



UNCONVENTIONAL AFFORDABLE HOUSING!

Projects, Practices, Policies

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GENNARO POSTIGLIONE, FRANCESCA SERRAZANETTI*

COLLECTIVE, SHARED, PRIVATE

Rethinking the threshold as an expanded space of dwelling

Introduction. The threshold as a device

The space of dwelling lies at the heart of the most significant transformations in contemporary society. While in the 20th century the “family” was the primary reference point for residential design, today it is just one of many possible configurations within an increasingly complex social landscape. This shift presents new challenges for housing design, as the “conventional” solutions of the past no longer meet current needs. The transition from the traditional family apartment to housing units and clusters designed for new models of domesticity highlights, particularly the growing prevalence of shared living arrangements. It is no exaggeration to say that shared and cooperative housing has emerged as one of the key trends of the 21st century. Since the 2000s, numerous studies, projects, and publications have focused on this new dimension of domestic living, exploring it from a variety of perspectives (Elsinga & Ronald 2012; Devies *et al.* 2012). From an architectural standpoint, several publications have documented new forms of shared and collective housing, identifying common features, continuities with the past, and trac-

* Politecnico di Milano, Department of Architecture and Urban Studies. This paper reflects both authors’ collective work and discussion. Gennaro Postiglione took the lead in drafting the paragraphs *New households, new housing needs, new forms of sharing; Bottom-Up transformations of use; The core: the minimum unit of the room*, while Francesca Serrazanetti was primarily responsible for drafting paragraphs *Private space as a multilevel environment; First threshold: between home and city; Second threshold: between the building and the home; Third threshold: between the home and the room*. The introduction and conclusions were developed jointly by both authors.

ing their roots to earlier experiences, such as Charles Fourier's Phalanstère¹.

Shared living practices and the growing spread of cooperative housing models are significantly redefining the role of contemporary residential architecture. These housing typologies bring to the forefront new and complex design challenges, grounded in the concrete needs of inhabitants and structured around approaches that move beyond the individualism typical of traditional architectural design. Shared living, in fact, breaks away from the paradigm of the housing unit as a closed and self-sufficient entity, opening up instead to spatial and relational configurations that emphasize interaction, cooperation, and the collective use of resources. The dwelling, far from being a static or neutral space, becomes a dynamic environment, continuously modified and redefined through everyday use (Aureli & Tattara 2017; Kries *et al.* 2017).

Starting from the observation of these emerging housing needs, and through a cross-sectional analysis of emblematic design case studies – primarily European – potential interpretative criteria emerge that allow us to view residential architecture from a renewed perspective. In particular, the concept of the threshold proves to be a key element for understanding the layers of relationships articulated in the transition from the public space of the city (the street), to the collective space of the building's common areas, to the shared space of cluster apartments – where present – and finally to the private sphere of the individual housing unit.

In this sense, the threshold is not merely a physical or functional element but acquires a symbolic and social meaning: it is a space of mediation, transition, and encounter, where relationships are built, boundaries negotiated, and a sense of belonging is defined. The valorisation of these transitions – these thresholds – appears to accompany a new culture of dwelling, capable of responding to contem-

1 See the various publications cited in the bibliography of this essay, and in particular: Canales 2022; Czischke *et al.* 2023; Espejel *et al.* 2022a; 2022b; Ledent 2022; Guidarini 2018; Kries *et al.* 2017; Schmid *et al.* 2019; Arc en rêve centre d'architecture (Ed.) 2009; Borasi 2021; Bond Society 2018; STAR Strategies + Architecture 2016.

porary needs for sociality, affordability², and sustainability, while also recognizing and embracing the complexity of today's ways of living. The need to question conventional spatial configurations also suggests a paradigm shift in the way we conceive, design, and inhabit domestic spaces. In this context, the threshold becomes a critical and design-oriented device of fundamental importance.

Premises. Observing reality

New households, new housing needs, new forms of sharing

Lately, the evolution of living arrangements has led to a gradual questioning of consolidated residential models. An exploration of the diverse expressions of unconventional forms of dwelling has been carried out in recent years at the Department of Architecture and Urban Studies of the Politecnico di Milano (Bricocoli *et al.* 2020), through extensive fieldwork involving international students. These students examined a wide range of case studies from their respective contexts, leading to the development of an *Atlas of Unconventional Households*. The main insight that emerged from this field work research is the confirmation of the literature findings on the subject. Housing and lifestyle models have become increasingly diversified over the past decades, in parallel with a more dynamic socio-economic development and a growing variety of life trajectories. While the traditional nuclear family model has not disappeared, alternative models are increasingly emerging and being added to it. Sharing appears to be a common denominator in the spatial arrangements of unconventional households. One of the most significant findings from the empirical analy-

2 “A well-established assumption holds that, in order to be affordable – that is, economically sustainable – housing expenses should not exceed 30% of income. [...] Affordability must always be understood in relative terms, that is, by specifically and contextually relating housing costs to incomes, and never in absolute terms as a characteristic of a specific housing project or product. Without reference to income, the definition of affordable loses its meaning” (Bricocoli & Peverini 2023).

sis is the deep diversification of cohabitation profiles. Whereas in the past, shared living was predominantly associated with students or young workers in transitional phases, this pattern now seems outdated. Contemporary shared living includes people of different ages: precarious workers, remote professionals, migrants, single parents, the elderly, artists, or individuals brought together by shared values and economic needs rather than familial ties.

This plurality reflects a broader transformation of contemporary social structures, in which the nuclear family no longer serves as the sole or primary reference for housing design (Manzini 2018; Tummers 2016).

This heterogeneity of households poses new questions to architectural design: which spaces, configurations and devices are adequate to accommodate living? Which practices of use and sharing emerge in response to the rigidity of traditional spatial organization?

Bottom-up transformations of use

The housing typologies we have inherited from the existing building stock are often rigid and only partially suited to accommodate the “unconventional” households of contemporary living. Despite this, sharing practices still largely unfold within traditional apartments, adapted by the inhabitants themselves to better fit their specific needs. In the absence of a housing supply designed for cohabitation, residents independently modify their spaces, reconfiguring rooms, adding lightweight partitions, redistributing furniture, or renegotiating how areas are used. These interventions – though often unrecognised or unregulated – represent a significant form of design, where spatial transformation responds to real, tangible needs, revealing a remarkable capacity for adaptation and bottom-up creativity.

Whereas in the past, the layout of a home was structured, according to the modernist model³, primarily around family com-

3 The modernist apartment and its spatial organisation were defined in relation to the concept of *Existenzminimum*, which was internationally codified during the 2nd International Congress of Modern Architecture (CIAM), held in Frankfurt am Main in 1929. Entitled *Die Wohnung für das Existenzminimum* and curated by Ernst May together with Mart Stam,

position and its routines – with clearly defined spaces such as the parents' bedroom, the children's room, the living area, and so forth – today, members of more heterogeneous cohabiting households adopt different strategies to manage the use of the domestic environment, which include: distinguishing between private and shared areas; introducing fixed or movable partitions to define spatial uses; alternating the use of shared spaces throughout the day according to individual and collective routines; and assigning multiple, hybrid functions to single elements or areas – for instance, the kitchen table may be used interchangeably for working, studying, cooking, gathering, or dining.

One of the most critical issues emerging in the informal transformation of existing domestic spaces concerns the chronic inadequacy of service areas – especially kitchens and bathrooms – which often prove unsuitable for intensive and multi-user use. These spaces, originally designed for homogeneous family units, become incompatible with the everyday life of larger and more diverse groups. Emerging practices such as staggered use, personalised furniture, or the extensive use of mobile devices demonstrate forms of compensation, but do not solve the structural shortcomings of these environments.

This challenge underscores the need for a radical rethinking of the function and morphology of service spaces, moving beyond the notion of kitchens and bathrooms as secondary or marginal in the design of dwellings (Rapoport 1969). In shared living contexts, these spaces too become sites of negotiation – essential for the construction of micro-communities while respecting appropriate levels of privacy.

Private space as a multilevel environment

Within the distinction between shared and private areas, we are witnessing a redefinition of private space, which can no longer be reduced to a mere place for nighttime rest (the bed) or the

the congress brought together some of the most prominent figures in European modernist architecture for a theoretical debate aimed at defining a minimum housing standard for the urban population.

storage of personal belongings (the wardrobe). Transformations in work and social practices – such as the rise of remote work, online education, artistic production, or home-based micro-entrepreneurship – are driving an increasingly multi-functional and intensive use of these environments.

In many cases, the bed becomes a multipurpose device: a place for rest, but also for work, leisure, digital socialization, or media consumption. While this hybridization reveals a remarkable capacity for adaptation, it also raises questions about the quality and character of living spaces.

Whereas research on shared and social spaces has advanced considerably, private spaces have yet to be fully reimagined to accommodate different levels of “privacy” within the domestic unit: one that is exclusive, and another that – while still private – can be open to social functions.

Observing these phenomena clearly reveals the need to rethink the conceptual categories through which we design and understand dwelling. A paradigmatic shift in housing design is needed – one that embraces versatility, sharing, and multifunctionality as guiding principles. This involves moving beyond the rigid dichotomy of private versus collective space, valuing thresholds as intermediate zones and relational activators, and recognizing dwelling as a practice in constant transformation.

Exploring the threshold

The identification of the threshold space as a key element in contemporary housing design stems from the considerations outlined above, as well as from the observation of a range of projects that intersect, at various levels and in different contexts, the themes of unconventionality and affordability. Based on these premises and grounded in a close reading of contemporary realities, the UAH! research project has defined a set of criteria to study and analyse – through a process of “unpacking” developed using in-

terpretive drawings⁴, data, and indicators – a selection of contemporary housing projects collected in an Atlas (UAH! Atlas 2025).

The threshold space has thus been recognised as a strategic typological device, both for reading and interpreting significant examples of contemporary residential architecture and for translating these analytical insights into design tools. In this context, the threshold is redefined not as a mere line of separation, but as a fluid and dynamic surface capable of expanding and connecting. On the one hand, it absorbs certain private services that are increasingly externalised; on the other, it integrates social functions traditionally associated with the public sphere, now reinterpreted within a shared domestic dimension, reflecting renewed attention to communal spaces and dynamics of social interaction.

This analysis adopts a canonical preliminary distinction between public spaces (open to the broader community), collective spaces (accessible to all residents of a building), shared spaces (inhabited by multiple families or individuals in a shared cluster apartment configuration), and private spaces (private rooms intended for families, further differentiated, as previously discussed, between private spaces for social use and those for exclusive use).

A close examination of these spatial levels has led – through a transversal reading of the selected projects – to the identification of different types of thresholds, which will be explored in the following paragraphs.

First threshold: between home and city. Public and collective spaces

Interpreted as a passage through different levels of privacy, the design of housing can be conceived as a system of cores and envelopes – the outermost of which is represented by the façade and the

4 The drawings accompanying this text were developed within this research context, through collaborations with students from the degree programme at the Politecnico di Milano. In the drawings, the different color intensities represent a gradient from public spaces (lighter) to collective ones (darker). Additional analyses, not published here, explore the varying levels of privacy within the apartments, from shared areas to private spaces.

ground floor—that regulate the relationship with the public space of the street. These define the building's role within the urban context and constitute the access to the residential realm. Thus, a first level of transition emerges: that between the external public space and the internal public (or collective, depending on the case) space, which is primarily articulated through two aspects.

The first concerns the tendency to establish continuity with the city, integrating functions other than residential ones on the ground floor and characterizing the spaces as open and inclusive.

Circulation spaces—which, as we will see, assume a central role as places of interaction—begin to acquire this function not only within the building but already in the relationship between architecture and the city. This relationship develops especially at the ground floor, where the boundary between public and private space becomes fluid and permeable, encouraging direct interaction with the street.

The porosity of the façades creates a visual and spatial continuity between inside and outside, inviting passersby to enter and engaging them in a natural appropriation of the space.

From an architectural perspective, the porosity of façades and continuity with the street seems to adopt and incorporate characteristics defined by public buildings in recent decades: transparency of the fronts, material continuity, openness, and spatial continuity (see, for example, the De Warren cooperative project in Amsterdam, 2023, or Obos Living Lab in Oslo, 2021).

Another relevant aspect regarding the relationship with the city is the frequent disappearance of boundaries that identify the parcel's edges, with a consequent expansion of the city's public space. The continuity between street spaces and the building's adjoining open spaces is, on one hand, a generous gesture proposing a form of domestication and softening of public space, and on the other, it creates continuity that enhances the potential for sharing.

This tendency can be observed in some contemporary projects. The three buildings composing the River Spreefeld complex in Berlin (2013) share a green space without fences that is fully accessible from the outside. The interior ground-floor spaces (offices, kindergarten, multipurpose rooms), although not strictly public functions, maintain visual and spatial continuity with the garden facing the Spree River.

Another significant example is the cooperative housing project Lyse Lotte in Basel (2023): the building is characterised by the permeability of its façades, fully glazed along the long sides, with balconies and terraces expressing a variety of typologies and inhabitants. In the surrounding green space, it is the densification of the landscaping that creates transitions into more protected areas related to living spaces.

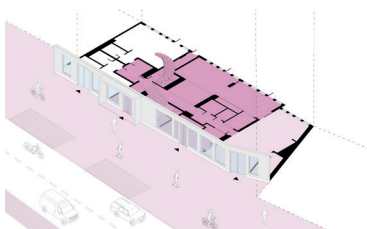


Figure 1. LPO arkitekter + Metropolis + Lillestrøm, Obos Living Lab, Oslo, 2021 (Graphic UAH! 2025).

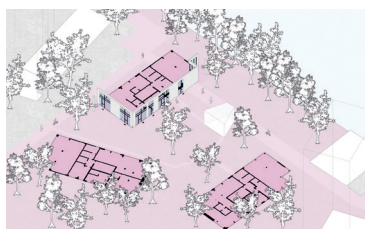


Figure 3. BARarchitekten, Carpaneto Architekten, Fatkoehl Architekten, River Spreefeld, Berlin, 2013 (Graphic UAH! 2025).

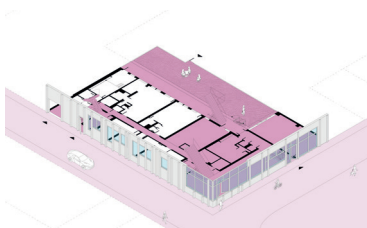


Figure 2. Natruified Architecture, Housing Coöperation de Warren, Amsterdam, 2023 (Graphic UAH! 2025).

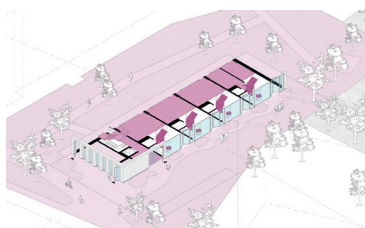


Figure 4. Clauss Kahl Merz, Lyse Lotte, Basel, 2023 (Graphic UAH! 2025).

Second threshold: between the building and the home. Connective and collective

The second level of analysis corresponds to the system of circulation spaces, often integrated with collective areas but at the same time adjacent to the private environments of the residences.

The internal pathways appear designed to progressively guide users through different levels of sociability and belonging: from public, to collective, to shared, and finally to private. Stairs, corridors, and distribution spaces are increasingly integrated with social and meeting functions, emphasizing the relational role of the spaces that connect and structure the different areas of the building.

Distribution spaces are therefore not only functional for connecting parts but also serve to accommodate a collective dimension; extending them in an integrated way to public and collective use areas allows for an expansion of their spatial dimensions and qualities beyond the design principles of the modern movement.

Supporting these conditions, a series of formal devices – such as openings, transparent materials, volumetric variations – accentuate the public and collective character of circulation spaces, granting them a quality that transcends the simple function of passage. Their size, shape, and placement are thus “adapted” compared to usual residential standards to stimulate interaction among users, encouraging a sense of community.

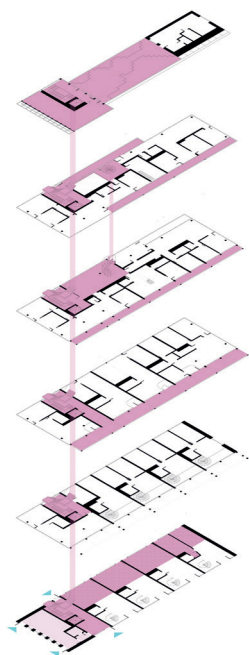


Figure 5. Clauss Kahl Merz, Lyse Lotte, Basel, 2023 (Graphic UAH! 2025).

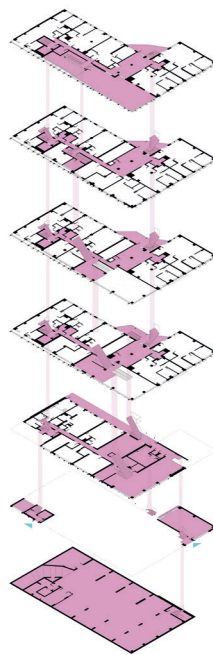


Figure 6. Natruffed Architecture, Housing Coöperation de Warren, Amsterdam, 2023 (Graphic UAH! 2025).

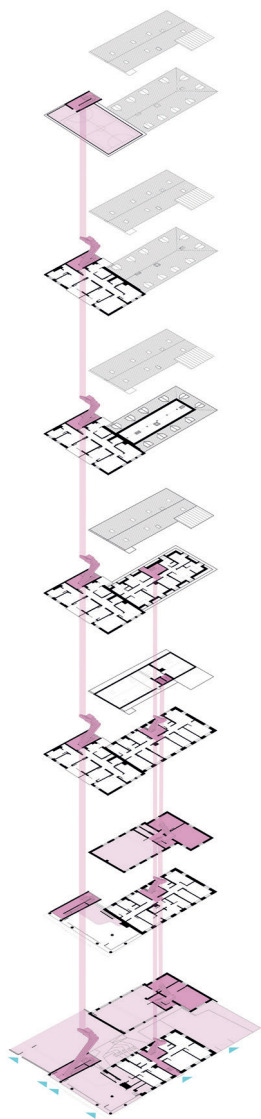


Figure 7. Hirner und Riehl Architekten, Bellevue di Monaco, Monaco, 2020 (Graphic UAH! 2025).

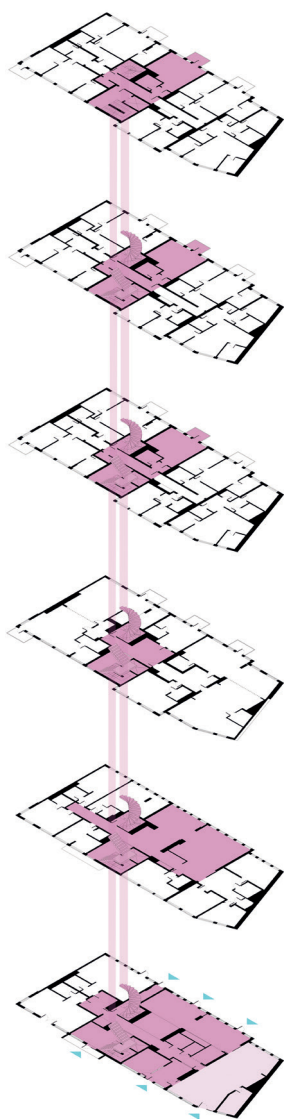


Figure 8. LPO arkitekter + Metropolis + Lillestrøm, Obos Living Lab, Oslo, 2021 (Graphic UAH! 2025).

Third threshold: between the home and the room. Shared and private spaces

In the articulation of living spaces, the distinction between public, collective, shared, and private areas emerges as a fundamental aspect to address the different needs for sociality and privacy of the inhabitants. In this perspective, as framed by our findings, private space assumes a complex and dual dimension: on one hand, an exclusively private space, conceived as an intimate and reserved place, inaccessible to anyone other than the inhabitant; on the other hand, a private space with social use, which can host guests, work activities, or moments of gathering.

At the next level lies the shared space, representing an area accessible to all people living within a specific unit or apartment. These spaces, although intimate compared to the rest of the building, foster coexistence and the building of relationships among those who share the same living environment. They are generally characterised as larger environments, receiving abundant natural light not only through large windows but also due to the spaciousness of the area itself.

Observations of this threshold reveal a general lack of attention to this type of transition, with some exceptions. Two examples illustrate possible approaches.

The first is one of the three buildings at River Spreefeld, designed by Fatkoehl Architekten (2013). Here, the shared and distribution space between the private areas of the cluster apartments is conceived as a “street” (a feature recalling the threshold discussed in the previous paragraph), and the individual rooms have windows overlooking this space, which can be closed. This allows for continuity between private and shared space, while at the same time suggesting an assimilation of the apartment scale with that of the building in the relationship between internal and external space. Similarly, the doors to the rooms are thick, insulating ones comparable to those separating different housing units.

A second example regarding this type of threshold is found in the cooperative housing project Lyse Lotte in Basel, designed by Clauss Kahl Merz (2023). Here, the family units on the top two

floors are organised around a double-height common hall, which serves as a social space and extension of the homes themselves, while simultaneously acting as a “filter space” between the private residences and the collective distribution system of the rest of the building. It is a place to dine together, let children play, or simply meet to share some daily burdens and moments.

The core: the minimum unit of the room

This layering of space – from private areas to shared, collective, and public realms – aims to dynamically respond to contemporary needs for sociality and privacy, promoting greater flexibility in forms of cohabitation.

Within housing units, both shared and private, the concepts of transformability, adaptability, and unconventionality are facilitated and conveyed through architectural devices that address the changing demands of contemporary living. From this perspective, architecture is not conceived as a rigid structure but as a collection of versatile spaces designed to respond to multiple needs and usage scenarios.

In this final core, which conceives the room as the minimal and fundamental unit of the architecture/house, three levels of interpretation (and representation) can be identified.

The first level concerns the architecture itself, including both structural elements and walls or partitions – these components are often designed to be adaptable and modifiable. The spatial configuration is therefore not rigid but adaptable, allowing the transformation of environments based on the needs of different inhabitants or their changes over time. An example experimenting with this kind of flexibility is again Lyse Lotte, which provides various possible configurations, especially in the first two floors of the building: duplex maisonnettes/ateliers with workspace featuring double exposure to the adjoining open area.

The second level is defined by the flexibility of furniture or other spatial devices: sliding partitions, fitted walls, and niche beds are some of the solutions at this level. Here, the focus is on furniture and modular or movable elements designed to offer adaptable configurations. Furniture becomes a tool for transforming space,

capable of encouraging and supporting new uses and modes of occupancy (Ottolini & De Prizio 1993; Bassanelli 2024).



Figure 9-10. Clauss Kahl Merz, Lyse Lotte, Basilea, 2023 (Graphics UAH! 2025).

In the experimental project Obos Living Lab, again, two of the apartments can be easily combined so that the space doubles and new sharing possibilities open up; in the shared spaces, beds fold out from built-in wardrobes to create private niches.

The third level, finally, is determined by the ways people use the space: it concerns how users live in and interact with the environment. Observing or imagining different uses of space suggests that the organisation of environments should encourage and accommodate multiple uses, adapting to the changing needs of those who inhabit them.

This approach is driven by the idea that the form of space, in relation to furniture and modular devices, can encourage different uses and create new modes of interaction. Spaces thus become dynamic containers, open to transformation over time

and capable of adapting to evolving needs, surpassing traditional typological conventions. Through this experimentation, architecture not only accommodates but also encourages and shapes behaviours and relationships, promoting a spatial experience that is fluid and always customisable.

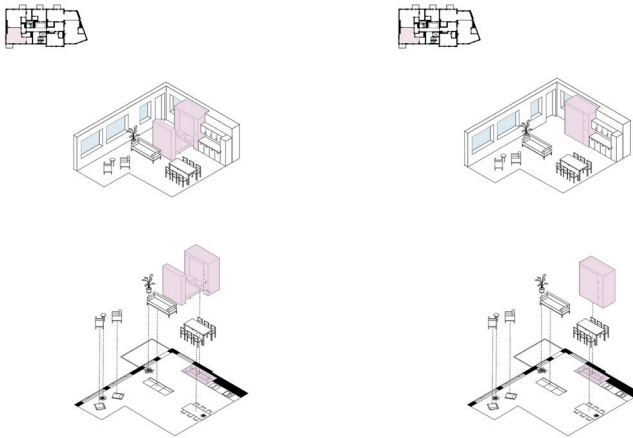


Figure 11-12. LPO arkitekter + Metropolis + Lillestrøm, Obos Living Lab, Oslo, 2021 (Graphics UAH! 2025).

Conclusions. Sharing, distribution, and versatility of spaces

New ways of living, together with a renewed interest in the collective dimension, have led to significant innovations in common spaces and their relationship with the urban context. One of the most evident aspects concerns the quality of collective spaces, which in many recent projects play a central role in community-building and in overcoming the traditional, individualistic residential model.

A first notable trend in this regard is the “outsourcing” of certain services at the building level. Laundry rooms, kitchens, and

other common spaces allow for a reduction in the areas dedicated to these functions inside individual dwellings. These spaces are designed with attention not only to their functional role in providing services but also with care to make them opportunities for meeting and interaction among residents. Such spaces – common rooms, kitchens, courtyards – offer innovative design solutions aimed at encouraging encounters and cooperation among inhabitants (Tummers 2016).

A second important element concerns the transformation of distribution spaces, which increasingly absorb collective and informal functions. Corridors, atriums, and landings become relational spaces, hybrid zones between public and private that encourage spontaneous use and widespread sociality (Hertzberger 2005).

In continuity with this logic, many recent projects emphasize the relationship between domestic and urban space, particularly on the ground floor. The integration of mixed functions – commercial, cultural, or social – at the base of buildings aims to generate porosity between private and public space, extending street life into residential architecture. This design choice fits into a strategy of urban activation and counters monofunctionality, fostering forms of collective appropriation of space.

The innovative momentum observed at the thresholds between different levels of shared space often slows when it comes to the innermost core of private spaces, which tend to remain anchored to traditional models. Here, spatial adaptability remains one of the most sought-after features, pursued through the use of movable elements, reconfigurable layouts, and adaptable solutions. These design practices explicitly reference 20th-century research, particularly the contributions of Team X and authors such as Habraken, who had already theorised an open and participatory architecture (Habraken 1972).

Contemporary innovations therefore engage in a continuous dialogue with historical experimentation, updating those principles in light of new technologies and current socio-economic transformations (Till & Schneider 2007).

Today's residential projects often stand out for their ability to innovate in collective and shared domains, while remaining conservative in more intimate spaces. A truly transformative design

approach, however, must also engage with these private spheres (Pesce & Postiglione 2023).

From the observation of housing practices and the tensions between the formal structure of dwellings and their actual uses, a need emerges – particularly within the most private, inner parts of the home – for a clearer separation between private space for social use and private space for exclusive use, a distinction that is still rarely facilitated.

“It is architecture that must adapt to people, and not the contrary”

Closing this exploration of the theme of the threshold in contemporary forms of living – at the intersection of public, collective, shared, and private spaces – an anecdote from the history of 20th-century Italian architecture seems particularly apt to deepen and consolidate the reflection. A reinterpretation of a project by what can be considered a master highlights the significance both of the threshold as a place of encounter and reconsideration of ways of living, and of the centrality of the collective dimension, as well as the evolving nature of design in relation to how people use space.

The reference is to Giancarlo De Carlo, who, defining the problem of housing as the materialization of the crisis of contemporary civilization, made it one of the focal points of his architectural practice, expanding the discourse – as is well known – to issues of participation and the relationship with society.

His first commission, dating back to 1950, was the design of a public housing block in Sesto San Giovanni (Milan): a compact five-story block, with ten identical apartments on each floor, façades marked by the voids of south-facing loggias and the structural grid of the north-facing balconies. De Carlo did not hide his self-critical reassessment of the project: he repudiated the absurd claim of forcing users’ lives into typological schemes established a priori and realised the fundamental error in the theoretical reasoning that had led him to conceive the collective spaces as he did. The open spaces (loggias and balconies) were indeed used by the inhabitants in a way completely opposite to what the architect had envisioned.

I spent a few hours on a spring Sunday watching, from a café across the street, the movements of the inhabitants of my building; I endured the force with which they attacked it in order to make it their own home; I realised the inaccuracy of my calculations. The sunlit loggias were full of hanging laundry, and people gathered to the north, all on the external walkways. In front of every door, with deck chairs and stools, they acted as both performers and spectators in the theatre of themselves and the street. The narrowness of the walkways heightened the excitement of the children weaving their bicycles through makeshift obstacle courses; the transparency of the railings on both sides, designed for a sense of vertigo, added to the spectacle the flashes of women's bare legs as they leaned over. It was then that I understood how uncertain my guiding principle had been, despite its rational appearance.

Orientation matters, and greenery and light and the ability to isolate oneself matter – but above all, what matters is being seen, talking, being together. Above all, what matters is communication (De Carlo 1954, p.29).

Thus, De Carlo unwittingly experienced the inadequacy of a rational approach based on theoretical and formal problems that did not consider the infinite ways in which people interpret space. He seized the opportunity to unleash his critique of the Modern Movement's functionalism, rejecting both the idea of the "machine for living" and the notion of "public housing", formulas that introduced a classist definition unacceptable to him: "because for me, giving everyone a home meant giving everyone a home equivalent in comfort, decor, and aesthetic dignity. [...] Because it is architecture that must adapt to people, and not the contrary" (De Carlo in Guccione & Vittorini 2005, p. 33).

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