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Capital accumulation through "urban sandboxing": Exploring planetary urbanization and marginalization in Rome's urban peripheries

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ABSTRACT

This article explores marginalization in association with market-driven urban restructuring in the urban peripheries of Rome. While urban exclusion is well-documented in European cities, less attention has been paid to the socio-spatial inequalities emerging at the edges of large metropolitan areas. Using qualitative methods and the frameworks of planetary urbanization and urban frontiers, we find that marginalization in Rome is multidimensional, involving infrastructural disconnection, labor market exclusion, and social stigma. To conceptualize these findings, we propose *urban sandboxing* as a novel framework that captures the tangible and intangible frictions preventing residents from accessing the urban. We invite further research to apply this framework to identify manifestations of capitalist-driven urban exclusion, thereby providing an empirical grounding for the more abstract theory of planetary urbanization.

KEYWORDS

Touristification economy; Southern Europe; Italy; neoliberal urbanism; urban frontiers

Introduction

The metropolitan city of Rome has undergone rapid urban expansion and socioeconomic restructuring over the past decades. These transformations reflect a shift in the role of Rome toward an economy centered on tertiarization and touristification (De Muro et al., 2011; Lelo, 2015; Rogatka & Kustra-Rogatka, 2023). While inner urban areas have benefited from concentrated services and the growth of short-term rentals favoring a tourist economy, new peripheries have emerged in response to demand for more affordable housing and speculation (De Muro et al., 2011; Lelo, 2015). This has resulted in a fragmented urban landscape marked by pronounced socio-spatial segregation, where peripheral neighborhoods experience systemic marginalization (De Vidovich, 2022; Lelo, 2015; Lelo et al., 2019a).

This article examines the marginalization of urban peripheries amid the ongoing expansion and transformation of the city of Rome. We draw on the concepts and theories of planetary urbanization and urban frontiers, which are useful to interpret market-driven spatial change and marginalization at the edge of large metropolitan areas like Rome (Brenner, 2018; King & Burt, 2019).

Planetary urbanization as an analytical framework has vastly been criticized for excessive abstraction, as well as lacking inclusivity and diversity (Angelo & Goh, 2021; Tuvikene et al., 2022; Wilson & Jonas, 2018). Consequently, there is limited research and frameworks addressing how these market-driven spatial processes manifest as urban frontiers in the everyday experiences of residents living at the edges of large metropolitan cities (Gillespie, 2020; Meth et al., 2021). This is especially important in Southern European cities like Rome where touristification economies are increasingly been associated with exclusion and met with resistance from residents. The central research question guiding this research is: How is the emergence of urban frontiers at the edge of the metropolitan city of Rome experienced by residents living in peripheral neighborhoods?

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To address this question, the study employs qualitative methods including semi-structured interviews, life history interviews, and go-alongs conducted with residents from six urban peripheries in the city of Rome. The results reveal tangible and intangible dimensions of exclusion, including physical distance from central urban areas, institutional neglect, labor market exclusion, and experiences of stigmatization.

To interpret these experiences and explain our findings, the article introduces *urban sandboxing* as an analytical framework. The term describes how residents encounter physical, social, and psychological frictions in accessing urban spaces, as if confined within *sandboxes*. This concept offers insights into how spatial inequality is both produced and lived in peripheral neighborhoods in Rome. Beyond our case study, urban sandboxing can be applied in further studies as a conceptual tool to analyze processes of spatial marginalization following market-driven urban development at small and medium scales. By doing so, urban sandboxing responds to growing demands for new vocabularies and conceptual tools that capture the empirical and tangible processes through which planetary urbanization manifests in everyday experiences (Angelo & Goh, 2021; Brenner & Schmid, 2015).

The structure of this article is as follows. The next section presents key concepts and analytical framework. Subsequently, the methodology, the case study, and the empirical analysis are outlined. The following discussion section introduces the concept of urban sandboxing, examines its relevance to the case, and explores its applicability to other contexts. The final section reflects on the findings, policy implications, and directions for future research.

The re-drawing of space and marginalization

Planetary urbanization and urban restructuring

Understanding contemporary urban development remains a central challenge in urban studies. Globally, urban areas undergo restructuring driven by a convergence of forces, including economic development, such as technological innovation and shifting industrialization patterns, that reshape spatial divisions of labor and global production networks. Political factors, such as evolving regulatory regimes and enduring colonial legacies, also play a key role. These processes collectively shape the organization and structure of urban spaces (Brenner, 2018; Brenner & Schmid, 2015; Harvey, 2010; Jain & Korzhenevych, 2022).

Since the 1980s, metropolitan areas in Western Europe and North America have experienced a significant revival as centers of economic activity and social development. This revival reflects a transition from Fordist to post-Fordist models of production, marked by the rise of knowledge economies and widespread deindustrialization (Brenner, 2018; Digaetano & Klemanski, 1991; Scott, 2008; Storper, 2013). In response to the crisis of the Fordist system in the 1970s, governments implemented neoliberal measures, including economic deregulation and the rollback of national-developmentalist policies and economic (Brenner & Schmid, 2015; Bruns-Berentelg et al., 2022; Gil, 2023). As part of this strategy, urban space is continually reshaped to accommodate the demands of a market-driven economy (Brenner & Schmid, 2015).

To conceptualize the global spread of capitalist urbanization, Brenner and Schmid (2015), building on Lefebvre's (2003) theorization of urban society, introduced the concept and analytical framework of planetary urbanization. This framework challenges traditional notions of the urban as confined to dense, bounded city centers (Tuvikene et al., 2022; Wilson & Jonas, 2018). Instead, it redefines the urban as a process extending across hinterlands and entire metropolitan regions (Arboleda, 2016; Brenner & Schmid, 2015; Roy, 2016; Smith, 2005). Planetary urbanization is thus conceived not as a uniform spatial form but as a constellation of interconnected capitalist urbanization processes and a theoretical category in itself (Brenner, 2018; Tuvikene et al., 2022). Rather than producing homogeneity, it generates uneven spatial development shaped by cycles of capital accumulation, leading to the continuous transformation of urban space (Brenner & Schmid, 2014, 2015; Bruns-Berentelg et al., 2022; Gil, 2023; Roy, 2016; Smith, 2005).

However, this ambitious conceptualization has faced criticism. A primary concern is its high level of abstraction and universalism, which limits its capacity to engage with empirical case studies and capture the complexities of social difference, agency, and context-specific dynamics (Angelo & Goh, 2021; Jain & Korzhenevych, 2022; Zhao, 2025). Critics also question its applicability across different scales and diverse urban contexts (Angelo & Goh, 2021; Khatam & Haas, 2018; Tuvikene et al., 2022).

To render planetary urbanization more empirically grounded and capable of explaining socio-spatial particularities, it is necessary to integrate complementary tools and concepts. These should illuminate connections across scales and social relations, while also addressing difference and specificity. Such an approach would enhance planetary urbanization's empirical applicability while retaining its analytical strength of holistic thinking and conceptualization of the urban as a centerless place-transcending process (Angelo & Goh, 2021; Tuvikene et al., 2022; Wilson & Jonas, 2018).

Urban frontiers and space re-drawing

Integrating the concept of urban frontiers within the framework of planetary urbanization offers a more tangible approach to understanding market-driven urbanization. Urban frontiers denote spaces where new forms of economic development and resettlement emerge during transitions between regimes of capital accumulation (Brenner et al., 2009; King & Burt, 2019). These frontiers are characterized by the creation of economic value through the hyper-commodification of urban space, both within city centers and at the urban fringes (Brenner et al., 2009; Gil, 2023; Gillespie, 2020; Goldman, 2011; Harvey, 2010; Meth et al., 2021; Smith, 2010; Wei, 2015).

Although rooted in colonial and racialized histories, the concept has also been widely applied to examine class-based urban transformations. It features prominently in gentrification literature (Lees et al., 2016), including studies on tourist gentrification (Mendes, 2018) and the role of art as a frontier in times of crisis (Avramidis & Tsilimpounidi, 2016). In these cases, certain social groups redevelop devalued urban areas by exploiting the rent gap, transforming them into profitable sites of capital reproduction through dispossession (Smith, 2005).

Spatial re-drawings are central to the formation of urban frontiers. These encompass both the material reconfiguration of space, i.e., the redevelopment of physical space (Jamieson, 2024; King & Burt, 2019), and the shifting of symbolic, social, and economic boundaries, also referred to as the urban margins (Carrosio, 2019; Lareno Faccini & Ranzini, 2021). Consequently, emerging urban frontiers can reshape existing urban margins, exacerbating urban exclusion, institutional neglect, and social fragility, or, conversely, contribute to improvement through investment in local communities and the strengthening of local governance (Carrosio, 2019; Lareno Faccini & Ranzini, 2021).

This suggests urban frontiers are not neutral. On the contrary, they redefine physical and symbolic urban boundaries, determining what and who is included in processes of development and capital accumulation (Jamieson, 2024; King & Burt, 2019). This may involve converting abandoned or disinvested areas into speculative terrains for capital investment and spatial contestation (De Vidovich, 2022; Lees et al., 2016).

A variety of actors including state institutions, municipalities, private developers, residents, and social movements, shape these spatial transformations through both promotion and resistance (Caldeira, 2017). For instance, in Italy, local and national institutions may advance laissez-faire policies that facilitate short-term tourist rentals. These policies, representing a new urban frontier for capital, restructure urban space through selective service provision that supports tourism (Lelo et al., 2019a). At the same time, residents and other stakeholders assert their rights through protest, as evidenced by recent tourism resistance movements across Europe (Morales-Pérez et al., 2022).

We identify four major spatial re-drawings associated with the neoliberal resurgence of urban areas since the 1980s that have impacted metropolitan city of Rome: agglomeration economies, touristification, socio-spatial segregation, and urban expansion (Brenner et al., 2009; Duranton, 2014; Gil, 2023; Gillespie, 2020; Martínez et al., 2023; Wei, 2015).

Agglomeration economies have underpinned the revival of many urban centers since the 1990s by clustering new industries to stimulate collaboration and creativity (Duranton, 2014; Scott, 2008). This process seeks to generate value through the concentration of knowledge services, creative and experience industries, and high-skilled employment (Duranton, 2014; Hansen & Winther, 2012; Pratt, 2008; Skytt-Larsen & Winther, 2015; Storper, 2013).

More recently, touristification has taken a stronghold in Southern Europe (Jover & Barrero-Rescalvo, 2023; Lelo et al., 2019b; Martínez et al., 2023; Sequera & Nofre, 2020; Simões et al., 2022). It commodifies urban assets into tourist attractions, concentrating services and amenities in specific areas (Lelo et al., 2019a; Sequera & Nofre, 2020). The expansion of the tourism sector has contributed to the proliferation of short-term rentals, particularly through digital platforms like Airbnb (Cocola-Gant et al., 2021; Harvey, 2010; Lelo et al., 2019b; Sequera & Nofre, 2018, 2020). This process often leads to increased property values, displacement of residents, and the marginalization of non-tourist zones amid austerity policies and reduced public services (Coppola & Punziano, 2018; Lelo, 2015; Peck, 2012; Sequera & Nofre, 2018).

The restructuring of city-centers in Europe due to agglomeration economies and touristification demands a third re-drawing: socio-spatial restructuring and deepening divisions of labor within metropolitan areas (Musterd et al., 2017). These include segregation (Annunziata & Lees, 2016; Mudu, 2006), filtering (Hedin et al., 2012; Lelo, 2015), gentrification, and displacement of lower-income populations from central areas to peripheral zones (Coppola & Punziano, 2018; Di Feliciantonio, 2017; Lelo, 2015; Smith, 1996). As a response, peripheral areas have been expanding and restructured to accommodate growing urban populations, often resulting in new social housing or gated communities (Ren, 2012; Roitman & Phelps, 2011; Wacquant, 2008; Wei, 2015). In Europe, such peripheries are frequently associated with social decay and economic marginalization (De Vidovich, 2022; Lelo et al., 2019b; Wacquant, 2008).

Finally, these processes entail a fourth redrawing: urban expansion into rural areas. This process continues across European metropolitan areas (Gillespie, 2020; Meth et al., 2021), including in shrinking cities (Guastella et al., 2019) and those experiencing urban sprawl (Wei, 2015). These spatial re-drawings illustrate shifting urban priorities and reveal the mounting challenges faced by those excluded from such emerging modes of urban economic development.

Urban marginalization

The emergence of new urban frontiers and the redrawing of space are often associated with various forms of marginalization (Brenner & Schmid, 2015; Jaatsi & Kymäläinen, 2023b; Smith, 2010; Wacquant, 2002, 2008). Urban marginalization has been widely documented, particularly in relation to its social-psychological dimensions, such as stigmatization (Harvey, 2010; Lefebvre, 1996; Wacquant, 2002, 2008). For instance, Wacquant (2008, p. 229) describes how economically disadvantaged residents in the urban peripheries of Paris are labeled as "urban outcasts" and subjected to systemic discrimination.

Further scholarship has explored marginalization through the lens of the "right to the city" (Harvey, 2010; Lefebvre, 1996) and social exclusion (Sen, 2002), illustrating how residents in urban peripheries are often excluded from full participation in urban life and may lack access to basic amenities and civic rights afforded to central urban populations. While these dimensions of marginalization have been extensively explored, fewer studies have examined the layered and complex forms of marginality that emerge at the edges of large metropolitan areas (Gillespie, 2020; Hansen & Winther, 2012; Meth et al., 2021). This gap underscores the need for new epistemological approaches capable of capturing the diverse and overlapping processes of marginalization in these peripheral urban contexts (Brenner & Schmid, 2015).

Materials and methods

Case study

We selected Rome as a case study to explore urban frontiers at the edge of large metropolitan areas due to two defining features: substantial urban expansion and the adoption of a touristification economy. This context provides valuable insights into how urban frontiers are experienced and can inform comparative studies, particularly in Southern European metropolitan areas. Within Rome, we have selected six urban periphery neighborhoods. While these fall within the city of Rome's administrative boundaries and must be considered as urban peripheries (De Vidovich, 2022; Lelo et al., 2021; Vazzoler, 2016), they are located up to 20 kilometers from the city center, often within a patchwork of urban and rural areas.

Among these neighborhoods, our primary focus is on the neighborhood of Tor Bella Monaca (TBM). TBM is a social housing area with approximately 30,000 residents. It was developed in the 1970s and 1980s as a solution to the informal settlements that had characterized the area since the 1950s (Cellamare & Montillo, 2020). The neighborhood consists predominantly of apartment complexes, many housed in 15-story buildings locally referred to as *Torri* (towers). These apartments have largely been allocated to vulnerable populations, including individuals facing eviction, people with disabilities, low-income families, the unemployed, the homeless, and young households (Attili & Portelli, 2016; Cellamare & Montillo, 2020; Diana et al., 2016).

As a result, TBM has a significantly younger population than the citywide average (Lelo et al., 2021), and up to 40% of families are estimated to live in absolute poverty (Cubeddu & Puccini, 2020). The neighborhood also exhibits some of the city of Rome's highest rates of early school dropout, unemployment, and house arrests (Cellamare & Montillo, 2020). These socioeconomic conditions have contributed to TBM becoming one of the largest drug trafficking hubs in Rome and Europe (Cellamare & Montillo, 2020; Cubeddu & Puccini, 2020).

The housing blocks have fallen into disrepair since their construction, having received little maintenance. Residents often set informal rules that override official ones, as with squatting, where they collectively decide who occupies public housing, overriding municipal decisions (Cellamare & Montillo, 2020). These conditions also reinforce the lived reality and perception in Italy that TBM and other urban peripheries are inherently linked to decay and hardship—a perception further entrenched by their portrayal in the media (Attili & Portelli, 2016; Cellamare & Montillo, 2020; Diana et al., 2016; Di Feliciantonio, 2017). As a result, TBM and urban peripheries more broadly, have come to be associated with social and economic struggles in contemporary Italian imaginaries, language, and public discourse (Cellamare & Montillo, 2020). This highlights how, in the Italian context, the periphery can be understood as an urban margin, carrying both spatial and social connotations (Carrosio, 2019; Cellamare & Montillo, 2020).

Adjacent to TBM are the neighborhoods of Torre Angela and Torre Gaia, also selected as neighborhood cases. Torre Angela is known for its unregulated, spontaneous urban expansion, while Torre Gaia is a middle-class area, enclosed by walls and protected by a monitored level crossing. Finally, our research also includes data from residents of the urban peripheral neighborhoods of San Basilio, Infernetto, and Fidene, which feature both social housing, unauthorized dwellings, and hardships more broadly.

Data collection & analysis

This study adopts an inductive and explanatory approach, employing qualitative methods to investigate the research question. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, life histories, and go-along interviews. The go-along method involves the researcher accompanying participants during their daily routines, enabling a nuanced understanding of lived experiences in situ (Kusenbach, 2003). This approach engages with the physical, social, and psychological dimensions of urban space, making

Table 1. Respondents' characteristics, neighborhood, and data collection method.

Respondent	Gender	Age	Neighborhood	Method
1	M	3	TBM	SSI, GA, LH
2	M	3	TBM	SSI, LH
3	F	3	TBM	SSI
4	M	1	TBM	SSI
5	F	1	S. Basilio	SSI, GA
6	M	2	TBM	SSI
7	F	2	TBM	SSI
8	M	2	Porta di Roma	SSI, GA, LH
9	M	1	Ponte di Nona	SSI, LH
10	F	1	Infernetto	SSI
11	F	1	Consorzio Torre Gaia	SSI

Age = 1, 18 to 30 years old; AG = 2, 31 to 45; AG = 3, 50 to 65; SSI = Semi-Structured Interview; GA = Go Along; LH = Life History

it especially valuable for examining socioeconomically disadvantaged contexts that are often analyzed from a distance (Jaatsi & Kymäläinen, 2023a; Schafran & Le Moigne, 2022).

Interviews were conducted between February and December 2021. Interviewees include residents of TBM and other neighborhoods located on the urban periphery and one a former chief urban planning officer from the City of Rome (see Table 1). Interview themes included housing, transportation, employment, crime, aspirations, and experiences of hopelessness. Both semi-structured and go-along interviews took place in diverse settings, such as quiet public areas and participants' homes.

Participants were identified through snowball sampling, and were selected for their ability to offer critical insights to the study. Older participants were included due to their long-term presence in local neighborhoods, while younger participants were chosen to reflect the aspirations and challenges faced by youth in peripheral urban areas.

To capture the layered nature of marginality, we conducted a thematic analysis of the data. Key themes included adjacent and distant marginalization, remoteness, institutional isolation, displacement, labor market exclusion, stigma, and filtering. The concept of urban sandboxing emerged as a cross-cutting theme throughout the analysis. Direct quotations from participants are included to illustrate and support key findings.

To address the inherent challenges of positionality in ethnographic research within marginalized contexts, we adopted a reflexive approach grounded in respectful and reciprocal engagement with participants (Jaatsi & Kymäläinen, 2023a). This included spending informal time with them beyond formal data collection and accepting invitations into their homes and personal spaces. The combination of reflexivity, snowball sampling, and informal interaction helped establish trust, ultimately enabling the collection of more nuanced and in-depth data.

Background: Urban frontiers and re-drawings in Rome

To understand how marginalization is experienced in Rome, we first need to examine how emerging urban frontiers have contributed to the reconfiguration of urban space, following the conceptual framework outlined in the literature review. Over the past century, Rome has undergone substantial transformations in its role and function, leading to repeated spatial reconfigurations and the emergence of new urban frontiers. Rome has never had a strong manufacturing base. After becoming the capital of Italy in 1871, it attracted numerous public offices to the city center, triggering significant in-migration (De Muro et al., 2011; Lelo, 2015; Lelo et al., 2019b). In the 1930s, fascist urban policies reshaped the city through large-scale demolitions in the historical center, displacing both residents and small businesses to peripheral areas (Baxa, 2010). By the late 20th century, the economy of Rome shifted toward tertiarization, embracing its role as the cultural capital of Italy and experiencing growth in the arts, higher education, the knowledge economy,

and tourism (De Muro et al., 2011). This transformation was supported by urban policies that concentrated amenities, resources, and services within the city center, where most tourist attractions are located (Lelo, 2015; Rogatka & Kustra-Rogatka, 2023). This centralization has aligned with the touristification urban frontier of the last decade, through the expansion of short-term rentals, leading to sharp increases in housing prices (Gil, 2023; Lelo, 2015). As a result, lower-income residents have been pushed to the urban peripheries in search of affordable housing (Lelo, 2015; Lelo et al., 2019a).

Another key frontier has been the post–World War II expansion of Rome into its hinterlands, giving rise to new peripheral zones (Lelo, 2015; Roma Capitale, 2015). This growth has resulted in making Rome one of the largest urban areas in Western Europe, second only to Greater London (Di Somma, 2011). Between 1950 and 2016, built-up areas in the Metropolitan City of Rome and the neighboring Fiumicino municipality expanded from 6.6% to 28.9%, largely at the expense of agricultural land (Nickayin et al., 2021). This urban expansion has proceeded mostly without adequate regulation, and the development of infrastructure, public transportation, and essential services have failed to keep pace (Lelo, 2015; Lelo et al., 2019a).

As a result of urban re-drawings, Rome today is characterized by widespread urban sprawl, marked by isolated, inadequately connected neighborhoods lacking sufficient infrastructure and services (Lelo, 2015; Lelo et al., 2019a). These spatial dynamics have produced significant socio-spatial segregation, with stark disparities in living standards across different parts of the city (Lelo et al., 2019a). Residents in central areas enjoy considerably better conditions compared to those in peripheral zones, as demonstrated by data on income, employment, poverty, life expectancy, housing, education, and school dropout rates (Istat, 2011). Moreover, residents in central areas benefit from better access to health care, schools, services, public spaces, and transportation (Istat, 2011). Disparities in the Human Development Index (HDI) between central and peripheral districts further highlight these inequalities (Lelo et al., 2019a). Finally, re-drawings are also associated with an increasing labor market polarization toward an hourglass-shaped distribution of employment opportunities (Causa & Johansson, 2010; Cavalca, 2008). While there have been attempts to promote self-sufficiency in peripheral areas, these have mostly been limited to the proliferation of shopping centers which have largely failed to produce meaningful improvements (Di Zio et al., 2010; Istat, 2011). Overall, the picture which emerges is a fragmented urban structure, with peripheral neighborhoods poorly integrated into the broader metropolitan framework.

Marginalization and sandboxing in Rome

Exploring the marginalization of residents in urban peripheries requires an examination of the multiple dimensions that constitute this condition. This article identifies key aspects of marginality to provide an overview of the mechanisms that produce exclusion in districts such as TBM. Understanding the multiplicity of marginalization is essential to understanding complex phenomena such as urban sandboxing in contexts like TBM.

Adjacent marginalization

A key dimension of marginalization is the socio-spatial segregation emerging between urban peripheries. In this section, we examine two neighborhoods: TBM and Fidene. The gated community of Torre Gaia stands in stark contrast to the adjacent neighborhood of TBM (Figure 1). On one side of Via Casilina, TBM is marked by visibly deteriorating high-rise buildings, many of which reaching fifteen stories. On the opposite side, Torre Gaia consists of houses and villas hidden behind gates and walls, under continuous surveillance. These physical barriers not only separate the two neighborhoods but also contribute to a psychological distancing. A resident of TBM described his first experience entering Torre Gaia after living in TBM for many years:

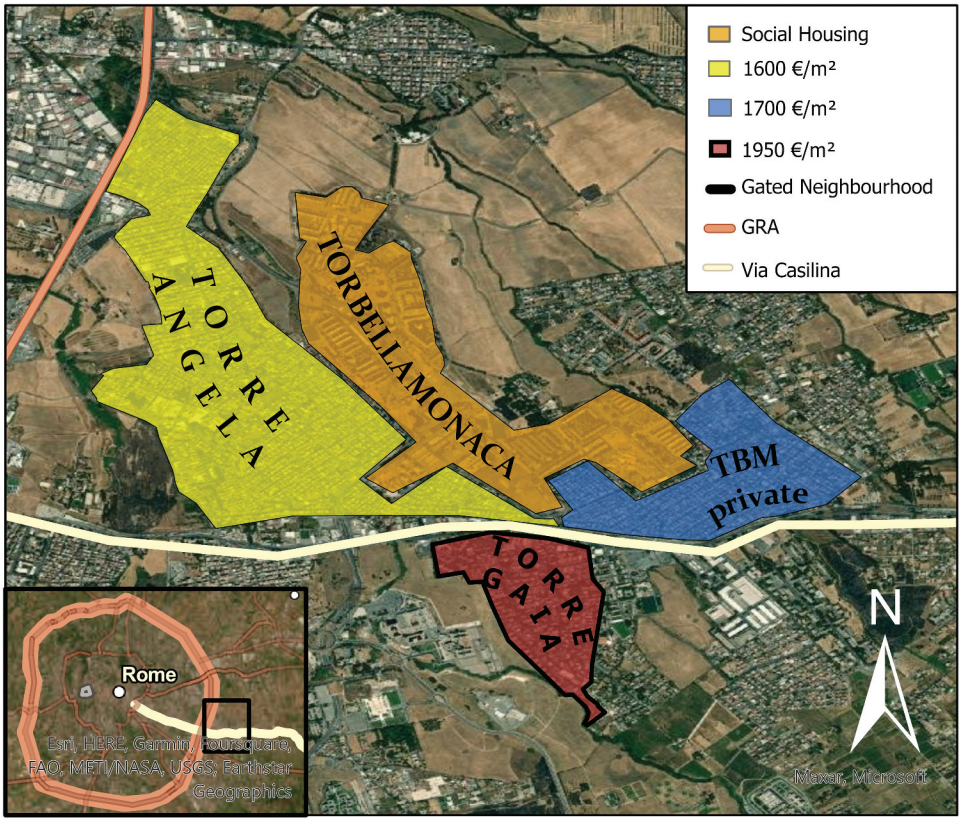

Figure 1. The adjacent neighborhoods of TBM, Torre Angela and the gated neighborhood Torre Gaia and their housing prices, emerging in the sprawling city into rural landscape. Created with Mercato Immobiliare (2021) data on ArcGIS PRO.

> One day I was finally invited in Torre Gaia. I have always wondered what it would look like on the other side of the wall. I felt like crossing a border into another country. Where did TBM, the noise, the trash go? It's so clean and orderly ... How can this place be just on the other side of Via Casilina? ... I see now, these walls exist because we [TBM residents] exist. By closing the gate and leaving hardships outside, they can put the prices up. ... If TBM's decay, like a virus, finds a way into Torre Gaia, say through squatting or other means, Torre Gaia will become like us and the prices in there will plummet.[1]

This account reflects a perception of Torre Gaia's enclosure as a deliberate strategy to physically and symbolically exclude TBM residents. The informant's metaphor of a *decay-virus* highlights fears that decay in TBM could infect Torre Gaia, undermining its real estate value. Torre Gaia thus appears to function as a sandbox, a controlled space designed to remain isolated from perceived external threats. It is not an isolated case; other gated communities, such as Olgiata in the northwestern part of Rome, reflect similar dynamics.

Physical barriers and security infrastructure are not the only mechanisms of segregation. In Fidene, spatial separation is reinforced by the absence of infrastructure (Figure 2). The neighborhood is characterized by high levels of *abusivismo*—the informal construction of buildings without permits—and lies adjacent to Porta di Roma, a planned neighborhood completed in 2007 and designed for middle-class and affluent residents. Despite their proximity, the hilly terrain and absence of an overpass create a tangible disconnection between the two areas.

A key informant noted that an overpass would function as a communicating vessel, increasing property values in Fidene while potentially reducing them in Porta di Roma. From this perspective,

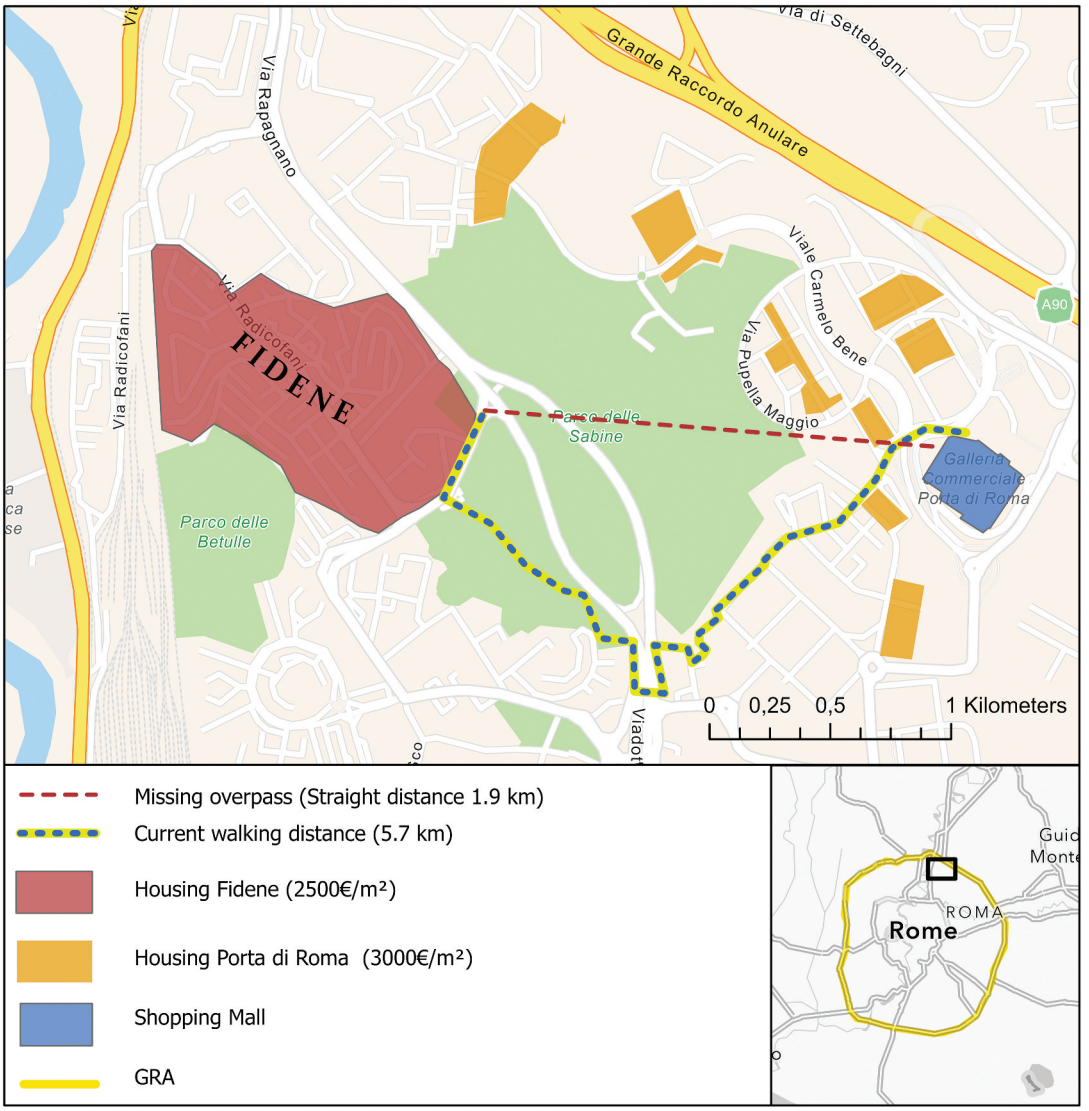

Figure 2. The adjacent neighborhoods of Fidene and the sandboxed neighborhood of Porta di Roma, with housing prices. Created with Immobiliare (2021) data on ArcGIS PRO.

preventing both physical and psychological connectivity has been a strategy aimed at preserving higher real estate values:

> The shopping center is not for us ... but it's us [in Fidene] that need something to do, what can the kids do around here? ... They made the shopping center to increase the value of the housing next to it! They didn't want to build an overpass between us and the shopping center area. They feared that if they made it easy for our kids to go there, they wouldn't make as much money from the adjacent housing.[2]

This experience contributes to the perception among Fidene's residents of being confined within their neighborhood, disconnected from the economic opportunities that Porta di Roma was meant to provide. Similar dynamics exist elsewhere in Rome; for instance, the lack of infrastructure between the EUR and Magliana districts has also led to resident discomfort and a sense of isolation.

Distant marginalization

The experiences shared by informants indicate that exclusion and marginalization in urban peripheries are not limited to relationships with adjacent neighborhoods but are also significantly shaped by dynamics at the metropolitan scale—particularly in relation to central urban areas. The following subsections examine these dimensions of marginality individually.

Remoteness

A primary dimension of marginalization between urban peripheries and central areas concerns space and distance. The vast scale of the Metropolitan City of Rome means that some neighborhoods are located tens of kilometers from employment opportunities and urban life. This spatial separation is compounded by inadequate infrastructure and limited public transportation options. A long-time resident of the TBM district conveyed a deep sense of disillusionment, contrasting with the initial optimism they felt upon moving there three decades earlier:

> I was the last to give up hope. When [in TBM] they used to say, "I'm going to Rome," I always found it annoying and roared back: "why, where do you think you are?" Then as years passed, I realized that here it doesn't feel like Rome. Rome is somewhere else. We're neither city nor village. We're neither fish nor fowl, we're in a limbo. And not knowing what you are is the worst thing. This is no one's land.[3]

This reflection captures the psychological strain of feeling removed from the city. Such sentiments are rooted in the long hours spent commuting—whether by car or public transport—to reach the city center. This is reflected in the data, as all interviewed residents of urban peripheries reported needing more than an hour to reach central areas. The inadequate provision of public transportation often discourages commuting altogether, even when it concerns essential activities like employment. As another TBM resident explained:

> I would go to Rome, only if I have a specific reason, like a doctor appointment ... and sometimes not even that. If you have to be there at nine in the morning, you have to leave here at six, latest at seven to avoid traffic and be sure to make it. So, for anything that isn't strictly necessary, it's not worth it. ... I went only once to Rome last year. ... They leave us here, making it difficult to get to the city. After years I realized that we are just not part of it, they don't want us to get in.[4]

These experiences illustrate how the combination of physical distance, poor transportation infrastructure, and limited mobility contributes to a sense of remoteness. This perceived detachment reinforces the feeling of being sandboxed from the rest of the city. In this context, the barriers to accessing central urban areas are imagined as the walls preserving the sandbox, limiting residents' integration into the broader urban system and reinforcing their confinement to the periphery.

Institutional isolation

Remoteness at the metropolitan city scale is also reflected in the limited provision of public services—such as healthcare, leisure facilities, libraries, and sports centers—in urban periphery areas. The difficulty in accessing both public and private services, which remain spatially concentrated in central districts, reinforces this sense of isolation. A TBM resident described how such disparities can have severe consequences:

> The couple living up there ... they had a son with a heart condition. They begged the administration for social housing closer to a hospital, but they were ignored. One day, while the parents were taking him to the kindergarten, the boy had a relapse. They called the ambulance. But it was more than 40 minutes late. The boy died. This is a harsh example, but it's true, we can't get the same services as if we were somewhere else in Rome. And to see a doctor, the queues are so long.[5]

This account highlights the critical challenges residents face in accessing healthcare. Such needs are particularly urgent in neighborhoods that are home to socially and economically disadvantaged individuals and families (Cellamare & Montillo, 2020; Lelo et al., 2021).

Further challenges emerge at the local scale, especially for those living in social housing estates within TBM. Everyday issues are frequent and often severe. For example, elevators in many of the towers are regularly out of order, leaving residents either stuck inside their homes or unable to return to them. One building is reportedly leaning, while many show visible structural damage, with informants reporting falling debris (Figure 3). Informants report water pumps are also frequently nonfunctional, limiting access to water access to households. We observed this directly during fieldwork. Our interview with a resident, Vincenzo, was interrupted by a neighbor asking: "Vincenzo! Is the water back today? to which he replied: What do you think? It's only been a few days; I wouldn't expect anyone to come this soon."[6] After the interruption, Vincenzo also engages with the topic in the interview:

> Yes, today we're without water, the pump broke. ... Yesterday it was the lift. And it may take weeks for someone to come fix things. Imagine, I live at the 13th floor, it's 231 steps! I am lucky I can still walk on my legs, many of the elderlies and disabled living here, get "kidnapped" by their own homes, they are scared they won't be able to come back home if they leave. And being stuck up there without water. ... You always need someone to help. ... The only joy of living in these tall, leaning towers is the view. The mountains ... for a moment you feel you are not in Rome. But then you smell the rotting trash and you look to the ground: the trash hasn't been collected for weeks ... That's why I say we are always the last people to get help, if we ever will.[7]

This breakdown in basic service provision is compounded by limited law enforcement, which contributes to an overall sense of insecurity and abandonment. This is especially relevant in TBM, where crime rates are significantly higher. Distrust in authorities often motivates residents to take justice into their own hands, as outlined by a TBM informant:

> In the tower where a friend of mine used to live, there was a man downstairs who used to play loud music in the middle of the night. My friend, Marco, spoke to him once, twice—he told him "Look, I'm a laborer, I work early in

Figure 3. Photograph of the R5 social housing complex in Tor Bella Monaca. Picture taken from a broken glass window in one of the towers in the R15 social housing complex. Authors' photo, 2021.

> the morning. Let me sleep." But the man wouldn't listen. So, Marco reported him to the authorities, but no one came. The police must have thought, "It's a feud between them, not our concern." One night, Marco went down to confront him, but three men opened the door and beat him up. Marco reported him again, but nothing happened. Later, he told me, "One day I couldn't take it anymore. I grabbed an ax, walked down the stairs, knocked on the door, and as soon as he opened it—I 'axed' him in the forehead." Marco ended up in prison for six months. He was a laborer with a clean record and had to leave his wife and children alone, and he also feared a reprisal. You can ruin your life so easily here. This is why no one here calls the police—we have to protect ourselves and take justice into our own hands.[8]

This account underlines the consequences of weakened institutional presence. The absence of effective response from public authorities fosters a reliance on self-policing and informal justice, further distancing residents from state institutions. Similarly, informants also described informal governance mechanisms related to housing, particularly in squatting practices. Residents often negotiate among themselves over who is entitled to occupy vacant apartments, disregarding official procedures and legal designations.

Displacement

Two senior TBM residents we interviewed,[9] like many others currently living in the area, previously resided in central Rome. A lack of viable alternatives forced their relocation to TBM. In one case, the family could no longer afford rising rents in the city center. In the other, their apartment was converted into an office, which provided greater profits and tax advantages to the owner. These cases reflect a broader pattern of displacement driven by agglomeration economies and the touristification of central Rome. This form of displacement has significantly affected the lives of those involved. One resident shared their personal experience, illustrating both emotional and practical hardships:

> My mother earned a living by repairing clothes and by receiving customers through word of mouth. She had a sewing machine and that was her means to make a living. ... One day, we received a letter at home: It was the ruling of our eviction. Had we not moved, the police would have come to kick us out, as happened to our neighbors. ... We were feeling lucky to be "deported" to TBM; we had no alternative. But moving there turned out traumatic. For my mother it became really difficult, she had to carry on the bus all the clothes she used to repair. Of course, she wasn't paid extra for the extra journey and soon it became anti-economical ... For me ... even today [40 years later] I yearn all the places where I used to live as a lad. I still feel anguish toward the day we were forced away from everything, our work, our friends, our family. We were expelled and planted in a place we don't belong, while all our connections remained with the center of Rome.[10]

This reflection highlights the profound trauma associated with forced relocation from the city center. The impact is twofold. First, eviction leads to the loss of work, social networks, and a sense of identity. Although some residents initially attempt to maintain connections to central Rome, these efforts typically become unsustainable due to the geographic and temporal distance created by displacement. Second, many displaced individuals struggle to rebuild a sense of belonging in the urban peripheries like TBM. Feelings of isolation and neglect are common, and the inability to reestablish meaningful social ties intensifies a sense of exclusion. Again, informants described their social worlds as fragmented—dispersed and unable to access parts of the city and social life.

Labor market exclusion

A further dimension of separation between the city center and the urban periphery relates to the structure and geography of the labor market. Labor market polarization significantly affects urban periphery residents. Highly skilled and secure jobs remain concentrated in the city center, requiring residents from peripheral neighborhoods to travel long distances. At the same time, lower educational attainment among these residents further limits access to such employment, leaving them with precarious and poorly paid work. This dynamic is reflected in respondents' accounts of insecurity and precarity, as illustrated by a senior TBM resident:

> I came from a poor family, I did not have the ambition of doing anything bizarre to make money. I just accepted what I could find, I've always done temporary jobs. Once I used to work in the botanical gardens. Once as a doorman. Sometimes as a taxi driver. ... But most times I've found jobs in agriculture, with peach harvesting. You don't need to know how to do anything, you are just a laborer, and they don't expect much of you. Rarely I got contracts longer than three months, and time passed between one job and the next. ... I remember going to the employment office when there were five positions for three months at ACI [Automobile Club Italy]. Over a thousand people showed up! They used to assign these positions to who had been unemployed for the longest. So, the first usually had something like fifteen or twenty years of unemployment, the second ten, and so on. If you only had five years of unemployment, you would have to settle for crumbs. The problem was if you worked for six months, your unemployment period would reset to zero. It was so hard to find a job in this system.[11]

Many residents shared similar experiences of struggling to access stable employment. Secure, well-paid jobs were consistently perceived as out of reach. One policy response has been the development of large shopping centers in peripheral areas. However, respondents unanimously reported that these had limited positive effects on their well-being. The jobs offered were mostly low-skilled, temporary, and poorly paid even when compared to equivalent jobs in the city-center. As one resident from Ponte di Nona explained their experience with an emerging shopping mall:

> A few people have started working there [in the shopping center], but it is only temporary, and you are just a laborer ... and it pays very little, if you even get paid. If you want to build a curriculum, you must go work in the center. There you can find better salaries, contracts, and opportunities. ... The shopping center has had a bigger impact for the shops than the neighborhood. Nothing really changed for us. ... I still prefer to commute over an hour each way per day and work in the center, for a similar job. ... It's impossible to plan a family like this, how would we pay the rent and everything else with those salaries? My partner and I are forced to stay with our parents and probably won't ever have kids.[12]

This quote underscores the limited utility of shopping centers as employment hubs in the urban peripheries. While they offer jobs, these roles rarely provide long-term security or upward mobility. This resident's decision to endure long commutes reflects a broader trend: younger informants often rely on city center jobs as the only viable means of economic survival, while continuing to live with parents in the urban peripheries.

Stigma

In addition to economic exclusion, many urban periphery residents report experiencing discrimination. This manifests in employment settings and while trying to form social networks beyond their neighborhood. A young TBM resident described the discomfort of job interviews:

> When they ask, "which neighborhood are you from?" we lie or say something like Casilina Avenue, to be as vague as possible. If we say we're from TBM ... it's difficult we'll find a job.[13]

Such perceptions of discrimination contribute to the belief that a hierarchy exists among urban areas, placing periphery residents at the bottom. This perceived inequality is reinforced by media portrayals, which residents claim often depict them as scapegoats for the problems in the city. One respondent cited a 2020 editorial—later retracted—from a columnist at a major national newspaper in relation to the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic. They kept a copy and read it aloud:

> Where do we think the vast majority of the youth disorder that are unsettling the city come from? Where else than the unlivable urban peripheries, from the remote dormitory neighborhoods? ... They come with the murky purpose of spreading infection to the respectable society, to destroy what they cannot have, ... so they spit on the intercoms of the fortunate who live in the city-center.

To which they commented:

> You see how ridiculous this is? But it is what they think of us. To them, we are not the same. We are an underclass, we are warehouses of human flesh, only exploited for the jobs they don't want to do themselves. We don't have the same rights.[14]

These narratives reinforce the idea of urban hierarchies between urban residents. Such stigmatization discourages residents from interacting with other urban populations, further deepening their sense of exclusion. Such findings reflect Wacquant's and Simmel's frameworks on urban outcasts and social anomalies (Wacquant, 2008).

Filtering

The challenges outlined in our data—few employment opportunities, remoteness, discrimination, and insufficient services—are overwhelming for many residents. These conditions often lead to feelings of depression, anxiety, and the desire to leave urban peripheries. Although some succeed in moving away and rebuilding their lives, most struggle to establish emotional and financial security elsewhere. Notably, residents perceive it is those with higher education who are more likely to express ambitions to leave. As a result, many urban peripheries function as filtering areas: only those unable to access education or afford to relocate remain. One younger and educated informant expressed their desire:

> Here in S. Basilio, I only have three friends who went to university and we're the weird ones out of the bunch. ... I would rather live and work in the city, I want to walk to the shops. Here it takes hours to do the simplest things.[15]

Similarly, a senior TBM resident has observed that while many left, he remained behind:

> All those who could leave, are gone. The woman living next to me married to someone wealthy and left. Others left after going to university. Even my partner didn't like TBM. She took our child and left. ... Everyone has been saying for decades that they want to leave. Years have passed, yet we never have. I still hope I'll die somewhere else.[16]

Discussion: Urban sandboxing as processes of marginalization in space

Our empirical evidence reveals multiple scales and dimensions of marginalization, encompassing both adjacent and center-periphery processes. Residents frequently describe adjacent areas, such as Torre Gaia relative to TBM, or inner urban zones, as enclosed and inaccessible, reinforcing their sense of exclusion from the broader urban system. These forms of spatial exclusion are deeply intertwined with broader dynamics of capital accumulation and urban restructuring.

To conceptualize and explain these processes, we introduce *urban sandboxing* as an analytical framework. Borrowed from computer security, where sandboxing isolates a program to prevent the spread of viruses and malfunctions (Greamo & Ghosh, 2011; Technopedia, 2020), we conceptualize urban sandboxing as the lived experience resulting from urban fragmentation and spatial encasement.

Urban sandboxing captures both tangible and intangible aspects of spatial marginalization, as well as their interactions. In Rome, physical boundaries, including gated housing and poor infrastructure, compound with imagined barriers like stigma to produce and reproduce marginalization. This is visible in stark physical demarcations, such as the gated neighborhood of Torre Gaia, and in intangible barriers, exemplified by the missing overpass in Fidene or the pervasive stigma associated with some urban periphery neighborhoods. The cumulative effect of slowed flows regulates inclusion and reproduces inequality.

This framework helps to illustrate how peripheral communities are enclosed by physical barriers, infrastructural gaps, housing costs, and social stigma, all of which restrict their integration into the urban. Unlike absolute exclusion, sandboxing operates through friction: residents remain within urban boundaries but face persistent constraints in accessing housing, services, and economic opportunities. Visualizing the urban as encased in urban sandboxes, enhances our understanding of the interplay between imaginary and tangible urban margins, which delineate the spaces of capital accumulation and exclusion.

This framework grounds empirically the connection between market-driven urban transformation and everyday experiences of marginalization. It serves as a tangible complement to the high levels of abstraction and universalism associated with planetary urbanization. This is achieved by centering on the observable scales and instances of market-driven urban transformation, giving priority to the behavioral, psychological, and cultural dimensions of spatial exclusion. Consequently, urban sandboxing is not only the means through which planetary urbanization manifests and is experienced on the ground, but also serves as an analytical instrument for comprehending the market-driven urbanization and exclusion.

Urban sandboxing can be observed and applied to diverse contexts—ranging from tourist cities in Southern Europe experiencing rent gaps as well as Global South, where colonial legacies, ambiguity in governance, or fragmented infrastructure are more pronounced.

Future research on emerging urban frontiers and the uneven geographies of contemporary urbanization can apply this framework to reveal the subtle architectures of inclusion and exclusion that underpin twenty-first-century urbanization. It can be identified by seeking empirical manifestations of friction toward access to urban systems. These can include physical barriers as well as ambiguous or psychological boundaries. Methodologically, ethnographic participatory approaches, such as the go-along method, are indispensable for detecting these otherwise invisible sandboxes. By accompanying residents through their daily routines, researchers can trace how individuals and communities navigate urban space, thereby revealing hidden margins. This approach emerges as vital in grasping the emergence of sandboxing, and the resistance toward it.

Conclusions

This study explored the experiences of marginalization in the urban peripheries of Rome in association with market-driven urban transformations, including tertiarization, and the adoption of a tourist-oriented economy. Our findings show that spatial restructuring in Rome produces both tangible and intangible forms of exclusion. These include infrastructural disconnection, segregation, exclusion from the labor market, displacement, and social stigma. Marginalization operates across multiple spatial scales, with empirical evidence revealing both adjacent and center—periphery dynamics.

To conceptualize these multidimensional experiences, this article introduced urban sandboxing as a novel analytical framework. This framework illustrates how specific parts of the city and their residents become spatially and socially encased within metaphorical sandboxes. The sandboxes consist of varying degrees of physical, social, and psychological friction that hinder integration into the broader urban fabric. By capturing how these constraints unfold and are experienced across scales, urban sandboxing offers a more concrete framework for empirical analysis and addresses the excessively abstract and universalizing tendencies of planetary urbanization.

Based on our findings, we recommend policy interventions to address marginalization and reinforce urban cohesion in Rome by fostering stronger integration between peripheral and central areas. This includes investment in infrastructure and the creation of new opportunities for residents in the urban peripheries.

There is ample room for exploring and improving urban sandboxing as an analytical framework in future research. Studies should further explore how sandboxing unfolds across diverse urban contexts, such as other Southern European cities with large tourist economies or rapidly expanding metropolitan areas in the Global South. Comparative case studies can enhance our understanding of how socioeconomic, political, and historical factors shape sandboxing, and inform the development of more sustainable urban designs that reduce friction and promote the integration of peripheral populations.

Notes

1. Informant 1.
2. Informant 8.
3. Informant 2.
4. Informant 1.
5. Informant 3.
6. Informants 1 and 2.
7. Informant 1.
8. Informant 2.
9. Informants 1 and 2.
10. Informant 1.
11. Informant 1.
12. Informant 2.
13. Informant 4.
14. Informant 2. As the article has been retracted, we could not independently verify the original article.
15. Informant 5.
16. Informant 2.

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