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# **Self-organized peripheries in Mediterranean cities. Examples from Rome and Jerusalem**

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## **Abstract**

*A millennia-old urban history shaped Mediterranean inner cities (Hakim 1988, 2014, Caniggia and Maffei 1979), whereas overall weak regulatory frameworks and attempts of forced modernization produced patchworks of informal, deregulated neighborhoods and top-down planned urban projects during the last decades. The urbanization process within the self-organized context is a fruit of two (overlapped) processes: self-constructed popular urbanization (Streule et al. 2020) and informal but market-driven and developer-led plot-by-plot urbanization (Karaman et al. 2020), in which it could be combined in space and time.*

*The paper will focus on the self-organized system as a way for inhabitants themselves to build their own neighborhoods and fulfill their needs. Deregulated settlements from Rome (Italy), and Jerusalem (Palestine) have been taken as case studies to understand the resulting urban morphology and to formulate hypotheses on the self-organized system efficiency in responding to inhabitant needs, representing the human scale approach, and producing a more adaptive and complex system than the regulated plans and projects.*

*Questioning the advantages and shortcomings of self-organized systems brings to the table alternatives to traditional urban planning theories, norms, and approaches, especially when it comes to urban complexity and inhabitant satisfaction in a structural lack of public funding and intervention capacity.*

*Keywords: self-organization, urban planning, urban morphology, urban complexity*

## Introduction

Building the physical city was always a question of shared responsibilities, as it includes different stakeholders, contexts, and factors to have the intended form and function. The resulting form of the physical city is the outcome of continuous interactions between three main coordination mechanisms: culture, market, and politics. The three mechanisms are path-dependent in the way that they interact with the physical form inherited from the past. The mutual interaction among the previous mechanisms results in the urbanization process. The sociotechnical process – which could range from spontaneous to the most controlled structure – leads to the actual fabrication of the city (what French scholars call *fabrique urbaine*, Noizet, 2009).

Self-organized systems in the urban peripheries are often described for their chaotic appearance, crucial lack of public spaces, amenities, public facilities, and access to reliable infrastructure due to limited urban planning. As a result, the system is frequently undervalued and viewed as an unreliable planning method. However, understanding it is important, as it might contribute to finding good urban-human planning practices.

What is particularly absent in self-organized urban peripheral growth is the political coordination of urban planning. Culture and markets are the most important coordination mechanisms of urbanization. Lacking the filter of professional planners, the self-organized system could represent a more direct and actual relationship between inhabitants and space. In other words, it reflects inhabitants' practices, preferences, culture, and lifestyle while respecting the space's limitations and opportunities. In the self-organized context, the system would keep adjusting itself until the whole neighborhood reaches the balance between “standards of quality of life” and “human preferences”. The way the system adjusts itself and deals with different constraints reveals hidden methods and techniques for low-cost urban development and represents factors behind the resulting urban structure. Furthermore, inhabitants tend to construct buildings (residential, commercial, mixed-use... etc.) for their needs and daily life satisfaction, therefore,

hypothetically, a human-scale approach could be intensely applied in these contexts unless different factors intervene.

The paper's objective is not to assume that the self-organized system is the perfect way for development and urban growth, but instead, it aims at understanding how the system functions, its factors, and what good practices could be derived from it. As the system already has the tendency to improve and adapt, it might present an opportunity for developers, authorities, and stakeholders, to work side by side with inhabitants, and practice bottom-up planning to achieve better living conditions for inhabitants.

## **Case studies overview**

The paper will discuss two main case studies, the first in Rome, called Borgate and the second is from Jerusalem called Kufr Aqab. Both case studies are urban peripheries within Mediterranean cities, sharing similar Mediterranean culture, mentality, and residential preferences (namely attachment to home ownership). Furthermore, both are self-organized and built by inhabitants themselves with the least to no urban planning regulations. In more detail:

### **- *Rome case study – Borgate***

Between 1950 and 1980 the city of Rome experienced a huge urban expansion, the municipality, at that time, was unable to cope with the fast demanding urban growth, failing to provide land to meet future housing needs. As a result, spontaneous “irreducible neighborhoods” emerged in vacant lands, and poor families themselves (masons, carpenters, and other craftsmen) built their neighborhoods within a self-organized system taking the name of Borgate (Vallat, 1995). More precisely, we are focusing here on the 84 illegal Borgate of the second after-war period, to be distinguished from the few legal Borgate which had been developed as social housing projects by the Fascist regime in the 1930s. The existence of the illegal Borgate neighborhoods in Rome was gradual, residents fought for their services and essentials (access to

water, gas, electricity, transport, and even citizenship recognition). Between 1982-1997 the government accepted the official recognition of the districts and their inhabitants as full citizens. It is followed by providing them with the needed services, and infrastructure, through detailed master plans that foresaw a few essential public facilities. Nowadays, the 84 Borgate are legally recognized within Zone “O” in the communal boundaries of Rome (Vallat, 1995).

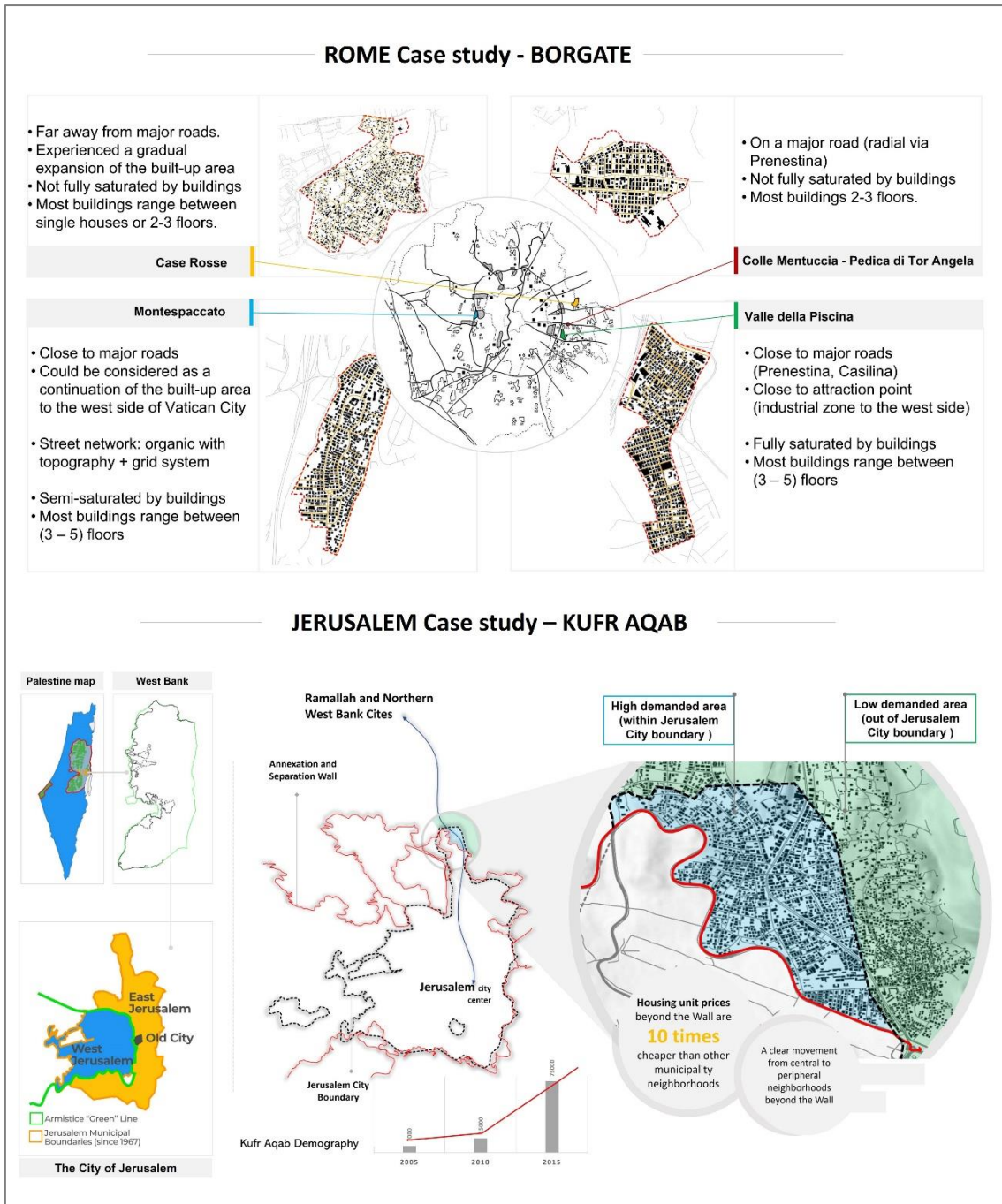
In favor of the main objective of the paper, the research will take four neighborhoods to focus on as they are different in terms of population, built-up area densities, street networks, topography, history, development process, building types, proximity to major access to the city center and to attraction points. This variation might help to understand the different cases in Rome, and find some general conclusions after all. The selected neighborhoods as shown in figure (1), are as follows: Colle Mentuccia, Valle della Piscina, Case Rosse, and Montespaccato.

- ***Jerusalem Case Study – Kufr Aqab***

The second case study is named Kufr Aqab - Jerusalem, which is located within Jerusalem municipality’s official boundaries but separated from the city center by the Annexation and Separation Wall (constructed in 2003). After the enactment of the policy of “Center of life” in 1996, the households’ increasing fear of losing access to the city, and the unaffordable housing supply, lead inhabitants to migrate beyond the Wall to more affordable neighborhoods located within the city boundary such as Kufr Aqab. Figure (1) shows the Kufr Aqab location and its characteristics.

It is worth mentioning that the “Center of life” policy means that Palestinians are required to prove that they are living within the official Municipal boundaries to maintain their “Residency Permits” - a permit to stay in or access the city. Therefore, inhabitants find their own way to fulfill their needs through a self-organized urban structure within the peripheral area of the city. Households and developers tend to construct illegal buildings to accommodate more inhabitants, and to still benefit from the proximity to the city as well as the “citizenship status”. The resulting

built-up area can be considered as a complex mixture of building use (commercial, residential, industrial use) accompanied by scant services and infrastructures that do not meet inhabitants' needs. The presence of the dividing line of Jerusalem's city boundary allows for some difference in observed urban forms, between a high- and a low-demand area, making the comparison with Rome's different Borgate even more pertinent.



## **Methodology**

In this paper, a comparative analysis methodology was applied to the research objects, which allowed for a thorough morpho-functional analysis within the local and historical urban contexts. It aims at understanding inhabitants' attitudes toward the space and the surrounding area. Besides, it aims at better analyzing the resulting urban form in the self-organized context, and the factors behind its functionality.

The comparative analysis does not seek to simply find similarities or differences between the two case studies (Rome and Jerusalem). Instead, it pursues to shed light on inhabitants' practices in the context of no regulations and find conclusions for best practices in urban planning, development, and resilience to some levels. In addition, the methodology aims at exploring the hypothesis of a relatively high level of complexity achieved, its' endeavors, and circumstances in fulfilling inhabitants' needs.

The paper analysis is based on remote observation of the case study areas, it counts on a comprehensive consideration of statistical and administrative mapping by governmental or institutional entities, besides, a broad of local research and publications. The remote work will help to create preliminary findings about the two case studies, hence, formulate hypotheses that will have to be confirmed by further fieldwork.

## **Morphological analysis**

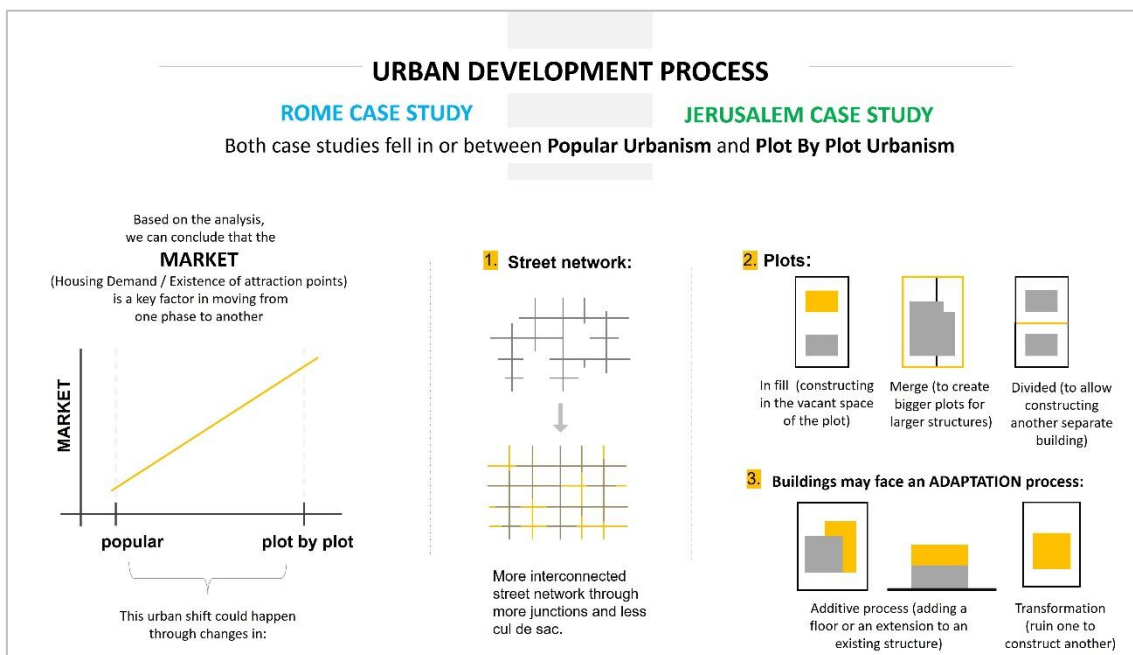
In favor of the paper's main objectives, an urban morphological comparative analysis was applied based on seven main pillars, which are as follows:

### ***1. Urban development process:***

The "popular self-urbanization" and the "deregulated plot-by-plot urbanization" presented by Schmidt et al. (2018) define a framework for the urban development process in self-organized systems. This distinction between "popular" and "plot-by-plot" urbanism is not clear-cut, while

there are striking similarities in certain low-income neighborhoods, therefore, overlapped processes can be seen at the same time in a given area (Streule et al., 2020). However, the question of “*for whom the inhabitants build*” can differentiate between the two processes. Popular self-urbanization is mainly the fact of households building their own dwelling, in plot-by-plot urbanization build-to-sell practices become more widespread, and illegal developers are the main agents of urbanization.

From the two case studies, the key factor to shift from one phase to another is the market mechanism, as shown in figure (2). In other words, the existence of attraction points in the area, or the increase in the housing demand, could create a market cycle from the wave of supply and demand. The transfer from one urban development phase to another could happen through a gradual change in the urban form elements as shown in figure (2).



In the case of Rome, there are different urban development processes, and it differs from one Borgata to another. Some Borgate follows popular urbanism such as “Case Rosse”, with a medium-low land occupancy rate, others plot by plot such as “Valle della Piscina”, showing a much higher occupancy rate of the land. One of the hypotheses surrounding the Borgate case

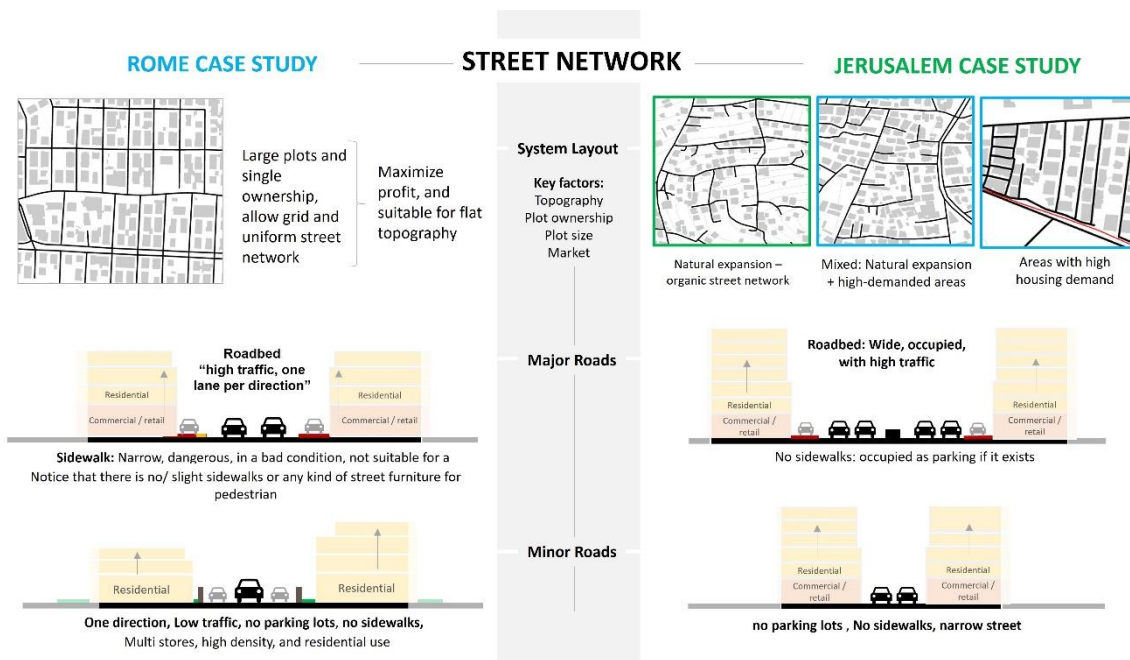


study is that: all Borgate had a 1<sup>st</sup> development cycle of individual houses in large plots used as utilitarian gardens, as a result of popular self-urbanism (the 1950s, 1960s). The best connected experienced an adaptive redevelopment through market-led plot-by-plot urbanism (the 1970s, 1980s). There is some evidence of this already in Vallat (1995) and a striking parallel with phenomena observed in Turkish cities (Karaman et al., 2020; Ünlü, 2021).

The urban development process in Jerusalem's low-demanded areas is comparable to that in Rome's Borgate neighborhoods. Residents frequently construct their own homes, businesses, and neighborhoods in accordance with their requirements and cultural preferences for individual houses with utilitarian gardens. Consequently, the urban development process tends to fill in popular urbanism, where development is mainly for inhabitants themselves, with a low land occupancy rate. It might gradually change into plot-by-plot urbanism based on the willingness of inhabitants to change to flat living under financial constraints, the market demand, and the availability of capital. However, in high-demanded areas, the urban development process approaches the plot-by-plot urbanism concept much earlier, as landowners or developers prefer to invest in land and build with a high occupancy rate for those in need of accommodation.

## ***2. Street Network:***

Based on the primary observation of case studies, street network structure follows four fundamental elements: topography, plot ownership, plot size, and the market (housing projects induce more uniform planned street networks). The street networks in both cases have a pedestrian scale in terms of block size and street width, but there is an overwhelming presence of cars (traffic and parking). Figure (3) shows the characteristics of the street network in both case studies.



Large plots and single ownership were more prevalent in Borgate districts in Rome, allowing for a grid and regular street network system to increase occupancy rates and optimize the profit from each plot. In terms of street furniture and roadbed architecture:

- Major roads in Borgate neighborhoods serve as the main access to the city center and can connect different areas of the city, like in the case of Colle Mentuccia. In terms of sidewalks, there are no sidewalks, and the ones that do exist are typically narrow, dangerous, and not suitable for a major road, and most often, they are used as car parking lots to serve commercial and residential land use.
- Minor roads: secondary streets in Borgate areas tend to be small, one-way, and less heavily used than major roads. They also lack parking spaces and sidewalks. As a result, residents often park in vacant spaces on the street and stroll past automobiles.

In the case of Jerusalem, plots are relatively small compared to Rome's case study, and land ownership is different between adjacent plots, this increases the need to have specific access to each plot. As a result, and specifically, in the low demanded areas, more natural and organic street networks arose to serve the area. Over time, the densification process, and different land use

induce more connections and junctions, see the illustration in figure (3). However, in the high demanded areas, investors and small developers tend to apply modifications on plots (merge or division) before the urbanization process, in favor of creating a profitable grid street network system first and then investing in bigger accessible projects (housing projects). As a result, a more uniform and integrated street network arises, see the illustration in figure (3).

In terms of street furniture and roadbed architecture:

- Major roads: the major road in kufr Aqab is the direct access between the city of Ramallah and Jerusalem, passing the Qalandya checkpoint. The roadbed and furniture are not that much equipped for the high daily traffic. Despite the two lanes per way, the roads are most often occupied by both vehicles (private small cars, busses, taxis, and trucks) and pedestrians who struggle for sidewalks. The illustration in figure (3) shows the distribution of cars and land use on the major road in Kufr Aqab.
- Minor Roads: there are two types of minor roads, one in the low-demanded area which shares the same characteristics as minor roads in Borgate. The second type exists in the high-demanded area, where roads are extremely narrow compared to the number of people served and buildings' height, besides, residents suffer from the huge need for sidewalks and parking lots. The illustration in figure (3) explains the situation in high-demanded areas in Jerusalem.

### **3. Plot**

Plots are a key factor in urban morphology, in the self-organized context, as they have a major role in the formation and later in the adaptation of the built-up form. The land occupancy rate, the urbanization strategy, and the variety of development used may all be driven by the size, form, and ownership of each plot. In the case of Rome, and more precisely in Colle Mentuccia, the small number of plot owners and the relatively big-sized plot allowed a systematic division of the land in a uniform way, this affected the distribution of streets and buildings after. Rome's rural

peripheries were indeed characterized by widespread latifundia (Strappa, 2012) which, in the case of many Borgate, were subdivided for illegal housing during the 1950s.

In the case of Jerusalem, small rural ownership was historically more frequent. Plots are thus relatively smaller than Rome's, with non-uniform shapes, and different ownership, which creates more limitations and drives development to follow informality. Knowing that the area was agricultural before, many plots took a longitude shape that is suitable for traditional agriculture activities, however, for the urban expansion seeks, inhabitants merged many plots to create suitable ones for construction purposes. The previous scenario happened quite often in the high-demanded areas where investors and developers apply modifications to the plot before going through their development. This allowed them to have larger plots suitable for bigger housing projects. However, in the low demanded areas, inhabitants adapt their buildings to the size and shape of the rural plots.

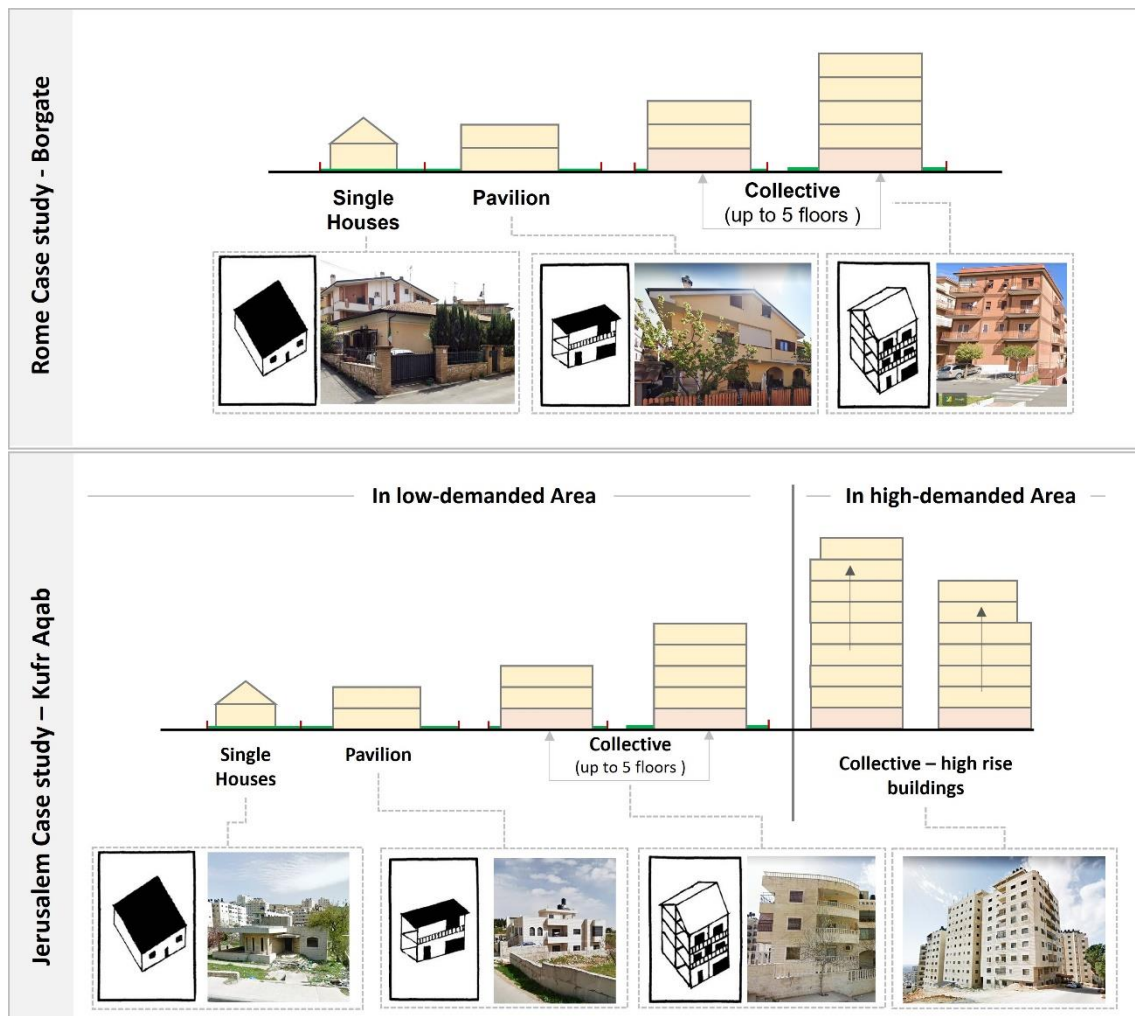
#### ***4. Buildings:***

Buildings are the smallest components of the urban form; they represent the image of the city or neighborhood by reflecting inhabitants' culture, identity, and preferences, and provide a space for various activities and land use. Analyzing both case studies reveals that despite the contexts' variances and the cases' differences, the building types are similar in many respects. Both cases are sharing three building types:

- Single houses: relatively compact one-floor structures, frequently gated off and surrounded by greenery;
- Pavilions: compact two-floor structures are often constructed over the course of several decades as an extension of the "single house" type, owing to the need for additional room and the availability of funding;
- Collective buildings that range from three to five floors. the collective building types eventually appeared due to, first, finding a place for a new family (married family

member), hence, it is easier and cheaper for the owner to add another floor rather than to begin constructing a new house. Second, to respond to the housing demand in the area, small developers invest in new buildings, new floors, or apartments for tenant purposes.

Figure (4) describes building types in Borgate in Rome – Colle Mentuccia, and building types in Jerusalem – Kufr Aqab in low and high- demanded areas.



Single houses and pavilion types are usually fenced with more vegetation around, and less occupancy rate compared to other types. However, in collective building types, they are also fenced but with less vegetation around them as the occupancy rate is higher and the existence of mixed land use (commercial on the ground floor and residential above).

In the case of Jerusalem, building types in the low-demanded areas are quite similar to the one in Borgate, with some differences in building identity, material, and kind of vegetation, but overall, they are similar in terms of the gradual development of buildings, extensions, added floors, beside the privacy and security level preferences. However, the situation is completely different in high-demanded areas, where collective – high-rise buildings intensively appeared.

### 5. *Public spaces and green areas:*

Together, they make up one of the most significant elements of the urban form. They bring livability, health, and aesthetic values to the area, by providing spaces for activities and green life (Jabbar et al., 2021). By analyzing the case studies, many vacant and green areas appear in the aerial photos, which could be green or public spaces. However, realities are completely different from expectations; as these open spaces are not actually open for public use, but instead, they are almost always fenced private plots, under-construction areas, or private gardens. See figure (5).



The previous induced some conclusion about the self-organized system; It is uncommon to find such features, as inhabitants have the tendency to ignore public benefits over private ones. In

the context of increasing land demand, the issue becomes significantly worse, hence, streets, sidewalks, and junctions are used as parking lots or as public areas for daily life activities. In Rome, post-legalization plans did introduce some public green areas in the Borgate. However, the examples of Parco di San Patrizio (Colle Mentuccia), Parco di Via Calimera (Valle della Piscina), or the Parco di Via Guglielmi (Montespaccato) show that these green areas are always located at the edge of the illegal settlement, disconnected from the main thoroughfares, and hence have a low potential of becoming local centers of public life.

Many different remarks can be made in the case of Rome and Jerusalem, first of all, inhabitants' propensity to prioritize their needs above others, and they are more concerned with their immediate surroundings than with the broader good of the community. On the one hand, it makes sense for a foreigner who seeks stability, security, and comfort, but on the other hand, this attitude prevents inhabitants from interacting with their neighbors or meeting new people in the area. From this point of view, the observable forms of the illegal self-organized neighborhoods seem to witness the hard reality of a hostile environment, creating a need for protection more than for interaction.

Once the settlement is established, it is hard for newcomers who sought affordable houses, or bought expensive land, to give some of their lands up for public use, especially, when there are no rules or guarantees to protect, take care of, or use it for public purposes. Post-legalization public gardens (as in Rome) tend to be located at the periphery of the settlements.

Second, public and green areas may characterize the neighborhood lifestyle, and they can add specific flavors to the neighborhood image. However, the question remains, do people in the self-organized system need these public spaces or not?

- At the very early stage of illegal urbanization (the 1950s and 1960s in Rome's Borgate, the 2000s in Kufr Aqab), big gardens were sought by newcomers from the rural countryside to grow their own fruit and vegetables.

- Less need for public and green areas if it is customary for each home to have a private garden, where most family activities may take place. Furthermore, in traditional Mediterranean culture, it is common to visit and extend invitations at home than to meet outside especially when there are social relationships between families, kinship, or they do trust each other.
- An urgent need for public and green areas if the neighborhood is saturated by built-up areas (ex. high-rise buildings), and a heterogeneous population. Hence, residents could ask for public and green spaces (to be verified by fieldwork).

The previous could explain why people in some self-organized systems are satisfied even if their neighborhood does not meet the least urban planning standards. Fieldwork research on neighborhood satisfaction will be needed to confirm this hypothesis.

Nowadays, even private gardens diminish, as the urban lifestyle is different now from before. With the increase in car dependency, parking lots surpassed private gardens and public spaces in importance. Therefore, compromising at some level is required and it is already happening.

#### **6. *Human scale:***

The human scale can be defined as the proportion of the space, elements, and features in relation to the human dimension and its physical capabilities (Radwan & Morsi, 2019). In the self-organized context, the Human scale means that the scale of buildings in the neighborhood is suitable for daily life activities, hence, inhabitants can practice their activities without resorting to technology. Additionally, it indicates that more varied land uses and less zoning planning are used in the development, and the main goal is to construct for people aiming to improve human interactions.

Finding out whether the self-organized system can create a human-scale urban form, and whether it may serve as a raw model for human-scale development or not, is one of the paper's



primary hypotheses. The paper will take three main pillars to evaluate the human scale in the case of Rome and Jerusalem.

- First, walkability: in the context of the self-organized system, it is unfair to assess walkability using urban planning standards, while the built-up area grows “naturally” without being bound by any urban regulations. The level of walkability may count on the proximity to services and public buildings, street conditions, inhabitants’ age, slope, shades, shadows ...etc. However, in the self-organized setting, inhabitants’ attitudes are prioritized over the previous standards! Despite the heavy reliance on cars, a self-organized neighborhood can be considered walkable in the sense that residents can access their needs within a walkable distance (300–500 meters) or with the least amount of effort required, either on foot or by car;
- Second, enclosure: refers to how a neighborhood makes pedestrians feel while strolling through. It may transmit positive vibes (encouraging walking and other outdoor activities), or negative vibes (feeling imprisoned or feeling lost). Field analysis is needed to testify the walkability and enclosure pillars;
- Third: life between buildings: it reflects the street life and activities within “the public and green areas”, even when they are reduced to the minimum. The difference between self-organized systems and zoned-planned ones basically comes down to the ability of land use diversification to produce such a life inside the community. In the self-organized system, people may adapt their buildings, routines, and activities to suit their needs, cultures, and lifestyles, hence, life between buildings gradually appears.

The previous may differ from one street, section, or neighborhood to another, therefore, a more thorough analysis is intended to verify the hypothesis and achieve more specific conclusions, also taking into account inhabitants’ perceptions.

## 7. *Urban transect:*

The urban-to-rural transect is an urban planning model created by the New Urbanist Andrés Duany. The transect defines a series of zones that transition from sparse rural farmhouses to the dense urban core. Each zone is fractal in that it contains a similar transition from the edge to the center of the neighborhood (Deal, 2017). The urban transect in a self-organized context provides indicators about the built-up areas' formation, limitations, and inhabitants' preferences as well. Furthermore, it conceives primary conclusions about land availability, ownership, development history, and inhabitants' lifestyle.

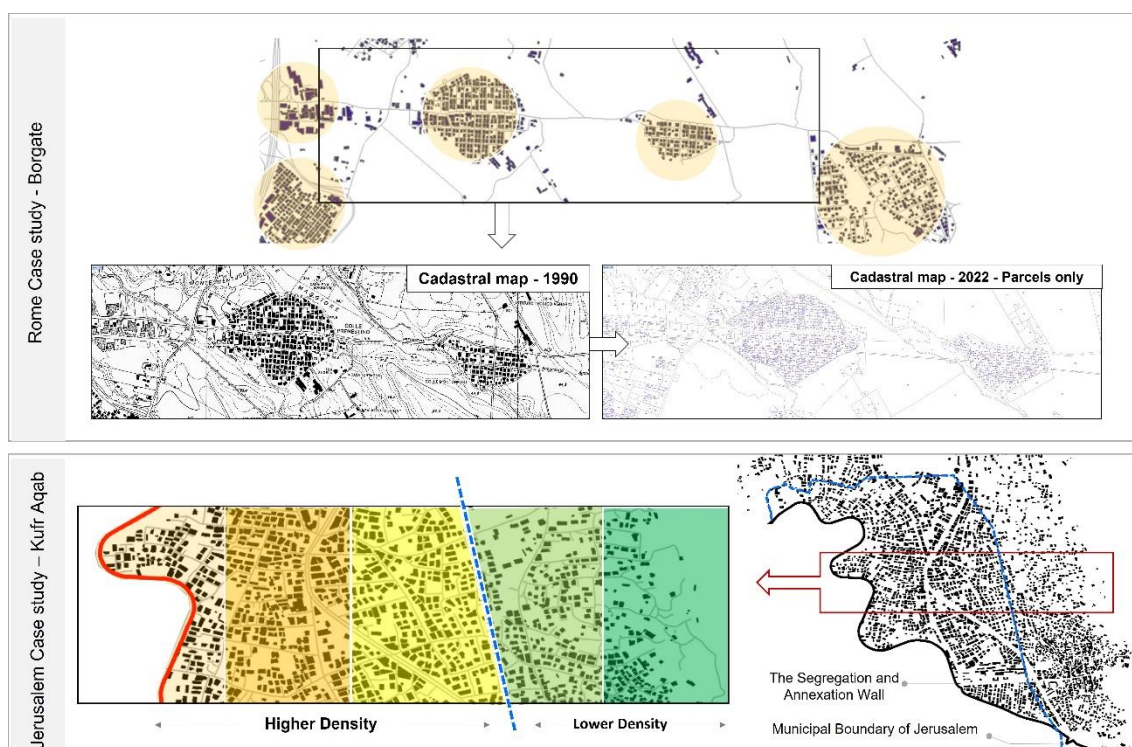
In the Rome case study, and by taking the Colle Mentuccia neighborhood, built-up areas spread in a leapfrogged way, where there is no continuity or gradual urbanization in the urban transect as it is supposed to be. Instead, neighborhoods are separated by pure agricultural lands with sharp edges, see figure (6). By going deep into the case study different scenarios can be concluded to describe the previous phenomena.

- Land ownership and size: the big-sized land and the few landowners allowed for regular land division and individual urbanization investment, even if the location of landlords ready to accept illegal subdivisions on their land is haphazard (hence the leapfrog development);
- Population trends: Rome's population stability by 1980 lessened housing demand, and the Borgate growth as a result, freezing their tendency to coalesce;
- Allocation and proximity to services: being "isolated" and far away from attraction points, decrease housing demand, hence urban growth;
- The following regulations: governmental interventions, compact city approach, and Rome's metropolitan boundary lessen horizontal expansion.

In the case of Jerusalem, the urban transect is completely different from Rome's case study but also different from the "normal gradual" model of urban transects. Different urban densities

can be noticed along the urban transect, as it gets denser in the highly demanded area within the Jerusalem boundary, and clearly, fewer outside the boundary, see figure (6). The rationale for the urban transect is as follows:

- Political situation, and the continuing population growth: As long as the existent political and administrative situation remains, as long as people will keep dwelling in Kufir Aqab;
- Land availability, ownership, and size: small, limited, and hereditary lands constrain larger urban projects, land regular division, and promote condensed built-up areas;
- Close to attraction points and facilities: since Kufir Aqab functions as a connection point between northern Westbank cities and Jerusalem, the location attracts many investments and commercial activities, thus, continuous urban growth.



## Conclusion

Self-organized urbanization, and the context of deregulated urban growth, are usually labeled as unqualified urban growth. The stereotypical urban planning approach sees that urban development and expansion should follow strict norms and standards in order to fulfill inhabitants' needs. The inhabitant/space relationship inspired by human culture, lifestyle, preferences, and attitudes, could create a complex phenomenon within the urban system. In the case of low-income populations, planning standards and norms could just be incompatible with the purchasing power of inhabitants and their cultural aspirations (Bertaud 2018). The alternative would be massive government intervention in social housing, which often resulted in high standardization and thwarted people's aspiration to home ownership.

The urban morphological and functional analysis - done through this paper- states that despite the differences between the two case studies particularly in housing demand and land availability, the self-organized system "hypothetically" could produce a more adaptive and complex system than controlled plans and projects. In Both Rome and Jerusalem, inhabitants avoid the simplified forms and functional specialized projects and tend to construct multi-use forms instead. In addition, Borgate and Kufr Aqab started as extremely low-cost urbanization but have been able to adapt incrementally over time whether through the first or second development cycle. Consequently, they can be considered as an example of ordinary city growth through the incremental mechanisms of typo-morphological adaptation as explained by Muratori (Trisciuglio et al., 2021).

The coming work will be dedicated to verifying these preliminary findings. The actual usage of public space, public/private interfaces, neighborhood satisfaction, and other related issues will be the object of a more specific investigation. Therefore, exploratory mapping and fieldwork, are required, accompanied by iterative rounds of detailed observations, questionnaires, and interviews with inhabitants and experts in order to confirm or infirm hypotheses and preliminary conclusions.

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**Illustrations and tables:**

- Figure (1): Location and characteristics of both case studies (Rome Case study – Borgate, and Jerusalem Case study – Kufr Aqab)
- Figure (2): Urban development process in both case studies (Rome and Jerusalem).
- Figure (3): Street network characteristics in both case studies (Rome and Jerusalem).
- Figure (4): Building types in Borgate in Rome - Colle Mentuccia, and in Jerusalem - Kufr Aqab in low and high- demanded areas.
- Figure (5): Aerial photo analysis expectation vs reality in terms of green and public spaces in both case studies (Rome and Jerusalem)
- Figure (6): Urban transect in both case studies (Rome and Jerusalem)