Filling a gap: the clandestine gang fixing Rome illegally

Level 3 • Advanced

1 Warmer

• What was the last bit of home or garden repair work you did? for example, fixing a dripping tap, repairing a broken wall, replacing a missing or broken tile
• Did you do the job by yourself, or did you pay someone to do it?
• Why was it important to do this repair work?

2 Key words

Find key words in the article that match the definitions below. The paragraph numbers are given to help you.

1. covered so that something cannot be seen _______________________ (para 2)
2. according to a strict way of understanding the meaning of a rule _______________________ (para 3)
3. holes in a road _______________________ (para 4)
4. secret and often illegal _______________________ (para 5)
5. members of a group that continue to fight secretly against an enemy who has taken control of their country _______________________ (para 5)
6. someone who deliberately damages or destroys the property of an enemy or opponent _______________________ (para 6)
7. trying to persuade someone to do something _______________________ (para 8)
8. the people employed to run government organizations _______________________ (para 8)
9. become involved in a situation in order to try to stop or change it _______________________ (para 9)
10. avoided dealing with someone or something, especially because you thought you could do something more quickly without them _______________________ (para 11)

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As Italy’s capital falls apart, a secret organization is doing the repairs the authorities won’t

Giorgio Ghiglione
10 April, 2019

1 It is 6am on a Sunday, and the streets of the Ostiense area in southern Rome are empty. The metro has just opened, and nearby cafés still await their first customers.

2 Seven men and women are working hard, their faces obscured by scarves and hoodies as they unload bags of cement and sand from a car near the Basilica of St Paul Outside the Walls.

3 They are not criminals. Members of the secret GAP organization, they hide their identities because what they are doing – fixing a broken pavement without official permission – is technically illegal.

4 City maintenance – or the lack of it – has long been a contentious issue in Italy’s capital. There are an estimated 10,000 potholes in the city – a source of frustration for the many Romans who travel by scooter. Rubbish collection has also become a major problem since the city’s landfill was closed in 2013, with periodic “waste crises” where rubbish piles up in the streets. Cases of exploding buses and the collapse of a metro escalator made international headlines.

5 The seven clandestine pavement-fixers are part of a network of about 20 activists quietly doing the work that the city authorities have failed to do. GAP stands for Gruppi Artigiani Pronto Intervento (“groups of artisan emergency services”), but is also a tribute to the partisans of Gruppi di Azione Patriottica, who fought the fascists during the Second World War.

6 “We chose this name because many of our parents or grandparents were partisans, and we liked the idea of honouring their memory,” says one of the activists, a fifty-something architect who goes by the pseudonym Renato. While the modern-day GAP aren’t risking their lives, their modus operandi is inspired by resistance saboteurs: they identify a target, strike and disappear unseen into the city streets.

7 GAP have been busy in recent months. In December, 2018, they repaired the fountain, built in the 1940s, of the Principe di Piemonte primary school. In January, 2019, they painted a pedestrian crossing on a dangerous major road. Their latest work, the pavement fixing in Ostiense, involved filling a deep hole that regularly filled with water when it rained.

8 They always leave their signature, a logo of a crossed hammer and screwdriver, either painted with stencils on the ground or on a piece of paper. They also leave leaflets exhorting their fellow Romans to follow their example: “GAP are a secret organization – instead of carrying out sabotage actions, the gappisti make repairs where bureaucracy fails. Find your goal, organize and repair: become a gappista yourself!”

9 Peppe (another pseudonym) is one of the founding members. He came up with the idea, he says, because his child goes to the primary school with the broken fountain. A few months ago, he recalls, city authorities came to fix it but only repaired the pipe and left the structure as a whole unusable. “So we decided to intervene at night …”

10 Peppe says GAP have to break the occasional law. To repair the fountain, they entered the school without permission, and to paint the pedestrian crossing, they blocked a road without authorization.

11 “True, we have bypassed the local government,” says Renato. “But in the case of the fountain, nobody else was going to fix it for at least two years, so we said to ourselves: let’s do it and see what happens.”

12 GAP members insist their actions are not a reaction to the city government of Mayor Virginia Raggi, of the populist Five Star Movement. “This situation is the result of many problems adding up over the years,” says Nadir, another pseudonymous GAP activist and architect. “All the parties that have ruled the city are responsible.”

13 Many Italian cities, including Rome, Naples and Turin, have faced significant budget cuts in recent years and are therefore struggling to fund city services. Critics might argue that citizen action like that of GAP could discourage the government from doing its job: why spend time and money on fixing holes when there are residents doing it for free? But GAP members hope their intervention energizes the local administration into action.
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14 “It’s not like we’re a group of anarchists,” says Renato. “We’re just people living here in this neighbourhood where everyone knows each other, trying to make things better.”

15 After about an hour, the pavement is fixed, and the group leave their logo engraved in the wet cement. As the street starts to fill with people going to work or walking dogs, the activists pack up their car and leave.

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3 Comprehension check

Answer the questions using information from the article.

1. How do people know that the repair work has been carried out by the secret GAP organization and not by the authorities?

2. In what ways does the group feel that they are honouring the memory of partisans in the Second World War?

3. In what ways might they technically be breaking laws?

4. Which three bits of work already carried out by GAP are detailed in the article?

5. What is their call to action to other people?

4 Phrases

a. Find and underline the following phrases in the article.

1. make international headlines
2. modus operandi
3. as a whole

b. Discuss what they mean.

c. Use the phrases in sentences of your own.

5 Discussion 1

Read paragraph 13 again. Who do you agree with most – the critics or the GAP members? Give reasons to support your opinion.

6 Discussion 2

Work in small groups. Think of other ways local residents could help to fix their area or make it more beautiful. Make a list of the ways and discuss them one by one.

• Which are the most viable ideas?
• Which might cause problems in the short or long term?
• What kind of signals are they likely to send to the local residents or council?

Compare your ideas with other students.
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**7 Group task**

In your group, think of something specific that needs fixing in your area. Discuss:

- how long this has been a problem, a danger, an eyesore
- who would benefit if it were fixed
- what skills you would need to be able to do the repair work
- what tools and materials you would need
- what the approximate costs might be
- what, if anything, might stop you from going ahead with the work.

**Report back to the rest of the class.**
KEY

2 Key words
1. obscured
2. technically
3. potholes
4. clandestine
5. partisans
6. saboteur
7. exhorting
8. bureaucracy
9. intervene
10. bypassed

3 Comprehension check
1. because GAP leave their signature of a crossed hammer and screwdriver either in the wet cement, painted on the ground or on a piece of paper using stencils.
2. They identify a target, strike and disappear in the same way that the partisans who inspired them. Also, their group is kept a secret from most people, and they work under cover of the night in a clandestine way.
3. by trespassing on private or government property; by not having official permission to carry out the work; by blocking roads while they carry out repairs without the necessary authorization
4. They repaired the 1940s fountain of the Principe di Piemonte primary school. They painted a pedestrian crossing on a dangerous major road. They fixed the pavements in Ostiense, included filling a deep hole that regularly filled with water when it rained.
5. They ask others to ‘Find your goal, organize and repair: become a gappista yourself!’

4 Phrases
b.
1. become famous by being reported in the news all around the world
2. a way of doing something that is typical of a person or group (from the Latin for way of working)
3. considering all the parts of something as one unit

6 Discussion 2
(Possible answers)
Planting flowers or trees (carrying out guerrilla gardening)
Painting over graffiti
Removing offensive or out-of-date stickers or posters
Doing a litter pick