

Inhabiting the urban realm: Metamorphoses and migrations of contemporary housing types

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1 Walter Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* (Frankfurt, 1955). [Eng. trans.: *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968).]

2 Walter Benjamin, *Einbahnstrasse* (Frankfurt, 1955 and 1972–89). [Eng. trans.: *One-way Street and Other Writings* (London and New York: Verso, 1979).]

From 'standardisation' to 'personalisation': the legacy and the betrayal of functionalist principles

Sleeping, washing, studying, preparing food, putting things away, resting after work: the units of activity contained in the circles of 'functionalist' diagrams were supposed to reform the human dwelling to meet objective and universal needs, opposing the morality of the *Neues Wohnen* in both the social hypocrisy of the middle-class home and the squalor of the slums of the industrial metropolis.

But the list of needs that the modern dwelling must satisfy now has to be updated in the light of the new desires and lifestyles of the variegated population of city users. If the rationalist manuals contained the stylised dark outlines of a 'standard' humanity (abstract typical users consistent with the resources of the new clean and sunlit accommodation), the designs for a contemporary dwelling ought perhaps to contain the icons of the diverse virtual population of the Sims or the Metaverse. The concept of the custom-made, of a sometimes extreme 'personalisation', has today brought together the body, the clothing, the domestic environment and even the musical, literary and artistic tastes of residents; transforming the walls of the house into an existential niche governed by the individual choice made possible by the 'dropdown menu'.

The 'liberation of desire' of the Sixties has lost its political overtones and instead has taken on a commercial character, generating a broad range of specific markets targeted by ever more aggressive advertising, where the slogan of 'do your own thing' is paradoxically used to promote the products of global brands.

Whether they like it or not, contemporary housing projects carry in their genetic code many of the results of functionalist and post-functionalist research about mass housing. Ironically, however, the main ideological presupposition of this research, that of an egalitarianism in the positivist mould stemming from the 'universal' character of human needs, has been dropped.

The extreme 'democratisation' of housing proposals

for the contemporary metropolis is now taking on new overtones, entering dangerously into resonance with the parallel targeting of market niches by advertisers or the entertainment industry, in the obsession with originality and personalisation that characterises the ever greater diffusion of commodities in mass society.

An awareness of how the city survives individual destinies seems to be the only way of thinking that is capable of laying the foundations for an ethic of resistance to the consumption of the ever-changing images of the 'sex-appeal of the inorganic' described by Walter Benjamin.

'Architecture has always represented the prototype of a work of art the reception of which is consummated by a collectivity in a state of distraction', and, 'its appropriation is accomplished not so much by attention as by habit',¹ once declared Benjamin, who elsewhere urged us to 'live without traces'.² Going back to a vision accepting a rather conventional relationship between container and content – not so different in the end from the progressive 'loftisation' of residential space – might constitute a healthy antidote to the suburban atomisation of the fabric that used to make up much of the city we love.

Inside/out or outside/in: the dialectic between the cell and the city

The conflict between the house and outside the urban organism, between the right to individual expression and the conservation of public space – which echoes other typical conflicts between the playful use of the city and the not-in-my-backyard attitude – can perhaps be resolved today through techniques of 'mediation' or the simple creation of an 'interface'. Form arises everywhere there is a need for communication: we could see form as the necessary 'translation' between one system and another, which allows two adjoining realities to hold a dialogue and represent each other.

We realised that the addition of many individual habitats is not able to form a city. The simple movement of the body, which traces and carves out the empty envelope of its living space (from Alexander Klein's



Milano

Nuovo Portello, Milan, 2002–08. By CZA Cino Zucchi Architetti, Zucchi & Partners. Credit: Cino Zucchi

diagrams of minimum routes to the organic interior of Friedrich Kiesler's *Endless House*), is not capable of producing true sociability, nor of a true evolution over time of the building substance generated by it. Better, perhaps, to imagine inhabitants as 'hermit crabs', in empirical migration from one shell to another through the orderly trails of the housing ads.

In this sense, the landscape of the *interieur* – from the elegy of the Biedermeier to the protoplasm of IKEA – is not capable of confronting the city directly without destroying it, like a cancerous cell that knows no boundaries and hierarchies among parts. It has to be confined by osmotic membranes that regulate the exchange between the two environments: windows, terraces, balconies, walls, parapets and screens that create microclimates of transition between outside and inside. In this sense, Josep Antoni Coderch's Barceloneta apartment house wrapped in shutters constitutes the common ancestor of many mutant species that have appeared in the urban ecosystem in recent years, collective organisms capable of joint action against the suburban plankton.

The functionalist tradition, in a hypertrophic aspiration to 'sincerity', denied independent formal value to the facades of houses, restricting them to a pretended direct expression of the organisation of the interior. On the contrary, many contemporary designs seem to aspire to the aesthetic paradigm of camouflage so widely used in modern fashion, which is increasingly adapting the

functional prostheses of the body (watches, sunglasses, military accessories) to play a 'cosmetic' role. In opposition to the panoptic ideal of the glass house, inhabited by tidy demi-gods, we now have faceless interiors wrapped in 'inhabited screens' of balcony and loggias acting as mediators between the private dimension and the public one.

The space between:
the rediscovery of urbanity and
the environmental emergency

The response to the changing needs and lifestyles of contemporary life generates every day a number of design solutions which are reshaping our living environment. While the historical city built up in time still constitutes a loved backdrop to our daily life, the expansions of the city of the last century often look like the simple addition of 'living units', which are seldom able to produce the comfort and the fascination of traditional urban spaces, where activities live together in a lively mix.

If the last century has been marked by the expansion of the city, today we see more and more a metamorphosis of the urban structure to respond to the evolution of the way we live, work, communicate. All Europe has been marked by the abandonment of large industrial or infrastructural precincts of the first industrial age,

whose location and size offer them as among the most interesting opportunities to shape the backdrop to the desire of a 'new urban dwelling', capable of uniting the richness and variety of the urban experience with the environmental qualities of the new suburban quarters.

Today we rediscover the positive qualities of urban density not only for the richness and the variety of the experience, but also in terms of sustainability: an inhabitant of the suburbs consumes twice the electrical energy and three times the petrol of one of the consolidated urban centres.

In giving shape to new dwelling environments, we can blend together all the positive qualities of the modernist research on housing – the search for light and air, optimisation of space, technical performance – with the desire for privacy and environmental quality which brought people toward the suburbs.

To do this, one of the crucial points is a thoughtful design of the 'in-between' spaces, of the interfaces between different scales. The transition from the entirely public dimension of the street to the entirely private one of the room can happen on many levels; these articulations can not only generate interesting small-scale collective spaces at the scale of the neighbourhood, but also an overall richness that creates an articulation between the 'chez soi' of the individual dwelling units and the richness of urban form and common green spaces.

These relation spaces, both at the foot of the building – with a stronger shared function, and the task to define the border between private and public open spaces – and at the various floors all the way to the roof – can acquire today an inhabitable character, and respond to the increasing requests of climatic and energy conservation concerns, becoming sophisticated environmental filters. The growing attention toward sustainability and the desire for private 'outdoor rooms' extending the inner space outward are generating new design themes which can respond to the desire for a new quality of life.

If a cautious experimentalism marks the 'foundation cities' of the new docklands, or the northern European polders like IJburg in Amsterdam or Wasserstadt in Hamburg, the transformation of large disused industrial zones in Italy into residential areas has for the most part been based on a few, disappointing, real-estate models. Even if the happy period following the Second World War can still offer useful lessons on modern living in the urban setting, it is not remotely possible to solve the problems posed today by the constantly changing environment of the multi-ethnic metropolis with the sunny model of the 'functional city' capable of integrating urban fabric and open space.

But the lesson of the housing project is also one of humility and seriousness, in an age that favours formal hyperbole even in the absence of meaning; it requires an attentive, affectionate gaze, one that knows how to work by means of small shifts rather than grand proclamations, pursuing a coherent series of small variations that can lead to unexpected discoveries. Of the new house, of the new city, we would like this: the fact of being at once reassuring and unexpected, capable of articulating the space of relationship and protecting the private dimension that Christopher Alexander saw as a primary necessity in defence of contemporary homogenisation.

Today the question of the form of the common space between housing units appears to be suspended between different objectives. If the modern tradition's policy of the 'satellite quarter' sought to recreate the social solidarity of the village within the new urbanised class, it is not clear what ought to be the social model or the formal paradigm of the connective space keeping together contemporary residential fabrics.

When we visit a foreign city, the shape and the rhythm of its public spaces, the attire of the people inhabiting its streets and parks, the finer grain of its cobblestones, traffic lights, tree trunks, shop signs leave us an impression that cannot be described in simple terms. We could call it the 'character' of the place; but when we try to grasp it, it seems to dissolve into the thousand fragments of a colourful mosaic. Still, some of the features of an urban landscape generate in us a brighter, longer-lasting impression.

A city that we often perceive as a 'second nature', as something that could be read as a natural event, has nevertheless been made by a series of intentional acts. An architectural design and its realisation are the result of complex forces: the architect's and the client's will, but also the fine net of rules and regulations, the constructive customs, the formal expectations by the public, whose combined action forms a building culture in a given moment of time.

Are the single buildings of a city – be they noteworthy architectural episodes or barely noticed anonymous infills – connected by some common kinship?

If traditional architectural history texts often talk about 'styles' as recognisable galaxies of coherent formal traits, the modern cultural emphasis on the 'author' of a design openly conflicts with this collective reading. Does an underground lineage connect in a thread through time the different buildings of a city, designed by different individuals and built for different, often contrasting goals and needs? Do they belong to a specific formal culture that survives unconsciously through the ages?

Quite differently from many others Italian cities, Milan sits on a plain – the Po River valley – and grew without any strong geographical feature – a river or a complex land contour – which could condition its growth. Its uniform expansion stemming from the original Roman settlement, marked by the radial streets named after the gates pierced in the inner ring of the medieval walls and in the larger polygon of the Spanish walls, is deformed into a heart-shaped figure by the presence of the great infrastructure of the Sforza Castle on the edge of the historical nucleus. All the urban expansions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries spread out from this structure with a clear urban grammar made of regular grids, tree-lined radial axes, and occasional monumental accents.

This rather simple urban code acts as a unifying pattern holding together a number of quite different 'architectural statements' appearing in the city from the beginning of the nineteenth century. But the marked eclectic character of its architectures quite soon generated a sort of artistic and architectural reaction, a *rappel à l'ordre* grouped around what was known as the 'Novecento' movement. The so-called Ca' Brutta (Ugly House) by Giovanni Muzio is certainly a seminal example of this, with its stripped-bare, 'classical' plaster bas-reliefs which wrap around the two-tone massive facade, following awkward rhythms.

Gio Ponti's Montecatini 1939 office building in via Moscova – with its aluminium windows flush with the facade and the peculiar smooth texture of the cipollino marble slab skin – is among the best examples of the aspiration toward the new themes posed by modernity and the simultaneous capacity of 'grafting' the new buildings on the existing urban fabric.

A large number of realisations of these years show an interesting blend of modernity and tradition; many of them show an urban lexicon that cannot be led back either to the whitewashed radical 'nudity' of northern European functionalism nor to the heavily academic architecture of the Fascist regime.

The centre of Milan has been heavily destroyed by the



Nuovo Portello, Milan, 2002–08. By CZA Cino Zucchi Architetti, Zucchi & Partners. Credit: Cino Zucchi

bombs of August 1943. Many historical landmarks such as the Scala Theatre, the Galleria, Palazzo Marino, the Ca' Granda have been damaged, but also the finer grain of the common fabric which constituted the historical nucleus. If cities which went through a similar fate, like Dresden or Rotterdam, were integrally reconstructed following modernistic urban design criteria, the peculiarity of Milan's 'healing' of the centre after the Second World War is considered today one of the most interesting examples of a mixed strategy capable of consolidating the form of historical open spaces and at the same time insert fragments of modern typology into the existing continuous building mass. Many coordinated interventions on the centre show the actual application of a principle clearly stated by Piero Bottoni, an influential architect and city planner of this period: a lower base following the street line and reinforcing its concave space joint with a higher building slab setback from the street edge and looking for light and air. The buildings by Piero Bottoni in Corso Buenos Aires, Gustavo and Vito Latis and Asnago e Vender ones in via Lanzone, Figini and Pollini in via Broletto, and the cantilevered mass of Luigi Moretti in Corso Italia are interesting examples of this rather original infill strategy.

Residential architecture seems one of the most interesting themes developed by such involved architects as Ignazio Gardella, the Latis brothers, Figini e Pollini, Asnago e Vender, BBPR or Ludovico Magistretti. In this context, the lonely but seminal figure of Luigi Caccia Dominioni – today going through unexpected international attention – stands out for its capacity to respond to the issues of 'modern living' with free-style architectural pieces masterfully inserted into

the fabric of the historical city, such as the Corso Italia. But all this quality matured in a social environment of a relatively small dimension, where clients and architects fundamentally belonged to the same social class.

The social unrest of the Seventies, which for some strange reason in Italy seems to have had a peculiar ignition point in the architecture faculties, coincides with the sudden crisis of this well-established social role of the architect, a cultured and creative subject coming from the higher middle-class, and in this sense sharing his/her client's manners and values. Milan's 1980s and 1990s are difficult to describe in terms of architectural realisations, marked as they are by a great paradox: the contrast between the intense architectural debate and intellectual activity and the very low quality of the interventions which transformed the city. The city hosted the editorial boards of some of the most influential architecture magazines – *Casabella*, *Domus*, *Lotus International*, *Abitare*, *Modo*, *Ottagono* and others – and the Italian theoretical production in the matter was followed and discussed in Europe and America; yet famous Milanese architects such as Vittorio Gregotti, Aldo Rossi, Giorgio Grassi, Giancarlo de Carlo, Umberto Riva and others had very little chance to work in their city, which was on the contrary marked by a number of very mediocre buildings. In the long run, this lack of relevant built examples which could exemplify the key issues brought forward by the theoretical debate slowly relegated Milan and its architectural community from the status of an intellectual capital to a sort of weeping province.

This corresponded to a deep mutation of the power relationship between clients, architectural culture,

public administration and 'the market': Berlusconi's large residential neighbourhoods of Milano 2 and Milano 3 represent well the detachment between the actual transformation of our city and shared architectural values, which were somehow relegated in small and occasional 'side dishes' in the big city 'banquet'.

Things seem to have got slightly better in terms of final quality at the turn of the new millennium. The tradition of planning instruments put forward by the public – which tried to determine through what is called 'zoning' the form of the city – proved in the long run ineffective, and many lost opportunities are to be ascribed to these restrictions. The case-by-case strategy which followed it, if on one side risked letting financial powers alone determine how and where the city should develop, also permitted the realisation of a number of interventions on many dismissed industrial areas which were left for a long time in their decayed state by the rigidity of the previous rules.

The two bigger urban transformations of Milan's urban landscape of the last ten years, the Varesine-Porta Nuova one and that on the former Fiera Campionaria area renamed CityLife, represent not only a shift in scale but also of architectural and urban modes. Their ambitions, planning procedures and formal horizons stand in a cultural 'middle landscape' which can be barely seen as site-specific in terms of open space morphology, building typology and architectural lexicon. The 'green' concerns – be they sincere goals or just consensus-building strategies – have substituted the urban ones, and the optimistic promises of a new place uniting environmental quality and urban intensity are pursued following a market-oriented approach. As in a blockbuster film with all the right ingredients, the level of their overall craftsmanship is higher than a lot of self-produced counterparts. Yet, without giving too much voice to the huffy apostles of 'tradition', it is true that many citizens feel that something got lost along the way: the formal sophistication and the specificity in response to the site which seemed to be the peculiar characters of Milanese architecture from the 1950s to the 1970s.

Today we are all looking for a global '*galateo*', able to translate universal principles of courtesy, consideration for others, capability to listen, and other positive feelings which regulate the relationship between the desire of self-expression and the limitations needed to compose individual acts into a harmonious whole. To do this, we should discriminate the manifestations of self-imposed 'manners' which correspond to deeper feelings from the ones which appear just as adaptive hypocrisies. A strong city is able to metabolise both mediocre and 'bully' architectures in a larger whole, but there is a tipping point where its landscape can become a mere turf for the display of petty individual statements.

If, in fact, the urban expansion of the last century operated on the building types and layouts, the metamorphosis of contemporary Milan is only partially governed by a shared vision of the direction to give to the *Forma Urbis*; indeed, a number of different sites are still unresolved on different scales – empty buildings, abandoned industrial sites, railroad stations or buildings in need of restoration – and present themselves to the intangible forces of finance and politics as opportunities for transformation. In other words, the sites of future changes of the urban fabric are those of its past and present 'weakness'. The situation appears clearer now and somewhat more cohesive from the standpoint of urban and environmental objectives, although the variety of architectural proposals that characterise the main actions of urban reform still do not appear to be guided by any particular shared culture. Where we do observe among them a few common features, these seem due

to filtration and data selection through a strict network of regulations that, like an invisible sieve, shapes the structures 'by subtraction'. If, in fact, the architectures of the twentieth century appear still unified by a certain 'set of family traits', today's ones seem to be held together only by the structures of the laws on fire prevention and disability rights. The average quality of the urban and architectural reforms applied in Milan in this new millennium are without a doubt vastly superior to those of the twenty previous years. This has been achieved by applying new methods, rather than by restoring the conditions that produced the Milan of the 'boom' years. The 1980s swept away all the advances in technical and linguistic expertise that still characterised professionalism in the postwar period. What exists today has almost no continuity with so-called 'Milanese culture', whatever could be meant today by that term.

Within this complex ecosystem, an 'entomologist of architectural styles' could attempt a simple Linnaean classification, although any attempt of this kind risks dividing into artificial sectors a field in which the kinships and differences are often not so obvious. In the larger works, the products of a contemporary corporate architecture of Anglo-Saxon origin – in both the more classical and reassuring versions and in the more deformed versions dictated by parametric virtuosity – have formed the cornerstones of this new landscape, altering the skyline from the Po to the Alps before that of the city lying at their feet.

The CityLife skyscrapers (designed by Zaha Hadid, Arata Isozaki and Daniel Libeskind) and those of Porta Nuova (by Cesar Pelli, Pei-Cobb-Freed and Arquitectonica) arise from a design of the ground at their feet that has little or no relation to the canons of 'urban decorum' that have generated an unexpected continuity among the architectures of the past century despite their obvious diversity. But there is no doubt that the efforts of urban reform in which they participate gave rise to new standards of quality operating on several levels – not least that of the design of public spaces according to the canons of a 'new approach to the landscape' – which contrasts with all the disasters created in Milan in the 1980s.

On the other side, a number of projects developed by foreign architectural firms with significant critical and interpretative acuity (such as Sauerbruch and Hutton, David Chipperfield, Grafton Architects, Herzog & de Meuron, Rem Koolhaas, SANAA and others) – have succeeded in establishing a positive relationship and dialectic with the existing form of the city; free of complexes, operating as equals, they have succeeded in reapplying the strategy of grafting onto an existing fabric that we find in those works of our own modern architects in the postwar period that are now destinations for review and study by all Europe.

The real-estate frenzy of recent years has generated a series of opportunities on various scales and has stimulated the ideas of many Italian architects of various generations. The landmark of the Vertical Forest by Stefano Boeri Architetti and of the almost completed UnipolSai Tower by Mario Cucinella Architects are among the most persuasive icons of the new Milan. But the current architectural production of Milanese architects no longer seems to rise from a common language, much less from a 'continuous line'; rather, they seem to reveal an obvious condition of uncertainty, empiricism, even figurative opportunism at times.

In spaces and operations that are more limited in scale, we can find works that demonstrate an increasing interest of an 'Erasmus' generation of now mature architects who received their training in a global framework where they developed highly original theoretical and figurative concepts.

If, on these occasions, they are sometimes limited to

projects for interiors, staging, designing lofts and small additions, and only occasionally have the opportunity to design complete buildings, the cultural milieu created by them through the medium of exchange, sharing and listening to one another has made Milan an important virtual and physical meeting place of European culture.

There exists, right now in Milan, a framework of transformation of quality that is in no way inferior to that of many European capitals; driven by three or four significant opportunities, but also present in bits and pieces in almost the entirety of the city's fabric. The scale of certain abandoned industrial districts has made it possible to launch not only individual replacement constructions, but also concrete actions of micro-urban design; some of these have become workshops of an urban and environmental movement of a new type, which recombines fragments of various types discovered unexpectedly around sequences of collective spaces reinvented out of necessity. On a smaller scale, in a point-by-point transformation that follows the not always predictable mechanisms of 'gentrification', the replacement of buildings changes the aspect of certain districts and penetrates their cells with the gentle virus of an 'architecture of interiors' of excellent level, stimulated by rapid changes among the business activities.

Is there really a 'Milan Model'? If the architects who operate today in Milan do not appear unified by a common culture – but perhaps only by the spread of a 'contagion of ideas' – their clients are in a similar condition of cultural 'opportunism', an indefinable field where a number of seductive slogans (sustainability, smart city, resilience, biodiversity) act as attractors and mediators of the relationship between clients, administrations, professionals, media and the public.

Like jurors on a talent show such as *X Factor*, the powers that choose a subject or a song without reflecting on the long-term consequences are the ones that actually determine the future form of the city. This can generate surprisingly good intuitions – or disastrous errors whose fallout is paid for by the collectivity. On the other hand, the public actor does not seem either equipped or inclined to make architectural evaluations of project proposals, and is often limited to checking numbers, parameters and objectives of a social and environmental character.

The scenario of the new Milan created by the interaction of those forces that now regulate its transformation appears to our eyes a strange mixture of convincing innovations and lazy imitations of international paradigms. The fact that today we look with pride to the Pirelli and the Velasca towers as examples of the 'Italian way of doing skyscrapers' does not change the fact that nothing like them existed within the framework of the ancient city, much less in its nineteenth- and twentieth-century expansion.

History teaches us that the great cities have found ways to digest and integrate diversity, and the city is often more powerful and stronger than its architectures. But it is in its architectures that it reflects itself and it is they that represent it. Gio Ponti said in 1954, in a heartfelt plea to his colleagues of the Building Commission of Milan regarding the Velasca Tower: 'Milan is not threatened by modern architects, it is threatened, instead, by that mass of fatherless construction, lacking in design, that disfigure the new districts so hideously. Milan develops exclusively as a modern city (nor could it be otherwise) and the existence of a valorous and cultured class of modern architects who operate in the city is our highest guarantee.'

It may not be an accident that in contemporary Milan the discomfort that still remains is perceived in the terms of a social and 'environmental' inadequacy. As a city on a plain, lacking in geographical obstacles, it has expanded its web of streets and city blocks through

the centuries without being able to include any green islands, without creating any real alternatives to the centre, without aligning new construction with the routes of public transport.

To observe the 'centre' not from a 'periphery' but rather from an archipelago of urban nuclei connected by a tangible and intangible network is the only way to imagine the form of a new metropolis capable of blending urban intensity and environmental quality. The 'resistance' of a city and its irreplaceable particularities should not be seen either as barriers to change or as obstacles on the path to progress, but rather as places with an extraordinary ability to generate differences, as nuclei of quality in the changing landscape of a new urban environment that will somehow have to unite nature and human endeavour in ways that are just starting to become perceptible.

Nomothetic and idiographic:
a personal attitude searching
for shared values

With the background of this physical and social context, and guided by a rather personal path exploring different design directions under a common intellectual denominator, as Cino Zucchi Architeti we were able to test some of the general issues raised above in a series of very specific design occasions of housing complexes in different European and Italian urban contexts. If environmental values have entered permanently, and rightly, into the founding elements of our design process, we don't forget that architecture is a fundamental part of what we could call 'material culture'. Too often today the emphasis is placed solely on the procedure rather than on the final result, and the energy–environmental performance becomes an all-encompassing topic which often distracts from the fundamental theme, that of architectural and urban quality in a broader sense. We must not forget that the urban landscape is made up of the intermediate fabric, of many episodes which must have an individual character but which together must be able to create – like the musicians of an orchestra – a *Sinfonie der Großstadt* (as the title of the documentary by Ruttmann on Berlin 1927).

In the ongoing debate opposing the two complementary models of 'towers in the green' versus the reconstruction of historic blocks, we could argue that the reconstruction of postwar Milan could still lead the way to experiment with an interesting mix of the two. In the housing projects for the Nuovo Portello, the Corte Verde in Porta Nuova and via Valtorta, we have somehow unconsciously applied these principles in an attempt to respond to the two key objectives of the new millennium: the fight against environmental catastrophe and the rediscovery of city as a great 'social contract' capable of making different cultures engage in dialogue. In a metropolis, our next-door neighbour is not necessarily our friend, and contemporary research on so-called co-housing represents only a small part of the problem and often contains simplifications that do not stand up to the natural evolution of people, families and social groups. The collective dimension does not end within the single building, but should perhaps also be considered on the scale of the neighbourhood and the metropolitan one. To reflect on new living spaces, I often show a photograph of my twenty-year-old daughter asleep on the sofa among the symbolic objects of her 'millennial' existence: her smartphone, laptop, an empty cup of coffee, the remains of a Deliveroo meal, an Amazon package. This image represents both the failure of the 'Existenzminimum' housing model divided by functions but also of its contemporary digital 'reinvention'. It invites us to reconsider with fresh eyes the relationship between

the new individual dimension – at the same time intimate and connected – and the spaces that host it.

A serious reflection on contemporary housing and its relationship with the city must accept the multi-modal and multi-scalar nature of today's life. At the housing scale, this means rejecting the functionalist determinism that assigned a specific function to each room of the housing. In a broader vision, this means understanding how each housing unit relates in different ways with the size of the neighbourhood (or the city that can be reached on foot in fifteen minutes), with the urban and underground network (defined by the fifty- to sixty-minute journey on public transport) and now also with a continental territory accessible with a journey by plane or fast train.

It is interesting to reflect today on the concept of neighbourhood not only through an architectural and urban project, but also and above all from a socio-cultural point of view: what is the relationship between a part of the city with a relative historical and architectural identity and the communities who live there?

Classical ethnography – often traversed by exoticising or even racist prejudices – has always identified a cultural unit with a geographical one: climate, geography, customs, gastronomy, religion, legends, clothing, children's games, architecture were read in a unified way. But in the contemporary world made fluid and connected by the internet, we see every day the birth of what we could call 'atopic ethnic groups' who find their unity not in belonging to a place but in sharing aesthetic-cultural codes. Vegans, militarists, punks, yuppies are now human categories that we find all over the globe; they show similar psycho-social traits in very distant places, and often strong mutual conflicts within the physical space of a city. The project of a 'city by neighbourhoods', in Milan or elsewhere, cannot and must not have the ambition to 'retopicise' or root in one place these groups linked together by tastes and disgusts. Let's not forget that the step between ideological kinship and a 'gated community' is shorter than it seems. We should favour a 'city of neighbourhoods', or a 'mosaic of subcultures', but not all the way to see identity become social division; we should save the porosity and continuity of the public space that has always distinguished the European city and civil values, and accept that the metropolitan condition cannot assure to everybody the experience of what we call today the fifteen-minute city.

A rather 'romantic' view of the historical city dimension cannot make us blind to the fact that even the definition of *Großstadt* is no longer describing the territorial net; we are presently living it and the design problems we face are in relation to it. Perhaps only the confrontation with the 'different', with the implantation of non-European social customs within the European city-territory, can undermine the all too orderly sequence that has already integrated the varied experiences of 'participatory planning' for some time now. If photographic images of Eastern cities indirectly reveal the failure of the modern ideal of a 'rational' beauty of the big city, the European city may need to metabolise better the mosaic of subcultures which increasingly characterises it, accepting into its well-organised body those vital anomalies that bring the metropolitan dimension to life, according to the prophetic words of Josef Frank: 'So the new architecture will be born of the whole bad taste of our period, of its intricacy, its motley and sentimentality, it will be a product of all that is alive and experienced first-hand: at last an art of the people, not for the people.'³

Social and free-market housing in via Traiano, former Portello Alfa Romeo area, Milan

As part of the transformation of the industrial enclosure of the former Alfa Romeo factory, within the urban layout imagined by Gino Valle, CZA has designed a fragment of urban fabric mediating between the existing context and the new park.

On the southern side of the area, three linear eight-storey-high buildings take up the textures of the consolidated city by building a continuous urban front along via Traiano. The considerable depth of the volumes is excavated towards the south-west to give an outlook to bathrooms and kitchens: an expansive frame made up of metal profiles unifies the large balconies on the front facing the park. The social housing part is completed by two tall buildings whose staggered position generates a small square to mark the beginning of the boulevard and the visual cone towards the park. The articulated geometry of the openings and recesses of the loggias, the refined combination of colours and materials and the formal variations of elements such as parapets and blinds donate to the complex a strong domestic character.

In a sort of progressive fragmentation of the urban fabric toward the park, the project irregularly arranges three freestanding tower buildings around a common garden: projecting loggias unified by metal frames graft on regular volumes covered in stone of different cuts and colours.

The project is completed by the recovery of the former Alfa Romeo canteen whose facade along via Traiano is maintained and the rest transformed into work spaces. The outcome is a welcoming urban graft, capable of reinterpreting some postwar residential examples – the pitch geometries of the condominium in Piazza Carbonari designed by Caccia Dominioni or the materiality of the facades of Gardella's Borsalino house – and at the same time to engage in dialogue with contemporary European design culture.



Nuovo Portello, Milan, 2002–08. By CZA Cino Zucchi Architetti, Zucchi & Partners. Credit: Cino Zucchi