

Greetings From Valle Borghesiana

SMU-research at 13th International Architecture Exhibition, la Biennale di Venezia



For several years SMU- research, an international and inter-disciplinary working group, has been working in Rome at the intersection of the Via Casilina exploring the phenomena of “self-made” and urban informality. The goal of the working group is to understand unpublished urban and historical aspects, and the relationships between socio-political organizations and urban space.

One of the first working steps of SMU- research took place in Valle Borghesiana, a suburb of the municipality of Rome born without any urban planning, and consisting entirely of illegal buildings. Valle Borghesiana is currently concerned with the procedure of “Toponimi”, the urban recovery plans for illegal areas built in Rome from the 1980’s on. The “Toponimi” represents an innovative praxis of self-recovery and planning of the urban territory. With this planning instrument the municipality of Rome entrusts the planning and design of primary and secondary infrastructure directly to the citizens, in a consortium - a complex procedure that requires long, continuous participation by all involved stakeholders. In the next months, Valle Borghesiana should complete the executive recovery plan on which the inhabitants and their representatives

have been working for ten years. A communitarian process which, through self-organization, provided the planning of primary urban infrastructure and, after a long bureaucratic process, should lead to formal recognition of the district.

From 2009 on, the working group SMU- research organized several workshops with residents, neighborhood associations and “ConSORZI di Autorecupero”. During meetings, interviews and guided tours in Valle Borghesiana, SMU- research collected the testimonies of the protagonists of these events, the inhabitants of this territory situated at the extreme limit of Rome’s municipal boundary. Valle Borghesiana is a complex territory, paradigmatic and characteristic for many phenomena of Southern Italian and Mediterranean urban space.

From the - often collective - self-construction of houses, to forms of social self-organization and political struggles, which will lead to the legal recognition and legalization of the suburb, exploring the history of this neighborhood, means to retracing the history of a city and of a nation: The issue of a right to housing, which for years determined the national political debate, the issue of work and that of migration - first nationally and now globally - up to the current request for the “right to the city”.

The title “Common Ground” of the 13th International Architecture Biennale, signifies an opportunity for SMU- research to present this phenomena to a broad audience, allowing a different and deeper reading. In Valle Borghesiana you can observe a disputed Common Ground, full of contradictions and conflicts that highlights the difficult relationship between urban space and power, politics, and its areas of negotiation, the rights of the community, and the needs of individuals. The collaboration between SMU- research and Alison Crawshaw developed on many levels, pursuing different working methods and linking them together. The collaboration started by choosing the geographic location, the headquarters of “ConSORZIO di Autorecupero”, the only public building in the neighbourhood. This common space has been built with the contribution and work power of many residents. The building is used as a space for organizational meetings and for parties. It will

retain this function even after the approval of the recovery plan. In the installation in Venice, the work is temporarily taken out from its original context. The project “Greetings from Valle Borghesiana” re-contextualizes the intervention in a specific geographic, urban, social and historical space. “Greetings from Valle Borghesiana” shows a small selection of materials collected in the area by SMU- research, witnesses of a still undocumented and unpublished story that is as much a personal as collective one, and in any case exemplary for many urban areas.

A series of postcards shows the suburb Valle Borghesiana. On the front you will find a selection of photos taken by local inhabitants. On the back are excerpts describing the history of this neighborhood, the building of houses, the improving of every day life, and the political organisation from interviews recorded during the SMU workshops. The SMU- research’s installation for the 13. Biennale is embedded in a broader artistic, cultural and urban research context. With the working title “Self-Made Urbanism” an SMU- research working group is planning an exhibition at NGBK (Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst) in Berlin for September 2013. The exhibition will explore several “case studies” along the Via Casilina: the city’s growth, several phenomena of informality, self-organization and self-management starting from the center towards the periphery of Rome. With an experimental working methodology, the NGBK exhibition group will develop new contemporary art productions with international positions, showed side by side with unpublished private archives and historical, cultural and movie footage.

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