

# **Monumentality and Adaptive Reuse: Terzo Palazzo SNAM, from office quarters to unconventional affordable housing!**

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**Abstract.** This paper addresses an uncommon office building case study, listed as protected heritage: Terzo Palazzo SNAM, designed by Franco Albini and Franca Helg (1973). The building is linked to Metanopoli, an unusual urban development carried out by ENI in San Donato Milanese. The monumental 40,000 sqm building, surrounded by greenery, features striking horizontal red façades with aluminum ribbon windows separated by curved polyester resin surfaces. The cruciform design is accessed through a metal canopy, and its central atrium houses Albini's polygonal staircase. Currently abandoned, the municipality seeks a conversion into a mixed-use housing project to revitalize the area. Milan faces a housing crisis, caused by a gap between the new needs of unconventional households and scarce affordable housing, even for the middle class. The adaptive reuse of Terzo Palazzo into affordable housing is part of the PRIN research project UAH! led by Politecnico di Milano, to offer new housing insights. While preserving the building's structure and identity, the interiors will be reimagined through natural light and space to accommodate new dwellings. In its monumentality, Terzo Palazzo will provide the city with a new centrality, stronger connections to its surroundings, and innovative strategies for unconventional affordable housing, preserving the past for the future.

**Keywords:** Modernist heritage, Adaptive reuse, Affordable unconventional housing, Franco Albini, Monumentality.

## 1 Introduction

Heritage and monumentality tend to be considered exclusively in terms of very ancient buildings and spaces. Only in recent years some modernity pieces of the 20<sup>th</sup> century started being regarded and incorporated into our collective architectural and urban heritage. Therefore, the choice of presenting a masterpiece from the late 1960s-early 1970s, such as Terzo Palazzo SNAM designed by Franco Albini and Franca Helg, and discussing its monumentality towards new future uses could be this paper’s contribution to the ongoing debate.

Being a huge building, skillfully articulated in its volumes and shape, Terzo Palazzo is no less of a monument to labor than some old palaces were to royalty. Similarly to the use changes that many old monuments go through, this paper will present ideas towards the future, considering the goals of “UAH-Unconventional Affordable Housing!” a PRIN research project, looking for future answers to the present housing crisis in Europe (but also in San Donato Milanese where the building is located).

This is a reflection based on the result of a master level architectural design project from Politecnico di Milano AUIC School, a thesis framed inside the UAH! Research, articulated with the municipality of San Donato Milanese, with whom the DASTU department has been collaborating, namely on its 2023 PGT – Piano di Governo del Territorio.

## 2 San Donato Milanese

The Municipality of San Donato Milanese, with a present population of 32.221 inhabitants, is in the south-east of Milan (Fig. 1) and belongs to its metropolitan area. It is connected to Milan via metro line (Yellow Line M2) making it very accessible for commuters. Even though the metro line terminates precisely at the city northern limit, its expansion is already a municipality strategy, whose PGT (Territorial Governance Plan) foresees a new metro stop next to Terzo Palazzo SNAM.<sup>[1]</sup>



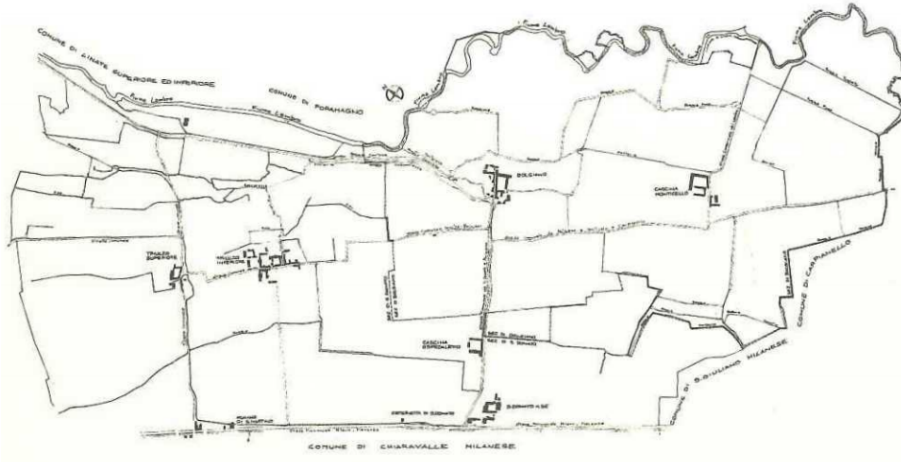
**Fig. 1.** Localization of San Donato Milanese (source: K. Tafaro and R. Farahbod, 2025)

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<sup>[1]</sup> Comune di San Donato Milanese (2014)

San Donato Milanese emerged as a small village along the Roman Via Aemilia, leading from Milano to the Adriatic Sea and is located today at the start of the Autostrada del Sole highway, connecting Milano to Napoli. This strategic position, further highlighted by relevant public transportation (metro line, train station, Milan Linate Airport close-by), gave the city a strong “satellite” character, with people moving daily between San Donato and Milan, for work and housing convenience.

However, the main reason why San Donato became the city that it is today, with its peculiar features, is directly linked to the establishment of the headquarters of ENI (Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi/National Hydrocarbons Company) in the town. In 1936 the village only counted 2.636 inhabitants, based on agricultural economy (Fig. 2).<sup>[2]</sup>



**Fig. 2.** San Donato Milanese before Metanopoli. (Source: Sermisoni S., 1995)

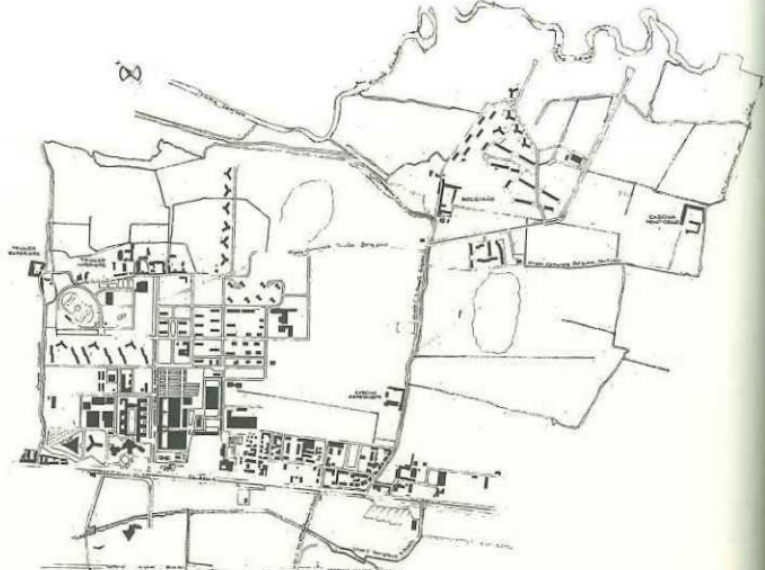
The huge and sudden growth that the town went through happened in the context of the economic post-war boom, in the 1950s, when Italy’s appearance changed radically and manufacturing industries and population both grew rapidly.<sup>[3]</sup> One of the most relevant newly born industries was SNAM (Società Nazionale Metanodotti), founded in 1941, which was soon incorporated inside the newly created ENI industries a few years later.<sup>[4]</sup> ENI developed fast under the guidance of its president Enrico Mattei, who chose the small town of San Donato Milanese for the directional center location, due to its strategic position.<sup>[5]</sup> The construction of the new headquarters, started in 1953 with the first buildings along the new road of via de Gasperi, were the first steps towards a new neighborhood, *Metanopoli*, designed by and for ENI. (Fig. 3)

<sup>[2]</sup> Tuttitalia (2022)

<sup>[3]</sup> Municipality of San Donato Milanese – Città Metropolitana di Milano (2025)

<sup>[4]</sup> Deschermeier D (2007)

<sup>[5]</sup> Magni F (2011)



**Fig. 3.** First urban planning of Metanopoli. (Source: Sermisoni S., 1995)

This decision shaped the destiny of the city, its housing, neighborhoods and identity itself, and the consequences are still visible today.

San Donato Milanese, unlike many other metropolitan municipalities in Milan's first belt, has today a significant public heritage derived from ENI including green areas, sports facilities, educational services, and cultural and leisure facilities.<sup>[6]</sup> The municipality boasts well-maintained green spaces, such as the condominium green space in the ex-ENI residential neighborhood as well as green boulevards and streets.<sup>[7]</sup> Additionally, the presence of one of the main hospitals of the metropolitan area of Milano is another attractor towards the city (as patients, visitors, or hospital workers). The great accessibility to Milan, along with the other features mentioned above, made San Donato Milanese highly attractive and an alternative to residing inside costly Milan, and yet it is the cause of the rising costs in its own housing market.<sup>[8]</sup>

### 3 Metanopoli

With the establishment of ENI, *Metanopoli* (whose name was clearly inspired by the “metanodotti” of SNAM), was designed with clear goals in mind: ENI and *Metanopoli* were meant to be a universe of industries, office buildings, housing for employees, and many collateral services and facilities. These were directed towards instruction,

<sup>[6]</sup> Comune di San Donato Milanese, DASTU (2020)

<sup>[7]</sup> Bricocoli M, Sabatinelli S, Savoldi P (2021)

<sup>[8]</sup> Politecnico di Milano, DASTU, Comune di San Donato Milanese (2025)

sports, free time, healthcare and in addition ENI was providing to employees and their families resources for personal and professional formation.<sup>[9]</sup> The housing was provided according to different social classes, and employees' wellbeing was given a big attention. One of the main goals of Mattei was to give his employees a sense of belonging to the company and he set high standards of living for them.<sup>[10]</sup> Therefore, housing and offices were designed inside a rich framework of green spaces and collective services. Metanopoli very soon developed to become a city and further expanded into new neighboring acquired areas, like Bolgiano.

Enrico Mattei wasn't only influential in a political and economic sense: his success allowed the company to acquire influence also in the architectural and city planning fields, with the commissioning of buildings urban planning of Metanopoli to relevant architects of the time. Mario Bacciocchi was commissioned in 1952 with the drafting of the masterplan of the area. Differently from other Italian planning experimentations (such as Ivrea and Olivetti) Metanopoli was designed ex-novo, completely outside of municipality restrictions and therefore also lacking connections to the existing fabric.<sup>[11]</sup>

On the architectural point of view, along the main axes of the new city (via De Gasperi in particular) several relevant architects were involved in the construction of numerous buildings (Fig.3). The churches of Santa Barbara, built in 1955 by Bacciocchi, and Sant'Enrico, built in 1966 by Ignazio Gardella after the death of Mattei, are examples of public buildings. Entire residential areas were built following each expansion, inside defined sectors called "quadre" by Bacciocchi himself: the wasp-waisted houses by Vittorio Gandolfi 1956-1957).

But the most significant and impactful heritage visible in Metanopoli today are the 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). Because of this heritage, some authors have considered Metanopoli as a true open-air museum of Italian urban and architectural history where architectural examples such as Terzo Palazzo are today seen as modernist (almost post-modernist monuments).<sup>[12][13]</sup>

#### 4 Franco Albini and Franca Helg

Franco Albini (1905-1977) and Franca Helg (1920-1989), were two key figures of Italian architecture and design who had a significant contribution and impact on rationalism and industrial design. Franco Albini studied at Politecnico di Milano (where he would become professor later), and his early career was shaped by working with Gio Ponti as a member of Gruppo 7, beside architects like Luigi Figini, Giuseppe

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<sup>[9]</sup> Municipality of San Donato Milanese – Città Metropolitana di Milano (2025)

<sup>[10]</sup> Fraticelli C, Scaleggi A (2015)

<sup>[11]</sup> Lombardia Beni Culturali

<sup>[12]</sup> Sermisoni S (1995)

<sup>[13]</sup> Fiano E, Guidarini S (1999)

Terragni, Guido Frette, Adalberto Libera, Gino Pollini, Enrico Rava and Sebastiano Larco. He was acquainted to and influenced by important architects of his time such as Mies van der Rohe, Persico and Nizzoli. Besides his famous works in interior architecture and awarded furniture design pieces, Franco Albini also designed residential buildings in Milan and did some experimental designs for modern housing at Triennale di Milano.<sup>[14]</sup>

Franco Albini was one of the most important members of the Italian Neo-Rationalist movement and his influence is evident through his design approach and methodology which reconciled modernity with tradition and his ability to capture the essence of a place, as his museums in Genova, lively discussed with the Art Historian Caterina Marcenaro, can testify.<sup>[15]</sup>

Franca Helg, who also studied and taught at Politecnico di Milano, joined the studio in 1950 and collaborated with Franco Albini until his death. Even though her role inside Albini Studio has been overlooked, she played a key role on many of Albini's projects, one of which is Terzo Palazzo SNAM. According to some authors she had a key role in the design of some of the studio master pieces from 1952-1977 like Terzo Palazzo SNAM or La Rinascente in Rome. The collaboration legacy of Franco Albini and Franca Helg surpasses their individual efforts and expresses the Italian rationalism, while pushing the boundaries of modern architecture of which Terzo Palazzo SNAM could be considered a highlight of their work and philosophy.<sup>[16]</sup>

## 5 Terzo Palazzo SNAM

The third office building of the ENI group, also known as “Terzo Palazzo SNAM” was commissioned by ENI itself and SNAM in 1969 to the architectural practice composed by Franco Albini, Franca Helg, Antonio Piva and Marco Albini (Franco's son) and it was built in 20 months, between 1971 and 1974.<sup>[17]</sup>

The building consists of five floors above ground level and one basement floor (partially above ground depending on the variable topography of the site), adding up to a total of about 40.000 sqm of surface.<sup>[18]</sup> The plan concept is a cross shape, with four wings organized through a rigid orthogonal geometry. One of the wings is shorter than the others due to the presence of the canteen building, originally not present but added during the design process.<sup>[19]</sup> This shorter wing was intended for management activities while the others were office spaces.<sup>[20]</sup> The four wings come together in the central squared space, with the main entrance of the building for visitors' control, marked by the presence of a canopy (Fig. 4) and where a monumental polygonal staircase (Fig. 5), in steel and granite, gives direct access to the upper floors.<sup>[21]</sup>

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<sup>[14]</sup> Jones K B (2014)

<sup>[15]</sup> Prina V, Piva V (2006)

<sup>[16]</sup> Leet S (1990)

<sup>[17]</sup> Rabuffetti A (2023)

<sup>[18]</sup> Ordine degli Architetti di Milano (2025)

<sup>[19]</sup> Rossi Prodi F (1996)

<sup>[20]</sup> Ordine degli Architetti di Milano

<sup>[21]</sup> Rossi Prodi F (1996)



**Fig. 4, 5.** On the left: the view of the frontal canopy from above (source: K. Tafaro and R. Farahbod, 2025). On the right: the central octagonal staircase (source: Rossi Prodi F., 1996).

Each wing consists of a triple body, obtained through the juxtaposition of three shifted rectangular shapes (Fig. 7), with different functions. In the internal core are the services and vertical distribution between the floors. The way the distribution is organized allows both autonomy of operation for each wing and each floor, and easy communication between wings.<sup>[22]</sup> The lateral rectangles instead contain the office spaces, which are very flexible in their open plan and only have a few movable walls, to separate or reorganize the more private spaces.<sup>[23]</sup> The flexibility is also assured by a regular and modular grid of 1,20 meters.<sup>[24]</sup> The shifting of the volumes in each wing creates a more dynamic facade, with asymmetrical edges and recesses (Fig.6), and helps to break the length of the wings, given the total length of the building which is about 200 meters.

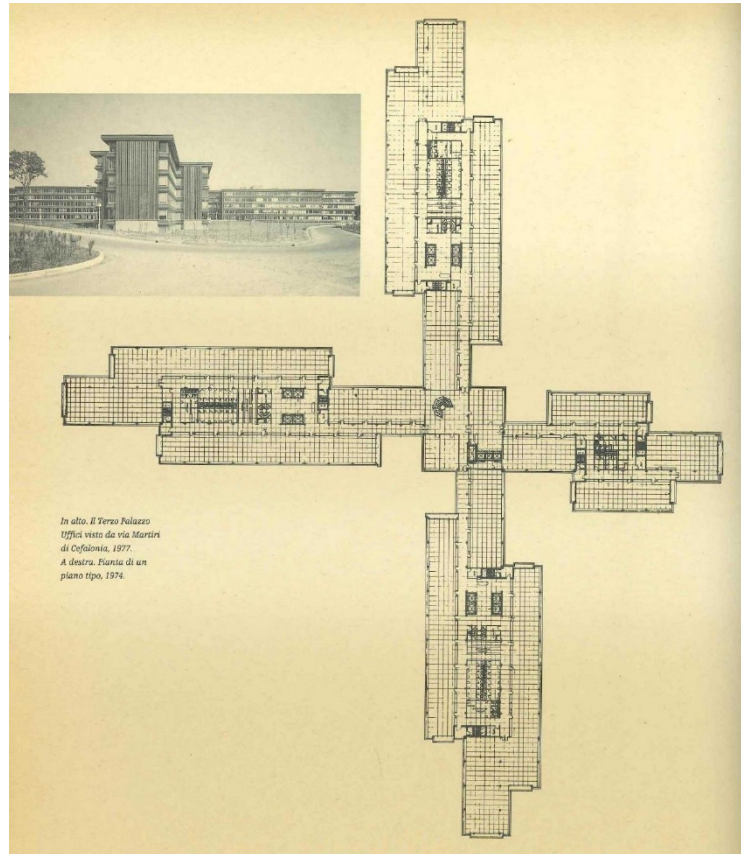


**Fig. 6.** View towards the central core of the building. (source: Dea Capital Real Estate)

<sup>[22]</sup> Rabuffetti A (2023)

<sup>[23]</sup> Ordine degli Architetti di Milano

<sup>[24]</sup> Ordine degli Architetti di Milano



**Fig. 7.** Original floor plan. (source: Sermisoni S., 1995)

While designing the building, the construction time was a significant factor. There was a need to reduce the construction to less than twenty months.<sup>[25]</sup> This goal was obtained through the adoption of two design choices. The first one was the use of a steel structure, composed of double T shaped beams and pillars, and with slabs made of metal sheet and reinforced concrete.<sup>[26]</sup> The second choice was 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. This element, a fairing in self-extinguishing polyester resin reinforced with red glass fibers, became the main feature of the building, through the emphasis of the horizontality of the building and using the strong red color to clearly distinguish the building from the green context.<sup>[27]</sup>

The building is entirely glazed (above the red horizontal stripes) through continuous horizontal ribbon windows, that further highlight the linearity of the façades. The

[25] Ordine degli Architetti di Milano

[26] Ordine degli Architetti di Milano

[27] Gatti R (1995)

glazing, which is fixed and made of just single glass, is interrupted only in limited sections towards the short end of the wings. Here, vertical pipelines, covered by the same red fiberglass, connect the structure vertically from the roof to the ground floor.

## 6 What makes Terzo Palazzo a monument?

Terzo Palazzo SNAM is a listed building and a relevant architectural example of modernism, being part of San Donato Milanese's cultural heritage. But one could ask, what is a monument?

Starting with the Venice Charter of 1964, many different definitions can be provided and discussed, because there is not one but many (evolving and debatable).<sup>[28]</sup> A commonly accepted feature is some kind of celebratory or commemorative character of a permanent structure, which can be a sculpture or a building, for instance. Ancient buildings that have endured and survived the passing of time can also be collectively recognized as having a cultural heritage value. But a valuable heritage piece can even be quite small and not necessarily classified as a monument.

Then, how can we classify Terzo Palazzo SNAM as a monument?

The concept of monument has somehow in its roots a notion of extraordinary dimensions ("monumental" as adjective is not usually applied to small things but instead it is often used to designate excessive and huge structures, even if sometimes it is more of a quantitative rather than qualitative aspect).

That can be an opportunity for Terzo Palazzo SNAM to step in: its huge dimension (45.000 square meters) immediately creates an impressive presence in the urban area, easily turning it into a monumental office building. Furthermore, the neutral (and boring) idea most people have of an office building is here surprisingly reinvented as a vibrant, colorful and articulated building, an architectural piece that is in itself a visual landmark impossible to miss in the city, both to pedestrians and to drivers.

When Robert Venturi [29] stated ironically "I am a monument" in his Las Vegas case studies, it was a semiotic issue of "communicative buildings" filled with signs and symbols, sometimes adopting the shape of the symbol itself.<sup>[29]</sup> In a generic and architecturally disqualified city, the message evolves from tool into the final goal.

That is not the case of Terzo Palazzo SNAM. This is a building of highest architectural value: the compositional quality of its functional plan a clear geometry of spaces, its cruciform shape and structural modularity, makes it a real "machine à travailler" designed as working habitat for 3.000 office workers.<sup>[30]</sup>

But monuments, besides offering qualified interior spaces, usually present a very recognizable external image, resulting from a qualified architectural composition.<sup>[31]</sup> That is the case of Terzo Palazzo SNAM: its façades result from a quite classical composition of base (the strong and yet semi-disguised underground floor), shaft (the sequence of the office floors) and cornice (the slightly protruding roof) one could

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<sup>[28]</sup> ICOMOS (1964)

<sup>[29]</sup> Venturi R, Scott Brown D, Izenour S (1977)

<sup>[30]</sup> Le Corbusier (1986)

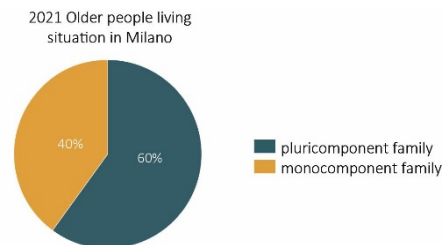
<sup>[31]</sup> Zevi B (1948)

almost consider it a post-modern reinterpretation of the Louis Sullivan and Chicago School principles for skyscrapers in a horizontal mode.<sup>[32]</sup> The high-rise sequence of floors in Chicago's skyscrapers clad with fireproof ceramic tiles is presented in Terzo Palazzo SNAM as a horizontal sequence of ribbon-windows vertically interrupted by the fireproof curvy ribbons of self-extinguishing polyester reinforced with red glass fibers, behind which the air conditioning, heating and ventilation run along the façade, elegantly hidden with maximum efficiency.

Monuments in the cities are often buildings that the lay citizens never enter, either because of its restricted function (state, government, entity buildings) or because of its image that keeps people respectfully away. And that has always been the case of Terzo Palazzo SNAM: office headquarters that only workers entered daily, or visitors for work-business reasons, and yet a huge, visually striking building, occupying a central position in a city designed for cars, a real monument to office labor.

## 7 Contemporary housing crisis

The metropolitan area of Milan, including San Donato Milanese, is facing today important socio-demographic changes, directly linked to similar changes that are taking place in all Europe. In the last 15 years we have observed a significant decline in birth rates, new migratory tendencies and the recent COVID-19 pandemic has contributed heavily to reshaping lifestyles and households. In addition, we have been observing important changes in household composition, with an increase in single-person households (Fig. 8), among which older people are especially relevant.<sup>[33]</sup>



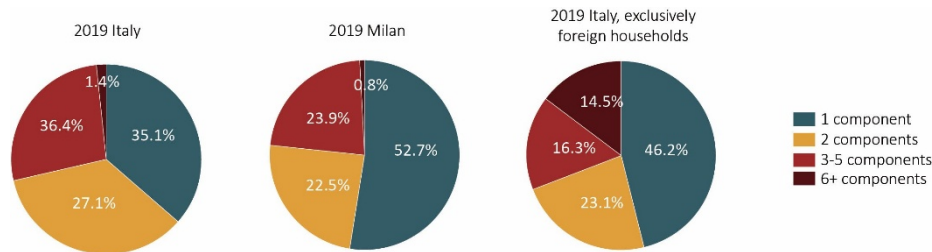
**Fig. 8.** 40% of older people (65+ years old) in Milan live alone (source: ISTAT, 2023)

These household changes are especially visible in metropolitan cities, such as Milan.<sup>[34]</sup> Milan and its surroundings have become in the past decades an important attractor for workers, students and immigrants, reshaping the city, its dynamics and its households. As consequence, one-person households are the most common type of household (Fig. 9).

<sup>[32]</sup> Frazier N (1991)

<sup>[33]</sup> ISTAT

<sup>[34]</sup> ISTAT



**Fig. 9.** Milan is above the national ratio for one component households. Foreign residents show a duality, with an above national average ratio of one-component households but also of 6+ components. (source: ISTAT, 2023)

Aside from the one-people households, we are also seeing other emerging household types, different from the traditional family by size and composition, but especially characterized by the cohabitation of different, non-related, people of different ages and socio-cultural profiles.

These “unconventional” households today usually find themselves living in traditional forms of housing, obsolete and unsuited for their new needs. What we can see today in the city, and the suburbs as well, is the presence of oversized apartments built during the economic boom period of Milan (from the 50s to the 70s particularly), when the city became the Italian capital of industrialization and housing production.<sup>[35]</sup> During that period, apartments were built to meet the needs of larger nuclear families, while today we are observing very different demographic tendencies, where the mono-component households have different needs from the traditional ones. Those large apartments of the past decades are therefore today often underused, being inhabited by older people (worsening their feeling of loneliness) or being transformed into different forms of housing, frequently to be speculatively rented to multiple people in an unconventional cohabitation form (Fig.10). The result of this phenomenon has been a collapse of the equivalence between the family needs and the housing typology and consequently an increasing distance between the existing housing supply and the new emerging housing demands.<sup>[36]</sup>

Additionally, the existing transformations in the labor market, worsened by the 2008 crisis and later by the COVID-19 pandemic, are leading to temporary employment, precariousness and work delocalization, contributing to new housing needs, related to the affordability topic.<sup>[37][38]</sup> Even though “an essential condition for living in a city is being able to bear the costs of housing, an issue generally summarized within the concept of housing affordability”<sup>[39]</sup>, a large section of the population, including the middle class, lives in conditions of reduced housing affordability (Fig.11), with precarious and informal situations and constrained access to housing.<sup>[40]</sup>

<sup>[35]</sup> Petsimeris P. (2018)

<sup>[36]</sup> UAH! Report (2025)

<sup>[37]</sup> Bricocoli M, Sabatinelli S, Savoldi P (2020)

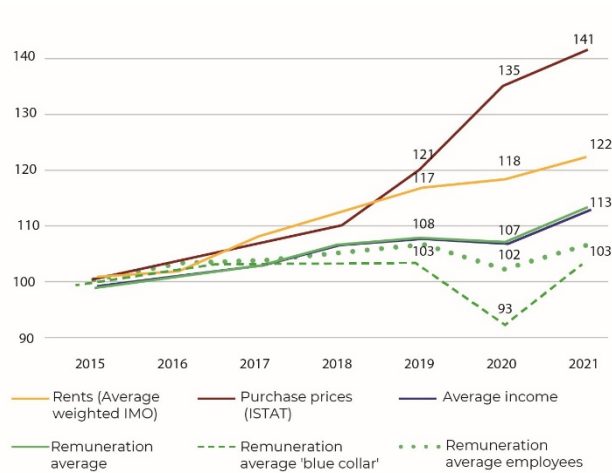
<sup>[38]</sup> Bricocoli M, Peverini M (2023)

<sup>[39]</sup> Haffner M, Hulse K (2021)

<sup>[40]</sup> UAH! Report (2025)



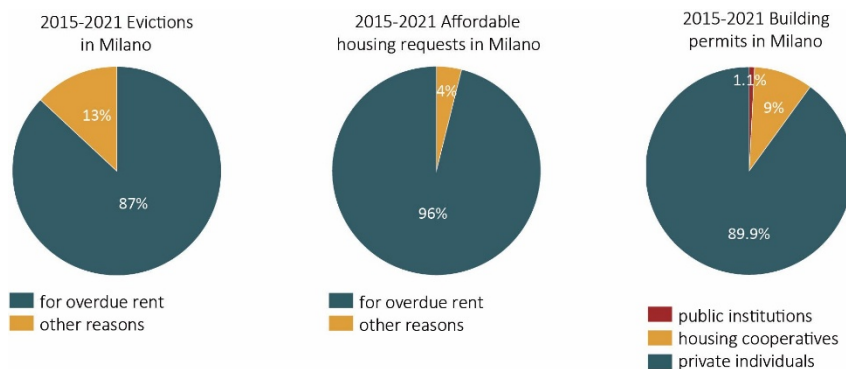
**Fig. 10.** Dwellings with surface higher than 120 sqm, used by mono-component households. (source: Comune di San Donato, 2020)



**Fig. 11.** The increasing gap between incomes and rental/purchase price of the housing stock. (source: Bricocoli M., Peverini M., 2023)

The Milanese context is also characterized by a general lack of adequate offer by social and public housing policies, in contrast with the high demand for these types of housing solutions.<sup>[41]</sup> This reflects the dissatisfaction with the affordable housing offers in the city.

<sup>[41]</sup> Bricocoli M, Peverini M (2023)



**Fig. 12.** Affordability problems in Milano, based on the data on evictions, affordable housing requests and building permits (source: Bricocoli M., Peverini M. 2023)

All these elements are pushing us into new directions where traditional housing is not sufficient anymore. The topics of affordable housing and unconventional housing arise as possible strategies to deal with these inadequacies. Compared to other European countries (Switzerland, Denmark, Sweden, Germany, to name just a few), there is much exploration to be done, in terms of new solutions suited for recent emerging housing needs, both considering the existing housing stock and new constructions.<sup>[42]</sup>

One of the possibilities, which is being explored as a resource for new forms of housing, is the existing office buildings stock. In 2015, approximately 31% of offices in Milan were vacant, a tendency that has only increased in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and the remote work phenomenon.<sup>[43]</sup>

## 8 The UAH! Research and San Donato Milanese PGT

The PRIN<sup>[44]</sup> research project “UAH! Unconventional Affordable Housing” was born as a response to this current housing crisis and as an experiment on the topics of unconventionality and affordability and how these two concepts can intersect, to provide valuable insights on existing dwellings and new housing strategies.

The research, guided by Politecnico di Milano with Università degli Studi di Trieste, Politecnico di Bari and Università di Bari, “aims at identifying and analysing existing affordable and unconventional housing solutions, investigating practices, projects and policies - thus, gaining an understanding of the wide range of housing phenomena considered unconventional and affordable in Europe; analyse these housing solutions and evaluate their qualities, innovative features, shortcomings and criticalities; and at developing architectural design proposals (in each of the research

<sup>[42]</sup> Czischke, D. K., Peute, M. H., Brysch S. L. (2023)

<sup>[43]</sup> Reggio P., D’Alessandro P. (2016)

<sup>[44]</sup> Progetto di Ricerca d’Interesse Nazionale / Research Project of National Relevance

units' geographical contexts) at the intersection of policies, practices and design, in order to explore the feasibility of innovative solutions within a given context".<sup>[45]</sup>

The choice of San Donato Milanese and Terzo Palazzo perfectly fits inside the UAH! research intentions, through the exploration of new housing strategies in a problematic context such as a vacant office building, which is a typology that today is becoming progressively interesting in terms of adaptive reuse.

Furthermore, through the cooperation with local stakeholders and the municipality of San Donato Milanese, aligning to their long-term urban strategies, UAH! aims to explore proposals rooted on the local context housing needs.<sup>[46]</sup>

From this perspective, the strategies and intentions of San Donato's PGT were taken as guidelines for the development of the project proposal.<sup>[47]</sup> The area of Terzo and Quarto Palazzo is designated by the municipality as an "urban regeneration zone", to be transformed into a mixed-use housing neighborhood, with new services, including a Museum of Energy, linked to the history of the city, and the new metro terminus, to be located close to Terzo Palazzo. The former office buildings are planned to be converted into various housing forms, including student housing, affordable housing and market-rate housing. Considering the lack of connections between this plot and the city, and the lack of services (especially commercial and catering) in the whole area of Metanopoli, the PGT includes a broader strategy of re-structuring the area through a new "urban park" along the historical street of Martiri di Cefalonia, south of the plot (Fig. 13). The urban park would link the existing older connection of the municipality building (to the West), to the historical "cascina" and the Lambro River (to the Est). Additionally, the already implemented pedestrian and cycling paths would strengthen slow mobility in the area.<sup>[48]</sup>

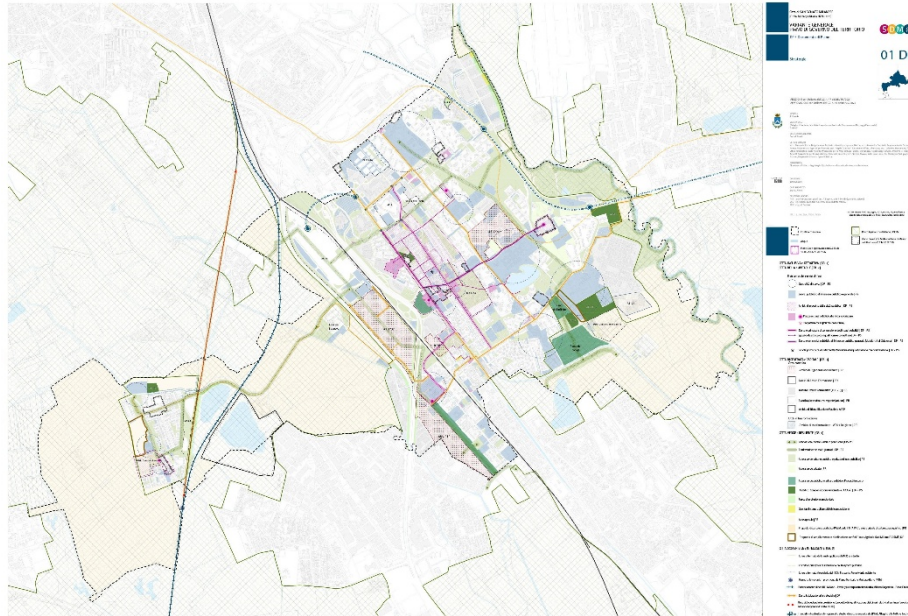
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<sup>[45]</sup> UAH! Report (2025)

<sup>[46]</sup> IST\_12\_19\_ELA\_ID\_03DP\_04\_RELAZIONE\_DI\_PIANO

<sup>[47]</sup> IST\_12\_19\_ELA\_ID\_03DP\_04\_RELAZIONE\_DI\_PIANO

<sup>[48]</sup> UAH! Design Studios Booklet (2024)



**Fig. 13.** Extract from the PGT of San Donato, where the area of Terzo and Quarto Palazzo is indicated as urban regeneration zone (source: Comune di San Donato Milanese, 2023).

## 9 Housing Project strategies

The project proposal covers different scales, from the urban setting to the building, to its interiors, to study new ways of living in the area and in an ex-office building.

Looking at the architectural scale in particular, the 6-floor building is not only transformed into the optics of affordability and unconventionality but also considers 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 level 0.

This allowed the building to become public and permeable at the -1 level by creating a main entrance square, giving now access to different public services, commercial activities and transit spaces inside the building.

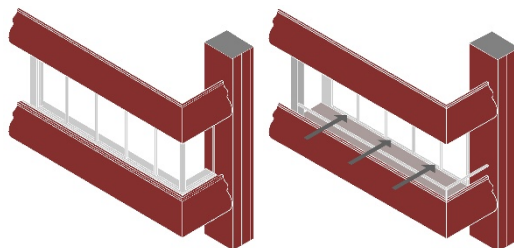
The iconic frontal canopy was moved down from the ground floor to the level of the newly excavated square (the previous -1 level becomes now the new ground level),

preserving its role of main invitation to the 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 (29,50 m 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 (Fig. 14). This meant a total dependence on air conditioning and electric lighting, a condition that is unacceptable for the intended sustainable housing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, thus requiring some strategic design decisions.

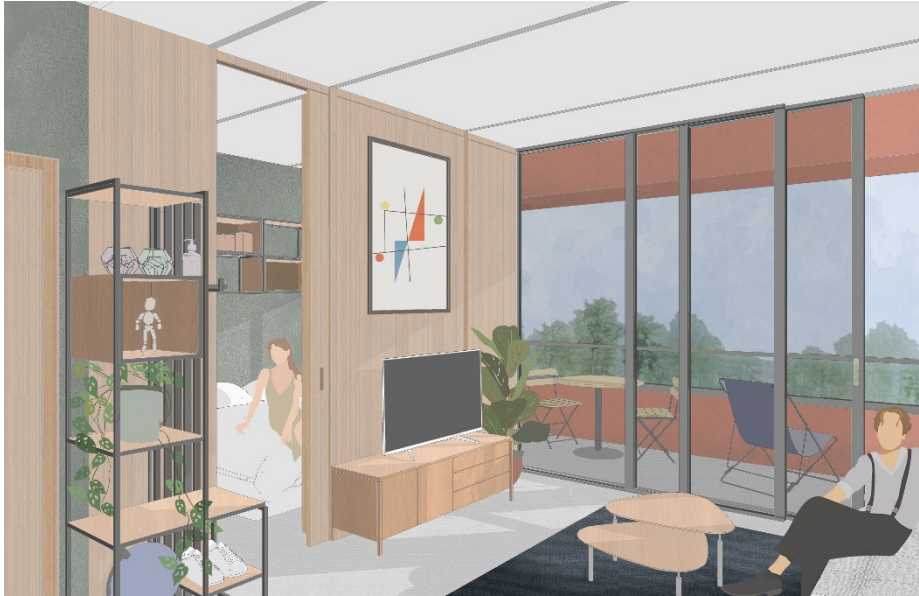


**Fig. 14.** View of the former office open space along the linear façade. (photo: K. Tafaro, 2024)

To tackle this problem on the upper floors (Fig. 15), 1,50-meter-deep balconies were generated through the translation of the glazed facades to offer a stronger relationship with the exterior and provide more quality of living to the apartments. In the center 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 open in the kitchens and living spaces (Fig. 16).



**Fig. 15.** The former glazed façade gave place to recessed balconies elements (source: K. Tafaro and R. Farahbod, 2025)



**Fig. 16.** Interior view of the recessed balcony and the red polyester resin elements of the façades (source: K. Tafaro and R. 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 (Fig. 17). The introduction of these vertical voids enhances the potential monumentality of the building from inside (Fig. 18), whereas nowadays there is no visual connection between floors but a simple repetition of horizontal typical floors.

**Fig. 17.** Typical floor plan of the South Wing, with central void characterized by interior balconies, residential units and shared/collective spaces on the left and right side of the void (source: K. Tafaro and R. Farahbod, 2025).



**Fig. 18.** The view of the central void of the South Wing (source: K. Tafaro and R. Farahbod, 2025)

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 for the 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 light-weight partitions inside the units themselves. All 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, allow for fast changes of the interior spatial composition, with the possibility of closing a kitchen, moving a bedroom or transforming the bedroom into home office or removing it completely (Fig. 19).



**Fig. 19.** 6x6 meters studio apartment unit with the flexibility of the inner partitions (source: K. Tafaro and R. Farahbod, 2025)

## 10 Intended users for the UAH! Housing

The project is targeted at a variety of unconventional households which fall mainly under 4 categories, conceptually reflected by the 4 wings of the building and used as starting point for the design of the apartment typologies.

The students and young professionals: in San Donato finding young adults who are living or moving back to live with parents is a common situation. 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.<sup>[49]</sup> This resident type was chosen as one that is in need of affordable housing, to gain independence from the family support system, and the spaces designed for them aim to provide small affordable solutions, complemented with common spaces which can stimulate a sense of community and collaboration.

The older people: in San Donato they are significantly present, especially in the area of Metanopoli, which is not only the oldest area of the city, but also the one where people tend to live alone the most.<sup>[50]</sup> Due to the problem of high percentage of ownership, paired with the rise of older people rate in the global population, a lot of seniors find themselves living alone in large apartments, with consequences of loneliness, lack of accessible care and services.<sup>[51]</sup> This resident type was selected therefore to research for an alternative solution, made with 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.

The temporary users: this type includes all those small households which have the 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 intermitted housing solutions, for those users that move or visit to the city for specific purposes.<sup>[52]</sup> 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.

The intergenerational households: this larger category includes a mix of different situations. More specifically, it usually brings together non-related users of different age groups, which may have different needs. 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.

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<sup>[49]</sup> Municipality of San Donato Milanese – Città Metropolitana di Milano (2023)

<sup>[50]</sup> Tafaro K L, Farahbod M R (2025)

<sup>[51]</sup> Tafaro K L, Farahbod M R (2025)

<sup>[52]</sup> Tafaro K L, Farahbod M R (2025)



**Fig. 20.** Selection of typologies and possible modifications and users. (source: K. Tafaro and R. Farahbod, 2025)

## 11 The space categories: public, collective, shared, private

As seen in the previous pages, 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.<sup>[53]</sup> It becomes even more important considering the challenge of transforming office headquarters into collective housing, which requires a feeling of domesticity and privacy. Additionally, after the COVID-19 pandemic, a new type of living emerged, where elements that previously happened away in the city (work, sport, education and more) started merging with housing, asking for private, shared and public spaces in the dwelling estates, and most importantly requiring design strategies on how they relate with each other.<sup>[54]</sup>

Public spaces are located on level 0 (Fig.21) and level 1 (Fig.22), accessible from the outside, particularly from the extremities of the wings and from the central core.<sup>[55]</sup> The transit space of the central lobby, identified on the outside by the pre-existing canopy (Fig. 4), 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 also, 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 (Fig.22) for the shorter wing of the guest house and mixed through the floors in the other wings, together with the shared spaces.<sup>[56]</sup> 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 the needs.

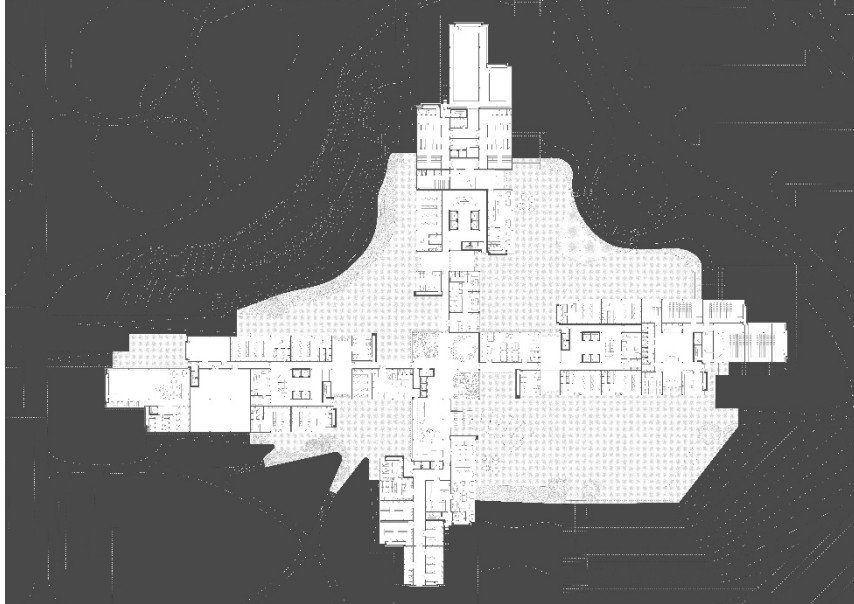
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<sup>[53]</sup> Tafaro K L, Farahbod M R (2025)

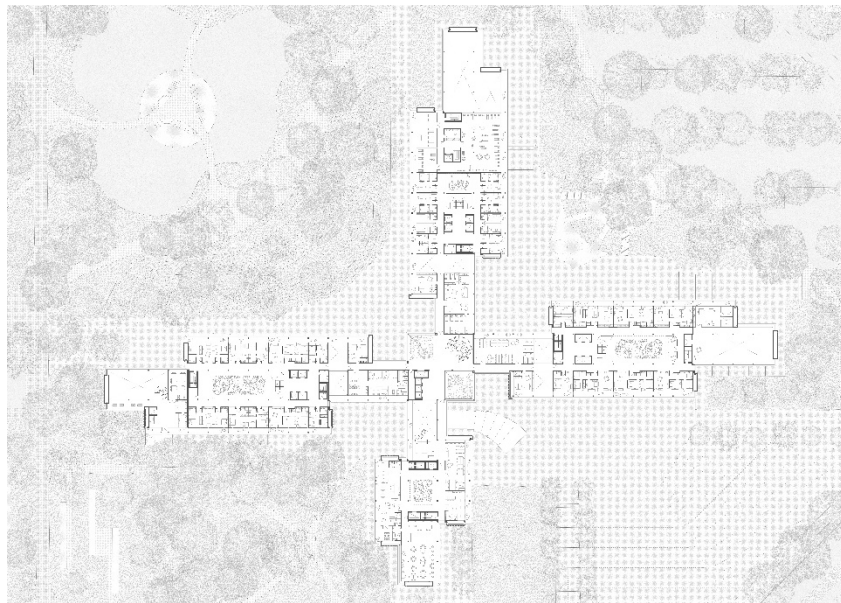
<sup>[54]</sup> Tafaro K L, Farahbod M R (2025)

<sup>[55]</sup> Fraticelli C, Scaleggi A (2015)

<sup>[56]</sup> Fraticelli C, Scaleggi A (2015)



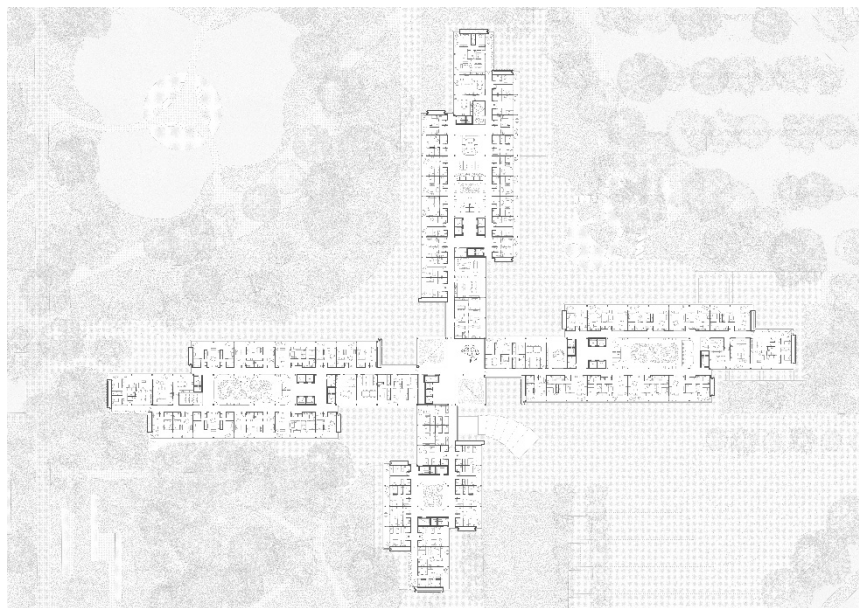
**Fig. 21.** Level 0, previously underground/level -1 (source: K. Tafaro and R. Farahbod, 2025).



**Fig. 22.** Level 1 street level floor, previously level 0. (source: K. Tafaro and R. Farahbod, 2025).

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.<sup>[57]</sup> 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.<sup>[58]</sup> The windows towards the inside (towards the voids, inner distribution and common spaces) were designed to give the residents the possibility to open up to the building life, to facilitate connections with the other residents.



**Fig. 23.** Level 2, typical floor. This floor is entirely residential, with private units and common spaces, organized around the empty voids (source: K. Tafaro and R. Farahbod, 2025).

## 12 The new hybrid monument

The project of adaptive reuse of Terzo Palazzo is not just a housing project inside a green park, but, as previously stated, it is a complex system, a hybrid building, with a program of public, private, shared and collective spaces and different functions. It is intended to contribute to the creation of a real urban center 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.

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<sup>[57]</sup> ISTAT (2023)

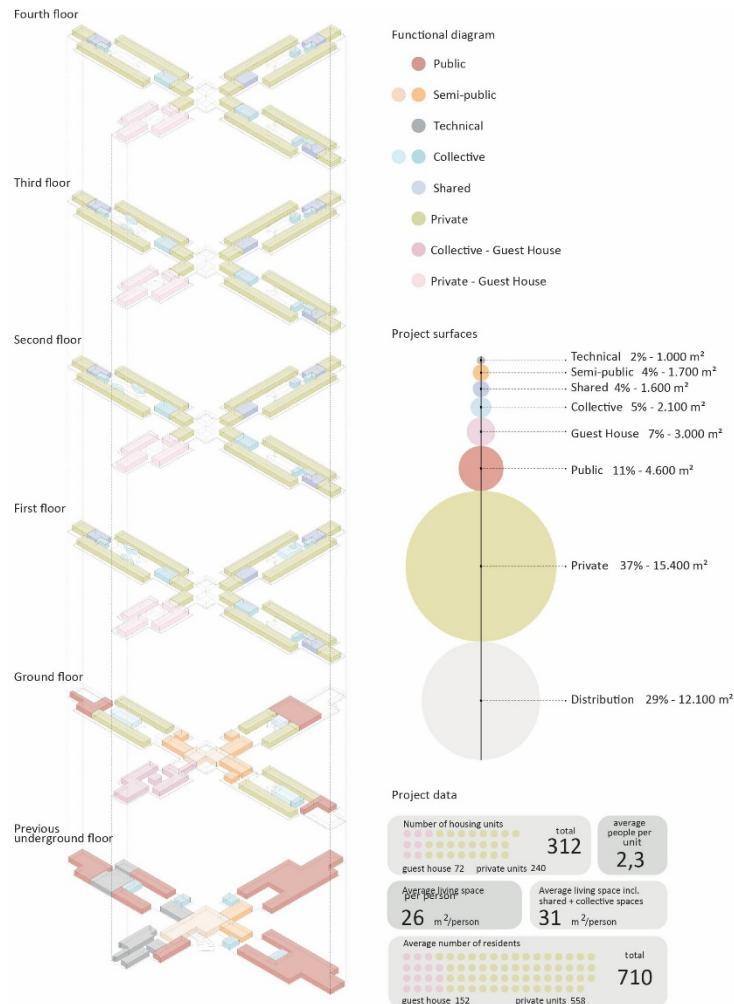
<sup>[58]</sup> Fraticelli C, Scaleggi A (2015)

Therefore, the building will offer spaces and functions that will attract other residents and passers-by, generating a civic center.

The preservation of the red polyester resin elements in all façades, further highlighted by the new balconies, which are designed to have a similar red ceiling, aims to keep the original linearity of the facades. The modular division of the façade, with 5 glazed partitions for every 6-meter pillar span, is also preserved. 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 even a greater preeminence, seen from the metro station exit, connected with new monumental stairs going down to the newly excavated public square.

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, now converted from office-only into a hybrid housing building. With a mixed-use program, 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 program 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.



**Fig. 24.** The Hybrid building: functional diagram, surfaces and project data (source: K. Tafaro and R. Farahbod, 2025)

### 13 San Donato Milanese's new city center

This project aims not only to give a proposal for an adaptive reuse of a listed building, a monumental testimony of Italian modernist architecture, and a strategy for new unconventional and affordable housing, but it wants to propose a way of regenerating a neighborhood, therefore an urban project has been proposed (Fig. 25) alongside to the architectural one.

Following the PGT's guidelines at the urban scale, the entire plot has been redefined to highlight Terzo Palazzo's strategic position inside the city, a resource meant to stitch together different parts of the city, existing services, and fill the urban void.

The monumentality and identitarian value of the building plays an important role in strengthening the new urban project and its new connections. The main goal is to give the city a new urban center with a strong identity, given the almost complete absence of a city center now. Terzo Palazzo can fulfill that void with its monumental red façades, a strong icon engraved in the mind of every citizen of San Donato Milanese who have always known it only from far, surrounded by hundreds of workers' parked cars and big empty green spaces. That isolated circumstance is changed by the new lively functions of the building, a hybrid structure with some public spaces open to everyone, surrounded by a network of public paths and activity spaces.



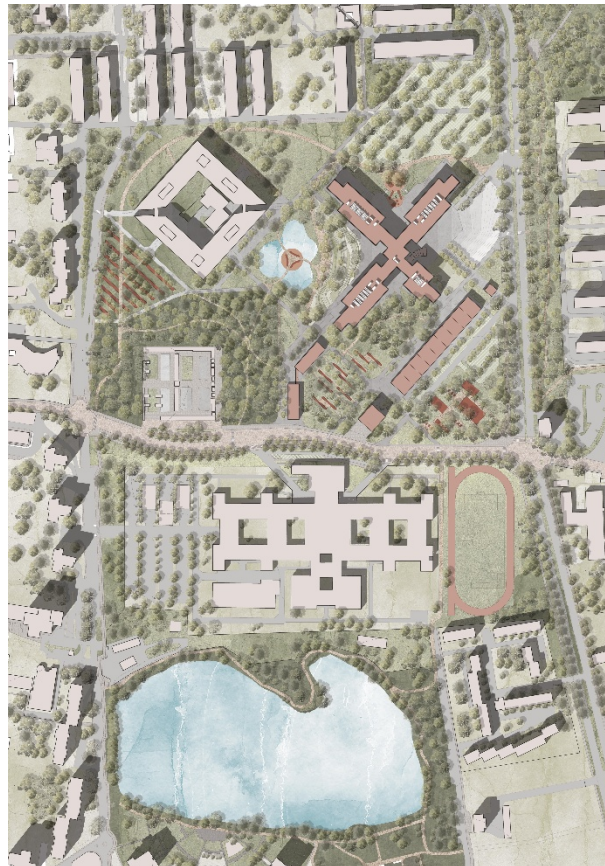
Fig. 25. Proposed urban strategy (source: K. Tafaro and R. Farahbod, 2025).

Following the 45° rotation of 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 (Fig.26), 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 Terzo and Quarto Palazzo, supplied through the ex-

isting underground water streams of the river Lambro. In the middle of it all, Terzo Palazzo with its red monumentality becomes the real landmark and urban attractor, a catalyst for the new urban center that the municipality of San Donato Milanese and its population are longing for.



**Fig. 26.** Proposed masterplan (source: K. Tafaro and R. Farahbod, 2025).

## 14 Conclusion

Terzo Palazzo SNAM has the characteristics and qualities to be considered a monument despite its office headquarters function and its relatively young age. In fact, its gigantic dimensions, the clever articulation of volumes, the classical composition of its façades, the surprising choice of an enduring industrial cladding material which provides its strong red color still today, all these aspects constitute necessary qualities to create the recognizable aura of a monument, a landmark in the city.

Being derelict for the past 5 years and under the risk of deep future changes, it is deemed to become a housing estate, in times of European (and local) housing crisis, as defined in the urban rules of San Donato Milanese's PGT from 2023.

Combining the municipality's interest in creating a lively city center in this area of the territory and the palazzo's huge capacity of incorporating many dwellings, its office DNA, based on working spaces along glazed but sealed façades (because exclusively relying on air conditioning and forced ventilation) and dark spaces in the core, creates nevertheless a big design challenge for refurbishment.

The proposal offers a masterplan to generate a lively urban space connected and gravitating around this central red monument which would open to the city its ground level spaces for commercial activity and public amenities. In its interior each of the wings would be devoted to a different resident group (students/young professionals, older people, temporary residents, intergenerational) with private apartments complemented with shared social spaces, always framed by the PRIN research of UAH-Unconventional Affordable Housing, articulating housing with other functions also to obtain a balanced business model.

The present "sealed off" façades would be transformed into lively longitudinal balconies for the apartments, keeping nevertheless the identitarian red horizontal stripes, while the ground levels would open and attract citizens to its commercial and public spaces, placing this red monument in the center of city life.

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