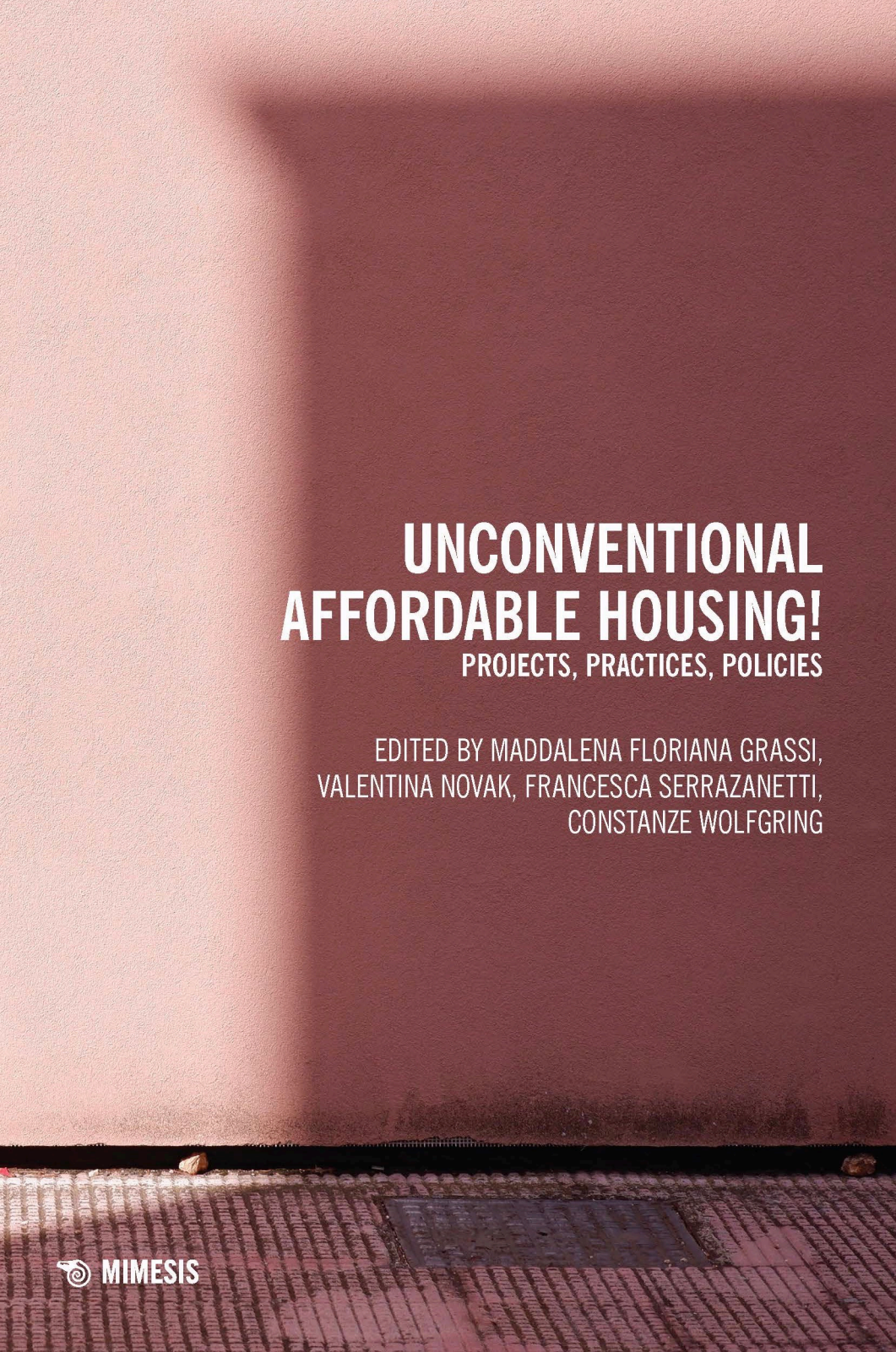

UNCONVENTIONAL AFFORDABLE HOUSING!

PROJECTS, PRACTICES, POLICIES

EDITED BY MADDALENA FLORIANA GRASSI,
VALENTINA NOVAK, FRANCESCA SERRAZANETTI,
CONSTANZE WOLFGRING

MIMESIS

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MIMESIS

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INDEX

UAH!
by Gennaro Postiglione, Elena Marchigiani, Daniele Petrosino 9

Unconventional Affordable Housing. Perspectives from an expanded field
by Maddalena Floriana Grassi, Valentina Novak, Francesca Serrazanetti, Constanze Wolfgring 15

PART 1 – UNCONVENTIONALITY, AFFORDABILITY, INFORMALITY. KEYWORDS AND DEVICES FOR NEW INCLUSIVE WAYS OF LIVING

Social innovation based on marginality. An analytical framework for the genesis and development dynamics of policies, projects, and practices in response to housing exclusion
by Maddalena Floriana Grassi, Angela Barbanente, Daniele Petrosino 25

Unconventional affordable housing. Including interiors in housing and urban policies
by Paola Briata, Constanze Wolfgring 43

Living in "sequence shot"
by Roberto Rizzi 63

Collective, shared, private. Rethinking the threshold as an expanded space of dwelling
by Gennaro Postiglione, Francesca Serrazanetti 83

Up close
by Marta Averna 105

Decoding affordability. Rethinking housing design for inclusive living
by Jacopo Gresleri 121

Rethinking domestic "spaces of care" for collaborative and affordable living
by Sara Basso 135

Living beyond the norm. Policies, cultural models, and domestic spaces for single people in Italy (1930s-1950s)
by Michele Rinaldi 155

Changes in ways of living. Informality as a relative and reactive concept to the universal inaccessibility of the right to housing
by Elena Carletti, Maddalena Floriana Grassi 175

Stories for living: experiences, needs and social inclusion. The role of life stories in affordable housing
by Marta Rosi 189

PART 2 – LEARNING FROM FIELDWORK. LOCAL PERSPECTIVES ON POLICIES, PRACTICES, PROJECTS

Unconventional policies for rental housing. The supportive neighbourhoods perspective
by Elena Marchigiani 205

Living in Barriera Vecchia in Trieste. Experimenting with affordable and unconventional policy models at the neighbourhood scale, between housing and services
by Teresa Frausin, Valentina Novak 231

Housing governance and the legacies of a company town. San Donato Milanese beyond ENI
by Constanze Wolfgring, Massimo Bricocoli 251

Terzo Palazzo Ex-SNAM Offices. A catalyst for affordable housing and urban regeneration in San Donato Milanese
by António Carvalho, Kerstin Letitia Tafaro 275

Adapting to the demographic transition and implementing housing affordability through intergenerational cohabitation. The case of Prendi in casa in Milan
by Agim Kërçuku, Gennaro Postiglione 299

Talking about housing in Bari. Between participatory governance and power asymmetries
by Elena Carletti, Maddalena Floriana Grassi, Nicola Schingaro 317

Urban collective squatting as a practice of resistance. A case study in the city of Bari
by Elena Carletti, Giovanna Servedio, Carmen Zaira Torretta 333

Public housing policies in the face of social and environmental changes. Spaces for innovation, opportunities and resistance in the San Paolo neighbourhood in Bari
by Laura Grassini, Nicola Schingaro 351

Give the ground to the people! Housing explorations on the ground floor in Quartiere San Paolo, Bari
by António Carvalho, Alarico Ruffino 371

Acknowledgements 389

Gennaro Postiglione, Elena Marchigiani,
Daniele Petrosino

UAH!

Dwelling is one of the most important and meaningful human actions. It lies at the intersection of multiple and diverse social practices and organizations, uses, and relationships. The many forms of dwelling are not only the product of specific social, political, and economic contexts, but are themselves generative of transformations and living conditions. From a scientific and academic perspective, the issues and challenges that affordable housing poses today to spatial design and urban policies should therefore be approached from multiple viewpoints, not with the ambition to be exhaustive, but with the clear conviction that only through dialogue among different forms of knowledge and action, and a deep engagement with local contexts, can we critically reconsider both the paths already taken and those yet to be explored.

The project funded by the Italian Ministry of University and Research, PRIN 2022, *UAH! Unconventional Affordable Housing*, was promoted by Politecnico di Milano (Department of Architecture and Urban Studies), Università di Trieste (Department of Engineering and Architecture), Università di Bari (Department of Political Science) and Politecnico di Bari (Department of Civil, Environmental, Land, Construction and Chemistry)[1].

1 The research teams are composed as follows: for Politecnico di Milano, Gennaro Postiglione (principal investigator), Paola Briata, Massimo Bricocoli, Gaia Caramellino, Antonio Da Silva Ferreira De Carvalho, Roberto Rizzi, Stefania Sabatinelli, Marta Averna, Francesca Serrazanetti, Constanze Wolfgring; for Università di Trieste, Elena Marchigiani (coordinator), Ilaria Garofolo, Sara Basso, Valentina Novak, Teresa Frausin; for Università and Politecnico di Bari, Daniele Petrosino (coordinator), Angela Barbanente, Valeria Monno, Laura Grassini, Maddalena Floriana Grassi, Elena Carletti, Nicola Schingaro, Giovanna Servedio.

UAH! brought together scholars from a range of disciplinary backgrounds – architectural and interior design, history of architecture, technical architecture, urban design and planning techniques, and sociology – to address several key questions. How has dwelling been transformed in contemporary postmodern and post-industrial societies? In what ways is it connected to changes in family structures and relationships, life courses, demographic configurations, population movements, and urban dynamics? Finally, how might the growing challenge of securing affordable housing be addressed by working at the intersection of spatial design and welfare policies, both within and beyond the housing sector?

These are difficult but unavoidable questions, especially in urban contexts increasingly pressured by overtourism or by processes that tend to displace the segments of the population with lower incomes. Possible answers have been sought through field investigations in the places where UAH! universities operate, as well as by collecting numerous experiences from Italy and across Europe that have experimented with different forms of dwelling through spatial, social, and policy innovations. The research thus produced several outputs.

The first is the UAH! website (https://www.uah.polimi.it/about-uah), which presents part of the work conducted during the project, along with an atlas – by no means exhaustive, as this is a dynamic field where cases evolve and change – aimed at exploring a diverse array of practices, projects, and policies across Europe.

The second output is a series of volumes, the first of which is *UNCONVENTIONAL AFFORDABLE HOUSING! Projects, Practices, Policies*, edited by Maddalena Floriana Grassi, Valentina Novak, Francesca Serrazanetti, and Constanze Wolfgring. Through the essays of the many researchers who contributed to the project, the book explores, from multiple disciplinary perspectives, cases, theories, and design initiatives centered on unconventional and affordable housing. The journey proposed by the texts guide the reader through cities and their transformations, examining how people respond to the need for housing and the desire or necessity to pursue alternative paths in the organization

of inhabited space. The issues of reuse, urban regeneration, and the avoidance of further land consumption are placed at the center, along with the design and urban planning choices they entail.

The third output is perhaps the most ambitious. From the very inception of UAH! the aim was to provide practical contributions to a complex topic such as affordable housing, primarily focusing on the cities and urban contexts where our universities are based. To this end, the research developed design concepts for selected sites, with the hope that they may lead to concrete future developments.

The places of UAH! consist of building complexes and individual structures that could be repurposed for residential use. Their identification and design exploration have been carried out through continuous collaboration among research units, local stakeholders, users, institutions, and technical experts, facilitated by discussion and co-design workshops that remain active to this day. In particular, in San Donato Milanese, the focus was on the conversion of office buildings, addressing a broad demand that also includes students and workers commuting to Milan. In Trieste, the projects concern an entire neighborhood near the city center (Barriera), to develop housing options for lower-income groups and people experiencing homelessness. In Bari, a state-owned complex, the former Military Hospital Bonomo currently under reuse, was selected, expanding its functions from offices and student housing to social and innovative residential uses. Parallel to this, the redesign of ground-floor "pilotis" spaces in the Bari's San Paolo district – characterized by severe housing distress – was also explored. A common feature across these projects is the transformation of existing buildings, considered within broader spatial and social contexts, to meet a diverse demand for affordable housing through non-standardized housing solutions.

The projects were developed in the interior design studios of the Politecnico di Milano, alongside a design network of national and international universities: Fakultät für Architektur – Universität Innsbruck (Austria), Universidade de Coimbra (Portugal), Universidade Lusófona Porto (Portugal), FAUP – Faculdade de Arquitectura da Universidade do Porto (Portugal), Instituto Superior

Técnico – Universidade de Lisboa (Portugal), TU Delft – Technische Universiteit Delft (The Netherlands), Northumbria University, Newcastle (UK), and University of Nicosia (Cyprus).

These activities involved hundreds of students, doctoral candidates, and researchers, generating a wide range of ideas for the various sites that will be the subject of dedicated meetings open to local stakeholders in the different cities.

A first significant opportunity for public presentation was provided by the hospitality of the Austrian Pavilion – *Agency for Better Living* at the 2025 Venice Biennale International Architecture Exhibition. During two days of debate and discussion involving the UAH! research group, the pavilion curators (Michael Obrist and Sabine Pollack), as well as scholars and key figures in affordable housing experiences (Marco Aliotta, Alessandro Balducci, Silvia Cafora, Carla Giarrido de Oliveira, Camillo Magni, and Veralisa Massari), the design explorations produced were revisited through six guiding questions. Posed provocatively, these questions outline some of the key issues that UAH! has highlighted and now brings forward to the theoretical and practical debate on accessibility and the innovation of spatial solutions and housing policies.

Affordable for whom, and for how long? Today, the social demand for housing extends from low-income individuals and households to increasingly broader segments of the "middle class". This variety of needs and conditions, as well as their frequent variability over time, calls for, on the one hand, a rethinking of living spaces from the perspective of greater flexibility and adaptability, and on the other hand, new synergies between housing and support services for the most vulnerable tenants.

What if no one owned it? Many practices and experiences of occupation, reclamation, and collective management highlight both the tensions between conditions of legality and legitimacy and the contradictions between housing understood as a right versus housing treated as a commodity. The potential of shared governance of urban commons demonstrates how it is possible to ensure the use of living spaces without resorting to private ownership, drawing on lessons offered by cooperative-based solutions and forms of non-private property.

(Why) do we have to share? This demand calls for reflection on the underlying motivations behind various practices of affordable living, as well as their relationships with different degrees of sharing and privacy. The challenge is to carefully construct and calibrate sharing itself, taking into account co-inhabitants' needs and a dwelling design better able to modulate individual, shared, collective, and public spaces.

Who manages and takes care of affordable housing? Envisioning shared arrangements calls for new and more effective management involving diverse actors, from public-private partnerships to the roles of local stakeholders, social services, and intermediaries bridging institutions and tenants. The emphasis is on the responsibility of public authorities in supporting these participatory processes, aiming for stronger integration of both the material and immaterial dimensions of care and residents' activism.

Can't we just demolish it? To pursue more impactful paths of innovation, however, a significant expansion of the affordable housing supply is required. The premise is that reusing the existing built environment is not merely a strategy, but a necessity. Many and diverse assets, not originally intended for residential use, can be mobilized. Overcoming the technical and economic obstacles that hinder their conversion entails challenging still-dominant norms and practices. This involves not only redefining building standards and regulations but also renewing design cultures by cultivating their capacity to accommodate solutions open to incompleteness, that can be implemented gradually, and in collaboration with self-construction practices by the residents.

Where's the line between the home and the city? The issues addressed thus far imply a clear stance. Discussing affordable housing means moving beyond the sectoral approach with which this field is still conventionally treated, and working instead on the thresholds and interactions between domestic and urban spheres, as well as between spatial and policy dimensions. Envisioning the home as more than a private place invites a reconsideration of its internal provisions and connections with other spaces and facilities in the city; reinterpreting it as a gateway and point of

access to urban life and broader social interactions; and conceiving it as a fundamental ingredient in wider transformations.

Through its numerous actions, outputs, discussion forums, and dissemination activities – and above all thanks to the many questions it leaves open – UAH! tells the story of a university that aims to be useful. A university that works in close collaboration with local actors to address the needs of a changing society; where research and teaching are intertwined to actively engage students; and where diverse disciplines converge to foster constructive dialogue – increasingly vital today to tackle complex challenges such as ensuring affordable and inclusive housing for all.

Maddalena Floriana Grassi, Valentina Novak,
Francesca Serrazanetti, Constanze Wolfgring

UNCONVENTIONAL AFFORDABLE HOUSING. Perspectives from an expanded field

This book brings together insights and perspectives from 26 authors on whether and how unconventional housing solutions – understood as bottom-up practices, public policies, and architectural projects – can contribute to rendering housing more affordable in European cities, where rising prices have increasingly challenged access to decent living conditions in recent years. It is part of the *UAH! Unconventional Affordable Housing* research framework and results from an internal call for papers launched within this context, aimed at collecting interdisciplinary contributions that reflect the variety of outcomes of the project. The call was furthermore addressing researchers working on similar topics and questions, encouraging a broader exchange around the themes explored by UAH!.

Launched in 2023, the UAH! project has embarked on the task to investigate the potential of *unconventional*[*] housing to address the growing challenge of urban housing *affordability*[**]. Funded by Italy's Ministry for Universities and Research under the PRIN (*Progetti di Rilevante Interesse Nazionale*) programme, it was carried out by a consortium of academic partners situated in three Italian cities: Milan, Trieste, and Bari. The team combines scholars from four universities (Politecnico di Milano, Università degli Studi di Trieste, Università degli Studi di Bari, and Politecnico di Bari) and diverse disciplinary backgrounds –

* By "unconventional", we mean above all the non-equivalence between the idea(s) of family and the type of housing.

** By "affordable", we mean the relationship between housing costs and economic capacity (as a widely used rule of thumb, a home is considered affordable when its costs do not exceed 30% of the household's net income).

ranging from architecture, urban planning and design to sociology, political science, anthropology, and history – reflecting a strong commitment to interdisciplinarity and promising different points of view on the questions at stake in the project, with unconventionality and affordability at its core.

The project explores how profound socio-demographic shifts in Europe have disrupted the modernist ideal of a fixed equivalence between "family" and "housing typology," revealing a growing mismatch between housing supply and increasingly diverse household forms and needs. A key hypothesis underlying the research is that unconventional and more affordable housing solutions may offer more responsive strategies to the evolving demands of contemporary living, shaped by precarious labour conditions, fragmented life trajectories, and the inadequacies of conventional housing provision[2].

The logic of the UAH! project is rooted in a practice-oriented and research-driven approach that combines critical analysis with design experimentation. Central to the project is the analysis of case studies, collected in an "Atlas" partially published online, and the active interaction with local stakeholders, including the public administration, experts, and the third sector, aimed at understanding the complexities and potential of adaptive reuse and unconventional affordable housing design in contemporary urban contexts. This approach has been tested through transformative reuse experiments in three Italian cities – Bari, San Donato Milanese, and Trieste – investigated by the project's core partners. Each partner, in consultation with local stakeholders, selected a project site with existing and (partially) decommissioned buildings for the development of design proposals – a former military hospital in Bari, an office complex in San Donato Milanese, and several historical residential buildings in Trieste – thus reflecting a diversity of typologies and context-specific challenges to be addressed. The project extended its reach through a "Design Studio Network" of European universities in six countries – Italy, Austria, Portugal, Cyprus, the Netherlands and the UK – where

2 See the description of the project on its website: https://www.uah.polimi.it.

design studios engaged around 300 students in proposing innovative reuse strategies in these locations. The proposals resulting from this collective experience reflect a shared commitment to interdisciplinary research and context-sensitive design within the broader framework of adaptive reuse.

The book is articulated into two sections, reflecting the dual nature of the research approach. The first one – *Unconventionality, affordability, informality. Keywords and devices for new inclusive ways of living* – adopts a theoretical and transversal perspective, critically addressing a set of core themes that have emerged within the conceptual and methodological framework of the UAH! project. Contributions in this section aim to provide interpretative tools and analytical categories relevant to the broader discourse on unconventional affordable housing strategies, projects, policies and practices. Grassi, Barbanente, and Petrosino explore the notion of social innovation as it emerges from conditions of marginality, proposing an analytical framework to understand how policies, projects, and practices addressing housing emergencies are generated and evolve over time. Briata and Wolfgring conceptualise unconventionality and affordability in the UAH! framework, proposing a practice- and research-based agenda for housing policies that respond to the realities of contemporary and increasingly diverse households. A series of contributions (Rizzi, Postiglione & Serrazanetti, Averna) then focus on more design-oriented aspects, particularly highlighting the relationship between the public, collective, and shared dimensions of contemporary housing design across different scales – from the urban context to the building, down to the more intimate scale of the individual housing unit – while exploring the concepts of threshold, flexibility, and adaptability. Gresleri then decodes affordability from the point of view of architecture, proposing four key elements – dignity, urban integration, participation, and sustainability – as cornerstones for designing affordable and inclusive living. Basso's contribution explores the relationship between housing affordability and domestic care, reflecting on whether traditionally care-oriented spaces – like kitchens – can inspire policies centred on affordable

and collaborative forms of living. Rinaldi provides a historical perspective on the cultural debate and architectural experimentation surrounding single households – a long marginalised demographic – in Italy between the 1930s and 1950s. The theme of informality is taken up by Carletti and Grassi, who discuss informal housing arrangements – such as urban squats or informal settlements – as both a reaction to the denial of the right to housing and a potential response to housing exclusion. Concluding the section, Rosi presents life stories – narratives collected through interactions and interviews with inhabitants – as a privileged tool to interpret inhabited spaces and lived experiences and to inform more responsive housing policies and design.

The second section – *Learning from fieldwork. Local perspectives on policies, practices, projects* – takes on a more applied dimension, translating these reflections into specific territorial contexts – Trieste, Bari, San Donato Milanese, and Milan – through the analysis of situated case studies and experimental practices developed within the scope of the research.

Trieste

The section opens with a contribution by Marchigiani, who – drawing on the outcomes of fieldwork carried out in Trieste – outlines a vision of supportive neighbourhoods where resources, actors, and approaches integrate in synergy across multiple scales: from housing to neighbourhood, up to the broader urban context. This is in response to the need to define unconventional forms of affordable and supportive living. The contribution provides the background for the following paper, in which Frausin and Novak reconstruct the work carried out in Trieste. They highlight how the process of dialogue and engagement with local stakeholders throughout all phases of the fieldwork was crucial to reconstructing a knowledge framework of local housing policies, identifying pilot areas and buildings for experimentation, and pinpointing key themes to investigate in order to inform local housing innovations.

San Donato Milanese and Milan

Wolfgring and Bricocoli frame the case study of San Donato Milanese, shaped by the historical presence of ENI, reflecting – based on insights from fieldwork with local stakeholders – on housing challenges in a post-company town context. Their contribution aims to enrich the broader debate on housing affordability and urban governance. In this context, the presence of two former, now-vacant, office buildings creates a large urban void that the Municipal Development Plan (PGT) aims to convert into housing. In particular, the "Terzo Palazzo SNAM", a building of notable architectural value, was reimagined as part of a master's thesis project described in the contribution by Carvalho and Tafaro. The proposal envisions transforming the building into a hybrid space, inhabited by a diverse population and serving as a civic centre for San Donato Milanese.

The contribution by Kërçuku and Postiglione explores how unconventional housing practices and the spatial configurations of social relationships can respond to demographic change and, at the same time, make living more accessible. The analysis is based on intergenerational co-housing experiences in Milan promoted by the *Prendi in casa* programme, which connects elderly people with students.

Bari

The contribution by Carletti, Grassi and Schingaro frames the housing context in Bari by retracing the participatory process carried out with local stakeholders. It focuses on the relational and participatory dimensions of the process and examines how participation may – or may not – impact the effectiveness of housing policies.

Carletti, Servedio, and Torretta analyse the occupation of the former Socrate high school in Bari as a form of unconventional living and a social laboratory, where vulnerable migrants find shelter and experiment with shared living practices based on "doing together," rebuilding ties with the surrounding area and developing a sense of belonging.

Another relevant case in Bari is the San Paolo public housing neighbourhood, presented by Grassini and Schingaro. Their contribution outlines its origins and development, and analyses the regeneration strategies implemented, offering new perspectives on public housing regeneration policies. This reconstruction supported the experimentation and rethinking of new unconventional housing solutions by the UAH! project's Design Studio Network. These solutions, illustrated in the contribution by Carvalho and Ruffino, aim to promote social integration within the neighbourhood and mutual support among residents, as well as to envision new services, activities, and community labs.

Together, the two sections of this book offer a comprehensive view of the most pressing issues in contemporary housing, as framed within the UAH! research initiative, bridging theory and practice across diverse urban scenarios.

As is often the case with things we take for granted, we rarely question the ways in which we inhabit space. Rethinking how we live – in a city, a neighbourhood, or a housing unit – tends to happen only under specific conditions: either in situations of necessity, where adapting space to meet urgent needs requires challenging existing norms and regulations; or, at the opposite end of the spectrum, when sufficient resources and autonomy allow individuals to reimagine and redesign space according to personal aspirations. This book explores the potential for innovation to emerge not only from top-down interventions, but also from engaging with the perspectives of those who are excluded from the decision-making processes that shape housing – those who often lack the means to secure not just a place to live, but the ability to choose how, where, and with whom to live. These reflections are addressed to practitioners, policymakers, scholars, researchers, and all stakeholders involved in the fields of affordability and alternative housing, inviting them to adopt new, shared perspectives that bring the voices and experiences of residents – especially those in precarious conditions – into the conversation.

Theoretical explorations and documented experiences offer a broad, interdisciplinary perspective, highlighting how spatial

quality, contextual characteristics, housing practices, and urban policies are deeply interrelated components of a layered and complex system. In this light, two key questions are posed: how can unconventional housing solutions contribute to greater affordability? And how can design respond to ways of living that do not conform to traditional models?

PART 1
UNCONVENTIONALITY, AFFORDABILITY, INFORMALITY. KEYWORDS AND DEVICES FOR NEW INCLUSIVE WAYS OF LIVING

Maddalena Floriana Grassi, Angela Barbanente, Daniele Petrosino*

SOCIAL INNOVATION BASED ON MARGINALITY

An analytical framework for the genesis and development dynamics of policies, projects, and practices in response to housing exclusion

Introduction

The principle of participation in the development of public policies is based on the recognition of the need for consensus to act legitimately, thereby preventing the role of civil society in policymaking from becoming merely symbolic or instrumental. The lack of consistent and structured responses from public administrations in Italy concerning housing policy is generating autonomous forms of claiming the right to housing, particularly among segments of the population in vulnerable conditions. These responses to the housing crisis are intriguing and could be considered unconventional forms of participation in policymaking.

The reactive dynamic to an institutional void is particularly valuable, both sociologically and from an urban planning perspective, as it compels a rethinking of the frameworks through which policies are constructed. Without continuous adaptation

* Angela Barbanente, Politecnico di Bari, Department of Civil, Environmental, Land and Building Engineering and Chemistry; Maddalena Floriana Grassi and Daniele Petrosino, University of Bari Aldo Moro, Department of Political Sciences.
The essay is the result of a joint effort by the three authors. The introduction and conclusions were written collaboratively, while the paragraph *Formality and conventionality in the Italian housing model* is by A. Barbanente, the paragraph *Informality and unconventionality in the relationship between housing type and household unit* by Daniele Petrosino, and the paragraph *How informal and unconventional ways of living interact with formal and conventional models: an analytical framework for the transformative cycle of policies* by Maddalena Floriana Grassi.

to social realities, policies would be unable to regulate them effectively. Housing needs that fall outside existing contexts and models give rise to new spaces, generating informal and unconventional forms that may even prove innovative for policymaking. This dynamic, arising from the conflict between needs and institutional responses, represents a possible form of participation if administrations are willing to observe and listen.

This contribution aims to establish a sociological analytical framework for examining practices, projects, and policies currently relevant to the national context of the housing crisis. This framework facilitates the exploration of potential applications for analyzing specific transformations in living arrangements. It is based on the intersection of the formal/informal and conventional/unconventional variables, thus allowing for the classification of observable cases and the reconstruction of the processes through which responses to the housing emergency are formulated.

Special attention is given to the emergence of innovation in housing and social policies arising from informal and unconventional practices that residents spontaneously adopt. Given that the reduction or denial of the right to housing is socially, politically, and even constitutionally unacceptable, it is important to emphasize the structural limitations of public administrations as levers for expressing the identity of civil society. It is also necessary to acknowledge the administration's own need to collaborate authentically with residents to fulfill its roles and functions.

Formality and conventionality in the Italian housing model

The Italian housing regime exhibits features characteristic of the Southern European model (Allen *et al.* 2004). In this model, responses to housing demand and needs are shaped not so much by the social composition of the territory, but rather by the cultural conception of the relationship between the housing unit and the family unit, and more broadly, by the pervasive diffusion of a culture of homeownership (Filandri *et al.* 2020). Traditionally, owning a home has been the primary means of

achieving housing stability, with the family playing a crucial role in providing social protection (Di Feliciantonio & Aalbers 2018). Housing policies in Italy, particularly since World War II, have been designed primarily around the nuclear family as the social unit. Consequently, cohabitation was primarily envisioned as being associated with marriage and the formation of a monogamous household, with policies aimed at enabling these households to achieve homeownership.

In countries like Italy, Spain, and Portugal, housing needs have generally not been met by strengthening the social rental sector but rather by utilizing tools such as cash benefits, which do not expand overall access to housing. In this manner, access to housing becomes connected to the family structure and its typically secondary role in the welfare state.

In Italy, in particular, even social housing has not primarily targeted the poorest or those most in need, but rather workers within monogamous households – those able to guarantee a medium- to long-term form of economic stability (Vereni 2015). For the poorest and most in need, temporary and "extraordinary" housing solutions have been utilised, such as shelters and reception centres, often resulting in the separation of family units.

In recent decades, this model has become even more pronounced. By 2021, approximately 70.8% (18.2 million) of Italian families (25.3 million total) lived in owner-occupied homes, which is 30% more than in 1971. The percentage of families renting in the private market dropped from 44.2% in 1971 to 20.5% (about 4 million) in 2021 (ISTAT 2021)[2]. However, the rise in homeownership has not been evenly distributed across social strata. Over the past 40 years, the share of the lowest income quintile renting a home decreased slightly, from 40% in the 1970s to just under 30% in the early 2000s, before rising again to above 40% after 2010. In contrast, among the wealthiest income

2 The available data come from various sources and are often outdated. This is mainly due to the absence of the National Observatory on Housing Conditions, the technical body established by Law No. 431/1998 to monitor housing conditions in Italy, with particular reference to public housing. Although it was formally set up by the Ministry of Infrastructure only in 2022, it is still not operational.

quintiles, the percentage of renters fell from 40% in the 1970s to 11.3% in 2006 (ISTAT 2021). This uneven distribution reflects the economic stratification of Italian families in terms of housing tenure (Esposito & Punziano 2020).

Housing market stratification becomes even clearer when considering housing hardship, defined as a situation where overall housing costs consume 40% or more of a household's income. This includes not only rent or mortgage interest but also insurance, taxes, maintenance, and utilities (Baldini & Poggio 2012).

According to the European Survey on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC), in 2018, approximately 3.3% of owner households experienced housing hardship, compared to 30% of renter households. This highlights a housing stability issue for renters, further supported by other non-economic indicators of housing hardship, such as overcrowding, neighbourhood quality, and the adequacy of homes for family needs. Although these conditions improve with rising income, hardship is more common among renters at similar income levels (Baldini *et al.* 2012, pp. 39-41). Poverty is more prevalent among renting households: in 2019, impoverished renting families comprised 15.1% of all renters, in contrast to 3.9% of owner households, with higher rates in southern regions (18.9%). Housing cost burdens exceed the median (41.5%) among single individuals, elderly persons, single parents, and elderly couples. Conversely, the lowest burdens are found among families with children and two employed parents (Nomisma-Federcasa 2020).

The feeling of housing insecurity is further exacerbated by the threat of eviction, a severe form of deprivation (Olagnero 1998), which has sharply increased in recent decades. Evictions due to rent arrears – by far the most frequent cause – rose from 27,154 in 2002 to 39,373 in 2023[3].

In this context, public housing remains a marginal component of the rental market, accounting for 3.5% of the total housing stock and approximately 18% of rented housing, or around 800,000 out

3 See Italian Ministry of the Interior 2023 data at https://ucs.interno.gov.it/ucs/allegati/Download:Provvedimenti_esecutivi_di_sfratto_e_richieste_di_esecuzione_dati_2023-20638488.htm [30.06.2025].

of 4.3 million units (Housing in Europe Observatory 2023). This decrease in public housing is partly due to 1993 regulations that allowed the sale of public assets, resulting in a 22% reduction in state-owned housing and further limiting public housing's ability to meet the demand for affordable housing (Federcasa 2015), which currently amounts to slightly less than 16,000 new assignments per year, i.e. 2.1% of the total stock on average (Federcasa 2024). Meanwhile, the State's role in supporting access to private rental housing has been inadequate, given the ineffectiveness of rent control agreements (Law 431/98) and successive demand-side subsidies (rent funds, arrears relief).

The growing housing hardship reflects a lack of understanding by public authorities of changes in housing demand caused by impoverishment, the breakdown of traditional families, and increasing social vulnerability. A new, more complex housing demand has emerged: the "impoverished middle classes" are now joining the traditionally marginalised, whose numbers are also increasing (Tosi 2008, p. 38). Faced with this transformation, a long-standing tradition continues to frame the housing emergency merely as the need for a roof, without addressing the full complexity of life experiences in housing distress. What is needed instead is access to services that support living. Traditionally marginalised individuals are rarely offered permanent housing solutions, reaffirming the primacy of construction ("the roof") over social support ("the services"). This approach has rendered the housing emergency a chronic condition for a segment of the urban population, institutionalizing preferences and exclusions in policies targeted at the middle social strata, particularly workers, as the privileged beneficiaries of social housing (Cacciotti 2020).

Therefore, the Italian housing system is marked by a significant degree of rigidity in both private and public housing supply. Vulnerable groups struggle to access housing, resulting in chronic housing instability and unsustainable living conditions. In other words, a structural segment of housing marginality exists, forcing affected individuals into extremely precarious situations. In this context, housing precarity becomes an additional critical factor of social vulnerability.

If this is the landscape of increasing social polarization in housing, even more significant is the failure to grasp social transformations, including changes in standard life-course models and the sedentary-nomadic dichotomy, as emphasised by migration and the pandemic.

Informality and unconventionality in the relationship between housing type and household unit

Among the responses adopted by populations facing exclusion from the housing market are the so-called "informal" housing solutions, such as unauthorised self-building and the occupation of dwellings and buildings. These responses emerge both as collective actions and as individual initiatives taken for oneself or one's family.

Traditionally, studies on informal housing in Italy have focused on self-building as a driver of urban development and as an informal channel for gaining property ownership (Coppola 2013; Cellamare 2010; Cremaschi 1990; Chiodelli *et al.* 2021). More recent debates on squatting also intersect with the issue of developing the housing welfare system (Grazioli & Caciagli 2018; Belotti & Annunziata 2018). In this context, squatting has been defined as a set of "self-housing" practices (Cacciotti 2020) aimed at appropriating spaces for residential use, regardless of their legally designated function. These practices may or may not involve self-building and always occur outside the legal framework.

In this contribution, we consider the dimension of informality as a mode of residence that arises in response to inadequate housing policies, systematically violating legally recognised urban planning and building regulations. In this context, segments of the population, especially the "marginalised", often find themselves living in conditions that lack essential services and infrastructure, alongside the dimension of unconventionality.

In architecture, unconventionality refers to the search for novel solutions that depart from norms or contrast with the taxonomies of the rational house as defined by modernist design. Such

a design aimed to standardize housing around rationalist principles of a "home for all", which became both the foundation of housing standards and the expected profile of its inhabitants. Unconventional design solutions experiment with alternative housing typologies that diverge from the standard model of apartments, typically tailored to the traditional nuclear family or individual living arrangements (Postiglione *et al.* 2022). By "unconventional", we refer to the mismatch between traditional notions of family and housing typology, considering existing ways of living that feature household units diverging from the traditional family model and encompassing various social and cultural profiles and age groups.

The non-standardised family models often lead to collaborative living arrangements founded on principles of solidarity and sharing. These arrangements may be supported or encouraged by the housing welfare system, or they may arise within informal housing contexts.

Navigating these two dimensions – informality and unconventionality – enables us, first, to comprehend the perspectives of inhabitants, builders, and public administrators, and second, to explore how they can interact and integrate.

Suppose those who experience housing emergencies and precarity are the first to respond. In that case, we find informal practices that may be conventional or unconventional, depending on whether they conform to the rationalist housing and family types. When responses come from builders or public administrators, we may find examples of experimental, unconventional projects or policies that, nevertheless, remain within the boundaries of formality, as they cannot violate existing urban regulations. When the unconventional solutions proposed by designers influence public administrators' policies – or vice versa – this suggests that the housing welfare system is adapting to observed social transformations.

However, the scenario described above illustrates that it is often the absence or inadequacy of the housing welfare system that drives residents to develop informal, conventional, or unconventional housing solutions. These responses are inherently conflictual because, by violating urban planning

regulations and lacking secure legal housing tenure, they cannot be tolerated under current structural and regulatory policies. In some cases, observable at both the European and Italian levels, informal housing solutions do manage to influence architectural thinking and even public policy. In these instances, politics allows itself to be swayed, and urban and architectural design becomes affected by ongoing social transformations – transformations that assert themselves as realities born of necessity and as forms of spatial reappropriation, the enjoyment of which should be a right in a society governed by democratic principles.

From this perspective, the value of marginality powerfully emerges through its disruptive and noticeable capacity, sometimes through conflict, to take part in transforming the very policies that govern its existence.

Housing precarity, both a product and a producer of specific ways of inhabiting the city, reveals the relationship between the lack of livable spaces (understood as the absence of stable, adequate housing, protection from eviction, and access to essential services such as healthcare, education, transportation, green areas, and recreational spaces) and the various practices implemented to resist or survive that absence (Rolnik 2014).

How informal and unconventional ways of living interact with formal and conventional models: an analytical framework for the transformative cycle of policies

In a context where the formal conventional standard is still characterised by a model of a standard nuclear family, reflected in housing units that conform to rational house taxonomies, adopting the perspective of marginality may help us understand how housing distress has shaped and continues to shape policies, projects, and practices derived from or entirely reflecting informal and unconventional ways of living. After all, a transformation of the housing regime cannot be held back when confronted with profound social changes that affect both the composition of household units and the demand for housing itself.

This transformative dynamic can be interpreted through an analytical grid (fig. 1), which intersects the variables of formal/informal and conventional/unconventional, as previously defined. This intersection enables the observation of emerging categories and related cases of practices, projects, and policies, as well as the potential paths a practice, project, or policy might take when one inspires or triggers the development of another.

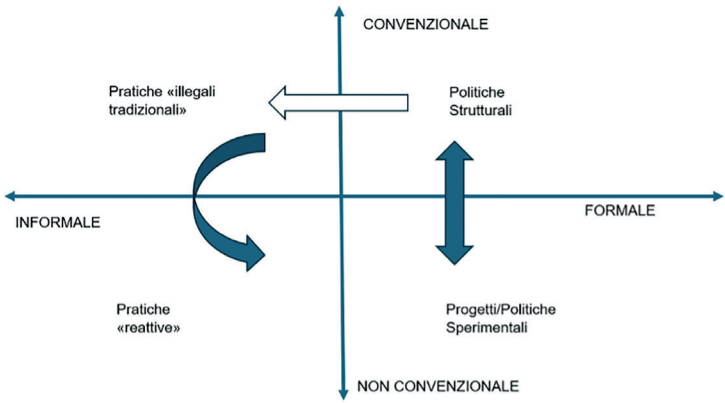

Figure 1. Analytical grid of the transformative cycle of policies based on informal and unconventional housing projects and practices (Own elaboration, UAH! 2025).

In the formal/conventional quadrant, we find policies that shape the housing regime of a specific territory at a particular point in time. These policies establish the benchmark by which the relationship between housing type and the household unit is deemed standard, meaning it is formalised both normatively and conventionally in the housing model of that context. In Italy, this aligns with the model described above.

In the informal/conventional quadrant are those practices that do not adhere to the formal legality of the housing type (i.e., they lack legal tenure), even though the relationship between housing type and household unit aligns with standard design

conventions and typical resident profiles. These practices are categorised as "traditional illegal practices" and primarily concern housing occupations.

An example is "Casa Comune" in Bologna, where, starting in October 2023, 111 individuals (including 40 children), mostly foreign nationals with regular employment contracts, occupied 24 apartments in a building at Via Carracci 63. In July 2024, a municipal agreement recognised the occupation as a temporary solution to the exclusion of these families from Bologna's housing market.

The building, originally publicly owned, was transferred in 2000 to ACER (Emilia-Romagna's housing agency), which decided in 2019 to terminate leases and vacate the property, leaving it unused. This occupation became part of a larger mobilisation known as the Radical Housing Project, organised by collectives protesting the management of public housing. Previously, the PLAT collective (Piattaforma di Intervento Sociale) had led other occupations, which were later cleared by the police, prompting large and tense protests.

In the Via Carracci case, eviction would have meant the municipality assuming responsibility for multiple families with children and the related emergency housing costs. The occupation was eventually recognised under a "housing transition" project managed by social service professionals, and the building now operates as a collaborative housing experience, featuring shared spaces such as kitchens, after-school areas, playrooms, and language classrooms. This case illustrates how an initially informal and conventional housing solution evolved into a formal and unconventional one through the recognition of public authority (fig. 2).

Projects or policies in the formal/unconventional quadrant, while adhering to legal and regulatory frameworks of tenure and construction standards, explore non-standard relationships between housing units and household structures. These explorations may draw inspiration from other initiatives designed by local planners and scholars, or they may arise from the housing demand in that context.

Figure 2. The case of Carracci Casa Comune (Own elaboration, UAH! 2025).

An example is "Homes4All – Innovating the Right to Housing in Turin", an innovative startup operating as a benefit corporation supported by the Social Innovation Fund[4]. Its goal is to transform public administration approaches to fragile housing conditions and reduce housing emergencies by promoting urban regeneration. Homes4All is a social impact finance project backed by the City of Turin, aiming to quickly reintegrate vacant private properties into the housing market by leveraging the private sector's economic capacity. Managed apartments – either purchased by Homes4All or offered by members – are rented at below-market prices, expanding affordable housing options while lowering the costs typically borne by public administrations. Tenants, including individuals and families with low incomes, receive support throughout their housing process.

As part of Torino Social Impact, a platform connecting over 200 local social innovation actors, this initiative, after initial design and testing, aims to scale its model. Here, we see a public-sector experimental project that seeks to evolve into

4 Cfr. DPCM 21/12/2028, https://www.governo.it/sites/governo.it/files/DPCM_20181221.pdf [30.05.2025].

a structured policy based on integrated public-private governance (fig. 3).

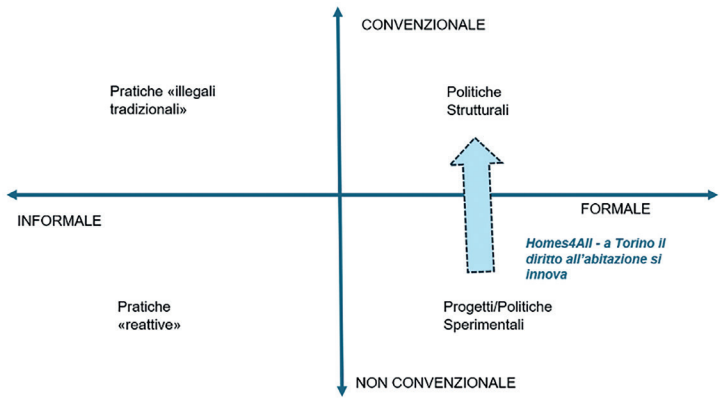

Figure 3. The case of Homes4All (Own elaboration, UAH! 2025).

Lastly, in the informal/unconventional quadrant are practices that meet neither the formal nor conventional standards of a context at a specific time. These practices do not conform to local family housing models, standard housing design, or legal tenure. They can be defined as "reactive practices", where housing needs respond to structural deficits by adapting to extreme spatial uninhabitability and reshaping those spaces according to basic existential needs.

One example is the Ex Socrate case in Bari, a building that once housed a high school branch, which closed in 2005 due to structural safety issues. It was occupied in December 2009 by about 140 migrants (mainly Eritreans, Sudanese, and Ethiopians) who had left a reception centres with no alternatives. Backed by the local Antiracist Network and the *Rivoltiamo la precarietà* collective, the building remains occupied, mostly by undocumented adults. There is no reliable census, no guaranteed utilities (only a single water fountain), and space management is self-organised. Despite repeated eviction at-

tempts, the occupation has become known to locals and has generated a sense of community among its residents. The city administration is currently planning a redevelopment project, with some involvement from residents; however, no viable relocation plan is in place for the construction phase.

This case reveals a stagnant housing situation, one that is trapped in an informal and unconventional status.

Informal and unconventional practices are particularly interesting as they inspire experimental projects and policies. The success of these initiatives could lead to their transformation into structural policies, ultimately innovating the existing housing regime.

One notable case is "Porto Fluviale RecHouse" in Rome (Careri *et al.* 2022). Originating in 2003 as one of the city's longest-lasting squats in the Ostiense district, the occupation of a former barracks brought together diverse cultures, creating accessible spaces and services for the community. In 2020, the City of Rome initiated a co-design process with Roma Tre University and the local community for an urban regeneration initiative, aiming to transform the barracks into a model of social and housing inclusion. The project commenced in 2024 and was awarded a tender call launched under the Innovative National Programme for Quality of Living (PINQuA – Programma Innovativo Nazionale per la Qualità dell'Abitare[5]). The project aims to integrate social housing with shared spaces, expand the affordable housing stock, create public areas for social interaction, and implement energy efficiency and sustainability measures. A participatory governance model is being developed with the support of LUISS University. The hope is that Porto Fluviale RecHouse becomes a sustainable, inclusive co-housing model, preserving the historical continuity of the original occupation.

5 PINQuA is the acronym of an Italian programme funded by the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR), aimed at promoting physical and socioeconomic urban regeneration, with particular attention to marginal neighbourhoods and housing hardship. The programme includes interventions to improve the quality of living, increase social cohesion and the safety of places, and rehabilitate public spaces and buildings.

This case serves as a prime example of how an informal and unconventional experience can inspire public intervention and lead to structural innovation in housing policy (fig. 4).

When builders and public administrations are guided by how people live, even through conflicting processes, it becomes a form of participatory governance.

It is therefore crucial to examine the margins to understand ongoing societal changes promptly. Systematically incorporating marginal perspectives into the development of policies and projects would result in more sustainable and accessible innovations. Public administrations should learn to recognize opportunity contexts (Pruijt 2013): a set of factors that define how conducive a scenario is to the emergence of new ways of living, and to identify housing needs before they escalate into emergencies.

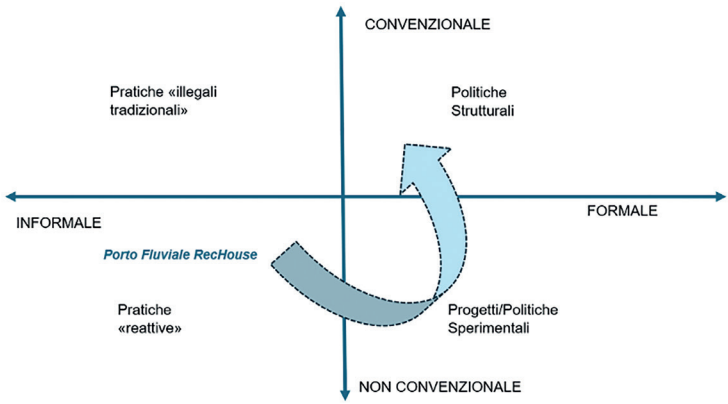

Figure 4. The Case of Porto Fluviale RecHouse (Own elaboration, UAH! 2025).

Conclusion

To dwell, to have a place – even a temporary one – where one can rest, eat, and live with a partner and children is a primal human need. People have always responded to this need in various ways, depending on family models, lifestyles, and evolving requirements.

Residential groupings have needed regulation – for reasons of hygiene, governance, or power – but have always had to account for people's ability to adapt these models to meet their necessities.

Self-building, informality, and unconventionality (understood as a departure from social conformity) are not exceptions but integral elements of the adaptive processes of living. These aspects should be viewed as part of a continuum within the housing dimension, transitioning through areas that may not always be regulated, as they emerge from social changes that either gradually spread through society or arise from unresolved needs that still require attention.

Therefore, the categories we use must be applied with caution. Formal and informal classifications depend on regulations and are subject to change. Conventional and unconventional labels reflect socially defined norms, which are also subject to change. Although both regulations and designs can influence social practices and guide them in one direction or another, there remains a certain inertia in acknowledging ongoing transformations, particularly when they affect minority segments of the population that remain marginalised.

However, it is precisely at this boundary between the formal and informal, the conventional and the unconventional, that new ways of dwelling practice emerge. We wish to explore this frontier, motivated by the belief that what is unconventional today could become tomorrow's norm and that the informal contains vast potential for agency, which could lead to social generation.

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Paola Briata, Constanze Wolfgring*

UNCONVENTIONAL AFFORDABLE HOUSING
Including interiors in housing and urban policies

The UAH! project is driven by two distinct yet, as we shall elaborate, complementary "souls", with *housing and urban policies* on the one hand, and *architecture of interiors* on the other. Guided by the central research question of whether and how "unconventional" housing policies, practices, and projects can contribute to more affordable cities, we argue that these two souls can *cross-fertilise each other*, generating innovative housing policies *starting from interiors, stretching into the city and back*, from practices of domesticity, which have transformed in tandem with societal changes over the past decades. This contribution reflects on the two key concepts at the core of the research – affordability and unconventionality – and aims to conceptualise how they have been framed within UAH!, offering some considerations for further reflection on the future of unconventional and affordable housing.

Conceptualising housing affordability

Housing affordability has been conceptualised and operationalised in various ways. Several models have focused on *supply-side parameters*, describing characteristics of the housing

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This paper reflects both authors' collective work and discussion, who contributed equally. Paola Briata took the lead in drafting the chapter *Defining unconventionality: A positioning in space and time*, while Constanze Wolfgring was primarily responsible for drafting chapters *Conceptualising housing affordability*, *Affordable housing, affordable cities*, and *Unconventionality: a practices-led definition*. The introduction and discussion (*An open "to-do list" towards unconventional and affordable housing*) were developed jointly by both authors.

offer itself. These include the below-market model, which defines affordability as rents or prices set at a specific percentage below market rates, and the cost-rent (or price) model where housing is deemed affordable when rents or prices are set in correspondence with the costs of housing production (including land, construction, financing costs, and maintenance) (Peverini 2023). A key limitation of such models is that they fail to take into account the divergencies in resources and means of households and thus have demonstrated to be insufficient to adequately portray (un)affordable housing as a lived experience with concrete economic, social and spatial implications, affecting a constantly growing number of individuals and households and increasingly heterogenous groups across the societal spectrum. *Demand-side approaches* have attempted to mitigate this gap by factoring in the economic capacities of households, expanding the understanding of housing affordability. These include the cost-ratio approach, which defines housing expenses as affordable if they remain below a certain proportion of the household income. This approach is based on a threshold – a "rule of thumb" – which has gained normative acceptance over time, despite its approximative nature and the fact that the ratio of what is deemed acceptable has tended to rise over the past decades (Stone 2006). A prominent example is the housing cost overburden rate used by Eurostat and OECD, which considers housing costs unaffordable if they exceed 40% of the disposable household income (including utilities such as water, electricity, gas, and heating). The residual income concept of housing affordability goes a step further, looking at how much is left for other essential needs – such as food, heating, schooling, and clothing – after housing costs are accounted for.

The more recent models of conceptualising housing affordability underscore that it *is not an absolute metric* but a relative parameter, as several researchers (Stone 2006; Bricocoli & Peverini 2024) have pointed out:

> It is fundamental to emphasise that affordability must always be understood as a relative condition – specifically and contextually relating housing costs to income – instead of as an absolute

> characteristic of a specific housing offer. Without reference to income, the definition of what is "affordable" loses its meaning. (Bricocoli & Peverini 2024, p. 54).

Housing affordability is therefore a key parameter in the broader relationship between a household's income and the costs it must bear for living, including dwelling and other expenses required for a dignified life. While this may sound banal, it is crucial to stress this point at a time when "affordable housing" has been discovered by market players and commercial housing developers as a promising niche to exploit and capitalise on. As can be read on the website of CBRE, a global real estate and investment firm based in the United States:

> Affordable housing investment volume grew to an all-time high of $13.5 billion in 2021 from just $674 million in 2009. CBRE defines affordable housing as that which offers below-market rents resulting from certain regulatory requirements, typically associated with tax incentives or other subsidies (CBRE 2023).

As "affordable housing" becomes increasingly marketised – reduced to a label rather than describing a condition or a sociopolitical objective – it is crucial for researchers to redirect attention to the core issue of *housing affordability* (Bricocoli & Peverini 2024). This means asking: who can afford to pay rent in a given context, under which conditions, who is being systematically excluded, and what implications does this have for (urban) societies more widely?

Affordable housing, affordable cities

In the more recent past, the geographies of purchase and rent prices have produced dynamics of segregation and expulsion, transforming the social and spatial fabric of cities, in several European contexts and beyond. As housing-related household expenses increase much faster than incomes, and low-income groups are being priced out of urban housing markets, researchers

(Wetzstein 2017; Haffner & Hulse 2019) are calling attention to the emergence of a *global urban housing affordability crisis*. This has been triggered or reinforced by a peculiar phenomenon that has taken shape (to varying degrees of intensity across different cities) over the past two decades, namely the financialisation of housing, which has produced buildings and, in extreme cases, neighbourhoods built for investment purposes exclusively, devoid of people living and using the spaces, undermining the very idea of cities as lived spaces (Rolnik 2019; Harvey 2012; Aalbers 2016). A key takeaway to draw from this is that the issue of housing affordability increasingly merges with the broader issue of urban affordability, in which the understanding of housing as a fundamental infrastructure (The Foundational Economy Collective 2022) clashes with the notion of housing as an investment product. Affordable cities, as Philipps (2020, p. 95) stresses, "are those where housing is a predictable, boring, low-yield investment, not a roll of the dice".

Ensuring that housing remains affordable for broad population segments inevitably requires a substantial *public intervention* in the face of such contemporary pressures, as exemplified by cities like Vienna (Wolfgring & Peverini 2024). "There is no example from anywhere in the world where the market itself, i.e. the housing economy, is in a position to provide affordable accommodation for the majority of the population" (Steiner 2018, p. 7). Yet in many cities, public administrations have interpreted rising real estate values as a sign of a city's attractiveness and "a comprehensive index of the city's good performance" (Bricocoli & Cucca 2016, p. 82), as has occurred also in Milan (Briata & Di Vita 2024). This narrative has masked the growing inaccessibility of housing in cities for the very people who sustain and operate the city's daily functions. Rethinking affordability, therefore, is not just a matter of social justice, but increasingly becomes a matter of the very viability of cities. This becomes evident in the case of Milan, where public service positions – such as those for bus drivers – remain unfilled because the salaries offered are insufficient to afford housing within the city. The broader discourse on key workers in "analogous" professions – transport staff, nurses, police officers – highlights this issue. These are roles that cannot

be outsourced, digitised, or performed remotely, but require the physical presence of workers at specific (including nocturnal) times of the day. What begins as an individual problem – the inability of a worker to secure housing – transforms into a collective one, ultimately undermining the city's ability to function. This illustrates that housing, as a foundational infrastructure of daily life, can only be outsourced spatially to a certain degree, and not without damage (The Foundational Economy Collective 2022). Providing affordable housing thus means enabling those that sustain daily urban operation through their labour to continue living within the very urban space where their presence is essential. The extent to which a city can fulfil one of its main purposes, namely, to function as a "machine of inclusion" (Siebel 2015) is directly related to its capacity to accommodate people who contribute to its wellbeing and livelihood.

Defining unconventionality: a positioning in space and time

The second key parameter of our research, "unconventionality", builds on an exploration of households and their practices. The UAH! project starts from the convention of the *nuclear family* in Western societies, consisting of two (heterosexual) parents and one to two children, which throughout large parts of the 20th century has served as a cardboard cutout accompanying both architectural and policy design throughout Europe. In architectural terms, this is reflected in a corresponding dwelling typology, which, after World War II, went hand in hand with the blooming period of mass production and suburbanisation, producing large-scale residential neighbourhoods in urban peripheries (Urban 2012). From a policy perspective, social (and thus also welfare) policies were designed with the same nuclear family in mind (Carlson *et al.* 2022), and different household models have long been considered an anomaly in the dominant narrative[2], a deviation from this rule. Our investigation into

2 Notwithstanding this dominant framing, there have been several early attempts to address the needs of such household types. In the 19th and early

unconventionality in housing thus departs not primarily from the space in which housing takes place – i.e., the dwelling – but from a curiosity in "unconventional households", that is, households defying the convention of the nuclear family – which is steadily declining in prominence (an example of which is the city of Milan, where single households meanwhile constitute almost 56% of all households, ISTAT 2023) –, and on how they organise, arrange, and adapt their housing environments according to their needs.

At this point, it is necessary to more clearly define the meanings that could be attributed to "unconventionality". A starting point could be the most common definitions given in dictionaries of "conventional" and "unconventional". The Cambridge Dictionary of the English Language defines "conventional"[3] as "traditional and ordinary: conventional behaviour/attitudes/clothes; conventional medicine/farming; a conventional wedding; disapproving: I find his art dull and conventional. Opposite: unconventional". "Unconventional" is then defined as "different from what is usual or from the way most people do things: unusual, uncommon, rare, unconventional, unique", and people's lifestyles are called into question to clarify the term: "an unconventional childhood/lifestyle/marriage". Interestingly, several examples used to clarify terms such as conventional and unconventional refer to lifestyle, age, and "family issues": "Following the usual practices of the past: We were raised in a conventional, middle-class family". At the same time, conventional refers to "relating to accepted or traditional ways of doing something".

These definitions of conventional/unconventional render quite clear the relativity of these terms, as conventions are always context-based, and the context could be historical, geographical,

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20th century, boarding houses in the United States provided housing solutions for single (predominantly male) adults (Gunn 1857), while in Germany, women's rights activist Lily Braun developed the *Einküchenhaus* – communal housing with a shared kitchen – to support working women and single mothers (Breuss 2019). The issue gained renewed prominence in the aftermath of the World Wars, when many men did not return, and female-headed households became more common.

3 https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/conventional [30.05.2025].

cultural, or related to other issues. A first point is thus clarifying that our work focuses on unconventionality concerning housing and households by looking at the everyday use of unconventional housing, for example, on the web. By typing "unconventional housing" in a search engine, the only results responding precisely to this definition are related to our research projects and writings (Bricocoli *et al.* 2020; Postiglione *et al.* 2022; Briata & Postiglione 2025). A second outcome is related to a series of housing typologies labelled "alternative housing". In this direction, a quotation from Wikipedia summarises the wide range of alternative/unconventional housing solutions that populate the web:

> Alternative housing is a category of domicile structures built or designed outside the mainstream norms […]. In modern days, alternative housing commonly takes the form of tiny houses, dome homes, pyramid-shaped houses, earth-sheltered homes, residential tree houses, abandoned factories and hospitals, and even up-cycled vans or buses. The motivation to create alternative homes can arise from destitution or lack of resources to buy or rent a typical home, and therefore include improvised shacks in shantytowns, buses, cars, and tent-like structures […]. Alternative housing, much like common housing, usually offers an area for cooking, sleeping, bathing, and an overall living space.[4]

As framed by Wikipedia, alternative housing has some points in common with the use of "unconventional housing" proposed in UAH!, but also some differences. Unconventionality – in the UAH! rationale – has thus nothing to do with eccentric housing solutions such as pyramid-shaped houses or residential tree houses but, based on a "beyond growth dependency" positioning (Rydin 2013; 2025; Savini *et al.* 2022) considers recycling existing buildings such as abandoned factories and hospitals, but also existing residential buildings that do not match contemporary lifestyles, as a key instrument to deal with the lack of affordable housing. This also means that if alternative housing is a way to deal with the lack of resources, our definition of

4 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alternative_housing [30.05.2025].

unconventional aims at being intrinsically linked to this issue. Finally, UAH! aims to challenge the traditional organisation of dwelling spaces, going beyond the design principles of "conventional housing".

In the most basic understanding, "conventional" describes how things are done typically, but conventions are culturally, geographically, and historically situated, and this means that reflecting on *unconventionality in housing* means individuating a *historical slot of time*, as well as a *socio-economic-geographical context of reference*. In this research, conventions are referred to *dwelling spaces expressed by the Modern Movement*, in particular, even if not exclusively, in Western countries, and reflecting the socio-economic organisation of the Fordist city. The dwelling space conceived by the Modern Movement is related to the definition of the rational home as defined by the modernist project and by the CIAM – the *Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne* – dedicated to the *Existenzminimum* (dwelling for the minimum level of existence), setting the conditions for a dignified and healthy life for everyone. This positioning has erased many housing traditions and forms to homologate people to the principles of the rationalist house (Irace 2015; Korbi & Mingotto 2019). The principle governing dwelling forms from 1927 onward has been formalised in different contributions such as Neufert's *Bauentwurfslehre* (1936) in Germany, which has been translated into many languages, becoming a worldwide reference; DOE's *Housing the Family* (1974 [1950]) in the United Kingdom; Diotallevi and Marescotti's *Il problema sociale, costruttivo ed economico dell'abitazione. Problemi di architettura sociale* (1948) in Italy, to provide some examples. In this direction, *unconventionality could be read through comparison with the rationalist house* and subsequently the modernist and contemporary home.

Feminist studies (Dalla Costa & James 1972) have moreover helped understand how the traditional home, as conceived by the Modern Movement, was also functional to the Fordist city. The conventional house and the conventional nuclear family were thus read as the place for the reproduction of a social structure, where women's domestic work plays a core role in maintaining

the capitalistic system. In the 1980s, specific feminist work dealt directly with "homemaking", focusing particularly on architecture and interiors, by criticising the man-made environment and the idea of the traditional nuclear family that affected home design. For example, the Matrix Feminist Design Co-operative in London was founded by a group of women-architects in the context of a broader architecture coalition whose aim was reorienting design practices towards users (Matrix 1984). Their work is a direct critique of the modernist way of producing dwelling spaces for the nuclear family, also assumed as a point of reference in design guides such as *Housing the Family* (1950), which provided guidelines to build council housing in Britain from the 1950s to more recent years. Matrix's work is interesting also because in the 1980s it challenged the supposed dominance of the nuclear families in our societies: "less than a third of households consist of a husband, wife and dependent children, and in more than half of these the mother has a paid job outside the home" (*ibid.*, p. 4-5). They further state:

> We have tried to show how the plans for houses have changed, reflecting and refracting societal changes. Over this period, the house has become synonymous with the nuclear family unit, although 60 per cent of households no longer match this model" (*ibid*., p. 79).

Design guides exclude many people, such as single-parent families, communal households, and elderly people. They also underline that it is only since 1980 that council tenants have been allowed, as a right, to have lodgers or subtenants in their own homes. More recently, feminist scholars such as Bassanini (2024) have argued for the need to develop critical thinking on current dwellings, as families have what she calls a "variable geometry". "Families" are no more traceable in the way registry offices depict them: there are "social families", "elective families", "legal families", and so on. In this context, the demand for dwellings is more and more dynamic, articulated, diversified, and unpredictable, but the offer is still very standardised, reflecting an outdated idea of the family. The result is a mismatch between existing dwellings and dwelling needs.

Finally, reflections in the specific field of architecture and design have fed our work. In this direction, a key reference is the special issue of Harvard Design Magazine number 41 on "Family Planning", edited in 2015[5], where a wide range of international authors reflect on the evolution of family configurations in contemporary societies and consequent responses of cities and architecture:

> as family configurations evolve and atomize, and "exceptions" become the norm – divorced, blended, solo, cooperative, childless, single-parent, widowed, queer, aging, migrant, transnational, foster, adoptive, multigenerational – the material construct of our homes, institutions, and cities asks to be reconsidered. This issue of Harvard Design Magazine is based on the premise that we need to imagine new, different spaces for living together. It confronts the persistent myth of the nuclear family and reconsiders the architectures that contain and reproduce it. It examines how family realities influence, and are influenced by, the spaces we inhabit, and the patterns of our existence in cities, suburbs, and the countryside. Do these spaces correspond to the way we live, or want to live? Do they enable and support, or dictate and confine? And how do other social constructs – corporations, institutions, communities – mirror or redefine familial configurations?

UAH!'s work is in line with these foundational questions and enriches these reflections through direct dialogues with public administrations and other key actors producing and allocating homes, and, at the same time, is directly working on possible design solutions for existing buildings where unconventional households are assumed as a target population.

Unconventional households: a practices-led definition

Various expressions of "unconventional households" have emerged through extensive fieldwork over six years at our School of Architecture, Planning and Construction (AUIC) at the

5 https://www.harvarddesignmagazine.org/issues/family-planning/ [30.06.2025]. See, in particular, Tattara and Aureli (2015), and Maak (2015).

Master degrees in Architecture and Planning by and with hundreds of international students in studio classes, who investigated such situations, encountered in their owns environments, in depth – through drawings, interviews, participatory observation, and photography – the results of which were bundled to an "Atlas of Unconventional Households"[6]. This includes various models, such as: individuals living with others, not connected through biological or elective family ties; couples living with other individuals or adults; single elderly sharing their homes with another/other adults (for instance, a caretaker, or a student); single parents and their child(ren) living with third persons; individuals living alone but sharing some collective spaces and facilities with others; individuals living multi-locally and renting rooms for parts of the year; couples living together only partially; divorced parents living with their children only partially.

The core insight emerging from this survey is that living and housing models have become increasingly diverse in recent decades, driven by more dynamic socio-economic developments, increasingly precarious and short-lived work environments, and a growing variety of lifestyles. While the nuclear family model is far from being replaced, other models are emerging alongside it and adding to it, in correspondence with the plurality of today's (particularly, urban) societies. These include, for instance, temporary living arrangements often shared with non-family members, multilocal forms of residence, and "living apart together" (LAT) constellations. Meanwhile, the housing typologies we have inherited in the existing stock are often rigid and only partially suitable for accommodating these households, and limited space is a frequent source of conflict. While the layout of the nuclear family's dwelling has been organised by functions – the parents' bedroom, the children's room, the living room, and so on – the same dwelling must now accommodate unconventional households, whose members employ various strategies in configuring and (re-)arranging their dwelling spaces. These strategies include the delineation of private and shared spaces, the creation

6 Available for download via https://www.lablog.org.uk/2018/09/09/recode-2018-final-report/ [30.05.2025].

of divisions through (fixed or improvised) means or devices, the asynchronous use of the same space according to daily routines (for instance, scheduling time slots for the use of shared spaces), and the use of the same space or devices in multiple ways and for various purposes (e.g., a kitchen table for working, studying, or manufacturing). Sharing (albeit to different degrees, according to spatial conditions) appears to be a common denominator in unconventional households' housing arrangements. The motivations behind these practices are manifold, situated on a spectrum ranging from necessity – for instance, financial constraints that make living on one's own unattainable, or the impossibility of living alone for health reasons – to choice, driven by the wish to live with others and share (spatial and other) resources for personal or ideological reasons (Schmid *et al.* 2019).

An open "To-do list" towards unconventional and affordable housing

Our research has revealed that households adopt a wide range of strategies to adapt their dwellings and living arrangements in response to structural barriers and suboptimal housing conditions. These include both social practices and technical adaptations, including sharing, self-building, adding onto existing spaces, subdividing units – temporarily or more permanently – squatting (in both residential and non-residential buildings), or using devices to render rooms usable in multifunctional ways and by multiple members of a residential nucleus or community. We have moreover learnt that whilst ideological motivations like sociability, solidarity, or a commitment to the right to housing do inform these practices, the pursuit of accessing or maintaining affordable housing remains a key driver behind them. This raises a critical question: how can such practices inform better housing policies, aimed at increasing affordability and catering to the realities of unconventional households? Until now, domestic interiors have not been a central focus of housing policies, partly because they have been associated with the needs of the conventional nuclear family. UAH! argues for and explores

possibilities for interiors to enter the reflection on housing and urban policy. In this direction, several key points have emerged during the project and merit further exploration.

A first premise for addressing this question is the still under-explored *role of data and knowledge* about the "target group", which, as our investigation has shown, is highly heterogeneous, with potentially highly diverse priorities and needs. While our definition of "unconventional households" follows a residual approach, being centred on those households who diverge from the nuclear family model, there is currently no comprehensive statistical overview indicating how extensive this segment of the population actually is – or, conversely, how large the share of "conventional" families is. If we extend our focus to include single-person households as potential target groups of unconventional affordable housing policies – recognising that such living arrangements are not always voluntary and that individuals living alone are particularly vulnerable to housing affordability challenges due to reliance on a single income – it becomes evident that such policies might be relevant to a significant share of urban populations. Gaining a robust, both quantitative and qualitative, knowledge base is essential for acquiring a clearer understanding of how many "unconventional households" exist, who they are, how they are composed, which life stage(s) they are in – and how this influences their housing requirements – and what their needs, aspirations, and priorities may be. The significance of this knowledge extends beyond academic relevance – it constitutes a form of "usable knowledge" (Lindblom & Cohen 1979) that enables policymakers to design and promote policies and measures tailored to these profiles, while at the same time providing a sound basis for the justification of necessary investments.

Data are needed to give us a clearer idea about the status quo, but household models and how we are living together will continue to be in flux, also in the future (along with migration movements, better health support, and thus an ever-growing acceleration of aging). Some trends are predictable to some degree, but some great unknowns remain, signifying that the stock we are (re)building now must, in any case, leave some degrees of adaptability to evolving needs.

A second premise concerns the *reuse of the existing building stock*. On the one hand, as said, affordability is linked to a "beyond-growth dependency" perspective, where the reuse of existing buildings and housing stock becomes imperative to avoid the waste of resources; on the other hand, our practices-led definition of "unconventional households" has shown how bottom-up forms of reuse could answer to societal and economic changes that so far are unmet by the public administrations' responses. Given limited resources and the imperative to combine forces to mitigate the effects of climate change, any forward-looking housing policy must build upon what already exists – that is, the current built environment. This includes both the existing residential stock and non-residential buildings, which, particularly if publicly owned, represent a valuable resource. In both cases, however, challenges persist in terms of architectural transformability, regulatory constraints, and institutional capacities. The existing housing stock, designed for the nuclear family, is characterised by layouts that no longer meet contemporary needs, especially those of unconventional households.

Non-residential stock, on the other hand, was not designed for dwelling purposes at all and thus requires a complete rethinking to be transformed for residential use. At the same time, precisely because these buildings were not originally conceived as homes, they might offer more freedom for being transformed in "unconventional" ways – where the constraints of the given form might inspire inventive and unusual housing solutions. In any case, both the residential and non-residential existing building stock can serve as testbeds to experiment with and develop new housing models. Yet this potential remains largely unfulfilled, partly due to an absence of good practices and established procedural frameworks capable of guiding such transformations. Public administrations moreover often struggle with limited resources, coordination capacities, and bureaucratic inertia. Several examples encountered during the implementation of UAH! have shown public administrations making considerable efforts to fit people who live in unconventional ways into conventional housing units.

However, a broader *cultural shift* is needed, not just in terms of architectural design, but also concerning the institutional culture of public administrations themselves.

Thirdly, affordable housing at a large scale can only be achieved if there is the political will to make it happen. Many of the cities we live in still reason and operate, in various ways, according to an *urban growth paradigm* in which rising property values and land prices are not viewed as problems to be addressed, but rather as expected (and to some extent desired) collateral effects in a global competition for attractiveness, investment, and perceived urban success. However, the history of housing policy teaches us that genuinely affordable housing for the many has always been the result of political intent on publicly owned or publicly controlled housing. While our research has shown that households' practices often emerge as responses to the inadequacies, inaccessibility, or insufficiency of affordable housing in urban markets – as well as to the inaction and indecisiveness of policymakers – mitigating the effects of these shortcomings to some degree, a political commitment remains indispensable for providing a structural and sustained response to the issue at large.

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Roberto Rizzi*

LIVING IN "SEQUENCE SHOT"

Suggestions

a.

When Pieter De Hooch painted *Interior with Women beside a Linen Cupboard* in 1663, now housed at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam (fig. 1), he drew attention to a simple gesture of daily life: two women are intent on placing clean linen in a wardrobe while a little girl is playing nearby. The scene is placed in the foreground, slightly off-centre to the left. The open wardrobe doors envelop the women in a somewhat dusky embrace, highlighting the luminous patch of folded sheets toward which their four hands converge, hands that seem to exchange glances of complicity.

Several sources of light rhythmically structure the depth of the composition: a diffuse light emanates from the stairway leading to the upper floors of the house; another one filters through glazed openings highlighting the window on the façade of the house; the farthest light falls on the buildings in the background and reflects in the water of the canal that runs between two streets.

This layered structure of spatial depth is reinforced by a succession of spaces portrayed.

The first room, in which the main scene takes place, is followed by another room, perceptible by the differing layout of the floor tiles. Beyond the open doorway, the urban space unfolds: a street, the water of the canal, another street, and finally, through the half-open door of the house in the background, one could imagine another sequence of rooms belonging to that dwelling.

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This representation expresses an ideal of continuity in domestic spaces, coherently linked in sequence: each space is precisely identified by its spatial qualities, the articulation of its boundaries, and the typology of its furnishings. At the same time, however, these spaces are tightly interwoven through a complex web of relationships governed by the very thresholds that divide them: the transparency of windows, the gradable apertures of doors, the varied material treatments of surfaces. It is a form of continuity in which each fragment appears to be entrusted with a specific activity, an activity that, while perhaps unsuitable or impossible in a neighbouring fragment, does not result in indifference, mutual exclusion or in a mere juxtaposition between the parts.

It is as if each spatial unit, each room, looked at its contiguous to acknowledge their differences while preserving shared qualities. This "gaze" is defined by a kind of selective disposition, manifest in the way transitions between rooms are resolved: the elements of separation and connection and the quality of light and materials come together to define thresholds that, in the design of living spaces, act as junctures between places of *resemblance*[2] and difference.

b.

Mark Rothko's pictorial research unfolds within the framework of American Abstract Expressionism. However, it gravitates toward a kind of "abstract impressionism" in which the gestural impulses typical of his contemporaries[3] are tempered by a calm, measured movement. His work is shaped by a contemplative attitude, the result of which is a slow and delicate gesture that leaves no visible trace (fig. 2). Varying degrees of transparency or depth are achieved through successive layers of pigment,

2 I use the word *resemblances* to highlight the coexistence of sameness and difference, to evoke a condition, typical of contemporaneity, in which change becomes meaningful precisely through the simultaneous presence of identity and alterity. What I attempt here is to articulate, in spatial and architectural terms, the reflections developed by Francesco Remotti (Remotti 2019).

3 One need only think of Jackson Pollock's *action painting*.

Figure 1. Pieter De Hooch (Rotterdam 1629-Amsterdam 1684). *Interior with Women beside a Linen Cupboard*, 1663, oil on canvas, 70x75,5. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum (on loan from the City of Amsterdam).

which transform the flat chromatic surface into an actual space, perceived as a vibrant, expanded, and luminous substance. The rigid plane of the canvas is thus transfigured into a sort of veil that not only allows light to pass through, but almost seems to emit it at times, becoming space itself, expanding not just beyond the painting, but especially on the viewers' side of it, enveloping them into it (Argan 1977).

What is depicted in these works becomes a metaphor for these very dynamics: large chromatic fields, composed in horizontal bands, are placed side by side, dense at their core, dissolving at their edges which can be defined – although never sharp – more often ragged, permeable, or fused into one another through subtle blending.

When transposed into the three-dimensional realm of architecture, this approach invites us to consider boundaries as places of connection, rather than breaks or separations between adjacent elements. Thresholds that are not mere gradients of passage, but particular spaces capable of organising relations, generating space where previously there was division, turning a boundary into a place to be inhabited.

Figure 2. Mark Rothko (Dvinsk 1903-New York1970), Untitled (Violet, Black, Orange, Yellow on White and Red), 1949, oil on canvas, 207 x 167,6 cm. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York Gift, Elaine and Werner Dannheisser and The Dannheisser Foundation, 1978 (© 1998 Kate Rothko Prizel and Christopher Rothko/Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York).

c.

One of the most well-known warnings that opens Georges Perec's *Espèces d'espaces* (Perec 1974) ends with a similarly well-known and often-quoted phrase:

"In short, spaces have multiplied, been fragmented, and diversified. Today, there are spaces of every kind and size, for every use and every function. To live is to pass from one space to another, while trying as much as possible not to hurt oneself too badly." (*ibid*., pp. 15-16).

Perec's reflection begins with the need to become conscious of what, by habit, is taken for granted or experienced without attention, as though it no longer contained any information or meaning. Habit anaesthetises and conditions: "Where is our life? Where is our body?" and crucially, "Where is our space?" (Perec 1989; it. tr. 1994, p. 12). The spaces we inhabit appear familiar in their apparent realism, but their reality and everyday presence do not make them immediately comprehensible. And if our present time has multiplied, fragmented, diversified, and specialised the spaces in which we live, the real challenge is our ability to move among them, to navigate these fragments and, in so doing, recompose a unity that cannot be assumed a priori.

Beyond the philosophical background of Perec's thought, what is particularly relevant is the emphasis on the need for connections across spaces that enable movement and passage, thereby making life possible. That is, not merely the spaces, but the way in which they are related, so that passage occurs "as much as possible without hurting oneself too badly". What Perec suggests is that dangers and tensions lie not only in the physical differences characterising spaces, but in the relationships among those occupying them: individuals or groups with divergent or even conflicting interests, or different or asynchronous times of use.

Here is what Perec's observation seems to convey: the urgency of carefully designing the transitional spaces mediating between the multiplicity of contrasting spatial fragments that characterise contemporary dwellings. These connections must allow for ordered, resolved, and hierarchically articulated transitions.

Contextualisations

a.

Since the urbanisation processes triggered by the Industrial Revolution, architecture has been called upon to devise residential solutions capable of responding to high demand under constrained financial and spatial conditions.

At the height of its engagement with this issue, the Modern Movement developed housing strategies that, broadly speaking, revolved around the relationship between the *dwelling unit*, whose spaces were rationally configured and equipped to meet the needs of private family life, and *service* spaces, conceived as collective and public complements. The former were assembled according to precise distributive rules (fig. 3) (such as corridor-access or linear block typologies) within compact buildings laid out on open lots defined by transport networks. The latter were either clustered into architectural focal points or extended across specific parts of the buildings (e.g. the base, the rooftop).

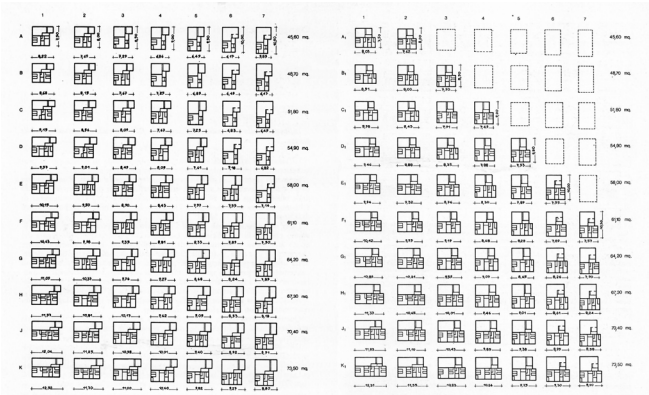


Figure 3. Analysis of a housing typology in which the depths of the building body (rows) and the front (columns) vary, maintaining the same area. Left: east staircase. Right: west staircase. Alexander Klein, Contributi scientifici applicati al problema dell'abitazione, in "Zeitschrift für Bauwesen", n. 10, Berlin 1930 (Source: Baffa Rivolta & Rossari 1975, pp. 102-103).

Furthermore, the private units were strictly defined according to the number of users (fig. 4) and their financial means, which determined the number of "rooms" and their hierarchical arrangement based on function and circulation. Services were identified according to usage thresholds, intended to compensate for what was lacking within the dwellings themselves (Aymonino 1971; Baffa Rivolta & Rossari 1975).

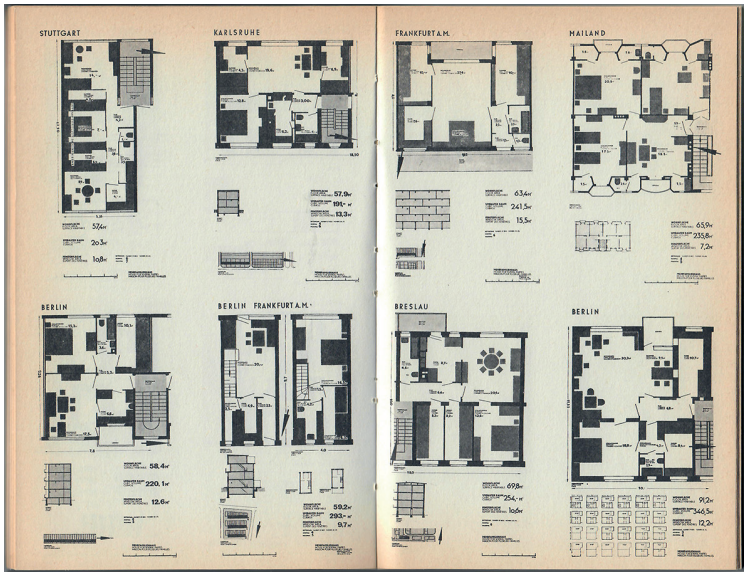


Figure 4. Housing for the Existenzminimum, II International Congress of Modern Architecture, Frankfurt, 1929, Exhibition panel curated by Ernst May. Above right is the Italian participation with a plan by Giovanni Broglio for the IACP Regina Elena (now Mazzini) quarter in Milan. Source (Aymonino 1971, pp. 150-151).

What increasingly came to dominate, ultimately becoming a stereotype, perhaps even betraying the movement's original ideals, was the self-contained nature of the housing unit: spatially hierarchical and entirely set apart from what lies beyond its entrance door. This exacerbated an idea of independence that

cannot truly exist and engendered a potential disconnection between the home and the city, between dwelling and social interaction, as though the apartment were the ultimate guardian of intimacy, the embodiment of the self or the nuclear household. This model neglects that the city itself – and the distances inherent in any social relationship – protects us from the excessive proximity and intimacy that the domestic sphere imposes, as the recent pandemic has made all too clear (Molinari 2020).

Conversely, the potential of the domestic environment to respond to the crisis of traditional public spaces, which have been taken over by commerce and leisure activities concentrated in specific times and places, remains largely unexplored.

The crisis of this model is made evident by new economic and sociodemographic dynamics, and by the resulting transformations in modes of dwelling. These changes challenge the entire system underpinning the model itself, ranging from regulations (which govern dimensions, performance standards, and requirements derived from this model) to construction methods and technologies, to the organisation of the real estate market, to public intervention policies and related funding mechanisms.

It would seem more fruitful to pursue research and experimentation capable of overcoming this rigid duality, breaking through the closed autonomy of the dwelling unit, toward a continuum that draws fragments of domestic activity into public spaces and invites particles of collective life in proximity to the home.

b.

Dwelling, understood in its broadest sense as a form of relationship among human beings, and between humans and other living beings, objects, and the world, is today shaken by profound transformations. It continues to be of concern to us, insofar as we uphold the principle that these very relationships ground and give meaning to architectural design: a practice that translates them into form, making them both possible and meaningful.

These transformations affect relationships among subjects, between subjects and places, and between subjects and time.

Today, residential demand appears profoundly transformed, marked by great variety and fragmentation. The traditional family unit, consisting of a couple with children, is no longer dominant, while new forms of cohabitation are emerging, driven by economic and sociodemographic changes (fig. 5). An economic change is for instance, the delocalisation of work, which not only causes people to move away from their original places of residence but also leads to repeated relocations in order to follow the shifting availability of jobs, often based on temporary contracts subject to frequent changes and transfers. This all unfolds within a context of ongoing economic instability and precarious employment.

In terms of sociodemographic changes, examples include young people's lengthened stay at their family homes, declining birth rate, and ageing population, only partially offset by increasing migration.

New modes of cohabitation are emerging, with single-person households becoming particularly prevalent. In Milan, for instance, out of a population of 1,396,059 people[4], the average number of individuals per household has remained steady at 1.84 for over a decade, with approximately one-third of households comprising a single person. These individuals may be students, workers, or the elderly, but also the unemployed or adults who end up alone and out of work because of personal reasons and disrupted life paths. These situations are highly diverse, often marked by hardship and vulnerability.

Similarly, cohabitation arrangements are increasingly diversified, ranging from adults who choose, or are forced, to share a residence (e.g. elderly people with students or caregivers; young adults living with their parents for extended periods), with degrees of autonomy that may be rather high, to single-parent households or blended families with children.

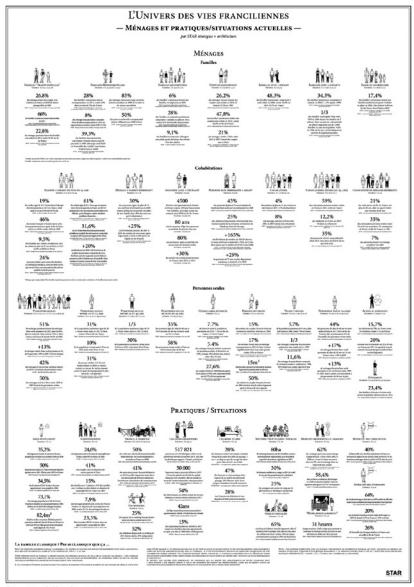
The relationship between people and places is also marked by growing transience, driven by work-related mobility. As a matter of fact, work is increasingly carried out across distributed networks – dictated by organisational needs, proximity to clients or end users, or logistical constraints – rather than in one fixed location.

4 As of 31 December 2019, Municipality of Milan based on ISTAT data.

However, mobility also stems from many other factors, such as the pursuit of a desired place of study, participation in events for professional or recreational reasons, or simply tourism. Displacements caused by extreme conditions, such as economic or humanitarian migration or natural disasters, should also be considered.

Finally, new modes and practices of inhabiting are emerging, for example seasonal or permanent rental of individual rooms, and the reconfiguration of parts of the home for other uses, including work, entertainment, socialising, and more.

Such practices demand a specific and original organisation of time and space that does not correspond to the established and rigid structure of the dwelling unit, nor to the traditional ways in which units are aggregated within buildings or connected to public spaces in the cities.



"Current Households And Practices/Situations": Sociological Exploration of Households, Lifestyles and Current Practices

Figure 5. STAR, Strategies + architecture, Current households and practices/situation: sociological exploration of household, lifestyle and current practices, The Interior of the Metropolis, Research project, 2015 (Source: "MONU", vol. 24, April 2016, Rotterdam, pp. 99-106).

A proposal for design

How could we synthesise the reflections developed thus far?
What impact can they have on architectural design culture?
How could we formulate an ideal design brief that puts these ideas into value?
Which elements could we focus on to respond to the questions that emerge from them?

The hypothesis here proposed is to reason through the notion of *spatial transitions*, as a category capable of capturing and addressing the issues we have outlined, not by concentrating on moments of "duration," that is, on states of equilibrium and stability (rooms defined by specialised functions), but instead on their *transitional passages*, seen as essential and generative elements.

The suggestion explored here is that of a: *sequence of thresholds from kerbside to street-facing window.*

{sidewalk … gate … concierge desk … (covered) path … [shared service] … garden …
[shared service] … courtyard … [shared service] … stairwell entrance … landing … [shared service] … stair/elevator … landing … [pause] … entrance door … apartment … circulation … [equipped node] … room … [flexible partition] … services … window}.

What is proposed, then, is not a single threshold element where two opposing and competing entities confront one another, but rather a concatenated system of passages (cfr. De Hooch), resolved in sequence through resemblance (cfr. Rothko), and enabling (cfr. Perec) both movement and dwelling. A system along which variations in layout can be articulated both in terms of the gradation between shared communal spaces and private ones (thus overcoming the binary of dwelling/services), and in terms of a more collective articulation of domestic space (thus overcoming the hierarchy of room/apartment).

Such a sequence must also be imagined as part of a system, one composed not only of a variety of similar points of origin

and destination (from various sidewalks to other frontages and overlooks), but also of sequences shaped by other trajectories (toward workplaces and places of study, to mention some). The outcome is a complex web of converging, overlapping, diverging, or interrupted directional strands, along which different subjects move at different times, and whose coexistence becomes possible, and meaningful, precisely through the way the spaces they traverse are articulated: either in continuity or in rupture.

These sequences must therefore be imagined as successions of spaces (marked by continuity and interruption) that are progressively selective and specifically attuned to the people who, along any given sequence, proceed along their path, stop to move towards other relational systems, or enter, arriving from elsewhere. Each sequence can be considered in both directions, either inbound (toward the gaze upon the street) or outbound (toward the street), with corresponding variations in use and dynamic flow. The aim is to hold together seamless continuity and gradations of specificity, so that what is lost beyond a threshold is compensated by what is gained beyond it: what is no longer possible merges with what now becomes so.

A didactic experimentation

For some years now, within design studios and master's theses in Interior Architecture, part of the Architecture, Built Environment and Interiors programme at the Politecnico di Milano, we have been working on these themes. We have done so by focusing on various public housing neighbourhoods in Milan (San Siro, Mazzini, Ponti, Niguarda, Gratosoglio, Lorenteggio, Sant'Ambrogio, fig. 6), with contributions from colleagues in other disciplines (Urban Design, Architectural Technology, Building Physics and Environmental Studies, Sociology), and, despite the autonomous nature of academic research, by engaging as much as possible with local stakeholders (public agencies, associations, third-sector organisations).

The projects developed by our students in this context have sought to explore these issues and have been an essential source of insight for the reflections here presented[5].

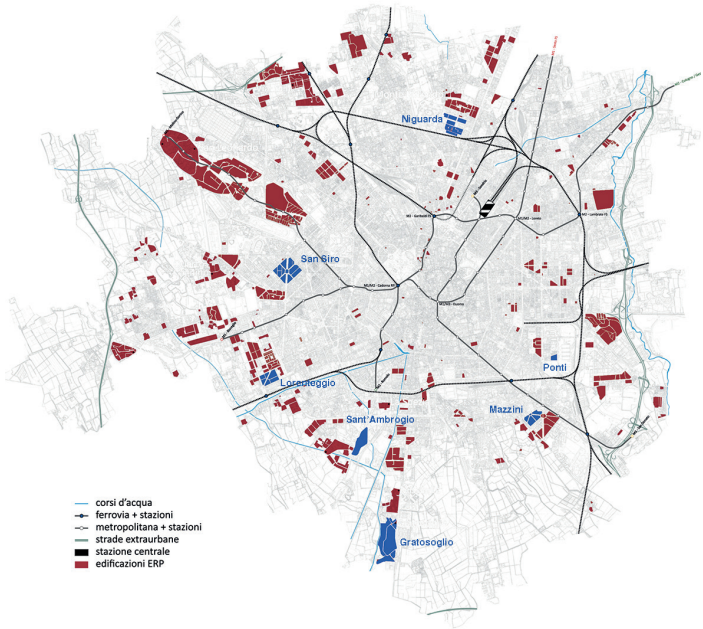


Figure 6. Public housing (ERP) in Milan. Map showing the location of ERP neighbourhoods (as of 1993), highlighting the neighbourhoods in which didactic experimentation was carried out in the Milan Polytechnic's Interior Architecture Studios.

5 This is not the place to present a systematic overview of the solutions that have been tested. The neighbourhoods listed include portions that are sufficiently homogeneous in terms of accessibility, built density, and resident profiles; within them, a range of different transformation strategies have been experimented. Comparing these cases makes it possible to identify a repertoire of alternatives tied to specific contexts, while a transversal reading brings to light both recurring patterns and exceptions. What is here presented is a further synthesis, organised into broad thematic groupings.

The choice of context for this design exercise is not accidental, nor should it be seen as contrary to the premises outlined above. On the contrary, the most recent examples of rehabilitation within this housing stock have begun to experiment with innovative solutions, disrupting the rigidity of the original layout and introducing new forms of mediation between places, between buildings, and between apartments. Examples of such forms of mediation include giving depth to windows, enhancing balconies and loggias, disseminating spaces for bodily care, adding value to stairwells at ground level and on intermediate landings through light and spaciousness, incorporating green spaces and micro-gardens into buildings, and introducing "domestic infrastructures" that support social interaction.

In synthesising the outcomes of these experiences, rather than listing specific solutions or their variations depending on context, we should identify the different spatial domains that may arise, regardless of scale or location (urban space, building, apartment, environmental unit, among others). These domains are not fixed, dimensionally defined places within a strict hierarchy, nor are they isolated from one another. Rather, they are simultaneously co-present and diachronically reiterated. They could be identified as follows:

Entrances

Entrances are places where passage is selective. Movement is smooth for those who belong to, or recognise themselves within, a cohesive or formalised system of relationships beyond the threshold; it is interrupted for outsiders. Entrances thus make a different way of being together visible. The opposite direction, on the other hand, introduces conditions of looser constraints and anticipates a return to broader forms of shared space. Entrances occur repeatedly along the sequence described earlier, and at each point, they reduce (or increase) the size of the user group, tying spatiality to differing degrees of communal experience.

This can be seen, for instance, when approaching a group of buildings organised around a shared open space, often marked

by a civic number and a concierge's station (frequently abandoned or underused). The deviation from the general flow of the street is often accentuated by moments of expansion, like an effluent branching off from a main current. Here, fragments of delocalised services, coordinated with others, serve both as a prelude to the sharing of a specific group and as a link to other relational systems. Or again, this dynamics can be seen in the repeated ground-level access points to vertical circulation cores along building fronts, where the insertion of elevators and the reactivation of rarely used or degraded ground floors and basements dissolves the abrupt transition from the openness of courtyards or gardens to the enclosure of stairwells, extending the collective character of outdoor spaces (through transparency, dimensions, greenery, etc.) to areas typically reduced to mere functional corridors. The same applies to the proximities of residential units' entrances, which are often enhanced by material treatments or volumetric articulations (greenhouses, winter gardens, which sometimes have passive climate control functions) or by site-specific personalisation devices. Similarly, within individual environmental units, the crucial issue is how to express the variability of entrances and their potential connections in ways that correspond to the multiplicity of interpersonal relationships: each condition – to open or close, to expand or contract, to allow or deny the passage of light and gaze – activates design devices and relational dynamics that must be attentively considered.

Nodes

Intersections of movement mostly involve individuals who share a common purpose, where passage is not selective, since all participants belong to the same relational system. Nodes are points of stops, pause or stillness, of temporary dilation along the route. Because of their static character, they often become opportunities for localised functional intensifications, for instance in connections or changes of direction along horizontal or vertical paths, in open or enclosed settings, or on the intermediate landings of stairwells. The same applies within

residential units, where nodes often mark the point around which services such as bathrooms and kitchens are arranged.

Simple elements, including benches, supports, and the like, or the material, chromatic, geometric, or spatial articulation of one of the building's surfaces, can confer character to these spaces and help to counterbalance the excessive functional specialisation of individual rooms. In doing so, they promote greater fluidity and diversity of use through a partial diffusion of functions and activities.

Overlooks

Associated with moments of rest or contemplation, these places invite us to observe, penetrate into, and understand (or imagine) what lies beyond. Attention is paid here to the visual relationship of space and light between places, made tangible through the enhancement of visual depth, toward the greenery, the city, or other parts of a building or dwelling unit. Overlooks may unfold horizontally (through apertures, windows, or transparencies) or vertically (e.g. through double-height spaces, balconies). They may as well rely on inclined planes, rotated or offset walls and ceilings, ramps connecting different levels, or even on more complex articulations such as stepped platforms with integrated seating.

Paths

Paths lie along horizontal or vertical lines of movement, towards the most private spaces or away from them. They facilitate a coordinated movement, connecting entrances, nodes, and overlooks. They accompany motion with a rhythmic cadence or an uninterrupted continuity of their defining elements. Often undervalued in favour of those spaces designed for dwelling, with which they are sometimes contrasted, paths instead offer an opportunity to emphasise the dynamism of movement, whether of people or things. This dynamism reflects the evolving nature of relationships among residents.

Beyond the Threshold

The threshold is a place of interweaving, a space where opposing sides generate relationships.

When read in sequence, thresholds acquire directionality, generated by the sense of movement. The place one comes from begins to recede, while the place one is approaching begins to take shape. One has experienced the former, while the latter always holds something unforeseen.

Within this anticipation lie expectations, desires, and hopes…

The threshold becomes the place from which we perceive what lies beyond in an original way, not merely in its literal reality.

In many ancient Roman houses, small garden courtyards open off large reception halls. These *viridaria*, where fragments of nature are combined with frescoed representations of lush gardens (as in the Villa at Oplontis), do not offer direct access. They can only be contemplated through windows set in the surrounding walls, as though, by denying entry, an added value were produced – a value born of the threshold itself, which admits the gaze while withholding the body[6]. In this sense, every window possesses such a quality: we do not simply see what lies outside, namely beyond that glass, but also what we imagine to lie beyond it (fig. 7)[7]. Like any threshold, considered as a tangible architectural space, its surface expands and contains our presence *here*, along with the difference *there*, creating a single, possible whole.

6 This is a line of thought often revisited by Francesco Venezia. See, for example, S*tanza con finestra* (Venezia 2010) or *Introduzione al mondo etrusco* (Venezia 2012).

7 This is masterfully described by Giovanni Raboni (Raboni 1977).

Figure 7. Ettore Sottsass (Innsbruck 1917-Milano 2007), Mia madre seduta davanti alla finestra piccola. Era contenta…, [My mother sat in front of the small window. She was happy] lithography, in Alfredo Taroni, ed., "Trattato di architettura", artist's book in 70 copies with 10 original lithographs (© Edizioni Lythos, Como 1999).

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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 tracing their roots to earlier experiences, such as Charles Fourier's Phalanstère[2].

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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.

2 See the various publications cited in the bibliography of this essay, and in particular: Canales 2022; Czischke *et al.* 2023; Espegel *et al.* 2022a;

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 contemporary needs for sociality, affordability[3], and sustainability, while

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.

3 "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,

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 analysis 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

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).

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 organisation?

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 model[4], primarily around family composition and its routines – with clearly defined spaces such as the

4 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, 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.

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 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 multifunctional 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 interpretive drawings[5], data, and indicators – a selection of contemporary housing projects collected in an Atlas (UAH! Atlas 2025).

5 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.

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 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.

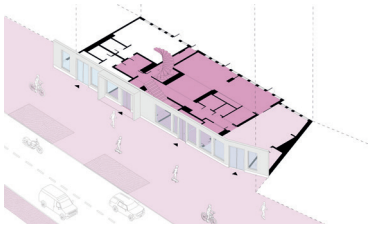

Figure 1. LPO arkitekter + Metropolis + Lillestrøm, Obos Living Lab, Oslo, 2021 (Graphic UAH! 2025).

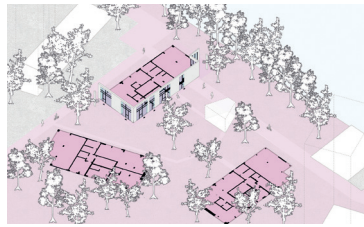

Figure 3. BARarchitekten, Carpaneto Architekten, Fatkoehl Architekten, River Spreefeld, Berlin, 2013 (Graphic UAH! 2025).

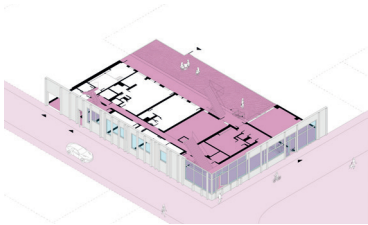

Figure 2. Natrufied Architecture, Housing Coöperation de Warren, Amsterdam, 2023 (Graphic UAH! 2025).

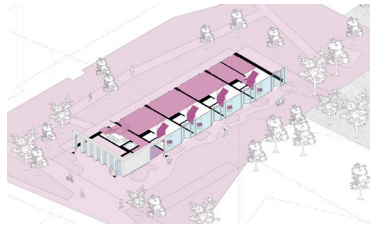

Figure 4. Clauss Kahl Merz, Lyse Lotte, Basel, 2023 (Graphic UAH! 2025).

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.

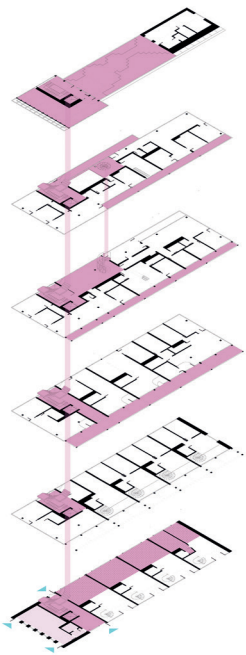

Figure 5. Clauss Kahl Merz, Lyse Lotte, Basel, 2023 (Graphic UAH! 2025).

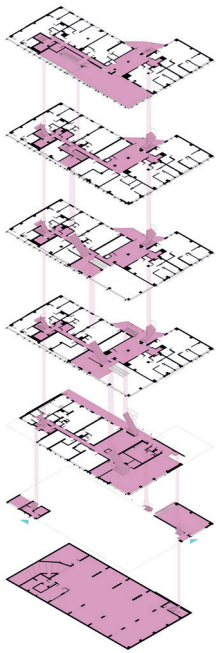

Figure 6. Natrufied Architecture, Housing Coöperation de Warren, Amsterdam, 2023 (Graphic UAH! 2025).

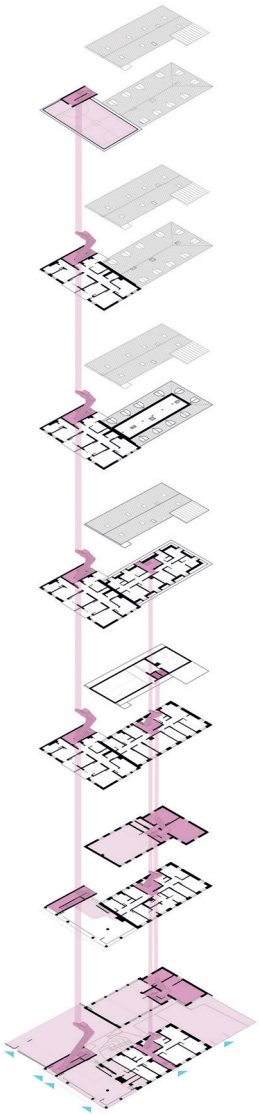

Figure 7. Hirner und Riehl Architekten, Bellevue di Monaco, Monaco, 2020 (Graphic UAH! 2025).

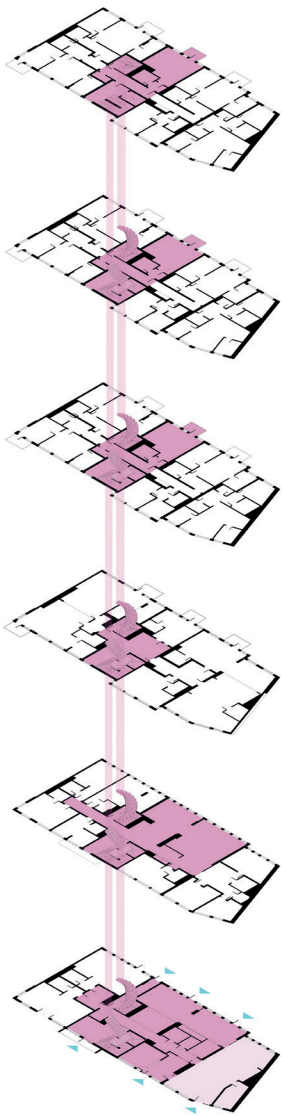

Figure 8. LPO arkitekter + Metropolis + Lillestrøm, Obos Living Lab, Oslo, 2021 (Graphic UAH! 2025).

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 maisonettes/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.

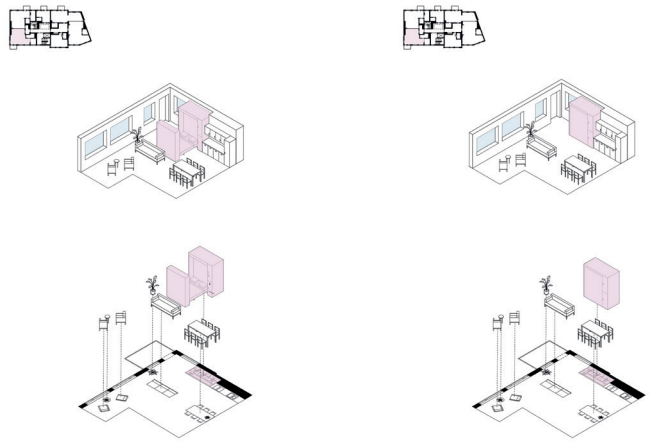

Figure 11-12. LPO arkitekter + Metropolis + Lillestrøm, Obos Living Lab, Oslo, 2021 (Graphics UAH! 2025).

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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Marta Averna*

UP CLOSE

In the initial twenty-five years of the third millennium, a different focus on the house has come to the fore.

The heroic theme of the Modern Movement had lost its centrality by the end of the twentieth century, when the home had been reduced to a poorly sized appendix of public and collective spaces, which began to absorb some of its functions: cafés, offices, museums, cultural centres – spaces reimagined and made into places of hospitality, socialization, and work, often borrowing some of the domestic features to become even more welcoming and recognizable (Averna 2021).

The home lost its status, no longer representing the heart of social life, but one of many nodes in a complex network increasingly skewed toward shared and public dimensions. This rebalancing led to a contraction of domestic space, both in amenities and in scale.

The turn of the millennium brought another shift in this paradigm.

Several developments, such as the intensification of transience, especially in the world of work, the exacerbation of migratory phenomena, the decreasing purchasing power of individuals and households, and the questioning of the family as the foundational unit of society, have reshaped not only the structure of society but also the spaces in which everyday life takes place. Furthermore, they were amplified and accelerated by the urgency of the pandemic, which heightened unresolved tensions. (Amann y Alcocer & Martella 2020) The traditional idea of a permanent home – designed for a postwar nuclear family, with a breadwinning father, a mother devoted to childcare and domestic labour, two or more children, a predictable future, a car, and holidays by the sea –

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has proven to be unsuitable for today's living arrangements: tiny units for individuals and much larger ones for migrant workers and low-income families, all of them temporary.

How do we cope with this new emergency? How can we adapt existing spaces and design new ones? As with any other architectural project, designing domestic spaces is no simple task. Like any architectural project, many variables are to be considered, but in this case the challenge is even more serious due to the centrality of the subject addressed. Domestic design takes form not only in relation to the convergence of technical expertise involved, but also around a broader idea of inhabiting.

What is a home?[2] Who lives in it, and who potentially, shares it? What activities take place within it?[3] What can remain public and what must become private?[4]

This vision reflects a political position[5] – challenged and transformed by lived experience of "a complex system composed of places/objects/people […] in a specific place" (Postiglione & Briata 2023, p.11), in which, despite spatial constraints, people

2 Domestic space needs and expectations have undergone significant and rapid changes in recent years, with a marked acceleration following the pandemic, which caused a renewed interest in and the value of nearly forgotten spaces: those acting as thresholds between public and private, between homes and their interior, enabling modulated relationships and parallel activities, as well as outdoor spaces – linking thread with the external environment (Averna 2022).

3 The house of the Modern Movement – one that shaped the urban neighbourhoods encircling Western metropolises – was entirely dedicated to the private life of the nuclear family: a place where a couple could raise and educate their children who would eventually leave upon reaching adulthood. It was not suited, in its size or organisation, to host other activities – either work-related or social – which were generally carried out elsewhere.

4 The modern all-private home isolates family units from society, protects them, and simultaneously controls them. It reflects the concern for social stability typical of the industrial era, where human functions and activities are organised into separate, often hidden, spaces – especially those related to hygiene and bodily care.

5 What are the rules – translated into laws and customs – that shape the spaces of housing (rooms, functions, surfaces, relation to air and light, opportunities for gathering, service provisions), and determine who is allowed to live together, access credit, or use property?

seek ways of living that better suit their evolving needs. What exemplary cases can we turn to?

Through what lens can we observe them, as a society composed of interconnected rooms, and in the complexity of the individual spaces that compose them?

The whole

A first gaze turns to the overall design of the building[6], through its distributive and connective devices, which – within a carefully maintained tension between specificity and interpenetration – define and relate different, yet complementary, rooms and gestures. This gaze explores their articulation, form, and dimensions to understand how public, collective, shared, as well as private spaces and uses can be brought into relation – and through which in-between transitions. It also examines how this same openness-oriented tension extends into the space that appears purely private – the dwelling – and how equipment and furnishings can support unexpected and variable ways of using it.

This analytical gaze, which highlights the recurrence of certain traits, helps bring to light a logic centred on distribution – understood as a welcoming infrastructure for encounter and socialization, such as in the external corridors of Gleis 21[7] in Vienna, where the access path, marked by the regular rhythm of the structural bays, expands into balconies and widenings that also accommodate vertical connections; and on a set of shared spaces and amenities, such as those near the entrance at De Warren[8] in Amsterdam, where a continuous stepped platform invites sitting, listening, seeing through, and ascending to higher levels – prefiguring a new way of inhabiting.

6 See the Atlas developed for the project UAH! (UAH! Atlas 2025) which analyses some housing projects at the building scale with a focus on the aspects mentioned here.

7 Einszueins Architektur, *Gleis 21 – Wir bringen das Dorf in die Stadt*, Vienna, Austria, 2017-2019.

8 Natrufied Architecture, De Warren, Amsterdam, Netherlands, 2018-2023 (UAH! Atlas 2025).

An approach that focuses more on distribution and connection than on the design of a single form – an approach that defines each element in relation to the others.

Up close

The reflection I develop in this text begins with this thorough initial analysis and proposes a complementary interpretive approach that – starting precisely from the design of the building and its distribution logic – shifts the gaze toward how the architecture takes shape, both as a whole and in its individual constituent rooms. It examines the construction features – material, texture, colour, and light – to verify how these elicit the same responses to new housing needs even at the smallest scale, that of the object and the single unit of space, experienced through daily use and close contact.

The aim is to highlight how, precisely thanks to its complex nature, that of an integral, "in the mathematical sense, as a fusion rather than a simple summation of multiple elements, characteristics, or constituent aspects" (Ottolini 1996, p. 29), architecture is capable of systemizing space and the solid margins that define it in the design of beautiful spaces. In doing so, it overcomes the purely functional and distributive logic – which nonetheless remains the foundation and framework of inhabitable space.

It also seeks to demonstrate how architecture comes to its full realization only when, in its "dominant intentionality," it is directed toward the "creation of harmonious places in which to live, for shorter or longer periods of time" (*ibid.*, p. 8).

Ultimately, this reflection intends to bring architecture back to the centre of the discourse – because only then can it fully express its deeper meaning as a welcoming space for living beings, thanks to its very nature as a "harmonious construction (that is, not just any construction, but one aesthetically determined) of the space in which human life takes place and in which human life is artistically translated into material form." (Ottolini 2017, p. 8)

Elements and gestures

Even when focusing on domestic space alone, there is no single way to explore its complexity. Rather, several – often complementary – approaches can be identified, each of them capable of highlighting different points, modes, and attitudes. Two apparently opposite perspectives emerge: one focuses on meaningful cores, in which architectural features condense around emblematic gestures; the other on the individual elements that define and qualify the interior of the dwelling.

It is possible to recognise, within the home, dense places[9] shaped by the gestures[10] of its inhabitants, capable of expressing the identity of individuals and households, and by consequence, a certain way of understanding life and the space in which it unfolds. Each of these spaces contains a world, explored through a sequence of gesture-spaces, each identified by a verb and composed of space, threshold, and equipment. Among the verbs included, there are those marking the transition from public to private, such as *to access*, "to move toward someone or something" (Cornoldi 1994, p. 36), *to enter*, "to pass through spaces and diaphragms, progressing from the threshold to the heart of the home" (*ibid.*, p. 40), or *to move through* (*ibid.*, p. 50); and those related to social interaction or protection from being seen, such as *to look out* (*ibid.*, p. 55) – as in seeing, being seen, participating without necessarily being involved – and *to withdraw*, "two sides of the same coin: that of participation in the collective life of the home," where the former represents "a discreet, mediated attraction toward domestic life," and the latter "a retreat from it without being excluded." (*ibid.*, p. 59) Particular attention is given here to thresholds and the transitions – both from public to private and vice versa – that accompany and support the passage from one condition to another. These passages create awareness

9 First explored by Adriano Cornoldi (1994), who examined both individual living units and their aggregation into recurring residential typologies.

10 Gestures – not merely actions. "We call a gesture every action with a beginning and end that carries meaning," from the Latin *gero*, to carry (Pianigiani 2008).

of a new spatial and experiential state, making the use one moves toward feel "appropriate," and the one left behind "less suitable".

In parallel, attention can also be directed to the configuration of the architecture itself[11], and to the elements that compose it. This may involve examining the dialectic "that arises between an 'open' space – namely a spatial cavity circumscribed by its margins (regardless of whether enclosed or outdoors) and receptive –, its edges or limits, which define it in relation to an outside, the partitions, which as sensitive diaphragms articulate it from within, and the things – the fixed and movable furnishings – that equip it" (Ottolini 1996, p. 17).

Thus, attention shifts away from movement and action, along with the expectations each of us, even unconsciously, associate with them, toward the forms of architecture that serve as host and interpreters of these concepts through entirely specific responses. It compels us to observe the "atmospheric space, naturally comfortable or conditioned," the "stones," meaning the solid margins that define and identify it, and the "furnishings," fixed and mobile, that equip it (Ottolini 2017, p. 8) – in order to first understand their construction and composition. Only later do they, precisely through their forms, begin to suggest their meaning and the potential uses that specify and characterise them.

Hinges and connections

Each of these approaches seems to point toward a privileged site of investigation. Indeed, a gaze that focuses on spaces dense with meaning pays special attention to hinge and connection zones between spatial domains. The system of thresholds and transitions that articulates the spaces of access – moving from public to private, through collective and shared zones, through *entering* and *moving through* spaces – leads to the core of the dwelling, where the identity of the individual or of the small household is

11 As Gianni Ottolini did on several occasions, including significantly in *Forma e significato dell'architettura* (1996).

expressed, before moving back toward shared spaces. This sequence is emblematic of a particular understanding of the home and private dwelling.

Hinges and connections can thus function as passages facilitating the movement from the main entrance to the individual units deep within the building. This concept is well represented by the uninterrupted grey resin flooring of the corridors and stairs at the IBEB[12] in Berlin. Its plan is punctuated by the regular arrangement of full-height widenings, made bright white by the pebble basins and the lightwell walls, and equipped with concrete seating surfaces and interior windows looking out from some of the apartments. Other connections may be external corridors, true laboratories for unexpected social relations, as proved by the one connecting the three blocks of Kavel 6[13] in Amsterdam. This corridor is articulated by interruptions and extensions and continues into the small two-level inner garden. A metal mesh, which provides a structural framework for climbing plants and replaces a more conventional parapet, visually merges with the garden, mirrored in the panels that clad the stairs.

Finally, such elements can also be points that enable people's sight to turn to other places, namely windows and doors. A notable example can be found in San Riemo[14] in Munich, where windows and doors are designed to gather an entire world and present it to those who cross or approach them. The entrance façade – clad in grey corrugated metal – features a green band, also in metal that frames the ground-floor door and windows of the upper-floors. Both bands are articulated in depth, creating shadows and highlighting the openable fields set within fixed ones, emphasised by black framing profiles. Here, the cladding becomes smooth, cut diagonally next to the door, thus tracing an additional visual link, whereas it resumes its corrugated surface at the tall canopy that shelters individuals about to enter.

12 ARGE Ifau, Heide & von Beckerath, *IBEB – Integratives Bauprojekt am ehemaligen Blumengroßmarkt* (Integrated Building Project at the Former Wholesale Flower Market), Berlin, 2018.

13 HOH Architecten, *Kavel 6 De Stoomkracht*, Oostenburgereiland, Amsterdam, 2019-2024.

14 Summacumfemmer, Büro Juliane Greb, San Riemo, Munich, 2021.

Equipment

Focus on the elements that shape architecture, it is essential to take into consideration its equipment.

The issue at hand is not simply that of furniture – let alone movable furniture, subject to change over time and according to the needs of the inhabitants, and which has been eventually replaced by "a new word: 'domestic equipment'" (Le Corbusier 1930, p. 105) –, but rather that of something fixed: an element so tightly and substantially bound to architecture that it becomes one of its articulations and specifications, which "nonetheless participate in the volume, making it usable in everyday life" (De Giorgi & Romanelli 1994, p. 7). Equipment needs to be considered as a figure of "integration between furniture and architecture (or, if one prefers, architecture that performs furnishing functions)" (Ottolini & De Prizio 1993, p. 15). It embodies a dual nature: as an indispensable tool – rooted in the Latin *attrahere*, "to draw toward oneself,"[15] and related to the French *équiper*, "to equip a ship with everything necessary for departure and travel" (CNRTL 2012); and as something to care for, echoing the etymology of furniture, from the Gothic *ga-redan*, "to take care of" (Pianigiani 2004): a useful object to live with and to care for.

Equipment is not movable, or relocatable, or customizable in the manner typically associated with furniture. It is almost architecture: designed in advance, not for a specific user, but with reference to a shared and universal humanity (Rogers 1946), aimed at durability and essential in defining the identity of a place – even in terms of use only.

In this sense, it is a service element, and "at the service of the human being, understood as a physical being who lives and inhabits the designed space" (Grimaldi 2012, p. 7), tied to corporeality and to "the concrete and practical dimension of

15 "Our 'tool' comes from the Old French *atraits*, literally meaning 'those drawn toward' – yes, *drawn toward*, from the Latin verb *attrahere*. Tools, as a group, are equipment – things you carry with you, that you constantly call to hand. Curiously reversed but ultimately inevitable, the singular idea of 'tool' was derived from the plural" (Moretti 2022).

phenomenally existing in space" (*ibid.*). This imply that "there is no architecture if the human body cannot exist in it, i.e. if human life cannot take place within it." (Ottolini 1996, p. 12)

The design of equipment eventually necessitates a close examination at architecture and its project – bringing unequivocally into play the importance of details. This entails designing things in accordance with the gestures they correspond to, of working at the scale of interiors, and recognizing their defining quality.

It compels us to consider how objects and human beings interact, and to what scenarios and possibilities they open up: the door at *San Riemo* is what it is precisely because of the alternation of smooth and corrugated metal, the differentiation of openable panels by use of colour, and the play of setbacks and layering that give autonomy to each of its part.

Where

What, then, are the form, qualities, role, and meaning of equipment in innovative housing projects developed in the third millennium? Is it possible to identify tendencies, recurring positions, and shared approaches – even across a broad selection of built examples, primarily realised across Europe and the Western world[16], gathered through successive research initiatives and educational experiments?

The examination of equipment can be conducted in relation to its position – i.e. whether it is situated at the centre, along vertical margins, at the boundary with the exterior, as internal partitions, or along horizontal margins, such as floors and ceilings – or to the possibilities it enables, especially in terms of flexibility, by concentrating furnishing provisions into a few defined areas. Rooms "freed" from the clutter of furniture elements, in fact, open up to varied and customizable uses, depending on the users, the time of day, and the specific phase of life.

16 Which include and build upon those already collected and analyzed in the *Atlante* (UAH! Atlas 2025).

In

A first approach places equipment into blocks at the centre of the space, leaving almost empty rooms around them – open to interpretation depending on their size and material character. These can be read as spaces for circulation or places for living and doing.

In this case, equipment often stands out from the architectural shell not only because of its materials, geometry, and construction techniques, but also because of the distances it establishes from the margins, from which it steps back in plan and lowers in section.

In the 235 units of Domūs Houthaven[17] in Amsterdam – integrated with shared services and a commercial ground floor – a coloured module accompanies the entrance and changes in configuration depending on the layout of each dwelling. It incorporates kitchen, bathroom, storage, and bed. Each component is distinguished by the colour and texture of the surrounding panels. The sleeping niche is always defined by grey panels, perforated in a regular circular grid. Open or closed, the module – being the only coloured element between the continuous surfaces of the concrete ceiling and the wooden floor – completely changes the perception of the interior: at night, it becomes a single large sleeping area; by day, a space suitable for domestic life and work.

Equipped blocks can modify the logical order of space suggested by the architecture, offering an autonomous interpretation that alters it – sometimes even to the point of overwriting it. They may become self-sufficient, and in extreme cases, display a marked indifference to the qualities of the building that hosts them, which is thus reduced to a neutral background.

Between

Distributing equipment along the building's margins reaffirms the layout of the enclosing shell: it responds to it, emphasizes it, and provides specificity. Equipment may be hidden

17 Shift AU, *Domūs Houthaven*, Amsterdam, 2017 – 2022.

within an unsuspecting blank wall, transformed only through its use, or merely suggested through the smallest of openings or apertures.

The desire to make the margins continuous characterizes both the entrances of the small units at Quintana 4598 in Buenos Aires, integrated into a long white wall, and their interiors. In this configuration, the defining wall is reinforced by a full-height white furnishing element that, upon opening, reveals a sequence of equipped rooms – kitchen and bathroom – and storage compartments. The design is completed by a tall sleeping niche near the windows, while the internal partitions are designed as full-height cabinet doors that alternate opaque and transparent surfaces.

Beyond the enclosing concrete shell, everything else is equipment.

Above / Below

Horizontal planes can also be subject to the same kind of integration. Ceilings, lowered to suggest specific uses – either for compressed spaces, circulation, or moments of retreat and silence – often incorporate within their volume storage compartments, utilities, and service elements. This expedient enables optimisation of the space below and allows for flexibility in the placement of technical components throughout the home, in turn enabling greater adaptability over time.

The same applies to the floor: in the Estradenhouse[18] in Berlin, the opposing façades of each apartment are lined with wooden platforms, raised above the dark glossy floor surface, and articulated to host various uses – seating areas, verandas, and work surfaces. Declared in their furnishing nature through the material from which they are made, these platforms offer possibilities and act as intermediary elements between the "inside" of the home and the "outside", characterised by the metal grating balcony that encircles the entire unit. Yet, they differentiate themselves from

18 Wolfram Popp, *Estradenhouse*, Chorinerstraße, Berlin 1996.

both inside and outside, through either material or elevation, defining a third in-between element. Designed for a variety of uses, the platforms are complemented by two lines of sliding panels that enclose the central block, which houses entrances, bathrooms, and kitchen. These panels can be opened to reveal their contents and can be configured with additional doors, rotating on a central pivot to screen functional zones, distribution areas, or furnishing elements.

By clearing out the space of the rooms, they make room for more explicit flexibility devices.

Flexible

In 2019, ETH Zurich launched an experimental study on the use of flexibility devices by installing a full-scale model apartment – *Performative Haus*[19] – on the roof of the Department of Architecture. It was inhabited by forty different residents, either individuals or couples, for a period of one week each. The apartment, with its elongated plan, was characterised by the presence of both fixed and mobile equipment. The fixed components were integrated into the floor, for instance into the platforms at the base of the bed and in the living area, or built into boundary walls, such as the bathroom block and storage units. The mobile components included a wall rotating on a central pivot between the sleeping and living areas, two arm lamps, and a storage unit, also mounted on a pivot. Throughout the testing period, every movement of the components was monitored by sensors. The most frequently moved element, after the trash bins and the refrigerator door, was the central rotating wall. The ability to transform a small, equipped space through such elements was greatly appreciated by the users, and many of them expressed their willingness to consider living there long-term. This feedback led to the actual construction of a residential building that incorporated this kind of solution.

19 Elli Mosayebi – EMI Architekt*innen, *Vacancy / No Vacancy*, Zurich 2019.

The simplicity of these movements – essentially controlled by a handle or an arm – makes the transformation of the domestic setting both easy and effective. The continuity between the red floor plane and the white ceiling, the visibility of the black metal tubes on which walls and lamps rotate, the articulation of the architectural boundaries, and the presence of mirrored surfaces that expand and reflect the space jointly enhance and amplify the perceptibility of each transformation.

Serving

As previously mentioned, this final and complex case study, exploring a wide range of modes and themes within the limited space of a single dwelling, reaffirms an interpretive key to equipment that seems particularly suited to non-conventional housing solutions, especially in terms of users and their alignment with spatial forms capable of welcoming them.

It enables us to recognize equipment not only as a "tool and servant" (Le Corbusier 1930, p. 223), but above all as a relational structure stretched between the elements of architecture – the structural boundaries, the inhabitable space, the furniture – and the human being who engages with them, in a reciprocal exchange of gestures and glances, where both the space and the person test one another and open themselves to hospitality. It is precisely in this mutual availability that the transformation of a dwelling's structure and potential becomes possible – not as a luxury good reserved for a select few who are able to identify a need and recognize the best way to meet it, but as a shared guarantee of quality: affordable, and open to every human being.

In this way, it reveals the deeper meaning of architecture, beyond its purely functional purpose, by responding coherently to the daily gestures of its inhabitants. It does so by reaffirming quality across all scales, from the overall design to the smallest detail. Furthermore, the structure of a built space is rendered legible and understandable, thereby ensuring its capacity to respond to even the most novel desires and needs.

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Jacopo Gresleri*

DECODING AFFORDABILITY
Rethinking housing design for inclusive living[1]

Introduction

The topic of affordable housing demands a particularly pragmatic and mindful approach, as it involves navigating a range of multifaceted and interconnected dynamics. The architect's technical, scientific, and humanistic expertise appears particularly well-suited for steering the entire process, from the inception of a design idea to its tangible implementation. The sheer complexity and breadth of issues tied to this theme, along with the inherent difficulty in delineating its content and specificity, make it essential to adopt analytical and practical tools that can guide the development of effective methodologies and frameworks aimed at achieving the most desirable outcomes. To better grasp the essence of affordable housing, it might be helpful to introduce a conceptual lens, an image that encapsulates and prefigures its fundamental meaning. This can be found in the renowned fresco painted by Ambrogio Lorenzetti[2] in 1338 for the Sala del Consiglio dei Nove (also known as the Sala della Pace) in Siena's Palazzo Pubblico, titled *Effects of Good Government in the City*. The painting depicts a thriving everyday scene, capturing the harmonious balance of

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1 This text is loosely based on the author's text "Last, but not least. An interpretation of affordable housing design and the research of its coding", published in 2023 in "Living 2060", edited by TU Wien, Institut für Städtebau.

2 The fresco is part of the cycle of the "Allegories" and also includes the "Effects of Bad Government". Using a comparative method, these pictorial representations were intended to serve as a warning to the citizens gathered in the council, and to inspire their actions in the administrative acts of the city of Siena.

a busy yet celebratory day within the confines of a 14th century Italian city. Arches, portals, towers, and crenellated walls form the backdrop of the artwork, simultaneously delineating the pictorial boundary and representing the physical edge of the city, a space where cultural and economic activities intermingle. In this environment, commerce flourishes within what appears to be an equitable framework of wealth distribution: notably, there is no depiction of individuals seeking charity or those in distress, like the marginalised figures we often encounter in passing with hardened indifference. In Lorenzetti's well-governed city, marginalisation is absent: it is inclusive, making space for everyone and offering not just shelter but homes and a sense of belonging. If Lorenzetti's medieval fresco visually and symbolically encapsulated the purpose of affordable housing nearly seven centuries ago, it remains important – and highly relevant today – to ask how such a vision can be actualised in our modern context.

The multifaceted challenge of defining poverty and affordable housing

Architects are fundamentally problem solvers, uniquely positioned to address spatial challenges. Their approach is characterised by a rigorous methodology employing diverse expressive languages and precise operational logics. This involves meticulous data collection, insightful information processing, and attentive listening to experts and those directly affected, treating them as key witnesses. The synthesis of these inputs yields potential solutions to intricate problems demanding both technical expertise and profound empathy. Indeed, competence devoid of sensitivity, and vice versa, results in sterile designs, rarely ascending to the level of true Architecture, understood as a body of cultured knowledge. But what evidentiary basis guides our inquiries?

When confronting the critical issue of affordable housing – the provision of low-cost residences for impoverished or disadvantaged populations – it is imperative to grapple with

the very concept of poverty and, consequently, to develop a comprehensive understanding of the intended beneficiaries of our design endeavours. This necessitates leveraging statistical data and graphical representations to delineate the scope and specific characteristics of the phenomenon. Examination of such visualisations[3] reveals a striking geographical concentration of poverty within the tropical regions of the planet and throughout much of the Southern Hemisphere, particularly in South Africa and South America. This prevalence extends across virtually all of Asia and parts of Southeast Asia, reaching westward to the Balkan periphery of Europe, with the notable exception of the Australian continent. This phenomenon impacts a staggering 1.3 billion individuals who endure conditions of multidimensional poverty, characterised by malnutrition, inadequate housing, lack of access to potable water, and other critical deprivations (UNDP 2018). A superficial interpretation of these figures might suggest a simplistic dichotomy between a wealthy Global North and an impoverished Global South, rendering the pursuit of affordable housing in European and North American contexts seemingly superfluous. While this conclusion contains a kernel of truth, it is readily refuted by observing the lived realities within our cities, particularly in suburban areas[4], where the most vulnerable segments of Western societies reside.

Therefore, to avoid succumbing to simplistic stereotypes, it is crucial to appreciate the inherently polysemous nature of the term "poverty". This seemingly straightforward word encapsulates a far more nuanced and multifaceted reality than commonly perceived. To designate an individual as "poor" signifies

3 See https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Poverty_headcount_ratio_at_1.90_a_day.png. More data and insights can be found at https://data.worldbank.org/, at https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/income-and-living-conditions,andathttps://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/field/population-below-poverty-line/.

4 This is particularly true in the European context. In USA, on the contrary, suburbs are often the chosen place for a richer population which prefers detached houses and private property, while the downtown or peripheral neighbourhoods are dense of migrants and disadvantaged people.

more than merely describing someone subsisting on limited means, dwelling in makeshift accommodations, or wearing tattered clothing. Rather, it alludes to a more pervasive, and often invisible, condition of precarity (Kangas & Ritakallio 1998; Fusco 2007). To accurately conceptualise and frame this phenomenon, definitions derived from economic and social sciences are typically adopted, aligning with semantic, numerical, and legislative macro-categories. In essence, the factors and potential causes contributing to an individual's impoverished state can be traced to an inability to secure fundamental necessities (e.g., insufficient food intake), a utilitarian perspective encompassing limited access to social services (healthcare, education, etc.), or a "capability vs. ability" framework, highlighting the disparity between an individual's inherent potential to perform specific actions or engage in particular activities (*capabilities*) and the actual opportunities available to translate those skills into practice (*abilities*), as elucidated in Sen's influential theory (1979)[5]. These interpretations, presented here in abbreviated form, give rise to divergent operational perspectives, complicating the formulation of universally applicable design solutions for the challenge of low-cost housing.

The European Commission (EEC 1975) offers a salient contribution, defining poverty as

> a lack of command of resources (including cash incomes, material assets and privately organised services such as housing or education) so extreme that individuals, families and categories of persons concerned are excluded from minimum acceptable ordinary living patterns, customs and activities.

5 Amartya Sen is an Indian philosopher and economist known for his critical approach to the so-called "welfare economy" and forerunner of the "capability approach" that won him the Nobel Prize in 1998. In addition to a vast literature on the subject, Sen's books are considered of particular importance, including, by way of example, *Collective Choice and Social Welfare* (1970), *On Economic Inequality* (1973), *Commodities and Capabilities* (1985), *Inequality Re-Examined* (1992). For a more general introduction to the subject, I recommend https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/capability-approach/.

This conceptualisation was refined a decade later by the same Commission:

> […] "the poor" shall be taken to mean persons, families and group of persons whose resources (material, cultural and social) are so limited as to exclude them from the minimum acceptable way of life *in the Member State in which they live*[6] (EEC 1985 art. 1.2).

The introduction of a geographical element, transcending the prior generalised notion of poverty, raises a fundamentally important issue for understanding the theme: its intrinsic *relativity*. A single, universally applicable definition is untenable, as poverty manifests and presents itself distinctly across diverse social contexts and physical environments (Mack & Lansley 1985; Halleröd 1998; Dickes *et al.* 2010). This sentiment was echoed by Adam Smith, anticipating Townsend's (1970) concept of *relative poverty* by approximately two centuries: "by necessaries I understand not only the commodities which are indispensably necessary for the support of life, but whatever the custom of the country renders it indecent for creditable people, even of the lowest order, to be without […]" (Cannan 1904 p. 354).

These linguistic definitions have been sustained by algebraic formulae, frequently employed in statistical and economic assessments. While the purported objectivity of mathematics enhances the quantitative evaluation of the issue, the concept of destitution remains complex due to the fluid "access threshold" defined by numerical parameters, which further proliferate the points of view. Concepts such as absolute poverty, relative poverty, the Headcount Index, the Income Gap Ratio, the Poverty Gap Index, and the poverty line are indicators that complicate the creation of a concise profile of destitution. This "shifting boundary", by virtue of its inherent "elasticity", redirects the discussion toward varying levels of analysis, thereby compounding the challenge of defining the target demographic for affordable housing initiatives.

Despite these multifaceted challenges, it is evident that the phenomenon of poverty is widespread and not geographically

6 Emphasis added.

confined, as previously demonstrated. The potential for access to housing, or more broadly defined, "decent accommodation", serves as a decisively discriminating factor[7]. Even in economically advanced Western nations, homeownership, the ability to utilise and benefit from a residence as an economic asset, or conversely, the lack thereof, remains a salient criterion for assessing the living conditions of citizens and gauging their level of wealth. Since the post-World War II era, particularly in Europe and Italy, housing has been considered a primary good, and in some contexts, even an indispensable right to be afforded to all.

The Italian Constitution from 1947, in Article 47, enshrined the right to housing, promoting "the access of the popular savings for homeownership". Similarly, Article 25.1 of the UDHR – the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) – stipulates that "everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, *housing*[8] and medical care and necessary social service […]" (United Nations General Assembly 1948). Further emphasising this principle, the European Commission (2010, 10) underscored the absolute priority of social policies in protecting the citizens of member states, asserting that "access to affordable housing is a fundamental need and right".

What constitutes affordability?

The legitimation of the right to housing entails recognising its essentiality for all individuals. Transcending the intricacies of definition, refugees, migrants, the homeless, "slum dwellers",

7 Today, 24% of the world's urban population live in slums, and by 2030, about 3 billion people will be in need of proper housing (UNDP 2018. This is also why the "2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development", written by United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, at Goal 11 "Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable" aims to "by 2030, ensure access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services and upgrade slums" (UN General Assembly 2015).

8 Emphasis added.

disaster victims, and other vulnerable populations, the impoverished – however defined – represent the demographic most in need of suitable and effective housing solutions. But what are the characteristics of such a solution?

The concept of "affordable housing" encompasses both temporary and permanent conditions of indigence. This temporal distinction necessitates design choices that guarantee both functional and habitable spaces for varying durations. Refugee camps, for example, characterised by rows of tents and makeshift shelters arrayed along hastily demarcated paths, address a transient need that is ill-suited to accommodate the functions necessary for the sustained existence of a community within a prolonged "colony". These improvised settlements, often situated in border areas lacking essential services due to conflict, famine, political persecution, or genocide, epitomise the extreme condition of low-cost housing for a desperate population. They represent a testament to humanity's survival instinct, transforming tents, shacks, and temporary constructs into enduring dwellings, temporary settlements into permanent ones, and emergency solutions into institutionalised norms[9].

Conversely, conventional approaches often emphasise clear distinctions between temporary and permanent solutions, categorising them using adjectives that denote divergent uses, lifespans, and intended users. The duration of the intervention is carefully considered, and construction techniques are selected to underscore the distinct identities and specific purposes of use. For example, permanent residences (albeit affordable) are typically expressed through "traditional" means: masonry

9 One of them is the Zaatari camp, in Jordan. Set up in July 2012 to accommodate Syrian refugees fleeing the war, it has gradually expanded to become one of the largest Jordanian "cities" (in 2013, the UNHCR estimated a presence of over 130,000 people), self-determined and constantly expanding, with "shops" and toponymy, but totally dependent on international and Jordanian humanitarian aid. A circumstance that was supposed to be limited in time has turned into a timeless living arrangement, resulting in a condition where the absence of a social structure and government, absolute misery and lack of any resources, makes a minimally dignified life impossible.

structures exhibiting an ordinary appearance, often multi-story to minimise construction costs, equipped with adequate sanitary facilities conforming to local regulations, and situated within urban contexts, albeit frequently peripheral ones. The multifaceted nature of affordable housing engenders confusion, disorientation, and precarious operating prospects, due to its inherently indefinite and elusive nature. Affordable housing is both all-encompassing and contradictory, encompassing low-cost, temporary, and emergency accommodations, while simultaneously encompassing permanent and planned residences. The sole unifying element appears to be the economic aspect, characterised by low construction costs significantly below market averages.

Consequently, how can one codify the operational methodologies governing these residential forms? How can these notions be translated into a design process that effectively addresses housing needs and fulfils the rights repeatedly sanctioned by international bodies, yet systematically disregarded by the policies of national governments and the silence surrounding these "uncomfortable" topics? From a design perspective, what commonalities exist between Balkrishna Doshi's Aranya Housing Project[10] and Shigeru Ban's Paper Log House[11]?

Given the inherent difficulty in assigning concrete form to something so fluid in its definition, it follows that no universally applicable design elements can be traced back to empirical experiences. Rather, no common constructive, technological, or typological characteristics would allow for the formation of a single, definitive category of the "affordable product". The area of inquiry should not be the constructional, normative or formal one, but rather the meanings and values derived from the principles that determine design choices, which can be summarised in four guiding principles, four "pillars" to be used with awareness and diligence.

10 https://www.sangath.org/projects/aranya-low-cost-housing-indore/.
11 http://www.shigerubanarchitects.com/works/1995_paper-log-house-kobe/index.html.

Designing affordable housing: four cornerstones

The creation of successful affordable housing demands a holistic approach, informed by fundamental principles. Hence, four interconnected cornerstones can be identified:

The first, and perhaps most neglected, is *dignity*. Architecturally, this aligns with a proper understanding of the *Existenzminimum*, a term often misconstrued within Modernist discourse. It did not advocate minimising living spaces, but rather committed to guaranteeing every individual a minimum provision of space – encompassing essential functions and services – conducive to a dignified life. This defines the lower threshold, below which housing solutions become inadequate for human flourishing and impede social relations. Informed by the work of Gropius, Teige, Klein, and other pioneers, architectural design must prioritise the "indispensable minimum", ensuring that outcomes consistently meet standards of dignity, mitigating the influence of purely economic, speculative, or functional concerns.

In design terms, dignity also necessitates that affordable housing transcends visual cues of cheapness or functional determinism. It must not be "labelled" as a low-cost solution for marginalised populations. More than any other housing typology, affordable housing should foster a sense of home and promote spontaneous participation within a broader community, free from any sense of conditional acceptance.

Avoiding readily apparent markers allows for a more comprehensive design method, integrating the building with its context. This is our second cornerstone: *urban integration*. Regrettably, affordable housing is often conceived as a peripheral intervention, driven by economy and limited to basic construction. The INA-Casa initiative in Italy (1949-1963) offers an instructive counterpoint (Di Biagi 2001). This post-war reconstruction programme, fuelled by Marshall Plan investments, commissioned leading designers to create housing for low-income workers. Shared guidelines fostered innovative design languages that synthesised existing urban characteristics. Simple materials and technologies ensured cost containment, while facilitating complex solutions capable of harmonising project scales. The ap-

proach extended beyond single dwellings to encompass entire neighbourhoods, integrating services and public spaces to prevent segregation. Even today, housing, services, and public spaces must form an inseparable triad in the creation of economically viable housing, a complex composition wherein each element mutually reinforces the others.

A successful housing solution also hinges on the relationships cultivated by its inhabitants, with each other, the place, and the building itself[12]. Experiments in the 1960s and 1970s introduced and tested *participatory* design principles, which have seen a resurgence internationally. Involving residents not only in the investigation and design stages, but also in the construction and management of housing and communal spaces, is critical to successful low-cost housing projects. Building not just a physical environment, but a community, or at least fostering a sense of community and active participation within shared facilities, strengthens the bond between people and place. This relationship is both utilitarian and rooted in identity, encouraging a virtuous attitude and valuing each person's contribution to the collective well-being.

Habraken's (1972) "Support and Infill" concept continues to offer a particularly effective approach, especially within the context of low-cost housing. Imposing abstract housing models developed without resident involvement is unlikely to meet user needs, especially in collective housing scenarios. The award-winning projects by Elemental (the "do tank" founded by Aravena) at Quinta Monroy[13], building on the visions of Dutch Structuralism, demonstrate the value of this approach.

Finally, *sustainability*, encompassing both environmental responsibility and project feasibility, is paramount. Sustainability

12 The theme has been widely investigated on many occasions, in particular within the Dutch Constructivism movement (e.g. the experiences of Van Eyck and Bakema), and the Team X. As far as the Italian experience is concerned, we cannot forget the contribution of De Carlo. In any case, it is worth remembering Hertzberger's text (1973), a true guide for addressing these studies.

13 https://www.elementalchile.cl/works/iquique-violeta-parra-ex-quinta-monroy.

demands sensitivity to environmental impact, a characteristic that was once limited to visionary designers, and requires attention to the impact of building on the environment. In affordable housing, this translates to researching and mastering local construction techniques, enabling the use of unskilled labour and locally sourced raw materials to reduce costs. This cornerstone necessitates careful pre-planning to identify optimal solutions given the context, considering the technical, economic, and social viability of the intervention. Its effective management depends on the designer's acumen, which must now extend beyond aesthetics and form.

Ideally, interventions should integrate residences with urban fabric services, including workspaces that support residents' economic autonomy and foster integration with the host community. Theatres, restaurants, gardens, workshops, and study centres are options that can be designed *for*, and *with*, residents to create micro-communities open to the wider neighbourhood, encouraging self-sufficiency and participation in public life through local micro-economies, ultimately fostering dignity among participants.

Synthesising affordable housing thus requires a complex, nuanced, and empathetic approach. It is not simply about design proficiency but about addressing the multifaceted challenges – technical and otherwise – of creating this form of housing, broadening professional expertise to promote the best possible quality of life for future residents. It is not enough for buildings to be constructed from adobe, brick, concrete, or bamboo, or to adopt courtyard, in-line, or tower typologies. It is essential to recognise that what we are designing is not simply a *house*, but an environment where inhabitants can truly feel at *home*, extending beyond individual dwellings to encompass social relationships within the entire neighbourhood[14].

14 With this in mind, an important contribution has been made by the Social Habitat Working Group of UIA (International Union of Architects). Synthesising the participation and vision of scholars from all the regions represented by the institution, in 2023 the SHWG presented the "Social Habitat Manifesto" at the World Congress in Copenhagen (https://www.uia-architectes.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Social-Habitat-English.pdf). This is a document of global interest, currently being considered

As architects, we possess a culture of living and the tools necessary to meet the needs of all users, imagining spaces where desired relationships can flourish. We can prefigure articulated and complex environments, rich with subjective and collective meaning, ideally through resident participation in public life.

It is our task to pursue this goal, imagining *civitas* and designing *urbs*, creating a city where "no one is left behind", mirroring the vision of Lorenzetti's fresco. This *imago urbis* is realised not only in buildings and squares, but also in the actions and relationships that our designs can welcome and encourage.

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by UN-Habitat for possible adoption and promotion, explicitly intended as a guiding tool in the design of social housing. The Manifesto is built precisely on the four cornerstones above mentioned, and its dissemination can take on extraordinary value in land-use and housing planning globally, bringing together the principles described and fostering a holistic reading of the issue.

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RETHINKING DOMESTIC "SPACES OF CARE" FOR COLLABORATIVE AND AFFORDABLE LIVING

Introduction

With growing interest, attention is once again being turned toward the home as a means to ensure full rights to the city and its inhabitants. A solid body of research has already identified the causes of the current housing crisis. It is attributed both to a complex overarching framework of polycrises and to more specific and contextual social changes which, in Italy, include an increasingly aging population with diverse and intersecting vulnerabilities, greater territorial mobility, and family compositions no longer aligned with traditional models (Cognetti & Delera 2017; Lodi Rizzini 2013). Also converging is the focus on housing affordability – which links housing costs to income – as a lens through which to investigate the issue and attempt to ensure housing for those excluded from the market and ineligible for public housing (Bricocoli & Peverini 2023; Bricocoli *et al.* 2025).

Extending beyond practices and policies, the debate also engages design disciplines, which are called to question the concept of the *Existenzminimum*, which in the 1920s revolutionised social housing by offering "adequate space" to millions of people (Di Biagi 2001; Ortelli *et al.* 2019; Pesce & Postiglione 2024). The effort is now directed at reassessing some of the modernist principles to reconsider how domestic spaces can once again contribute to ensuring fundamental rights and reducing various inequalities reflected in space (Secchi 2013). The urgency of a paradigmatic shift in the concept of the "minimum habitable" must now translate into the search for spatial solutions capable

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of going beyond the home's interior, offering "opportunities to achieve a higher level of social quality" in terms of services, proximity-based relationships, and freedom of choice (Manzini 1994, p. 41).

From these premises, the aim of this contribution is to bring housing affordability into dialogue with domestic care. It specifically asks whether rethinking some traditionally care-oriented residential spaces – such as the kitchen – can help renew policies that support affordable and collaborative living, while also contributing to meaningful transformations of traditional housing models toward "maximum social quality". To articulate this hypothesis, some research strands that place care spaces at the centres of housing discourse and design will be briefly reviewed. Two case studies will help highlight key spatial and policy-related issues relevant to this discussion.

Roots and research fields

Looking again at the home as a field of research and design offers an opportunity to address inequalities exacerbated by the now well-recognised crisis of social reproduction and by the equally troubling trend toward the "commodification of care" (Saraceno 2022; Serughetti 2020a). Since the pandemic, the renewed attention toward care work (Serughetti 2020b) has led to a rethinking of the domestic "private" sphere and prompted design disciplines to explore residential models that are more open to contamination between private and collective life (Brysch 2019).

This interest is not new to the discipline but, as is well known, has deep roots in the history of architecture and urban planning, updating a legacy of experiments, studies, and research that go far back in time (Hayden 1982; Di Biagi 2016). Starting in the 1960s and 1970s, feminist research (from Dolores Hayden and Matrix Architects to Silvia Federici and Maria Mies) offered a critique that challenged the traditional single-family home model, identifying in its spatial patterns the origins of gender inequality and the exclusion of women from public life (Vestbro & Horelli 2012; Horelli 2013; Bassanini 2008; Andreola & Muzzonigro

2023). These studies interpret the right to domestic privacy as a disguise for biopolitical mechanisms, where the single-family home and its spaces become tools of control over bodies and their reproduction at the service of capitalism and neoliberalism. This control is also tied to the progressive disengagement of public policy from housing, and the consequent transfer of much of the welfare system's burden onto the family (Federici 2014; 2020; Aureli & Giudici 2020).

The kitchen has not been spared from analysis, understood as both a manifesto and synthesis of modernist research into the ideal measure of one of the key family care spaces. This critical reflection, on the one hand, led to a rediscovery of precursors to Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky (such as Catharine Beecher and Lillian Gilbreth, among others), and on the other, allowed for a critical re-reading of the revolution represented by the *Frankfurter Küche*, without diminishing its importance (De Vault 1991; Clarisse 2004; Vigneault 2024). In this critical stance, the reduction and optimisation of space are recognised as factors contributing to a process of "housewifisation" (Vigneault 2024, p. 8), which effectively confined women to a limited space, often poorly connected to other areas of the home. The progressive isolation of the kitchen – and its detachment from a "public dimension" – is questioned, with causes attributed to the commodification of food and the spread of lifestyles that drastically reduce time spent on food-related practices, severing them from local systems.

Within this complex theoretical framework is the recent resurgence of interest in collective living. Co-housing, in its many forms, has been once again praised as an "ideal-typical" solution to the pressing demand for "adequate living spaces" where care responsibilities are shared (Horelli 2020; Gresleri 2015; Bettini 2019). However, a more cautious approach encourages a critical reading of co-housing experiences to highlight the challenges they face in effectively responding to the crisis of social reproduction. Analyses that examine co-housing more closely bring to light a central issue in the relationship between home and reproductive labour: the negotiation of care work, which becomes difficult when such models lack policy integration (Chiodelli 2010; Bifulco 2011; Ledent & Salembier 2021). Without being

embedded in broader policy frameworks, shared living risks losing its transformative potential and becoming a "niche innovation" (Tummers & Mac Gregor 2019, p. 77). Beneficial only for a few, it fails to significantly impact the fair distribution of reproductive labour or address the "privilege of irresponsibility" identified by political scientist Joan Tronto (1990) – now widely recognised as a key issue in the effort to "politicise care" and use it as a resource to imagine alternatives to neoliberalism (Casalini 2020; Serughetti & Fano Morrisey 2022).

More convincing are the radical alternatives proposed by Dogma, where the sharing of certain spaces turns "the house into a sequence of areas where being alone or together can be constantly negotiated by its inhabitants" (Aureli & Tattara 2015). The re-approximation of domestic and work spaces enables democratic negotiation of care (Dogma 2022). The reorganisation of domestic environments creates opportunities to share reproductive activities and foster living models rooted in solidarity and mutual support (Aureli *et al.* 2019). Grounded in strong theoretical thought, these proposals urgently call to "repoliticise" the home: architecture becomes a medium to make both productive and reproductive work visible once more in a public and democratic forum.

Architect Anne Puigjaner (MAIO) focuses instead on repositioning the kitchen beyond domestic walls. Placed "in public", the kitchen becomes a space-device for extra-familial collaboration, already widely experimented with in ephemeral Japanese kitchens and Latin American *comedores populares o comunitarios* (Puigjaner 2019; MAIO 2023). Similar strategies of kitchen relocation can also be recognised in the examples of the food courts/hawkare centres in Singapore (Shee 2023). These experiences, she writes, "in highlighting the political dimension (and definition) of domestic space, remind us of the home's capacity to play a significant role in the development of the public sphere" (Puigjaner 2019). In short, the kitchen acts as a device for forming a domestic-urban collective infrastructure that promotes and sustains solidarity bonds born through food sharing.

These are not isolated developments. This body of research includes not only the better-known historical precedents (such

as Godin's *Familistère*) but also lesser-known or more recent initiatives. Among them are the research activities of the Gruppo Femminista Immagine, active in Varese between the 1970s and 1980s. Member Maria Grazia Sironi experimented with housing solutions to facilitate women's domestic labour, focusing on spatial form rather than function, designing single-family homes with kitchens that opened to the outside (Ferrario 2023; Vigneault 2024). Gruppo Vanda, founded at Politecnico di Milano in the 1990s, focused on the relationship between care spaces and the urban dimension. Care is understood as a practice that extends beyond the home's interior and instead engages with the complexity of urban space (Marinelli 2015; Bassanini 2008). Extending the concept of care to the city detaches it from a fate solely tied to women and redefines it as a design practice guided by an ethic of world-maintenance (Tronto 2013). These theoretical shifts underpin efforts to re-orient urban design practices toward a "city of care" (Davis 2022; Chincilla 2022). These reflections assume that spatial design has a clear responsibility in enabling both formal and informal care practices and in facilitating the meeting of needs – removing them from market dynamics.

Despite differing critical positions, these reflections all invite to a reconceptualisation of care as place-based (Davis 2022), adopting an approach that reassesses the generative potential of space and its capacity to support the agency of its inhabitants (Bifulco 2003). Within this framework, kitchens and food-related spaces play a decisive role, especially as the commodification of food-related domestic labour (e.g., reliance on pre-cooked meals, which feeds into global exploitation chains) is recognised as a clear consequence of neoliberal policies that re-privatise social reproduction (Casalini 2016; 2020). Juxtaposing the kitchen and care spaces with the issue of affordability allows for a deeper investigation into cooperative living[2] and the policies needed to support collaborative practices capable of making such housing truly affordable.

2 For a review of selected cooperative housing models, see the Atlas of the research *UAH – Unconventional Affordable Housing* (UAH! Atlas 2025).

Issues and case studies

Building on the research fields briefly outlined above, this section aims to explore the relationship between affordability, care, and social reproduction by focusing on two central issues. The first concerns the assumption of democratic negotiation in care work that underlies many proposals for cooperative/collaborative housing. The key question is which social actors are actually able to autonomously manage such negotiations, and how welfare policies (particularly those relating to social reproduction) might support such models without reducing them to exclusive "niche innovations". The second issue pertains to spatial dimensions – specifically, which design strategies can foster innovative ecologies of cohabitation rooted in food-related care practices that extend beyond the private home, potentially articulating more complex infrastructures of care at the urban scale.

The analysis of case studies proves useful in shedding light on certain elements that may help address these issues, while also suggesting alternative spatial solutions. These are examples in which food-related spaces and practices – guided by different design frameworks – have either sparked or contributed to the spatialisation of housing policies that are inclusive, affordable, and innovative. At the same time, they offer concrete illustrations of how kitchens and spaces of care can be composed into broader urban infrastructures, potentially extending beyond domestic boundaries.

Care spaces for collaborative and solidarity-based living

"This is the path of the Simon de Cyrène Association" – so begins the story of an encounter between Évelyn and René, two elderly residents of Marseille, and the inhabitants of one of the Simon de Cyrène Association's homes, located across the street from their apartment[3]. In this residence, people with disabilities live together with individuals who choose to participate in an

3 https://www.simondecyrene.org/2022/06/17/6759/ [10.06.2025].

"inclusive living" project supported by the French government[4]. From exchanging greetings from their respective windows to sharing a communal meal, the transition was natural. Évelyn and René were invited to join a moment of conviviality at the *Cabanon de Simon*: overlooking the street, the Cabanon functions simultaneously as a communal kitchen, a creative space, and a place for social gathering.

The Cabanon's transparent windows – designed by the renowned architectural collective Collectif Etc.[5] – offer a view into a modest space where the kitchen was built with the help of all the residents involved in the participatory construction workshop organised by the same collective. On one of the walls, a mural composed of wooden panels – convertible into tables when needed – depicts a communal dinner. The illustration, created by artist Élodie Lascar, celebrates the principle of *vivre ensemble fondé sur la relation fraternelle* ("living together based on fraternal relationships") that underpins the inclusive housing model promoted by Simon de Cyrène.

Three core elements define this project. The first two relate to the internal organisation of the residence. Each resident has access to a private apartment – approximately 30 square metres – that includes a kitchenette and a bathroom, ensuring housing independence and offering affordable accommodation in central urban areas. Affordability is ensured in exchange for a commitment to provide support to those in need living within the residence, providing help in their daily lives (preparing meals, accompanying them shopping, etc.) and, more generally, encouraging and supporting their autonomy. The real heart of inclusive living, however, lies in the communal kitchen, presented as the space that "facilitates time for encounters, exchange, and conviviality", and where solidarity toward individuals with disabilities, the elderly, or those in vulnerable situations is most strongly expressed.

The third distinguishing feature is the project's anchoring in neighbourhood life. The immediate surroundings of the Cabanon

4 See: https://www.pour-les-personnes-agees.gouv.fr/changer-de-logement/autres-solutions-de-logement/habitat-inclusif-un-chez-soi-et-une-vie-sociale-partages [10.06.2025].

5 http://www.collectifetc.com/realisation/le-cabanon-de-simon/ [10.06.2025].

– the sidewalk and residential street it faces – are often activated by food preparation and the lively sharing it entails. Without explicit architectural intention, the life of the Cabanon spills onto the street, infusing the neighbourhood with its imperfect yet vital daily rhythm, opening up to other residents eager to participate, like Évelyn and René. Indeed, proximity to the urban fabric is a key requirement of the government-supported *Habitat inclusif* model[6]: to foster autonomy, access to public transport, shops, and services is essential. Integration into neighbourhood life becomes crucial to sustaining and building social ties, precisely through relations of proximity.

Figure 1. Marseille, Le Cabanon de Simon in the solidarity housing residence developed by the Simon de Cyrène Association (Source: Collectif Etc).

6 Inclusive housing is primarily supported by public funding: those who promote inclusive housing developments – provided they meet the eligibility criteria – receive financial support granted by the Departmental Councils through a dedicated call for proposals (*Aide à la Vie Partagée* – AVP). Residents contribute to the project by paying a reduced rent, made possible through *Aides Personnalisées au Logement* (APL). In addition, persons with disabilities receive specific support through the *Prestation de Compensation du Handicap* (PCH). These different forms of assistance contribute–each to a varying degree–to the overall financial sustainability of the project: https://www.credofunding.fr/fr/simondecyrene-pret [10.06.2025].

Figure 2. Marseille, Le Cabanon facing the street (Source: Collectif Etc).

Care Spaces to Integrate Living and Working

Outdoor tables and transparent windows offer a view into the affordable neighbourhood restaurant: this is La Ferme du Rail in Paris[7], an agro-urban space where agricultural production, employment, social reintegration, and housing are woven into a collective lifestyle in harmony with nature. Winner of the "Reinventing Paris" initiative, launched in 2003 by the city government to repurpose underutilised urban areas, the project was developed by a multidisciplinary team – including social organisations, architects, and landscape designers – and combines a focus on social and environmental concerns with the provision of new housing forms.

La Ferme du Rail is an urban farm equipped with greenhouses, gardens, and areas for experimenting with permaculture, aquaponics, and sack-based cultivation. It employs about twenty people, and its residential component is tightly intertwined with urban

7 https://www.fermedurail.org/ [20.04.2025].

agriculture work. The site consists of two buildings. The first, facing the street, is dedicated to work-related functions. It houses greenhouses on the top floor; a workshop and garage on the lower, semi-underground level; and, on the intermediate level, an affordable restaurant. This restaurant opens onto the street and includes an outdoor area, forming a transitional space that welcomes visitors. The greenhouse above is entirely transparent, emphasising the lightness of a structure built with sustainable materials.

The second building is residential and includes both a shelter and job reintegration centre for vulnerable individuals (15 units), as well as five student apartments. Each floor includes a shared kitchenette. All residents participate in the operation and maintenance of the farm. The project serves significant social aims. Among the associations involved are Travail et Vie, which supports professional reintegration, and Bail pour Tous, which advocates for dignified, high-quality housing for people in need. Moreover, beneath the restaurant, the workshop hosts about twenty individuals undergoing job reintegration, along with students from the École du Breuil (École d'horticulture de la Ville de Paris) or the École des Ingénieurs de la Ville de Paris (EIVP).

Figure 3. Paris, *La Ferme du Rail*: the restaurant seen from the street (© Jéromine Derigny / Argos).

In this agro-urban system, private residential units and communal spaces are fully integrated. While shared areas foster interaction and community, private spaces ensure intimacy and autonomy. Biodiversity and sustainability are promoted through the use of diverse plant species in the outdoor spaces, reclaimed or low-maintenance materials, and closed-loop resource systems such as rainwater harvesting, reduced water consumption, and composting. Ecological building principles enhance the site's architectural quality while also improving the everyday life of those who live and work there.

Partial conclusions, future perspectives

Returning to the questions posed at the beginning: what lessons can be learned from these case studies? What clues can help shape research paths toward collective and affordable living, beginning with the democratisation of care work and food-related social reproduction?

Lesson 1: Using food-care spaces to renew housing welfare

Recognising the centrality of care spaces, especially those related to food, can provide an opportunity to renew housing-related welfare. Sharing these spaces can be strategic not only for ensuring inclusion and sociality but also – and above all – to address growing vulnerabilities linked to food poverty, which is increasingly shown to affect housing quality (Seo & Park 2021). If the right to food is recognised as part of a broader sphere of citizenship rights (Rodotà 2014), then spaces for food preparation and consumption can play a decisive role in ensuring quality (social) housing. The case studies show that ensuring this right enables the identification of various social vulnerabilities and creates opportunities for social and work inclusion starting from the home. At the same time, assigning a central role in housing to the kitchen and food-sharing spaces provides a chance to consolidate a culture of sharing that transcends ethnicity, generations, identities, and gender – and serves as a solid foundation for truly

collaborative living. In these cases, care for relationships is at the heart of the project to democratise reproductive labor: the relationship between ourselves and others as a condition for social life and for making the world habitable (Simay 2022).

The first lesson is that the kitchen and food-related spaces can drive welfare renewal only if we move beyond the assumption that the right to housing simply equates to the right to a dwelling in contexts of social vulnerability. Breaking this binary correspondence means acknowledging the potential of shared care practices (and thus food practices) to create, through affordable housing, "communities of care": concrete utopias rooted in "necessary and situated solidarities", spatially embedded in ecologies with greater potential for everyday realisation (Serughetti & Fano Morrisey 2022; Haraway 2022). It is in this dimension that inhabitants – and women in particular – while "reimagining new ways of being together and building commons, invent new relational environments, re-establish new relationships between public and private spaces through novel forms of occupancy, and create different ways of participating in and self-managing social spaces" (Decandia 2019, p. 25).

Lesson 2: The kitchen as an opportunity to create "infrastructures of care"

But what role does space play in all this? And what kind of design can help support the described processes? In the examples cited, the focus is not so much on private space – which, even in collaborative housing, must be protected to guarantee individual intimacy and privacy. Rather, the design focus shifts to mediating spaces, to thresholds between shared areas and everything beyond, whether public or private. Physical accessibility to shared spaces proves fundamental (Bifulco 2003): in both the Cabanon and the Ferme du Rail, opening onto the street is essential for achieving a socially high-quality housing experience. In both cases, it is the kitchen that opens toward the city, offering the opportunity to connect the domestic and the urban through spaces where the bounderies between services and housing are blurred, generating hybrid and innovative spatialities open to wider collective use.

Breaking the invisibility of the kitchen is a necessary strategy, but even more crucial is the fine-grained design work aimed at reconfiguring the connecting spaces that mediate transitions between different living states (intimacy-sharing; individual-collective; collective-public). Designing thresholds ensures transitions between different degrees of sharing and can spark design invention – reconfiguring private interiors and imagining their variability over time based on the changing needs of their inhabitants.

Focusing on mediating spaces makes the process of re-collectivising care truly possible, restoring its visibility in the public sphere. As it becomes an "infrastructure of care" (Power & Mee 2020), the kitchen and other collaborative spaces provide fertile political and epistemic ground for linking care with social reproduction. Through policy, care and reproduction can find a dialogic and generative dimension in the collectivisation of kitchens and shared care spaces.

Lesson 3: The importance of intermediary actors in democratising care

The final lesson concerns the role of the actors involved. Democratic negotiation of care reaffirms the need for a strong public actor, capable of managing increasingly complex, multi-stakeholder processes. Now more than ever, we need bold and courageous public institutions – to re-balance the roles of involved parties, build alliances with private actors, and work within legal frameworks to experiment with innovative welfare models that generate new spatial anchors for democratically shared living.

But the presence of a public actor alone is not sufficient. The examined cases show that care negotiation also and especially depends on strong and capable intermediary actors – able, on the one hand, to manage the process of creating the spaces, and on the other, to ensure democratic sharing of care responsibilities without overly interfering with daily living. In France, for example, the *bailleur social* – a specialised social housing provider authorised to request subsidies and funding (comparable perhaps to Italian public housing entities

but more dynamic and diversified) – and the "care coordinator" emerge as key figures in guaranteeing the realisation of supportive and collaborative housing.

Catherine Clarisse (2004) reminds us that in optimising the kitchen "to save time, we lost space". Returning to the kitchen, in its many design iterations, now offers the chance to reclaim that space to recognise our interdependence with others, and to nurture relationships of solidarity in a reciprocal weave that sustains the fabric of our lives.

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Michele Rinaldi*

LIVING BEYOND THE NORM
Policies, cultural models and domestic spaces for single people in Italy (1930s-1950s)

Introduction

At the International Housing and Town Planning Congress held in Stockholm in 1939, engineer Giuseppe Gorla, official delegate of Italy, presented a national report titled *Habitations pour Catégories Spéciales* (House Building for Special Groups). This section encompassed several distinct branches of housing welfare, addressing the needs of groups such as agricultural workers, the elderly, war invalids, large families, unmarried wage-earners of both sexes, and others. Within this broader framework, Gorla's report included a subsection on *Les travailleurs célibataires des deux sexes* (Unmarried wage-earners of both sexes), where he noted:

> In Italy, there are no dwellings exclusively reserved for workers of either sex. Single people generally live in furnished rooms when they are unable to reside with their families. […] Nota bene – the policy pursued by the fascist regime is to promote families, particularly large families. Consequently, singlehood is not encouraged; there is even a bachelor tax in Italy, calculated proportionally to age and income. […] In essence, Fascism aims to encourage the formation of the family, to protect it, and to strengthen it to the highest degree (Fédération internationale pour l'habitation et l'urbanisme 1939, p. 3).

Gorla briefly referenced the Domus Civica project – constructed in Venice between 1918 and 1921 by engineer Paolo Bertanza and promoted by the Istituto Autonomo per le Case Popolari

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(IACP) – offering only general data on room types and services. He made no mention of contemporary housing developments aimed at unmarried individuals.

Yet Gorla's report – one of the few explicit acknowledgements of housing for singles during the *Ventennio* (the twenty-year period of Fascist rule in Italy) – raises crucial historiographical questions. Was his depiction representative of the Italian context, or did it oversimplify and obscure a broader spectrum of experimental initiatives? And what were the consequences of this selective narrative for post-war housing discourses?

These questions frame the inquiry undertaken in this essay, which seeks to reconstruct a largely forgotten chapter in the history of Italian housing. Although seldom recognised in official records, a range of architectural proposals – some speculative, others realised – sought to accommodate single individuals through alternative dwelling models. Whether developed within, around, or in resistance to prevailing ideological constraints, these projects illuminate how architecture could respond to emerging social realities while simultaneously negotiating dominant domestic norms.

Singe-person housing in Fascist Italy: Typological experiments with ideological constraints

By the mid-1920s, changing social behaviours – particularly concerning unmarried and childless individuals – began to reshape architectural discourse on domestic life. As modernist architects responded to shifting demographic and socio-cultural conditions, the figure of the single individual emerged as a legitimate subject in the redefinition of the modern dwelling. Housing was increasingly conceived not merely as a space supporting patriarchal familial structures, but as a socio-cultural programme attuned to the needs of a new, independent inhabitant (Gropius [1929] 1979a; [1929] 1979b).

Within the Modern Movement, this interest materialised in a series of experimental projects and theoretical reflections disseminated through exhibitions, journals, and international

platforms (Schmid *et al.* 2019, pp. 56-57). For the first time, architectural discourse began to articulate models of housing that fell outside religious or marital norms, proposing secular alternatives to traditional domestic configurations designed for single people. The "minimum dwelling" – a central concern of modernist inquiry – joined typologies such as boarding houses, hostels, and dormitories in collectively reimagining the ideal inhabitant: not the nuclear family, but *life-cycle* or *lifelong singles*[2].

Beyond avant-garde circles, however, the actual living conditions of single individuals remained precarious. As Czech architectural theorist Karel Teige observed in the early 1930s, subletting was often the only option for those living outside marriage – a reflection of both housing scarcity and economic exclusion:

> It seems that today anyone who lives outside the institution of marriage is obliged to live without a flat: the dominant dwelling type offered is the family household and, as a result, proper dwelling is reserved first and foremost to the bearers of the honorific wedding ring. Even then, poor couples in financial straits, or those obliged to change their residence because of a new job, or those who cannot afford to buy their own furniture have often no other choice than to live in sublets (Teige [1932] 2002, p. 174).

Italy was no exception. In the interwar years, nearly 36% of the adult population was single, and 11% of individuals over fifty remained unmarried throughout their lives (Istituto centrale di statistica 1976; Barbagli *et al.* 2003). Despite the introduction of the imposta sui celibi (bachelor tax) in 1927 – levied on unmarried men aged twenty-five to sixty-five – these figures were scarcely affected (Regio Decreto-Legge 19 dicembre 1926, n. 2132; Regio Decreto 13 febbraio 1927, n. 124; Ipsen 2002).

2 Historians Judith M. Bennett and Amy M. Froide (1999) introduce the distinction between *life-cycle* and *lifelong* singlehood in relation to the condition of single women in Europe before 1800. These two categories – extendable to single people more broadly – help distinguish between individuals who experience singlehood as a transitional phase between childhood and marriage (*life-cycle singles*) and those who remain unmarried for life, for a variety of reasons (*lifelong singles*).

While the tax had little demographic or economic impact, its symbolic weight was significant. It highlighted the dissonance between Fascist pronatalist policies and the demographic realities of Italian society. This disconnect was further reinforced by housing legislation: the Consolidated Act on Public Housing of 1938 imposed a two-room minimum per unit, thereby excluding single individuals from access to subsidised housing (Regio Decreto 28 aprile 1938-XVI, n. 1165). As a result, single people were left to seek housing on the private market – where options were limited to expensive interiors for the affluent – or in minor experiments conducted in company towns and colonial settlements[3].

Italian architects were not detached from international debates around housing for single individuals. Yet among those most engaged with European modernism – particularly within the Rationalist group – a cautious approach prevailed. In a 1937 article published in Domus, titled "L'abitazione minima", Giuseppe Pagano (1937) explicitly critiqued the term *casa per scapoli* (bachelor housing) as misleading. He argued that such housing did not necessarily imply celibacy, but rather responded to pragmatic urban pressures.

Pagano defined these dwellings as modest, affordable, and semi-autonomous solutions suitable for professionals – state employees, magistrates, and teachers – who required respectable yet temporary accommodation in large cities. His emphasis on spatial functionality and typological clarity marked a clear detachment from the social conditions of singlehood. Instead, the discourse was reoriented toward typological reasoning and spatial efficiency. This framing reflected the Rationalist project's broader tendency to abstract the housing problem from demographic specificity, treating the minimum dwelling as a formal and programmatic solution rather than a socially embedded one.

3 While the phenomenon of housing for single individuals also unfolded across a wide range of scales – including interior design, industrial settlements, and colonial infrastructures – this essay deliberately restricts its scope to urban housing projects in major Italian cities such as Rome and Milan. This methodological delimitation serves to foreground the intersection of architectural experimentation, demographic transformation, and ideological constraint within the metropolitan dimension of the national territory.

The clearest attempt to transpose international experimentation in housing for singles into the Italian context came with the *Progetto di casa in serie per scapoli* (Serial Housing Project for Bachelors), developed by Guido Fiorini. First published in 1934 in *Quadrante* and later exhibited in the *Architettura Italiana* section of the 6th Triennale di Milano (1936), the project, conceived for Milan[4], drew direct inspiration from Le Corbusier's *Immeubles-villas* (1922) (Fiorini 1934; Pica 1936; Triennale di Milano 1936).

In Fiorini's project, the invocation of *bachelor housing* functioned less as an engagement with the contemporary housing needs of single individuals than as a symbolic device to legitimise architectural experimentation. His use of the term served to align the project with the progressive international discourse on housing, particularly recent typological innovations conceived for single people, without addressing the underlying social conditions they responded to. What Fiorini advanced was not so much a model for single-person inhabitation as a technically ambitious exercise in tensile structural design – a constructive solution he had been exploring since 1928. The label *bachelor housing*, therefore, operated rhetorically: it conferred a veneer of social relevance and contemporaneity onto a project primarily concerned with formal and structural invention.

The housing complex consisted of "small terraced houses", each with a 5,60-metre-high ceiling divided into two 2,80-metre levels. The ground floor featured a compact kitchen and WC adjacent to a double-height living room with a glazed façade. A spiral staircase and gallery connected the upper level – containing bedroom, study, and bathroom (fig. 1). While the flats were conceived as independent units, they also incorporated collective amenities at the ground level: a lobby with concierge, cloakroom, switchboard, reception halls, restrooms for both sexes, service kitchen and pantry, administrative office, and a dining hall with a bar (Fiorini 1934). Notably, the inclusion of women's restrooms suggests that, despite its gendered label, the project may have been designed with mixed-gender occupancy in mind.

4 Guido Fiorini's archive is held within a fonds at the Central State Archives in Rome. In the inventory compiled in 2009, the project is listed as being located in Milan. See De Conciliis (2009).

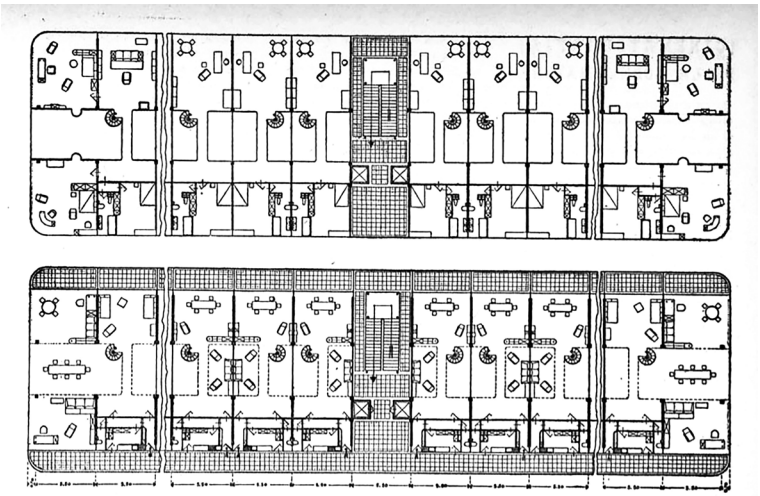

Figure 1. Guido Fiorini, Serial Housing Project for Bachelors, upper and lower floor plans, 1934 (Fiorini 1934).

This form of communal housing – rare in 1930s Italy – provided comprehensive services to a modern urban single population, which clashed with the socio-political climate in which it was conceived. Under Fascism, collective amenities were generally limited to workers' dormitories within paternalist welfare schemes – not associated with modern autonomy. Fiorini's project remains the only 1930s housing scheme explicitly designed for singles. It foreshadowed the Wohnhotel model, later more fully developed in postwar Italy with the *case-albergo*.

Wartime anomaly and Piccinato's studio-apartments: housing for singles in times of war

The fall of the Fascist regime in 1943 coincided with the repeal of the bachelor tax (Regio Decreto-Legge 2 agosto 1943, n. 707), signalling a broader ideological shift in how non-familial life was publicly framed. Yet the closing years of the Ventennio

– despite the intensifying constraints of wartime – saw the completion of one of the few housing projects explicitly designed to accommodate single individuals: the *Appartamenti-studi per artisti* (Studio Flats for Artists), designed by Luigi Piccinato and located on via Nicotera in Rome.

Begun in 1938 and completed in 1943, amid wartime difficulties, the project was shaped by stringent zoning constraints that classified the site for villa-type developments. To comply, Piccinato divided the building into two separate volumes linked by a shared staircase. Each one-room unit comprised a small service area (entrance and bathroom) and a living space with a balcony. A built-in wardrobe partitioned the sleeping alcove from the rest of the space, enabling efficient spatial use. On the ground floor, shared facilities – including a restaurant, laundry, and concierge – underscored the project's collective ethos and its alignment with contemporary ideals of modern domesticity (fig. 2).

Figure 2. Luigi Piccinato, Studio-Apartments for Artists on Via Nicotera, Rome, 1938-1943 (Bo 1943).

In a 1943 article, Lina Bo (Bardi) praised the project for its progressive stance and:

> […] how far architecture has progressed since then, not only in its design but also in its alignment with human life and, even more so, in how it reflects the evolving lifestyles of all social classes; the fact that these "nuclei" are not exclusively inhabited by artists but also by small families and professionals indicates that this "modern architecture" once seen as purely theoretical and difficult to adapt to everyday life is gradually becoming part of ordinary reality (Bo 1943, pp. 18-19).

Yet the broader impact of this project would not materialise until after the war. Piccinato's design remained an isolated case within a political climate still heavily invested in traditional family ideals. Its modernity lay not only in its spatial configuration but in its coded framing: by designating the units for artists – figures generally granted more latitude in lifestyle and morality – the project was able to operate within the ideological confines of the regime while implicitly addressing a wider, more heterogeneous social group. The resonance of Piccinato's project extended into the postwar imagination. In January 1944, the journal *Lo Stile* published two speculative housing proposals aimed at future real estate development. Both invoked the Studio-Flats for Artists as a precedent, alongside Sven Markelius's Kollektivhuset in Stockholm – one of the few comparable European models of collective housing for single people (n.a. 1944).

One of the two proposals was entirely dedicated to single occupants, save for a single-family flat on the ground floor. A series of illustrations offered a symbolic profile of its intended residents: an architect, a poet, a sculptor, a musician, a painter, and a choreographer – the only woman among them (fig. 3). This imagined community captured both the cultural capital and the gendered exclusions underpinning architectural narratives of singlehood. In contrast to male single tenants – routinely framed as transitional or creative figures – single women remained largely invisible, excluded from both public housing schemes and financial independence.

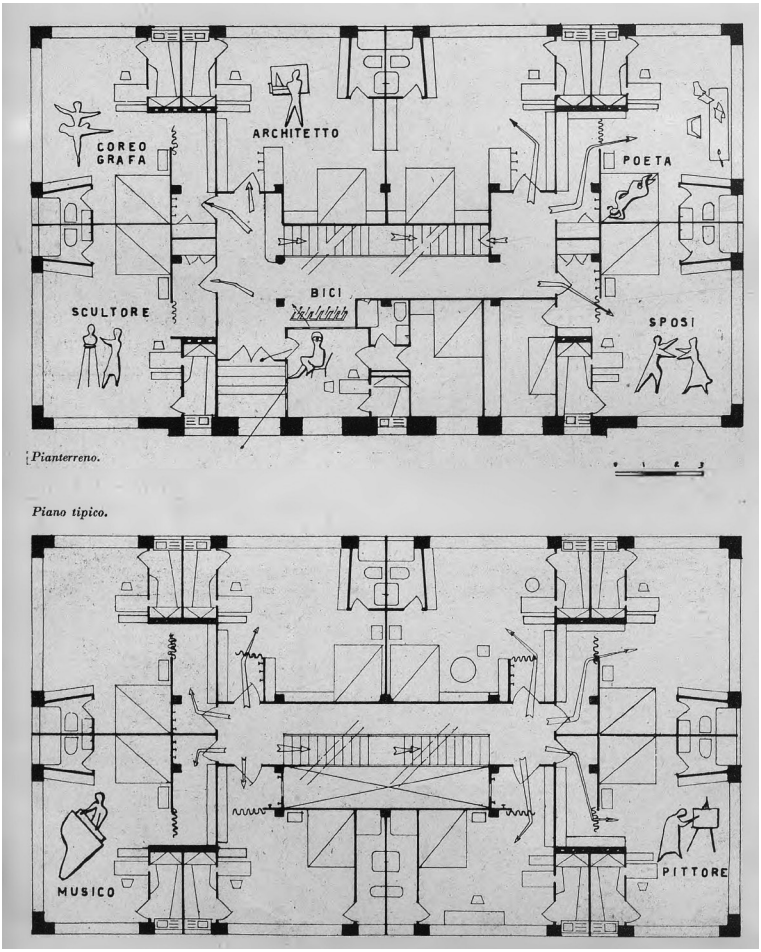

Figure 3. Housing proposal for single people or childless couples, 1944 (n.a. 1944).

The institutional invisibility of single women in Fascist Italy was not incidental but systemic. The 1938 Consolidated Act on Public Housing explicitly prioritised married men as housing beneficiaries, effectively barring single women from eligibility. Employment laws further entrenched their marginalisation, capping the employment of women in both public and private

sectors at 10 per cent and limiting their access to senior positions and professional autonomy. This exclusion was all the more significant given the symbolic weight attributed to the domestic sphere in Fascist ideology. While single men were targeted through fiscal instruments like the bachelor tax, single women were rendered structurally illegible – absent from architectural policy and housing design alike. The gendered asymmetry in how singlehood was spatially accommodated reveals a deeper architectural complicity with state-defined norms of productivity, morality, and family formation.

The short season of the casa-albergo: forms of non-normative living in the postwar period

While the 1930s and early 1940s functioned as a speculative laboratory for alternative housing types – often unrealised or restricted in scale – the postwar period provided fertile ground for their implementation. Among the typologies that resurfaced with new urgency was the *casa-albergo*, or residential hotel: a hybrid model that combined private living units with communal services, tailored to the needs of individuals excluded from conventional family housing.

This shift was precipitated by both material necessity and demographic complexity. Italy's wartime destruction had exacerbated an already acute housing crisis, which overlapped with long-standing deficiencies in the accommodation of non-familial domestic arrangements. As Mario Carbonara observed, familial households frequently absorbed "orphaned grandchildren, the disabled, the elderly, widows, and, of course, unmarried men and women" (1954, p. 649). The *casa-albergo* emerged as one of the few formal responses to these inadequacies, signalling a new – if tentative – recognition of singlehood as a legitimate housing category.

Unlike Fascist-era policies, which defined eligibility primarily by family size and the number of rooms, postwar debates began to engage with new modes of inhabitation and more flexible typological solutions for single individuals and mobile urbanites.

The casa-albergo model found its most articulate advocate in Luigi Moretti. In 1946, the city launched a permanent construction exhibition. On that occasion, he published an essay promoting the case-albergo project by Cofimprese, a joint-stock company focused on housing development. Moretti, both architect and entrepreneur, articulated the urgency of creating alternatives to the family model:

> The case-albergo address one of the most delicate and pressing needs of a large urban organism. […] The accommodations in the case-albergo are intended for single men and women, childless and with one child married couples (who are usually not granted access to housing benefits or special provisions) and belonging to that social class of employees, teachers, magistrates, professionals, students, technicians, and workers who today find shelter only in so-called camere ammobiliate (furnished rooms); one of those institutions that exemplifies the inability of buildings to align with social realities, once again demonstrating how buildings remains an absurdly imprecise phenomenon in the modern world (1946, p. 33).

His diagnosis was both architectural and ideological. The Italian construction industry, he argued, had long been shaped by a patriarchal model in which individuals were expected to leave the family home only to form another. This cultural inertia had resulted in an infrastructural void – one that left single individuals without adequate housing and condemned them to transient or precarious arrangements.

Against this backdrop, the casa-albergo offered what Moretti called "the comfort of a home of one's own, even if minimal", and "the warmth of a community – different from the family but also profound and humanly solemn" (1946, p. 34). His vision was not purely functional: it aimed to foster intimacy, dignity, and a sense of place for those outside normative family structures.

This ethos was clearly reflected in the interiors. Drawings showcased details that evoked personal comfort and individual expression: a dress casually draped over a bed, a decorative wall plate, a framed photograph. Each unit was fully furnished with a wardrobe, kitchenette, writing desk, sofa bed, and shelves

balancing standardisation with a domestic aesthetic that countered the anonymity often associated with single-person housing (fig. 4).

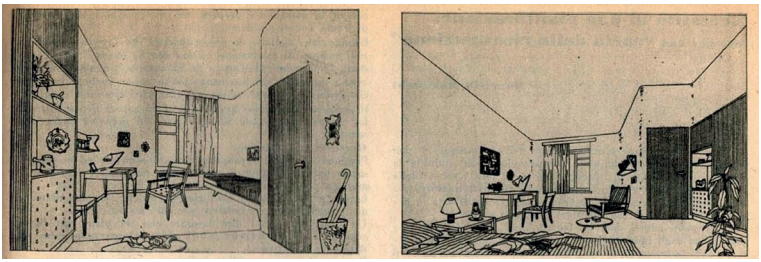

Figure 4. Luigi Moretti, preliminary study for the case-albergo, perspective views of the interiors of two apartments (Moretti 1946).

Despite its promise, the project was only partially realised. Of the twenty-two planned buildings, only three were constructed – in Via Bassini, Via Corridoni, and Via Lazzaretto[5]. These remain the only large-scale public housing schemes specifically designed for singles undertaken in postwar Italy between the 1940s and 1950s.

Not all architects embraced the collectivist overtones of the casa-albergo uncritically. This is evident in more nationalistic sentiments regarding domestic life as expressed by Giulio Minoletti in relation to the casa-albergo model:

> The formula of the casa-albergo is a typically collective formula and therefore suited to the North American mentality and way of life on the one hand and the Soviet way of life on the other; the solution put forward in this study aspires to be, within the narrow limits granted by the formula itself, as "Italian" as possible, that is, as little as possible to upset those hereditary habits that continually dissolve or change within us, but which are never definitively cancelled. […] In our opinion, there is no need for the casa-albergo to be equipped with communal lounges for living, music, games, etc., as all these

5 For the specific case of Milan and the *case-albergo*, see Rostagni 2008.

> services are already much better "centralised" in the respective public places […] (1948, s.p.).

This reflection accompanied a speculative project developed with Gian Casé and presented later that same year in *Domus* (Minoletti 1948). Commissioned by a private real estate company, it targeted a middle-class clientele of single tenants and young couples. The project combined compact, rational interiors with a wide range of services – maintenance, office support, restaurant, laundry, storage, and gym. Flats were delivered fully furnished, down to linens and dishware, with customisable details such as curtains, bedspreads, lamps, and wall décor – offering a rare degree of personalisation within the rental market.

Where Moretti emphasised domestic intimacy and collective identity, Minoletti proposed a more cautious reconciliation of innovation and tradition. His casa-albergo retained the formal vocabulary of modernism while reasserting a culturally specific Italian model of the home that resisted the ideological associations of hotel-style living. Yet these architectural advances were soon undermined by a series of legislative reversals. Initially, Legislative Decree No. 399 of 1947 had appeared to legitimise one-room flats by establishing a forty-square-metre minimum, legitimising one-room flats as viable spaces for single people and childless couples (Decreto Legislativo 8 maggio 1947, n. 399.). This marked a significant break from the 1938 Consolidated Act and opened the door to more flexible housing solutions for single people.

However, this momentum was quickly reversed. In 1949, Law 43, which introduced the INA-Casa programme[6], while initially revising the minimum dimensions for one-room flats down to 30-35 square metres, soon after, one-room units were excluded entirely in favour of two-room flats (Centro per la ricerca applicata

6 INA-Casa refers to the Italian state-led housing programme implemented between 1949 and 1963. Conceived by Minister of Labour Amintore Fanfani – hence also known as the "Fanfani Plan" – it aimed to develop public housing across the national territory in the wake of the Second World War. The initiative was financed through resources administered by a dedicated body within the National Institute of Insurance (*Istituto Nazionale delle Assicurazioni*), known as the INA-Casa Administration.

sui problemi dell'edilizia residenziale 1959). This trajectory was reinforced by the 1949 Tupini Law (Legge 2 luglio 1949, n. 408), which aligned public housing policy with the earlier Royal Decree of 1938 by once again excluding one-room flats. Subsequent legislation continued in this vein. Law no. 715 (1950) and Law no. 1148 (1955) consolidated the two-room flat as the minimum acceptable standard in both public and private housing. In doing so, they not only shaped architectural practice but ideologically recodified domestic legitimacy in strictly familial terms.

These regulations contributed to a broader cultural redefinition. As the minimum surface increased, the one-room flat – once synonymous with single-person living – lost its symbolic association with autonomy and experimentation. Instead, the housing system gradually reabsorbed single people into more traditional family-oriented categories, often by default. This shift, particularly evident in the 1950s, reflects another factor which is related to the marriage boom which was the ultimate result of the postwar Italian economic recovery and economic miracle which obviously effected the percentage of single people in the population, a trend that started to decrease from the 1950s on (Sarti 2006, 167; Barbagli *et al.* 2003).

These factors help explain why the casa-albergo had such a brief lifespan, gradually fading out during the 1950s. Nonetheless, notable examples, among others, include the housing block for single people within the INA-Casa Tuscolano III neighbourhood in Rome by Adalberto Libera (1950-1954) (Belli 1989) and the case-albergo-style flats occupying floors 19-25 of the Torre Velasca in Milan, designed by BBPR and completed in 1955 (Cecchi 1957).

Conclusion

The history of housing projects for single people in Fascist and postwar Italy reveals a complex negotiation between socio-demographic transformations, ideological and regulatory constraints, and architectural experimentation. It challenges the notion that living alone is an exclusively contemporary phenomenon, instead presenting it as a condition with a long and

multifaceted genealogy, shaped by evolving and often contested meanings. Through the realised and unrealised projects analysed here, architects grappled with the urgency of accommodating lifestyles that exceeded the normative structures of the nuclear family and its spatial corollaries. Although the Fascist regime and the postwar reconstruction period differed radically in political ideology and institutional configuration, both moments – albeit intermittently – provided opportunities for typological innovation and a degree of social recognition of single-person dwellings. At the same time, this historical inquiry reveals the fragility of such experiments when confronted with legislative, cultural, and demographic pressures, illustrating how even the most forward-looking visions were frequently neutralised by the persistent attempt to marginalise non-normative ways of living.

This reconstruction invites us not to regard typologies, laws, or housing programmes as monolithic or ideologically coherent entities. Rather, it uncovers the plurality of actors – architects, planners, legislators, private developers – who responded in diverse and uneven ways to changing social configurations and to the housing needs of groups historically marginalised or perceived as exceptional.

The history of housing for single people in early twentieth-century Italy not only sheds light on past forms of marginalisation: it also calls for critical reflection on the responsibility of architecture and housing policies to acknowledge and accommodate all forms of living and subjectivity that exist beyond – and against – the norm.

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CHANGES IN WAYS OF LIVING
Informality as a relative and reactive concept to the universal inaccessibility of the right to housing

The inevitability of change

The transformation in the ways people inhabit public and private spaces is part of a broader process of social change, marked by complex and interconnected dynamics. These include environmental, demographic, cultural, economic, and technological transformations. Various scholars have analyzed these changes by proposing theoretical frameworks, such as postmodernity, liquid society, network society, and risk society, that explore their implications on life paths, social inequalities, cities, and informal practices.

According to Giddens (1994), postmodernity represents a phase of advanced modernity characterised by growing complexity and accelerated social change. Individuals are increasingly aware of their position in society and are constantly engaged in self-reflection. This leads to tendencies toward isolation and individualization. Simultaneously, there is a *disembedding* of social relationships from local contexts, driven by globalization and the pervasive role of technology in everyday life.

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Globalisation, viewed as a multidimensional process, has profoundly reshaped contemporary societies through the global flow of people (e.g., migration), technologies, capital, media, ideologies, and values (Appadurai 1996). However, this process also reveals limitations in the actual reach of these flows, which take different forms depending on local contexts. The notion of glocalization (Robertson 1992; 1994; Bauman 2005) emphasizes how globalization does not erase local specificities but transforms them, creating a continuous interaction between the global and the local. The risk of being potentially interconnected with anyone and being able to access anything at a global level is that of not being in relation with anyone and no longer being able to make a choice that reflects one's own identity, which thus risks being disembedded, uniformised, standardised.

Bauman (2000) explores this disembedding with the powerful metaphor of the liquid society, contrasting it with the "solidity" of traditional institutions. Interpersonal relationships become increasingly fluid and temporary, as growing individualism weakens social ties. The instability of social roles and institutions generates anxiety and existential insecurity, while identity construction increasingly relies on consumerism within a market-driven context.

Globalization and digitalization are key drivers of these profound transformations, redefining social relationships and generating new forms of discrimination based on unequal access to networks. Castells (1996) conceptualizes the network society as a new social form shaped by information and digital communication, in which digital networks replace traditional hierarchies as the primary organisational structure. While globalization fosters rapid flows of information, capital, and people, reducing geographic barriers, network connectivity becomes a new axis of social inclusion and exclusion, accessible only to those with adequate initial economic, social and educational resources.

In this context, risk becomes a central element of everyday life, not just as an external threat, but as a consequence of social dynamics themselves. Ulrich Beck (1992), in his theory of the risk society, highlights how technological and industrial progress generates new global threats (e.g., environmental disasters, economic crises).

Elements of change

Below is a summary of the key elements of change widely recognised in the literature, acknowledging that all of them interact with one another.

Climate and demographic change and cultural and value transformations

Climate change is one of the most significant factors shaping the present and future of society. It leads to extreme weather events, such as heatwaves, hurricanes, and floods, that have devastating effects on ecosystems and human communities. The accumulation of greenhouse gases, plastics, and other waste is damaging the natural environment and public health. Transitioning to renewable energy sources and adopting low-emission transportation systems are central to addressing the climate crisis, although such shifts also entail significant economic and social changes (Giddens 2011).

Demographic shifts are reshaping the foundations of the global population. In developed countries, the increasing average age raises concerns about welfare systems, healthcare, and economic sustainability. Global migration flows – driven by conflicts, economic inequalities, and environmental crises – are transforming both the societies of origin and those of destination. This creates the need to redefine models of reception and citizenship, raising challenges regarding to cultural integration, resource redistribution, and the balance between inclusion and exclusion (de Haas *et al.* 2019)

Social transformations influence and are influenced by cultural values and practices. On the one hand, economic and technological development may allow individuals to increasingly focus on immaterial goals, such as quality of life, social justice, equal human rights and the sustainability of the planet; on the other hand, the personal autonomy that this development allows may take the form of unbridled individualism, weakening community ties and family networks. As previously observed in relation to migration, the encounter between different cultures offers opportunities for enrichment, for example, but also generates conflicts, underscoring the need for inclusive policies (Bauman 1998; 2002).

Technological innovation, economic changes and social inequalities

Technological innovation drives many social and economic changes but can also amplify inequalities. The widespread adoption of digital technologies has transformed communication, education, and work, bringing both opportunities and risks, such as overreliance on technology. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the spread of remote work, which offers flexibility but raises questions about the boundary between private and professional life. The internet and social media enable instant global interaction, but they also spread misinformation and exacerbate digital divides (Robinson *et al* 2015).

The shift from a mass-production economic model to one focused on flexibility and customization has altered the labour market. While this improves adaptability to environmental demands, it also generates widespread precarious employment. Temporary, low-paid, and unprotected jobs have become the norm in many sectors, contributing to increased economic instability (Atkinson 2015).

The growing polarization of wealth is eroding the middle class and increasing economic poverty. Alongside this, new forms of poverty are emerging, affecting a broader range of vulnerable groups and further weakening large segments of the population. Moreover, the growing predominance of the financial sector in the global economy is exerting a negative impact on the real economy and household welfare (Saraceno *et al.* 2022).

As previously discussed, social inequalities – while not new – are evolving in response to the economic and demographic transformations of contemporary societies. They are expressed through a growing divide between social groups and the erosion of social protection structures, resulting from the interplay of multiple changes previously outlined.

Job insecurity and the rising cost of living are contributing to the impoverishment of families, making social mobility more difficult. As highlighted by recent Caritas reports on poverty and social inclusion (Caritas 2022), this also contributes to increasing levels of intergenerational poverty.

Regarding the resilience of welfare systems, which are increasingly overwhelmed by the growing and diverse forms of poverty, the emergence of new citizen communities (Bauman 2018) and the rising costs of pensions and population aging, which are placing mounting pressure on financial sustainability, there is a noticeable decline in their capacity to respond effectively. This further exacerbates the precariousness of already vulnerable population groups, such as young people, immigrants, and precarious workers.

Various forms of social support are often conditioned by strict eligibility requirements, reducing access for the most fragile groups. This also includes a tendency to reserve social benefits for native citizens and individuals with equal legal status, thus excluding third-country nationals, and fueling social tensions (Gargiulo *et al.* 2024).

How cities are changing and the housing crisis

Cities are at the heart of social, economic, and environmental transformations. These changes are reflected in housing dynamics, urban mobility, and the growing polarization of urban spaces.

Gentrification, now evident in most medium-to-large urban centres and often tied to the process of touristification (Sequera & Nofre 2018), has serious consequences for residents. The first and most immediate effect is the displacement of long-time residents from redeveloped areas – typically the historic parts of cities – which, due to rising housing costs, become unaffordable, forcing vulnerable populations to leave their communities.

Furthermore, when urban growth models neglect the needs of residents, political choices may increasingly turn in the direction of consumption. In these cases, public spaces tend to be reshaped to suit tourism and economic elites, to the detriment of the needs of more vulnerable groups due to age, economic status or social characteristics subject to discrimination in a given context (e.g., young people, families, elderly people, ethnically diverse communities).

In recent years, a growing portion of the population has been drawn into housing distress, mirroring broader patterns of poverty. Both rents and property prices have risen dramatically, making it difficult for many to access decent housing. Available accommodations often do not meet the needs of large families or low-income individuals.

Those most affected by the housing crisis are also among the most at risk of absolute poverty. These include: young people and students, who struggle to find affordable housing; older adults, especially those living alone with insufficient income to maintain their homes; single-parent families and immigrants are particularly vulnerable to discrimination in the housing market.

When the right to housing is understood not only as the right to possess a home, but also as the right to inhabit and engage with urban spaces, attention must also be paid to challenges around mobility. Cities must strike a balance between efficiency, accessibility, and environmental sustainability.

Promoting public transportation and shared mobility systems is crucial for reducing environmental impact and enhancing inclusivity.

Informal living as a reactive change

Informal living refers to residential arrangements that systematically violate legally recognised urban planning regulations. This form of housing is characterised by unplanned settlements, such as slums or occupied areas, where people often reside without access to essential services or adequate infrastructure.

Informal living represents a spontaneous, non-institutionalised response to housing needs unmet by traditional systems. It manifests in both urban and rural contexts through strategies like occupations, self-built settlements, spontaneous co-housing, and community-based practices. It is often a direct result of economic inequality, housing crises, and ineffective public policy (Shrestha *et al.* 2021).

In the context of rising housing costs, job insecurity, and social marginalization, informal living becomes, for many, the only feasible way to secure shelter. However, despite addressing urgent needs, these practices are often fraught with challenges related to safety, legality, and access to basic services.

Still, informal living can serve as a social laboratory for new forms of solidarity and cooperation. It challenges rigid housing markets and welfare structures, underscoring the need for inclusive and innovative housing policies that cater to the needs of vulnerable groups.

One common feature of informal settlements is the presence of shared spaces that straddle the boundary between public and private domains. These *in-between* spaces serve essential social functions, encompassing both public activities (such as commerce and leisure) and private ones (like hygiene and cooking). The notion of a community extending beyond the nuclear family appears to underpin the formation and development of these spontaneous settlements, which frequently evolve in ways that are misaligned with the structural characteristics of contemporary urban environments (Di Pinto & Cutini 2018).

In industrialised countries, urban informal settlements, especially housing occupations, often represent creative reuse of otherwise unused spaces. Reclaiming abandoned areas becomes a transformative process, returning value to spaces excluded from the dominant dynamics of gentrification, real estate speculation, and capital reproduction (Belloni *et al.* 2020).

All individuals who lack housing, whether in a long-term existential condition or during short-term episodes, experience housing exclusion. This may lead them to choose or be forced into informal living.

Housing exclusion often coincides with or overlaps with other forms of social exclusion, which may require varying degrees of support for those affected. Therefore, it cannot be addressed solely through public housing policies focused on physical shelter, but must also involve social and urban policies. In this sense, the right to housing is intertwined with rights to work, health, and dignified human development.

Access to housing should be understood not only as having a dwelling but also as enjoying social relationships and services that give meaning to inhabiting a home, a neighbourhood, and a city.

Informal housing practices often aim to preserve emotional ties or maintain proximity to neighbourhood anchors, even at the expense of legal ownership, observance of building codes and policy compliance, or physical health and safety standards.

Housing exclusion and housing poverty

The European Commission has stated that housing exclusion – that is, being without a home or a decent one – is perhaps the most severe form of poverty and social exclusion in our society (Abbé Pierre Foundation & FEANTSA 2018). Housing plays a fundamental role in achieving both individual and family well-being, as it satisfies a wide range of economic and symbolic primary needs and forms the basis for structured social interactions and actions. In this sense, housing policy can rightfully be considered a pillar of the welfare system (Palvarini 2006).

It is challenging to define housing poverty in a universally accepted way, due to its variability across countries. To address this gap, FEANTSA (European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless) developed a European typology of housing exclusion and homelessness, known as ETHOS (Abbé Pierre Foundation & FEANTSA 2015; 2018). Although still not exhaustive, ETHOS aims to standardise national approaches through an expanded interpretation that goes far beyond the concept of "homelessness". This is based on the idea that restrictive definitions lead to inefficient policies that fail to recognise the diversity of situations and personal paths that lead in and out of housing poverty.

ETHOS is built on the theoretical premise that homelessness is a transitional and dynamic condition that requires policies capable of addressing not only its visible symptoms but also the underlying vulnerabilities. It views housing poverty not as a standalone issue, but as one deeply embedded in broader social exclusion, where social vulnerabilities also pose risks for housing exclusion.

ETHOS has also been used to define the concept of "home", which includes three domains: physical – having a space over which one can exercise exclusive control; social – the ability to maintain satisfactory and private relationships in that space; legal – having recognise legal rights that ensure full enjoyment of the home.

Exclusion from one or more of these domains results in thirteen levels of housing poverty, ranging from the most extreme form (no shelter) to potential housing risk (where discomfort has not yet occurred, but could emerge from small changes). These levels are grouped into four main ETHOS categories:

Rooflessness: individuals without any shelter, living on the street.

Houselessness: individuals without housing but residing in institutional arrangements (emergency shelters, hostels).

Insecure Housing: individuals living in structurally adequate dwellings but at imminent risk of becoming homeless, due to legal or social reasons, such as lacking tenancy rights, being under eviction threat, or suffering domestic violence.

Inadequate Housing: individuals residing in spaces physically unsuitable for living, such as mobile homes, buildings not intended for housing, severely overcrowded conditions, or substandard accommodations below national habitability criteria.

This presents a complex conceptual framework where housing poverty takes on multiple, variable forms. The framework used to define it carries significant implications for policy design, as policies are shaped according to the adopted definitions.

ETHOS confirms that housing poverty is not a static phenomenon, but a fluid process that can affect vulnerable individuals at various life stages. Therefore, policies designed to combat it must be as flexible as possible, just as more adaptable approaches are called for in combating poverty and social exclusion in general, especially as poverty itself becomes increasingly *liquid*.

The gap between social policies and housing policies

Despite increased attention to housing in Italian social policy agendas, genuine integration between social policies and structured

national housing policies is still lacking equally throughout Italy. As a result, responses and housing solutions targeting severe marginalisation are often characterised by: temporariness – based on the assumption that vulnerable individuals will quickly regain autonomy (fio.PSD 2024); emergency logic – quick, short-term responses to immediate needs; experimentation/innovation – often in the form of pilot projects that are difficult to scale to national levels.

Today, social services can often manage emergency housing needs, but, as stated in the Italian national plan of social services and social work interventions (2021-2023) ("Piano Nazionale degli interventi e dei servizi sociali") drafted by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies (MLPS), they "cannot alone offer a long-term solution unless social policies are supported by coherent housing policies that provide a natural outcome for care pathways aimed at achieving autonomy for individuals and families in need" (MLPS 2021-2023, p. 25).

Thus, despite the social sector's efforts to address severe housing distress, a significant disconnect persists between public policies, particularly between social and housing policies.

Housing policies, which are institutionally and constitutionally responsible for ensuring access to decent housing for the full development of the individual, are currently unable to meet the chronic lack of accommodation for an ever-growing and increasingly diverse group of people.

This policy divide makes it difficult – if not unsustainable – to comprehensively address housing issues and housing-related distress at a systemic level.

Conclutions. Towards a plurality of ways of living

The intensification of the housing crisis in many urban centres is being driven by the emergence of new social needs, the diversification of lifestyles, and the treatment of housing primarily as an emergency issue–often addressed through fragmented and poorly integrated housing and welfare policies. This scenario calls for a fundamental rethinking of housing solutions along two primary lines.

First, it highlights the need for a renewed and more active role of public authorities in the housing sector, as they are increasingly the only actors capable of addressing emerging and complex housing demands. Second, it points to the necessity of re-evaluating both access mechanisms and housing typologies–within both public and private provision–so that they become more flexible and better aligned with rapidly evolving life trajectories and living arrangements.

Broadening the scope of housing governance to include those directly affected by housing precarity–particularly individuals engaging in informal housing practices–would reshape the understanding of housing as a public good and foster more meaningful resident participation in defining more inclusive and accessible housing thresholds (Sennett 2018).

The emergence of new social needs, the diversification of lifestyles, and the weak institutional capacity to address emerging and unconventional housing demand – with housing now often treated as an emergency issue– are contributing to a deepening housing crisis in many urban centres and prompting a rethinking of living arrangements themselves.

This situation highlights the growing need for a thorough revision of access methods and housing configurations, both in public and private housing. These must become increasingly adaptable to accommodate rapidly changing life paths and lifestyles.

From this perspective, informal living, in its multiple forms, can serve as a source of learning and reflection for both public and private actors, offering insights into how people creatively adapt to unmet needs and how institutions might rethink the boundaries and practices of housing provision.

Ultimately, informal living should not be viewed solely as a symptom of exclusion or failure, but as a meaningful expression of resilience, adaptability, and spatial agency. Its existence reveals the limitations of current housing systems and calls for more inclusive, participatory, and context-sensitive approaches. Recognising the knowledge embedded in informal practices can offer valuable insights for reimagining housing as a right, rather than a commodity, and for developing policies that reflect the real complexity of contemporary urban life.

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STORIES FOR LIVING: EXPERIENCES, NEEDS AND SOCIAL INCLUSION. The role of life stories in affordable housing

Inhabiting the spaces of relationships

The human being has always dwelled. I exist, therefore I dwell (De Carli 2008). This could be a synthesis of the philosopher Martin Heidegger's reflection on dwelling. In this sense, dwelling is no longer a purely physical act limited to occupying the surrounding space; rather, it becomes a social and political experience, intrinsically linked to the deepest and most intimate meaning of both individual and collective existence – an experience that transforms space into place (Dissegna 2021). "I dwell" becomes an imperative, emphasizing the central role of dwelling in constructing personal identity and enabling individual self-determination. This goes beyond the functional aspect of the house – as a tangible, physical space – to encompass a sense of belonging, participation, and inclusion, often intangible. Dwelling – or more precisely, the experience of dwelling – fundamentally concerns places and relationships, and how these interact and shape each other.

In Heidegger's thought, dwelling is about "shaping" the environment through our presence and relationship with it (Heidegger 1976).

This idea of dwelling as a relational and transformative experience finds an imaginative representation in the city of Ersilia, described by Calvino in *Invisible Cities* (Calvino 2017 [1972], p. 74) – a city composed of relationships that define and hold together the shared urban space. In Ersilia, the inhabitants stretch strings between houses to illustrate the network of relationships that bind them – kinship, exchange, authority, representation.

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When the strings become too entangled, they abandon the city to build another, leaving behind only the dense web of connections. Looking back, they realize it was not the buildings that made the city real, but that very relational fabric: "that is still the city of Ersilia, and they are nothing" (*ibid*). In this sense, as in Ersilia, our cities are defined less by physical structures and more by the relationships that weave through them. Places are shaped by daily practices, uses, lived experiences, and interpretations – and are built through interpersonal relationships. Likewise, when such relationships become too complex or conflictual, cities unravel and lose their communal and social potential, becoming spaces devoid of shared identity.

Precisely due to its inherently relational nature, dwelling is rarely an individual experience. In contemporary urban contexts – marked by migratory flows, housing insecurity, and new forms of cohabitation – it unfolds in shared, complex, and often temporary ways. Urban space is animated and defined by its many inhabitants, diverse in age, gender, socioeconomic conditions, social origin, and cultural background. Yet all share the same need for housing and for forming social bonds: "there can be no relationship without a physical and spatial context, without specific mental maps that define and give meaning to the place we inhabit" (Presenti 2012, p. 15).

Each person inhabits domestic and urban space in subjective – and therefore "unique" ways, resulting in a multitude of possible interpretations of both cities and private spaces. Despite this plurality of perspectives and experiences, the city persists as a "unified" entity, and the house – aspiring to be a *home* rather than merely a *house*[2], serves as a skin, a den, a refuge: an intimate, relational space (Groisman 2017).

2 While in English the difference between the two terms is quite precise, in Italian *home* and *house* are two words that converge into a single definition: "casa." Even though synonyms can be found to define it – *abitazione*, *dimora*, *alloggio*, *residenza*… – none of these words convey the intimate and sentimental dimension linked to the term *home*, which differs from *house*, associated instead with the technical and structural dimension of dwelling. Diébédo Francis Kéré, an architect originally from Burkina Faso and based in Berlin, clarifies this distinction during an interview with

In this sense, homes tell stories – the stories of those who live in them – and it is precisely these stories that give meaning to homes and places. It is almost exclusively through personal narratives that we can understand the deeper meaning of dwelling and the symbolic significance attached to domestic space.

Life stories as a lens on experience, needs, and social inclusion practices

Life stories, understood as a research methodology, represent a privileged tool for interpreting inhabited places, starting precisely from those who inhabit them. This method, borrowed from sociology, is widely employed within policies and projects aimed at addressing the housing crisis, homelessness, and severe adult marginalization. The narratives collected through structured or semi-structured interactions and interviews are grounded in the direct experience and subjective account of the inhabitants, becoming a vehicle for accessing urban realities that are often difficult to capture through traditional means.

These narratives allow for the emergence of subjective dimensions and qualitative data linked to the lived experience of dwelling, bringing to light voices, relationships, and themes that often escape structural and quantitative analyses. Stories, understood as accounts of human praxis, thus enable the abstraction of the invisible layer of social relations and its translation into the tangible reality of inhabited spaces, moving from individual micro-stories to collective macro-history. If "'the essence of man is, in reality, the ensemble of social relations' (Marx, Sixth Thesis on Feuerbach), then any individual human praxis is a synthetic activity, a dynamic totalization of a broad-

Sara Groisman at the Locarno Film Festival in 2017, as part of a series of discussions on the theme of living. He states that building a *house* is a technical act, whereas turning it into a *home* is a living process that requires time, relationships, and care. It is through the concrete experience of inhabiting – shaped by emotions and the traces left by daily life – that one cultivates a deep connection, ultimately transforming a structure into a place where one truly feels "at home." (Groisman 2017).

er social context" (Marx 1845 in Ferrarotti 1997, p. 41). It is for these reasons that, through dialogic processes, both individual and community-based issues may emerge, issues that would otherwise remain excluded from housing-related policy and planning processes. In this way, the personal narrative is transformed into a lens on the urban condition. The specificity and strength of this approach lie in the fact that each life story includes an "interactive phase" (*ibid.*, p. 67), a crucial element that methodologically distinguishes it from other approaches. Each interview becomes a unique and unrepeatable experience, grounded in the construction of an authentic dialogue made possible by a relationship of trust and deep empathy between the researcher and the interviewee. What emerges is not an objective truth, but a narrative rich in meaning, indispensable for a deep qualitative understanding of social reality. Only in this way is it possible to access that wealth of images, narratives, and meanings that a community holds about itself, and which often elude analyses based solely on data, percentages, and indicators. This opens the way for a deeper investigation of the social practices and symbolic meanings associated with dwelling. If the experience of dwelling is configured as a relational, affective, and identity-building process, it cannot be separated from its material dimension: having a place to inhabit. Housing, first and foremost, involves the right to dwell, which was recognised in a broader sense for the first time in the 1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*[3]. From this perspective, the primary place of dwelling is the home itself. It is therefore essential to start from housing, "because housing is a justice issue" (Yates 2023, p. 3) but it is also much more.

In stories collected by various organisations, both in Italy and abroad – such as fio.PSD (2023), Caritas (2024), Fondazione Abitare, Cooperativa On the Road, Y-Foundation (2017), Path-

3 "Art. 25 Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of themselves and of their family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond their control (…)" (United Nations General Assembly 1948).

way to Housing PA[4], and many other actors engaged in social work– life stories, often conveyed through oral accounts, serve multiple functions. On one hand, they restore voice and dignity to individuals, actively involving them in their own journey as inhabitants; on the other, they offer a valuable tool for practitioners, as they foster a deeper understanding of needs, challenges, and the strengths of the programme implemented.

These stories reveal a wide array of meaningful insights: some pertain to personal and social data, helping to identify recurring profiles and trajectories, to understand how and to what extent family and social systems influence the pathways of more vulnerable individuals, and to grasp the mechanisms through which marginalization takes shape. This knowledge enables the development of bottom-up practices and the formulation of more equitable project proposals, policies, and cultural approaches.

Other aspects emerging from the narratives concern the barriers encountered along the path to inclusion, offering crucial perspectives for rethinking services and procedures with greater affordability and inclusivity. Furthermore, these stories provide a user-centered lens to evaluate the effectiveness of interventions, and offer a profound reading of the relationship with place – revealing how spaces can contribute to either generating or mitigating exclusion.

What also clearly emerges from these accounts is the transformative role of dwelling: the home is not merely a physical space, but a context in which identities, relationships, and future planning can be reactivated. It makes visible the deep interconnection between dignity, recognition, and the right to housing. Across these personal stories, a strong and recurring theme becomes evident – the central and pivotal "role of the home".

Not only as a place to live, but as a fundamental condition for social reintegration. It represents the first step toward autonomy and self-determination. These narratives highlight the "deeper

4 Some of these can be accessed at the following links: https://www.fiopsd.org/category/storie-di-vite/, https://www.fondazioneabitare.it/chi-siamo/storie_dalle_nostre_case/, https://www.ontheroad.coop/news/storie/, https://pathwaystohousingpa.org/success-stories [24/05/2025].

meaning of home" (Padgett *et al.* 2018, p. 103) and its close link to the concept of "ontological security"[5] (*ibid*). The domestic gains meaning through daily "rituals": "taking a bath, cooking, smoking in bed," and through personal objects: "stuffed animals, dried flowers, an assortment of cosmetics on the nightstand" (*ibid* pp. 106, 117). Intimate gestures and habits are encapsulated in the physical and symbolic act of opening the front door–crossing the threshold from the collective space to the safety of the domestic (Molinari 2024, p. 25). A safety that, according to all these stories, is only possible when one considers the house *their own*. As the famous line from *The Wizard of Oz* goes: "There's no place like home" (Fleming 1939).

The home represents the condition for existing with dignity in our cities, for exercising our rights, and for being fully recognised as inhabitants[6]. Increasingly, however, it is becoming a

5 By *ontological security*, in our case, I refer to the definition provided by Dupuis and Thorns during their studies on the psychological benefits of having a home. "Dupuis e Thorns cite four factors or conditions that lead to ontological security. A home should therefore be a stable social and physical environment (1), where one can carry out their daily activities (2), where people can have control over their lives because they are free from external surveillance (3), and finally, where they can build their own identity (4)" (Padget, Henwood, Tsemberis 2018, p. 104). This builds on Giddens' concept of ontological security, defined as "the sense of well-being that leads to feeling stable *within one's physical and social environment*" (4) (*ibid*., p. 103), thus providing a secure base for personal development and self-realization. This feeling grows through the sense of stability individuals experience in their daily lives.

6 Without a home – and therefore without an official residence – many essential activities become impossible. One cannot access a general practitioner or the National Health Service, obtain identity documents, work legally, enroll children in school, open a bank account, or receive official correspondence. Furthermore, individuals lose entitlement to welfare benefits, the right to vote, and the possibility of being fiscally recognised. Some municipalities offer the option of a fictitious or conventional residence, thus allowing even people experiencing homelessness to access basic guaranteed services. However, the condition of homelessness is characterised by a multidimensional complexity that would require dedicated in-depth analysis. For the purposes of this reflection, what is essential is to highlight how the experience of homelessness is closely tied to a deeply rooted stigma within the social fabric–one that not only hinders full access to citizenship rights but also denies the recognition of

privilege for the few, compromising access to the city itself. The housing market, driven by speculation, and growing socio-economic disparities have widened the gap between those who can afford a home and those who are excluded. As a result, many are forced to live in cramped or overcrowded conditions or face *homelessness*. To speak of housing today is also to confront the inequalities that shape access to dwelling, widespread housing insecurity, and the difficulty of ensuring adequate, stable, and affordable housing for all.

In a society that, as Bauman would say, is increasingly liquid – where everything is fluid, unstable, and in constant transformation (Bauman 2002) – institutions, relationships, work, and identities have become fragile and transient, fostering insecurity. The "fascia grigia" of the population[7] is growing, encompassing ever larger segments, posing new challenges for the middle class.

What emerges is a clear need for a paradigm shift in housing policy, moving from the ordinary, marked by bureaucratic thresholds, toward the extraordinary. New approaches are needed to respond to what has been called *an outcry for housing*. The initiatives inspired by the Housing First model, as well as those related to affordable housing – understood not merely in economic terms but as an expression of a new paradigm of housing affordability – promote an approach that goes beyond the mere

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the individual as a legitimate inhabitant of urban space, contributing to a distorted visibility marked by suspicion and exclusion.

7 The term "fascia grigia" ("grey area") of the population, refers to a heterogeneous group of individuals who, while not officially recognised as poor nor falling within a formally defined category of vulnerability, occupy an intermediate position between full social inclusion and clear social exclusion. This group often remains invisible to statistical surveys and public policies. It includes individuals who are not poor enough to qualify for housing services or welfare measures aimed at extreme marginalization, yet do not possess sufficient economic resources to independently bear the costs of housing and urban life. This condition of socio-economic fragility exposes them to a concrete risk of slipping into deeper vulnerability and housing insecurity, representing a crucial segment for understanding the contemporary dynamics of housing exclusion. Included in this category are, for example, pensioners, single-parent families with dependent children, single individuals, young couples, and students.

relationship between income and housing cost. They aim to guarantee full and dignified access to housing, which also includes the possibility of participation in social, cultural, and urban life.

Housing, in this sense, is not only a material asset but a threshold of citizenship and inclusion, a space that enables the reactivation of social bonds, projects, and a sense of belonging. From this perspective, innovative housing policies represent a concrete response to this challenge by promoting housing models that combine economic sustainability, social inclusion, and quality of living, transforming the question from "where do I live?" to "how do I live?".

Life stories convey this emerging demand, offering – as previously discussed – significant critical insights into the social and experiential dimensions of this approach. They become an operational and political tool capable of informing social practices, public policies, and the decisions of the professionals involved. Through critical listening, these stories help identify recurring themes and terms, enabling tailored interventions and a dynamic understanding of change trajectories. They help assess service strengths and weaknesses and support new, realistic empowerment-oriented initiatives. Valuing and collecting these stories, and giving voice back to users, allows us to move beyond standardised approaches – acknowledging the complexity of personal trajectories and the often-overlooked need to live with dignity.

These narratives take multiple forms and serve diverse purposes. In some cases, they become autobiographical accounts – texts, short videos, or podcasts – as seen in various *Housing First* initiatives. In these contexts, the stories are not just analytical tools but integral to the care process, capturing subjective housing needs and supporting personalised planning that respects beneficiaries' desires and particularities, enabling a collaborative rather than paternalistic approach. These stories also serve as tools for public awareness, bringing the lived experiences of marginalised individuals back to the centre of the housing debate.

They may also result in more tangible actions – like the informal city maps created by architect and urbanist Nausicaa Pezzoni in her research with newly arrived migrants. As part of

her work, carried out in Milan, Bologna, and Rovereto, Pezzoni asks one hundred participants to draw their own map of the city, tracing the places and routes that structure their daily routines, thereby choosing to explore the city through the *experience of inhabiting it*. The resulting representations are rich in personal and collective meanings, offering an original and subjective vision of urban space: a visual narrative of everyday experience" (Pezzoni 2013; 2020). Each inhabitant and each gaze offer their own interpretation of the city, giving rise to a multitude of cities, as many as there are people who live in and observe it (Ceriolli 2017). These narratives, in the form of drawings, influence urban design by providing a concrete contribution to planners and administrations, linking urban regeneration with housing inclusion, and transforming maps into tools for listening and co-design. The purpose of these maps is to help build a city that is more welcoming, dynamic, and aware of contemporary transformations. Ultimately, each map is a life story that tells of the difficulties, but also the resilience, of those who live on the margins and, at the same time, are an integral part of the urban setting. Numerous urban practices emerge and develop from grassroots voices. Among these are, for example, community pacts, self-building and self-recovery initiatives, and co-design workshops, community mapping, and more. All of these practices can, to some extent, be likened to life and collective stories, as they take shape, just like biographical narratives, from a personal and/or collective account and interpretation of lived experience. They are grounded in active listening and participation, contributing to the creation of new, inclusive, and relational forms of dwelling.

The value of personal narratives, regardless of their form, extends beyond their descriptive or analytical function: they acquire a profound and symbolic significance, capable of reconfiguring meanings and offering a transversal, multi-layered reading of dwelling spaces. Such narratives prompt a rethinking of housing as a flexible, participatory, and collective practice, foregrounding the richness of individual and collective experiences while underscoring the pivotal role of bottom-up initiatives in fostering community and a sense of belonging. Story by story, a new idea

of dwelling emerges: dignified, accessible, and rooted in people's real needs.

Life stories as a design tool

In light of the insights gained so far, it becomes essential to consider life stories as a fundamental tool for reading contemporary urban and domestic contexts in a comprehensive and profound way. Individual narratives urge us to move beyond a reductive view of affordable housing as merely the relationship between income and housing costs. Instead, they invite us to understand it as a complex process involving multiple actions at various levels, which ultimately converge to produce significant impacts on housing design and policies at the urban scale.

This complexity demands a comprehensive view of housing affordability, one that crosses disciplines – urban studies, sociology, economics, housing studies – and embraces multiple perspectives and actors (Peverini & Cavicchia 2021). We must be careful not to reduce housing to a service, overlooking its nature as a fundamental right – a truth that emerges clearly from the numerous stories collected.

Architecture, which shapes inhabited places, must no longer be seen as a system of objects, but as a system of people – a field of relationships where humans move, recognize themselves, and reflect (Vitta 2008, p. 116). Dwelling becomes the meeting point between architect and inhabitant, a space of negotiation and shared meaning (*ibid*). This perspective invites us to rethink architecture by restoring users' voices and placing them at the project's centre. As architects, we must ask ourselves: how has architecture engaged with inhabited space, when it ultimately designs space to be lived in? (*ibid.*, p. 114). Here, "inhabited space" is understood as the stage for life stories – telling of our obsessions, protected thoughts, gestures, and rituals – becoming part of our public life (Molinari 2024, p. 16).

Architectural space, although designed to be inhabited, can truly become so only when the inhabitant is present – when the body, through its lived experience, transforms geometric forms into life

experiences (Vitta 2008, p. 115). The home, the first horizon where our way of inhabiting the world takes shape, opens up a broader reflection on dwelling as an existential and cultural experience – one that can be grasped almost exclusively through narratives.

It is precisely from this perspective that the theme of affordable housing emerges. not merely as an economically accessible response to housing needs, but as a driver of social inclusion and a means of reconstructing identity in life paths marked by vulnerability.

In this context, biographical narratives prove to be a valuable tool for understanding the real impact of housing policies on people's daily lives. The stories of those who dwell – stories that speak of identity, permanence, belonging, and the ways of inhabiting domestic space – constitute a relational and symbolic resource which, if carefully listened to, processed, and shared, can contribute to the construction of shared values. These values can emerge powerfully from lived experience, helping to foster dialogue between institutions, communities, and designers.

This process is not automatic; it requires the creation of authentic and participatory spaces for listening, along with tools capable of translating subjective experiences into collective knowledge. It is through the public and dialogical sharing of these narratives, their reworking in co-design processes, and their resonance with other lived experiences that such stories become transformative tools – generating new frameworks capable of influencing visions, policies, and design approaches.

In this way, the housing experience is no longer confined to the private sphere but becomes a resource for rethinking contemporary ways of living.

The emerging design paradigm is based on a transformed vision of architecture and urban space, rooted in a series of design experiences previously explored. These new guiding principles, articulated in the form of directives, can be summarised as follows:

– Involve inhabitants in the design process, not only as users but as co-authors of the space; restoring the participatory process with the necessary depth, as already advocated by architect Giancarlo De Carlo and summarised in the collection *L'architettura della partecipazione* (De Carlo & Marini 2015);

– Collect and translate narratives (drawings, words, maps, practices) into tools useful for urban design, as already observed by Kevin Lynch (Lynch 1964);

– Recognise and value everyday micro-geographies: informal spaces, unplanned routes, alternative uses of space; acknowledging their specificity through observation of real urban life (Jacobs 1961);

– Experiment with hybrid and flexible housing forms, capable of accommodating the diversity and instability of contemporary living;

– And above all: conceive the city as a relational organism rather than a constructed object (Lefebvre 1976).

Giving voice to those who inhabit the city, through their stories, is the first step toward a design approach that can truly be called inclusive – one oriented toward spatial justice, capable of embracing vulnerability and valuing difference. This means transforming our cities into more just and equitable places by fostering an open practice – one that listens, is sensitive to context, and is committed to creating spaces that generate belonging, care, and shared responsibility.

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PART 2
LEARNING FROM FIELDWORK. LOCAL PERSPECTIVES ON POLICIES, PRACTICES, PROJECTS

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UNCONVENTIONAL POLICIES FOR RENTAL HOUSING
The supportive neighbourhoods perspective

Introduction

In recent years, Italy has witnessed a continuous rise in the cost of living, accompanied by increasing precariousness in both employment and sociodemographic conditions. Intersecting situations of social, economic, and housing vulnerability have become the norm for a growing number of individuals.

Today, accessing housing at affordable rents is difficult, and overall housing and living expenses have a significant impact on the budgets of many households, often leading to impoverishment. On the open market, the availability of low-cost rental options is generally limited, particularly in the most attractive urban areas, where processes of touristification and a strong presence of temporary populations – due to study or employment – prompt many property owners to opt for the higher profitability of short-term and transitional leases (Ghiraldo *et al.* 2024). The supply of public subsidised housing is wholly inadequate, while needs linked to severe marginality continue to be addressed through assistance-based and emergency interventions, which "risk fragilising rather than extending the right to housing" (Tosi 2017, p. 10).

This contribution provides the background to the work carried out in Trieste as part of the UAH! research. Drawing on an overview of the growing and increasingly diverse demand for affordable rental housing in Italy, the paper critically reflects on the state of housing policies in the country. These policies reveal a marked sectoral division between "social" and "very social" measures, treating the provision of housing, assistance,

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and economic support as parallel rather than integrated domains. To address these shortcomings, active collaboration with local stakeholders in the city of Trieste has highlighted one particularly significant issue: the need to define unconventional forms of affordable, support-based housing policies and projects that are capable of integrating and systematising diverse assets, actors, modes, and scales of intervention – from the home to the neighbourhood, and the wider urban context.

The "supportive neighbourhoods" perspective adopted in this contribution to rethink housing policies draws on two key principles: on the one hand, an expansion of the concept of affordability to encompass a complex array of material and immaterial living conditions; on the other hand, the territorialisation of interventions to ensure their relevance and responsiveness to specific contexts – that is, their adaptation to particular parts of the city and to the resources and needs that characterise them. The underlying hypothesis is that, in order to address increasingly complex and pervasive situations of vulnerability, place-based synergies among multiple and diverse actions are essential. Beyond housing, these actions also involve public space, facilities, and welfare services, conceived as extensions of the domestic sphere and as settings for interaction and mutual support between institutions and individuals, as well as among individuals themselves. Speaking of supportive neighbourhoods, therefore, does not imply a simple discretisation of the housing issue into narrowly defined urban areas, but rather a comprehensive, multi-level reconfiguration of policies and tools, projects and interventions.

Misalignments

As in other European countries, in Italy the gap between the demand for and the supply of affordable rental housing constitutes a substantial aspect of the housing question, with serious implications for the living conditions of many individuals and households (Marchigiani & Novak 2024). These implications

underscore the inadequacy of current policies in this area of public intervention.

A growing demand, with many nuances

In the country, 20.5% of all households (5.2 out of 26 million) live in rental housing. While renting is more common among lower-income families – often characterised by conditions of unemployment and the presence of foreign nationals – it is by no means limited to these groups, instead encompassing a wide and diverse range of situations. The highest proportions of rental acommodation are found among single individuals under the age of 35 and young couples without children; however, a significant share also corresponds to single adults aged 35 to 64, and to single-parent families with one or more minor children (ISTAT 2022).

If we focus on the commonly accepted affordability threshold – defined as rent accounting for 30% of household income, or 40% when including all housing-related expenses (OECD 2024; 2025) – the situation is alarming. In 2016, it was estimated that the 30% threshold was exceeded by 1.7 million Italian families (Nomisma-Federcasa 2016). More recent surveys, however, show that the percentage of people for whom the total cost of housing (whether owned or rented) exceeds 40% of household income now stands at 5.7% of the population, equivalent to around 3.4 million individuals. Among them, the largest share consists of those living in market rental housing and who are at risk of poverty (EUROSTAT 2023; Bricocoli & Peverini 2024). Evictions due to rent arrears are on the rise: according to data from the Ministry of the Interior, the housing emergency in Italy has returned to pre-pandemic levels, reaching record numbers after the partial halt to the execution of housing expulsions from September 2020 to June 2021. Between the end of these emergency measures and 2022, there was a significant increase both in eviction requests (over 99,000, up 199.1% compared to 2021) and in evictions carried out with the intervention of bailiffs (over 30,300, up 218.6%) (Ministero degli Interni 2023). The impact of housing costs is clearly becoming unsustainable

for many persons, leading to a gradual descent into more critical situations.

In Italy, more than 14 million people (24.4% of the population) are at risk of poverty and social exclusion; that is, they have an income below 60% of the national median, are unable to afford the expenses necessary for a quality life, and/or are in conditions of low work intensity (Caritas Italiana 2023; ISTAT 2023a). At the same time, nearly 5.7 million individuals live in absolute poverty (equivalent to 9.7% of the country's residents), meaning they lack the economic capacity to cover a minimum monthly expenditure for the purchase of goods and services considered essential for a decent existence (ISTAT 2023b). The 96,197 people recorded as homeless and without a fixed address in the national ISTAT 2021 census therefore appear to be a largely underestimated figure, as highlighted by fio.PSD (the Italian federation of organisations for homeless people) (fio.PSD 2023). In many cities, various sociodemographic changes are increasingly making it likely that even those who until recently were considered part of the so-called "middle class" will struggle to afford rental housing.

First of all, the number of "working poors" is increasing. These are individuals and households who have jobs, but due to irregular, precarious, and low-paid work, find themselves in vulnerable situations. Today, out of a total of 23.3 million employed people, approximately 2.7 million (11.5%) are at risk of poverty (ISTAT 2023a). In addition, changes in family structure have occurred, such as the rise in the number of people living alone (also linked to ageing trends), and of single-parent households with children. The number of individuals facing sudden drops in income due to separation or divorce, retirement, reductions in the purchasing power of their wages, or the need to cope with unexpected medical or other expenses, is also growing.

What emerges, ultimately, are various forms of housing poverty – ranging from hardship to deprivation – whose boundaries are becoming increasingly blurred and fluid. Precarious employment conditions and changes in household composition often coexist and are connected through non-linear, interrelated cause-and-effect dynamics, affecting an increasingly prominent "grey area" of the

population (Desmond & Gershenson 2016). This area also includes those who have not reached extreme hardship but whose incomes make access to both the private rental market (too expensive) and public housing (too limited) particularly problematic.

An inadequate supply, marked by numerous problems

In Italy, the limited availability of social rent housing is the result of a gradual withdrawal of public intervention from this area of the welfare system. This does not mean, however, that housing has not been the focus of public policies over time. On the contrary, indirect "fiscal welfare" measures (tax breaks and incentives) (Pavolini & Ascoli 2019), supported by substantial financial resources, have primarily targeted the demand for home ownership, understood as a form of households' protection and investment. Parallel to this, measures aimed at containing rental costs have played a marginal role, with significant repercussions on the widening of social inequalities and the increase in debt among individuals and families (Cucca & Gaeta 2018; Filandri *et al.* 2020).

The main pillar of public policies directly aimed at rental housing has remained "subsidised housing" (*Edilizia residenziale pubblica* – ERP). However, since the 1990s, there has been a steady decline in investment and a significant disposal of the available stock (Storto 2018). Today, the housing units managed by public housing agencies (formerly *Istituti autonomi case popolari* – IACP) total are around 700,000; of these, an estimated 14% are vacant due to pending maintenance, while outstanding applications are likely underestimated at around 650,000 (Bricocoli *et al.* 2021).

In recent years, measures such as the introduction of the definition of "social housing" and the "Housing plan" (*Piano casa*) (Interministerial Decree of 22 April 2008; Council of Ministers' Presidential Decree of 16 July 2009) have led to an expansion of financialisation processes within the publicly governed housing sector. Marked by uneven distribution across the country, interventions in the field of "social residential housing" (*Edilizia residenziale sociale* – ERS) target the so-called

"grey area" rather than focusing on cases of severe housing deprivation. Moreover, they typically see the public sector limit its role to granting private developers both regulatory benefits (such as assimilation to urban planning standards) and financial incentives, partly through the reallocation of funds previously earmarked for the IACP administrations (Dagnes & Salento 2022). In practice, decisions about the share of dwellings to be offered at social rent and the selection of beneficiaries are primarily shaped by the need to ensure financial sustainability for investors and by the income level and stability of prospective tenants.

A further distinct area of public policy concerns the promotion of rent-controlled agreements on the private market in exchange for tax relief, guarantees, and financial incentives for property owners. In recent years, several Italian municipalities have taken an active role in establishing dedicated intermediary bodies between housing demand and supply – so-called "social rental agencies" (*agenzie sociali per l'affitto*) (Festa *et al.* 2024). However, despite promising perspectives for their future development (Daglio *et al.* 2021), their practical impact has so far remained limited.

In parallel, as a response to the growing "very social" demand from people living in conditions of extreme poverty, solutions are typically sought through specialised forms of assistance, distinct from those designed for the wider population (Donzelot 2005; Tosi 2017). Ensuring access to decent housing for the poor is still largely regarded as an indirect responsibility of public policy. Public action generally limits itself to providing social benefits, income support for families, and subsidies for renting on the private market. Meanwhile, housing solutions for the homeless – such as temporary shelters, dormitories, other reception facilities, and precarious shared living arrangements – are often managed by the third sector and demonstrate little attention to spatial quality. As a result, beneficiaries risk remaining trapped in the lowest tier of an emergency-based housing provision, where poverty is recognised as a barrier to a dignified life, yet the role that housing can play as a preventive, compensatory, and proactive factor remains secondary.

A sharp separation between targets and procedures, solutions and approaches, also persists in the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (*Piano nazionale di ripresa e resilienza* – PNRR), submitted by the Italian government to the European Commission in 2021 (Governo Italiano-Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri 2021). Of the total allocation amounting to €235 billion (comprising both EU and national resources), about €26 billion are dedicated to housing. However, these funds are fragmented among various areas: housing for out-of-town students (about €1 billion); housing for the elderly and disabled (€500 million each); temporary housing and shelters for the homeless (€450 million); subsidised (ERP), social residential housing (ERS), and urban regeneration (approximately €9 billion across the Innovative Programme for Housing Quality, Integrated Urban Programmes, and Urban Regeneration Projects); and energy and seismic retrofitting of public and private buildings (in fact the largest share, almost €15 billion). To properly assess the outcomes of the PNRR, it is necessary to wait for its imminent conclusion; however, a notable shortcoming of the Plan is its failure to seize the opportunity and urgency for a structural reform of housing policies, which are addressed only partially and often indirectly (Caritas Italiana 2022; Basso & Fregolent 2023).

The number of households experiencing (or at risk of) housing vulnerability reveals intrinsic and increasingly severe weaknesses within the "system of (both direct or indirect) public rental policies". This refers to the broad network of interrelations among a variety of actors (institutions and tenants; public, private, and third-sector entities), types of housing stock, and actions involved in the production, regulation, and management of affordable housing solutions (Bourne 1981). The system's weaknesses are evident not only in the limited number of dwellings it is able to mobilise but also, more generally, in the problems affecting its *modus operandi* and sustainability.

A primary issue concerns the contradiction between a variable and diverse social demand and the persistence of considerable rigidity in the response. Access procedures for publicly driven housing solutions appear highly selective, relying on income, specific household profiles, social vulnerabilities, and requirements for

prolonged residence and employment within the regional or municipal area. These conditions are assessed at the time of beneficiaries' admission, with the assumption that they will persist throughout the entire contract duration. In subsidised housing (ERP) in particular, this duration often becomes indefinite, as the lack of systematic checks contrasts with the increasingly rapid changes in households' composition and their financial capacity. The impact on the limited availability of this housing offer is evident: a measure conceived as temporary and supportive frequently becomes a permanent condition for a limited number of allocated households.

Another issue concerns the financial sustainability of public policies that more or less directly address housing welfare. Specifically, the management of an impoverished demand appears unsustainable, when characterised on the one hand by a generalised recourse to emergency solutions and reduction in rents within ERP, and on the other by a significant increase in financial subsidies granted to those slipping into critical conditions of vulnerability. Moreover, what exacerbates the situation is the management of these interventions by various local government sectors (housing agencies and municipalities), where a frequent lack of effective coordination exists between housing measures, access to employment, and economic, social, and healthcare assistance. Such coordination is crucial in cases of major fragility, where the relationship between housing and services needs to be closer, continuous, and tailored to the recipients. Moreover, this lack is often compounded by the absence of a coherent framework of diverse housing solutions options from which individuals can choose and potentially transition (from temporary accommodation, to public housing and rent-controlled private market housing), as well as by insufficient monitoring systems to calibrate material support in relation to individuals' actual needs and their real capacity to bear the economic and social costs of housing.

Housing and beyond

To overcome these criticalities, it is necessary to rethink the structure and governance of rental housing policies as a service in its own right. This approach requires understanding the "rental

housing service" as a fundamental means of supporting full citizenship and social cohesion, where access to an affordable home is recognised as a cornerstone of the "foundational economy" – that is, "the economic space in which essential goods and services for individual and collective well-being are produced and distributed, constituting the infrastructure of everyday life" (Dagnes & Salento 2002, p. 13). This represents a radical shift in perspective and an invitation to delve into a still "grey" and marginal area of policy, where the lack of adequate approaches and solutions calls for new forms of experimentation.

First and foremost, reducing the notion of affordability to its purely economic dimension appears questionable (Haffner & Hulse 2021; Peverini 2023; Bricocoli & Peverini 2024; Frausin & Bertolini 2024). A household's capacity to spend on housing and other essential needs cannot be assessed in isolation from territorial differences that influence the provision of welfare services – such as healthcare, social and financial support, education, and employment assistance – as well as the level of local taxation and, more broadly, the overall cost of living. For individuals in vulnerable situations – such as the elderly, young people living alone, individuals with dependent children, those facing challenges in labour market (re)integration, or people with a migratory background – access to not only housing but also a broader range of public provisions offering both direct and indirect support often plays a crucial role in establishing and maintaining conditions of autonomy.

It is on the basis of these considerations that some principles of the Housing First (HF) model appear potentially applicable to both the fields of 'very social' housing and social renting, as well as their intersections. These principles indicate a valuable direction for developing solutions capable of addressing a plurality of housing demands and needs at risk of exclusion through complex, multidimensional projects (Pleace 2016; Jones *et al.* 2022).

HF has spread since the 1990s, initially in the United States and later in Europe and Italy, as an effective approach to addressing homelessness and preventing recourse to emergency housing solutions. It recognises housing as a fundamental individual right and an indispensable starting point for constructing new life

trajectories. In this respect, HF presents itself as an alternative to the "staircase approach", which still underpins social policies aimed at severe marginalisation, where accommodation in shelters or temporary refuges and access to various forms of assistance are conceived as the first step in a long and difficult climb towards achieving housing autonomy.

Thanks to a holistic vision tailored to the needs of each individual, HF attributes a crucial role not only to decent housing but also to social and healthcare assistance and employment activation. However, whereas in traditional welfare approaches access to such services is generally subject to certain requirements (such as participation in social and psychological support programmes or job training), in HF housing must be offered unconditionally, regardless of these circumstances. Putting people at the centre also entails implementing flexible modes of service delivery (including housing), both in terms of eligibility criteria and duration. This flexibility arises from listening to and recognising individuals' ability to choose and collaborate – based on their own capacities and resources – in constructing an appropriate combination of types and intensities of support. Equally important is the work done to build community relationships, providing stability and reducing the risk of returning to homelessness (Marchigiani & Novak 2024).

In summary, HF prioritises housing, but its innovative scope lies above all in the co-construction with individuals of conditions enabling autonomous living. Clearly, normalising and extending the application of this model – from a target group requiring specialised support due to the severity of their problems to those simply in need of low-cost housing – raises issues of rationality, sustainability, and equity (Pleace & Bretherton 2013; Tosi 2018). Nonetheless, valuable insights are provided by the holistic notion of "360-degree affordability" underpinning Housing First (HF) – namely, its emphasis on a synergistic approach to addressing the economic, social, psychological, and spatial dimensions involved in gaining and maintaining stable housing.

This notion has guided the research carried out in Trieste within the framework of UAH!, starting from two hypotheses. The first is that new policies and projects for affordable, publicly driven rental housing can be defined by working on the intersecting

and overlapping areas between social and highly social housing demand and supply. The second hypothesis is that their conception and implementation should be characterised by a strong local grounding, addressing the frequent need to rebuild or strengthen a sense of belonging to spatial and community contexts, within neighbourhoods where housing is provided in a way that is both affordable and supportive.

Supportive neighbourhoods

The perspective of "supportive neighbourhoods" is shaped by two additional key concepts in the UAH! research: "unconventional" and "informal". Fieldwork conducted in Trieste made it possible to articulate these concepts in relation to the specific local context.

Grounding affordability in an unconventional manner

Trieste is a medium-sized city where a growing housing emergency is linked to distinctive sociodemographic dynamics (population ageing) and economic factors (significant processes of touristification), as well as a strong presence of transient populations (students, researchers, and people with a migration background). Despite a relatively modest number of residents (just below 200,000), such conditions make the picture of social demand highly complex.

Within the framework of UAH!, discussing "unconventional" policies for rental housing has involved reflecting on the development of spatial and managerial responses that are better targeted and aligned with the diverse nature of these needs. The underlying assumption is that such responses should be based on novel and stable synergies between different areas of action: a diversified supply of housing, with sizes and configurations of the dwellings that can no longer be standardised or predefined given the variety of family types and housing practices; welfare services and facilities, capable of supporting specific and increasingly intersectional vulnerabilities related, for example, to age, loneliness, health, and

job insecurity; and, finally, rent levels and lease durations that are better tailored to the individual needs of the beneficiaries and their life trajectories.

Parallel to this, the reference to "informal" practices reflects the intent to recognise and systematise a rich array of experiences and actors. These practices are typically associated with specific forms of assisted housing, such as those for elderly people or Housing First initiatives. They currently involve both material and immaterial resources, which the Municipality and the Housing Agency (*Azienda territoriale per l'edilizia residenziale* – ATER) of Trieste often deploy on a project-by-project basis, and which, for this reason, tend to remain confined to the residual domain of 'extraordinary' solutions. Nonetheless, despite this limitation, the history of Trieste's public welfare system provides important foundations for a stronger integration between public policies and informal practices, grounded and embedded in place.

The reference is to the process of de-institutionalisation, understood as a "reinvention of institutions" – in terms of their technical-administrative structures and their underlying cultural frameworks – and as a driver of social innovation. This process was developed in the 1970s by Franco Basaglia, both within and beyond the initiatives that led to the closure of the psychiatric hospital in Trieste and the national mental health reform of 1978. Since the late 1990s, it has evolved through the *Habitat-Microaree* programme for health and community development, which has brought services, social and health workers, ATER staff, volunteers, and personnel from social cooperatives closer to local areas and their residents. This has been achieved through the establishment of local service desks and "social concierges" (*portierati*, namely community-based support points) in districts characterised by a significant presence of ERP and by complex conditions of housing, sociodemographic, and economic hardship (Marchigiani 2021).

Within the framework of *Habitat-Microaree*, the territory is not understood as a mere backdrop to action, nor simply as a catchment area or a surface onto which new specialised institutional structures are deployed. Rather, it is understood as "the fabric from which to extract the raw material that gives shape and

substance to care activities", involving both places and people (Rotelli 2018, pp. 11-12). Being present within daily life contexts enables institutions – and those working alongside them – to carry out continuous, close-up, and often informal work of mapping needs and resources, as well as the conditions and capacities of individuals for co-living. This presence makes it possible to reach out and give voice to those who – due to a lack of information or trust – struggle to access services, while also helping to reactivate skills and foster relationships among inhabitants (Gallio & Cogliati Dezza 2018).

The idea of supportive neighbourhoods stems from this notion of proximity, understood as a concrete practice of bringing public policies closer to both places and the people who inhabit them. Specifically, the value of working at the scale of a city district in an immersive, everyday, and routine manner lies in the opportunity to rethink and personalise the housing offer. This is achieved by simultaneously integrating and recalibrating – according to specific contexts and needs – both the operational approaches of different welfare sectors (beyond housing, including health, social services, employment, and income) and the domestic and urban spaces, facilities, and collective services that contribute to the quality and affordability of living. This process involves networking a range of actors (institutions, the private sector, the third sector, and residents) and mobilising existing on-site resources, while also fostering synergies and cross-fertilisation between housing and social management models activated by local stakeholders.

The term "supportive" therefore does not refer to the narrow (and still prevalent) dimension of shared and community-oriented living within individual dwellings or buildings, "where isolated clusters of resident-driven communities dot the territory, yet fail to develop connections with other clusters to reach the critical mass necessary to produce supportive cities" (Sitton 2018, p. 176). Rather, it denotes the construction of connections among different actors aimed at producing public and relational goods, even if initially based on individual experimental projects that are nevertheless designed to support structural changes in institutional practices and welfare policies (Costa & Minora 2022). In essence, the reference is to "disruptive" practices and projects (Manzini

2016) which, although initially limited in scope, have the potential to stimulate a widespread, more reflective and proactive public action, open to novel collaborations.

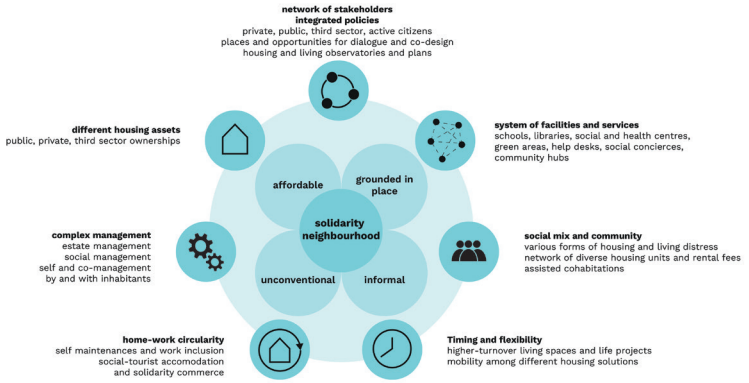

Figure 1. Supportive neighbourhoods: operational domains and approaches (Author: Valentina Novak).

A different way of doing

From an operational standpoint, working at the neighbourhood scale can facilitate achieving a housing and social mix that is difficult to attain when dealing with a few scattered individual dwellings alone. Furthermore, the impact of integrating *in situ* people with multiple vulnerabilities and difficulties can be mitigated if accompanied by the creation of complex 'mixes' that include individuals and households experiencing varying (and not always extreme) levels of distress and that are better tailored to the local context.

In particular, the ability to rely on a cluster of publicly owned dwellings – both managed within and outside the official ERP waiting lists – as well as units privately owned or managed by third-sector organisations, located in close proximity and comprising a variety of types and sizes of flats at different rent levels

(including very social, social, and regulated ones), enables the creation of a "critical mass" that better meets diverse social needs. This also facilitates tenants' turnover and mobility in line with the evolution of individual life trajectories.

An additional and significant aspect of innovation concerns both the coordination and expansion of the range of available services, as well as the ways in which these services are used. Operating at the scale of a city district helps interconnect existing facilities, fosters their more flexible use over time, and supports the creation of new spaces for interaction with and among residents. These include well-equipped public and collective spaces (such as schools, libraries, social and health centres, and green areas); local help desks that guide residents in accessing institutional services; social concierges, which serve as initial listening and preventive support points prior to formal service engagement and as nodes of collaboration among institutions, associations, and active citizens; and, the potential transformation of these latter into community hubs capable of hosting self-organised, resident-led activities.

The local scale can also facilitate the distribution, among multiple actors already operating within the same neighbourhood, of the financial and staff commitments that are required for the coordinated functioning of facilities directly linked to forms of supportive living, such as shared spaces and services used by multiple dwellings across different buildings. In fact, effective management is a crucial factor in the success and further development of this type of initiatives. It may include, for example, the implementation of self-maintenance processes in synergy with work integration programmes for tenants experiencing vulnerability; or the introduction of commercial and hospitality activities within buildings designated for social and very social housing, that are managed wholly or partially by the tenants, with the aim to combine living and working while contributing to rent sustainability.

Furthermore, the development of cohesive, publicly led housing policies at the neighbourhood scale can provide reliability guarantees to property owners who keep their dwellings vacant due to concerns over rent arrears. This may involve the establishment of "local social rental agencies", designed to reactivate private properties at

regulated rents, thereby expanding the available housing supply. In this context, neighbourhood-based structures – such as social concierges and community hubs – can facilitate a close match between landlords and prospective tenants. These structures can ensure that both institutional and third-sector actors, who assume responsibility for the maintenance and social management of individual rent-controlled contracts, are consistently present and easily accessible, helping to overcome mutual distrust between lessors and tenants. Moreover, this approach allows for more precise calibration and targeting of public support measures, including incentives, tax relief, and renovation bonuses for property owners, as well as funds to cover security deposits and potential rent payment delays by tenants.

Equally promising is the experimentation with "assisted cohabitation" pathways within dwellings that have become underutilised due to ageing occupants and the consequent shrinking of their household sizes. These conditions increasingly expose owners themselves to unsustainable living expenses as well as to loneliness, making ageing in place an unviable option. In this regard, piloting intergenerational cohabitation projects supported by a territorially rooted network of services offers the opportunity to explore new shared living arrangements for people carrying diverse needs, such as elderly individuals living alone, students, young workers, and other persons for whom the threshold of rent affordability is low. If landlords can receive from subtenants a contribution to housing costs, as well as minor maintenance, daily management tasks, or light forms of support (such as assistance with shopping or medical appointments), tenants in turn gain the opportunity to live in a home at a rent significantly reduced compared to the private market. Here too, continuous and close accompaniment of the entire process by institutions and the third sector – from matching supply and demand to the entire duration of the contract of cohabitation – is a fundamental element in facilitating and enabling assisted co-habitation initiatives.

In conclusion: a promising approach with some clarifications

Building on pilot experiences developed over recent years across Europe, the perspective of supportive neighbourhoods aligns both with the "district renovation" approach at the core of the Affordable Housing Initiative (being an integral part of the policy and funding package of NextGenerationEU) and with the issues addressed by the newly established (January 2025) Special Committee on the Housing Crisis in the European Union (HOUS) (Housing Europe Observatory 2023; European Commission 2025; European Parliament 2025).

The call is to consider affordability in its spatial and "locational" dimensions, promoting coordinated and complementary actions. In fact, fragmented and inconsistent policies prove ineffective in addressing increasingly complex and interconnected challenges: from the conditions of vulnerability affecting a growing number of people, placing the sustainability of traditional welfare models under severe strain; to issues related to the reuse, renovation, and regeneration of the building stock and urban spaces, which are essential to tackling the energy and climate transitions and that – if not properly managed and supported – risk exacerbating social and economic inequalities. The assumption is that working at an intermediate scale – between the individual dwellings and the city – facilitates achieving a critical mass within projects that are specifically tailored to contextual conditions. This involves recomposing and integrating various "everyday life infrastructures" (homes, as well as collective facilities, spaces, and services) and multiple welfare sectors, alongside the capacities of different actors, and diverse financial resources and funding channels that may even target single and specific segments of the planned chain of operations.

In fact, this approach is not new for Italy; it has deep historical roots, albeit marked by a discontinuous history. The reference is to the two seven-year programmes of the INA-Casa Plan (1949-1963), a national employment and housing initiative that also served as a testing ground for the creation of new urban districts, architectural and spatial solutions for homes, facilities, and neighbourhoods, as well as organisational structures and management models for social services (Di Biagi 2010). Although overshadowed for decades,

the legacy of this initiative resurfaced in certain respects during the brief era of the Neighbourhood Contracts (1998; 2002), which primarily focused on the material and immaterial regeneration of existing urban areas, often comprising subsidised housing (Storto 2018). However, the subsequent period was characterised by a departure from this tradition, marked by a gradual withdrawal of investment in ERP and retreat from socio-urban policies centred on truly social housing provision. Today, speaking of supportive neighbourhoods therefore entails revisiting lessons learned from past experiences and updating them to inform urban regeneration approaches more firmly centred on rental housing affordability.

The usefulness of these approaches has become particularly evident during the UAH! research conducted in Trieste, focusing on a part of the city that can be described as an "inner periphery": a semi-central neighbourhood still on the margins of touristification processes, inhabited by a mix of elderly people, immigrants, and single-parent families, with a significant presence of housing units, commercial premises, and buildings that are vacant and in need of renovation. In this district, creating conditions and opportunities for affordable living provides a way to prevent regeneration – undoubtedly necessary – from triggering gentrification and the displacement of the most vulnerable residents (Lanzani 2024).

While the perspective of supportive neighbourhoods appears promising, some clarifications are nevertheless necessary. The first concerns the incremental approach it implicitly entails – that is, the possibility of rethinking urban-level housing policies starting from localised projects, regarded as contexts for learning and experimentation of institutional and social innovation that can potentially be replicated and scaled up. However, incremental does not simply mean additive, nor can the complex and structural causes of vulnerability be addressed solely at a limited scale. For example, policies for supportive neighbourhoods cannot be effective without appropriate strategies for the equitable distribution of social and public facilities across the territory, as well as consistent recalibration of institutional practices for their management.

A second clarification, closely related to the previous one, concerns the criteria for selecting neighbourhoods in which to intervene and the integration of these interventions within "mainstream" policies. In the absence of a strategic and comprehensive framework, implementing area-based operations, calibrated in intensity and approach in response to extreme or contingent situations (such as a high concentration of people in vulnerable conditions or the activism of local institutional and non-institutional actors), entails two risks. On the one hand, it may produce forms of "positive discrimination" that reinforce exceptionalism and stigma; on the other hand, it may lead public authorities to delegate their responsibilities to the third sector and to residents themselves. In essence, while allowing room for an approach that can also proceed by "trial and error", the perspective of supportive neighbourhoods should nonetheless be framed within a city-scale public policy – one capable of guiding and motivating decisions about why, where, and how to prioritise interventions.

Affordable housing and living observatories and plans constitute, in this regard, useful and necessary tools. Reference is made, for example, to ongoing experiences in Trieste (Comune di Trieste 2025) and, in a more complex form, in the metropolitan areas of Bologna (Comune di Bologna 2025) and Milan (Dipartimento di Architettura e Studi Urbani del Politecnico di Milano *et al.* 2025). These experiences confirm that understanding the territorialisation of housing distress and defining the appropriate scales to address it require broad perspectives and careful work in developing new tools for analysing, interpreting, and planning.

Speaking of supportive neighbourhoods as a possible perspective does not, therefore, imply that the issue of housing adequacy can be addressed exclusively at the local or municipal level, nor that it can be reduced to project-based forms of self-organisation due to a limited availability of resources. Renting – both social and very social – requires an expansion of the public housing supply, structural reforms, and significant funding. In the absence of these elements, even the most promising experiments risk losing effectiveness and relevance. To transform them into more general practices, there is a strong need for a solid "institutional infrastructure," composed of coherent public policies,

appropriate and stable regulations and economic sources, as well as governance processes of sufficient scale and scope to ensure sustainability and consolidation. Without this support, "innovative experiences carried out locally remain fragile, fragmented, and of uncertain future" (Bertotti & Bifulco 2018, p. 71).

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LIVING IN BARRIERA VECCHIA IN TRIESTE
Experimenting with *affordable* and *unconventional* policy models at the neighbourhood scale, between housing and services

Introduction

The development of housing policies tailored to the increasingly diverse needs of a wide range of people – whose working, personal, and health conditions change over the course of their lives – cannot be separated from a careful and in-depth understanding of the contexts in which these policies are implemented. A strongly situated knowledge of the area under investigation is, in fact, the foundation for identifying the network – either existing or to be developed – of resources, services, and facilities supporting housing strategies (Frausin & Novak 2025). In this regard, the involvement of stakeholders from the early phases of analysis and subsequently in the design process is crucial (Lanzani 2024). This paper retraces the process of stakeholder engagement and co-design carried out in Trieste, one of the three pilot cities involved in the research project *From Unconventional Households to Unconventional Housing* (UAH!). The project aims to develop field research and experimentation to explore possible innovative solutions for affordable living. Through the use of various tools – desk analysis, in-depth interviews, dialogue with key stakeholders, roundtable discussions, and focus groups – it was possible, on the one hand, to reconstruct the landscape of urban housing policies and local experiments, and on the other, to identify a

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pilot area in which to collaboratively explore new shared trajectories with a group of local actors. The rich and multifaceted picture that emerged guided the identification of themes and locations for envisioning housing policies and design explorations aimed at testing new ways of living. These were developed in close dialogue with the urban context and supported by the educational activities of the European network of design studios involved in the UAH! research project.

Living in Trieste: analyzing a complex context toward rebuilding key issues and connections

In terms of housing, Trieste is a particularly interesting case study, as its social, demographic, and economic trends and challenges are common to many other Italian and European urban contexts. A medium-sized city (currently home to just over 200,000 inhabitants), Trieste holds a strategic position on the Italian-Slovenian border and overlooks the Adriatic Sea. It is an important hub for trade with the Mediterranean – Trieste's port is currently the busiest in Italy in terms of cargo volume – lying along the Trans-European Corridor V. Traditionally a significant centre for the tertiary sector and home to a growing university with internationally recognised research centres, Trieste has become an increasingly attractive tourist destination, with a considerable number of non-resident students and researchers adding to the growing tourist flows. The territory is layered, with varying settlement patterns and demographic trends. Population density varies significantly by area, ranging from a maximum of 15,000 inhabitants/km² in *Circoscrizione 5* (local definition of "district") to fewer than 300 in *Circoscrizione 2*, compared to a citywide average of 2,363 inhabitants/km² (RUPA 2024[2]). The city's demographic structure is undergoing a phase of transition, marked by a long-term population decline (-3.8% from 2011 to

2 The Urban Regeneration and Housing Policies Observatory (Rupa), launched by the Municipality of Trieste in June 2024, functions as a local knowledge tool supporting municipal-scale planning and policy design.

2023) (RUPA 2024) and an aging population well above the national average (aging index: 271.7 for the municipality vs. 199.8 nationally) (Municipality of Trieste 2024; ISTAT 2024). Recently, increased migration flows along the Balkan route have led to a rise in the number of foreign nationals "in transit" (ICS 2024).

In terms of housing supply, the share of vacant public and private housing units is high (103,435 occupied units out of 125,422 registered in 2021) (ISTAT 2021). Much of the city's public subsidised housing stock is outdated (about 47% is over 50 years old; ATER 2021), with major issues related to energy efficiency, spatial adequacy, and architectural barriers. In terms of housing demand, applications on the waiting list of Trieste's Territorial Housing Agency (ATER) remain high and growing – nearly 3,000 households are currently awaiting assignment (ATER 2021). Meanwhile, the cost of private rental housing has become increasingly unaffordable (+22.9% in rental prices from 2016 to 2022) (RUPA 2024), driven by touristification and the significant shift of housing supply toward short-term rentals. This is compounded by rising living costs, which further reduce spending power and undermine housing autonomy for large segments of the population. These conditions outline the contours of a housing issue that, while not yet critical, is becoming increasingly severe and difficult to address.

Regional Law 1/2016 (Comprehensive housing reform and reorganisation of the ATER) provides the legal framework for housing policy in Friuli-Venezia Giulia, integrating public measures with local initiatives and recognising housing as essential for inclusion and social cohesion. While promoting various forms of housing support (rental, ownership, subsidised, regulated, and assisted), several operational tools remain only partially implemented. In Trieste, for instance, the multi-stakeholder table for co-design – foreseen by the law – has functioned inconsistently, missing the chance to establish a steering body for public housing. The law is currently under revision to reinforce ATER's coordinating role, currently held by the municipality, and to expand housing supply and improve rental support, with a focus on pathways to stable housing through employment and economic autonomy (Friuli Venezia Giulia Region 2024). Local-

ly, the regulatory framework includes tools such as emergency housing allocation (also under former Law 15/2004), financial aid, and rent subsidies. Since 2024, a new agreement between the Municipality of Trieste and third-sector organisations supports co-designed pathways to housing autonomy for marginalised households, including pilot projects based on Housing First and housing-led models (Marchigiani et al. 2025).

In order to respond to increasingly pressing and complex housing needs, a diverse network of local public and third-sector actors has initiated a series of projects and experimental initiatives in the field of housing over the years. These are innovative housing pilot cases that nonetheless remain fragmented due to the lack of a public policy framework capable of steering them. From the beginning, it was therefore necessary to reconstruct a comprehensive understanding of local housing in dialogue with key actors who have been working experimentally in this field for years. In parallel, a series of in-depth interviews with key stakeholders made it possible to explore new perspectives by building on both existing strengths and identified weaknesses. Projects identified as particularly relevant for the research vary in nature and include: welfare housing programmes; social cohabitation; assisted self-recovery and self-maintenance practices; Housing First initiatives; and the Solidarity Agency for Renting (figure 1). These experiments are embedded in Trieste's strong tradition of social housing (Di Biagi & Marchigiani 2009): a substantial and consolidated public housing stock (about 10% of total dwellings) (RUPA 2024) serves as a foundation for rethinking housing between the home and shared services.

Since the radical reforms in mental health care initiated by Franco Basaglia in the 1970s, the city has developed unconventional housing models to support various types of vulnerability, integrating living spaces with community-based services "deeply rooted in the territory" (Bono & Del Giudice 2022, p. 2): deinstitutionalisation in mental health; fighting homelessness; family homes for children and youth; the integrated system of social and care services in public housing neighbourhoods (Marchigiani 2022); more recent innovative homecare models

supporting disability and active aging (Bono & Del Giudice 2022). The approach underpinning these experiences can shape future housing visions for other, more hidden and precarious forms of vulnerability (e.g., youth, working poors new family structures, recently arrived migrants), by networking actors, resources, and spaces, both inside and outside the home (Marchigiani & Novak 2024).

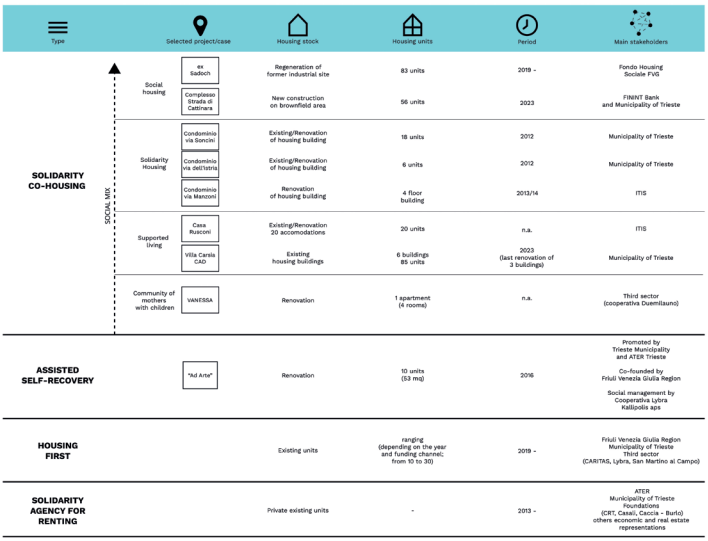

Figure 1. Mapping of innovative housing experiences and projects (by authors).

Fieldwork carried out among highly localised actors, approaches, and themes

Actors and approaches

The involvement of locally active organisations is essential to understanding the complexity of housing issues in the Trieste case and to attempting to connect "nodes" that, from the outside,

may appear independent but that, from an "insider's" perspective, reveal affinities and potential interactions. The fieldwork initially focused on examining the contextual conditions to be addressed: on the one hand, a pressing, "social and very social" (Tosi 2017) demand for affordable rental housing; on the other, the presence of a set of local initiatives which, although rich in experimentation, still struggle to coalesce into a coherent and coordinated policy system led by a clear public authority (Marchigiani *et al.* 2025). At the same time, the mapping of local stakeholders made it possible to identify key third-sector actors – *Azienda Pubblica Servizi alla Persona (ITIS)*, *Caritas Trieste*, the social cooperative *Lybra*, and the volunteer organisation *Comunità di San Martino al Campo* – which in recent years have proposed innovative models of inclusive housing in Trieste for people experiencing severe housing marginalisation and at risk of homelessness, with particular reference to solidarity-based housing and the Housing First model.

From interactions with these key actors, it emerged that the city provides fertile ground for exploring the development of housing-led and Housing First models, already tested by Caritas Trieste and Lybra, appearing particularly convincing as innovative approaches for the selected case study. The difference between these models is generally measured in terms of the intensity and duration of the support services provided for housing integration (more limited in the former, more comprehensive in the latter). The housing-led approach offers support services aimed at achieving housing autonomy for people facing difficulties, even for a limited amount of time (e.g., migrants, former inmates). The Housing First model combines housing provision with integrated support – covering social, healthcare, and employment needs – for individuals experiencing chronic housing and social exclusion (Pleace 2016; Y-Foundation 2017; fio.PSD 2024). Both models, despite their different applications, address a highly diverse target population – ranging from individuals experiencing severe and prolonged hardships to those facing temporary challenges who require stable housing as a foundation for regaining autonomy. The approach is surely different from more traditional forms of supported hous-

ing, which tend to focus on specific categories of vulnerability (e.g., facilities for the elderly or for individuals with cognitive or physical disabilities), and to council housing models, where support services are sporadic or minimal. Notably, the Housing First approach is particularly relevant in terms of economic affordability: it allows for flexible intervention and strategies to identify and activate housing solutions, including both newly built and existing properties. This allows for starting pilot projects with relatively limited initial investment, which can progressively attract greater resources and be integrated into residential contexts with an appropriate social mix. In Trieste, existing Housing First experiments are still marginal and rely heavily on public investment. The Housing First pilots implemented in Trieste are particularly noteworthy, yet they remain limited in scale and somewhat isolated. It is therefore essential to reflect on their potential for scalability, taking into account the challenges and opportunities that have emerged.

A dialogue on housing

In envisioning housing models that integrate dwellings and services to address the shortage of affordable rental units (both public and private) it became essential to broaden the range of stakeholders involved and to reignite the housing debate in Trieste (figure 2). The engagement process conducted in 2024 and 2025 brought together different voices – from the public, private, and third sectors – active and interested in housing and personal services. Three discussion tables highlighted challenges, needs, and resources across the entire city, while several issues emerged as critical for future interventions. First, the growing complexity of socio-economic hardship calls for diversified and graduated responses to loneliness, social marginalisation, and limited mobility due to aging and disability. In this regard, new functional mixes – at the scale of housing units, buildings, and neighbourhoods – are considered essential for rethinking a socio-health and personal support welfare system. Second, addressing vacant public and private housing is crucial, as it is either exposed to speculation in high-value markets or to abandonment and de-

cay, hindering recovery by fragmented ownership and a lack of coordinated governance. Finally, a third issue, closely linked to the first, is the need to innovate processes and procedures for integrated property and social management among public and third-sector actors. This includes experimenting with unconventional models that can respond to growing needs in a context of increasingly limited resources.

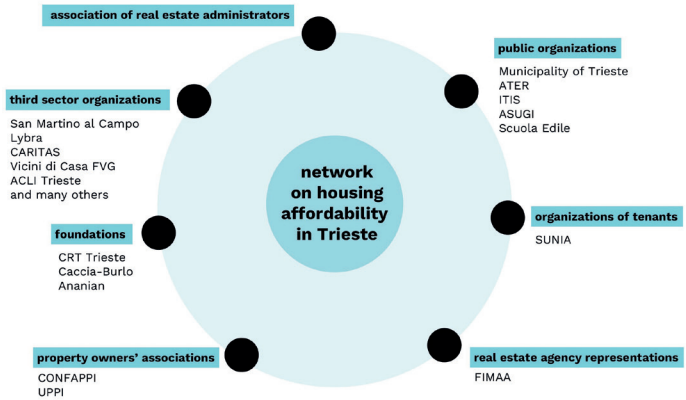

Figure 2. Stakeholder map (by authors).

From this dialogue, several opportunities and relevant issues emerged as a basis for developing new projects, albeit not without obstacles (Marchigiani *et al.* 2025). First, reactivating the Solidarity Agency for Renting was proposed to unlock vacant housing. Lunched in 2014 at municipal scale under ATER, results were limited. A renewed approach could revise incentives and safeguards for private landlords, including guarantee funds, insurance schemes, and tenant training programmes. Moreover, introducing intermediary entities to manage the housing stock paired with processes of self-maintenance and self-recovery – however challenging (Marchigiani *et al.* 2019) – appeared of interest. Finally, the possibility of addressing increasing

individual fragility through various forms of cohabitation to promote personal autonomy could build synergies between property management and social support.

It is important to highlight that a key outcome of this dialogue was the identification of an area within Trieste's "inner periphery", the historic district of Barriera Vecchia, as a significant site for experimenting with new affordable housing approaches and solutions within the scope of the research. This urban sector, where the subsequent phase of field research was conducted, proved particularly interesting due to the presence of many already active actors (with whom the network can be strengthened), the coexistence of numerous ongoing projects, and the potential to activate multiple open and connective spaces, including through the involvement of residents. Strengthening dialogue with the actors involved at the table also made it possible to identify four pilot buildings on which to experiment with spatial solutions for unconventional housing. The potentials of both the buildings and the neighbourhood were further explored in a third discussion table held in March 2025, alongside participation in ongoing local activities.

Work at the neighbourhood scale: integration with other projects, citizen involvement, and focus groups

A neighbourhood between challenges and potentials

Barriera Vecchia is part of *Circoscrizione V*, the most populous and densely inhabited[3] area of the city. Characterised by small family units[4] and a significant presence of residents with migrant backgrounds[5], the area is attractive mainly to foreign and young populations (aged 20-35) as well as to people com-

3 The population density of the district exceeds 15,000 inhabitants/km², compared to a municipal average of 2,363 inhabitants/km² (RUPA 2024).

4 55.7% of households are single-person, compared to a citywide average of 50.5% (RUPA 2024).

5 Foreign residents make up one quarter of the district's population and account for 42.7% of the municipality's total foreign population (RUPA 2024).

ing from outside the city[6]. The neighbourhood faces overlapping vulnerabilities and challenges: one of the highest percentages of low-income residents in the municipality; frequent situations of isolation, especially among elderly people living alone with reduced mobility; phenomena of loneliness and marginalisation; and a recent social mix that raises integration issues and generates conflicts among residents. The proximity to the historic centre, good connection via public transport, and the dense, orthogonal network of paths and public spaces – together with the mix of historic residential buildings and key attractors like the covered market in Largo Barriera (Nicoloso & Rovello 2008) – are structural and valuable elements for the neighbourhood's livability. The neighbourhood originated from progressive expansions between the 18th and 19th centuries and maintains continuity with the older core, preserving the original character of the urban fabric, with small-sized blocks maintaining an intimate relationship between buildings and the accessibility network. This layout potentially supports pedestrian mobility, which is however hindered by narrow street sections and widespread vehicular access. Most buildings, mainly historic, have 5 to 8 floors with relatively small internal courtyards often cluttered and poorly maintained. Apartments are frequently large (100-200 square metres) and face accessibility issues due to various architectural barriers such as the absence of elevators. Ground floors intended for local commercial activities are often vacant or underused, reducing the area's attractiveness and compromising the sense of safety along pathways. Public open spaces are sparse, poorly equipped, or difficult to access (due to architectural barriers and steep gradients). However, there is a rich availability of both material and immaterial resources: various forms of shared housing, vacant public and private buildings, underutilised open spaces, diverse commercial facilities and activities, as well as social, health, and cultural services. Notably, there is an active group of public and third-sector actors ready to collaborate and pool resources, skills, and experiences in the field of low-threshold rental housing.

6 In the 5th District, the non-native population approaches 50%, compared to a municipal average of 41.4% (RUPA 2024).

A deeply rooted engagement

Among the most interesting and active actors in Barriera Vecchia, the Public Service Company for Personal Services (ITIS) is increasingly positioning itself as a central hub for initiatives in the area, with the intention to strengthening the role of its facilities and services, opening them up to the neighbourhood. In addition to operating one of the largest elderly residences in Trieste (with 411 beds), ITIS provides prevention, health, rehabilitation characterised by a courtyard with a formal layout. Over time, the facility has been equipped with services intended not only for its residents but also accessible to other types of users. By coordinating multiple initiatives – with a mix of activities, diverse target groups, and different durations of support, ranging from occasional activities or services to temporary housing and more stable forms of supported living – ITIS can take on a leading role at the neighbourhood scale, making it a crucial stakeholder to engage. The management of ITIS has progressively developed a series of initiatives acting on different fronts, aiming to build a local network at the neighbourhood level, which residents can rely on especially in times of difficulty, finding adequate and multidimensional tools and solutions that blend physical and immaterial components (Geerts *et al.* 2021). In particular, the neighbourhood has launched a "social concierge" pilot project (European Social Fund 2020), serving as a point of reference and listening for the community. This initiative takes place in a small commercial unit on the ground floor of one of the Barriera Vecchia residential blocks – thus easily visible and accessible – capable of gathering proposals, hosting projects, and organising public events. Its main focus is to offer informal support to people, creating over time a sense of safety and mutual trust, which are essential for building neighbourhood ties, especially important in situations of loneliness or vulnerability.

The need to foster local networks is at the basis of another initiative – *CrossCare 2.0*, promoted and coordinated by ITIS –, and developed directly from the experience of the social concierge. This project focuses on the construction of shared responses to address the challenges posed by the progressive aging of the pop-

ulation. In this context, the concierge service acts as a starting point for building a strong, supportive network among various local actors, aimed at assisting people living in the neighbourhood. Within *CrossCare 2.0*, a wide array of stakeholders collaborated on the shared mapping of needs, available resources, and critical issues. This mapping is intended to serve as a foundation for systematising and supporting the many initiatives already active in the area. By foregrounding key needs – such as health, autonomy, and the development of "supportive" neighbourhood relationships – the project highlights the importance of ensuring safe and accessible domestic spaces, while simultaneously broadening the focus from individual housing units to the neighbourhood as a whole. Recognising the increasingly strategic role of the social concierge as a neighbourhood-scale coordination hub points to the need for integrated planning approaches capable of bringing together resources, services, and spaces, both domestic and urban. The signing of a Community Pact, also supported by the Department of Engineering and Architecture (DIA) of the University of Trieste, marks a formal commitment by the participating stakeholders to develop a stable, structured, and ongoing collaborative network. This represents a complex design and governance experience, while providing a valuable opportunity for shared insights on housing and neighbourhood dynamics within a stable, cross-sectoral working group.

Spaces as opportunities

The neighbourhood context, where open spaces are scarce and poorly equipped, includes areas that are currently perceived as residual but hold potential for new uses – both temporary and long-term – through micro-transformations that support residents' needs related to mobility, socialisation, and access to outdoor environments. These spaces can be reimagined as extensions of the home, where bonds of mutual familiarity can be strengthened, contributing to the revitalisation of the local social network. From this perspective, it is valuable to adopt an incremental approach, testing pilot projects for the reactivation

and placemaking that redirect residents' attention toward these underutilised spaces. For instance, during the fieldwork phase, an initial experiment in reactivating public space was carried out in Largo Niccolini, one of the few open public areas in the neighbourhood. Although currently underused, the site offers significant potential. The neighbourhood event – organised primarily by ITIS and the DIA research group as part of the *CrossCare 2.0* project – provided an opportunity to "test" collaboration among actors already active in the area, and to collectively imagine new uses for the space, conceived as a welcoming and inclusive gathering place for all ages.

The project for Barriera Vecchia involves the reactivation of disused and underutilised properties, alongside the mobilisation of resources to initiate processes of acquisition, rehabilitation, and maintenance of both public and private real estate assets. At its core, the project aims at experimenting with new forms of shared living – promoting solidarity-based co-housing with a strong social mix, intergenerational cohabitation, and supportive housing models aligned with the Housing First approach. This work is closely tied to a rethinking of how domestic spaces, services, facilities, and public open spaces can be integrated. Key sites and spatial potentials within the neighbourhood have been identified, with the goal of creating a network of spaces and small-scale interventions capable of fostering community ties and supporting residential autonomy. The buildings selected – through a participatory dialogue with local stakeholders – are representative of Barriera Vecchia's architectural fabric and present diverse conditions. These include mixed public-private ownership structures, managed by entities with differing missions (such as ATER, Fondazione Caccia-Burlo, ITIS, and Caritas Trieste); a range of apartment sizes; accessibility issues, especially related to vertical circulation (e.g., the presence or absence of elevators); and differing relationships between thresholds and urban space. This diversity calls for flexible and context-sensitive design approaches, capable of adapting to the specific characteristics and needs of each situation.

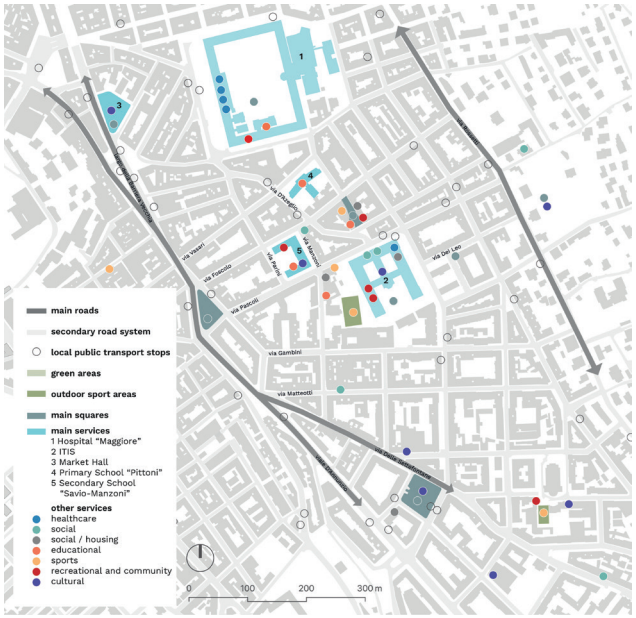

Figure 3. Mapping of resources and spaces in Barriera Vecchia (by authors).

To conclude, extending the reflections beyond the fieldwork

The reconstruction of the overall housing framework, the identification of the pilot area, and the integration with ongoing projects, within the local network have enabled parallel actions on two levels: spatial and policy, with the aim of realising a model of a "solidarity neighbourhood" (see Marchigiani in this volume). At the spatial level, the selection of four pilot buildings, representative of the existing fabric, initiated reflections by the Design Studios Network on innovative, flexible, and replicable spatial solutions that can adapt to other urban contexts and meet diverse housing needs in terms of duration and household composition. Insights gained during fieldwork highlighted key themes for the reuse and reactivation of buildings, with potential applications also in other city neighbourhoods as well.

The theme of the threshold – between inside and outside, private and collective – raised questions about which collective spaces to provide and how many, both within buildings and in the broader neighbourhood context. A central issue is the redesign of street-level entrances, which must function both as spaces of connection and as protection (from the weather, as well as from the unsolicited interactions). Ground floors can become spaces for residents' use, "lighting up" with functions accessible to other uses and users, acting as a filter between public and private space. Another crucial issue concerns connections, both material and immaterial. Buildings should not be treated as isolated units but understood in relation to their surrounding urban blocks. This implies differentiated treatment of façades – those facing the street versus those overlooking internal courtyards – and the promotion of functional interconnections between the project buildings and surrounding neighbourhood spaces. The spatial dimension integrates with the policy dimension: the collaborative process with local stakeholders and the exploration of innovative models of management and care (such as Housing First) make it possible to envision new support mechanisms for future residents, adapting both the timing and modalities of housing access. This includes approaches to acquiring vacant properties, revitalising existing housing stock, and integrating living arrangements with services and personal autonomy – all with a view toward a solidarity-based neighbourhood (Marchigiani *et al.* 2025).

At the policy level, the project has prompted a rethinking of housing beyond the binary of rental and supported accommodation, suggesting new ways of cohabiting, sharing spaces, and fostering mutual support. Particular attention is given to forms of cohabitation involving people excluded from traditional housing markets, new intergenerational and sometimes temporary living arrangements, and shared services at multiple scales. Operating "between housing and services", inside and outside the home, requires a substantial rethinking of proximity-based welfare – starting from "modular" forms of active domiciliary care, the reactivation of micro-spaces like courtyards and ground floors, and the creation of new neighbourhood-level connections. The Trieste case also underscores the importance of a neighbourhood-

level entity capable of coordinating multiple services, actors, and resources.

These themes are now central to ongoing dialogue with local stakeholders, including established organisations such as ITIS and Caritas – already key local references – and other entities which, through neighbourhood-based experimentation, are contributing to the development of urban-scale scalability. The current phase focuses on consolidating the progress achieved so far, by strengthening the actor network and exploring tangible projects and actions. Among these is a small-scale pilot of solidarity-based cohabitation, made possible through collaboration with key stakeholders: housing management (ITIS), socio-assistance support (the *CrossCare 2.0* network, Social Concierge, various associations), and funding bodies. This experiment will test specific themes that emerged from community dialogue and serve as a basis for assessing potential application across the wider municipality. To be continued.

Acknowledgments

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Constanze Wolfgring, Massimo Bricocoli*

HOUSING GOVERNANCE AND THE LEGACIES OF A COMPANY TOWN
San Donato Milanese beyond ENI

San Donato Milanese, bordering Milan to the southeast, is a city of 33,000 inhabitants with a history strongly linked to the establishment of the general headquarters of ENI, the Italian National Hydrocarbons Authority, in 1953. It is one of the most remarkable Italian examples of a company town, which gave rise to a distinctive architectural, urban, and sociocultural heritage, and specific configurations in terms of housing. Today, as part of the metropolitan area of Milan and connected to it by subway, San Donato faces increasing housing affordability pressures (Bricocoli & Peverini 2024), including rising prices and rents, the expansion of a luxury residential segment, a rise in short-term rentals and a growing hesitance of private landlords to rent out their properties on a long-term basis, as well as the outmigration of young populations to more affordable municipalities. Together, these developments pose a wide range of housing-related challenges for the public administration to address.

Against this backdrop, a collaborative process was launched in 2024 by the Department of Architecture and Urban Studies (DAStU) of Politecnico di Milano with the city administration of San Donato Milanese, within the framework of the national research project UAH! Unconventional Affordable Housing. Drawing on an earlier collaboration that began in 2014 and led to the drafting of the city's Guiding Document for Housing Policies (*Documento Direttore per le Politiche Abitative*) (Bricocoli *et al.* 2021) and contributions to its Territorial Governance Plan (PGT, *Piano di Governo del Territorio*), adopted in 2022, the renewed engagement with the city government also aimed to advance insights into how housing-related challenges have evolved over the past decade.

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The primary objective of the recent collaboration is to reflect on current housing-related challenges, resources, and emerging perspectives on how contemporary housing needs are articulated in the city. Specifically, the exchange sought to address the following questions: What are the current challenges and available resources in San Donato Milanese's housing landscape and related policymaking? How are these connected to the city's legacy as a company town? And what opportunities for innovation exist in addressing these challenges and leveraging available resources? The process, conducted between 2024 and 2025, entailed closed-door meetings with representatives of multiple municipal departments – encompassing both technical-operational and political roles –, a workshop engaging a broader group of stakeholders, including third-sector actors, and in-depth interviews with key figures from the public administration, experts, and actors from the realms of ENI. Overall, the encounters involved around 50 persons, with public administration personnel including, among others, representatives from the Department of Community Development, the Housing Office, the Urban Planning Department, Social Services, the Office for Youth Policies, and the Office of Productive Development. Interviews were conducted with ten individuals.

Building on this process, the paper examines the duality of ENI's influence on San Donato – while historically, ENI contributed to the city's growth and to the provision of a consistent housing stock, in recent years its presence implies ambivalent dynamics, as it has transformed into a financialised market actor whose assets, formerly part of a public infrastructure, have transformed into private real estate holdings subject to valorisation. Our research seeks to understand how local urban and housing policies can cope with such a strong corporate legacy in a post-company-town context, and what implications it has for urban governance today. The paper thus firstly introduces the history of San Donato Milanese as a company town and ENI's impact on the city's housing situation, revealing both challenges and resources; secondly, it lays out what has emerged from fieldwork and interviews regarding contemporary housing issues, how these are informed by the city's history, and how they

are being addressed by the current administration; and thirdly, it discusses what the case of San Donato may contribute to broader debates on housing affordability, the legacies of company towns, and urban governance.

San Donato Milanese and its legacies as a company town

> For me, there is something that fundamentally characterises San Donato Milanese: You cannot avoid starting from its history. And this needs to be acknowledged. As a result, there is still a bit of veneration of the past. But that past is gone, and it's not coming back (Tassinari 2025).

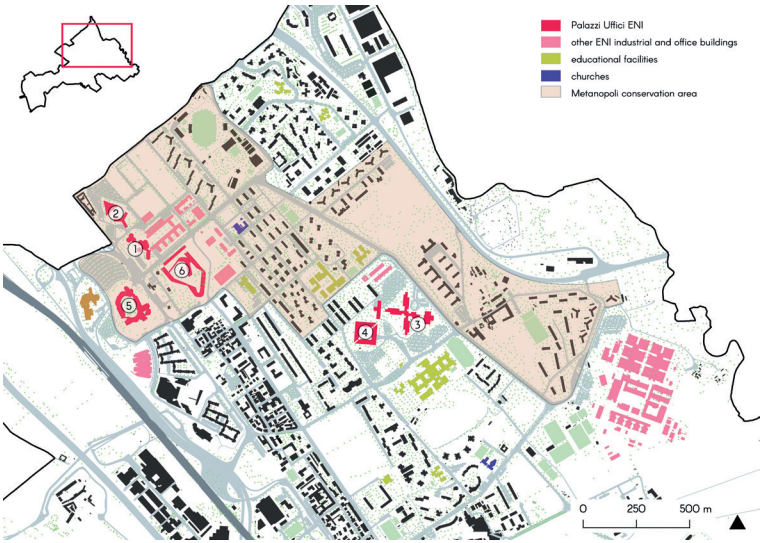

Figure 1. The physical imprint of ENI in San Donato Milanese (by authors).

San Donato Milanese, bordering Milan to the southeast, is inextricably linked to ENI, the Italian National Hydrocarbons Authority, founded in 1953. With the creation of ENI's facilities,

including the company's administrative centre, offices and productive infrastructure, and housing, the then-small town – home to 2,700 inhabitants in 1951 – underwent a process of rapid transformation, growing tenfold to around 27,000 residents by 1971. The choice of site acquired by Enrico Mattei – paternalist and visionary founder and president of ENI – followed strategic and logistical considerations, as the area was traversed by SNAM[2]'s first methane pipeline and bordering via Emilia, a major thoroughfare linking San Donato with Milan in the north and Emilia-Romagna in the south (Deschermeier 2008). The establishment of ENI within the municipality of San Donato and its rapid expansion throughout the 1950s and 1960s consolidated its role as both an industrial and residential centre.

> To give you a sense of the person: he wanted to do things quickly, with an aim of the common good. But he was a corsair. Someone who had his own rules, who knew exactly what he wanted, and had a way of pursuing it… at times borderline illegal, certainly by today's standards. […] This reflects, to some extent, the postwar spirit overall – because above all, there was a need to build, to move beyond the destruction, despair, and pain of the war (Anselmi 2025).

Mattei had drawn inspiration from the experience of Adriano Olivetti in Ivrea[3] – in terms of the ambition to pursue a comprehensive vision of a city in which work, housing, and welfare would be interwoven to enhance both productivity and quality of life. As regards the built form, "Metanopoli" (or "villaggio ENI"), as the new and growing part of the city soon came to be known, did not follow a predetermined design programme

2 The SNAM (*Società Nazionale Metanodotti*) is an Italian company established in 1941 as part of the AGIP (*Azienda Generale Italiana Petroli*), a state-owned company founded in 1926 – both predate the establishment of ENI in 1953. ENI merged with AGIP and other entities to form a national energy conglomerate, and SNAM became part of ENI's corporate structure.

3 An industrial town in Piemonte developed from the 1930s onwards, which is an essential point of reference in the history of Italian urban planning, architecture, and industry (Savoldi 2007; Peroni 2016).

but was incrementally developed in response to emerging needs and contingent circumstances (Sermisoni 1995). One of the first completed buildings – the church of Santa Barbara, the saint of miners – designed by Mario Bacciocchi and inaugurated in 1955, was intended as a focal point at the intersection of the residential sphere (to the east) and the sphere of labour (to the west) (Anselmi 2024), where two years later the first ENI headquarters (the "Primo Palazzo Uffici") was constructed. Metanopoli subsequently expanded significantly, incorporating various housing types, differentiated by employee profiles and ranks (executives, middle management, and workers), work facilities – ranging from industrial sites to office complexes – and services such as kindergartens, schools, churches, sport facilities and green areas. To complement the provision of material welfare, Mattei moreover initiated the construction of a holiday village in Borca di Cadore (Veneto), which ENI workers could access free of charge. As several interviewees pointed out, San Donato Milanese was divided between "the world of ENI" – which encompassed the majority of the population, granting a series of privileges – and "the world of non-ENI", excluding those not employed by the company:

> There was definitely an invisible wall, distinguishing the population in their access to services: for example, the park's sports facilities were for employees and their families only. So, a part of the population has always experienced this "being excluded" from the magical, golden world of ENI (Tassinari 2025).

There was, however, also a material (albeit subtle) dimension to this divide, as Giorgio Bertolotti, former long-term employee in the city's planning department (2025) explains:

> Metanopoli was somewhat a city within the city. Because it was in its entirety owned by ENI, including the streets, which were usually open and accessible. But what tends to be forgotten is that there were gates – some of them still exist – dividing Metanopoli from the rest. I have personally never seen them closed, but some inhabitants of the "villaggio" told me that in fact they had been closed at times, when opening hours were scheduled.

Figure 2. The *Pagoda* in front of the *Primo Palazzo Uffici* (Photo: Constanze Wolfgring).

Figure 3. The *Ex Laboratori di Ricerca Scientifica e Tecnica* in front of the *Primo Palazzo Uffici* (Photo: Constanze Wolfgring).

Figure 4. The *Terzo Palazzo Uffici* (Photo: Constanze Wolfgring).

Figure 5. The Quarto Palazzo Uffici (Photo: Constanze Wolfgring).

Figure 6. Housing in Metanopoli (Photo: Constanze Wolfgring).

Figure 7. Housing in Metanopoli (Photo: Constanze Wolfgring).

Figure 8. Housing in Metanopoli (Photo: Constanze Wolfgring).

Figure 9. Housing in Metanopoli (Photo: Constanze Wolfgring).

Figure 10. Centro sportivo Enrico Mattei (Photo: Constanze Wolfgring).

Figure 11. Centro sportivo Enrico Mattei (Photo: Constanze Wolfgring).

Despite Mattei's untimely death in a plane crash in 1962, his role in shaping both the physical and social landscape of San Donato was foundational and continues to resonate in the city's identity to this day. ENI's presence – and specifically the decisions taken during Mattei's leadership – left a lasting imprint on the city's socioeconomic fabric, urban layout, and housing conditions. Today privatised, ENI still maintains its headquarters in San Donato. The privatisation process itself, initiated in 1992 and culminating in the company's stock market entry in 1995, brought further transformations with significant repercussions for the city and its inhabitants. The legacies of these trajectories include:

A population of privileged renters transformed into privileged owners

During the privatisation process, most of ENI's physical assets were sold off, including both the residential and tertiary building stock. Dwellings were offered to sitting tenants for sale at prices well below market value, providing privileged access to homeownership for many workers and the opportunity to accumulate substantial wealth based on real estate ownership. In cases where tenants opted not to purchase their dwellings, others could step in, resulting in a situation where several formerly working-class households in San Donato today own one or more dwellings previously owned by ENI, several of which have become small-scale landlords (Bricocoli *et al.* 2021). Today, the rate of owner-occupation in San Donato reaches 82.2%, exceeding both the national (76.7%) and the Milanese share (70%) (ISTAT 2021). Another specificity is the disproportionate presence of large dwellings, with around 25% of the housing stock exceeding 120 square meters, as a survey conducted by DAStU (2020) revealed. A concentration of dwellings over 200 square meters is found in Metanopoli, with many of these being inhabited by single, often elderly residents. This suggests a significant share of underoccupied, oversized dwellings, largely constructed during the 1960s and 1970s (DAStU 2020). San Donato is demographically ageing at a fast

pace, with an elderly index[4] of 195.8, surpassing both the Milanese (187.9) and the national value (193.1). Differently from Milan, where the index declined over the past twenty years (from 202.8 in 2004), San Donato experienced the opposite trend, having increased substantially from 119.3 in the same year. This situation constitutes both a challenge and a potential opportunity. On the one hand, the city faces a strongly ageing population without institutional facilities to support their needs – there is no elderly care home in San Donato, signifying that care must be organised at home. On the other hand, the current underoccupation of large dwellings might become a catalyst for experimenting innovative housing models based on sharing and intergenerational living – approaches that might benefit younger people, who are currently priced out of the market or unable to access housing in the first place.

The transition from "Mamma ENI" to big corporate governance

ENI's privatisation and stock market listing – despite the Italian state retaining significant shares, with 30% through the Cassa Depositi e Prestiti and 2% through the Ministry of Economy and Finance (ENI 2025) – marked a clear cultural shift in the company's philosophy. It evolved from a paternalistic model of corporate welfare ("As people here used to say: Mamma ENI will take care of it") (Tassinari 2025) – personified by its founding figure – to one oriented around private ownership and market efficiency. These changes subjected ENI to market valuation, with its worth now driven by investor confidence rather than political or personal priorities. Broader structural changes in the economy – including periods of crisis and austerity politics – have additionally contributed to ENI's evolution, as well as shifting work paradigms and habits, including the rise of remote work and digitalisation, accelerated by the pandemic. In combination, these transformations also resulted in a changed relationship between

4 The ageing index is a demographic indicator measuring the degree of ageing in a population, calculated as the ratio between the population aged 65 and over and the population under 15 years of age.

ENI and its workforce, as both current and past employees underline: "Those who have been working at ENI for decades often say: 'it is not the ENI that it used to be.'" (E. 2025). Sandro Maniga, president of the San Donato fraction of the Associazione dei Pionieri e Veterani dell'ENI[5], stresses (2025):

> We, the "old ones" who have experienced and been part of ENI in its earlier years, try to pass on the values that Mattei had promoted to the young employees, but it's difficult. They are not very interested in this. Times have changed, and of course conditions have also changed. They haven't lived through that company; they haven't experienced the atmosphere of those times.

Concrete efforts to keep Mattei's memory alive, specifically addressing younger generations, include countrywide collaborations with schools through the *Progetto Mattei*:

> Every year, we agree on a small project with ENI's external relations department and choose a topic related to energy – last year it was artificial intelligence, this year it's alternative energy sources, and the students then develop projects on that topic. […] The best projects are awarded, with plaques for the winning school and medals for teachers who put in an effort (Sonson 2025).

"Vacant giants" awaiting transformation

As part of the privatisation, not only housing was sold to tenants, but also the tertiary building stock – including five large office complexes, the "Palazzi Uffici ENI" – to a real estate asset management company. Two of these (the "Terzo" and "Quarto") were dismissed in 2023 and 2024. As outlined in the PGT, they are designated for transformation into a mixed-use neighbourhood with around 700 new housing units, including both market

5 The APVE (*Associazione dei Pionieri e Veterani dell'ENI*) is a voluntary organisation established under the patronage of ENI in 2007. It brings together former and current employees, organising socio-cultural and educational activities.

and social housing, public services, and a museum centered on the theme of ecology. The remaining three office buildings – the "Primo", "Secondo", and "Quinto" – are expected to be decommissioned in upcoming years and repurposed for non-residential mixed uses. Possible functions may include a mix of offices, laboratories, small-scale production, and educational activities, following a precedent set by another repurposed ENI property, which formerly hosted the company's scientific and technical research laboratories (Carminati 2025; Sermisoni 1995). Meanwhile, construction on the "Sesto" – a new headquarters which will eventually accommodate all remaining ENI staff – is underway. The transformation and repurposing of the five "vacant giants" is both an important challenge and a complex task, for various reasons. One concerns constraints imposed by heritage conservation regulations: as outlined in the PGT, specific protection measures apply not only to the architectural heritage of the buildings, but also to the wider Metanopoli neighbourhood, which was granted landscape conservation status in 2003 following ENI's privatisation, to prevent alterations. More substantially, however, a challenge lies in identifying uses that both respond to the city's needs and are at the same time economically viable and thus attractive to potential developers. Given that the alternative to transformation – ongoing abandonment – is a worst-case scenario for the city, the process demands a delicate balance and negotiation between the owners and the municipality in finding mutually beneficial solutions. As Francesca Micheli, deputy mayor for housing and social policies, stresses (2025):

> ENI shaped the lives of thousands of families and generations have experienced and spent time in those buildings. There is a deep affection for them. […] I am well aware that they are energy-intensive and not sustainable by today's standards. But that building [note: the "Quinto"], if you think about it twenty years from now, still holds up because of how it was designed. The Terzo and the Quarto as well. Maybe they have unusual forms, but it is as if they were eternal – they are part of the city's history. So, there is a strong collective sense of responsibility; the citizens are asking and expecting from us to find solutions to give those buildings a new life.

The paradox of non-public public spaces

One of San Donato's main qualities, mentioned by several interlocutors, is its abundance of green areas, shaped by garden city principles that inspired Mattei. In Metanopoli, a dense presence of trees is combined with a remarkable integration of housing and open space, reflected in the absence of fencing. Several interviewees, however, noted a contradiction between the abundance of green and public space and the lack of areas for social use, gathering, and spontaneous encounter, as well as the absence of an urban core – a result of the lack of comprehensive public planning, which has led to a fragmented and non-hierarchical organisation of open spaces. Alessandro Carminati (2025), director of the city's planning department, explains that

> the reason for this is that the development of the city was entirely based on conventions between the public and private actors. There were never any public projects for centers, public spaces, or squares – all the "public" areas resulted from agreements, from subdivision plans that included spaces designated for public use, but they fundamentally remained private property. What we are trying to do now is the opposite – to shift gears and create spaces that are fully publicly owned.

Housing-related challenges and resources in San Donato Milanese today

The interviews revealed a broad and diversified set of housing-related dynamics in San Donato Milanese, some of which are rooted in the city's specific legacy as a company town, while others have emerged against the backdrop of more recent discussions about prospective urban developments, including plans for an expansion of the subway, the construction of a new stadium for the AC Milan soccer club, and overall growing housing price dynamics across the metropolitan area. Some of the key issues that have emerged shall be outlined in the following.

Increasing prices, rents, and market selectivity

Housing costs in San Donato Milanese have increased significantly over the past decade, as several interviewees underlined:

> 10 years ago, rents were already high, but not as they are today. Today, it is as if San Donato has become a small piece of a wealthy Milanese neighbourhood (Micheli 2025).

This is reflected by data which show a clear upward trend in purchase prices and even more so in rents, with dynamics accelerating after the pandemic. As of 2025, asked prices for residential property have increased by 21% since 2017, and rents by 31% (immobiliare.it 2025). Looking at how dynamics have changed in the OMI (*Osservatorio del Mercato Immobiliare*) database of the Italian Revenue Agency (*Agenzia delle Entrate*) from 2017 to 2024, this evolution is largely confirmed, showing a particularly pronounced increase in the case of rental contracts, both for dwellings in "normal" qualitative conditions (where rents have increased by between 23 and 45%[6]) and in "very good" conditions (where rents have grown by between 41 and 62%). This highlights a concern raised by several interlocutors: the recent dominance of luxury residential developments, largely inaccessible to low- and middle-income groups.

Vacancies in the private stock and micro-financialisation

10.6% (around 1,700 dwellings) of the city's housing stock is vacant (ISTAT 2021). These vacancies (mostly in the private stock) constitute a potential resource for San Donato in mitigating growing market pressures, however, they are hard

6 The OMI database compiles data on actual prices recorded in property sales and rental contracts. The data is presented as a range – indicating minimum and maximum prices and rents per m² – for specific locations (here, the reported data refers to central locations, including Metanopoli), and is differentiated by the state of the dwelling (classified as "normal" and "very good").

to mobilise. Many owners are reluctant to rent them out on a long-term basis due to concerns over tenant reliability, a lack of trust in the public administration to provide adequate support, and an increasing preference for short-term rentals, perceived as safer and more profitable alternatives. "This is one of the key differences to ten years ago", as Micheli (2025) underlines, "because back then short-term rentals didn't exist at all in our reality". Demand for short-term rentals in San Donato is largely driven both by its vicinity to Milan ("here we feel the 'weeks' – Design Week, Fashion Week, the *Salone del Mobile* – because you're in piazza del Duomo in 20 minutes by metro") (Tassinari 2025) and by the presence of the Policlinico – a teaching hospital that sustains a continuous but temporary presence of students and medical professionals. The emergence of short-term rentals in the city reflects a growing trend of "micro-financialisation", where the availability of a second or third home is not merely treated as an integration to the household income, but as an opportunity to generate high profits.

> We have seen that incentives to private owners are not enough to mobilise housing at long-term and affordable conditions. We are investigating which kinds of instruments we can develop to render it more attractive and increase trust, but we also ask ourselves whether and how we can find ways to appeal to the "social responsibility" of owners,

as Lara Baio (2025), coordinator of the Housing Office, underlines. The reluctance of property owners to rent out their dwellings, particularly to lower-income groups, is further illustrated by Licia Tassinari (2025) along the following example:

> We – social services – had an allocation of about €25,000 in the 2024 budget that could be used to help with the stipulation of new rental contracts, for families facing eviction, people losing their homes, etc. But we couldn't use this money. Not because there is no need for it, but because these people couldn't find homes to rent. Because no one wants to rent out their properties.

In 2023, a public-led housing agency – the "Agenzia dell'Abitare" – was established as a joint initiative between San Donato Milanese and eight other municipalities[7] with the aim to tackle housing-related issues in a comprehensive and coordinated way, representing an important attempt to innovate (supra-)urban governance on a cross-sectoral issue. Operationally, its institutional positioning within the municipality of San Donato follows a dual logic, combining technical and social tasks and competencies – a rather atypical arrangement in Italy, where housing governance is usually compartmentalised and integrated with welfare policies. One of the Agenzia's tasks is to build a solid knowledge base on how housing needs and resources within its operational realm are articulated – a currently ongoing process undertaken with the aim to ground policy decisions in evidence. Another task is the facilitation of the mobilisation of vacancies in the private stock, by acting as an intermediary between owners and tenants, offering incentives and guarantees to promote long-term contracts at moderate rents, attempting to create benefits for both. So far, these efforts have had limited success – partly due to the relatively short existence of the Agenzia, and partly because the available instruments lack persuasive power and leverage when compared to more attractive market alternatives. However, the establishment and particular design of the Agenzia as a collaborative endeavour is a substantial step forward as compared to ten years ago, when the lack of intermunicipal interventions and coordination had been identified as a major obstacle in tackling housing challenges effectively (Bricocoli *et al.* 2020).

Limits and potentials in negotiating with big commercial players

A particularly complex and delicate issue regards the negotiation of developments between the municipality and commercial private actors, particularly in the case of large-scale built heritage like the

7 Carpiano, Cerro al Lambro, Colturano, Dresano, Melegnano, San Donato Milanese, San Giuliano Milanese, San Zenone al Lambro e Vizzolo Predabissi, together constituting the so-called "Distretto Sociale Sud Est Milano", a governance level established to facilitate intermunicipal cooperation in social and health-related affairs.

"Terzo" and "Quarto". Such negotiations unfold against the backdrop of largely differing, to some degree incompatible interests. Commercial actors, like the asset management fund owning the office buildings, first and foremost represent the interests of their shareholders – i.e., profitability and the maximisation of returns –, while the public administration is accountable to citizens and must ensure that projects meet local needs, preserve heritage, and generate public value. As Carminati (2025) elaborates:

> Big funds think in terms of profit, of monetisation. They don't have the kind of sensitivity a builder may have, who might take pride in constructing a beautiful building because people will say "this was built by that company". So, it's very important to find strategies that are attractive for the fund and present them concrete proposals that give them a vision – but one from which they can also generate revenues.

A key challenge lies in the municipality's reduced bargaining powers when dealing with big commercial players. The instruments available are those laid out in planning regulations and the PGT, which – while setting a formal framework – provides limited means and weak incentives to enforce action on the part of the owner. If the conditions set by the municipality are deemed unattractive, a private real estate fund can opt for leaving a property vacant – awaiting a more accommodating future administration –, resulting in its deterioration, without breaching any legal obligations. Such inaction, however, can have substantial negative repercussions for the city, particularly where large-scale and symbolically significant sites such as the "Palazzi Uffici ENI" are concerned. Carminati (2025) stresses that:

> we absolutely need to sit down at the table with them – early in the process – and avoid making decisions solely from our own perspective, because the risk would be failure, meaning that the buildings remain empty. For the development of the city more widely, we really cannot afford to leave them empty. We wouldn't achieve anything beneficial, neither for us nor for them.

The risk of long-term vacancy and decay highlights that there is a structural imbalance in power – reinforced by the fact that San Donato has less negotiation power than a larger administration (as for instance Milan). This underscores the need for stronger regulatory tools or innovative forms of negotiation able to align private investment strategies more closely with public interest goals. So far, the main instruments at hand include quotas (typically, 20%) for the compulsory development of social housing units in cases of a change in land use designation (which can, however, also be compensated for through payment), as well as volumetric bonuses in the case of further contributions to public wellbeing. In terms of negotiation capacities, a so far underused lever is the requirement to deliver

> a detailed financial plan, submitted by the implementing party, and evaluated by us in a way that the economic balance of the operation can be assessed. As San Donato in some areas is starting to have very high real estate values, the implementing party is required to include them in this plan in a way that the value increase is made clearly evident. Of course, if a plot is valued at, let's say, a billion Euros, you cannot demand a billion in public works as a contribution – that is true. But rendering explicit the economic situation provides a unit of measurement that allows you to negotiate. And this is why usually no one comes forward with a precise financial plan: they're all very vague. So, this could definitely be an important lever to improve our position for negotiation. Another important factor is uncertainties – uncertainties which, however, on paper are already set. For example, the issue of the metro extension is crucial: today, it is not visible, so it is difficult to use it as a lever or as a driver for value enhancement. However, we know that it is a concrete project – it hasn't been financed yet, but it most likely is going to happen next year, meaning that works could start in two years, and in three or four years, the metro will be there (Carminati 2025).

Learnings from San Donato Milanese beyond ENI

The case of San Donato Milanese highlights several broader societal and governance challenges that are common to many

European (and not exclusively urban) contexts yet accentuated here by the prominent role played by ENI.

One of these is the question of intergenerational justice. The city can be considered paradigmatic of a growing divide between those who were able to benefit from the post-war economic boom and today's younger generations, who face increasing difficulties in securing decent incomes and thus in obtaining and maintaining stable and affordable housing, eroding not only the economic security of lower- and middle-income groups, but also access to the city. This calls for a "renewed intergenerational alliance" (DAStU 2020, p. 35), a social contract across generations aimed at redistributing wealth as well as access to resources and opportunities. This is not only a matter of equity and the sustainability of welfare systems (increasingly strained by pension-related expenditures), but also a structural necessity if current pathways shaped by demographic and market dynamics – ongoing population ageing alongside the attraction of an exclusively high-income population – are to be redirected towards more inclusive visions of what the city should become, and for whom it is intended, in the future.

Secondly, the case of San Donato Milanese highlights the complexities of negotiation between the public and property owners, including both major commercial players and private individuals, which require profound and very different kinds of efforts and instruments, as ideological visions for the city and societal goals clash with smaller and larger economic interests. Harmonising longer-term development objectives with short-term market logics remains a key challenge in contexts of limited regulatory leverage. In this regard, San Donato – as the "*città dell'ENI*" – exhibits some particularities, but is far from unique in facing the need to operate within a given framework of power relations, constraints, and opportunities which are – more or less so – the result of its historical trajectories. The tension between the city's historical dependence on ENI – perceived as both a resource and a burden – and its aspirations to autonomously define its future trajectories will thus remain a constant companion for those tasked with governing the city. While ENI's role has substantially changed over the decades, its influence remains very

relevant, as its presence, actions, and decisions continue to shape the city's development, room for manoeuvre, and physical environment. As Licia Tassinari puts it (2025):

> San Donato has the "six-legged dog" tattooed on it. You can't remove it. […] When you say, "now we are finally free to do what we want", I think you are denying the obvious. […] If we had a Mount Rushmore, we would have Mattei on it. That's just how it is. […] But I think we can say: Let's start from that point and move forward.

Acknowledgements

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António Carvalho, Kerstin Letitia Tafaro*

TERZO PALAZZO EX-SNAM OFFICES
A catalyst for affordable housing and urban regeneration in San Donato Milanese

Introduction

The European housing crisis is a phenomenon also felt in San Donato Milanese, a municipality facing some specific challenges such as the urban impact of two derelict office headquarters located in a strategic position, therefore risking the rise of a big "empty centre", coupled with an ageing population (now living in oversized apartments) while the young active population struggles to find local housing responses. This led the municipality to consider in its territorial governance plan the mandatory conversion of these highly qualified office buildings into mixed-use housing to revitalise the area.

That is the case of the office building known as "Terzo Palazzo SNAM", designed by Franco Albini and Franca Helg with Antonio Piva and Marco Albini (1973), today listed for the quality of its architectural features and landscaped surroundings, an urban landmark in a green park.

Considering the academic goals of the PRIN project "UAH! Unconventional Affordable Housing"[1], led by Politecnico di Milano, this was recognised as a good opportunity for applied research through design, namely in final projects for masters' theses in architecture, exploring ideas and diverse housing solutions for a universe of people associated into unconventional households that face strong hardship in the housing market, both in terms of affordability and space solutions.

Therefore, this paper revolves around the academic masters' thesis project developed by Kerstin Letitia Tafaro and Moham-

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1 As described in the editorial.

mad Reza Farahbod, transforming the "Terzo Palazzo SNAM" into a hybrid building capable of attracting diverse residents but also becoming the so far nonexistent civic centre that the municipality aims at and San Donato Milanese needs.

San Donato and Metanopoli

The municipality of San Donato Milanese is in the south-east of Milan and belongs to its metropolitan area. The city emerged as a small village along the Roman Via Aemilia (today: via Emilia) and is located today at the start of the Autostrada del Sole highway. This strategic position, further highlighted by relevant public transportation (metro line, train station, the vicinity to the Milan Linate Airport) gives the city a strong "satellite" character, with people moving daily between San Donato and Milan, for work and housing convenience. Additionally, the presence of one of the main hospitals of the metropolitan area of Milano is another attractor towards the city, bringing in patients, visitors, and hospital workers.

The city's development is historically unique, being directly linked to the establishment of the headquarters of ENI (Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi/National Hydrocarbons Company) in the town during the economic boom following the Second World War[2]. In an operation of strengthening the Italian independence from fossil fuel importation, a multitude of industries including SNAM (*Società Nazionale Metanodotti*), founded in 1941, were incorporated inside the newly created ENI industries in 1953, led by Enrico Mattei as president (Deschermeier 2007). ENI developed fast under the guidance of Mattei, who chose the small town of San Donato Milanese as the site of the directional centre, due to its strategic position (Magni 2011). The construction of the new headquarters, started in 1953, gave birth to a new neighbourhood, *Metanopoli*[3].

2 See also the contribution by Wolfgring and Bricocoli in this volume.
3 The name was clearly inspired by the "metanodotti" of SNAM.

Metanopoli was designed with clear goals in mind: ENI and Metanopoli were meant to be a universe of industries, office buildings, housing for employees, and a framework of green spaces, services and facilities, directed towards instruction, sports, free time and healthcare (DAStU 2020), still present today and of great value for San Donato. Inside Metanapoli, housing was provided according to different social classes, and employees' wellbeing was given big attention, with the goal of giving them a sense of belonging to the company and set high standards of living for them (Fraticelli & Scaleggi 2015). As a consequence, the urban development and demographic increase was astonishing in the following decades[4].

Mattei's successful leadership allowed the company to involve relevant architects of the time, such as Mario Bacciocchi, who was commissioned in 1952 with the drafting of the masterplan of the area, as well as several renowned architects that contributed to the city's architectural heritage[5]. Because of this heritage, some authors have considered Metanopoli as a true open-air museum of Italian urban and architectural history where architectural highlights such as Terzo Palazzo are seen today as modernist monuments (Sermisoni 1995; Fiano & Guidarini 1999).

Terzo Palazzo SNAM

The third office building of the ENI group, also known as "Terzo Palazzo SNAM" was commissioned by ENI and SNAM in 1969 to the architectural practice composed by Franco Albini, Franca Helg, Antonio Piva and Marco Albini, and it was built between 1971 and 1973 (Gatti 1995).

4 In 1936, the village on San Donato counted 2.636 inhabitants only and was based on agricultural economy. Less than 50 years later, the city was counting more than 30.000 inhabitants, the majority of which were revolving around ENI and Metanopoli (Tuttitalia.it 2025).

5 The most impactful heritage visible in Metanopoli today are the ENI office buildings: the first, by Nizzoli and Oliveri (1955-1957), the second (1961-1962) and fourth (1980-1984) by Bacigalupo and Ratti, the third, by Franco Albini's studio (1969-1973), the fifth, by Gabetti and Isola (1985-1991) and the sixth, by Morphosis and Nemesi Architects (2022 – under construction).

The building was constructed south of the original Metanopoli masterplan, as an outpost of the new neighbourhood, in a large green plot and with a rotation of 45° compared to the existing urban fabric, highlighting its uniqueness. It consists of five floors above ground and one basement floor (partially above ground, depending on the variable topography around), adding up to a total of about 40,000 square metres of surface (Ordine degli Architetti di Milano 2025). The plan concept is a cross shape, with four wings organised through a rigid orthogonal geometry and one wing shorter than the others due to the presence of the canteen building, added during the design process (Rossi Prodi 1996). This shorter wing was intended for management activities while the others were office spaces (Ordine degli Architetti di Milano 2025). The four wings come together in the central square space where a polygonal staircase, in steel and granite, gives direct access to the upper floors. The main entrance for visitors is marked outside by an invitational canopy (Rossi Prodi 1996).

Each wing consists of a triple body, obtained through the juxtaposition of three shifted rectangular shapes with different functions. In its middle core are the services and vertical distribution between floors. Inner distribution and circulation allow both autonomy of operation for each wing and each floor, and easy communication between wings (Rabuffetti 2023). The façade rectangles instead contain the office spaces, with open plan flexibility and only a few movable walls, to separate or reorganise the more private spaces (Ordine degli Architetti di Milano 2025). The flexibility is also assured by a regular and modular grid of 1.2 metres (*ibid.*). The shifting of the volumes in each wing creates a more dynamic facade, with asymmetrical edges and recesses, and helps to break the length of the wings, given the total length of the building – which is about 200 meters.

While designing the building, the construction time was a significant factor – there was a need to reduce the construction to less than twenty months (Rossi Prodi 1996). This goal was reached through

the adoption of two design choices: the use of a steel structure[6] and the positioning of the air conditioning system pipes (cooling and heating) entirely on the exterior facades of the building, protected by a convex horizontal band along the length of each floor (*ibid.*). This element, a fairing in self-extinguishing polyester resin reinforced with red glass fibers, became the main feature of the building, emphasising a horizontal image and using the strong red color to clearly contrast with the green context (Gatti 1995).

The building is glazed (above the red horizontal stripes) through continuous horizontal ribbon windows that further highlight its linearity. The glazing, which is fixed and made of just single glass, is interrupted only in small lateral façades of the wings. Here, vertical pipelines, covered by the same red fiberglass, connect the structure vertically from the roof to the underground floor (where the main technical spaces are located).

The housing crisis in San Donato Milanese

San Donato Milanese, in its urban planning, housing stock and demographical composition, today faces important issues, especially linked to the historical influence of ENI. The development of the neighbourhood of Metanopoli happened differently from other Italian planning experimentations: it was designed ex-novo, completely outside of municipality restrictions and therefore also lacking connections to the existing fabric (Lombardia Beni Culturali 2014). The previously small village was transformed radically, and its barycenter was moved from via Emilia towards the east. The new masterplan was designed revolving around efficiency, cars, and company policies, without considering a proper city centre. Today, the city appears decentralised from the original nucleus and still lacks a centre with real urban life. Furthermore, while the new masterplan included abundant green spaces and public facilities (especially linked to sports and leisure), constituting

6 Composed of double T-shaped beams and pillars, with slabs made of metal sheet and reinforced concrete (Rabuffetti 2023).

today a valuable resource for the city, there is a severe lack of commercial and catering services in the areas built by ENI (Comune di San Donato Milanese 2020b).

The housing heritage left by ENI shows significant differences compared to other neighbourhoods developed later in the city. In Metanopoli, there is a heritage of traditional and large apartments[7] originally designed for the employees and their families (Fraticelli & Scaleggi 2015). After the privatisation of the company in 1992, this housing stock was sold at low prices to the employees themselves (Bricocoli *et al.* 2020), increasing homeownership rates (already high in Italy). But it also contributed to housing unaffordability, with high rents and selling prices, especially speculating on the purchasing power of foreign workers involved with ENI. These dynamics radically changed the local demographics as well, especially because those oversized apartments originally built for large families now host either older couples or singles, with accessibility and home maintenance struggles, or young adults benefitting from the acquired generational privilege (Bricocoli *et al.* 2020).

The numerous office buildings present in the city, defining its skyline and identity, are today partially underused or in some cases completely empty, like the Terzo Palazzo SNAM. Already in 2015, a big percentage of offices in Milan were vacant (Reggio & D'Alessandro 2016, cit. from Fianchini & Ferrucci 2018), a tendency that has only increased in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and the remote work phenomenon. In San Donato, this phenomenon is especially visible: with the internal changes of the company and the contemporary evolution of the work dynamics, the necessity for large office buildings (real monuments to labour, such as the Terzo Palazzo) became less important, resulting in multiple vacant office buildings.

Last but not least, Milano and its hinterland, including San Donato, today constitute an important attractor for workers, immigrants and students, which implies a rapid and significant change of household composition in the city. These new types

7 The majority of the apartments have more than 5 rooms (Fraticelli & Scaleggi 2015, p. 105).

of households (multiple generations living together, cohabitation of unrelated adults, single-person households, etc.) often have to adapt themselves to obsolete apartments that weren't designed for their needs, which might apply also to the housing stock of Metanopoli. These large apartments, if not inhabited by their aged owners, might end up being transformed into different forms of housing, including to be speculatively rented to multiple people in unconventional forms of cohabitation. The result of these oversized *empty nests*[8] has been a collapse of the equivalence between the households' needs and the housing typology and consequently an increasing distance between the existing housing supply and the new emerging housing demands (Postiglione *et al.* 2022). Additionally, a progressive unaffordability of the current housing market is becoming an issue, due to speculations and existing transformations in the labour market, leading to temporary employment, precariousness and work delocalisation (Bricocoli *et al.* 2020; Bricocoli & Peverini 2023). As a consequence, a growing section of the population, including the middle class, lives in conditions of reduced housing affordability, with precarious and informal situations and constrained access to housing (Postiglione *et al.* 2022).

All these elements are pushing us in new directions, where traditional housing is no longer sufficient. The topics of affordable and unconventional housing arise as possible strategies to deal with these inadequacies and in this context, empty office buildings have been recently explored as resources for new housing solutions. The experimentation on the Terzo Palazzo SNAM is not an isolated case but an opportunity to foster further research and experimentation on other office buildings.

The Municipality of San Donato itself has been working on a strategy to give a new urban structure to the city, new connections and a new city centre, and had designated the area of the Terzo Palazzo as an "urban regeneration area" (Comune di

8 Empty nest refers to a family life course transition and post parental phase that occurs when children have moved out and left the parental home (Mitchell 2019).

San Donato Milanese 2020a), with the intention of rendering it a new crucial node of the city. Even though the Milanese metro line M2 terminates precisely at San Donato's northern borders, its expansion is already a strategy of the municipality, whose Territorial Governance Plan (PGT) foresees a new metro stop next to the Terzo Palazzo SNAM (*ibid.*).

The plot instead, today mostly covered by parking lots, is planned to be transformed into a mixed-use neighbourhood, with housing and new services, including a Museum of Energy, linked to the history of the city. The former office buildings (apart from the Terzo Palazzo, the plot also entails the so-called Quarto Palazzo) are planned to be converted into various housing forms, including student housing, affordable housing and market-rate housing (*ibid.*). Considering the lack of connections between this plot and the city, and the lack of commercial activities and services of the area, the PGT includes a broader strategy of re-structuring the area through a new "urban park" along the historical via Martiri di Cefalonia, south of the plot. The urban park would link the existing older connection of the municipality building (to the west), to the historical "cascina di Santa Scolastica" and the Lambro River (to the east). Additionally, the already implemented pedestrian and cycling paths further strengthen slow mobility in the area.

Considering the municipality's intentions for the near future, the Terzo Palazzo SNAM constitutes a tangible potentiality. In the framework of the UAH! project, and with the municipality's PGT as guideline, it can become a pilot project, able to simultaneously address numerous relevant issues and develop new insights on the future of housing.

Project strategies

The project proposal covers different scales, from the urban setting to the building, and its interiors, to study new ways of living in the area in a former office building.

Looking at the architectural scale in particular, the 6-floor building is not only transformed to accommodate affordable

and unconventional housing solutions but is also highlighted in its identitarian value as a heritage landmark. The red horizontal elements, which strongly define the façades and the external appearance of the building, were preserved as one of the main features.

To further enhance the monumentality of the building in its peculiar and very natural context (of great value in itself), one of the urban strategies was to connect the building to the surroundings through new urban spaces and public services. A detailed mapping of the trees, paired with a study of the irregular topography of the surroundings, enabled us to manipulate the topography, excavating it to expose the underground floor to host public spaces, while safekeeping as many trees as possible and preserving the red resin fairing on the former ground floor.

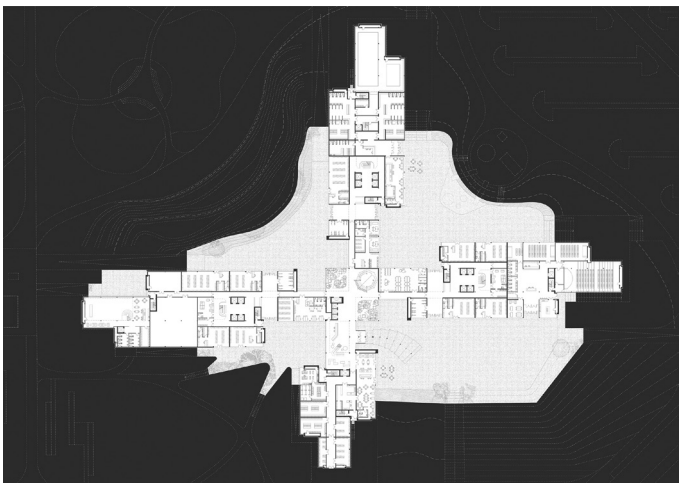

Figure 1. Ground floor, previously underground/level -1 (Tafaro & Farahbod 2025).

This allows the building to become public and permeable at the -1 level by creating a main entrance square and direct access from the outside to different public services, commercial activities and transit spaces inside the building (fig. 1).

The iconic frontal canopy was moved down from the ground floor to the level of the newly excavated square (the previous -1 level becomes the new ground level), preserving its role as the main invitation for visitors to enter the building, and at the same time highlighting its geometrical composition, particularly visible from above. Sculpturally, it becomes a tool to identify the public entrance of the building and to help the residents and visitors to orientate themselves, much like its original purpose.

The excessive depth of the building (29.5 metres between opposite façades) was one of the main design challenges of the proposal. This depth creates a very dark middle core where toilets, storage, stairs and elevators are located at present, while all the office rooms are displayed along the sealed façades. This meant a total dependence on air conditioning and electric lighting, a condition that is unacceptable for the intended use of sustainable housing in the 21st century, thus requiring some strategic design decisions. To tackle this problem on the upper floors, 1.50-meter-deep balconies were generated through the translation of the glazed façades to offer a stronger relationship with the exterior and provide more quality of living to the apartments. In the centre of each wing, where the windowless service spaces are located, four interior spatial voids were carved, surrounded by gathering spaces, connecting the ground floor to the new roof skylights, allowing natural light and ventilation. The apartments face outside through the balconies and inside towards the inner distributive streets through windows opening to the kitchens and living spaces (fig. 2).

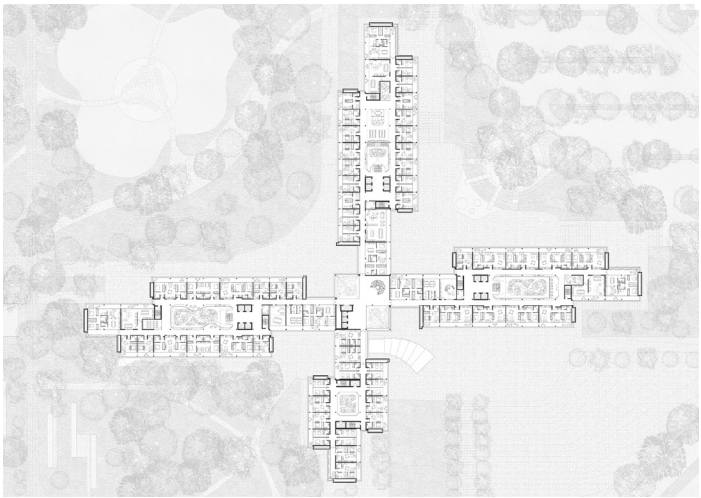

Figure 2. Level 2, typical floor (Tafaro & Farahbod 2025).

The former office distribution system of corridors becomes now a sequence of gathering places, where each central void is distinguished from the others through different spatial compositions. On each wing and each floor, collective and shared spaces are distributed to extend the livable space from the private apartments to the whole building. The introduction of these vertical voids enhances the potential monumentality of the building from inside, whereas nowadays there is no visual connection between floors but a simple repetition of horizontal typical floors.

The smaller wing, towards the east, will be slightly different, with the common spaces concentrated on the ground floor and the upper floors entirely dedicated to small apartments and bedrooms, thereby creating a guest house.

The apartments are based on two modules, following the pillar spans, 6x6 meters and 6x7.5 meters and a variety of typologies and sizes are derived from these measures, to answer the needs of new unconventional households, easily modifiable among each other with small changes thanks to compatibility and the use of lightweight partitions inside the units themselves. All

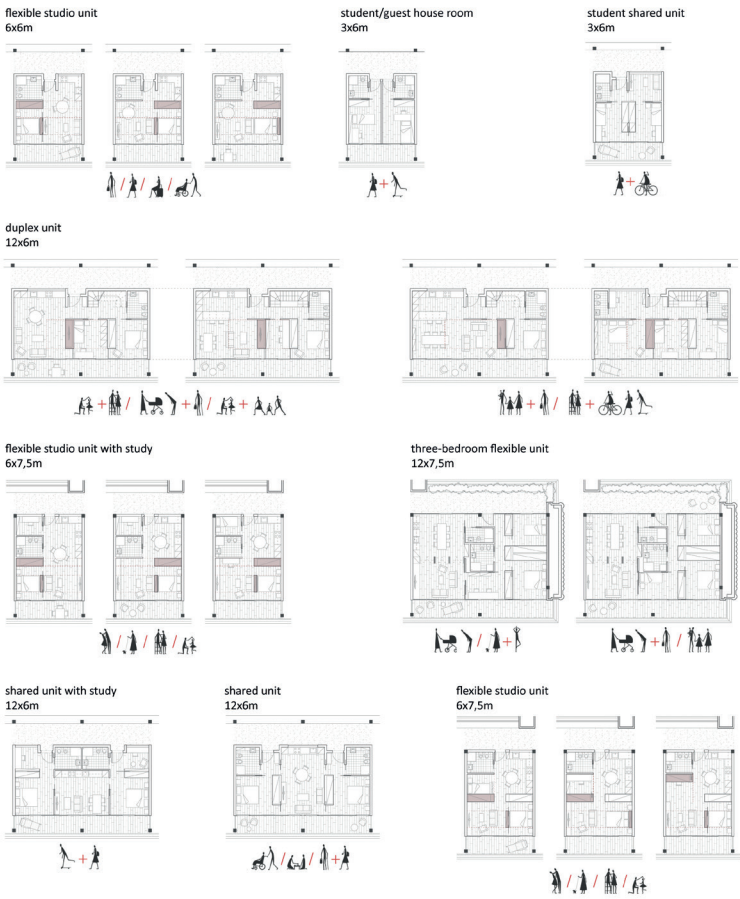

Figure 3. Selection of typologies, their possible modifications and users (Tafaro & Farahbod 2025).

units are vertically stacked with kitchens and bathrooms pushed towards the inside and living spaces and bedrooms towards the balconies, thus contributing to the overall transformability of the units through time.

Inside the units, the use of floor-to-ceiling closet blocks and door panels, sliding suspended from rails, allows for fast changes of the interior spatial composition, with the possibility of closing

a kitchen, moving a bedroom or transforming the bedroom into a home office or removing it completely.

Intended users

The project is targeted at a variety of unconventional households which fall mainly under four categories, conceptually reflected by the four wings of the building and used as starting point for the design of the apartment typologies (fig. 3).

Students and young professionals: in San Donato, it is common to find young adults who are living or moving back to live with parents. The instability of the job market and of income pushes the young generation into the "grey zone", unable to afford independent living, but at the same time unable to apply for public housing (Fraticelli & Scaleggi 2015). This resident type was chosen as one that is in need of affordable housing, to gain independence from the family support system. The spaces designed for them aim to provide small affordable solutions, complemented with common spaces which can stimulate a sense of community and collaboration.

Older citizens: in San Donato, they are significantly present, especially in the area of Metanopoli, which is not only among the most aged areas of the city, but also the one where people tend to live alone (Fraticelli & Scaleggi 2015). Due to a high percentage of ownership, paired with the increase of the share of the elderly in the Italian population, a lot of seniors find themselves living alone in large apartments, with consequences of loneliness, lack of accessible care and services (ISTAT 2023). This type of residents was therefore selected as a target for alternative solutions, consisting of small units, individual or paired to share a living space, complemented with common spaces to meet and generate social activities, and especially the presence of services easily accessible inside the building, linked to healthcare, entertainment, and physical activity.

Temporary users: this type includes small households which have a need for a temporary housing solution. In San Donato, the Gruppo San Donato Hospital and the ENI offices are big attractors and create a need for temporary, flexible and intermittent housing solutions, for those users that move or visit to the city for specific purposes

(Fraticelli & Scaleggi 2015). This housing type is concentrated in the shorter wing in a structure that we define as a "guest house", constituted by small studio apartments, single and double bedrooms, complemented with several common spaces, for free-time, cooking and productivity.

Intergenerational households: this larger category includes a mix of different situations. More specifically, it usually brings together users with diverse needs, often belonging to different age groups and without family relationships. This dwelling type, which corresponds to higher degrees of sharing, was considered through the design of larger housing units, with flexible rooms and multiple entrances in case of the duplex typology.

Space categories: public, collective, shared, private

The complexity of this unconventional housing is reflected by its various types of spaces, designed to serve different users. These spaces go from the most public ones to the most private ones, defining a sequence of privacy layers, an important concept when working on a building of this monumental scale (Coppola Pignatelli 1977). It becomes even more important considering the challenge of transforming office headquarters into collective housing, which requires the creation of a feeling of domesticity and privacy. Additionally, after the COVID-19 pandemic, a new type of living emerged, where elements that previously happened elsewhere in the city (work, sport, education and more) started merging with housing, asking for private, shared and public spaces in the dwelling estates, and requiring design strategies on how they relate with each other (Espegel *et al.* 2022).

Public spaces are located on level 0 and level 1, accessible from the outside, particularly from the extremities of the wings and from the central core[9]. The transit space of the central lobby, identified on

9 Public spaces inside the building: dance hall, swimming pool and gym with connected café, auditorium (at the extremities of the long wings); guest house reception and connected restaurant (at the extremity of the short wing), commercial activities (along the sides of the long wings);

the outside by the pre-existing canopy, distributes the inner service core and the guest house. The restaurant and the service core are accessible both from the outside and from the inside, making them more permeable. One very important aspect when dealing with public spaces and private housing at the same time was the necessity to provide security and control over the residential accesses. This is why the lateral accesses on each wing are solely usable by the residents of the building, allowing for direct access to the upper floors, while offering visual connection but physical separation between the central lobby and the public spaces.

The collective spaces were designed on level 1 in the case of the shorter wing of the guest house and mixed throughout the floors in the other wings, together with the shared spaces[10]. Collective spaces are commonly accessible by all the residents of the building; therefore, they have some very different uses like coworking, fitness, arts and crafts, music room, cinema room, and more. They can also change through time, according to evolving needs.

Shared spaces were designed to contain kitchens and living rooms, which can be used for daily use but also as common rooms for events and more[11]. They are meant to be used by the people of the same wing and floor; therefore, they are semi-private because they constitute the layer that is immediately before the private apartments.

Private spaces exist on every level, and they all have (with little exceptions) windows on two sides, towards the outside and the inside[12]. The windows towards the inside (facing the voids, inner distribution and common spaces) were designed to give the res-

coworking, physiotherapy, doctor, day care (in the inner central core of the building at level -1 and 0, accessible from frontal canopy).

10 Collective spaces inside the building: remote working room, fitness room, arts and crafts room, coworking space, indoor garden, bicycle storage, computer room, reading room, music room, study area, cinema room (distributed on all floors starting from level 0 with the indoor gardens).

11 Shared spaces inside the building: shared kitchens, shared living rooms (distributed among all floors).

12 Private units inside the building: single bedroom with private bathroom, single bedroom with shared bathroom, studio apartment with flexible bed area, studio apartment with two flexible bed areas, studio apartment with flexible bed area, study/work room and flexible guest area, one-bedroom apartment with flexible second bedroom, two-bedroom apartment with study/work room, two-bedroom shared apartment with separate entrances

idents the possibility to open up to the building life, to facilitate connections with the other residents.

San Donato Milanese's new city centre

The project of adaptive reuse of the Terzo Palazzo is not just a housing project inside a green park, but is a hybrid building, with a complex programme of different spaces and functions. It is intended to contribute to the creation of a real urban centre in San Donato Milanese, bringing together transportation connections (metro, buses, cars, bicycles, pedestrians) with new urban spaces (squares, green spaces and water spaces), surrounding the new public functions that this monumental building will host at the ground levels (fig.4). Therefore, the building will offer spaces and functions that will attract other residents and passers-by, generate a civic centre and make the Terzo Palazzo a resource meant to stitch together different parts of the city, existing services, and fill the urban void. The main goal is to give the city a new urban centre with a clear identity, through the strong and iconic image of the Terzo Palazzo, engraved in the minds of all the citizens of San Donato Milanese who have always known it only from afar, surrounded by hundreds of workers' parked cars and vast empty green spaces. That isolated circumstance is changed now by the new lively functions of the building.

The monumentality and identitarian value of the building plays an important role in strengthening the new urban project and its new connections. The preservation of the red polyester resin elements in all façades, highlighted by the new balconies, and the preservation of the modular division of the façade, with five glazed partitions for every 6-meter pillar span, both aim to keep the original linearity of the facades. The external front canopy is preserved (even if replaced on the lower level) and enhanced as the main entrance to the public spaces. It has now an even greater preeminence, seen from the (future) metro station exit, connected with new monumental stairs going down to the newly excavated public square.

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and bathrooms, three-bedroom apartment, duplex apartment with separate entrances (and two to five flexible bedrooms).

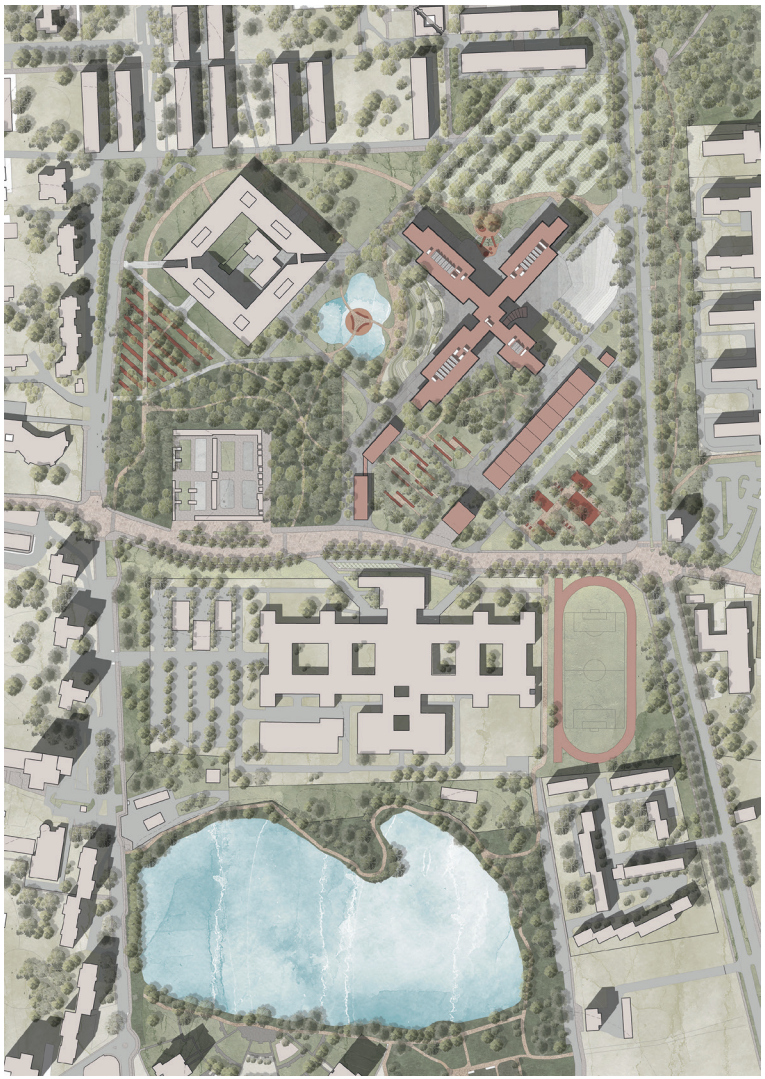

Figure 4: Proposed masterplan (Tafaro & Farahbod 2025).

Affordability and unconventionality, the starting concepts of the project, are developed through small- and large-scale choices. The unconventionality is ensured not only through the housing units' typologies, their design and their users, but also by the strong urban presence of this listed building that is a strong visual reference – a real landmark – in San Donato Milanese, converted from office-only into a hybrid housing building. With a mixed-use programme, the building becomes an attractor open to the city, with many functions that are shared among residents and outside citizens. The affordability relies not only on the apartments' design, adaptable through time, but also on the provision of collective spaces, allowing more activities and opportunities outside a small or micro-dwelling unit. In fact, the public programme of the building also contributes to its global affordability, where new commercial activities can constitute revenue, beneficial for the housing financing under a global management of the whole estate, in addition to the reactivation of a small-scale local economy.

Following the 45° rotation of the Terzo and Quarto Palazzo's orientation, new axes have been traced, connecting the corners of opposite sides of the plot and defining alternative ways of crossing the area.

The newly exposed underground floor becomes the new ground floor level, and its public spaces are surrounded by a new urban area, with slopes, urban stairs and a green hill auditorium, integrating the building into the context. The building is further highlighted by new functions: the new metro exits, the food court, the new sports area related to the existing one, the museum of energy and didactic area related to the school, the urban forest protecting the historical cemetery and the linear garden.

The existing street of via Martiri di Cefalonia is strengthened through the addition of these new functions, following the PGT's linear park strategy. Straight paved axes create fast and strong ways of crossing, the curved paths create soft loops to explore the area until the existing lake Europa, south of the plot, which gains a new importance. The former parking lots are reduced and pushed to the sides, to create a car free

environment, with the possibility of access of emergency vehicles. In the centre of the plot a small lake connects the Terzo and Quarto Palazzo, supplied through the existing underground water streams of the river Lambro. In the middle of it all, the Terzo Palazzo with its red monumentality becomes a landmark and urban attractor, a catalyst for the new urban centre that the municipality of San Donato Milanese and its population are longing for.

Conclusion

The "Terzo Palazzo SNAM" is a remarkable architectural piece, a quite surprising work from Franco Albini's final years. Following basic modernist principles such as the open plan, modular repetition, linear circulation, core infrastructures, prefabricated panels and glazed façades, Albini masterfully managed all ingredients to create a red urban landmark in a strategic location of San Donato Milanese.

The office building was broken into four wings in a cruciform plan, thereby distributing the workspaces along the fixed ribbon windows, seeming a cluster of four smaller buildings. The façades, made of polyester resin panels, proved to have a resilient material and an ingenious solution: the undulated surface, besides hiding the AC pipes, creates a shaded surface of horizontal lines.

Being a derelict building listed by the municipality for its architectural quality, its rationalist DNA offers a good matrix for the UAH! *research by design*, as the masters' thesis project presented above illustrates. The conversion of this office building into housing can therefore be regarded as a case study for the reuse of abandoned office buildings.

This means converting it into a hybrid building where different functions are open to the public at the ground level, thus turning it into an urban magnet near the future metro station, able to promote a civic centre for the whole neighbourhood, while on the upper floors different residential units are arranged to respond to new living styles.

From small individual living units to larger co-living solutions, they all benefit from shared spaces distributed on all floors around central courtyards. These central voids serve as social magnets for the residents by bringing in natural light from roof skylights, thus turning the old office corridors into inner streets to which the different residential units open doors and windows.

The "Terzo Palazzo SNAM" as an icon would thus be preserved while reinterpreting and renovating *Metanapoli's* legacy for the future as a catalyst for affordable housing and urban regeneration in San Donato Milanese.

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Agim Kërçuku, Gennaro Postiglione*

ADAPTING TO THE DEMOGRAPHIC TRANSITION AND IMPLEMENTING HOUSING AFFORDABILITY THROUGH INTERGENERATIONAL COHABITATION

The case of *Prendi in casa* in Milan

The text explores experiences of intergenerational cohabitation in Milan through the programme *Prendi in casa*. It examines the potentials and constraints within the relationship between demographic transition and shared living. By focusing on both the elderly population and young students – often overlooked players in the urban landscape – the aim is to provide a fresh perspective on Milan and spark discussions about the challenges of contemporary living arrangements.

Many fears, concerns and obsessions about the consequences of demographic transition have marked the first two decades of the 21st century. Addressing the social, economic, and environmental costs of progressive depopulation, aging, and declining birth rates has created widespread global awareness. It is shaping the precautions taken by society today and in the future. While there are still concerns about high population growth rates in some parts of the world, in others, there are fears about the consequences of decline. There are signs of these fears in the implications of and responses to the ongoing transformation: in policies to encourage higher birth rates; in national agendas to support repopulation and migration; in social security reforms; in political and economic agendas; in the processes of extinction of cultures and traditions; in stories of loneliness and isolation and the weakening of family and community ties. Addressing the issue of demographic transition today has become a matter of survival. A few figures help to establish the scale of this transition. According to ISTAT's most recent forecasts on the demographic future, the Italian population aged 65

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and over will rise from 23.8% in 2022 to 34.5% in 2050. The resident population will contract further, from 59 million on 1 January 2022 to 54.4 million in 2050. The number of people living alone in 2042 will be 9.8 million compared to 8.4 million in 2022, about 37.5% of the total households (ISTAT 2023). This population structure will radically alter many aspects of collective life. The contemporary city will have to rethink its housing identity profoundly. *Prendi in casa* a cohabitation project bringing together older adults, students and young workers, can be seen as an indication of how the residential landscape is changing in cities.

Figure 1. Location map of the homes involved in Prendi in casa (Source: J. Abouelezz, E. Alberton, B.E. Alfar, A. Beni, R. Piantelli).

By examining these cohabitation experiences, we seek to delve into the spatial features of social relations that the demographic transition poses. In the second part of this article, we will explore current perspectives on aging and demographic transition. The third part will then focus on unconventional senior housing, highlighting how it may represent a valuable resource for adapting to these demographic changes. Moving on to the fourth part, we will present the framework that allowed us to explore the *Prendi in casa* case study and illustrate its findings and implications. Ultimately, the underlying question that runs through this paper revolves around how unconventional living practices can help respond to demographic shifts while making housing more affordable.

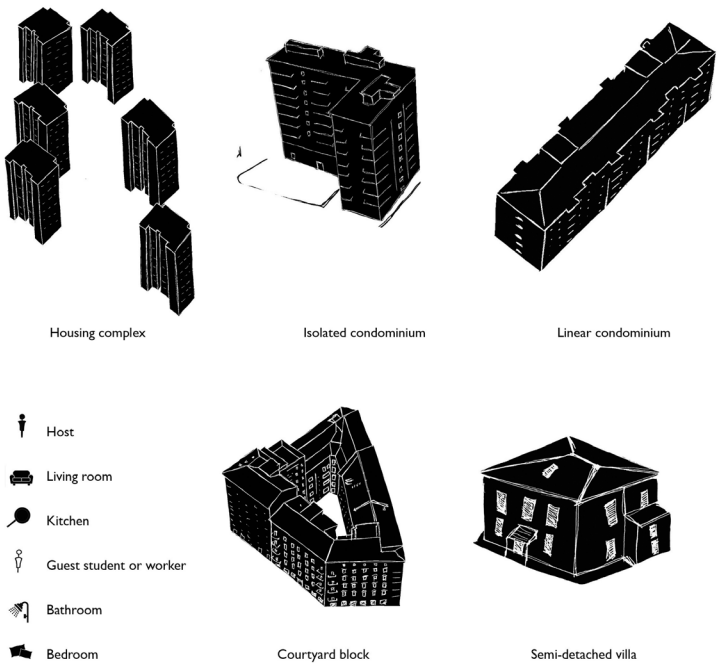

Figure 2. Abacus of Housing Typologies (Source: J.Abouelezz, E. Alberton, B.E. Alfar, A. Beni, R. Piantelli).

Aging between misfortune and conquest

The progressive ageing of the European and global population marks an epochal event, constantly hovering between being perceived as a misfortune or an achievement (Johnson 2021). On the one hand, we witness anxiety and apprehension about the ageing process' social, political and economic consequences. At the same time, however, the ageing of society represents an achievement. After all, an ageing population is the positive and inevitable result of the successes that humanity has been pursuing for some time: the extension of the average life span of people, the reduction of infant mortality and the emancipation of women (Deaton 2015; Rosling 2018; Johnson 2021).

Yet, coming to terms with an ageing population means addressing the different conditions of health and wealth, as well as the differing access to capital, social, material, and spatial resources, among the elderly population (Ulijaszek *et al.* 2012). Being elderly still means experiencing a shrinking personal space, network of relationships and the right to the city. It means being trapped in one's own home or cohabitating with family members or private caregivers or, on the other hand, being institutionalised in nursing homes. But it is equally true that being elderly today means being a strong subject in the city. It is no longer possible to consider the figure of older people solely through the lens of frailty and welfarism.

Dealing simultaneously with the dual dimensions of misfortune and achievement, fragility and strength, makes the ageing process one of the most complex and urgent urban issues to be addressed. For these reasons, from a theoretical and operational standpoint, we cyclically encounter the problem of how to approach the ageing population within our cities. It is true that, compared to the past, there has been an evolution in the way city design is promoted, with a greater emphasis on creating *age-friendly* environments and spaces that cater to different ages and attitudes towards the use of public space (Handler 2005). However, the risk remains that we simplify the category of older people as inhabitants, treating elderly living as a specialised function within our cities and imposing a unitary, rigid and homogeneous orientation through universalistic

normalisation and the rationalisation of everyday life, similar to the modern movement (Tosi 1994; Bianchetti 2020). These simplifications fail to consider the varying degrees of autonomy and isolation, and fragility and power within dwellings and urban spaces of proximity. Architect, urban planners and policy makers must think of the home and neighbourhood care system, considering the multigenerational dimension of the entire community, the material and psychological dimension, the affective and cognitive connection to the home (Herbers & Mulder 2017), and the context in which one is located and where basic activities take place and the social relationships of daily life develop (Moulaert *et al.* 2013). Elderly populations still live within a system in which it is possible to detect a strong gap between housing demand and supply, where both housing policies and the market have not yet fully overcome the separation between the traditional concept of family, the elderly and housing types.

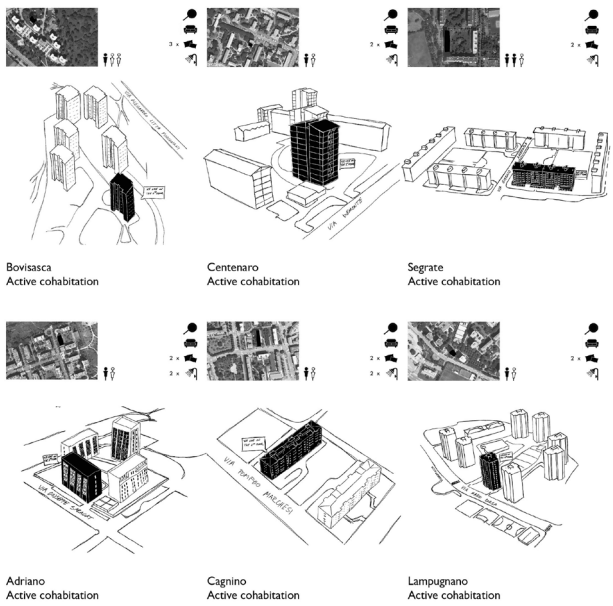

Figure 3. Cases of cohabitation in housing complex typology (Source: J.Abouelezz, E. Alberton, B.E. Alfar, A. Beni, R. Piantelli).

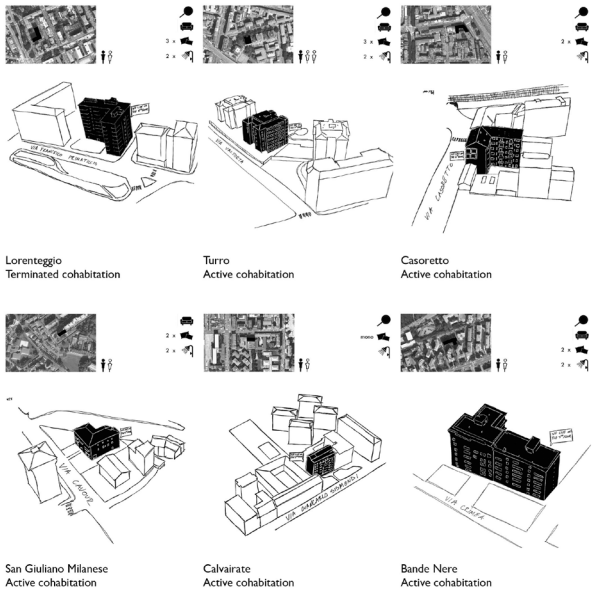

Figure 4. Cases of cohabitation in isolated condominium typology (Source: J.Abouelezz, E. Alberton, B.E. Alfar, A. Beni, R. Piantelli).

Unconventional senior living

Some aspects escape the theoretical and practical stalemate surrounding the topic of ageing and instead show how a change of approach is possible. They can be identified in the unconventional practices of living, initiated informally and spontaneously from the bottom up or supported temporarily by institutions and private or public local realities that have not yet had the time, strength or capacity to institutionalise and spread. They take different forms and emerge from various housing experiences in response to dissatisfaction with the conventional housing options for the elderly, which are often inadequate and inaccessible. They are realities that arise in the wake of the lack of adequate supply from public housing policies and the market, which fail to align with the socio-demographic transition. This galaxy of unconventional

practices becomes a privileged field of exploration, representing an inheritance of latent resources that, if observed and understood, could help us develop new urban policies capable of addressing the potentialities and problems of demographic transition (Bricocoli *et al.* 2020). Exploring the theme of unconventional senior living thus provides a means to help us introduce a shift in approach when addressing the issue of ageing. This allows us to align with and anticipate the evolution of the issue while tackling the inadequacy of the housing supply in relation to the changing demands and socio-cultural profiles of the elderly population.

In our work as researchers and teachers we have been exploring how contemporary social and demographic dynamics challenge housing policies and projects. These issues have been at the core of teaching activities. In 2024, as part of a design studio at the School of Architecture Urban Planning Construction Engineering (AIUC) of Politecnico di Milano, we began exploring some practices of Unconventional Senior Living. By "unconventional living", we mean all forms of living that cannot be categorised as traditionally driven by family ties or within traditional family units, such as individuals or couples living together in a home, or within residences and nursing homes for older people. Spurred on not only by the literature on the subject (Elsinga & Ronald 2012), we are engaged in field research investigating the state of the art of dwelling practices, to develop alternative housing solutions and typologies able to overcome the distance that emerged between demand and supply. This gap is linked to major changes that have happened in the last twenty years regarding the composition of households, lifestyles, and what has been typically referred to as the *family* (Meyer & Carlson 2014), resulting in an increasing detachment between the ideal equivalence of the *family* and the *apartment typology* (Star strategies + architecture 2016).

In recent years, there have been attempts to outline a new phenomenology of elderly living with the aim of highlighting the emergence of different ways to reorganise housing practices within a new community or multigenerational forms. The multiple origins and causes of this phenomenology have been analysed (Durrett 2009) along with its various effects and

consequences (Simpson 2015; Kërçuku 2021). Forms of elderly living have become both a physical space in which projects are measured (Farrelly 2014; Buffel *et al.* and a conceptual space endowed with a vast interpretive capacity, where definitions and reflections abound (Huber 2008). Although these studies are very noteworthy, they have some limitations. These studies often describe new forms of cohabitation as positive expressions of well-being, creating an ideological focus that emphasises the private sphere of older people. This perspective can obscure the complexity of their living conditions and fail to address the gap between available housing and the real needs of older people. Furthermore, there are disparities in interests among local actors and a mismatch between established norms and the need for flexibility. However, exploring how architecture, urban studies and social studies frame the lives of older people can represent an essential training ground for new interpretations and imaginative explorations, allowing us to generate knowledge and social innovation (Parés *et al.* 2017).

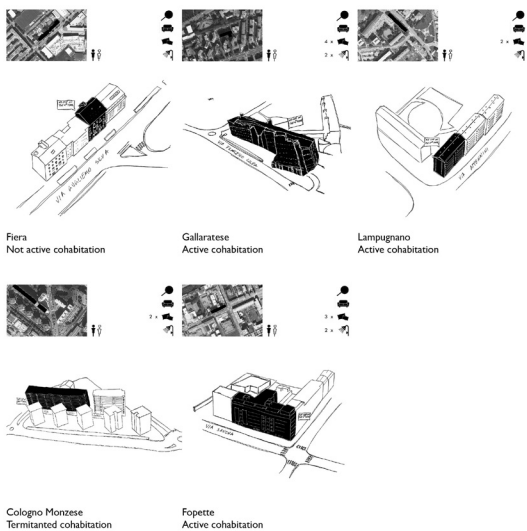

Figure 5. Cases of cohabitation in linear condominium typology (Source: J. Abouelezz, E. Alberton, B.E. Alfar, A. Beni, R. Piantelli).

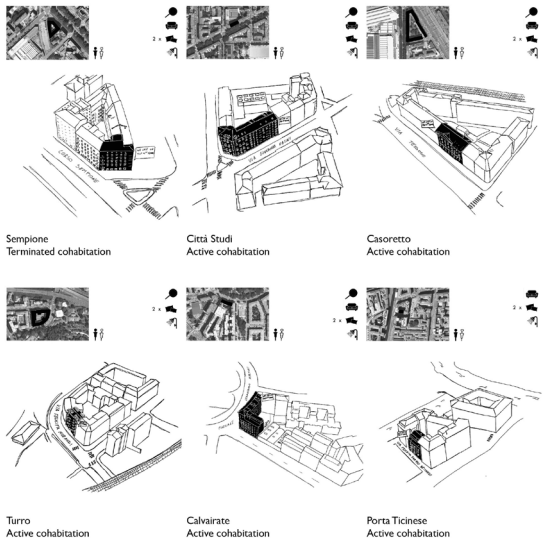

Figure 6. Cases of cohabitation in courtyard block typology (Source: J. Abouelezz, E. Alberton, B.E. Alfar, A. Beni, R. Piantelli).

Exploring Prendi in casa in a teaching experience

We invited our students to understand the city and take part in a knowledge-building process. To simplify our thoughts and to guide our students, this knowledge process has been divided into four interconnected and sometimes overlapping steps: (a) entering the field and defining it; (b) staying in the field and *absorbing* knowledge; (c) post-producing what has been observed and tracked in the field; (d) orienting the post-production also based on the final output (Briata & Postiglione 2023). During the didactic experience, they were asked to initiate a process of *direct participant observation*, looking at the relationship between people, spaces and practices in everyday *unconventional senior living*. Through an ethnographic journey, it was possible to observe how people use spaces. Priority was given

to the perspective that swings from the scale of the interior to the larger scale of the neighbourhood, city or the territory. We traced practices that show the transformations and adaptations of people inhabiting spaces in an unconventional way according to their needs and desires.

One of the cases explored, *Prendi in casa*, consists of intergenerational between individuals with no family ties: elderly adults, students and young workers. The *Prendi in casa* experience can be read through the lens of resistance and adaptation to the changing conditions. The high percentage of the elderly population and underused flats in Milan, combined with the approximately 211,000 university students in the city, has become an opportunity to rethink alternative living models and intercept the challenges of demographic transition and housing affordability. In about ten years, the association *MeglioMilano* with its project *Prendi in casa* has enabled about 1,000 students from 51 countries to access the rental market with favorable prices and conditions compared to the city's complex real estate market and the elderly residents to pursue social and economic stability, offering alternative solutions to the issues of isolation, the diversification of cohabitation nuclei and the management of spatial excess. It is an experience that, over the years, has taken root in the city to such an extent that spontaneous cases of cohabitation outside the association's network can be observed. *Prendi in casa* serves as a case of a heterogeneous range of initiatives that have shaped Milan's housing landscape.

The observational work reveals that both urban and domestic spaces are experienced from vastly different perspectives by each user. Each person shapes the space, making it their own. These experiences highlight the role of space in the processes of sharing while also mitigating the individualistic component that cohabitation can create. In this context, elderly people and student share services, such as the kitchen, living room and bathroom, while occupying one or more rooms privately. This cohabitation generates visible value through mutual support but also tensions in shared spaces through the contestation of objects and the appropriation of common areas.

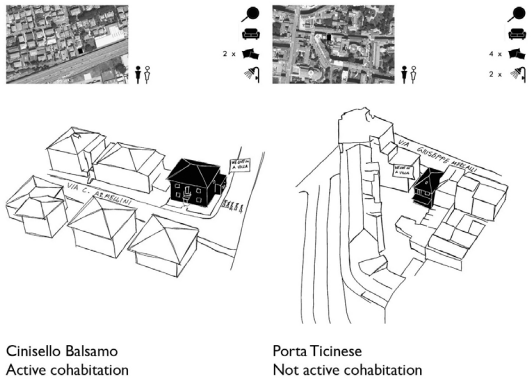

Figure 7. Cases of cohabitation in semi-detached villa typology (Source: J. Abouelezz, E. Alberton, B.E. Alfar, A. Beni, R. Piantelli).

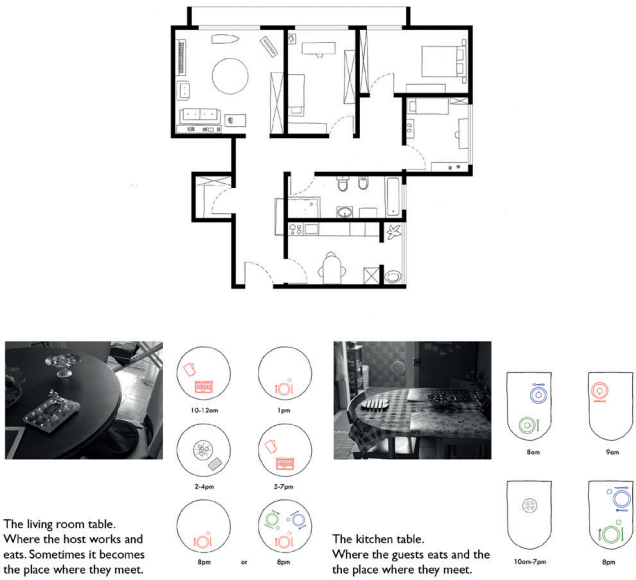

Figure 8. The floor plan of one of the houses observed and detail of the use of tables (Source: J. Abouelezz, E. Alberton, B.E. Alfar, A. Beni, R. Piantelli).

Conclusion

How can we bring about a paradigm shift in the way we discuss, study and address the issue of an ageing population? How do we identify unconventional living practices? How do we explore and study the realm of unconventional living practices? What are the spatial and social implications? How do we describe and represent the fragments of unconventional everyday life in cities? What are the different forms and design strategies that these living experiences can provoke? What are the possible opportunities and ambiguities that should be considered? Observing the cases of *Unconventional Senior Living* helps us to implement the necessary change of approach to address the issue of ageing. Exploring *Unconventional Senior Living* allows us to uncover new behaviours, rituals and values, as well as their spatial implications. It also catalyses urban and architectural interventions that accommodate, influence and, in some cases, anticipate our new lived realities (Borasi 2021), along with the strategies, forms and solutions identified in everyday living practices.

What emerges is the resilience of the elderly population in autonomously adjusting to the demographic transition. It also shows the capacity of space to be shaped according to the various stages of life and the needs that arise with ageing. Moreover, what stands out is the ability of older people to be strong subjects in the transformation of cities. With their bodies, practices and ways of appropriation, they radically transform how the city functions. In this context, the dual nature of the elderly – fragile and strong – and the perception of the ageing process as both an achievement and a misfortune add depth to the observed situations and allow us to build a bundle of knowledge. The unconventional practices of inhabiting cities are a latent legacy at our disposal, allowing us to better understand how we can adapt to the demographic transition today. The critical issue is not to consider the elderly population in our cities as a static, rigid group but to understand how it continually evolves, requiring space design and housing policies to align with this change.

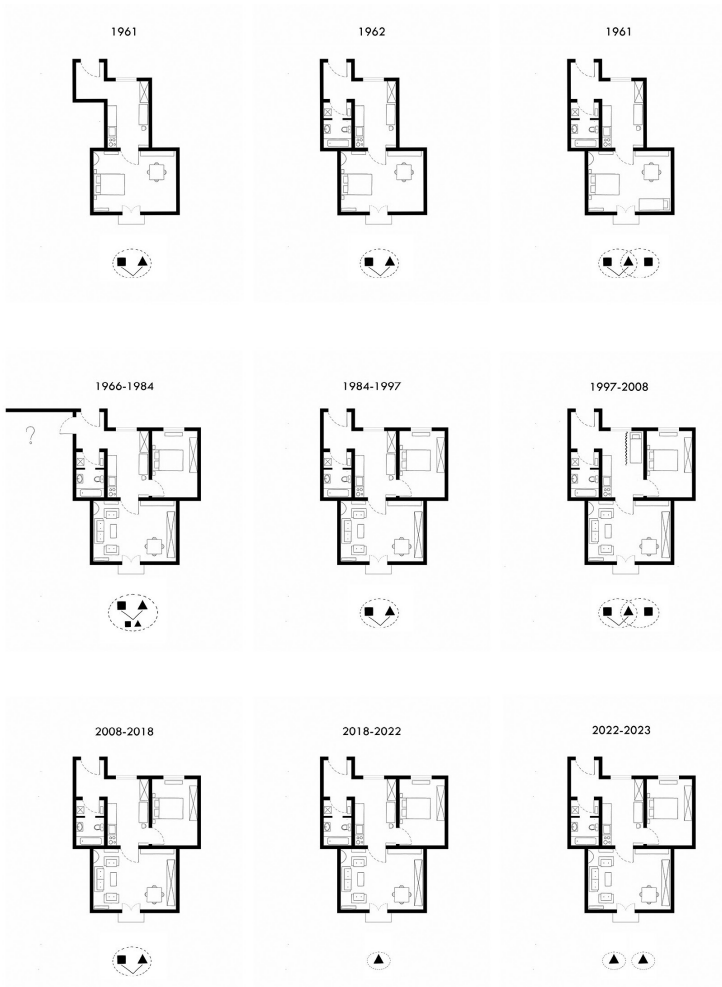

Figure 9. The evolution of the floor plan of an apartment. It shows how the apartment has changed with the changing demographic composition (Source: J. Abouelezz, E. Alberton, B.E. Alfar, A. Beni, R. Piantelli).

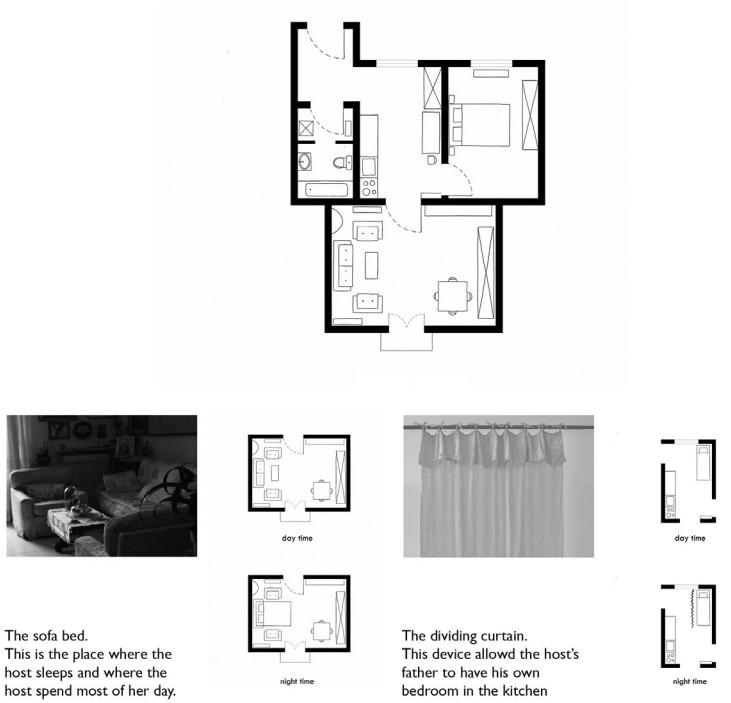

Figure 10. Details of two space devices that enable cohabitation within homes (Source: J. Abouelezz, E. Alberton, B.E. Alfar, A. Beni, R. Piantelli).

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Elena Carletti, Maddalena Floriana Grassi,
Nicola Schingaro*

TALKING ABOUT HOUSING IN BARI
Between participatory governance and power asymmetries

Introduction

This contribution stems from the project "Unconventional Affordable Housing (UAH!)" and aims to analyse the outcomes of a participatory process with various stakeholders involved – at different levels – in the topic of housing. The goal is to reconstruct the current state of policies, projects, and practices in the city of Bari, identify needs, and co-develop proposals.

This process – which included institutions, representatives (both political and technical) from municipal and regional governments, trade unions, third sector organisations (volunteer associations, cooperatives, religious entities), and students – began with two focus group meetings, held in October and November 2024. These meetings were essential for assessing the current landscape and understanding the positioning of the various actors involved.

From these discussions emerged the need to continue the dialogue with a more operational and proactive approach. This led to the launch of a series of meetings called "UAH! Bari da abitare" (Living in Bari), which established three thematic working groups: Table 1 "Current status and implementation

* Università degli Studi Aldo Moro di Bari, Department of Political Sciences. Although the article is the result of a collaborative effort, the following sections can be attributed to the respective authors: paragraphs *Introduction*, *Context: housing in Bari*, and *The meanings of housing* to Elena Carletti; paragraphs *Participation*, *Mediation and guidance*, *Support and accompaniment* to Maddalena Floriana Grassi; paragraphs *Monitoring and data collection*, *Sustainability*, *Relational communication dynamics*, *Participatory governance: between possibilities and limitations* and *Conclusions* to Nicola Schingaro.

of housing regulations and planning"; Table 2 "Harmonisation of data and identification of key target groups; Table 3 "Political will and strategic directions".

So far, two meetings have taken place, in February and April 2025, with plans to continue and develop policy documents and summaries of the emerging proposals.

The aim of this paper, which focuses on the material collected during the two focus groups, is to offer a preliminary analysis of the key themes that emerged and the positioning of the various actors. It also explores the relational dimension – in terms of mutual expectations, communication and critical issues raised during the discussions – and reflects on the participatory dimension of the process and how it may or may not influence the effectiveness of housing-related policies and projects.

Context: housing in Bari

The city of Bari today represents an urban reality undergoing profound transformation, marked by social, demographic, and economic tensions that reflect broader national and global dynamics. As of January 1, 2024, the city had a population of over 316,000 and is the core of a metropolitan area comprising 41 municipalities and over 1.2 million residents (Istat 2025). This context presents complex challenges for urban planning, housing policy, and social cohesion.

Traditionally regarded as a hub for services and commercial exchange, Bari has seen its attractiveness in key sectors, such as higher education and industry, diminish over time. Simultaneously, there has been growth in the service sector and tourism, with controversial effects on the urban fabric: the phenomenon of touristification, for example, has increased housing pressure in the historic centre, driving up rental prices and gradually displacing more vulnerable social groups.

Demographic changes are also significant. The aging index has increased, while the number of single-person households and is on the rise. At the same time, immigration has helped stabilise the population, but it has also introduced additional challenges regarding

inclusion and access to services, including housing. The housing market has become increasingly segmented and inaccessible: on the one hand, there is a considerable number of vacant or underutilised properties (over 27.000 as of 2022, ISTAT), and on the other, an unmet and growing demand, particularly from students, young workers, migrants, and low-income families.

From an urban planning perspective, the city exhibits a sharp divide between a gentrified, tourist-oriented centre and peripheral areas that remain affected by degradation and a lack of services. Urban regeneration policies have primarily focused on central districts, leaving large peripheral zones excluded from the benefits of transformation. Additionally, the public housing supply is inadequate, with long waiting times for assignments, poor maintenance, and structural challenges in managing the public housing stock.

This scenario underscores the urgent need to revise housing policies, not only in terms of the quantity of housing but also the quality of living, understood as a complex, relational, and situated right (Tosi 2009). Within this framework, this paper aims to refocus on people, experiences, and needs in the development of more equitable and sustainable housing solutions.

Emerging themes and stakeholders' perspectives[2]

The meanings of housing

The concept of housing, as emerged in the focus groups, goes beyond the material need for a roof. It also includes symbolic, relational, and cultural dimensions (Lefebvre 2009).

For public institutions, the term unfolds along two main lines: a technical-administrative aspect related to the management and allocation of public housing stock, and a political aspect connected to planning interventions aligned with the actual needs of the territory.

2 A summary table of the FG participants is provided at the end of the article.

However, many institutional actors acknowledged the difficulty of operating within a rigid regulatory framework and with often insufficient resources. They emphasised the need to listen to the real needs of the territory to optimise the use of limited resources for projects that are truly meaningful to the people.

> There is truly little listening to the territory, and we don't like that. Before launching a funding line, we would like to ensure that we are starting something relevant to the needs of the territory. And this is not a given, it should be, but it often is not [A1][3].

According to this vision, an employee of the Municipal Department for Social Services in Bari highlights the centrality of the individual and their idea of a home:

> What we have learned from the projects we've implemented is that it's easier to find a home not only by working on the context but also by working with individuals […]. People often have an idea of what home means, and they want to make that idea a reality – even if it's not a shared or standard idea of home. This suggests that we need personalised projects that begin by listening to people, as well as by addressing the urban environment […]. Social housing experiences are crucial, but they are part of a programme and a project. It's not enough to provide space for a house; we must also understand the idea of home that people have [A3].

Residents' perspectives become the focus of the discussion – not only to assert their right to co-create physical and symbolic spaces, but also as a recognition of their role as "experts by experience", capable of more effectively influencing policies and projects (Cabiati & Panciroli 2019).

The Regional Agency for Housing (ARCA Puglia, responsible for managing public housing in the province of Bari) emphasises the importance of the community dimension of housing and the broader concept of wellbeing, extending beyond just material needs. From this perspective, the idea of

3 See Table 1 to understand how the interviewees were coded.

establishing community concierges and botanical gardens in older public housing units has emerged.

> We are focusing on the concept of a community concierge, on social management of housing, which cannot just be about maintenance and allocation, but also about communal living and a sense of wellbeing. It is a service we want to provide for residents. This is in the experimental phase […]. We are also imagining – again, experimentally – a botanical garden in older housing units, where we can give users a sense of well-being. They could even manage a small garden on their own [A9].

Representatives from the third sector and volunteer organisations emphasise the identity-based and social dimensions of housing, which are deeply tied to people's life stories, especially for those in vulnerable situations. This requires a shift in perspective: it is not the individual who must conform to a predefined housing solution, but rather the home must be conceived with and for the person (Krumer-Nevo 2005).

> The issue of housing is linked to the social question, because housing encompasses a person's social dimension, not just as a factor of self-determination, since I live in a space and that's where my personality expresses itself. But it's not just the space itself, it's also the spaces I share with others and the people I live with [A19].

From the students' point of view, the right to housing is interpreted in terms of accessibility, which links housing to overall urban quality of life, including transportation, public spaces, and social relations. Housing is recognised as a complex right that intertwines both material and immaterial needs.

> We try to represent the voice of students, and for those of us living in Bari – one of the largest cities in southern Italy – things should work better and offer more services. But we are seeing growing difficulties for students trying to regularly attend university life in the city, mainly due to two reasons: an insufficient public transport network and the housing emergency [A21].

Participation

The stakeholders unanimously recognised the principle of participation as an essential element for effective housing policies. The municipal administration of Bari presented it not only as a working method but as a strategic objective within urban regeneration initiatives.

> [We are] working on urban and social regeneration and common goods; one of the key topics during the general assembly on urban regeneration will be the housing emergency […] through this participatory process we are planning; we want it to be an integrated effort, a shared vision among all stakeholders at the table, associations, unions, ARCA, and all actors who can build a shared vision and action plan for what is a socially dramatic issue [A7].

> We had a meeting with the city councillor of Bari to open a permanent communication and co-participation roundtable. Our main goals include mapping vacant properties, especially considering that Bari, according to the latest data, is one of the Italian cities with the highest number of properties seized from organised crime, many of which remain unregistered and unused […]. We also aim to propose measures to improve the transport network and increase housing availability [A21].

However, a tension emerged between formal and substantive participation. Many contributors noted that participatory processes are often initiated too late or are limited to consultations with no decision-making power.

ActionAid[4] strongly emphasised the need to acknowledge power asymmetries in participatory processes, especially when

4 ActionAid is an independent international organisation that operates in 71 countries around the world and, together with the most marginalised communities, takes action against poverty and injustice, in many different fields: children and women rights, immigration, climate change, education. ActionAid is managing a project for the Municipality of Bari focused on housing orientation for migrants residing in the city.

involving "experts by experience" (residents, migrants, vulnerable individuals). Without clearly defining the decision-making space and providing empowerment tools, participation risks becoming a mechanism of legitimation rather than an instrument of genuine democratic engagement (Warren 2007).

They proposed a vision of participation as a structured, ongoing, and inclusive process, built on the recognition of diverse positions and capacities for action.

> What we focus on are the power asymmetries – they are real, and we can assume they become even more pronounced in participatory processes. For example, in the PUG (Urban General Plan), a participatory attempt was made […], but the real issue is the impact of those proposals. What matters is *how* it has been done and *what* the actual decision-making space is. This must be clearly stated at the outset, because participants need to know the boundaries within which they can enact some form of change. The dynamics already limit what we can do at a local level. At the very least, let's be honest about the scope. The distrust is enormous […]. Let us not forget that a large portion of the population is unrepresented, and these are opportunities to try and mend that. Consent can't be built flatly – it must be intersectional and account for various forms of discrimination within participatory processes [A18].

Mediation and guidance

Another key issue that emerged strongly was the need to establish mediation mechanisms among the various stakeholders in the housing system, including between public and private actors, landlords and tenants, and citizens and institutions. It was noted that, especially in the current historical moment, it is increasingly complex to find common ground among the various parties and interests, often to the detriment of those who are already in the most vulnerable positions.

Trade unions highlighted their historical role in mediating housing conflicts, while also acknowledging their current limitations in terms of available tools and resources.

> In the complex world where housing supply meets demand, which, along with labour, is one of the hardest things to reconcile, we try to function as facilitators. That means we try to explain to landlords what the advantages could be. But what I am realising is that there is a vast universe of people […] where facilitation is urgently needed. If I had to sum it up in one word, I'd say: mediation, because maybe what we need most in this society is to make those encounters possible [A13].

Third sector associations described mediation more in terms of active guidance, especially in the relationship between citizens and the institutional network. The task is not just to inform, but to guide people through administrative processes, in the search for solutions and understanding of their rights. This is especially urgent in a context of complex regulations, technical jargon, and a multiplicity of actors, which risks generating inequality in access.

A shared proposal was the establishment of one-stop help desks, simplification of procedures, and the promotion of legal and social literacy.

> Lack of information is a driver of exclusion […]. That is why we talked about facilitation. One proposal that emerged from these meetings was the creation of reference figures–whether institutional or community-based–who can serve as go-to contacts […]. And then there's also the psychological dimension, which I think is essential, because settling into a place depends on multiple factors: the well-being of the neighbourhood, neighbourly relations, and other aspects that cut across these issues [A19].

Support and accompaniment

Closely related to the issue of guidance is that of accompaniment, which was described as a crucial function for the success of any housing policy, particularly when it comes to vulnerable individuals. Accompaniment takes various forms: cultural and linguistic mediation for migrants, housing coaching for homeless

individuals, financial support for struggling families, as well as educational and empowerment interventions.

The logic of accompaniment requires moving beyond emergency approaches to focus on sustainable paths to autonomy (Grassi 2022). Various experiences shared during the focus groups – such as social help desks and social housing agencies – demonstrated the effectiveness of personalised approaches but also highlighted the fragility of projects tied to short-term funding.

Many participants emphasised the importance of stabilising these services and incorporating them into permanent public housing policies.

> These people often come to our help desks and do not know where to start looking for housing. Many of them have multiple problems – not just related to housing, but also health and employment – so they feel disoriented and don't know where to begin […] they need guidance [A17].

> Job placement comes before housing, there are so many issues we could open up, but we're focusing on housing now. Still, those issues are unavoidable when we're trying to help families or individuals keep their home […]. It's not about providing aid, but about structured, ongoing support [A20].

Monitoring and data collection

All stakeholders agreed on the need to improve the knowledge base on housing issues through more effective, coordinated, and transparent data collection tools. Currently, data are often fragmented, outdated, or not interoperable among the various entities (municipality, ARCA, region, third sector). This hinders the understanding of needs and the planning of coherent interventions.

There was a discussion about the potential benefits of a shared regional platform, with multi-level access, to gather information on housing stock, social demand, vulnerability indicators, and intervention outcomes.

The goal is not only to increase efficiency but also to foster a culture of transparency and evaluation, so that citizens can be kept informed about the policies being implemented.

Furthermore, in pursuit of coordinated and transparent action, participants emphasised the importance of having a shared language among all stakeholders. This shared language would reflect a mutual understanding of the issues, the tools available, and the people involved.

> I notice how difficult it is to compile reliable data, real data […]. What is the size of the public and private housing stock? I asked the municipality of Bari: how many private properties are currently vacant? […] There is a whole set of data that could be retrieved if the institutions cooperated [A23].

> In my opinion, we need to clarify the terms, because we often use expressions like "social housing". But do we know what that means? Who are the actors? […] We need to first establish a common language, otherwise we're just talking past each other and not working in the same direction. Second: data, because launching strategies without knowing your starting point (which helps define objectives and indicators to monitor) is not helpful [A1].

Sustainability

The concept of sustainability has been approached from a multidimensional perspective.

Beyond the financial dimension – linked to the stability of funding and the continuity of projects – great attention has been paid to the social and cultural sustainability of housing solutions.

Many interventions have highlighted how the introduction of innovative models (Housing First, social housing, co-housing) risks remaining merely theoretical if not accompanied by cultural adaptation efforts and the active involvement of residents.

Furthermore, many projects have been criticised for their top-down approach, often designed more to meet the criteria of public calls than to address actual local needs.

What is needed instead is a place-based approach to planning, one that challenges the rhetoric of innovation in order to make room for a situated and participatory evaluation of both the effectiveness and the desirability of proposed solutions (Parolari 2024).

> Over the past year, unfortunately, we have seen people return to our services [overnight shelter] after having previously been supported by the municipality or other housing initiatives that did not work out. These individuals were assisted into housing, hosted with significant financial investment, and yet have come back to our shelters […] So I would ask: where have we all failed, in some way? What is the real issue? Should we really be spending resources that will never be recovered, when there are people who – despite receiving a pension – prefer to stay in shelters rather than in housing solutions? Perhaps because understanding social housing is not easy, or because sharing an apartment with four other people – who were not chosen, who are unknown, and from different cultural backgrounds – is extremely difficult. And this is something we regularly bring up in Caritas roundtables, because it's a widespread problem at the national level [A20].

Relational and communication dynamics

Despite the repeated emphasis on participation as an essential element for effective planning, the meetings revealed a widespread lack of habit in inter-institutional dialogue and a structural difficulty in transforming dissent into constructive conflict.

While the stakeholders invited to the same table recognise that they share common goals, differences in how they approach the topic of housing often create communication barriers, which can lead to isolation rather than collaboration.

However, the awareness of these dynamics has already led to the exploration of network-based strategies, as well as the creation of dedicated spaces and opportunities to build shared pathways. The sole purpose of these efforts is to uphold and protect the right to housing.

It is from this perspective that ActionAid presents the creation of the Solidarity Housing Network, comprising institutional

actors, third sector organisations, and active citizens, as a participatory path for building practices and projects through dialogue and the sharing of each actor's vision.

> We strongly supported the development and establishment of a solidarity network for housing that takes into account the multiplicity of interests involved and the various realities it comprises, intending to bring together and encourage the exchange of practices, knowledge, and skills. The focus of inclusive housing must consider not only the key aspects, but also the differences between people. […] We realised that the sphere of housing is extremely complex. It requires mobilising all necessary skills and involving all relevant parties. Clearly, this is a process–processes are inevitably slow. They must be supported over time, always taking into account the many nuances involved, because I believe there can never be a single solution. Processes must be sustained, monitored, and observed [A18].

The focus groups themselves were received positively by the participants, some of whom said they came away enriched with greater knowledge of the issue, new contacts, and a broadened perspective on their role and the paths to pursue.

In this process, the university played a key role by helping to make the moments of exchange concrete and structured, proposing shared methodologies and safe spaces for dialogue.

Participatory governance: between possibilities and limitations

Participatory governance, in the context of housing policies, was recognised by all involved actors as a necessary yet difficult goal to achieve. It entails moving beyond the vertical and centralised model of public decision-making in favour of a horizontal, network-based system that values the contributions of a diverse range of stakeholders, including institutions, third-sector organisations, trade unions, citizens, residents, and experts by experience (Fung 2006).

However, participation as a principle faces numerous structural, cultural, and operational barriers. Primarily, there is a lack of regulatory and administrative tools that would make participatory

processes binding. Participation is often implemented as a consultative or supplementary procedure and rarely influences final decisions. This fosters disillusionment and mistrust among citizens and the organisations involved.

Secondly, participatory governance is hindered by the fragmentation of responsibilities. Housing-related competencies are divided among various entities – municipalities, regions, and ARCA – which often struggle to communicate effectively due to the lack of integrated information systems and differing terminologies. This results in slow, inconsistent, and at times conflicting decision-making processes, discouraging collective efforts to develop solutions.

Another limitation concerns inequality in access and capacity to participate. Not all social actors have the same material or immaterial resources to engage effectively. Marginalised groups – such as migrants, isolated elderly people, precarious youth, and single-parent families – often lack a voice in decision-making processes or are only included in tokenistic ways. To be genuine, participatory governance must incorporate mechanisms for mediation, facilitation, relationship-building, and the reduction of asymmetries (Cornwall & Gaventa 2000).

During the focus groups, the need to recognise and enhance existing alliances between public and private entities, local experiments, and neighbourhood-based networks was also highlighted. However, many of these initiatives remain fragmented, sporadic, and dependent on the goodwill of individual operators or the availability of temporary funding. For this reason, a shared proposal emerged to establish permanent multi-level dialogue platforms to serve as spaces for listening, negotiation, and co-decision-making.

Finally, it was emphasised that the "great absentee" in housing governance processes is still the resident, not just as a beneficiary, but as an active subject in urban transformation. Bringing back the perspective of those who experience spaces daily, especially in vulnerable conditions, is the most radical and necessary challenge. There is no participatory governance without substantive democracy, and no effective policy without spatial and social justice.

Conclusions

The path undertaken has revealed how housing is an inherently relational and political issue. The effectiveness of policies does not depend solely on the quality of technical solutions, but on the ability to build alliances, recognise inequalities, activate diverse forms of knowledge, and anchor planning in actual needs.

Participation cannot be treated as a rhetorical device: it is a condition for effectiveness, legitimacy, and social justice. However, it requires a profound redefinition of its meaning, one that includes residents as protagonists, not merely as passive recipients.

This contribution aims to provide a basis for reflection and action towards more inclusive, sustainable housing policies that can restore housing to its full recognition as a human right.

Table 1: Actors

CODE	INSTITUTIONS	ACTORS
A1	Apulia Region	Officer, Housing Policies Section
A2	Apulia Region	Director, Education and University Section
A3	Municipality of Bari	Deputy Mayor / Councillor for Urban and Social Regeneration
A4	Municipality of Bari	Councillor for Controls, Legality, Transparency, and Social Anti-Mafia
A5	Municipality of Bari	PoEQ Social Desk, Department of Social Services
A6	Municipality of Bari	Social Worker, Social Desk, Department of Social Services
A7	Municipality of Bari	Personal Secretary to the Deputy Mayor
A8	Municipality of Bari	Director, Department of Land Governance and Development
A9	ARCA Puglia	Director
A10	ARCA Puglia	Spokesperson of the Sole Administrator

A11	ARCA Puglia	Architectural Technician
A12	Trade Union SUNIA	Provincial Secretary
A13	Trade Union SICET	General Secretary
A14	Trade Union UNIAT	Regional Secretary
A15	Confabitare	President
A16	CAPS Social Cooperative	Coordinator
A17	CAPS Social Cooperative	Social Worker
A18	ActionAid	Coordinator
A19	ActionAid	Housing Officer
A20	Diocesan Caritas of Bari-Bitonto	Coordinator
A21	UDU Link Bari Student Association	Student
A22	UDU Link Bari Student Association	Student
A23	Mutual Aid Desk	Volunteer
A24	Design Studio	Architect

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Elena Carletti, Giovanna Servedio,
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URBAN COLLECTIVE SQUATTING AS A PRACTICE OF RESISTANCE
A case study in the city of Bari

Introduction

Figure 1. A view of the underground gym of the former high school (Photo: Savino Carbone).

Urban collective squatting, understood as the unauthorised occupation of abandoned or disused spaces, is a practice

* Università degli Studi di Bari Aldo Moro, Department of Political Sciences. Although the article is the result of a collaborative effort, the following sections can be attributed to the respective authors: *Introduction* to Elena Carletti; *The Occupation of Ex Socrate and Management and Living Spaces* to Giovanna Servedio; *Projects and Collaborations and Challenges* to Carmen Zaira Torretta; *Conclusions* to Giovanna Servedio and Carmen Zaira Torretta.

situated at the intersection of material need, political action, and social experimentation. Emerging in Europe in the 1970s as a direct response to the housing shortage and the expulsion of the most vulnerable from the housing market, squatting has gradually evolved, combining demands for housing, criticism of dominant urban policies, and the creation of new models of coexistence (Martínez 2013; Cattaneo & Martínez 2014). In some of its potential manifestations, squatting can be understood as a form of collective reappropriation of urban space, actively opposing the exclusionary processes produced by neoliberal logics (Harvey 2012).

In recent decades, the European urban context – particularly in Italy – has witnessed an increasing privatisation of common goods, rising land and real estate values, the disposal of public assets, and a marked reduction in state investment in housing welfare. These processes have led to deep social transformations, exacerbating inequalities and generating new forms of marginalisation. In this picture, squatting emerges as a concrete response to the housing crisis and an explicit critique of an exclusionary urban model based on speculation and the expulsion of non-conforming persons, migrants, precarious workers, the unemployed, youth, single-parent families, refugees, trans and queer individuals, and the elderly living alone (Mudu 2014).

The occupation of an abandoned space can also become a political act, a form of resistance to market dominance and the erosion of the city's social function (Lanzaro 2017). It can be a gesture that not only challenges the principle of absolute private property but also reactivates and reinvents the use of forgotten places, returning them to the community through practices of self-management, mutual aid, and shared care (Picker & Pasquetti 2015). In many cases, squatted spaces are transformed into social centres, cultural venues, collective homes, laboratories of active citizenship and solidarity, profoundly impacting the urban and relational fabric of the neighbourhoods in which they are located.

Urban collective squatting experiences we are referring to are distinguished by ability to bring together diverse individuals around shared needs and values (Pruijt 2013). Self-management,

direct democracy, tangible solidarity, inclusiveness, and grassroots networking are foundational elements of these spaces, which often function as alternative microcosms to the dominant system. In this sense, squatting is not only a way of "making a home" but also a laboratory of political and social experimentation, where rules of coexistence are redefined, new forms of community are built, and alternative models of urban life are imagined (Bodnar 2015).

The centrality of everyday experience and interpersonal relationships is one of the factors that make collective squatting such a significant socio-political phenomenon. In many occupations, such as the one discussed later, people do not merely find temporary shelter but actively participate in managing and transforming the space and in decision-making dynamics. Assemblies, shared tasks, collective kitchens, cultural and educational activities, and services offered to the community reflect a widespread desire to create inclusive, participatory spaces rooted in people's needs (Di Feliciantonio 2017). This "doing together" dimension could rebuild ties of proximity, together with the surrounding territory, and foster a sense of belonging.

In Italy, the phenomenon of squatting has taken on distinctive features shaped by the socio-economic context and the trajectories of social movements. Occupations have primarily developed in large urban centers – Rome, Milan, Naples, Turin, Bologna – but also in mid-sized cities like Bari, where they have become increasingly important in addressing housing hardship tied to migration flows and structural precarity (Paba & Pitzalis 2021). The occupation of the former Socrate high school in the San Pasquale neighbourhood aligns with this framework, serving as a paradigmatic example of how squatting can provide a refuge, a social laboratory, and a site of resistance for migrants facing housing and legal vulnerability.

The experience of Ex Socrate highlights many of the core aspects of urban squatting: the ability to reorganise disused spaces into functional living environments, the creation of shared rules among residents, an often-conflictual dialogue with local institutions, and the building of a collective identity capable of challenging social stereotypes and stigma. Born out of a housing

emergency, the occupation has evolved into a community project that restores dignity and visibility to individuals often rendered invisible in official narratives. The coexistence of people of different nationalities, the organisation of activities open to the neighbourhood, and engagement with public policies on urban regeneration and social inclusion all underscore the complexity and transformative power of this experience.

Figure 2. A classroom on the second floor of the former Socrate high school building in Bari, converted into an apartment (Photo: Savino Carbone).

However, housing occupations often face structural tensions and internal contradictions. On the one hand, legal precarity exposes squatters to the risk of eviction and criminalisation; on the other, interaction with local institutions can be ambiguous, swinging between attempts at co-optation and repressive strategies (Vitale 2007). Moreover, the internal balance of squatted spaces is constantly tested by the need to mediate between individual and collective needs, between cultural and linguistic differences, and between forms of self-management

and the necessity for regulation. In this context, the ability to build participatory, inclusive, and flexible governance is crucial for the long-term sustainability of occupations.

In light of these factors, urban squatting serves as a privileged lens through which to analyse ongoing transformations in the contemporary city. It is not merely a form of "tolerated illegality" or urban deviance, but a practice that raises fundamental questions about the right to housing, the use of public space, structural inequalities, and the role of institutions (Lefebvre 1968). In an era marked by growing social inequality, increasing numbers of people experiencing housing precarity, and a crisis in welfare policies, squatting experiences offer essential insights for reimagining the city as a shared, inclusive, and accessible space for all.

Despite many challenges, housing occupations demonstrate that it is possible to build grassroots alternatives for urban life, based on solidarity, self-management, and mutual recognition. Experiences like the occupation of Ex Socrate in Bari remind us that every occupied space hides stories, relationships, conflicts, and hopes – vital elements for imagining a fairer and more inclusive city.

The Occupation of Ex Socrate

The city of Bari has a long-standing history of hospitality and solidarity. Following the so-called "North Africa emergency", the town faced increasing migratory flows, that is, a growing number of people requiring assistance and protection. In this context, in 2008, the CARA[2] camp (Reception Center for Asylum Seekers) was established in the suburban neighbourhood of Palese, with 744 places available for the reception of migrants. From the very

2 Reception Centres for Asylum Seekers (CARA) were established in 2002 under the initial name of Identification Centres (CDI), and were later regulated by Presidential Decree No. 303/2004 and Legislative Decree No. 25/2008, which introduced their current designation. These centres are intended to host asylum seekers who have been admitted to, or are otherwise present on, national territory while awaiting the outcome of their application for international protection.

beginning, however, the capacity of the CARA proved insufficient: in 2008, 3,367 arrivals were recorded, with numbers continuing to rise until reaching 8,521 by 2011[3].

As reported by the Observatory on Administrative Detention of Immigrants and Asylum Seekers in Apulia, these critical issues and the overcrowding were not solely due to the increase in migration to Bari but were also linked to broader national policy challenges. Italian migration policies have often taken an emergency-driven, sometimes repressive approach, exemplified by long delays in issuing residence permits. These delays place migrants' lives in a state of limbo, preventing them from deciding where to live, seeking work, or finding housing; in short, from pursuing their migration projects.

Adding to these systemic issues was the need expressed by migrants for dignified second-stage reception, after their stay at CARA camp had ended. This need intersected with the aims of the local anti-racist network, and with its support, migrants began occupying public buildings across the city of Bari.

This paper specifically aims to reconstruct the events that began in 2009 at a former school building located on Via Fanelli, known as "Socrate", situated in Bari's San Pasquale neighbourhood near the central train station and the city centre. Built in the 1970s, the building was transferred from the municipality to the province in 1998, with a free-use agreement and the condition that it be used for educational purposes. It became the home of Socrate High School. Later, due to structural issues, the building was declared unfit for use and eventually returned to the Municipality of Bari.

In December 2009, following a sit-in at the city hall that ended without a proper response to the needs and demands of the migrants – who were tired of living unprotected on the streets – about 140 migrants, including Eritreans, Sudanese, and Ethiopians, many of whom were asylum seekers or holders of international protection, occupied the building.

3 Data from the Observatory on the Administrative Detention of Immigrants and the Reception of Asylum Seekers in Apulia, available at: www.osservatoriomigranti.org.

Figure 3. Wooden shacks built by seasonal migrant workers in the basement of the former high school gym (Photo: Savino Carbone).

Management and Living Spaces

On the morning of December 16, 2009 – the day after the occupation – the migrants organised an assembly in the school gymnasium to begin registering themselves and organising the space, starting with the distribution of beds in the classrooms. The largest rooms hosted up to 7-8 people. Approximately 80 migrants settled in the building, with a constant seasonal "turn-over", as many left to work in the surrounding countryside or the city, primarily in the restaurant industry. Even today, the building houses a mix of residents: those who live there permanently and work in the city's businesses; migrants who stay for a few nights before continuing their journey; and so-called "seasonal work-ers" who stay at Ex Socrate while working in the agricultural fields around Bari.

Following the initial assembly on space distribution, regular meetings were – and continue to be – held to address practical difficulties and seek solutions that accommodate the needs of the whole community.

Figure 4. One of the upper corridors of the former Socrate high school, in darkness due to lack of electricity (Photo: Savino Carbone).

The building has three floors and contains 35 rooms, created by dividing former classrooms using plywood or drywall partitions. These spaces now serve as housing units for families or individuals. Room changes occur informally: the person leaving a room is replaced by a new occupant. Only the rooms have access to electricity; in common areas and stairwells, residents must use flashlights. Even at the time of the 2009 occupation, the building was not connected to the power grid or municipal water system. Non-potable water came from two large cisterns in the basement, and three generators provided electricity. Access to utilities remains a significant issue. The building currently has only one water fountain with potable water, installed by the municipality, while electricity access remains precarious.

The residents formed an association – called Socrate Association – whose board manages logistics, fundraising, and social or cultural activities hosted in the building. To cover expenses, a mutual aid fund was established with Banca Etica (Ethical Bank), primarily funded through membership dues and self-financing initiatives.

To manage coexistence, regular assemblies have been held since the beginning to discuss emerging issues and collectively develop solutions that benefit the entire community.

The occupied space has hosted various socio-cultural activities, including workshops on social and civil rights awareness. These events have been open not only to residents but also to the broader local community. Such initiatives helped reduce stigma from neighbourhood residents, who began to see the occupants as "neighbours" and "residents" in their own right. This transformation fostered a tangible network of proximity and solidarity, visible especially during difficult times such as the COVID-19 emergency or during repeated eviction attempts by law enforcement.

Projects and Collaborations

In response to the uninhabitability and precarious conditions of the structure, a collaboration was initiated in May 2011 between the Socrate association and the association "Engineers Without Borders – Bari" to launch a participatory self-rehabilitation project for the building. Several actors were involved in the project in addition to those already mentioned, including the Apulia Region, the Municipality of Bari, ARCA (the Regional Agency for Housing), Formedil Bari (Vocational Training School for Construction), and the Polytechnic University of Bari. These stakeholders formalised their commitment to the self-rehabilitation initiative by signing a memorandum of understanding for the creation of a training site for the renovation of the Ex Socrate building, signed at the Presidency of the Apulia Region on May 22, 2014. The agreement outlined the launch of an experimental construction site for the partial and supported renovation of the building, with objectives to: promote inclusion between the building's resident community and the wider urban social fabric; guarantee the right to dignified housing for poor and vulnerable individuals; encourage the self-rehabilitation of a disused public structure through environmentally compatible technologies and the direct involvement of residents, beginning with securing the premises and restoring plumbing and electrical systems; facilitate the acquisition of technical skills

among migrants through training essential for both the self-rehabilitation effort and their future integration into the labour market; and return a public space to the broader community by offering services accessible to all citizens.

Figure 5. Icons of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church in part of an occupied classroom (Photo: Savino Carbone).

Challenges

Despite the collaborative and ambitious nature of the self-rehabilitation project, which involved institutions, associations, and residents, it gradually became sidelined and eclipsed. The institutions later made other proposals, but the residents' position remained firm: any renovation and self-rehabilitation project should not entail their removal from the premises. It should include a formal agreement with the municipality, ensuring the direct allocation of spaces to the current residents.

In December 2020, during the height of the COVID-19 health emergency, a fire broke out in the building but was quickly extinguished by the residents. In the aftermath, citing both the health emergency and the increasingly precarious condition of the

structure, the institutions attempted to offer alternatives through the city's welfare services, such as the second reception system (SAI, Reception and Integration System)[4], "Community Houses"[5], and the "House of Cultures"[6], as had been done in similar cases. These offers were rejected mainly by the residents, who, with support from the local solidarity network, deemed them inadequate for addressing their long-term need and their right to housing.

Figure 6. An Islamic prayer rug facing the qibla (Photo: Savino Carbone).

4 The SAI service (Reception and Integration System) is a second-level reception service funded by the Italian Ministry of the Interior, aimed at enabling the reception and socio-cultural integration of adult migrants, families or unaccompanied minors who are applicants for, or holders of, international protection.

5 The Community House is a social and assistance facility, either residential or semi-residential, that accommodates families or individuals living in extreme poverty or facing serious socio-economic hardship. It serves both Italian and foreign citizens – including EU and non-EU citizens with a valid residence permit – who are referred by the professional social services of the Municipal Districts and by the Immigration Office of the Department for Personal Services of Bari. centre

6 The Multifunctional centre called "House of Cultures" is placed in Bari, it includes temporary residential reception services for immigrants, a help desk for socio-cultural and health integration, and a centre for the promotion of and dialogue on intercultural exchange.

Another attempt was made in 2022, when the current municipal administration – through coordination with the Social Services Office of the Municipality of Bari and a team of volunteer citizens and migration experts – sought to include the residents of Ex Socrate (on a voluntary and consensual basis) in project titled "Extraordinary Integrated Reception Interventions for Asylum Seekers and Holders of International Protection"[7].

The general aim was to help 47 residents find studio, one-bedroom, or two-bedroom apartments or rooms within the Bari metropolitan area. The project guaranteed private landlords a 12-month rent subsidy (with a municipal guarantee) renewable for an additional 12 months or until project funds were exhausted. However, despite institutional goodwill, very few of the 47 squatters transitioned to conventional housing.

This failure must be understood through cultural, religious, and urban lenses. On the one hand, overtourism and gentrification of involved urban areas has made the search for housing more and more difficult; in addition, while many Bari locals support the cause of migration in principle, they are not willing to host non-EU migrants in their properties. Their objections are often rooted in labour-related or racial prejudice: insecurity associated with seasonal work in agriculture and fear of foreigners. On the other hand, residents are inclined to live in and recreate communal environments, even when faced with the spatial limits and discomforts of the squatted building. Thus, the idea of "condominium-style" housing does not align with their concept of community-based living. It was also challenging to find multiple housing units close to one another that could sustain collective practices in a new setting. Moreover, ex Socrate residents voiced concerns about being relocated to poorly connected and

7 The project, funded through part of tax revenues allocated by citizens to the direct management of the state for the year 2017, aims to achieve two specific objectives: the activation of dedicated support for asylum seekers and holders of international protection with significant vulnerabilities, and the strengthening of interventions aimed at facilitating the integration paths of asylum seekers and holders of international protection, through the improvement and sustainability of housing inclusion pathways, including innovative approaches.

underserved peripheral areas of Bari, as most of them rely on public transport or bicycles and do not own cars.

This concern was also related to their religious practices: many Eritrean residents are Orthodox Coptic Christians and have attended Fasika services for years at the Church of San Marcello, located near the occupied building, an important marker of local attachment. Sudanese residents, who follow Islam, maintain personal prayer spaces in their rooms since the city's only two mosques are located in the distant Libertà neighbourhood.

Figure 7. The rooftop of the former Socrate building. Some resident-occupants have set up small solar power systems to compensate for the lack of electricity (Photo: Savino Carbone).

Increasingly, the Ex Socrate occupation is turning into a form of internal ghettoisation, manifested not visibly on the outside, but within the occupied building itself. The communal and autonomous spaces (the so-called "apartment-classrooms") are undergoing irreversible transformation, with a makeshift slum emerging in the basement reminiscent of informal

migrant settlements like those seen in the Capitanata region. Living conditions are at their lowest, despite residents' efforts to implement alternative solutions for sustainability, such as installing solar panels on the rooftop to address the lack of electricity.

The most recent proposal put forward by the administration involves the demolition of the building to transform it into a multifunctional and reception centre, following initial phases of consultation with residents. The consultation process revealed a wide range of needs, which should be translated into a variety of spaces, both individual and collective. The plan also includes the possibility of creating ground-floor areas dedicated to services for the wider community as well as for the residents themselves, in order to encourage interaction with the outside world. However, at present, construction work has come to a halt, raising questions about how the project will respect the residents' desire not to be displaced from the building.

Conclusions

Fifteen years later, the city seems to have fully absorbed the squatter-residents into its urban slumber. The dialogue between urban planning policies and welfare systems in the city of Bari appears weakened and sluggish, unable to keep pace with, on the one hand, the financialisation of real estate values and, on the other, the lack of widespread reception services for migrant citizens. This has deepened territorial disparities in some urban regions and generated new ones.

The denial of the right to housing, intensified by forms of urban segregation, hinders the gradual and stable integration of migrant citizens into the urban fabric and its communities. It exposes them to a high risk of ghettoisation and marginalisation from all spheres of public and social life in the city. The case of "Ex Socrate" encapsulates this political, social, and cultural short circuit in the capital of Apulia.

Rethinking and reconstructing the experience of the occupied Ex Socrate building could also mean attempting to redraw the

history of the city's reception system over the past fifteen years or so.

It naturally leads to a reflection on what has been done so far, and on how much still needs to be done, how much the voices of those who benefit from these services have been heard, and how much policymakers have been willing and able to give space to those voices, desires, and dreams of independence and empowerment.

This broader reflection likely requires tackling the issue one step at a time, trying to respond to the questions raised by this reportage without losing sight of the bigger picture, without forgetting that all the needs that have emerged are part of a single system.

The right to housing in the city of Bari, as in other major Italian cities, appears to be the starting point, the right that must be reestablished.

To define the right to housing means going beyond the basic need for a bed, which could be addressed through existing welfare policies, shelters, and rent support programmes – programmes that certainly need to be rethought, but which nonetheless exist.

It means looking at reality through the eyes of the residents themselves, who have re-found a home, a family, and a neighbourhood within that building. So why not reflect on what, after all these years, keeps them together? What compels them to live in materially precarious conditions, simply to feel part of a community? What leads newly arrived seasonal migrant workers to settle in what used to be the school gym, sleeping in makeshift arrangements, yet still feeling welcomed and safe?

The right to housing – the right to a private space where one can reclaim intimacy, where one can host others, feel a sense of community – is not merely a result of tailored policies or planning. It is a right to live and to *be* a community together. Perhaps, in order to understand the reality of "Ex Socrate", as well as similar occupations, it would be desirable to start from trust in one's neighbour, from believing in a self-regulated system, in other words, from a sense of belonging to a community. The same community that, in 2009, without hesitation and regardless

of differences, came together to offer shelter and dignity to migrant citizens living on the streets in the cold, by entering and occupying that former high school in the San Pasquale neighbourhood of Bari.

It is 2025. The first light of dawn on the first Sunday in May coincides with preparations for the celebration of Saint George at the Church of San Gaetano in Bari Old Town. It is an essential day for Eritreans, as they celebrate Eritrea's Independence Day in prayer with the saint. Songs and incense fill the air before returning to the one-room "classroom-apartments" of the squatted building on Via Fanelli; songs and prayers to face life on the margins with courage, to strengthen the spirit against darkness and dampness, and against the god who sees everything but does nothing.

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Laura Grassini, Nicola Schingaro*

PUBLIC HOUSING POLICIES IN THE FACE OF SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGES
Spaces for innovation, opportunities and resistance in the San Paolo neighbourhood in Bari

Introduction

Public housing policies in Italy are currently experiencing a period of great ambiguity and uncertainty. On the one hand, the evolution of housing needs, linked to profound social and environmental changes, is unfortunately confronted with public housing policies (ERP) that are still predominantly oriented towards providing mere accommodation rather than human-centred housing and well-being (National Observatory on Housing and Urban Regeneration Policies 2022). On the other hand, there is a lack of strategic vision for the redevelopment and management of outdated housing stock, which is often seen as a problem rather than a resource for the contemporary city (Cognetti & Padovani 2016). This has led to repeated disinvestment and disposal strategies[1] (Padovani 2017).

In our country, housing policies have always been marginalised, both financially and symbolically, within an overall weak welfare system characterised by the precarious nature of interventions

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1 While public homes built between 1951 and 2001 were around 1 million, the sale permitted by Law 560/1993 have resulted in the loss of over 22% of public housing stock, furthermore creating "mixed" condominiums that are difficult to manage (Forum Diseguaglianze Diversità, 2020).

(Allen *et al.* 2004; Mugnano 2018). The only period of significant experimentation was the post-war era, during which the INA-Casa plan, promoted by the Fanfani government, financed the construction of 355,000 homes (approximately two million rooms), resulting in a real laboratory for urban and architectural experimentation (Di Biagi 2001). Other organisations were established during this period to finance the construction of low-cost housing[2], and in 1954 the Popular Housing Coordination Committee (C.E.P.) was created to oversee their activities.

This occurred alongside the transformation of cities by private development, with widespread real estate speculation progressively displacing an increasing number of families from central areas. These families were moved into the large public housing neighbourhoods under construction (Borri *et al.* 1980). One hope for creating space for housing for disadvantaged groups in urban expansion districts was embodied by Law 167/1962, "Provisions to encourage the acquisition of buildable areas for economic and social housing", which introduced the Plans for Economic and Popular Housing (P.E.E.P.). Instead, it favoured the creation of the large public suburbs of our cities, which have complex and multidimensional problems resulting from the multiple dynamics of marginalisation that generated them.

Since the 1980s, the ERP financing, production and management system has progressively contracted, resulting in a reduction in this type of housing. Today, it constitutes just 4% of the housing stock in our country – a figure more than four times lower than in France and Germany (Forum Diseguaglianze Diversità 2020). This reflects the prevailing belief in our country that a house is a real estate investment and reinforces the gap between those who can buy a home and those who rent, usually out of necessity[3].

2 Its purpose was to coordinate the activities of: the Autonomous Institutes of Public Housing (I.A.C.P.), the National Institute for the Housing of State Employees (I.N.C.I.S.), the Administrative Committee for the Relief of the Homeless of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (U.N.R.R.A. C.A.S.A.S.), I.N.A.-Casa.

3 In confirmation of this, various studies show how renting families are predominantly low-middle income, with over 40% of them located in the poor-

In this context, we wonder how policies for public housing can address the complex problems of these fragile contexts by acknowledging the complexity of their problems and, at the same time, their often unexpressed potential – revolving around community ties and informal solutions. The aim is to produce real innovations in policies, management and design.

In the mid-nineties, also on the basis of the reflections developed in the *Quartiers en crise* city network, some initial innovations had been attempted with the so-called "complex programmes", through the integration of housing with urban regeneration policies (Rossignolo 2020). After the unsuccessful attempts of the Integrated Intervention Programmes (PII) and the Urban Renewal Programmes (PRiU) – whose focus was anchored to the purely physical dimension of the interventions (Governa & Saccomanni 2002) – with the Urban Rehabilitation Programmes (PRU) and, above all, with the Neighbourhood Contracts I and II, the introduction of the integrated approach of European origin has allowed to test an integration between the social and physical dimensions in ERP policies at the neighbourhood scale. Interesting experiments on a regional basis have therefore followed (Barbanente *et al.* 2022), also as a consequence of the reform of Title V of the Constitution and the leading role assumed by the regions in ERP and regeneration policies (Rossignolo 2020).

The San Paolo neighbourhood, which we discuss in this essay, arose as a result of post-war housing policies. The first part of it was built with funding provided by the C.E.P., 7-8 km from the outermost ring of the urban fabric at the time. This location was chosen due to an intricate convergence of speculative and reformist interests (Borri *et al.* 1980). It was then expanded under Law 1662/1967, which led to the identification of two additional compartments included in the P.E.E.P. Today, San Paolo is the largest and most populous ERP neighbourhood in Bari, with approximately 30,000 inhabitants. It is emblematic of the complex problems generated by its genesis and the inadequacy of the responses given to emerging issues and basic living needs.

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est areas of the city, reinforcing segregative tendencies (Mugnano 2018).

This paper reflects on innovation spaces as well as opportunities and resistance to change in the definition and implementation of regeneration policies for public housing in San Paolo. This is done through interviews with key stakeholders, particularly the residents and the Regional Agency for Housing (ARCA) Puglia Centrale, which manages the ERP assets of this neighbourhood[4]. The ideas informing this work were developed in the Research Project of National Interest "UAH! Unconventional and Affordable Housing".

The birth and evolution of the San Paolo neighbourhood

San Paolo is a typical southern Italian suburb. Discussions about the new neighbourhood began in 1956. The area of the first C.E.P. nucleus was supposed to be reachable in a reasonable time from the centre and to allow for future expansion. Instead, the chosen area was about 7-8 km from the outermost ring of the urban fabric at the time and offered no possibility of expansion, as it was blocked on one side by the railways and the industrial area, and on the other by the airport.

The project for the first C.E.P. nucleus (fig. 1), approved in 1958, provided housing for around 2,000 families (approximately 10,000 rooms). At the time, the urban situation in Bari was very critical (Borri *et al.* 1980). The city was facing a serious housing emergency that would soon come to a head, leading to the abandonment of the idea of designing the new neighbourhood as a residential settlement to serve the production centres of the nearby industrial area. In fact, the neighbourhood rapidly became home to many fragile families coming from vulnerable areas of the city, and remained so for a long time. These families were poor and large, and needed a home. Since the Second World War, they had either been homeless or had lived in unhealthy and "immoral" homes, shanty towns and hovels

4 The ARCA were established under the Regional Law 22/2014 as public bodies responsible for managing the real estate assets of the former IACP. San Paolo falls under the jurisdiction of ARCA Puglia Centrale.

scattered in the disreputable areas of the city that were already stigmatised for their high concentration of poverty, degradation, hardship, marginalisation and deviance, as well as crime.

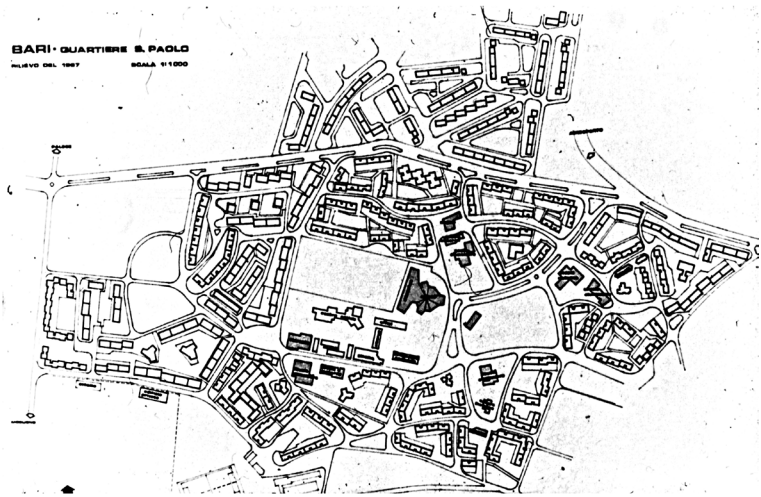

Figure 1. C.E.P. Project (L. Carbonara, V. Chiaia, V. Cirielli, M. Lopopolo, A. Petrignani, L. Sandri, 1957).

The first families to arrive at the C.E.P. in the first half of the 1960s came from: the "Casbah" or "Socia" – an enormous building inhabited by around 300 families and located not far from the centre; "Torre Tresca Refugee Village" – a former prison camp with around 3.000 inhabitants, including former internees, refugees and displaced persons; crumbling and dilapidated buildings in the Madonnella, Libertà, Fesca, Carrassi, San Pasquale, Murat and Bari Vecchia neighbourhoods, where speculative pressures were growing rapidly. From the second half of the 1960s onwards, a new wave of migration was underway. The Municipality proclaimed a real or presumed danger of collapse of many buildings in the old city and ordered their evacuation, reassuring residents that public houses were available at the C.E.P.

These were mainly located in Sector B (1963), which, together with subsequent Sector C (also foreseen in the P.E.E.P. made for the implementation of Law 167/1962), constitute the two main expansion nuclei of C.E.P. (Cucciolla 1990), as shown in the following figure.

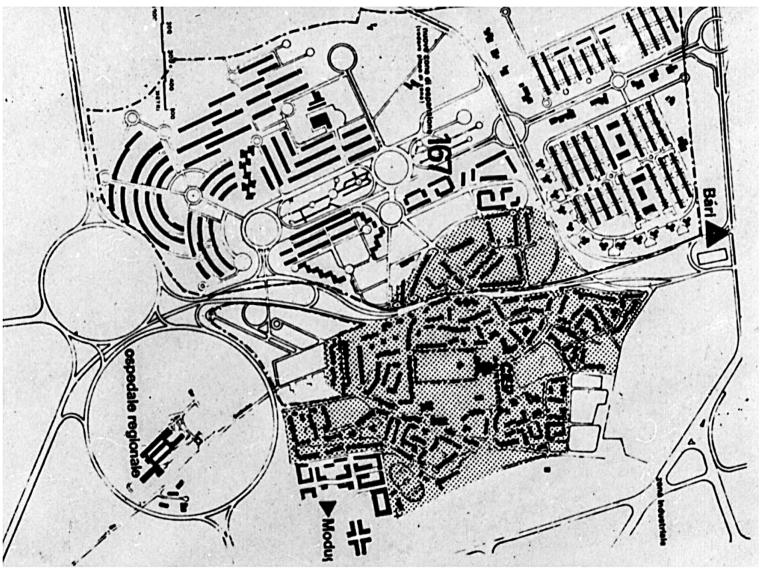

Figure 2. The first C.E.P. nucleus (bottom) and the two Sectors B (top left) and C (top right) foreseen in the P.E.E.P.

The policies of evacuation and emptying the city in the 1960s and 1970s pushed many poor and large families to seek shelter at the C.E.P., with arrivals taking place in waves. Many were assigned a public home, while many others occupied one illegally or settled in the basements of public buildings, waiting for the first "free" flat to become available. During this period, some housing blocks (built with INA-Casa or INCIS funds) were allocated to families of medium socio-economic status (clerks, railway workers, postal workers, armed forces personnel, etc.)

in an unsuccessful attempt to create a mixed community. Many of these families remained in the neighbourhood for only a short time, so this approach did not work.

When they arrived at the C.E.P., these people were confronted with the surreal sight of a few public homes surrounded by an immense, distressing empty space, which destroyed any sense of community. There were no roads: strips of land traced the outline of buildings that had been or were being constructed. There was no gas or water supply. There was no electricity in the houses and no public lighting.

While the urban masterplan (PRG) "Quaroni" (1976) was transposing the provisions of the P.E.E.P. by adding further residential expansions and large infrastructure projects to connect the neighbourhood with the city (Fig. 3), many additional families looking for public or low-cost housing moved here in the 1970s and 1980s.

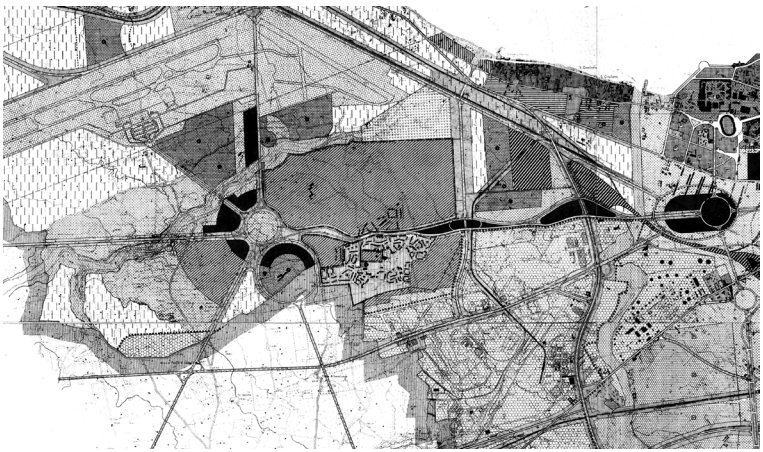

Figure 3. The San Paolo district in the "Quaroni" PRG, 1976.

By the end of the 1980s, the neighbourhood had become a place characterised by high levels of marginalisation and crime. Affected by rapid changes, it seemed enveloped in a pervasive sense of anomie. It was a neighbourhood that had been

stigmatised for a long time; this had a profound impact on the lives of its inhabitants. Known simply as C.E.P., the acronym had taken on the meaning of "Centro Elementi Pericolosi" (Dangerous Elements Centre) outside its borders, to the extent that, by the end of the 1960s, a delegation of residents had approached the mayor to request a name for the neighbourhood, suggesting "San Paolo" after its first parish, which was being completed at that time.

In the neighbourhood's early years, there were no services. The memories of the first residents tell of a public school that operated in shifts throughout the day, a pharmacy that, in the absence of anything else, also served as a place of socialisation, a small post office and a shop where a variety of goods were sold, as well as some street vendors who came from the city to sell mainly food. Between 1965 and 1967, the parish church of San Paolo was built, and in 1966 Aldo Moro laid the foundation stone for the hospital, which began operating many years later in 1997. At that time, the neighbourhood was a no man's land, with no control. There was a small Carabinieri barracks, but it was insufficient to combat the widespread presence of deviance and crime in the neighbourhood.

Experimenting with neighbourhood regeneration

Over time, the social fabric of San Paolo has partially diversified, particularly following the construction of the two P.E.E.P. sectors, which are characterised by different types of subsidised housing besides public housing. After a period of "abandonment" in the early decades – which led to informal protests and poorly organised collective mobilisations to claim rights and spaces, unable to establish a sense of real civic participation among residents – the neighbourhood gained increasing attention since the end of the 1980s. It became the target of many interventions decided "from above", with contrasting outcomes.

In 1997, the PRiU of Lama Balice was approved, with the expectation to provide the neighbourhood with services (a primary and middle school, a social centre with a library and an auditorium)

and shops. However, this resulted only in an exchange of zoning[5] and their partial modification (from tertiary to a mix of residential and tertiary), which benefitted the private sector exclusively. None of the planned services were ever implemented[6]. Some interventions carried out in the first decade of the 2000s achieved better results. With the funds from the Regional Operational Programme (ROP) FESR 2000-2006, the metropolitan railway and tram line connecting the neighbourhood to the city centre was completed in 2008. During this period, a complex with services and management buildings was constructed along the Piazza Europa axis, including the first ASL Territorial Multifunctional Centre, which was built in 2010 thanks to a regional supplementary agreement.

The urban regeneration project, financed by the "Periferie" programme (2015) and currently in its final implementation phase, is interesting. With a focus on improving open public spaces to encourage social interaction, it has provided the neighbourhood with 7,200,000 euros of funding to enhance urban mobility, including the introduction of cycle paths and pedestrian areas, improve urban greenery, upgrade the areas in front of community centres, and establish public spaces in courtyards of residential buildings.

In order to strengthen civic community services and garrisons, it is worth mentioning few other initiatives that the municipal administration is carrying out in the neighbourhood. These initiatives aim to reinforce processes triggered "from below" by associations, social cooperatives and foundations that have emerged in the neighbourhood over time. These organisations play a key role in responding to complex social and educational needs that go beyond a mere lack of physical resources. These include the creation of: a Community Library in the "Lombardi" secondary school, which is now managed by "I Bambini di Truffaut" association; a community garden with trees and a vegetable plot, which was financed by the Bari municipality's "Creative Regenerations"

5 Necessary to overcome the unbuildability of some areas due to the new landscape constraints.

6 Of the three service buildings mentioned, two were never built and one, the middle school, was never completed and is unusable.

project and involved several social cooperatives and associations (led by the "Tracce Verdi" cooperative) in the start-up phase; the creation of the "Corte Don Bosco" as a space for social relations and climate refuge, which was planned with the involvement of (or, at least, the attempt to involve) the local community[7].

These "top-down" and "bottom-up" initiatives have hardly affected ERP. ARCA Puglia Centrale has only recently launched some refurbishment initiatives for its property. These, however, seem to be operating in isolation and barely interfering with urban regeneration policies. Among them are some interventions financed by the complementary measures of the PNRR[8] within the Regional Housing Plan. These consist of improving the safety and energy efficiency of some buildings in sector C and in the first C.E.P. nucleus, as well as carrying out minor renewal work on condominium green areas[9]. The ERP's property portfolio in the neighbourhood is substantial, comprising 3,600 homes owned by ARCA Puglia Centrale, primarily located in the first C.E.P. nucleus and in sector C[10]. Additionally, the municipality of Bari owns 653 homes in sector B, which are also managed by ARCA for assignments only. Unfortunately, especially in the first C.E.P. nucleus, these dwellings often lack basic amenities such as lifts and heating systems. They are also in a poor state of repair, with water and sewerage network leaks and infiltrations. Over time, this has generated deep hostility towards ARCA among residents, making it one of the neighbourhoods with the highest incidence of arrears in Italy[11].

7 This project was funded by the "G124" programme promoted by Renzo Piano.

8 PNRR stems for the National Plan for Recovery and Reconstruction.

9 These are interventions funded by the programme "Safe, Green and Social: Redevelopment of Public Residential Housing" (PNRR Complementary Measures under the Regional Housing Plan).

10 Source: May 2025 data provided by ARCA Puglia Centrale.

11 According to data provided by ARCA (2025), 47,3% of tenants in Agency-owned accommodation are in arrears by more than 100 euros. These arrears total 18,105,531 euros and are distributed across all income brackets, including the highest. Households in the top two income brackets, with a taxable income exceeding 27,085 euros, account for 20% of the total arrears.

Moreover, the management of the real estate assets of ARCA Puglia Centrale is very complex, even when considering the purely economic and financial aspects. Despite the properties sold, in 2023 ARCA Puglia Centrale owned 20,667 homes[12]; over 60% of these are over 40 years old (Puglia Region 2022). Considering the lack of maintenance over the years, these homes are in poor condition. The Agency's tentative attempt to secure additional funding to manage this portfolio has not yielded significant results to date. In the exploratory call it published for the transfer of credit derived from the 110% Superbonus[13] for energy efficiency interventions on its assets, very few companies expressed interest in intervening in San Paolo, and in any case, the measure was withdrawn by the national government before being used. Recently, ARCA Puglia Centrale published a similar call to obtain expressions of interest in carrying out energy efficiency works under Measure M.7-I.17[14] of the PNRR. Clearly, even if these interventions were carried out, they would only address the physical and infrastructural aspects of the ERP estate, thereby improving housing conditions but falling far short of the integrated, person-centred housing policies that are needed.

The residents' point of view

In what ways can the participation of residents contribute to the innovation of public housing policies and improve living conditions in ERP neighbourhoods?

In the suburbs, certain structural, cultural and relational conditions intertwine and reinforce each other, hindering participation in all its forms, from social life to informal protests to active civic/political participation.

12 Source: data included in the ARCA Central Apulia annual report for 2022. https://www.arcapugliacentrale.it/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Decreto-AU-n.-72-del-22.10.2024-RELAZIONE_ART._43_ANNO_2023.pdf.

13 It was an incentive measure introduced in 2020 by the Italian government, consisting in a series of facilitation mechanisms, deductions and reimbursements for energy efficiency interventions.

14 This measure, with a total funding of 1,381 million euros, is specifically aimed at improving the energy efficiency of public housing.

Various types of inequalities generate structural obstacles.

There are (*a) Socio-economic inequalities*. "Cultural" and "economic" capital, which are important for participation in political life, are not equally distributed in society (Bourdieu 1983), and predominantly remain at medium-low or low levels in the suburbs. Precarious economic and housing conditions, especially if experienced for long-term, often constitute an obstacle to participation by reducing the time and energy available for civic/political commitment.

> I live in the building where the balconies collapsed about three years ago, and we have been without them all this time. After the collapse, we contacted ARCA. They came before the summer and told us that they would install the balconies the following September. Two years have passed and they have done nothing. There was another meeting, but I didn't go because I'm fed up with being lied to (Worker, 49 years old).

Even when faced with the opportunity to improve one's living space, as in the case of the regeneration planned by the "G124" project to create "Corte Don Bosco", people have often refused to participate due to their precarious living conditions.

> If they plant trees, it will be more beautiful than what we've had for the last fifty years. But don't ask me to come to the meeting; I can't think straight and we don't know how to move forward. I won't come, but you can tell them that we will be happy if they create this forest (Pensioner, aged 64).

Other times, (b) *unequal access to services* is the obstacle to participation.

Inadequate public infrastructure (transport, schools, communal spaces, etc.) significantly limits the ability to build social ties and participatory networks. Even long-term absence of communal spaces can hinder participation in social life. The tendency, built up over time, to "shut oneself up at home" often persists even when common spaces are created nearby.

> I only like it because when I look out from the balcony, I see some greenery, which is nicer than before. But I don't go for walks here. We never went anywhere else, only to Bari when I had to go out! (Housewife, aged 67).

Finally, (c) *institutional marginalisation* poses an obstacle to participation.

Suburban residents often feel distant from institutions, which they perceive as either absent or hostile.

> "I don't know the mayor, and the new president of the municipality is never there. I went to the municipality two or three times to speak to her, but she wasn't there (Housewife, aged 69).

Socio-economic inequalities (a) and *institutional marginality* (c) are significantly intertwined, especially with regard to housing insecurity.

> When we call ARCA, if all goes well, they send a technician to carry out an inspection. But then they forget, and in the meantime, you could even die! We have been reporting these problems for years! (Housewife, aged 68).

> They left us abandoned under the arcades of "Viale delle Regioni" (Regions street). The drain pipes are exposed, and they leak sewage every now and then. The stench is terrible. I had a water leak and cockroaches were coming out of the bathroom, but luckily they fixed it. We are surrounded by mosquitoes, cockroaches, snakes and rats; it's disgusting. There is dirt everywhere because people come to dump their rubbish here and AMIU[15] doesn't collect it. It's like a landfill site here (Worker, 50 years old).

There are also *cultural and symbolic obstacles* to participation.

On the one hand, there is (a) *territorial stigma* (Wacquant 2008), whereby certain neighbourhoods are perceived and experienced as degraded and dangerous places. This affects the inhabitants' self-

15 AMIU is the Bari Cleaning Company (municipal undertaking).

perception and their propensity to participate. Stigma often acts as a powerful mechanism of self-exclusion. Added to this is a (b) *low participatory culture* that is still widespread. A lack of a participatory tradition and a weak political socialisation contribute to a culture of disillusionment and detachment. "Social capital" – mutual trust, networks, and norms of reciprocity – is crucial for civic activation, yet it is often lacking in marginal contexts (Putnam 2000). Here, (c) *social fragmentation* is rife, hindering the construction of collective identities and forms of solidarity and having a corrosive impact on urban social bonds (Sennett 1977).

> When I think about my life here, I think about my home. I've never met anyone outside of it. I've almost always stayed inside the house. Even when I was young, I only went out to go shopping with my husband or to Bari to buy things or go for a walk. I've always been afraid of the neighbourhood because of the crime. It seems like it's calmed down recently, but we've seen all sorts of things (Housewife, 69 years old).

Finally, *relational and communication obstacles* are generated in the suburbs.

We often encounter a (a) *lack of spaces for dialogue*. The absence of physical and symbolic places and accessible, recognised public spaces where inhabitants can meet and discuss is a barrier to the formation of the local public sphere. Therefore, real participation is necessary to avoid merely staging (b) *instrumental participation*. However, very often participatory processes are reduced to formal rituals promoted from above rather than truly transformative practices. If we add relational and communicative obstacles to the structural, cultural and symbolic ones through fake participation, a further growth in (c) *distrust and isolation* will be almost entirely inevitable. A sense of isolation and distrust of the outside world is often the result of institutional abandonment and a fear of social conflict. In the absence of strong networks, inhabitants of the suburbs therefore tend to adopt defensive identities that block openness and change (Castells 1997).

The words of an operator involved in creating the community garden financed by the "Creative Regenerations" project encourage us to critically reflect on participation and avoid unnecessary simplifications.

> It's difficult for families to respond. It's difficult to convince them that they can take care of a public garden! To date, more than a hundred trees have been cut down. The space is often used as a dumping ground. But the problem runs deeper than that. The residents have not been able to take care of it. One night, we found some boys vandalising the trees. The context here is different from that in which the Domingo and Gargasole gardens[16] arose because the cultural environment is different. Here, people live in poverty and cannot afford to waste time taking care of the garden. Perhaps there should be more continuity. The more you work, the more people you can involve, and the more interested they may become. However, when work stops, the tendency to neglect the space returns (Social worker, 52 years old).

Even in the participatory process envisaged by the "G124" project to create "Corte Don Bosco" – a process that has perhaps brought together expertise and residents more than any other – contradictions and weaknesses have emerged.

> We're happy if something gets done here! I don't really believe in it. Since I moved here more than fifty years ago, this ugly pavement has always been here. If they plant trees now, it will look nicer! (Housewife, aged 57).

> They said that with this forest, we should have a green roof over our heads, but they planted trees that are so small that perhaps our grandchildren will see them grow (Housewife, aged 70).

What has emerged confirms, once again, that the obstacles to participation are often interconnected factors that reinforce each other: poverty, marginalisation, weak social networks and institutional inadequacy. Overcoming these obstacles requires

16 These are two community gardens created in other neighbourhoods in Bari.

material interventions, such as services, spaces and resources, as well as deep work to rebuild trust, social capital and democratic legitimacy. Participation must be used as a tool to emancipate the peripheries. To achieve this, participation must become a structural, daily political practice.

Concluding remarks

By tracing the physical and social dynamics that led to the creation and development of San Paolo, and by analysing the regeneration strategies implemented there, this study has provided room for reflection on potential areas for innovation in the regeneration policies for public housing.

After several decades of neglect, during which a long history of discrimination and stigmatisation dominated, the neighbourhood is now at the centre of a series of urban regeneration initiatives with uncertain outcomes. These initiatives have been mainly planned in response to public funding opportunities. These interventions coexist with initiatives aimed at opening spaces for bottom-up activation. However, these latter still fail to impact conventional housing policies or promote real emancipation in the suburbs. They fall short in promoting forms of self-organisation and shared care, as well as in establishing solidarity networks that foster social generativity and new community welfare, which should play an increasingly central role in contemporary housing policies (Ferri *et al.* 2017).

The San Paolo has long been a ghetto and its inhabitants "undifferentiated components of the masses" (Whyte 1964, p. 10). Policies to combat deviance and crime have long focused almost exclusively on repression rather than the cultural and social regeneration of the neighbourhood. Despite the numerous associations born from below and the great vitality within the neighbourhood, the interventions carried out over the last thirty years have not eradicated the main problems associated with suburbs: unemployment, poverty, crime and a low level

of education[17]. For this reason, San Paolo has been, and still is to some extent, a reflection of a "self-fulfilling prophecy" (Merton 1948).

Reversing this trend is very complicated and requires action on multiple levels. Due to its size, the ERP heritage could be a significant catalyst for innovation in housing policies, given its dual role as both a problematic element and a potential resource for change. However, this requires the development of a medium- and long-term strategic vision, based on the potential and resources that emerged during the "top-down" and "bottom-up" experiments. This vision should guide change, rather than merely chasing funding availability.

On the other hand, people-based housing policies require communities living in the suburbs to practice participation in their everyday life. This involves promoting community self-organisation, shared care of public spaces, collective demands for rights and services, building solidarity networks, and establishing permanent, inclusive decision-making processes. Participation can become a form of politics from below when it is grounded in people's everyday experiences and real needs. It becomes a tool for emancipation when used to recognise and enhance the potential of marginalised communities, to claim spaces for speech, representation and decision-making, and to build forms of active citizenship that oppose marginalisation. Only in this way can emancipation become a collective, non-welfare process arising from the protagonism of inhabitants and contribute to the construction of a new era of housing policies in the suburbs.

17 It is no coincidence that, in terms of socio-economic status, in 2011 there was still a much lower incidence of young people in the neighbourhood with a university education (13.7%) compared to that of young people in the city (27.7%), nor is it surprising that the unemployment rate of young people in the neighbourhood (96.80%) is more than double that of young people in the city (46.5%).

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GIVE THE GROUND TO THE PEOPLE!
Housing explorations on the ground floor in Quartiere San Paolo, Bari

Introduction

The students of the annual course "Architectural Design Studio 2", in the second year of the three-year bachelor's degree in Architecture at Politecnico di Milano, were involved in the International Research Project "UAH! Unconventional Affordable Housing", dealing with the theme of architectural design within a peripheral urban context, in a plot of the public housing neighbourhood of San Paolo in the north-western outskirts of Bari, in Puglia, Italy.

The students, divided into 15 groups of four members each, were tasked with developing a project for an urban lot of the neighbourhood, where there are two buildings of public housing. However, each group was asked to intervene in the design only on the ground floor of these buildings, which appears as an empty space raised by large *pilotis* in reinforced concrete.

The students had to exploit this residual space to design new unconventional housing arrangements, which can promote social integration in the district and mutual support among the inhabitants, as well as possible new services, activities and workshops. In addition to the intervention on the existing buildings, the students were asked to propose a project for the requalification of the open spaces of the lot and design two small tower buildings.

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San Paolo neighbourhood

The San Paolo district is located northwest of the historic centre of Bari, close to the large ecological corridor of the Lama Balice Natural Park. Born as an urban expansion in the 1950s to cope with post-war demographic growth, the district now occupies a large peripheral area, with more than 30,000 inhabitants (Chirivì 2022). The first nucleus of San Paolo, built as a "CEP"[2], arose in Bari in 1958 as a "satellite district", on an area of approximately eighty hectares, aimed at meeting the demand for public housing for workers in nearby factories (Borri *et al.* 1980).

The next two expansions in the 1960s and 1970s transformed the neighbourhood into the largest public housing area in the city. The first occurred following the issuing of Law 167/1962 and the approval of the ten-year plan for new public housing, which led to the creation of a new residential area close to the original CEP (Don Milani 2009). Finally, in 1971 another construction programme began in an area that now belongs to the neighbouring municipality of Modugno, characterised by a type of intensive mixed-use building: commercial on the ground floor and residential on the upper floors; thus, making up for the shortcomings inherent in the older settlement, all oriented towards residential use. The San Paolo district today presents itself as a heterogeneous residential area, where complexes of buildings of different types are placed side by side, interspersed with large lots that should have been used as public green spaces, but which in reality have never been equipped for this purpose. This type of planning, based on the rationalist principles of the time, led to a rapid urbanisation of the area; however, the limited attention to architectural details has contributed, over time, to phenomena of physical and social degradation (Bauman 2004).

The same housing heterogeneity present in the San Paolo district is also reflected in its population, which is made up of a mix

2 "CEP" (Comitato di coordinamento per l'edilizia popolare) neighbourhoods were built from the late 1950s onwards in several Italian cities with the objective to foster the development of self-sufficient, coordinated neighbourhoods (Wolfgring 2024).

of low to lower-middle income groups (Bottalico & Palmisano 2007). The settlement phenomenon that characterised the increase in population was the arrival of families ousted from other degraded areas of the city. What was supposed to be an innovative workers' settlement instead almost immediately became a place which, in the absence of community structures and social facilities, faces evident fractures such as unemployment, housing marginalisation, social stigma and organised crime, which contribute to the deterioration of the urban fabric (Whyte 1964).

However, San Paolo also has strengths that are still unexplored, including its proximity to the sea, the presence of large usable green spaces, and the fact that it is halfway between the airport, the industrial area and the railway station, making the neighbourhood an interesting logistical hub (PoliBa Chronicle 2022). Furthermore, following the construction of a surface metro line in 2008, the neighbourhood can be reached from the historic centre of Bari in just 12 minutes.

Public housing and construction typologies in San Paolo

Almost all of the housing stock in San Paolo consists of a repetition of blocks of public housing with reinforced concrete structures, long windowed facades alternating with lateral blind facades, external stairways and perimeter loggias. In many cases, the design choices have favoured construction standardisation and cost reduction, to the detriment of typological variety and architectural quality. This has resulted in a homogeneous residential fabric, devoid of recognisable elements and poorly suited to fostering community identity (Bottalico & Scardigno 2007). One of the main architectural features of the district involves the elevation of the housing units on reinforced concrete pilotis, which, although designed to ensure flexibility and permeability of the spaces on the ground floor, have often been the subject of abusive interventions or episodes of crime (Spagnolo 2025).

Today this enormous heritage of public housing is the responsibility of ARCA Puglia Centrale, the Regional Agency for Housing and Living, which was established by Regional Law no. 22 of 20 May 2014, taking over from the former IACP (Autonomous

Institute of Public Housing) of Bari and thus ensuring the continuity of local housing policies of public housing, urban regeneration and territorial welfare (ARCA Puglia Centrale 2025).

The latest Municipal Housing Plan, dating back to 2009, includes interventions of both new construction and redevelopment of public housing. However, some of these interventions are still incomplete, while others have not even begun. Nonetheless, the plan has provided at least one response to the city's serious housing emergency: in 2024, a Memorandum of Understanding between the Municipality of Bari and ARCA, called "Pact for Fair and Sustainable Housing", was adopted with City Council Resolution no. 635 of 29 October 2024 (Comune di Bari 2024). The pact identifies four strategic lines, with interventions for a total of over 250 million euros:

1. Strengthening social and housing services, experimental co-housing projects and support for young couples;
2. Redevelopment of existing public housing stock;
3. New models for fair and sustainable living: to improve urban and architectural design;
4. Observatory of housing supply and demand, to help produce more effective interventions.

ARCA also plays a role as a promoter of the PIRU (Integrated Urban Regeneration Programme) for the redevelopment of San Paolo, for which a memorandum of understanding has been signed with the municipality in 2016. The programme includes public and private interventions to address issues of urban decay (through the recovery of existing public housing stock and the creation of public infrastructures and services), of housing hardship (through the implementation of social, private and subsidised housing interventions), as well as the improvement of mobility and public spaces (Comune di Bari 2023).

Project area and objectives

The project area of the Architectural Design Studio, proposed by the municipality of Bari and the local UAH! research team is

located in San Paolo, more precisely at Viale delle Regioni 21-23, and bordered on the opposite side by Via Trentino Alto Adige. The lot in question, of irregular shape, is therefore well defined by two main roads to the south and west, at whose southern intersection a row of small shops on the ground floor overlooks the site, and by two perimeter walls with fences on the north and east limits. The area includes two mirrored block buildings of public housing, both of 7 floors (ground floor and six floors) and supported by a series of pilotis on the ground floor. The students, after having analysed the area in person through a field survey, were given the task of re-imagining the empty space between the pilotis, designing new unconventional solutions of affordable housing, as well as improving the open space around the existing buildings, in order to contribute to creating a better environment for residents and the neighbourhood. In addition to the residential component, students were asked to hypothesise possible new services and functions, which

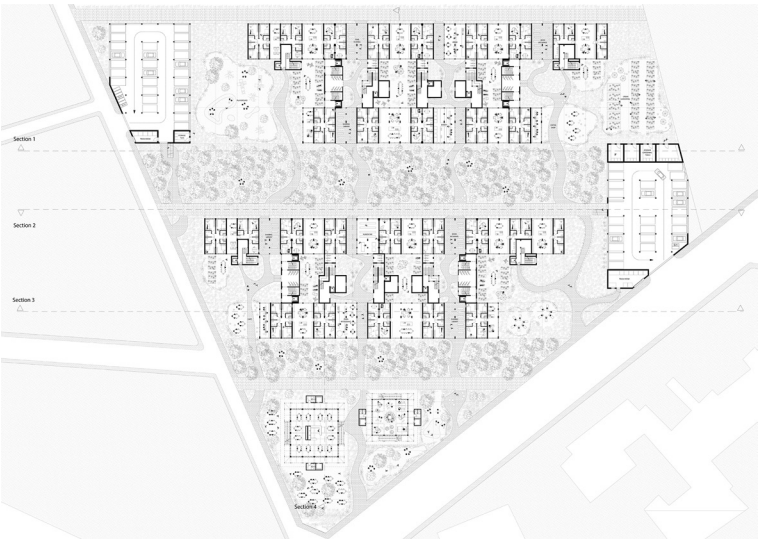

Figure 1. North-south and east-west paths connect the whole plot, creating some activity places (an outside restaurant, a playground, an outside café, urban farming). The two towers stand as urban landmarks in the south corner, while two garages mark the eastern and western limits (Authors: P.J. Leppert, H.S. Mazur, E. Batmaz, A. Hristova, 2025).

could be placed on the ground floor of the existing buildings or inside the two new tower buildings that have been designed inside the lot. The small towers should have a limited base area and could have a residential, service or mixed function, should interface with the pre-existing buildings, without exceeding their height, and should ideally be configured as new urban landmarks to redevelop the identity of the area (fig. 1).

Existing and new households

In recent decades, a gradual shift in family dynamics across Europe can be highlighted. Due to recent social and economic changes, a strong transformation in household composition can be observed, moving from the traditional patriarchal extended family model to a nuclear or non-traditional one (Meyer & Carlson 2014). These transformations have challenged the traditional meaning of the term "family", shifting attention to groups that are typically underrepresented and understudied in housing policies, such as: single-person households, divorced couples with children, single parents, and the growing elderly population. In response to the emerging needs of these social groups, recent years have seen a rise of unconventional housing models such as cohabitation, not only among students but also among young couples, adult workers and young people with elderly people, all looking for more accessible housing solutions (Postiglione *et al.* 2022a). At the same time, changes in the labour market (Taylor-Gooby 2004), the worsening of employment conditions, the increase in precarious employment, the difficult affordability of housing and delocalisation, are forcing more and more people, even those with average incomes (Costa *et al*. 2014), into precarious housing conditions and frequent changes of address (Rolshoven 2007; Reuschke 2013; Postiglione *et al.* 2022b).

Overall, these phenomena have called into question the meaning of "home" inherited from the Modern Movement and the housing programmes implemented in the last century, requiring a thorough reworking of both the concept of family and traditional housing models.

The social and public housing heritage inherited from the twentieth century, like the one present in the San Paolo neighbourhood, was designed for a society of workers very different from current public housing tenants, who, as previously highlighted, are often part of vulnerable and/or economically disadvantaged groups (Don Milani 2009). The lack of local services and the absence of adequate meeting spaces have exacerbated the discomfort of resident families, posing evident disadvantages. After typological research (Zoller 2014) based on case studies[3], students were given full freedom of decision, which translated into several architectural proposals and different housing solutions. Some design teams chose to focus on young populations in difficulty or looking for work, others on older people, and again others on disadvantaged families, single mothers or immigrant workers. The design teams therefore had to deal with different needs and requirements depending on the selected type of users, but all of them dealt with the theme of contemporary living in a context of marginalisation.

Although "unconventional" and "accessible" housing solutions can take on very different forms and derive from a plurality of housing and family situations, their existence and diffusion often reflect the dissatisfaction or inaccessibility of traditional. One of the key hypotheses underlying the Design Studio and the UAH! project is that unconventional housing solutions can represent strategies to address these inadequacies, thus responding to households' evolving needs solutions (Postiglione *et al.* 2022).

New spaces and functions

Social transformations, combined with economic and urban transformations, have on the one hand increased the demand for non-traditional typologies, especially for single-person families

3 Recent and inspirational case studies from Tokyo, Copenhagen, Zurich, Paris, Vienna, Berlin, and Amsterdam were presented in class and discussed in terms of design, policies, planning tools and economic forces as valuable inputs to the student projects.

(students, young workers and seniors over the age of 65), while on the other hand they have made housing increasingly inaccessible in terms of costs, both for rent and for purchase (Bricocoli & Peverini 2023). Also, in the city of Bari, housing prices are continuously increasing, while the index of housing affordability is low (15.9%, referring to single households) and has been decreasing over the past years[4] (Immobiliare.it 2024). Students were therefore called upon to address the complexity of contemporary living at different design scales and in its various programmatic components, hypothesising new spaces and functions (residential and non-residential) to be placed in the intervention area. These themes, and the related challenges, must stimulate students to reflect on the complexity of collective residential construction and on the different functions, spaces and human relations it must accommodate, thus also putting the ethics of the profession into practice. Working in a suburban area, with empty areas or residual spaces, students must reflect on the design options to create successful housing models, also reflecting on the failure of many public housing complexes built in the past in the area. The goal is to propose accessible housing typologies which are at the same time of high architectural and urban quality, capable of intercepting and responding to the diversified needs and requests of new emerging or more vulnerable household profiles of the San Paolo neighbourhood. Students were asked to propose, on the one hand, innovative residential solutions for the users they have hypothesised and, on the other hand, new complementary functions, in order to compensate for, at least in part, the deficiencies of the neighbourhood in many aspects, such as social, cultural, sports, recreational and educational services.

With the proposals developed by the students, the course and in general the research project UAH! aims to analyse and propose new unconventional design solutions capable of reducing

4 The index measures the percentage of the housing supply offered for sale in a given municipality that is affordable for a single person with a net average income equal to the municipal average. It is assumed that the property purchase is financed at 80% through a 25-year fixed-rate mortgage, with an interest rate corresponding to the average recorded during the reference period (currently 4.45%) (immobiliare.it 2024).

the research gap on multiple themes related to contemporary living (fig. 2).

Figure 2. A balanced distribution of green spaces and activity spots throughout the plot. The west tower stands as a landmark parallel to the street while the east tower stands in axis with the new central public space completing it. A set of new shops create the south triangular piazza. Apartments show a zigzag of private and social spaces, with courtyards for collective activities (Authors: R.B. Madeira, B. Savin, A. Trsic, A.A. Zaorska, 2025).

New urban space

The open public space around the buildings, is currently characterised by a situation of urban decay and the presence of numerous illegal parking lots, ruined pavements, informal waste collection areas scattered in different places, lack of greenery and urban furniture. The layout of the open spaces within the neighbourhood and the presence of large green areas reflects the rationalist principles of the 20th century and an unexplored potential for future redevelopment interventions (Archistart.net 2017).

The groups were therefore asked to re-imagine this space too, always with a view to economy and social interaction, to improve the living quality of all residents, existing and new, and strengthen the urban identity of the area, instead of its present suburban character. Students were given full freedom and were asked to relocate a minimum number of formal parking spaces necessary for the residents, to eliminate architectural barriers for pedestrians guaranteeing continuity of sidewalks and paths and the entrance of emergency vehicles (such as ambulances). The strategies proposed by the students for the open space could potentially be replicated and developed at the neighbourhood level around other buildings, thus proposing a widespread regeneration of the urban space.

Public interventions with similar objectives have been proposed in recent years, such as "SanPArt" (San Paolo Art) in 2021/2022 promoted by the Mecenate 90 Association, the "Corte Urbana Don Bosco" in 2023 promoted by Renzo Piano's G124 Project or some tactical urbanism interventions on public facilities of the neighbourhood[5].

New community

The design of new unconventional housing solutions in the San Paolo neighbourhood could not ignore the creation of new

5 The "SanPArt" (San Paolo Art) project in 2021/2022, by the Mecenate 90 Association with the support of the municipality and the Puglia region promoted the creation of 11 murals and 6 creative workshops (Chirivì 2022). Two of these murals decorate now our residential blocks in the project area. In 2023, Renzo Piano's G124 promoted the recovery of the "Corte Urbana Don Bosco", to transform the empty space between the buildings into a collective garden, including a circular clearing with seats, sustainable lighting and draining pavement (Montani 2024). Finally, some tactical urbanism interventions were undertaken on the external areas of church Santa Maria Madre della Chiesa, "E. De Amicis" and "G. Pascoli" schools, and the "Don Bosco" municipal sports centre, where street furniture, artistic installations, urban greenery and new cycle/pedestrian paths were created to underline the importance of sustainable mobility systems for a smoother connection with the city centre (Archilovers 2024).

forms of community. In fact, the redevelopment of the two existing buildings, together with the arrangement of the open spaces of the lot and the construction from scratch of two small tower buildings, aims not only to propose a replicable model of architectural and urban intervention, but also to regenerate the image of the district, creating a stronger sense of belonging and community among the residents of the neighbourhood. The new public housing designed by the students is not limited to the spatial and functional dimension of living but also explores relational and social potential. Following the principles of flexibility and cohabitation, the challenge posed to the students was to think of the home not only as a private place, but also as a social medium, capable of generating forms of coexistence and cooperation among residents, overcoming the fragmentation and isolation often present in the neighbourhood (fig. 3).

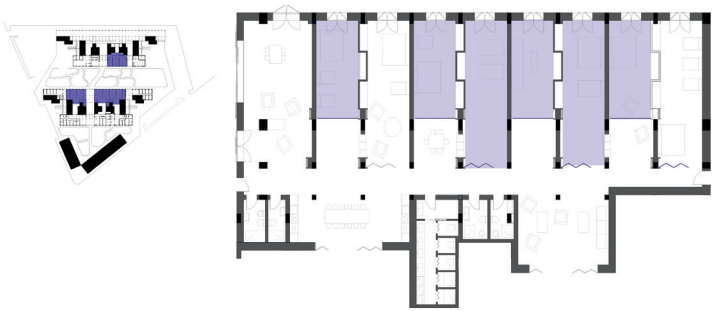

Figure 3. Emergency housing for victims of domestic violence and short-term housing for single parents with children, share a flexible solution of narrow modules varying in length. Social spaces are shared with direct connection to the outside courtyards, enclosed and protected where children can safely play (Authors: R. Rana, T. Cavinato, S. Pollini, T.M. Pintilie, 2025).

New services for citizens, such as shops, workshops and meeting spaces, will act as social catalysts, promoting greater integration and mutual support between people of different age groups, as well as between different cultures and religions.

With this in mind, many projects have introduced common and shared spaces, such as kitchens, laundries, craft workshops, urban gardens or multipurpose rooms, imagined as key elements for building a supportive and cohesive community. Some groups have proposed co-housing or collective housing models, in which the residential units overlook common spaces, encouraging the sharing of time, resources and skills among the inhabitants.

Others have developed thematic micro-communities, aimed at specific users such as artists, single mothers, lonely elderly people, out-of-town students or migrants, suggesting ways of intergenerational or intercultural coexistence (fig. 4). In several cases, the architectural design has been accompanied by the proposal of participatory governance models, in which the inhabitants themselves become promoters of the management and maintenance of shared spaces. The physical proximity guaranteed by living on the ground floor and the possibility of direct interaction with the public external space have been interpreted as opportunities to strengthen social ties between residents and the sense of belonging to the neighbourhood. Some proposals have suggested opening up common spaces to the outside, imagining activities that can also involve the wider neighbourhood, triggering dynamics of exchange and mutual contamination. The presence of hybrid functions, between public and private or between residence and service, has been used as a strategy to break the rigidity of traditional housing models and promote greater adaptability over time. In many projects, an explicit desire to respond not only to material needs, but also to immaterial ones, such as security, recognition, participation, and identity, has emerged. In this sense, architecture has been understood as a tool to generate belonging, activate inclusive processes and build new community narratives, capable of countering the marginalisation and stigma that still affect some popular neighbourhoods such as San Paolo in Bari.

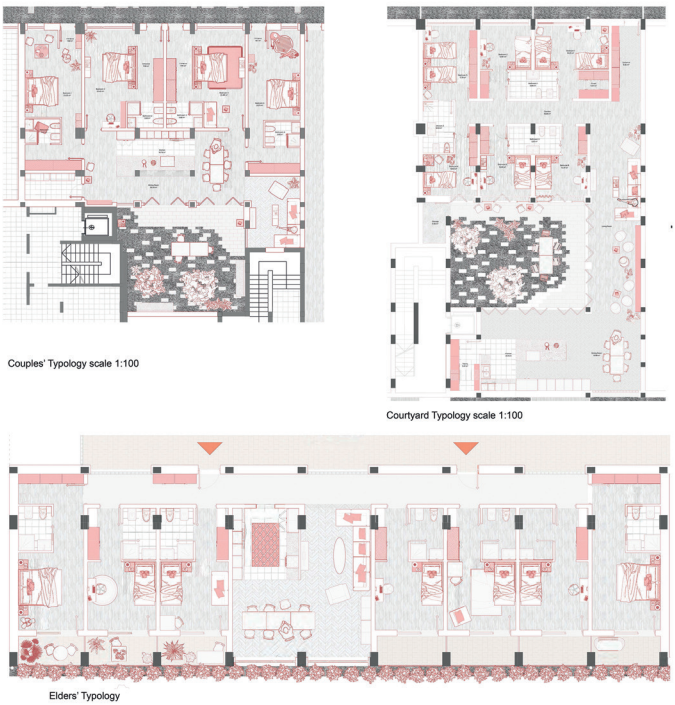

Figure 4. The diversity of residents justifies different apartment layouts: older people with individual private balconies; shared apartments for couples with independent entrances to each bedroom sharing social spaces and a courtyard; foster home for orphans; U-shaped apartment around courtyard for co-living (Authors: C. Fredholm, M. Czyzkowski, A. Ansarijoo, B. Dizdar, 2025).

Conclusions

The project developed during the semester represents a significant example of applied research that intertwines teaching, theory, architectural design and social commitment. Through the design exploration of residual and degraded spaces on the ground floor of the public housing blocks of the San Paolo district in Bari, second-year students of the "Architectural Design Studio 2" course

were called to deal with the complexities of contemporary living in a fragile context, marked by social inequalities and marginalisation. The transformation of unused areas between the pilotis into unconventional residences and service spaces represents not only a design challenge, but also an opportunity to trigger processes of urban regeneration and social cohesion. The work carried out is part of a broader framework of critical reflection on living, stimulated by the international research project UAH!, which invites us to rethink the concept of "home" and "family" in light of the socio-demographic and economic changes of recent decades. The solutions proposed by the students, although diversified in form and content, share the common goal of promoting the role of the architectural project as a tool for urban redevelopment, social inclusion, solidarity and housing innovation.

In this sense, the project offers concrete ideas for future public policies oriented towards affordable and unconventional living. Finally, the possibility of presenting the projects to institutions (the municipality and involved stakeholders) and citizens makes this experience a virtuous example of integration between university education and civic commitment, paving the way for a necessary dialogue between designers, administrations and local communities, to imagine the future of often forgotten neighbourhoods together.

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