

# UNCONVENTIONAL AFFORDABLE HOUSING!

PROJECTS, PRACTICES, POLICIES

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Francesca Serrazanetti, Constanze Wolfgring

Funded under the PRIN 2022 programme – Projects of Relevant National Interest, by the Ministry of Education, Universities and Research (MIUR) with PNRR funds: NextGenerationEU – Mission 4, Component 2, Investment 1.1. Project Title: “From Unconventional\* Households to Unconventional Affordable Housing”. CUP H53D23007080006. Project Code: 2022PZYKER

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MIMESIS EDIZIONI (Milano – Udine)

[www.mimesisedizioni.it](http://www.mimesisedizioni.it)

[mimesis@mimesisedizioni.it](mailto:mimesis@mimesisedizioni.it)

Isbn: 9791222324302

DOI: 10.7413/1234-1234095

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2025 – MIM EDIZIONI SRL

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20099 Sesto San Giovanni (MI)

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ANTÓNIO CARVALHO, ALARICO RUFFINO\*

## GIVE THE GROUND TO THE PEOPLE!

Housing explorations on the ground floor  
in Quartiere San Paolo, Bari

### *Introduction*

The students of the annual course “Architectural Design Studio 2”, in the second year of the three-year bachelor’s degree in Architecture at Politecnico di Milano, were involved in the International Research Project “UAH! Unconventional Affordable Housing”, dealing with the theme of architectural design within a peripheral urban context, in a plot of the public housing neighbourhood of San Paolo in the north-western outskirts of Bari, in Puglia, Italy.

The students, divided into 15 groups of four members each, were tasked with developing a project for an urban lot of the neighbourhood, where there are two buildings of public housing. However, each group was asked to intervene in the design only on the ground floor of these buildings, which appears as an empty space raised by large *pilotis* in reinforced concrete.

The students had to exploit this residual space to design new unconventional housing arrangements, which can promote social integration in the district and mutual support among the inhabitants, as well as possible new services, activities and workshops. In addition to the intervention on the existing buildings, the students were asked to propose a project for the requalification of the open spaces of the lot and design two small tower buildings.

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### *San Paolo neighbourhood*

The San Paolo district is located northwest of the historic centre of Bari, close to the large ecological corridor of the Lama Balice Natural Park. Born as an urban expansion in the 1950s to cope with post-war demographic growth, the district now occupies a large peripheral area, with more than 30,000 inhabitants (Chirivì 2022). The first nucleus of San Paolo, built as a “CEP”<sup>2</sup>, arose in Bari in 1958 as a “satellite district”, on an area of approximately eighty hectares, aimed at meeting the demand for public housing for workers in nearby factories (Borri *et al.* 1980).

The next two expansions in the 1960s and 1970s transformed the neighbourhood into the largest public housing area in the city. The first occurred following the issuing of Law 167/1962 and the approval of the ten-year plan for new public housing, which led to the creation of a new residential area close to the original CEP (Don Milani 2009). Finally, in 1971 another construction programme began in an area that now belongs to the neighbouring municipality of Modugno, characterised by a type of intensive mixed-use building: commercial on the ground floor and residential on the upper floors; thus, making up for the shortcomings inherent in the older settlement, all oriented towards residential use. The San Paolo district today presents itself as a heterogeneous residential area, where complexes of buildings of different types are placed side by side, interspersed with large lots that should have been used as public green spaces, but which in reality have never been equipped for this purpose. This type of planning, based on the rationalist principles of the time, led to a rapid urbanisation of the area; however, the limited attention to architectural details has contributed, over time, to phenomena of physical and social degradation (Bauman 2004).

The same housing heterogeneity present in the San Paolo district is also reflected in its population, which is made up of a mix

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2 “CEP” (Comitato di coordinamento per l’edilizia popolare) neighbourhoods were built from the late 1950s onwards in several Italian cities with the objective to foster the development of self-sufficient, coordinated neighbourhoods (Wolfgring 2024).

of low to lower-middle income groups (Bottalico & Palmisano 2007). The settlement phenomenon that characterised the increase in population was the arrival of families ousted from other degraded areas of the city. What was supposed to be an innovative workers' settlement instead almost immediately became a place which, in the absence of community structures and social facilities, faces evident fractures such as unemployment, housing marginalisation, social stigma and organised crime, which contribute to the deterioration of the urban fabric (Whyte 1964).

However, San Paolo also has strengths that are still unexplored, including its proximity to the sea, the presence of large usable green spaces, and the fact that it is halfway between the airport, the industrial area and the railway station, making the neighbourhood an interesting logistical hub (PoliBa Chronicle 2022). Furthermore, following the construction of a surface metro line in 2008, the neighbourhood can be reached from the historic centre of Bari in just 12 minutes.

#### *Public housing and construction typologies in San Paolo*

Almost all of the housing stock in San Paolo consists of a repetition of blocks of public housing with reinforced concrete structures, long windowed facades alternating with lateral blind facades, external stairways and perimeter loggias. In many cases, the design choices have favoured construction standardisation and cost reduction, to the detriment of typological variety and architectural quality. This has resulted in a homogeneous residential fabric, devoid of recognisable elements and poorly suited to fostering community identity (Bottalico & Scardigno 2007). One of the main architectural features of the district involves the elevation of the housing units on reinforced concrete pilotis, which, although designed to ensure flexibility and permeability of the spaces on the ground floor, have often been the subject of abusive interventions or episodes of crime (Spagnolo 2025).

Today this enormous heritage of public housing is the responsibility of ARCA Puglia Centrale, the Regional Agency for Housing and Living, which was established by Regional Law no. 22 of 20 May 2014, taking over from the former IACP (Autonomous

Institute of Public Housing) of Bari and thus ensuring the continuity of local housing policies of public housing, urban regeneration and territorial welfare (ARCA Puglia Centrale 2025).

The latest Municipal Housing Plan, dating back to 2009, includes interventions of both new construction and redevelopment of public housing. However, some of these interventions are still incomplete, while others have not even begun. Nonetheless, the plan has provided at least one response to the city's serious housing emergency: in 2024, a Memorandum of Understanding between the Municipality of Bari and ARCA, called "Pact for Fair and Sustainable Housing", was adopted with City Council Resolution no. 635 of 29 October 2024 (Comune di Bari 2024). The pact identifies four strategic lines, with interventions for a total of over 250 million euros:

1. Strengthening social and housing services, experimental co-housing projects and support for young couples;
2. Redevelopment of existing public housing stock;
3. New models for fair and sustainable living: to improve urban and architectural design;
4. Observatory of housing supply and demand, to help produce more effective interventions.

ARCA also plays a role as a promoter of the PIRU (Integrated Urban Regeneration Programme) for the redevelopment of San Paolo, for which a memorandum of understanding has been signed with the municipality in 2016. The programme includes public and private interventions to address issues of urban decay (through the recovery of existing public housing stock and the creation of public infrastructures and services), of housing hardship (through the implementation of social, private and subsidised housing interventions), as well as the improvement of mobility and public spaces (Comune di Bari 2023).

### *Project area and objectives*

The project area of the Architectural Design Studio, proposed by the municipality of Bari and the local UAH! research team is

located in San Paolo, more precisely at Viale delle Regioni 21-23, and bordered on the opposite side by Via Trentino Alto Adige. The lot in question, of irregular shape, is therefore well defined by two main roads to the south and west, at whose southern intersection a row of small shops on the ground floor overlooks the site, and by two perimeter walls with fences on the north and east limits. The area includes two mirrored block buildings of public housing, both of 7 floors (ground floor and six floors) and supported by a series of pilotis on the ground floor. The students, after having analysed the area in person through a field survey, were given the task of re-imagining the empty space between the pilotis, designing new unconventional solutions of affordable housing, as well as improving the open space around the existing buildings, in order to contribute to creating a better environment for residents and the neighbourhood. In addition to the residential component, students were asked to hypothesise possible new services and functions, which

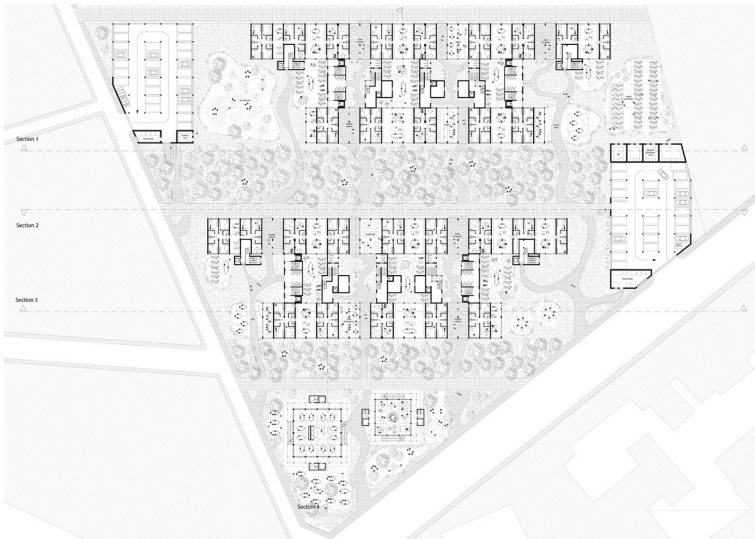


Figure 1. North-south and east-west paths connect the whole plot, creating some activity places (an outside restaurant, a playground, an outside café, urban farming). The two towers stand as urban landmarks in the south corner, while two garages mark the eastern and western limits (Authors: P.J. Leppert, H.S. Mazur, E. Batmaz, A. Hristova, 2025).

could be placed on the ground floor of the existing buildings or inside the two new tower buildings that have been designed inside the lot. The small towers should have a limited base area and could have a residential, service or mixed function, should interface with the pre-existing buildings, without exceeding their height, and should ideally be configured as new urban landmarks to redevelop the identity of the area (fig. 1).

### *Existing and new households*

In recent decades, a gradual shift in family dynamics across Europe can be highlighted. Due to recent social and economic changes, a strong transformation in household composition can be observed, moving from the traditional patriarchal extended family model to a nuclear or non-traditional one (Meyer & Carlson 2014). These transformations have challenged the traditional meaning of the term “family”, shifting attention to groups that are typically underrepresented and understudied in housing policies, such as: single-person households, divorced couples with children, single parents, and the growing elderly population. In response to the emerging needs of these social groups, recent years have seen a rise of unconventional housing models such as cohabitation, not only among students but also among young couples, adult workers and young people with elderly people, all looking for more accessible housing solutions (Postiglione *et al.* 2022a). At the same time, changes in the labour market (Taylor-Gooby 2004), the worsening of employment conditions, the increase in precarious employment, the difficult affordability of housing and delocalisation, are forcing more and more people, even those with average incomes (Costa *et al.* 2014), into precarious housing conditions and frequent changes of address (Rolshoven 2007; Reuschke 2013; Postiglione *et al.* 2022b).

Overall, these phenomena have called into question the meaning of “home” inherited from the Modern Movement and the housing programmes implemented in the last century, requiring a thorough reworking of both the concept of family and traditional housing models.

The social and public housing heritage inherited from the twentieth century, like the one present in the San Paolo neighbourhood, was designed for a society of workers very different from current public housing tenants, who, as previously highlighted, are often part of vulnerable and/or economically disadvantaged groups (Don Milani 2009). The lack of local services and the absence of adequate meeting spaces have exacerbated the discomfort of resident families, posing evident disadvantages. After typological research (Zoller 2014) based on case studies<sup>3</sup>, students were given full freedom of decision, which translated into several architectural proposals and different housing solutions. Some design teams chose to focus on young populations in difficulty or looking for work, others on older people, and again others on disadvantaged families, single mothers or immigrant workers. The design teams therefore had to deal with different needs and requirements depending on the selected type of users, but all of them dealt with the theme of contemporary living in a context of marginalisation.

Although “unconventional” and “accessible” housing solutions can take on very different forms and derive from a plurality of housing and family situations, their existence and diffusion often reflect the dissatisfaction or inaccessibility of traditional. One of the key hypotheses underlying the Design Studio and the UAH! project is that unconventional housing solutions can represent strategies to address these inadequacies, thus responding to households’ evolving needs solutions (Postiglione *et al.* 2022).

### *New spaces and functions*

Social transformations, combined with economic and urban transformations, have on the one hand increased the demand for non-traditional typologies, especially for single-person families

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3 Recent and inspirational case studies from Tokyo, Copenhagen, Zurich, Paris, Vienna, Berlin, and Amsterdam were presented in class and discussed in terms of design, policies, planning tools and economic forces as valuable inputs to the student projects.

(students, young workers and seniors over the age of 65), while on the other hand they have made housing increasingly inaccessible in terms of costs, both for rent and for purchase (Bricocoli & Peverini 2023). Also, in the city of Bari, housing prices are continuously increasing, while the index of housing affordability is low (15.9%, referring to single households) and has been decreasing over the past years<sup>4</sup> (Immobiliare.it 2024). Students were therefore called upon to address the complexity of contemporary living at different design scales and in its various programmatic components, hypothesising new spaces and functions (residential and non-residential) to be placed in the intervention area. These themes, and the related challenges, must stimulate students to reflect on the complexity of collective residential construction and on the different functions, spaces and human relations it must accommodate, thus also putting the ethics of the profession into practice. Working in a suburban area, with empty areas or residual spaces, students must reflect on the design options to create successful housing models, also reflecting on the failure of many public housing complexes built in the past in the area. The goal is to propose accessible housing typologies which are at the same time of high architectural and urban quality, capable of intercepting and responding to the diversified needs and requests of new emerging or more vulnerable household profiles of the San Paolo neighbourhood. Students were asked to propose, on the one hand, innovative residential solutions for the users they have hypothesised and, on the other hand, new complementary functions, in order to compensate for, at least in part, the deficiencies of the neighbourhood in many aspects, such as social, cultural, sports, recreational and educational services.

With the proposals developed by the students, the course and in general the research project UAH! aims to analyse and propose new unconventional design solutions capable of reducing

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4 The index measures the percentage of the housing supply offered for sale in a given municipality that is affordable for a single person with a net average income equal to the municipal average. It is assumed that the property purchase is financed at 80% through a 25-year fixed-rate mortgage, with an interest rate corresponding to the average recorded during the reference period (currently 4.45%) (immobiliare.it 2024).

the research gap on multiple themes related to contemporary living (fig. 2).



Figure 2. A balanced distribution of green spaces and activity spots throughout the plot. The west tower stands as a landmark parallel to the street while the east tower stands in axis with the new central public space completing it. A set of new shops create the south triangular piazza. Apartments show a zigzag of private and social spaces, with courtyards for collective activities (Authors: R.B. Madeira, B. Savin, A. Trsic, A.A. Zaorska, 2025).

### *New urban space*

The open public space around the buildings, is currently characterised by a situation of urban decay and the presence of numerous illegal parking lots, ruined pavements, informal waste collection areas scattered in different places, lack of greenery and urban furniture. The layout of the open spaces within the neighbourhood and the presence of large green areas reflects the rationalist principles of the 20th century and an unexplored potential for future redevelopment interventions (Archistart.net 2017).

The groups were therefore asked to re-imagine this space too, always with a view to economy and social interaction, to improve the living quality of all residents, existing and new, and strengthen the urban identity of the area, instead of its present suburban character. Students were given full freedom and were asked to relocate a minimum number of formal parking spaces necessary for the residents, to eliminate architectural barriers for pedestrians guaranteeing continuity of sidewalks and paths and the entrance of emergency vehicles (such as ambulances). The strategies proposed by the students for the open space could potentially be replicated and developed at the neighbourhood level around other buildings, thus proposing a widespread regeneration of the urban space.

Public interventions with similar objectives have been proposed in recent years, such as “SanPArT” (San Paolo Art) in 2021/2022 promoted by the Mecenate 90 Association, the “Corte Urbana Don Bosco” in 2023 promoted by Renzo Piano’s G124 Project or some tactical urbanism interventions on public facilities of the neighbourhood<sup>5</sup>.

### *New community*

The design of new unconventional housing solutions in the San Paolo neighbourhood could not ignore the creation of new

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5 The “SanPArT” (San Paolo Art) project in 2021/2022, by the Mecenate 90 Association with the support of the municipality and the Puglia region promoted the creation of 11 murals and 6 creative workshops (Chirivì 2022). Two of these murals decorate now our residential blocks in the project area. In 2023, Renzo Piano’s G124 promoted the recovery of the “Corte Urbana Don Bosco”, to transform the empty space between the buildings into a collective garden, including a circular clearing with seats, sustainable lighting and draining pavement (Montani 2024). Finally, some tactical urbanism interventions were undertaken on the external areas of church Santa Maria Madre della Chiesa, “E. De Amicis” and “G. Pascoli” schools, and the “Don Bosco” municipal sports centre, where street furniture, artistic installations, urban greenery and new cycle/pedestrian paths were created to underline the importance of sustainable mobility systems for a smoother connection with the city centre (Archilovers 2024).

forms of community. In fact, the redevelopment of the two existing buildings, together with the arrangement of the open spaces of the lot and the construction from scratch of two small tower buildings, aims not only to propose a replicable model of architectural and urban intervention, but also to regenerate the image of the district, creating a stronger sense of belonging and community among the residents of the neighbourhood. The new public housing designed by the students is not limited to the spatial and functional dimension of living but also explores relational and social potential. Following the principles of flexibility and cohabitation, the challenge posed to the students was to think of the home not only as a private place, but also as a social medium, capable of generating forms of coexistence and cooperation among residents, overcoming the fragmentation and isolation often present in the neighbourhood (fig. 3).

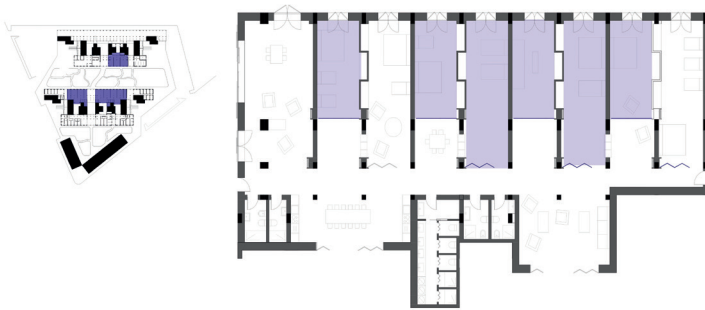


Figure 3. Emergency housing for victims of domestic violence and short-term housing for single parents with children, share a flexible solution of narrow modules varying in length. Social spaces are shared with direct connection to the outside courtyards, enclosed and protected where children can safely play (Authors: R. Rana, T. Cavinato, S. Pollini, T.M. Pintilie, 2025).

New services for citizens, such as shops, workshops and meeting spaces, will act as social catalysts, promoting greater integration and mutual support between people of different age groups, as well as between different cultures and religions.

With this in mind, many projects have introduced common and shared spaces, such as kitchens, laundries, craft workshops, urban gardens or multipurpose rooms, imagined as key elements for building a supportive and cohesive community. Some groups have proposed co-housing or collective housing models, in which the residential units overlook common spaces, encouraging the sharing of time, resources and skills among the inhabitants.

Others have developed thematic micro-communities, aimed at specific users such as artists, single mothers, lonely elderly people, out-of-town students or migrants, suggesting ways of intergenerational or intercultural coexistence (fig. 4). In several cases, the architectural design has been accompanied by the proposal of participatory governance models, in which the inhabitants themselves become promoters of the management and maintenance of shared spaces. The physical proximity guaranteed by living on the ground floor and the possibility of direct interaction with the public external space have been interpreted as opportunities to strengthen social ties between residents and the sense of belonging to the neighbourhood. Some proposals have suggested opening up common spaces to the outside, imagining activities that can also involve the wider neighbourhood, triggering dynamics of exchange and mutual contamination. The presence of hybrid functions, between public and private or between residence and service, has been used as a strategy to break the rigidity of traditional housing models and promote greater adaptability over time. In many projects, an explicit desire to respond not only to material needs, but also to immaterial ones, such as security, recognition, participation, and identity, has emerged. In this sense, architecture has been understood as a tool to generate belonging, activate inclusive processes and build new community narratives, capable of countering the marginalisation and stigma that still affect some popular neighbourhoods such as San Paolo in Bari.

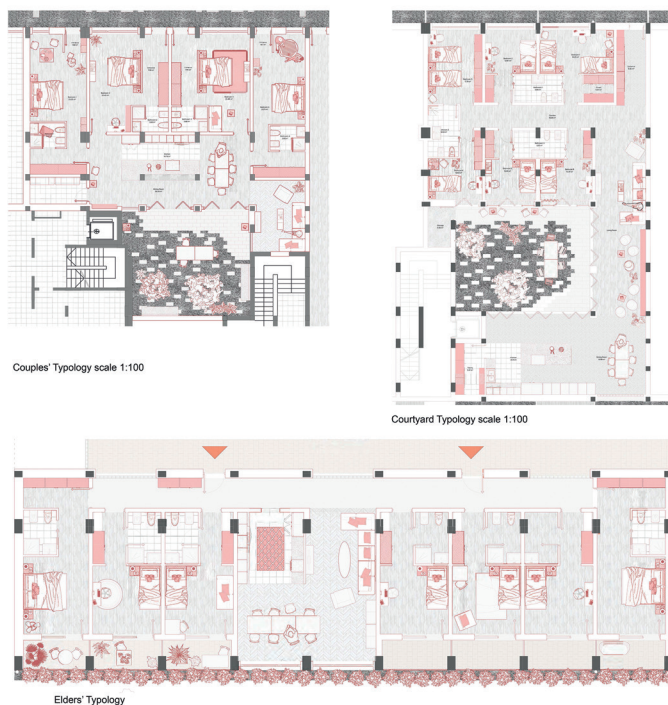


Figure 4. The diversity of residents justifies different apartment layouts: older people with individual private balconies; shared apartments for couples with independent entrances to each bedroom sharing social spaces and a courtyard; foster home for orphans; U-shaped apartment around courtyard for co-living (Authors: C. Fredholm, M. Czykowski, A. Ansarijoo, B. Dizdar, 2025).

### *Conclusions*

The project developed during the semester represents a significant example of applied research that intertwines teaching, theory, architectural design and social commitment. Through the design exploration of residual and degraded spaces on the ground floor of the public housing blocks of the San Paolo district in Bari, second-year students of the “Architectural Design Studio 2” course

were called to deal with the complexities of contemporary living in a fragile context, marked by social inequalities and marginalisation. The transformation of unused areas between the pilotis into unconventional residences and service spaces represents not only a design challenge, but also an opportunity to trigger processes of urban regeneration and social cohesion. The work carried out is part of a broader framework of critical reflection on living, stimulated by the international research project UAH!, which invites us to rethink the concept of “home” and “family” in light of the socio-demographic and economic changes of recent decades. The solutions proposed by the students, although diversified in form and content, share the common goal of promoting the role of the architectural project as a tool for urban redevelopment, social inclusion, solidarity and housing innovation.

In this sense, the project offers concrete ideas for future public policies oriented towards affordable and unconventional living. Finally, the possibility of presenting the projects to institutions (the municipality and involved stakeholders) and citizens makes this experience a virtuous example of integration between university education and civic commitment, paving the way for a necessary dialogue between designers, administrations and local communities, to imagine the future of often forgotten neighbourhoods together.

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