

The background of the cover is an aerial photograph of a modern building with a highly complex, crystalline facade. The structure is composed of numerous interconnected, angular, metallic-looking panels that create a dense, three-dimensional grid. The overall color palette is dominated by shades of blue, teal, and grey, with some highlights from the sky and surrounding environment. The perspective is from above, looking down at the building's intricate geometry.

Emilio Lonardo | Nilüfer Saglar Onay

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Explanation of the Method

[Luciano Crespi]

This research into residential standards in public housing - part of which will be examined in later chapters - mainly took the form of experimental design work in the project's workshops taught in on the Politecnico di Milano's Interior Design degree course. It was long term work which was done in partnership with certain sectors of Milan city council' - which needed to renovate part of its considerable residential heritage and make it available to users who had very different needs from those for whom public residential housing was originally designed - in harmony with the decisions to target new ways of living in educational programmes. This meeting of virtuous intents led to a number of interesting project experiments.

Milan city council had to acknowledge the existence of a huge void between the nature of its public housing stock and the housing demand coming from new sectors of the city's population. The most consistent phenomenon is the large increase in numbers of people living alone and not by choice as a result of the profound changes in family composition which have taken place over recent years. "While a majority of people still marry and have children, the traditional family is in difficulty and new ways of living together have appeared" [Zanatta, 2003], Anna Laura Zanatta, sociologist, has written.

Customs ranging from cohabitation, single parent families, extended families and single person units. This latter group has increased exponentially over the last thirty years in the most highly industrialised countries and within them above all in the large conurbations. In Berlin one residential unit in three is a person living alone. It is a tendency which covers all the main towns and cities, with Hannover in the lead on 33%, but which encompasses the whole of Germany where around 16 million people lived alone in 2011, an increase in 40% as compared to 1992 when just over 11 million lived alone. Germany comes second in Europe for the number of people living alone with Sweden in first place. In this sense New York is emblematic. Its population is growing continually and is expected to expand beyond 600,000 over the next twenty years. Finding a place to live - already a huge problem for many social classes - is a potentially explosive problem. Many people live in inadequate collective housing or even in illegal accommodation with no safety provision. It should be added that less than 20% of housing is occupied by single people, childless couples, single parent families with children. Here too the bulk of housing is occupied by single people, childless couples, single parent families and family units with very different housing needs from those which the housing market is capable of responding to. A clear discrepancy between residential housing supply and demand both private and public has thus emerged. A Making Room initiative to study this issue was held at the Museum of the City of New York which began in 2011 with the launch of a design project competition targeting innovative responses to current housing demands including from the point of view of modifying current legislation which is often an insuperable obstacle.

In 2008 in Italy (Istat source) people living alone made up 30% of the population. In some cities, above all in the North, this has come to the fore to an extraordinary extent. The number of people living alone in Trento increased by 80% from 1990 to 2012. According to official figures in Milan there are 333,000 single person residential units in the city, of whom 110,000 are over 65 years of age, out of a population of 1,300,000. This is around half the city's family units [Crespi, Ruffa, 2014].

An April 2007 document by Milan city council's Housing Department notes as follows:

This realistic overview of Milanese residential difficulties was based on a specific fact: as compared to the past, the real estate market and the rental segment in particular, is increasingly characterised by a considerable variety of demand

¹In particular we worked with Patrizia Di Girolamo, architect and head of Programmi Complessi di Riquilificazione Urbana, and Angelo Foglio, architect, Casa e Demanio central management committee, Milan city council.

exerting pressure on a frequently inadequate supply. This demand was, first and foremost, less poor, numerous and concentrated into a highly homogeneous social segment in the past. There is another pressing issue alongside this one which is both the presence of new groups and the specific conditions in which the elderly are living. In first place is the so-called newly formed families who are to be found across the various social groups. Secondly non EC immigrants are an increasing element in housing demand and this will continue to grow. This group is obliged to live in vulnerable conditions but following on from more stable employment conditions it is also looking for more suitable housing at levels which are now becoming considerable and a dynamic and potentially important factor. There is also temporary demand which takes the form of so-called city users, workers and university students off site, etc., people living in more than one place - Milan and their home towns. Study and work place is often different from home town and the two often overlap. This is also an increasingly important rental market demand factor. Social and emergency housing demand also requires assessment as a large and potentially growing section of the population for whom difficult economic conditions combine with other forms of deprivation. There is, specifically, an ever larger segment of the population which is finding it difficult to keep up with increasing rental costs which are taking up an increasing percentage of household income. In the light of these latter observations it is becoming increasingly clear that the dynamism of the real estate market in recent years is leading to new imbalances and new forms of residential malaise which border on a state of emergency" [Milan city council, 2007].

If we remember that these considerations were formulated prior to the current new waves of immigrants it is clear that this is a top priority issue. Unfortunately Milan city council, in common with many other large city councils, is obliged to respond to this new demand with a housing stock which is, for the most part, totally inadequate from the space organisation, residential characteristic and bed space points of view. It is from the starting point of these considerations that the work of the Interior Design Laboratory has been targeting the search for innovative solutions founded on flexibility and versatility requirements for housing designed to accommodate new single person units with no financial resources: the elderly, young fixed term workers, students away from home, single parent families and young people with social difficulties behind them. On the subject of accommodation for people living alone research has focused on two alternatives: one concentrating on very small or ultra-small housing on the basis of the criteria set out by the Modern Movement and summed up by the notion of Existenzminimum [Baifa, Rossari, 1975; Griffini, 1933]. The second focuses on exploring the possibility of assigning medium or large housing to bring those living alone together without compromising the individual's right to his or her own spaces in which to find, however partially and provisionally, a sense of community belonging.

In the first case it is a matter of developing proposals capable of taking account of the cultural changes which have taken place in the space of the almost a century which has passed since the Existenzminimum theories were expounded. "A century ago the functions of the human body were the reference points for spaces which were, at times, quantitative. Today we see the body as a sensory antenna which puts the emotional sphere of the person in touch with an environment seen in qualitative terms as a whole beyond the individual syntactic elements which make it up [dimensions, materials, colours, etc.]" [Crespi, Ruffa, 2014]. Responses seeing housing as a machine à habiter are no longer acceptable. "If in the first half of the last century the goal was to achieve wellbeing by means of a codified quantity of spatial elements [and thus the direct objective was the spatial elements], today housing proposals target psychophysical, social and reflexive pleasures directly by the subjective building of a multi-sensory environment. In other words size and layout are an important

element in housing but not the only considerations. The minimum standards to be kept in mind are not value dimensions but relate to the overall quality of the project required to achieve the general wellbeing of those living in it. Size is just one thing which contributes to this quality together with other elements" [Crespi, Ruffa, 2014]. As Alessandro Mendini has written, the challenge must be passing from "esistenza minimum to esistenza maximum" [Mendini, 1990].

From the starting point of these considerations the Project Laboratory has looked into the potential for rethinking residential systems in 'below-minimum standard' public housing. By 'below-minimum standard' accommodation I mean a smaller than 30 square metre space, considered the minimum size by Milan city council, for housing to qualify for the Edilizia Residenziale Pubblica (ERP) market. The existence of a vast pool of accommodation below this minimum standard, however, makes housing which cannot qualify for the ERP official market a hugely important resource capable of responding, however temporarily, to the most dramatic and urgent emergencies. For it to do so it must be put onto the market already furnished and capable of accommodating users from a range of social and geographic contexts.

'Ventidue progetti per ventidue metri quadri' [twenty-two twenty-two square metre projects] is the title of the final phase of a reconnaissance project of the ways in which interior design can take on the theme of the renovation of public below-minimum standard housing. It is a project whose origins are remote. It started from research into the characteristics of potential demand and the requirements of a user group represented, in this case, by single parent families in financial difficulty and with under-age children. It also started, secondly, by a study of the most innovative and experimented with examples in the world above all as far as the subject of the flexibility and adaptability of small size accommodation units, the reversibility of work and the cost involved in work are concerned. The intention was to demonstrate that it is possible to intervene in this specific segment of the public housing market which requires the city council to supply furnished accommodation experimenting with high quality, innovative solutions but at reduced cost encompassing recourse to the artisan business world too. It is thus an alternative to consolidated practices involving tenders aimed at identifying the best proposals and in which furniture sector companies in the lowest price bracket usually take part.

Ideas have emerged from this work with a certain subversive potential, however unrealised, in relation to the dominant models in the contemporary public housing panorama. Guidelines from the culture of design according to which changes under way must be accommodated and translated into innovative design responses were taken into consideration here. Like those formulated by Alessandro Mendini thirty years ago, when we were invited to follow the 'soft project' formula founded on the use of great hospitality gestures, so different from the stubborn certainties of the 'hard project' and for this reason capable of touching the fragile bodies of men and women without hurting them [Mendini, 1983]. The aim was also to cast aside all those simplifications based on the notion of function to breathe life into new forms of home, houses which "rather than living rooms, kitchens, bathrooms and bedrooms would have swimming rooms, rooms for plants, for debate, to read books in. We could eat in the swimming room, cook in the debating room and sleep in the library" [Mendini, 1982]. Or like those now coming from a number of convincing examples of residential

experimentation on the living theme which are moving in the direction of turning the idea of housing as spaces marked out by 'specialised' space contexts on its head. This is a feature of some of Sou Fujimoto's projects including Final Wooden House, a surprising and radical exercise in breaking down the concept of furnished space which returns to the idea of a sort of 'cave house', 'final' residence of man in search for the authentic and 'being in the world'. Or certain sophisticated layouts by the Bouroullec brothers which play with the use of fragile, textile elements to mark out places and make them available to an infinite series of transformations to the extent of being able, in their case, to talk of a 'homoeopathic' design. Or Ugo La Pietra's research masterpieces on 'unbalancing actions' begun in the 1960s and still under way which have triggered experimentation into the room design context which are still extraordinarily relevant today.

22 project proposals thus emerged relating to spaces of 22 square metres designed for a wide variety of user types and harbingers of radical transformation in 'historic' domestic rituals. These are projects drawn up initially in the form of conceptual models and subsequently applied to existing physical realities: a public housing complex in a delicate and controversial area like Quarto Oggiaro, a town on the edge of Milan. With the goal of trying out the efficacy of the project concepts and breathing life into a sort of mini 'project type repertoires' of below-minimum standard spaces furnished and ready for use: each designed to illustrate that public employees can also respond to housing emergencies with accommodation spaces which, however cheap, are founded on a great variety of solutions from the point of view of their character and the flexibility and versatility of the décor.

This way of working has constituted a sort of new project paradigm whose purpose is to introduce a procedure founded on the search for innovative solutions to the theme and which thus favours the multi-disciplinary enquiry phase, the development of thought capable of turning the prevailing models of reference on their heads. To do this what is needed is a process which is initially independent of the physical context in which action is required precisely because the solutions which are to come to us should be as 'free' as possible of the conditioning imposed by the nature of the place. The outcome of all this is the introduction of innovative but practicable, i.e. non-utopian, solutions capable of working on a different scale from that of the residential district to which architecture projects have already attempted to provide answers, often spectacularly unsuccessfully. It is by acting on a more limited scale, on the other hand, on the urban micro-environment which we might call 'condominium'-scale, that we can engage in experiments capable of putting the theme of a new residential civilisation into play involving a different view of the public-private dynamic mixing up residential spaces with those destined for other activities and internal and external. It is a little like doing contemporary art which aims to establish 'more ethical social relationships, denser lifestyles, multiple and fertile existence combinations' as "art no longer seeks to conceive utopias but rather to build concrete spaces" [Bourriaud, 2010]. It is thus an attempt to build territories built of collections of elements each of which has its own multiplicity of functions from which it may be possible to obtain a new environmental system made up of a great many bio-diversities each characterised by high aesthetic and symbolic quality. I have called these devices neotopias, innovative systems of spaces capable of saving areas from destinies which otherwise might be described as inevitably atypical, introducing a sort of transplant of new fabrics which, by the very nature of the

services offered and the quality of the design that gives it its shape, can have a virtuous impact not only on the area of action itself but on much larger areas. Neotopias, then, as urban fertilisers aimed at giving forgotten urban spaces a new role, identity and life.

The same working technique was used to look at renovating medium and large scale housing units for the use of individuals living in the same living space. In this case it was a matter of dealing with the question of the solitary dimension of housing and seeking to use furniture devices the task of allowing each resident the chance to develop their own neighbourhood context, a space to identify with and feel at home in and, at the same time, facilitate forms of sharing of certain spaces. To achieve this project research also foresees the potential to introduce a number of spaces for collective use on the condominium scale: workshops and ateliers, training spaces, free time and socialising spaces, children's and elderly people's areas, shared kitchens or laundries. Re-organising and re-planning spaces like halls, corridors and general distribution spaces available in all apartment blocks and frequently under-used is planned. These have been rethought on the basis of new use methods or simply as spaces given their own character and thus capable of moving away from their frequently service role. The same was done with certain external spaces which were reinterpreted as places capable of breaking down the walls between public and private spaces. The planning approach was of a layout type in all cases, founded on the use of low cost materials, introducing reversible solutions inspired by the most significant Italian and international design experiences.

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