

Research Article



A Tale of Two Squats: Gentrification and Urban Movements in Contemporary Ljubljana

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Introduction

In the early morning hours of January 19, 2021, in Ljubljana, the squatters of the Rog Autonomous Factory woke up to the intrusion of an eviction crew. Although this was not the first time the municipality attempted to evict Rog, this time the squatters would not be able to fend off the guards, riot police, and demolition crew deployed to evict all squatters and tear down their settlements. After only a couple of hours, not much remained of what had been created by the squatters for the preceding 15 years.

At the same time, only a brisk 10-minute-walk away, a regular morning passed at the squatted Autonomous Cultural Centre Metelkova Mesto. Having stood as an alternative cultural institution in the city for three decades, the squat has endured pressures of eviction and legalisation, yet the municipality seems to accept parts of Metelkova's 'alternative' presence. Perhaps more than that, Metelkova's status as a tourist attraction and vivid space for culture and nightlife seems to grant it some protection from eviction.

How can we understand the differing fates of two long-standing, large-scale squats within the same city? What caused the municipality to crack down on Rog, while Metelkova is tolerated, perhaps accepted? This paper attempts to answer these questions by focusing on interactions between each of the two spaces and the gentrification of Ljubljana, drawing on a total of 6 weeks of ethnographic fieldwork in Ljubljana across two visits (2019 and 2022 respectively). The analysis is informed by participant observation, 19 qualitative interviews with a total of 23 participants (including activists, urban planners, cultural workers, and municipal officials), as well as document analysis of both activist texts and municipal policy. By putting this material in dialogue with relevant literature on urban squatters' movements and gentrification as a global project with local idiosyncrasies, I advance the argument that the two outcomes may partly be understood through the respective relationships of the two autonomous spaces towards Ljubljana's 'creative' development strategies.

Metelkova and Rog as squats

At its core, urban squatting is a straight-forward phenomenon. A commonplace definition posits that squatting is *the unlawful occupation of dwellings*. Going beyond this rudimentary definition, Thörn (2012) has highlighted how long-term squatted spaces may engage in struggles to combine autonomy and publicness through the formation of a counter-public sphere. Such ideals of publicness were integral to the interpretations of *autonomy of* many Rog and Metelkova activists', embodying a counterpoint towards urban enclosures and authoritarian political developments. As formulated by one of my interlocutors, speaking for both Metelkova and Rog:

I would also say that because of its material conditions it offers a theoretical standpoint, or political standpoint, from which processes that are taking place in the city can be articulated. It's not an abstract discussion anymore, when we speak about gentrification or political struggles. It's a very material position.

(Interviewee cited in Siegrist & Thörn 2020, p. 1851).

For many activists, framings of *autonomous space* as a counterfoil to the gentrification of the city centre sustained their engagement in the squats over time. Among them, there was a wide range of common themes in interpretations of autonomy: independence from commercialisation and official institutional bodies; aversion to hierarchical authority in favour of self-management and horizontal decision-making; critical attitudes towards professionalisation of civil society. These autonomous ideals led to political demands related to both *being left alone* (i.e., remaining ‘autonomous’) and to co-shape the city as a space of cohabitation.

Geographically, Metelkova and Rog were both large-scale squatted spaces spanning multiple buildings and several thousand square meters each, both located within the heart of the city centre of Ljubljana. Metelkova consists of the former Slovenian headquarters of the Yugoslav People’s Army, which was dedicated as a space for cultural activities in the late 80s. After the municipality instead attempted to demolish the site in 1993, it was quickly squatted by activists connected to the alternative cultural and political scene and has since become a permanent squat. The Rog factory grounds, on the other hand, represents an important institution in Ljubljana’s industrial heritage. Industrial use of the area goes back to the late 1800s, while the main factory building was erected during the early 1900s (Second Chance 2012, p. 79). Initially known for leather production prior to and during the second World War, the factory workers manufactured typewriters and a now-iconic brand of Rog bicycles from the 1950s onwards. During the Yugoslav era, the factory was governed in accordance with principles of workers’ self-management. Production closed permanently during the early 1990s and the factory was abandoned. Unofficially, the factory site was sporadically used for cultural activities and the like, yet remained officially empty, until it was squatted by activists in 2006 (Ibid.).



Figure 1 The southern part of Metelkova, filled with artist interventions. The buildings host artistic ateliers, political collectives, and nightlife and represent a major tourist attraction in Ljubljana, in contrast to the picturesque city centre. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Despite shared similarities, the spaces were in many respects distinct in terms of activities and layout. For instance, Metelkova emerged in tandem with Slovenian national independence and has garnered acceptance by the municipality over time. Whereas no competing projects to Metelkova were realised, Rog was squatted in 2006 and has throughout its existence competed with large-scale investment plans, although these plans have shifted over time. Initially, the 2006–2007 development plans for the Rog area were based on the model of *public-private partnerships*, to fund a hotel and high-end apartments in the former factory. After the 2008 financial crisis, however, the would-be investors withdrew from the project, causing the funding model to collapse (Abram 2017).

After a reconstruction of the investment project, a new so-called “public-civic” model of the emergent Center Rog replaced the public-private partnership model (Štular 2021). This model instead connects to many of the ideals held by squatters, such as migrant inclusion, spaces for DIY culture and arts, and free-to-access public space, which are embodied in the plans for a public library and a public park. Ultimately, it was the finalization of the Center Rog plans along with the closure of a long-winded court process between Rog squatters and the municipality that paved the way for the eviction of Rog squatters in 2021. At the time of writing, the ‘project value’ invested in Center Rog is just shy of 20 million euros and its estimated time of completion is set to 2023 (Municipality of Ljubljana 2022).

The Rog area was thus from the outset contested by private and public entities, arguably making the squat more precarious than its older counterpart. Moreover, Metelkova’s affinity for attracting tourists and merry partygoers was overall less mirrored by Rog. Whereas Metelkova is filled with elaborate graffiti and art installations while being easy to stroll through, the Rog area was walled off by concrete structures initially intended to enclose the industrial area from the outside city.



Figure 2. Autonomous Rog Factory prior to eviction. The large mural portrays a DIY gun, embellished with the international squatters’ symbol, pointed towards the neighbouring city centre, indicating a declaration of war towards the gentrification of Ljubljana. It was painted by street-artist BLU, after Rog was successfully defended from an eviction attempt in 2016. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Gentrification on global and local scales

As much as this is a tale of two squats, it is also the tale of one city. The urban development of Ljubljana influenced the activist communities’ engagement within Rog and Metelkova. In emphasising Rog and Metelkova’s position in relation to the gentrification of Ljubljana, this paper connects to accounts that stress the role of gentrification in neoliberal urbanization globally (Paton 2014; Paton et al 2017), the context-bound nature of local gentrification trajectories (Kubeš & Kovács 2020; Mayer 2016), and the role of urban movements in contesting local implementations (Breznik 2008; Martínez 2020; Thörn 2012).

However, despite its global aspirations, an Anglo-Saxon bias has permeated much of gentrification scholarship (Berg 2022; Kubeš & Kovács 2020). In a review of literature on gentrification in Central and Eastern European (CEE) cities, Kubeš & Kovács (2020) showcase severe fault lines in adapting such models to post-socialist contexts. Transitions from state communism (in the case of Yugoslavia, self-governing socialism) to market

capitalism from the 1990s and onwards marks a novel contextual configuration, as housing marketisation was typically non-existent under state communism due to central management and public planning of housing stocks. It was not until the transitional period in the 90s, when large-scale privatisation of housing and public space was enacted through ‘shock therapy’ transitions, that the real estate market began its development in the cities, leading to emerging “gentrification-like urban phenomena” during the 2000s and onwards (2020, p. 2593). On the consumer side of CEE gentrification, the importance of foreign groups must be underscored, as opposed to domestic classes, especially following the rise of ‘airbnbification’ during the 2010s, which meant that rising costs of living and housing stemming from capital investments by private rentiers prioritised short-term lettings at the expense of long-term affordable housing (2020, p. 2602).

These processes are nowadays highly visible in the city of Ljubljana. We can consider the forms of gentrification shaping 21st century Ljubljana as driven in large part by ‘airbnbification’. The city centre has been re-shaped both by ‘soft’ gentrification retailoring existing facilities to upper class and tourist interests, revitalisation, and construction of high-end housing stocks (Rebernik 2013). Such tendencies polarise wealth inequalities and re-shape central districts to capitalise on tourist influx, in line with Ljubljana’s post-industrial transition towards increased reliance on tourist economies. Importantly, this transition has built on “the incorporation of certain cultural expressions and practices” entailing a city branding which “promotes [the] city’s character as green and environmentally sustainable” and as home to a vivid scene for cultural activities (Abram 2022, p. 290). This is a crucial backdrop for understanding the interactions between the two autonomous spaces and gentrifying processes.

Gentrifying the squat

Rog: From Autonomous Factory to Creative Centre

Prior to its eviction, the Rog Autonomous Factory successfully managed to combine the struggle for non-commercialised space within the context of increasing ‘airbnbification’ of the city centre with grassroots organisations for migrants’ rights and shelter. The former struggle was largely articulated in terms of *the right to the city* of working-class residents, alternative communities, and youths. The latter was concentrated on activities that started with Refugees Welcome in 2015 and a movement for the recognition of Slovenia’s “erased” population (meaning groups left without legal recognition of their existence after the Slovenia’s independence). Additionally, Rog contained a social centre and various other grassroots initiatives within its vast industrial grounds. In this sense, Rog embodied what Thörn (2012, p. 157) describes as a “strong overlap between the occupation of a material public space and the formation of a counter-public sphere”, which fostered engagement with various social movements and activist collectives.

The official planning of the emerging Center Rog, the municipally driven “social and creative hub” which materialised after the eviction of the squatters, connects to these legacies. In interviews, urban planners and project managers discussed this in a threefold manner. First, migrant struggles will be recognised by offering activities cantering

migrants' inclusion and the "erased" would be commemorated in the name of the new public park within Rog grounds called Park of the Erased. Second, much like how Rog housed artist ateliers, the new Center Rog would offer ateliers to individual artists. Third, Center Rog project managers articulated a historical divide between an initial wave of "temporary use" squatters who merely agreed to use and refurbish the space while it stood empty and a second generation of unruly squatters, who instead demanded the right to an "autonomous zone" (cf. Štular 2021). While this framing portrayed early squatters as operating in the same creative and social spirit as the emerging Center Rog, the later squatters were, instead, framed as unable to cooperate amongst themselves with potentially sectarian trends. In doing so, the Center Rog project was framed as resurrecting the values cultivated by the 'good' squatters which was tarnished by the 'bad' squatters, who were subsequently and implicitly framed as rightfully evicted (cf. Martínez 2019).

While some interlocutors agreed that Center Rog was preferable to the initial plans of a public-private partnership model, the former Rog squatters interviewed fully rejected any argument that their activism informed the emerging project. Instead, they framed Center Rog as a tarnish on their social bonds and migrant struggles in order develop Ljubljana's city brand as a *creative city*, to attract tourists and further capital investments. Furthermore, some went on to reject the division between "temporary" and "autonomous" activists, instead positing that "temporary use" had been a rhetorical strategy employed to garner public support for the autonomous space at the outset.



Figure 3. The refurbishment of the Rog area one year after the squatters' eviction. Source: Author

Crucially, the municipality and the Center Rog development team had at one point invited the squatters into the new project. While Center Rog would take up most of the factory grounds, the squatters would be allocated a couple of hundred square meters of the large industrial area where they could remain "autonomous" in agreement with the municipality. In return, the squatters would wilfully surrender the squat to the municipality and exit its premises for renovation. This was rejected by the squatters, who framed it as a strategy to incorporate them into "the gentrification of Ljubljana", as formulated by one interviewee. Thus, the suggestion was understood as counter to the Rog squatters' aims, and ultimately the municipality instead elected to evict the squatters, paving the way for the Center Rog construction.



Figure 4. Concept image of Center Rog. Source: Municipality of Ljubljana, by Mark Kotnik, Studio Arrea.

Metelkova: Autonomy as a tourist attraction

“Oh, Metelkova will never be evicted”, a municipal official told me when I changed the topic from Rog to Metelkova. The consensus among both officials and squatters was that this protected status stemmed from the “harmonious” relation between contemporary modes of urban development and Metelkova. Although Metelkova remains squatted and is managed horizontally by its user-organisations, according to principles of self-governance and autonomy, it has established itself as a relatively stable alternative entity within the changing landscape of Ljubljana. Activist collectives, artists, alternative cultural clubs, and civil society organisations occupy most of the buildings. Despite an apparent trend towards institutionalisation, Metelkova still houses radical political collectives and remains committed to the political demand of *being left alone* as an “autonomous” entity (cf. Pruijt 2013). At the same time, this was a source of friction at the time of my interviews, as certain groupings had become increasingly positive to further *normalisation*, entailing, for example, the legalisation of parts of the squat, which was strongly contested by various groups and actors within Metelkova.



Figure 5. Examples of signs and art installations urging tourists not to photograph people within Metelkova. Wandering tourists, armed with cameras, are a mainstay of everyday life in Metelkova. Source: Author.

Prior analyses have pointed to the seeming coherency between Metelkova’s colourful and

visually appealing presence and the ‘creative’ urban branding strategies employed by the municipality, in tandem with its transition towards tourist economies and cultural events (Breznik 2008; Rodriguez-Barcón & Sousa 2021; Siegrist & Thörn 2020). This is corroborated both by the experience of everyday life in Metelkova, which has become shaped by the presence of curious tourists, and by interview statements framing the presence of tourists as part of municipal ‘soft’ repression retailoring Metelkova in line with the gentrification of Ljubljana. Such statements often connected the presence of tourists to the profit-driven municipal hostel Celica, which “is a unique design hostel situated in the autonomous culture zone Metelkova”, according to its own marketing (Booking.com 2022). Metelkova activists perceived the hostel as adjusting Metelkova’s autonomy into the urban branding of Ljubljana, intensifying the ‘airbnbification’ of the city.

Metelkova is a bit protected because it has this status of a tourist destination. But it’s a double-edged sword, because on the other side, it also becomes very disruptive in the summer. And it means Metelkova is largely seen as this space of consumption, not a space of real alternative activity. The price to pay for the people who really use the space for their artwork, or their political organising is that they have to live with commodification. My instinct is that, probably, commodification leads to the destruction of the space.

(Interview from 2019)

Paradoxically, then, the compliance that garners Metelkova protection from eviction is simultaneously framed as an existential threat to its autonomy. As has been highlighted in Breznik (2008) and Gržinić (2007), however, this is the outcome of a conflictual process rather than a natural development of Metelkova as hub for alternative culture. Breznik (2008) conceptualises Metelkova’s position as resting uneasily upon cultural branding strategies and recurring harassment from state and municipal authorities. “Far from being only a culture centre”, Breznik (2008, p. 7) argues, Metelkova “offers political freedom and supports the right of young people to assemble and to participate in social and cultural life”. Although there is no doubt that its cultural status has generated a certain protection – not least in opening avenues for enterprises such as Hostel Celica – Breznik also discusses how ideas of “cultural diversity” have paradoxically been mobilised against Metelkova: “the noise, graffiti and counter culture practices that disturb neighbours are employed as arguments characterising the centre as a non-cultural organisation” (Ibid.). As such, Metelkova’s “protected” status as a cultural institution enriching the city can be viewed as simultaneously reliant upon stigmatisation of deviant culture and de-politicisation, which indicates that this status may entail the “potential nullification of the liberties their communities advocate” in exchange for sustenance (Ntounis & Kanellopoulou 2017, p. 2223).



Figure 6. Street signs on Trubarjeva Cesta, one of the most tourist-dense streets in Ljubljana, pointing the way to Metelkova and Hostel Celica. Source: Author.

Concluding discussion

Squatting as a political practice may be considered anti-capitalist in nature, yet under the conditions of neoliberal urbanism, squatters' movements have found themselves in dubious terrain. On the one hand, squatters have been able to contend rising marketisation of housing by emphasising the concrete use-value of empty buildings as potential dwellings, as opposed to their exchange-value as commodities on competitive markets (Martínez 2019, p. 183). On the other hand, they have been vulnerable to cooptation by 'creative' management policies, for example, in the form of incorporation into place-branding strategies (Mayer 2013, p. 5). This raises the question on the relationship between gentrification and squatters' movements. Whereas squatters may often – as is the case in Ljubljana – position themselves in opposition to gentrification, can their co-optation conversely be used to further gentrifying strategies?

The two cases of Metelkova and Rog represent different responses to decades of gentrification in Ljubljana. While Metelkova has garnered sustenance in virtue of being adjustable to tourism, Rog was evicted to make way for the continued urban renewal of the city centre. The analysis highlights the interplay between activist strategies and gentrifying projects as one explanatory factor for the differing outcomes. Metelkova's status as a tourist attraction serves to protect it from eviction and thus facilitates the continued enjoyment of a certain set of freedoms and political agency (although those freedoms may be jeopardised by increased normalisation, as cautioned by Ntounis & Kanellopoulou 2017). Conversely, the comparatively more hardline rejection of gentrification processes of Rog activists led to their full refusal to participate in the Center Rog project. The municipality responded with eviction to pave the way for the project, while part of the activists' libertarian ideals were recuperated into the emerging Center Rog.

Rog's eviction may thus be viewed as based on a perceived *value gap* by the municipality, wherein investment projects such as Center Rog could be framed as profitable, despite costs and hassles associated with eviction. Metelkova may conversely be sustained by its partly incorporated status within Ljubljana's transition towards tourist economies and place-branding strategies, making any potential value gap between the site's current and

potential use unclear enough to warrant Metelkova's sustenance.

However, the two autonomous spaces have operated on differing historical trajectories, hampering direct comparison despite their many shared features. Metelkova's longevity and somewhat accepted status must, beyond the strategies pursued by its activists, be understood against the backdrop of the differing conditions of its emergence relative to Rog. Emerging with Slovenia's independence, Metelkova's status was in part established in parallel with the early roll-out of neoliberal urbanisation in Ljubljana and garnered sustenance due to a lack of realised competing projects. Rog, on the other hand, was from the outset contested by large-scale investment projects and the gentrification of the city centre. Nevertheless, the outcomes highlight trajectories attributable to political economic factors relating to increasing commodification of urban space and to activist strategies.

Thus, while squatters lack the political and economic power *to cause* gentrification (Martínez 2020, p. 109), historical experience shows that squats making claims to preservation of historical buildings may unwittingly lay the groundwork for future gentrification processes (cf. Franzén 2005; Lund Hansen 2011; Pruijt 2013; Thörn 2012). Operating as alternative cultural sites, squats may become incorporated into gentrifying place-branding strategies when "creative and cultural industries are pursued and promoted by local authorities as a strategy towards successful post-industrial urban economies" (Paton 2014, p. 35), as is the case in Ljubljana (Abram 2022; Breznik 2008).

In sum, the two cases allow for a nuanced understanding of the relationship between urban movements and neoliberal urbanism. The findings indicate the utility in considering gentrification as part of urban governance and as a strategic obstacle for urban movements to navigate – not only as an adversary in urban struggles. Further consideration of urban movements resisting gentrifying processes should thus take note of historical relationships to urban development trajectories, but also how the claims and legacies of movements may become divorced from their anti-systemic critiques, and what this entails – both strategically and theoretically – for those making claims to the right to the city under 'creative' urban governance models.

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