The regeneration of large-scale Social Housing estates

Spatial, territorial, institutional and planning dimensions

SºHoLªb

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This report is dedicated to the memory of Andrei Feraru whose invaluable contribution to this project ended too soon.

About

Already since the 1970s, internationally, the regeneration of large-scale modernist social housing estates has been on the research and policy agenda. What more can we say about this theme, after almost 50 years of regeneration practices?

Although social and spatial problems in large-scale social estates are inextricably linked, in the past decades, they have often been tackled independently from one another. Throughout Europe, various spatial policies have been deployed to regenerate estates. The demolition of high-rise buildings, the introduction of new typologies as part of a social mix rationale, spatial connections of public spaces with surroundings and the inclusion of social and commercial facilities are well-known examples of spatial policies. Participation programs associated to these interventions have been mainly based on mere information or consultation processes, putting local actors and habitants in a passive role instead of considering them as active agents. Recently, the social innovation and collective empowerment perspective is gaining ground in community work in Europe. Social organizations, self-organized collectives and grassroots movements increasingly deploy collective strategies to overcome socially exclusive conditions, as a complement to state-organized forms of governance. As a result participatory forms of governance in urban policy involving third sector-organizations are on the rise. In the UK, France and regions such as Brussels, associations and social housing organizations are encouraged to support social cohesion projects, social entrepreneurship and tenant boards. Such local organizations promote social mobility from within and more positive representations of the neighborhood. However, they often lack the spatial knowledge and means to impact top-down planning processes that shape the social estates.

The SoHoLab project therefore aims to develop an integrated approach towards the regeneration of large-scale social housing estates in Europe. Through a Living Lab approach, the project wants to address (1) the socially innovative potential of involving social housing residents in the regeneration of their housing environment, (2) embedded and/or ethnographic research as a tool to gather in-depth knowledge of local living conditions and to contribute to the construction of a counterhegemonic image of the neighbourhoods considered and (3) the capacity of collaborative research and planning, bonding and bridging efforts to unite residents, neighbourhood inhabitants, public housing organizations, spatial practitioners and cultural, educational and social organizations around the subject of regeneration.

This approach is developed, tested and refined on the basis of a

retrospective evaluation of existing projects in Paris; of action research in an ongoing LivingLab experience in Milan; and new LivingLabs in Brussels and Paris. The regeneration of large-scale social housing estates has been an important policy topic in Paris, which deals with a long history of conflicts in and on housing estates. The 3 cases selected for a retrospective analysis (Saint Martin in Longjumeau; La Fosse in Fresnes; Jean Bouin in Taverny) have high policy relevance, as they are rare past examples of collaborative approaches in Paris focusing on the sustainable redesign of public space in social estates. The Milan case builds on the experiences of a local observatory established by PoliMi in 2013 in the San Siro neighbourhood. By opening up a space in the neighbourhood, PoliMi has put in place an action-research project focused on the construction of alternative representations of the neighbourhood and on the promotion of local actions aimed at fostering local change. The focal area of the Brussels case is Peterbos, a large social estate at the fringes of the region, equally characterized by important social-spatial challenges. The diversity of cases results in a comparative and mutually beneficial approach: the retrospective analysis of the Paris cases offers important input to guide the consolidation path of the ongoing Italian experience and both give fruitful elements for developing and valorising such practices in Brussels.

This first SoHolab investigation on the spatial, territorial, institutional and planning dimensions of the regeneration of large-scale social estates in Paris, Milan and Brussels highlights the rise of 'extraordinary' and 'integrated' programs through temporal and territorially determined planning instruments, such as city and neighbourhood contracts. These contracts between different policy levels couple spatial improvements with social-political and -economic aims such as improving social cohesion and professional insertion. However, the short-term injections as part of these programs often fail to make up for structural deficits, including a lack of civil participation, public disinvestment and serious shortcomings in the management and maintenance in these areas. In addition, these 'extraordinary' measures are not enough attuned to 'ordinary' regeneration measures. We conclude it is this lacuna, which should be addressed within the ongoing and new LivingLabs within this research project.