uncontrolled urban development soon became crystal clear, leading the city council to revoke the resolution after 18 months. As a city council member stated:

Figure 2. Some *casette* in L'Aquila.
Source: Photos by Sara Caramaschi (2020).

> *Delibera* 58 was approved at a time of serious disruption, with the aim of enabling our citizens to find a solution to their housing needs [. . .]. Then everything degenerated. [. . .] The resolution was created with good intentions, but it turned into a process of uncontrolled development. (City council meeting minutes, October 10th, 2010, pp. 6–7)

In a year and a half, approximately 1000 dwelling units were built, while the number of unauthorized buildings—mimicking authorized *casette* in terms of location, construction techniques, and morphology—mushroomed to 3000–4000 (City Planner, interview, December 2019).

Although the 1000 houses which were constructed following formal approval by the municipal administration were authorized, in several cases they violated the provisions of *Delibera* 58 in certain respects such as size. Homeowners, in fact, were required to present a few documents to obtain building approval, but no inspection was required (e.g. to determine whether the *casetta* as built complied with the terms and conditions of *Delibera* 58). Moreover, while some people chose to erect prefabricated wooden structures, others built their *casetta* out of concrete and brick (see Figure 2). Even if the latter do not jibe with the notion of temporary dwelling, they do not violate *Delibera* 58, which nowhere specified what building materials and techniques were to be used.

Casette are mostly scattered and isolated on agricultural land, while in some instances, they have been built inside enclaves. Overall, the spatial outcome is a picture of uncontrolled, low-density, and dispersed development (Ciabò et al., 2017; Figure 3). Moreover, in many cases *casette* do not meet ordinary standards in terms of basic infrastructures

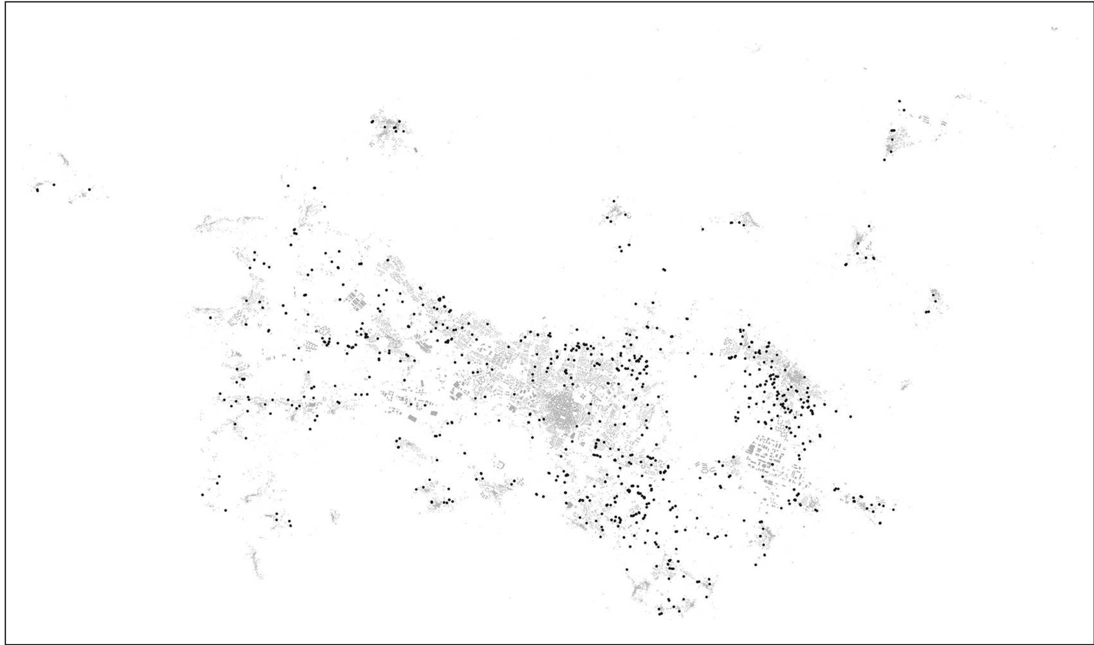

Figure 3. Location of authorized *casette* in L'Aquila.
Source: Elaboration by Sara Caramaschi.

and services: they are often poorly connected to the existing drainage and sewage systems, access to local streets is self-made, public services and businesses are far away. All in all, this poorly managed, self-provided urbanization of open areas has further dispersed the local population, fragmented the built environment, and damaged agricultural and protected areas. In addition, as almost all the local population has returned to their primary residence, there is a real risk that the *casette* will be left vacant and fall into disrepair (Caramaschi and Coppola, 2021).

Today, more than 14 years after the earthquake, the reconstruction of private properties is almost complete (Director of the Public Office for Reconstruction in L'Aquila, interview, March 2022. See also Coppola et al., 2021). Although homeowners are no longer dispossessed and, consequently, *casette* should be dismantled, almost all *casette* are still in place. Nevertheless, the local authorities have not taken active steps to have them removed. Only a few have received a demolition order because of their location in high-risk flooding areas (former Councilor for Urban Planning in L'Aquila, interview, March 2022).

Subjective meanings, aspirations, and perceptions at the roots of the informalization of the *casette*

In this section, we will analyze the different intertwined subjective meanings, aspirations, expectations, and preferences underpinning the informalization of the *casette*. Before proceeding with this analysis, however, it is important to clarify why thousands of people traded the chance of post-earthquake public accommodation for such an expensive self-provided solution (according to the interviewees, the cost of building a *casetta* ranges from €80,000 up to €150,000). The most recurrent reason is the perception of safety, quality, stability, and normality that a *casetta* guarantees. Indeed, most of the interviewees refer to the *casetta* with words like "refuge" and "home," in contrast to both the insecurity and unsafety of their pre-disaster houses and the precarity and desolation of emergency camps.

> We are very satisfied with our *casetta*. It is comfortable [. . .] It gives us a sense of safety. For example, when

> there was the earthquake in Amatrice,[4] it remained very stable. My wife wanted to leave the *casetta* at the time of the earthquake, but I told her: “What?! We built this house to be safe and now you want to go out? I’m not going out!” [. . .] After the 2009 earthquake, I told myself that we should have known exactly what building we were going to live in [. . .] We did this ourselves, so we know exactly how it has been done. (Interview 04, February 2019)

Moreover, the temporary housing provided by the public authorities did not always meet homeowners’ expectations. Indeed, some of the people who decided to build a *casetta* had been temporarily housed in an M.A.P.,[5] but soon decided to opt out because of the perceived inadequacy of this temporary dwelling arrangement. A self-provided house was seen as a comfortable alternative to public emergency accommodation, more similar to permanent housing than to temporary shelter.

> We were allocated an M.A.P. accommodation in December 2009. Regardless of the fact we are a family of five, we had a 40 square-meter apartment; hence, the reason for opting for the *casetta* was the space [. . .], the impossibility of living in the M.A.P. accommodation. We had a piece of land 20 kilometers away from L’Aquila [. . .] and so we moved there and regained our existence, as well as being able to relocate what we had salvaged from the house hit by the earthquake. (Interview 02, January 2019)

For others, building the *casetta* was the only way to spare the most fragile members of households (namely, children and the elderly) the additional trauma of displacement on top of the earthquake, since this made it possible to retain a semblance of pre-earthquake work, school and family routines, as some inhabitants explained. This deep psychological need to access a secure and stable shelter is compounded by a strongly negative perception of public action. Profound mistrust in public institutions is rather widespread in Italy (Farrell, 2009) and has been dramatized by several examples of ineffectiveness and corruption in managing post-disaster housing recovery (a blatant case is the 1980s earthquake in Irpinia; see Ricciardi et al., 2020).

> We didn’t trust the State to give us accommodation because of the eligibility criteria, nor did we trust the private market because we could not verify the condition [e.g., in terms of anti-seismic features] of the available solutions [. . .] Therefore, we felt building a *casetta* was our only option if we wanted to stay put in L’Aquila [. . .]. Nevertheless, I was wrong in not trusting the C.A.S.E. project. If I had been told that, in less than one year, I would have been housed in a C.A.S.E. accommodation, I would have waited for it. (Interview 03, February 2019)

Against the backdrop of multifaceted individual reasons spurring several people to opt for a *casetta*, a specific set of subjective meanings, aspirations, and perceptions played a crucial role in the subsequent informalization of *cassette*—viz., in preventing their removal at the end of the emergency, thus turning them into illegal dwellings. In particular, the perceived safety and stability associated with the *casetta* were pivotal. In fact, although most local households have restored their original housing units in compliance with anti-seismic criteria, there is still the feeling that the *casetta* is a worthwhile, indispensable anti-seismic shelter in the event of an emergency:

> *Casette* are important for your psychological wellbeing because they are a place you know you can go to. When earthquakes happen, all my kids come here, to the *casetta*. I think it is a psychological issue [. . .] When the quake hit Amatrice, there were a few cracks in our renovated house in L’Aquila [. . .]. I would like to keep the *casetta* forever because it is a refuge for the whole family. Dismantling it would just be suicidal. (Interview 07, March 2019)

This feeling is even stronger for those who have maintained the *casetta* as their primary residence because of personal circumstances. These households clearly state that they would never return to the houses where they used to live, claiming that the absolute safety of the *casette* (“When there is an earthquake, I roll over in bed and keep sleeping,” Interview 04, February 2019) outweighs disadvantages such as being far from the city center and commercial facilities.

The perception of the *casette* as a synergistic hybrid of assets, shelters, and non-disposable homes (Soaita and Searle, 2016) is central to the owners’ determination not to dismantle them even though they are now illegal. The “shelter” argument in

particular is invoked by the owners when they decide not to comply even with demolition orders. But there are also many homeowners who built their *casetta* with the clear intention of keeping it permanently, and possibly passing it down to their children as a form of intergenerational family welfare, confident in the knowledge that these buildings would be legalized at some point in time ("The idea for me has always been to live there forever"; Interview 07, March 2019). Apart from the explicit confirmation during many interviews, the intention to not dismantle the *casette* is bolstered by their high construction cost. Also, dismantling them would be quite an expensive operation: some interviewees stated that demolishing their *casetta* would cost approximately €10,000–€12,000, while others claimed that it would "reach up to 50,000 euros because of the labor and waste disposal costs" (Interview 07, March 2019). Another confirmation of the aspiration to not dismantle the *casette* is the fact that several households built them with permanent techniques and materials, defending this choice with a money–time rationale ("Why spend so much money for something temporary and precarious?," Interview 04, February 2019) and anti-seismic arguments (Interview 05, March 2019). Overall, none of the respondents is willing to remove their *casetta* voluntarily. Only one interviewee claimed she did "not feel threatened" by the prospect of demolition (Interview 07, March 2019), even though she would not proceed unsolicited. Besides, others provocatively opened up to the possibility of accepting the demolition, but only if they were fully reimbursed by the public authorities for the expenses they incurred.

It is worth mentioning that various public sources lent credence to the idea that the *casette* were only temporary on paper and would eventually become permanent over time. First, while acknowledging temporariness as a precondition, the text of *Delibera* 58 opened to the possibility of future regularization (Municipal Resolution 58/2009, pp. 3 and 5). Municipal bureaucrats confirmed this possibility to prospective owners who consulted the city offices amid the initial confusion. To many homeowners, this sounded like an indication of the political will to commit to the later formalization of these assets.[6] It should be noted that all this happened in a country where there have been three nationwide building amnesties for illegal buildings over the last four decades (Coppola and Chiodelli, 2019). The commonly held belief is that, sooner or later, it will be possible to regularize one's illegal dwelling—or that, at the very least, there will be no sanctions of any kind (Chiodelli et al., 2021). This perception of impunity for building offenses is supported by the rarity of inspections of, and sanctions against, illegal building works in Italy (Legambiente, 2018). This latter situation also applies in post-quake L'Aquila where, as the former urban planning councilor openly admitted, "all applications to build a *casetta* were tacitly approved, without any scrutiny, because there were not enough municipal employees to handle all the paperwork" (interview, October 2019). Even after the early revocation of *Delibera* 58, the local administration took no action to stop and sanction the mushrooming of unauthorized *casette*, thus further reinforcing the perception that *casette* would be tolerated, if not indeed regularized. However, as the local administrators soon realized, regularization would in practice be extraordinarily complicated for legal reasons and, in any case, could only be considered for a limited number of the authorized *casette* (former Councilor for Urban Planning, interview, October 17, 2019).

Furthermore to this, not only do all the interviewees look forward to the regularization of their *casetta*, but many of them *feel entitled* to such legalization. This sentiment is fed by the self-perception that they should be exempted from ordinary procedures and rules because of the disaster they suffered. It is also driven by subjectivation as they consider themselves to be self-entrepreneurs who have successfully taken the matter of sorting their housing into their own hands, even during catastrophic post-earthquake circumstances. This post-disaster entrepreneurial moral economy (Martin, 2002) led some households to emphasize the fact that the city council benefited from *Delibera* 58, as it "took the need to assist thousands of people and provide them with housing off the municipality's shoulders" (Interview 04, February 2019). Hence, as other interviewees mentioned, the *casetta* was the choice of those who had the stamina to "roll up their sleeves and carry on,

no matter what" (Interview 05, March 2019), without burdening the public purse, unlike people who used temporary accommodation provided by public authorities. By the same token, some interviewees even accused those who oppose the overexpansion of *casette* of social (or most likely class-related) envy, holding that they lacked the financial resources and the entrepreneurial spirit to provide their own housing recovery:

> Considering the fact that I have not burdened the state, I have not burdened the Civil Protection Agency and, in not doing so, I have also given other households the opportunity to stay in the C.A.S.E. accommodations, I do not think it is fair to be penalized. Besides, I spent 120,000 euros to build the *casetta*. Those who would have liked to do so and did not are now accusing us [*casette* dwellers] of outsmarting them [. . .] But how is spending 120,000 euros out my own pocket and also carrying out the urbanization work at my own expense outsmarting anybody? (Interview 05, March 2019)

Concluding remarks: at the roots of the production of informal space

The term "exception" has its etymological roots in the Latin *ex-cipere*, to take (*cipere*) out (*ex*). An exception is thus an event that lies outside the realm of regularity. This is the case with both the L'Aquila earthquake and the phenomenon at the center of this article's empirical analysis: the self-provision of temporary houses by the people displaced by the 2009 earthquake and these houses' subsequent process of informalization.

Although removed from regularity, an exceptional phenomenon does not lack epistemological value for understanding more general processes, and can become a vantage point where ordinary features of regular practices stand out in high relief. It is in this latter sense that we have taken the *casette* in L'Aquila as our subject: they are an exceptional phenomenon following an exceptional event, in which we can see amplified traits that are constitutive of urban informality per se. More precisely, empirical analysis of the genesis and informalization of the post-earthquake *casette* in L'Aquila offers two interrelated conceptual insights for a deeper, fine-grained understanding of the varied ontologies of housing informality that can apply beyond this case study. First, it illustrates the concurrence of simultaneous drivers, differing in nature (e.g. subjective and objective, structural and agency-related, micro and macro), at the root of the production of informal space. Second, it shows that informality is not a fixed and unambiguous state, but a fluid and conflictual condition continually shifting among different grades of (il)licitness and, therefore, entailing varied combinations of subjective and objective determinants.

The weight of perceptions

Interpretative and communicative needs often lead scholars and policy makers to identify a few dominant causal reasons for urban informality, mainly emphasizing economic, political, and institutional factors beyond the agency of informal dwellers. This does not alter the fact that, in practice, housing informality always has multiple concurrent determinants, both objective and subjective, macro and micro in nature, so that inhabitants' meanings, aspirations, perceptions, and expectations can also play a crucial causal role (Clapham, 2002; Clapham et al., 2014). In this regard, the *casette* phenomenon in L'Aquila is a case in point. Several subjective elements shaped the informalization of the *casette*: the perception of greater safety in owning an individual earthquake-proof detached house, whose construction has been followed in person; the aspiration to keep the *casetta* forever, which arose in the framework of the low "moral cost" of land use violations and the frequency of building amnesties in Italy; the expectation of a forthcoming regularization process promoted by the municipality; a keen sense of the legitimacy of individual efforts to satisfy housing needs in the aftermath of the disaster; and deep distrust in public institutions. The fact that some of these perceptions and beliefs are not grounded in any objective reality (e.g. traditional housing units rebuilt after the earthquake are as anti-seismic as *casette*) and that some of these expectations cannot be satisfied (e.g. municipal administrations in Italy cannot declare building amnesties, since this is a prerogative of the national government;

see Chiodelli et al., 2021) does not make these subjective drivers any less vigorous in fostering the spread of *casette* and their informalization.

Some of these subjective factors are connected to social perceptions which are widespread in Italy and are related to practices, processes, and measures that have characterized the nation's recent history: for example, the political approach to land use and building violations since the 1980s and the management of reconstruction after previous earthquakes. Others are more endogenous in nature: they relate specifically to the 2009 earthquake and to the enormous trauma suffered by many *casette* inhabitants in losing family members and friends, and seeing their home reduced to a pile of rubble. It is in this framework that some of the perceptions and beliefs discussed above—that is those related to safety—however unreasonable they may seem to an outside observer, are unshakable even in the face of the patently obvious, such as the fact that *casette* are no longer necessary today from the safety standpoint.

To summarize, although the role of such subjective forces has been at times underestimated by the prevalent scholarly focus on structural macro causes of informality, we argue that accounting for individual and family meanings, aspirations, perceptions, and expectations is fundamental to building a sophisticated understanding of the genesis, features, and developing trajectories of informal housing.

The fluidity of informality

Against the causally complex and unfolding nature of informal practices, the non-oppositional nature of some concepts employed in interpreting them is clear, thus pushing for a reading of urban informality as a battlefield of inextricably linked forces—structure and agency, micro and macro, subjective and objective, need and desire, mind and body, soft and hard—in a perpetual state of dynamic tension (McFarlane, 2012). Put differently, these concepts are attributional devices that observers use to make sense of social outcomes (Fuchs, 2001) and not ontological razors that cut reality into precise chunks.

To make this interpretative picture even more fluid, identifying a clear boundary between formality and informality is extremely difficult, as it is (at least to a certain extent) a matter of temporality, positionality, and social construction. Indeed, throughout the creation of the *casette* and their subsequent informalization, we can see that ambiguous, contradictory, and evolving conceptualizations of (in)formality, (il)legality, and (il)legitimacy have been constants. For instance, while many locals at the very beginning viewed the construction of the *casette* with a certain amount of skepticism, their attitudes hardened over time as they began to consider them illegitimate; they now see the failure to dismantle them as completely illegal. Conversely, owners of authorized *casette* perceive themselves as fully legitimate, viewing only the *casette* that infringed *Delibera* 58 as illegal. Environmental NGOs, for their part, have always criticized the construction of all *casette* and now strongly emphasize that they are all illegal.

The attitude of the local authorities has made it even more difficult to draw a line between legality and illegality. As said, for years, the municipality simply ignored the phenomenon, showing de facto tolerance. The recent municipal governments (2017–2022 and 2022 onward) have stated their commitment to selective regularization of the *casette*, as highlighted by the urban planning councilor of L'Aquila from 2017 to 2022 (interview, October 2019), who declared that "the municipality might grant an amnesty to the *casette* that can be integrated in the existing urban fabric, while the rest of the temporary units must be dismantled."[7] However, some 4 years have passed after this statement was made and there has been as yet no formal decision. The point is that local government is evidently unwilling to find any ultimate solution to this issue, due to the clash of opposing perceptions and ambitions of politically influential groups. Not only do an estimated 7000–8000 people, or around 10 percent of the total population, live in *casette*, but demolishing an unauthorized house in Italy is an extremely complex process, which can be slowed down and made terribly problematic if the owner appeals in court (it should also be borne in mind that the costs of demolition often fall entirely on the municipality; for a detailed illustration of this issue, see Chiodelli, 2019). The disconnect between the illegal status of the *casette* and the municipal administration's ambiguous

approach to the issue makes the conceptualization of (il)legitimacy even more confusing and fuels conflicting interpretations and unrealistic expectations.[8]

To summarize, all this suggests that the informal nature of a housing unit is not, in many cases, a condition acquired once and for all, but a temporary and unstable status that can evolve, for instance through multiple negotiations and changing political and institutional conditions. Hence, a dwelling unit can move through different life stages with diverse legal statuses (see Chiodelli et al., 2021 for a typology of administrative statuses of housing informality in Italy), in a trajectory which oscillates between dissimilar nuances of (in)formality (Esposito and Chiodelli, 2020). Each of these life stages and shades of (il)legality is characterized by (and fosters) different meanings, perceptions, and expectations, as well having a specific relationship with structural macro constraints.

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Notes

1. C.A.S.E. is the Italian acronym for Sustainable and Eco-Compatible Anti-Seismic Complexes (see Di Ludovico et al., 2020).
2. Such discourses are still present today in some countries, albeit in different forms (Azunre and Boateng, 2023).
3. The debate on housing security is not limited to informal settlements in the global South. For instance, considering both the rational and emotional elements that inform individual and collective perceptions of being secure in their dwellings, research on security of tenure also connects to the concept of “ontological security” stemming from housing, explored by Madden and Marcuse (2016).
4. A violent earthquake hit Central Italy on August 2016. The epicenter was close to the village of Amatrice, 45 km north of L’Aquila. This earthquake did not cause any damage in L’Aquila, but it created a climate of profound disquiet among the inhabitants, who were still in shock after the 2009 earthquake.
5. M.A.P.s (the acronym for *Moduli Abitativi Provvisori* [Temporary Housing Modules]) are prefabricated housing modules intended for the evacuated population who lived in the most remote parts of the L’Aquila area.
6. This perception was also supported by the fact that even leading members of the municipal administration built a *casetta* for themselves.
7. This intention was confirmed by the current Councilor for Urban Planning (interview, March 2023).
8. Also consider that, according to *Delibera* 58, all *casette* were to be dismantled at the end of the *emergency*, which the national government declared over on August 31, 2012. However, this declaration was only an administrative act; in reality, the city was still almost completely in ruins in 2012 and most of the inhabitants’ daily routine was still one of emergency and displacement. The question is, thus, when exactly did the “emergency state” indicated in *Delibera* 58 cease and, consequently, when did these buildings become *de jure* illegal?

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