



# Is there a role for cooperative actors in the management of public housing? Hybrid partnerships as trojan horses for profit extraction or vehicle of housing commons: reflections on a pioneering project in Milan

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## Abstract

After its expansionist phase in the XX Century, in most countries public housing has incurred in a state of long-term crisis that still lasts until today. With long-lasting disinvestment in the Italian public housing, many dwellings and buildings are vacant or in decay. Public housing companies yet rely heavily on dismissal and sales to cover high overheads and low rents. In this context, there has been sporadic experimentation of partnerships between public authorities and cooperative actors in enacting hybrid forms of management as an alternative to the sale of public assets. The article uses the case study of the Quattro Corti project in Milan and experts' panels in four Italian cities to explore potential innovation pathways for public housing in different contexts and to identify opportunities and challenges of the involvement of cooperatives through partnerships for hybrid management. A main question is whether such partnerships may be trojan horses for profit-actors or vehicles of housing commons. The article contributes to the emerging literature on the role of cooperative actors in public and social housing policies.

**Keywords** Public housing · Housing cooperatives · Housing commons · Hybrid actors · Public private partnership · Italy

## 1 Introduction

The present article deals with the pressing issue of the crisis of public housing, by exploring the potential opportunities and risks represented by specific types of hybrid partnership between public authorities and housing cooperatives regarding the management of unused public assets. With management we mean the practical organization of the housing pro-

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vision, ranging from allocation to rent calculation, maintenance and contact with tenants (Saporito, & Perobelli, 2021). Hybridization - among other things - concerns ways and means to reach public policy objectives for housing through public-private partnerships and private actors such as housing associations, housing cooperatives, and other no- or low-profit third sector actors in an intermediate and partly regulated segment of the housing market. The concept of hybridity was developed within the non-profit studies literature to account for how competing drivers of state, market and community interact to shape decision-making within non-profit organizations. It reflects the blurring of sector boundaries that has followed the welfare mix (Mullins et al., 2017). Housing scholars have stressed how hybridization mechanisms can be innovative but also risky (“magical or monstrous” in the words by Blessing, 2012), both for the welfare system and for non-profit organizations. In this framework, the article explores the actual and potential role of housing cooperatives in the management of unused parts of the public housing stock, and on associated risks and opportunities for public housing policies. While there is quite some literature regarding hybridity in housing policies for some countries such as UK and Netherlands, the article does so for Italy, an under-investigated context characterized by a dual and targeted housing regime (Padovani, 1996).

In Italy, public housing only accounts for around 4% of the total housing stock, but hosts over 21% of households in the rental sector, with a concentration of vulnerable and low-income ones. Italy may be considered a relevant context for the international debate on the public housing crisis since production-oriented hybridization mechanisms have practically disappeared since the neoliberal turn of housing policies in the 1990s (Peverini, 2021). Meanwhile, market-oriented legislation combined with socially-oriented rent calculation and allocation criteria have practically jeopardized the management- and business model of public housing providers (Saporito, & Perobelli, 2021). In this context, sales of the public housing stock (started during the 1990s) continue due to the unsustainability of the providers’ business model, while a relevant part of the public housing stock remains vacant due to the need for refurbishment (around 6% according to the national umbrella organization of public housing providers, FEDERCASA). Supply-side subsidies have been shifted away from public housing to new profit-oriented models linked to financial actors (Belotti, & Arbaci, 2021). While it is hard to estimate how many dwellings are currently being sold (as sales plans are organized at municipal or regional level), around 50.000 dwellings nationally are left vacant according to FEDERCASA.

Within such national landscape, the city of Milan stands out for the relevance of public housing (accounting for 8% of the total housing tenure), a high number of vacant public housing units (estimated at around 6.000 dwelling by the regional authority: Regione Lombardia, 2023), and skyrocketing housing prices that trigger a heavy affordability crisis and make privatization of the public housing stock particularly attractive. In this framework, the presence of a dense environment of civil society organizations (including cooperatives) and structured funding opportunities for public-private partnerships make Milan a breeding ground for unprecedented forms of hybrid collaboration – but also for privatization and profit extraction. The “Quattro Corti” case proves useful to distinguish between opportunities and risks of hybrid partnerships, in Milan as well in other Italian cities.

The article is organized as follows: Sect. 1 reviews the international literature on the crisis of public housing and on the re-emergence of housing cooperatives as hybrid actors and producers of housing commons; Sect. 2 describes aims, research questions and methods;

Sect. 3 analyses the case of Quattro Corti in Milan; Sect. 4 presents the results of experts' panels in four Italian cities; finally, Sect. 5 discusses the results with reference to the international literature.

## 2 Investigating hybridity in partnerships for the management of public housing in Italy

### 2.1 The crisis of public housing: from new public management to privatization

Following its period of development in the post-WWII era, public housing has experienced disinvestment and crisis in most countries that persist to this day. State policies have been more oriented toward the promotion of homeownership and less toward the construction and management of public housing. This was often accompanied by a shift to right-to-buy schemes or mass sales of the public housing stock together with budget cuts in funding and construction programs – the so-called “retrenchment” – and market-oriented reforms of the legislation of public housing providers, often turned into companies in the 1990s (Gruis & Nieboer, 2004; Belotti & Arbaci, 2021). Much literature has concentrated on where and how retrenchment from public housing provision has happened, and on its consequences in terms, e.g., of residualization, marginalization, and segregation (Poggio, & Boreiko, 2017). Meanwhile, the more organizational problems of the restructuring of the public housing system in the context of shrinking resources and decreasing construction activity have been less analyzed, especially in the Italian case (Perobelli & Saporito, 2021).

The discussion was largely driven by the turnaround of the new public management approach of many public housing authorities – which were often turned into public companies, generating growing expectations of economic sustainability (if not profitability) that were never met. Studies in public management have shown that any reasonable management of public housing at social rent costs without compensation looks inefficient in the light of these expectations (Fosti et al., 2019; Saporito & Perobelli, 2021). Preaching about the need for profit and exploitation of the best part of public properties (now intended as assets) owned by public housing organizations is perfectly suited to this inefficient environment. After all, via the privatization and financialization of public providers, publicly owned land and assets have come to be viewed as a source of income within the framework of liberalization and austerity policies (e.g., railway companies: Adisson & Artioli, 2019) according to the dogma of “highest and best use” and to financial logics. This cleared the path for a plan to sell off the most lucrative portions of public properties, piecemeal and at big discounts to market value. In attractive cities, the public housing stock typically has a large “rent gap”, or the margin of valorization if the housing stock was brought to its present market value, because of the age of the structures and frequent conditions of decay and stigmatization, and is a very attractive terrain for privatization and financialization (Smith, 1979; Adisson, & Halbert, 2022). In fact, there is evidence of growing interest in the acquisition of public housing assets by both small landlords and financial actors that may be willing to mobilize the necessary capital to acquire, restructure and manage part of the public stock at market rates (Belotti & Arbaci, 2021). Similar processes of valorisation have previously taken place in a number of European nations, such as England, when public housing estates were privatized through Right-to-buy programmes targeted at the wealthi-

est tenants (Scanlon & Whitehead, 2008; Poggio & Boreiko, 2017) or securitized and sold *en-bloc* to financial investors – as in the case of Berlin (Aalbers & Holm, 2008) and of the housing stock of Italian insurance companies (Cucca & Gaeta, 2018). This has frequently resulted in a crisis in the availability of affordable housing, raised rents and housing costs, and limited the public sector’s ability to meet housing requirements and respond to pressing basic needs (Aalbers & Holm, 2008; Poggio & Boreiko, 2017; Vollmer & Kadi, 2018). Privatization of public housing is cyclically proposed and discussed in the Italian public debate, especially in Milan. The quantity of public housing that has been privatized in Milan over the past thirty years – approximately 30.000 units – equals the number of households in the last waiting list for public housing, highlighting the reduction in the capacity of public authorities in responding to housing needs and guaranteeing the right to affordable housing (Peverini, 2022).

### 3 The re-emergence of housing cooperatives as hybrid actors and producers of housing commons

Recently, in the light of the structural housing affordability crisis (Madden & Marcuse, 2016; Wetzstein, 2017) public housing has started to attract more attention, with research explicitly addressing the vantage point of management. In this respect it becomes relevant to analyze certain aspects, such as: the economic and business models in a time in which there is no actual perspective of expanding the stock (Saporito, & Perobelli, 2021); the modes of housing management – i.e., standard or “social” management – in the face of a residualized target group (Bifulco & Mozzana, 2022; Peverini, 2023).

While there is extensive literature on the “hybridization” of housing policies in terms of housing provision – considering non-profit actors as producers and final providers of social and affordable housing (Blessing, 2012; Mullins et al., 2017) –, not much attention has been posed on hybrid ways of managing the existing public housing stock. Until now, the possibility of combining the business and management models of public housing providers with the action of private non-profit actors has been less explored. A seminal reference on public housing management is the extensive research developed by Anne Power, presenting key findings that emphasize the effectiveness of a “meticulous, detailed, day-by-day approach to all the aspects of running an estate” (Power, 2021: 185), but still within the direct management of housing authorities. Work on the UK context highlighted implications in terms of externalization and managerialization of the stock transferred from public housing providers to housing associations in a process of *de facto* abolishing public housing (Walker, 2001) and the shift of emphasis from “what matters” to “what works” (Springs, 2002). Comparative study on different European countries has shown how the shift and diversification of housing policies has produced a recurring segmentation of the rental housing market with a growing “intermediate” sector between full public housing and market rental (Czischke, & van Bortel, 2018). A relevant body of research has addressed the consequent hybridization of public housing provision and the precarious balance between social and market goals and “logics” of externalized providers (Blessing, 2012; Mullins et al., 2017), investigating innovative and controversial policies regarding self-help by tenants in the UK (Mullins, 2018; Mullins, & Moore, 2018) and the activation and responsabilization of tenants (Mullins, 2018). More recent work on the Italian context has been conducted from the vantage

point of public management, stressing how public housing providers have been affected by the managerial turn of public administrations while retaining their statutory role of “social” providers - i.e. to poor households and while low rents (Saporito, & Perobelli, 2021). The present article contributes to this literature by investigating possible developments of public housing management – within the boundary of the public housing stock and excluding privatization –, intended not only as an exclusive domain for public housing providers but also as a terrain for potential partnerships with other actors, and in particular with housing cooperatives.

Housing cooperatives may represent a third way between state and market for the provision of affordable housing. They have been traditionally framed as civil society organizations that pool housing needs and resources to arrange a more “human-centered” affordable housing provision through bottom-up processes (Mullins & Moore, 2018). In the light of the ongoing affordability crisis, there has been a renewed attention to housing cooperatives as one of the possible ways to contribute to an ease of the current housing crisis, especially concerning setting conditions for public intervention targeting very low-income groups – above all, provision of cheap land and subsidies – in housing regimes highly characterized by retrenchment and neoliberal governance (Ganapati, 2010; Ferrari, & Vidal, 2021). Recently, strong emphasis has been given to the collaborative character of housing production and management process that can be activated by housing cooperatives (Czischke & Huisman, 2018; Ferri et al., 2018).

Here, in line with recent literature, we focus on a different aspect of cooperative organizations, i.e. the statutory attitude to creating and perpetuating “housing commons”: it is an antonym of “enclosure” and the opposite of privatization and commodification. Housing cooperatives, it is argued, build a system of affordable, accessible and (partially) decommodified alternative housing provision to the market one, that can contribute to the overall provision of affordable housing (Ferreri & Vidal, 2021). Previous literature has identified a key principle of housing commons in “decommodification” - or the provision of housing at costs that are not maximizing the market value – and highlighted how neoliberal policies, pushing housing cooperatives toward market dynamics and commodification, disrupted existing housing commons (Gutzon, & Lund, 2015). Often, though not always, one of the guiding and statutory principles of housing cooperatives is housing provision at cost-renting: as described by Kemeny (1995): with cost-renting, charged rents amount to the mere repayment of the initial investment plus maintenance and management costs and can be reduced when the initial investment is repaid. By avoiding profit, cost-renting allows housing provision with good maintenance and management – and in some cases also further investment and expansion – while reaching better affordability levels than the market provision. In this sense, statutory adherence to cost-renting can be considered a good proxy for the creation and preservation of housing commons.

Nevertheless, the contribution of cooperatives to solve the affordability crisis risks being overemphasized, as researchers have also highlighted that housing cooperatives tend to produce effective housing outcomes mainly when the State (at different levels) acts as an enabler through supportive policies (Ganapati, 2010; Ferreri & Vidal, 2021; Barenstein et al., 2021). The hybrid behaviour of housing cooperatives (as for other non-profit actors) should be considered “state-directed”, because they depend on funding, subsidies, incentives, regulations and, in general, on policies enacted by the state at its various level. For housing cooperatives, hybridization includes governance, decision-making, resource allo-

cation, asset sales, cross-subsidy and the balancing of commercial and social goals (Mullins et al., 2017). In many cases, due to State policies (or their withdrawal) housing cooperatives shifted from a social to a commercial orientation, making HCs hybrid subjects between community and non-profit organizations and market developers (Morrison, 2016). In many neoliberalizing contexts, this seems to determine whether cooperatives succeed or are crowded out in moments when support by public policy is low or absent (Peverini, 2021). Additionally, the mythical bottom-up character of the housing cooperative sector (symbolized by the Rochdale pioneers in the United Kingdom where the movement originated) is nowadays deeply modified: by the time many small cooperatives have been going through a process of merging and unification to better deal with management problems and higher pressure in the land market, becoming rather big organizations with more structured and institutionalized governance (Lang & Novy, 2013).

Italian housing cooperatives were founded in the industrialized North around the end of the 19th Century by workers' organization as a response to the mainly speculative modes of housing provision, paving the way for municipal social housing experiments and the first public housing law of 1903. Their social-democratic orientation was strengthened by strong ties with socialist parties, later complemented by the creation of Catholic-social cooperatives. After experiencing repression and marginalization in fascist times, cooperatives exploded in the post-WWII growth, also thanks to generous subsidies and regulation (Peverini, 2021). Since the 1980s, however, with the end of public subsidies and land provision and the strong financialization of the real estate market cooperatives oriented to rental housing started declined in favour of market- and homeownership-oriented cooperatives that are closer to normal developers. Cooperatives are regulated by a national law that gives some small tax exemptions in exchange for statutory non-profit orientation and governance constraints. While cost-renting is a widely implemented principle of housing policies in some European countries, such as Austria, this is not the case in Italy, but is implicitly imposed in the non-profit requirement and the type of non-financialized dynamics of capital supply and remuneration of cooperative. In our analysis, we acknowledge the changes of the housing cooperative sector, as they are non-profit organization that became more structured and sensitive to market dynamics – depending on local state policies and market situation – but are still focused on production and reproduction of housing commons. While in some cases housing cooperatives have been moving – also pulled by state deregulation – towards market-oriented models of housing provision, resembling standard commercial developers, most of the time cooperatives resisted this change and, especially in the domain of rental housing, strongly retained a focus on housing commons and long-term affordability (Peverini, 2021). In this sense, housing cooperatives express an under-investigated potential to contribute to mitigate the crisis of public housing by actively participating to its management.

#### 4 Aims, research questions and methods

In the light of an ongoing crisis of public housing provision, it is worth exploring if and how housing cooperatives – with their statutory focus on housing commons, and the tendency to produce and reproduce them – could actively contribute to mitigating the continuous drain of the public housing stock through forms of hybrid partnerships that target the renewal

and management of public properties in alternative to the sale. Previous study has shown that cooperatives can sometimes succeed in preserving public ownership of strategic urban assets while providing a relatively affordable rental supply and innovatively respond to housing need (Peverini et al., 2023).

Within the framework of the crisis of public housing, the main research questions are: is there a role for cooperatives in the management of public housing? Are hybrid partnerships between public authorities and cooperatives for the management of public housing trojan horses for profit-extraction or vehicle of housing commons?

The article addresses these questions by:

- delving into the analysis of the Quattro Corti project in Italy, a unique case of public-cooperative partnership for the management of a decayed part of a 1920s public housing estate in Milan;
- and using it as a device to explore potential innovation pathways and risks for public housing in different contexts, through experts' panels in four Italian cities.

The research has been conducted through the analysis of one case, the Quattro Corti partnership, selected for its unprecedented and unique characteristics. Research was developed retrospectively in the time frame of the partnership. In this period, we can distinguish different phases: the conception and design of the partnership (1999–2001); its implementation and the physical refurbishment of the estate (2002–2004) the allocation of the dwellings and their management (2004–today). The analysis builds on information collected through secondary sources, including data and policy documents granted by the involved actors, and primary sources, including extensive field work and semi-structured interviews with key informants that were involved in the design and implementation of the partnership conducted between 2018 and 2020<sup>1</sup>. Additionally, information was collected from the actors involved concerning the future expiration of the partnership agreement and the perspectives of a wider implementation of this approach.

Information on the relevance and implications of hybrid partnerships was instead collected through experts' panels that involved key actors in relevant locally based institutions conducted between 2021 and 2022 in four Italian cities<sup>2</sup>, chosen according to different territorial contexts (North, Center, South) and size:

- Milan, where the Quattro Corti was developed and where the dense presence of non-profit actors could trigger further partnership;
- Catania and Bari, two metropolitan areas in the South of Italy, where public housing represents an important part of the stock but where non-profit actors are less present;
- Perugia, a medium-sized city in the center of Italy, where the local housing company

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<sup>1</sup> We conducted 23 semi-structured interviews to: 11 workers from the two housing cooperatives involved in the project (decision-making, design, management); 7 tenants living in the Quattro Corti; 2 officers from the public administration; 1 volunteer from a local association based on the ground floor of the building; 2 researchers who investigated the Stadera neighborhood. Interviews were transcribed, coded and analysed with qualitative methods.

<sup>2</sup> Four roundtables were organized by the authors in Milan (19/11/2021), Bari (17/01/2022), Catania (28/02/2022) and Perugia (21/10/2022), involving at least 4/5 experts in each focus group from: Municipal authorities, public housing companies, housing cooperatives and tenants' unions. In Perugia, Bari and Catania, the organization of the meetings was supported by researchers from local Universities.



has undergone an effort to innovate its structure and plays a central role in municipally-led regeneration projects; here non-profit actors used to be significant but were recently marginalized by market dynamics.

All roundtables started with a detailed explanation of the Quattro Corti partnership and were followed by an open discussion among the participants about factors at stake in the innovation of public housing management and about opportunities and challenges of the implementation of hybrid partnerships for the management of public assets by housing cooperatives in alternative to the sale in the local context.

#### 4.1 The quattro corti project: a pioneering hybrid partnership in public housing management

The “Quattro Corti project” is located in the Stadera public housing estate in Milan, in the southern edge of the city center. Stadera was built in the late 1920s on greenfield land in the south of Milan and consists of 29 buildings distributed in three large urban blocks, which were soon integrated and surrounded by a more diverse residential fabric and, recently, connected to a metro line (with the consequent rise in housing prices). In the eastern portion of the estate there are four four-story courtyard structures that make up the so-called “Quattro Corti” complex. In the 1980s, resident were gradually relocated to other public housing estates and the complex was abandoned at the start of the 1990s as a result of the buildings’ rising obsolescence and the failure to adhere to the minimum surface standards (24 square meters) set forth by a local legislation (Zenoni, 2022).

Reports by the local public housing company analysed and described the issues that affected the public housing stock and envisioned a «large refurbishment plan» (IACP, 1993). The reports state that in the Stadera estate, in 1991, 241 dwellings over a total of 1.866 (13%) were vacant, mostly located in the Quattro Corti buildings. In 1999 ALER, the provincial public housing company since 1996<sup>3</sup>, and the Municipality of Milan targeted the Stadera estate with an Urban Regeneration Program (ALER, 1999).

The regeneration plan was articulated in fifteen actions: while fourteen were publicly led, one promoted the refurbishment of the four buildings known as the “Quattro Corti” in an unprecedented way. A unique public-private cooperation was proposed for two of the four buildings. It was intended for qualified private actors to become involved, with a focus on housing cooperatives. They would use a 25-year loan-for-use to purchase the buildings, and they would rely on their own funds for building management and renovation (ALER, 1999).

This form of public-private partnership was the result of a process of intensive discussion and political negotiation which aimed at experimenting innovative actions also in terms of housing management. The negotiation involved ALER (the public housing company, see note 3), tenants’ Unions, entrepreneurs, developers and housing cooperatives to verify possible options of collaboration. The focus was on experimenting unprecedented ways of management and yet promoting a supply of rental housing in Milan for those who despite their low income can neither access the far too scarce supply of public housing dwellings nor the private rental market due to the skyrocketing rents. This agreement was satisfying for the public authorities – that would retain ownership but save on refurbishment costs – and

<sup>3</sup> In 1996 a Regional Law (L.R. 16/96) turned the Istituto Autonomo Case Popolari (IACP) into the Agenzia Lombarda Edilizia Residenziale (ALER).



acceptable for tenants' unions, that were dealing with the recent deregulation of the rental market and were looking for ways to improve their moderate rental supply. In these conditions, two locally-based housing cooperatives, Dar=casa and La Famiglia – the latter was then renamed Solidarnosc – saw an opportunity to increase their stock of rental dwellings and foster innovation in public housing provision and management by assuming a hybrid role with the public housing provider<sup>4</sup>.

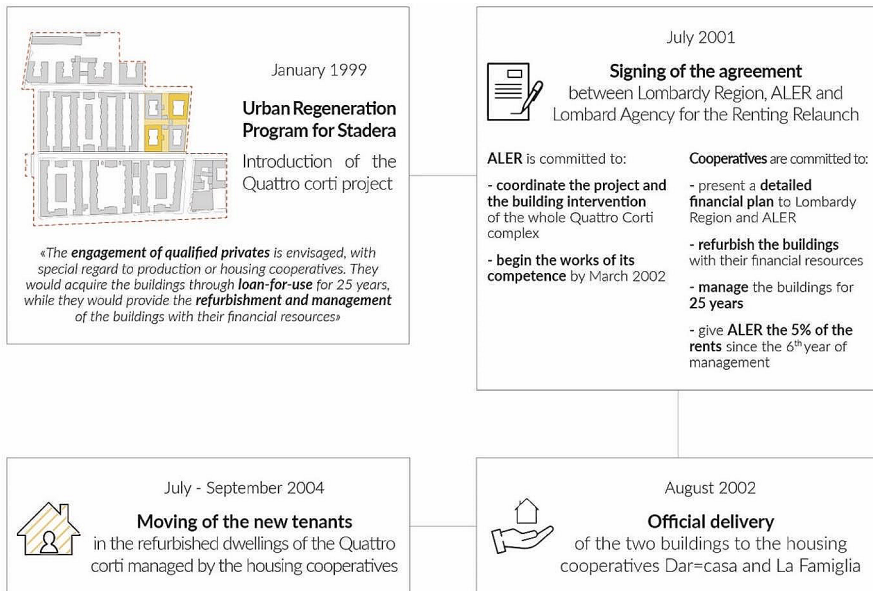
The partnership, signed in 2001, determines that: the two housing cooperatives would renovate the buildings with their own funds and manage them for 25 years (until 2029), giving ALER 5% of the rents starting in the sixth year onward; ALER would retain ownership of the buildings, define the architectural project, and provide for part of the restoration of the outer shell and the common areas. While the agreement unburdened the Public from part of the renovation costs, it safeguarded the public property of the buildings from possible sale.

In August 2002, the cooperatives started the renovation work, which mainly concerned joining substandard single-room flats into 97 larger ones with private toilet, improving the vertical connections and the common areas, investing around 20.000 euro per dwelling.

While funding from the Fondazione Cariplo, a bank foundation, covered one-third of the investment, the rest came from a social loan and a mortgage, and rents were calculated to repay these loans in the 25 years of the partnership. In 2004, refurbishment was over and the dwellings were allocated (Fig. 1), while the other actions of the Urban Regeneration Program started only in 2005.

Tenants in Quattro Corti are selected by cooperatives from among their members whose income is less than the upper limit set by Lombardy Region for the leasing of publicly owned residences; some could be entitled to a public dwelling if there ever were a sufficient offer. The minimum rental prices for the renovated homes are determined by the municipal agreement on the *canone concordato*, or agreed rent. Rents are set based on the objective features of the property within a range of minimum and maximum that is defined by an agreement among local stakeholders (primarily tenants' unions, landlords' associations, and the municipality) in exchange for tax breaks. This is an incentive-based contract on the private rental market. The rent is currently set around 60 €/m<sup>2</sup> per year. In the Quattro Corti, a two-rooms dwelling costs around 300 €/month. It is quite an affordable rent for Milan and in such a semi-central and well-connected location, where market rents have reached in 2023 around 240 €/m<sup>2</sup>. And though slightly more expensive than public housing (where rents are capped on a percentage of the very low households' income), it is lower than most social housing projects in the city (Nomisma, 2021) and even lower than currently agreed rent (*canone concordato*). Most interviewed tenants describe their rent with positive adjectives (e.g., “good”, “fair”, “convenient”) and acknowledge that otherwise they would be expelled by the city, while only few lamented that it is more expensive than public housing. With these low rents, the housing cooperatives have been able to repay the refurbishment costs while responding to the housing needs of members with low and moderate income: households with one (often precarious) income, in some cases entitled to access public housing but still on the waiting list. Many tenants have foreign origins, also due to the peculiar nature of the cooperative Dar=casa, founded to foster the housing inclusion of migrants. While public housing companies bear the social cost of providing housing at very low rents to poor households, here slightly higher rents are needed to guarantee that housing coopera-

<sup>4</sup> Primarily, the cooperatives aimed at providing housing to households with foreign origins, that at the time were excluded from public housing, with a focus on cultural and social integration (Alietti et al., 1998).



**Fig. 1** Schematization of the process that has brought to the realization of the Quattro Corti project. Source: information provided by the housing cooperatives and ALER's official documents, elaboration by the authors based on interviews and document analysis

tives return their investment for the refurbishment. For the two cooperatives, the Quattro Corti was an important opportunity to grow and reflect on their work. For Dar=casa, it was the first opportunity to manage one entire building: before the cooperative was mainly involved in the renovation of individual housing units scattered in different public housing estates. For Solidasrnosc it was the first occasion to embark on the management of rental assets – until then, it was a home-ownership-oriented cooperative. In turn, by managing the entire estate, the cooperatives have been able to significantly intervene in building quality, installations, and common parts, bringing their expertise in management and significant improvements to the buildings. From the cooperatives' point of view, the project must be economically viable, and good management and maintenance is seen as a good way to incentivize tenants to keep up with rent payments. In the interviews, tenants previously living in ALER buildings stressed how the housing management improved after moving in the Quattro Corti dwelling, where the cooperatives have a more practical user-centered (and even social) attitude rather than a bureaucratic one (Saporito, & Perobelli, 2021). Workers from the cooperatives are often present on site and intervene efficiently and promptly, both on the physical side and on the immaterial one. For example, the old heating system was replaced with an investment of the cooperatives; the open courtyard and two small buildings were refurbished and designed as common space for inhabitants and local associations; a concierge has been employed since the time of the building site, to support tenants in the settling-in phase and is still a key person and reference for many; tenants are informed and supported on access to rent allowances to prevent arrears and evictions. The effects of these improvements are acknowledged by tenants regarding both the costs and quality of living,

e.g., noting, among others, that the refurbishment of the heating system has significantly reduced condominium fees. This is a relevant point, since condominium fees often represent the heaviest expense for public housing tenants – since they are not parametrized on income (Polis Lombardia, 2021). Moreover, tenants highlight the quality of maintenance and of management services. The improvements will remain as a legacy when the buildings will return to the management of ALER after the expire of the 25 years' contract.

## 5 Public-cooperative partnerships for the management of the public housing stock: a viable way?

Despite some sporadic interest – mainly regarding the housing inclusion of foreign households – the Quattro Corti case had so far very limited public resonance, it has never been officially evaluated and is even scarcely considered a topic for academic research and public debate.

Nevertheless, regional legislation in Lombardy has recently developed a coherent orientation to the existing sale policy of public housing. The so-called “valorization alternative to sale” (*valorizzazione alternativa alla vendita*) was introduced by the Lombardy regional law 16/2016, partly as upscaling of the Quattro Corti case. Accordingly, in the face of scant public resources, public housing assets that are in a state of decay and require renovation may be temporarily allocated and rented out of the public system; an agreement may be signed between public housing providers and non-profit organizations, that can refurbish and manage the assets for a limited number of years in certain agreed conditions. Dwellings may be rented out at a moderate rent (slightly higher than the social rent) allowing for the repayment of the capital invested in the renovation. After the agreement has expired, the property turns back in full availability to the public housing provider. The valorization alternative to the sale of public housing is formally a priority of the Lombardy Regional Government, but there has been very small research on the actual effects of this policy.

Through the Quattro Corti partnership, in the context of increasing affordability problems and within the structural lack of affordable rental housing in the Milanese housing system, 97 low-income families have found an affordable and high quality rental housing solution since 2004. Additionally, the public housing company retains the property while being unburdened by the refurbishment and maintenance costs. Given the urgency of finding alternatives to the still ongoing privatization of the public housing stock and the rising call for a renewed public intervention in the field of housing, the Quattro Corti project represents an innovative response that some involved actors frame as a “model”. Often, the idea of model is a rather rhetorical one, as conditions vary across contexts, and the reproduction of certain schemes is very seldom possible. However, the interest expressed by various actors in in such public-cooperative partnerships can be used as a device to explore and discuss potential innovation pathways for public housing in different context.

Here we explore opportunities and challenges inherent in the potential of public-cooperative partnerships inspired by the Quattro Corti case, investigating by presenting and discussing this pioneering project with key experts and stakeholders in four focus groups conducted in Milan, Bari, Catania and Perugia.

The presence of unused public housing stock comes up in all the contexts as an opportunity, and is well documented. The legislative orientation that enables “valorization alterna-

tive to sale” is however not present outside Lombardy and would require different forms of coordination among actors (or the adoption of a similar legislation). Additionally, representatives of public authorities in the focus groups highlighted that the partnership would work for – potentially – any other form of underutilized public property. In Perugia, Bari and Catania, key informants from public housing providers manifested enthusiasm in experimenting with a similar model, remarking that these partnerships could be adopted in the multiple cases of unfinished buildings in public ownership - with a small investment by the cooperative sector, these buildings could be completed and rented out through different allocation criteria than public housing – or dismissed public office buildings. This would require a different operative framework, and the involvement of other public actors than the public housing provider. Qualitative aspects did not come out as a relevant factor: some insisted that even unfinished buildings (featuring only the structural elements) could work for such partnerships, so that cooperatives could make even better adaptation. This naturally would increase the refurbishment costs and, thereby, the length of the lease or the charged rent (if subsidies are not contextually available).

The establishment of public-cooperative partnerships is seen as simultaneously promising but also challenging to implement. One of the main challenges for partnerships is the missing presence of suitable cooperative actors that could match the role of non-profit temporary managers. While in the Milan case cooperatives acted as “policy entrepreneurs” (Pirani, 2008; Barenstein et al., 2021) and effectively lobbied for achieving the partnership, most of the time their influence is rather limited, especially when existing political linkages with public administration have been disrupted – as it is the case in Italy after the end of extensive social housing programs (Peverini, 2021). Anywhere, both cooperative and public housing providers highlighted as a criticality the shrinking of funding and shifting of land and subsidies to new financialized actors (Belotti & Arbaci, 2021; Adisson & Halbert, 2022). In Perugia, Bari and Catania, key informants argue that cooperative actors that could take up such partnerships are currently absent. In those cases, representatives from the cooperative sector stated that at present an adequate cooperative sector does not exist in their territories as most cooperatives either vanished (especially those that retained social rental orientation) or shifted to market-oriented and quasi-commercial models of homeownership promotion, resembling commercial developers, and are not ready (and perhaps interested) to manage rental housing in public property. Here, rather than from a restructuring of existing cooperatives, representatives insist that such partnerships could represent an occasion to kickstart new cooperatives as already happened in one case in Catania<sup>5</sup>. This is coherent with the “enabling” literature, arguing that in market-oriented housing systems public action is needed for a socially-oriented cooperative sector to exist (Ganapati, 2010; Ferreri & Vidal, 2021; Barenstein et al., 2021).

Certainly, the major controversy of such partnerships regards the shift of the dwellings from the public allocation and rent regulation scheme – which ties rents to tenants’ incomes – in favour of a less strict rent-control regulation (*canone concordato*), which allows a more flexible allocation and slightly higher – though still low and controlled – rents. This was marked as a criticality by representatives of the tenants’ unions in all cities, and especially in Milan. However, as we have previously highlighted, public property is preserved, allowing for a future use in public rent allocation at the end of the partnership. Most participants admitted the opportunity of enacting public-cooperative partnerships as a chance to experi-

<sup>5</sup> It is the cooperative Trame di Quartiere: <https://www.tramediquartiere.org/>.

ment with innovative management and opening to new ways of housing provision that are less bureaucratic than traditional public housing and cover emerging housing needs.

According to our analysis, in the big uncertainty characterizing the destiny of Italian public housing, we highlight that hybrid partnerships for its management can either be a trojan horse for privatization and devolution of public housing, or a vehicle for experimenting innovative management and forms of housing provision that are closer to the actual need depending on some conditionalities. In this light, some features are crucial to assure that housing commons are created and preserved and profit extraction minimized. Through the analysis of the Quattro Corti case, we identify three requirements that hybrid partnerships must fulfil to allow the creation of housing commons and avoid the use of public asset for profit making:

1. *Reuse of vacant stock or public assets.* The public asset at stake should be vacant and in need of refurbishment, in order to act as “boundary object” among the interests of public housing providers, tenants’ union and cooperatives. While qualitative characteristics are not so relevant, ideally the vacant stock should be organized in entire buildings (and not scattered units) to maximize management and maintenance efficiency;
2. *Preservation of the public property.* Public property can be preserved in the partnership through a time-limited concession of use of the buildings (a sort of land lease on the built stock). The partnership shall be discussed by public authorities and cooperatives as well as by other relevant local actors, e.g. tenants’ unions – for fixing socially acceptable forms of use of the public property, mainly regarding rent settings and allocation criteria (see next point);
3. *Cost-rent and temporary management.* A transparent business model should be part of the partnership, based on a cost-rent system in the agreement period, which can include subsidies for renovation (in the Quattro Corti case third of the costs were covered by a grant) that allows to charge lower rents, and careful management that keeps expenses low, with an expiration date and clear post-partnership conditions.

If these requirements are met, we argue, such partnership could be beneficial to public housing authorities, cooperatives and tenants, as in those cases the risk of commodification of public properties is minimized and housing commons are created and preserved.

According to the results of the focus groups, the issues at stake and the basic conditions for developing hybrid partnerships for the management of the public stock by cooperatives are:

1. *Available stock and assets.* A part of the stock or a built asset available for the partnership, in need of refurbishment, and more in general the opportunity of devolving the management of part of the stock to a partnership;
2. *Existence of non-profit actors.* A locally based agreement between the owner and the temporary manager (the cooperative) requires that adequate cooperatives exist locally. Such cooperative shall have a social orientation to accept the requirements exposed above;
3. *A convergence of interest among the various actors involved.* To implement such a partnership it is necessary to build a convergence of interests. Where cooperatives are

strong, they can act as policy entrepreneurs and activate a discussion process with other stakeholder, while public authorities guide and stimulate the process.

By exploring four different cities in Italy – through focus group with relevant actors – it becomes evident that seldom all these conditions are fulfilled. However, some of them are always present – at least, there is always vacant stock available and some degree of interest by public authorities – and the dialogue with key actors also anticipates possible developments, as small changes could eventually create the condition for kickstarting a partnership. In Perugia, Bari and Catania, as in many other places in Southern Europe, the presence of adequate housing cooperatives is the missing piece, despite some new small cooperatives are emerging again. This means that a partnership could eventually become feasible as soon as cooperatives are established: this seems to be the case in Catania, where a similar scheme was applied to private housing stock and could easily be transferred to vacant and unfinished public housing buildings.

## 6 Discussion and conclusions

In this article we investigate the critical situation faced by public housing in Italy and we analyze whether hybrid (public-cooperative) partnerships can have a positive or negative role in terms of creating and preserving housing commons or allowing profit making with private properties. Our analysis confirms previous findings regarding a general decline and crisis of public housing at the international level (Madden, & Marcuse, 2016), the increased segmentation of the rental market and the stress of policies towards an “intermediate” quasi-market segment instead than on proper public housing (Czischke & van Bortel, 2018; Belotti & Arbaci, 2021). However, we show that the Italian case has followed a different pathway, as the public housing stock has not (yet) been transferred *en bloc* to market actors as in Germany (Aalbers, & Holm, 2008) or third sector organization such as housing associations in anglosaxon countries and the Netherlands (Mullins et al., 2017). Italian public housing providers were turned into companies without changing their statutory public nature and social function – as highlighted also by studies in public management (Fosti et al., 2019; Saporito & Perobelli, 2021) – and, while struggling to balance their accounts, they have often been obliged to sell part of their stock. Additionally, Italian public housing companies do not show similar hybridization dynamics to those of other countries, as the contradiction between “social” and “market” orientation shown in other cases – e.g., in Australia, England and the Netherlands (Mullins et al., 2017) – is limited by a fully public nature and a strong socially-oriented statute. Managerialism in Italy produces then the paradoxical situation of pushing for balancing accounts with very low rents and poor tenants, an unresolvable tension that results in declining stock, failing maintenance and critical levels of empty dwellings and debt. Our findings do not show any sign of “post-neoliberal” housing policy in Italy and Milan – as found in Berlin, New York and Vienna (Kadi et al., 2021) but also Barcelona and Zurich (Barenstein et al., 2021) – and public housing remains at high risk of privatization and financialization, especially in Milan. While giving value to the “publicness” of public housing as a fundamental response to contemporary housing need and calling for a reform, we currently see the increasing risk of privatization and financialization

of the public housing stock highlighted by other authors (Poggio & Boreiko, 2017; Belotti & Arbaci, 2021; Adisson & Halbert, 2022) and the need to search for realistic alternatives.

In this wake, we introduced the topic of hybrid partnerships exploring whether there is a role for cooperatives in the management of the Italian public housing stock, and whether their role is that of trojan horses for profit extraction or virtuous vehicles of housing commons - a topic that is growing in the international literature together with increased interest for housing cooperatives (Gutzon, & Lund, 2015). While the literature focuses on promotion, investment and production of housing by cooperatives (Ferreri, & Vidal, 2021), we are suggesting an interest for the potential role that cooperatives may play in the management of the existing public stock through hybrid partnerships.

In the present article we analyse the Quattro Corti project, a pioneering partnership in which two cooperatives took up the refurbishment and management of a small portion of the vacant public housing stock in Milan for a limited period of twenty-five years, while the public housing authority retains the property. This pioneering case can be framed as vehicles of housing commons, as through it the risk of privatization is – at least temporarily – neutralized and the stock is still used for social functions: moderate rental housing for low-middle income household, mostly with foreign origins. Our analysis shows similar results to that of Mullins (2018) and Mullins and Moore (2018): community-based housing brings positive effects that can be achieved when procurement systems are redesigned to provide access for grassroots organizations. In this sense, that of Milan can be considered an additional case of “state-directed hybridity” among those investigated by Mullins et al. (2017), but with a much smaller scale.

Such hybrid partnership shows a good potential for expanding affordable rental housing provision and preserving public property, especially in the persisting state of crisis of many public housing systems as the Italian one (with privatization always being around the corner). Nevertheless, we see the Milan case as a shift in the use of the stock from the pure “social” orientation towards a quasi-market one. This is coherent with a more general emphasis given by policies on the “intermediate” quasi-market segment in many countries (Czischke, & van Bortel, 2018), that suggests that hybrid partnerships risk contributing to the decline of public housing. However, in the Milan case the public provider has more option to decide on the future orientation of the stock as the property remains public – in comparison to privatization or financialization where the property is sold or given out to a fund (Belotti & Arbaci, 2021; Adisson & Halbert, 2022). According to our analysis, the balance between the two orientations (social or market) ultimately depends on three conditionalities: reuse of vacant stock, preservation of public property and cost-rent management; on the long term, however, it depends on the destination of the stock at the end of the partnership (back to public housing, moderate rental or privatized?). In this sense, some limited projects that followed the Quattro Corti case in Lombardy show nuanced outcomes – depending on the type of organization involved, there is creation of housing commons or a rather profit-oriented use of the stock. Additionally, our case shows how collaboration among public housing authorities and cooperatives can trigger processes of mutual learning and create advantages (including innovative management and provision mechanisms), as stressed by literature on collaborative and community-based housing practices (Czischke, & Huisman, 2018; Mullins, 2018).

The present article also extends previous research (Peverini et al., 2023) to a wider national scale through expert panels with policymakers and stakeholders in four Italian cit-



ies. As the discussion around the Quattro Corti case shows, the collaboration between different actors is very much context-dependent, based on convergence of interests and on the will to find a feasible way to reach the aims established by the partnership. We found three enabling factors: available stock and assets; presence of cooperatives and non-profit actors; convergence of interest. Our findings confirm that the public actor plays a key role as “enabler” of housing cooperatives (Ganapati, 2010; Barenstein et al., 2021) also in hybrid partnerships for management, but also that State support is a necessary but not sufficient condition: if a proper cooperative sector does not exist in a local context, hybrid partnerships could fail or risk turning toward market actors – thereby increasing the risk of privatization. Differences in space and time make replication difficult to envision at first sight – and perhaps even undesirable as it is hard to consider the Quattro Corti as a “model”. However, the same differences can foster new frontline actions concerning housing provision and management.

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## Declarations

**Competing interests** The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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