Filling a gap: the clandestine gang fixing Rome illegally

Level 2 • Upper intermediate

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

Match the key words with the definitions. Then find them in the article to read them in context. The paragraph numbers are given to help you.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>leaflet</th>
<th>authorities</th>
<th>pseudonym</th>
<th>clandestine</th>
<th>intervene</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>bypassed</td>
<td>partisans</td>
<td>authorization</td>
<td>potholes</td>
<td>maintenance</td>
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</table>

1. work that is done to keep something in good condition _____________________ (para 4)
2. holes in a road _____________________ (para 4)
3. secret and often illegal _____________________ (para 5)
4. organizations or institutions that control something, often a public service _____________________ (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. a name that someone uses that is not their real name _____________________ (para 6)
7. a printed sheet of paper, usually folded, that is free and gives information about something _____________________ (para 8)
8. become involved in a situation in order to try to stop or change it _____________________ (para 9)
9. official permission to do something _____________________ (para 10)
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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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 are covered 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. They are members of the secret GAP organization, and they hide their identities because what they are doing – fixing a broken pavement without official permission – is illegal.

4 City maintenance – or the lack of it – has been a big problem for a long time in Italy’s capital. There are 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. At times, there are piles of rubbish in the streets.

5 The seven clandestine GAP members are part of a network of about 20 people 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 the name 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 group, an architect who uses the pseudonym Renato. While the modern-day GAP aren’t risking their lives, their way of working is inspired by the partisans: they find a target, strike and disappear unseen into the city streets.

7 GAP have been busy over the past few 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, fixing the pavements in Ostiense, included filling a deep hole that regularly filled with water when it rained.

8 They always leave their logo of a crossed hammer and screwdriver, either painted on the ground or on a piece of paper. They also leave leaflets asking their fellow Romans to follow their example: “The GAP are a secret organization – we make repairs where the authorities fail. Find your goal, organize and repair: become a GAP member yourself!”

9 Peppe (another pseudonym) is one of the people who started the group. He thought of 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, so the structure was still unusable. “So we decided to intervene at night …”

10 Peppe says GAP sometimes have to break the 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 Many Italian cities, including Rome, Naples and Turin, have had large budget cuts in recent years and are therefore struggling to find money for city services. Critics might argue that citizen action, like GAP, could discourage the government from doing its job: why spend time and money on fixing holes when there are people doing it for free? But GAP members hope their intervention energizes the local administration into action.

13 “We’re not 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.”

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

15 “I hope someone will follow our example,” says Nadir. “I would love to learn one day that GAP groups have formed in other cities.”

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First published in The Guardian, 10/04/19
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3 Comprehension check

Choose the best answer according to 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?
   a. They leave a hammer and screwdriver behind.
   b. They write their names on the ground.
   c. They leave an image of a crossed hammer and screwdriver.

2. In what ways are the group’s actions similar to the actions of partisans in the Second World War?
   a. They bypass the authorities when they fix fountains.
   b. They find a target, strike and disappear.
   c. They live in the hills around Rome.

3. In what ways might they be breaking laws?
   a. They enter properties and block roads without authorization.
   b. They don’t have permission to carry out the work.
   c. both of the above

4. What clandestine work have they already carried out?
   a. They mended a school wall.
   b. They cleared rubbish off the streets.
   c. They painted a pedestrian crossing on a busy road.

5. What is their call to action to other people?
   a. Fix, repair, hide!
   b. Find your goal, organize and repair!
   c. Donate money to GAP!

4 Phrases

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

1. a source of frustration
2. honour someone’s memory
3. follow someone’s example

b. Discuss what the phrases mean.

c. Use them in sentences about the article.
In your group, think of something specific that needs fixing in your area. Discuss:

- how long this has been a problem, a danger, broken
- who would be happy if you fixed it
- 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.

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. Compare your ideas with other students.

Group task

Read paragraph 12 again. Who do you agree with most – the critics or the GAP members?
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KEY

2 Key words

1. maintenance
2. potholes
3. clandestine
4. authorities
5. partisans
6. pseudonym
7. leaflet
8. intervene
9. authorization
10. bypassed

4 Phrases

b.
1. something that makes you feel annoyed and also angry that nothing is being done about it
2. show respect or admiration for someone who has died
3. do the same as someone who is considered as a model for other people to copy

3 Comprehension check

1. c
2. b
3. c
4. c
5. b

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