

Housing and Environmental Catastrophes

CHASING HOME AFTER A HEART-QUAKE



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Introduction

What is the social dimension of a natural disaster? The answer of Escalares (2007) to this question is very easy: "Earthquakes don't kill people: collapsing buildings do. While earthquakes may not be preventable, it is possible to prevent the disasters they cause."

Taking this as a starting point we took a look on how Italy is coping with earthquake-followed catastrophes. By doing so, we focused on the "soft" factors of disaster prevention and management: consideration of the social network, provision of social and green infrastructure, and citizen's participation.

In our comic we see the years following the 2009 L'Aquila earthquake through the lens of a 10-year-old girl, to bring attention to the lack of care towards these aspects and the questionable governmental management that followed the natural disaster. Taking her perspective we tried to translate the emotional consequences caused by the lack of contextualization in the housing matter: in the wide time span that saw a transition from temporary settlements to newly built housing complexes, keeping strong social bounds and relations was not always easy.

Einleitung

Was ist die soziale Dimension einer Naturkatastrophe? Die Antwort von Escalares (2007) auf diese Frage ist sehr einfach: "Erdbeben töten keine Menschen: Einstürzende Gebäude schon. Während Erdbeben vielleicht nicht verhindert werden können, ist es möglich, die Katastrophen, die sie verursachen, zu verhindern."

Auf dieser Grundlage haben wir Italiens Umgang mit auf Erdbeben folgenden Katastrophen betrachtet. Der Fokus lag dabei auf die "weichen" Faktoren von Katastrophenprävention und -bewältigung: die Berücksichtigung der sozialen Beziehung, die Bereitstellung von sozialer und grüner Infrastruktur sowie die Beteiligung der Bürger.

In unserem Comic sehen wir die Jahre nach dem Erdbeben von L'Aquila 2009 durch die Augen eines 10-jährigen Mädchens, um auf die mangelnde Berücksichtigung dieser Aspekte und das fragwürdige Katastrophenmanagement nach dem Erdbeben aufmerksam zu machen. Ihre Perspektive einnehmend haben wir versucht, die emotionalen Auswirkungen zu transportieren, die durch den Mangel an Kontextualisierung in der Wohnungsfrage verursacht wurden: Während der großen Zeitspanne zwischen dem Übergang von provisorischen Siedlungen zu neu gebauten Wohnkomplexen war es nicht immer einfach, starke soziale Bindungen aufrechtzuerhalten.

Authors

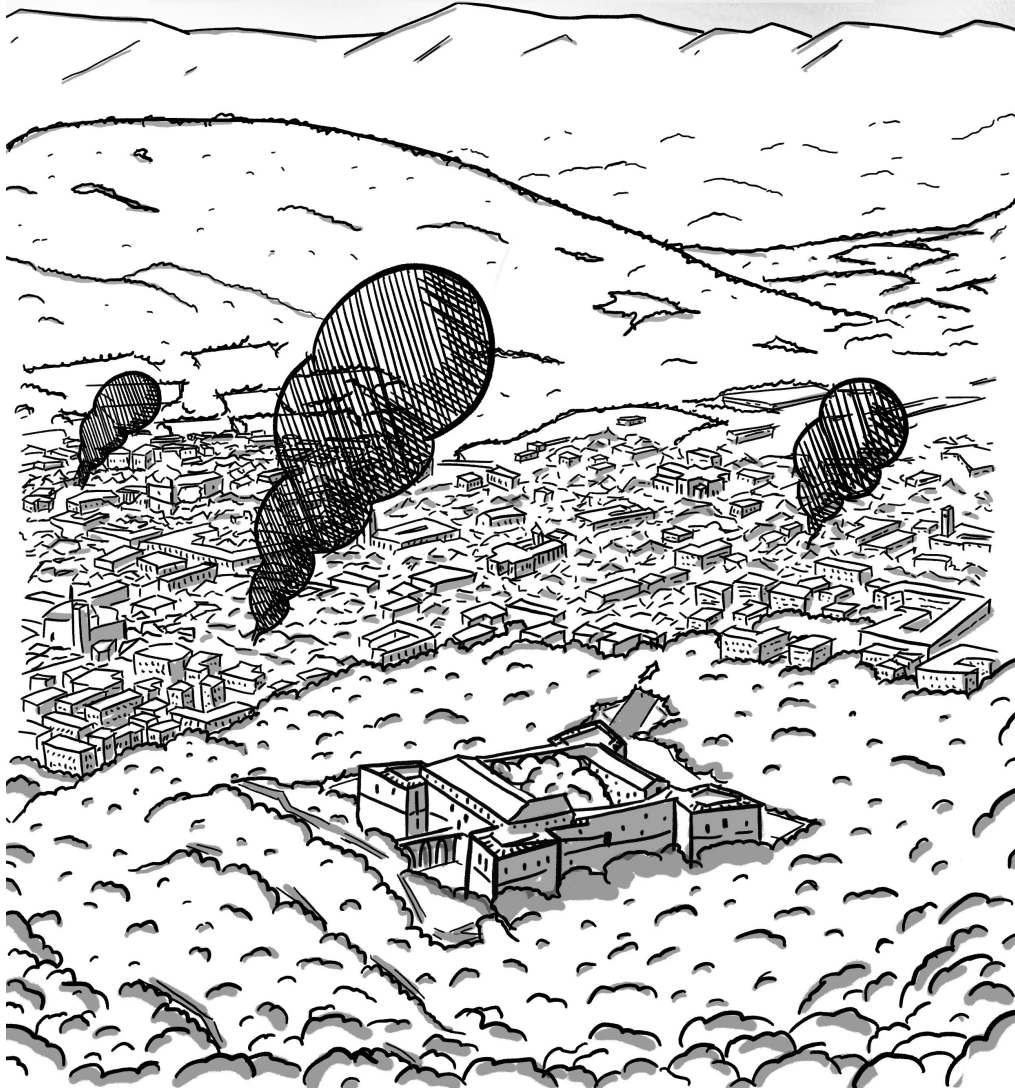
Burak is an urban planner from Turkey. Lately he's trying to figure out what he is going to do in the future.

Matilde earned a BSc degree in Building Engineering in her home country, Italy. Now she is exploring the social dynamics that inhabit the built environment at BUW.

Paul was always fascinated by the question what actually makes a place like it is. Looking for answers to this question in general in his previous studies in Geographie he now shifted his focus finally to the European cities.

Shiao-Ying is from Taiwan and her background is ethnology and urban planning and was a government officer in a national park of Taiwan. Now she is trying to figure out how the spatial planning in Germany works.

In 2009, I almost lost a friend during an earthquake. As the vibrations and shocks were gone, I cried because I couldn't recognize her. She didn't look alive at all, but actually she was. And then she fell asleep and she kept sleeping for a long time¹.

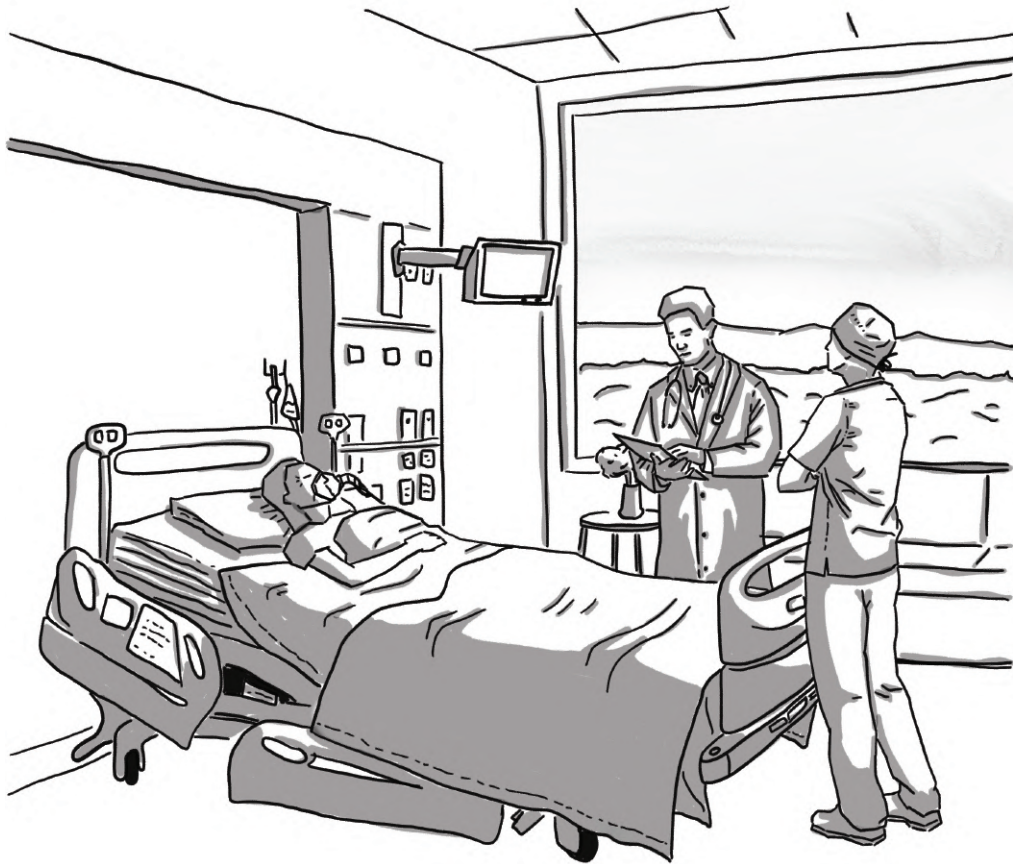


When I close my eyes I still can feel what I felt when we were together. Before.



She is much older than me, so as long as I can remember she cared for me. But not only for me, for all my friends. I remember us sitting in front of her while she was teaching us art. But not only the Romanesque and the Renaissance art' style but also the art of living². For her, that included making music together, playing, dancing and how to come together.

Now she is weak and slowly recovering. The doctors are taking care of her but the bettering pace is still low.



I saw how these jackals took everything, from her treasures to just the interior, out of her place to sell it at auctions or even to themselves³.



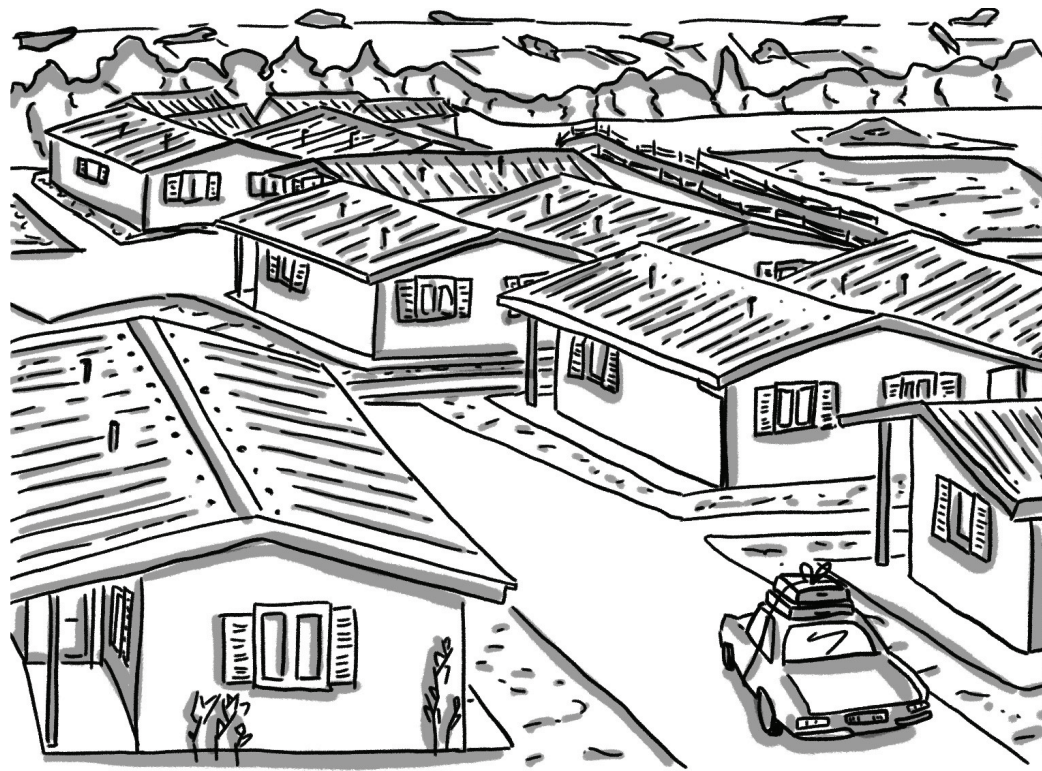
In the news I heard the Prime Minister state: "Exploitation will be impossible, we will reconstruct within 6 months keeping out exploitation and the jackals⁴." How could I believe in the 6 month when I saw the jackals already?

After we packed up everything that was left from what we called our home earlier, we drove to the countryside. It was already late in the night when we finally found a motel by the highway⁵. It was not meant to live in their, but since all accommodations in the region and, what we heart later, up to the coast where occupied, we stayed there.



A few days later, all of the sudden, my parents called after me to hurry up because we had to leave. In the news they have heart that there are houses provided for people that lost theirs.

The next station on our journey was a wooden bungalow, or Temporary Housing Module, as they called it⁶. It stood in a row with other bungalows just like in a song my father showed me once: "Little boxes on the hillside, little boxes made of ticky tacky, little boxes, little boxes all the same⁷."

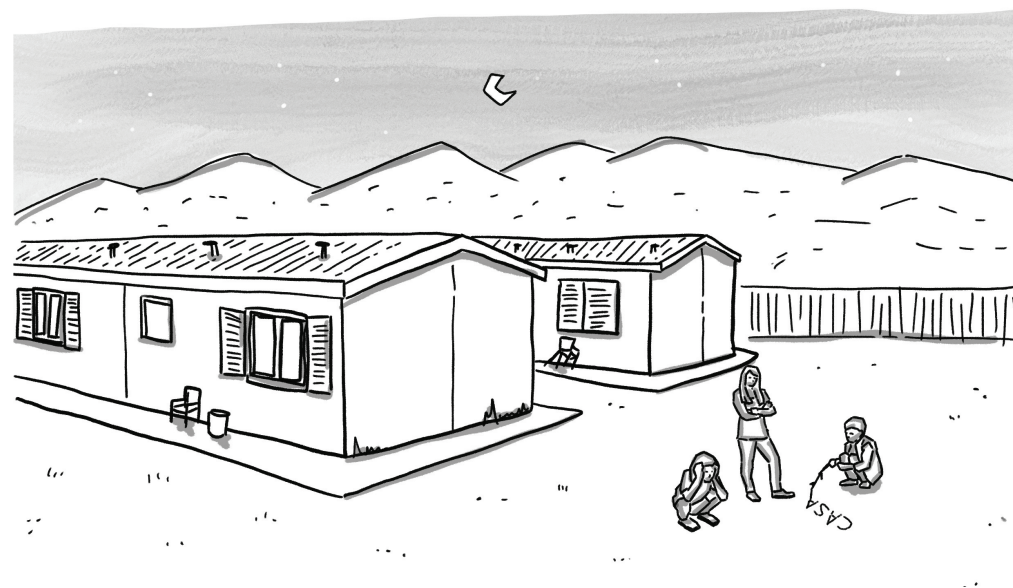


Besides missing her, my old friend, I also started missing my other friends. They were spread around the whole county. First, I just wanted to walk there, escaping this dreary place that led me down. My parents recognized how desperate I was and started to list all the positive and comfortable things that were here at the bungalow and they said they will try to get an even better one. But I didn't believe them.

Some days later I got a phone call from Paolo, a former neighbor of ours. He told me that he is in a settlement of little boxes, as well. Excited he explained that it is just three villages away from our place and that Marta is also there and that they already found some new friends. My heart was running like a hamster in its wheel and I asked my parents for permission. They agreed and were happy to see me this euphoric.

Since my parents had no time to bring me there, I had to go by bus to the other settlement. It turned out to be very complicated and when I arrived at Paolo's place it was already evening⁸. Their collection of little boxes was even drearier - they looked like the containers in the port of Civitavecchia from where we started our holidays once. There were no trees, no benches, no fountains, no nothing. Only little boxes.

Still, we had some fun in the container settlement. On the way back home I was filled with joy, but when I arrived I was even more desperate than before⁹. I just realized that she was the one who kept us together.



In the morning I said to my parents: "We have to visit her." They looked at me with faces of incomprehension. "I will visit her, no matter what!" My mother sighed, but nodded.

So, my parents drove me there. The kind of hospital she was had lots of security measures when we arrived there. We figured out very quickly that it is not allowed to visit her - for safety reasons. But at some point I was close enough to listen to a conversation between jackals and some doctors¹⁰.

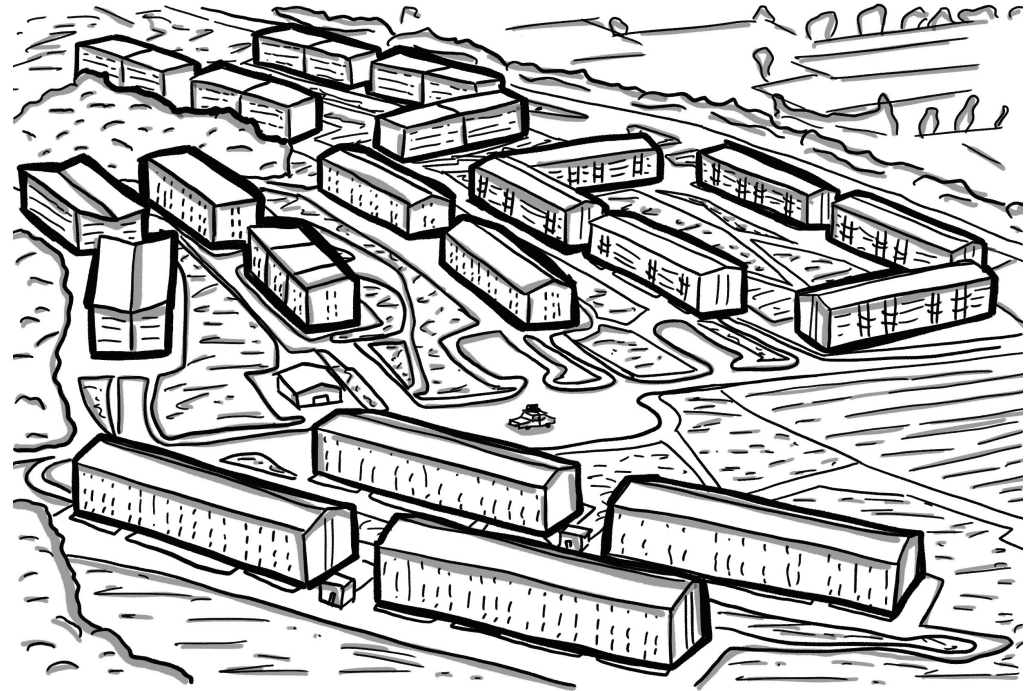
She is already doing better, but what she really needs are some people around her. It's hard for us to figure out what she really needs, I think the ones who know her better really could help us.



This is not necessary. The medicine we gave you should be enough. Don't talk about it with anyone. Talk with me, understand?

Shocked and desperate I ran to my parents and we went back to our little box.

As time went by, I was getting used to the situation in our settlement. I still did not like it but my memories were not that present anymore, so I did not think of her all the time. One day, my parents acted strangely when I came home. They were excited and cooked some nice food, my favourite dish actually. My mother hugged me saying constantly: "We will move! We will move!" Of course I was excited, too. But still a little bit sceptical.

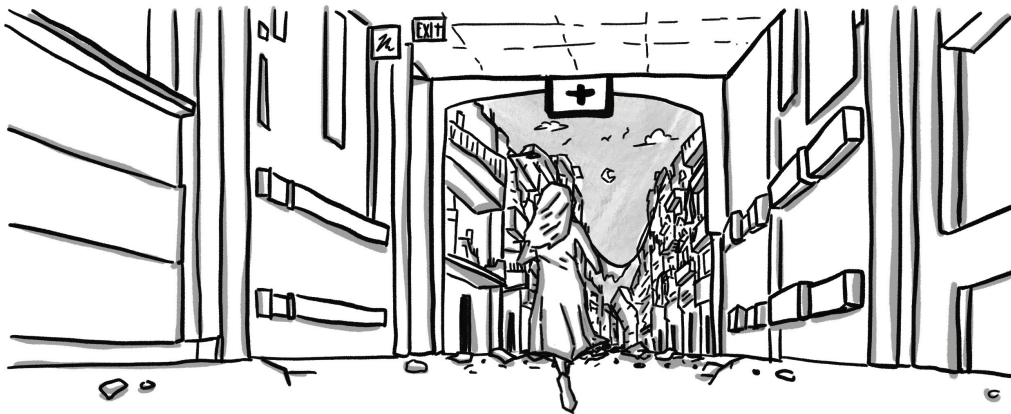


A few days later, all our stuff was again packed. As I already expected, we were not driving in the direction of L'Aquila. After some minutes of driving, we reached an all-new settlement with houses on stilts loosely distributed on a hill. They were no little boxes, but they were like all the other settlements I saw before: naked, sterile and without any soul.¹¹

This night I decided to go to her again, trying to get in by myself.

I missed her so much. Being surrounded by sterile buildings increased my feeling of alienation. As I couldn't cope with this emotion rooted in me anymore, I decided to escape from the new house we just moved in. I needed to meet her again and feel the peacefulness and familiarity she was able to transmit. The idea of being reunited with her was worth the risk to sneak in at night. That night I would have followed the thread that keeps us connected to reunite with her.

I prepared a backpack with the bare minimum to pass the night: a tick blanket and a torch and hid it underneath my bed. After my parents said good night, I waited to hear them closing their door. I got out of my bed, put on my clothes and took my bag. Carefully and silently I walked out of my room. I crossed the corridor on tiptoes, reached the entrance door and closed it making sure not to make any noise.



I ran, I ran as fast as I could. I couldn't wait to see her again! As I was almost there, I was disoriented seeing all the debris around me so much that I was afraid to lose my way. But some parts still looked familiar.

I walked through what used to be my home town.

And finally I was with her again.



Commentaries

1. According to Contreras et al. (2018), “the earthquake in L’Aquila ‘was a moderate seismic event’ compared to the magnitudes of other world-wide events [...]. However, the high physical vulnerability level of L’Aquila’s unstrengthened masonry buildings [...] led to the enormous damage”.

2. Referring to the Romanesque and Renaissance architecture in L’Aquila (L’Aquila, 2021).

3. According to the dossier from Libera (2010), the rubble disposal was one of the rare cases where the Civil Protection did not intervene, leaving therefore its management to private local businesses. Investigations show that some of the actors of these companies were involved in previous cases of organized crime and pursued by the police. Moreover, some of these businesses were part of the risk list released by the National Anti-mafia Department.

4. Regarding the criminal organizations, Mafia and Camorra, trying to infiltrate the contract procedures, Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi stated: "Exploitation will be impossible, we will reconstruct within 6 months keeping out exploitation and the mafia." (Ozerdem & Rufini, 2013).

5. In the month following the earthquake, public buildings and hotel rooms throughout L’Aquila were used to accommodate displaced residents and camps were set up around L’Aquila and other towns affected by the earthquake, with a total of 64,391 displaced persons, of whom 31,422 were sheltered in 170 camps, consisting of 5,584 tents, while the remaining 32,969 were lodged on the Abruzzo coast, in the Marche Regions or in private homes. Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi caused a controversy when he said, in an interview to the German station n-tv, that the homeless victims should consider themselves to be on a "camping weekend" – "They have everything they need, they have medical care, hot food... Of course, their current lodgings are a bit temporary. But they should see it like a weekend of camping." And he also told the people in a homeless camp: "Head to the beach. It's Easter. Take a break. We're paying for it, you'll be well looked after." (Ozerdem & Rufini, 2013; L’Aquila Earthquake, 2021).

In one case an engaged mayor tries to visit all citizens of his destroyed village that are spread around the county (Bayerischer Rundfunk, 2017).

6. MAPs (Moduli Abitativi Provvisori/Temporary housing modules) consist of the provision of furnished prefabricated units to replace cheaper temporary accommodation (including containers and public buildings). Prime Minister Berlusconi saw MAPs as a political opportunity and presented this outcome as his personal success, declaring on television that the Onna Village MAPs was a world record for rapid response after the earthquake (Ozerdem & Rufini, 2013).

7. Referring to the song Little Boxes by Pete Seeger, 1963. (Little Boxes, 2021)

8. For these new settlements have been located as quick and expensive housing solutions, nevertheless concerning problems such as lack of basic services, urban facilities (churches, schools, pharmacies, post offices, supermarkets, social centres, sports centres, etc.), limited public transport (infrequent and unreliable). That of course affected the social relations within the settlements. The location of these new settlements is scattered and isolated, initially designated as conservation land or farmland, and people rely mainly on the costly and non-eco-friendly option of transport by private vehicles to reach the area (Contreras et al., 2013; Al Jazeera English 2011).

9. The disruption continues throughout the town with many people having lost their jobs or homes, making it impossible of continuing with normal daily activities. Only 25% of the residents were able to return to their homes even six months after the earthquake (Gigantesco et al., 2013).

10. The government promised that L'Aquila would be reconstructed, and the Prime Minister promised this in person when President Obama arrived, but after many years the inhabitants still could not wait for this result, the temporary tents disappeared, but the inhabitants continued to live in the temporary construction MAP or CASE. Some of the reconstruction funds went to the organized crime, represented here by the jackals (European Journal, 2014).

11. The new settlement is the CASE (Complessi AntiSismici Eco-compatibili/earthquake resistant and environmentally friendly units) plan, a massive top-down decision on emergency response to post-earthquake recon-

struction, which has blurred the line between reconstruction and emergency, with no local government participation in consultation and no input from residents. The CASE settlement has changed the economic, environmental and social character of the area, and the plan was agreed and implemented under pressure - before the cold winter of L'Aquila, there was an urgent need to provide these families with adequate accommodation. However, because no in-depth analysis and feasibility studies have been carried out, they are often located in isolated areas, without infrastructure (electricity, roads, sanitation, housing, water) and far from livelihood opportunities, losing the social links of their original place of residence, with no friends other than the families who have moved there together, making it even more difficult to meet with friends because of the lack of infrastructure. Despite this, many families preferred be allocated CASE homes, due to the fear that MAPs could become a permanent settlement (Ozerdem & Rufini, 2013).

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