



#06

Social housing in Italia

Social housing in Italy

a cura di E.Capelli & L.Otti

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di Luisa Otti, 2012



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Social housing in Italia

Social housing in Italy



Technology is not enough

Social sustainability in renovation of Social Housing buildings: towards a user-oriented strategy

@ Elena Cattani |
Annarita Ferrante |

User-oriented |
Social Housing |
Energy efficiency |

The aim of this paper is to analyze the current condition of the Social Housing throughout Italy and Europe, seeking for a methodological answer to increase the variability and flexibility of the renovation process. The focus consists in investigating the various needs and desires of the users, trying to find out the existing conflicts between the current inhabitants and the existing buildings in order to achieve a socially sustainable revision of the buildings, going further the merely technological and architectural aspects. A collaboration between the Department of Architecture and Sociology of the University of Bologna¹ has led to the definition of a questionnaire that has been used as core preliminary tool: the social character of the renovation has been considered as prerequisite and premise for the energetic, technical and architectural renovation. One of the Italian pilot briefly illustrated with the experimental design outcome to illustrate the application of the proposed design methodology.

Introduction

Most of the Italian Social Housing compounds were built in the fifties, sixties and seventies in favor of an increase in value of socializing and collective living. They represented the physical and architectural interpretation of the socialist utopia, especially in Emilia Romagna this resulted in the development of important urban and architectural experiments. The new residential areas were planned to be fully self-sufficient, green, lively, equipped with all the services and infrastructures needed, based on the new idea of collective housing based on air and light.

¹ In the context of energy policies outlined in the Action Plan for Energy Sustainability (PAES), the Municipality of Bologna has started a project involving the district PEEP powered by the district heating Corticella Bologna, with contribution of Researchers of the University of Bologna, the project has been called "Il cantiere della sostenibilità"

Benevolo defined the reconstruction as “the absolute maximum that Italian architecture could reach [...] if Social Housing before was a poor product when compared with the peaks of the Italian architecture, now it is a good product, the best that the professional class in Italy could give nowadays” (Benevolo, 1960).

The dream was not meant to last: from the alignment of these cleaned cell automatically the new city was born, then when inhabitants had brought inside their furniture, we left disgusted sneering (Kollhoff 2003). Our society changed rapidly in the past thirty years and those shining districts turned into grey and abandoned peripheries, no-men’s land. The original families have moved out, the building are no longer able to meet the safety, energy and salubrity standards and regulation. The original inhabitants for whom the houses were designed have left and the current users – mainly elderly people, immigrants and low income families – are living in apartments that are far from answering to their everyday needs (Ferrante 2013). The housing units have now turned into dwelling units, in Italian even the word *alloggio* commonly used to refer to these apartments, derives from *allocare* (to allocate), maintaining in its etymology a strong bond with the industrial process of goods’ (as habitants) allocations (La Cecla 2012), underlining the anonymity that today characterizes the picture of Social Housing districts.

“This image, you find it everywhere, [...] throughout the whole world. It’s a phenomenon of the 1940’s, 50’s and 60’s. To start with you find it normal. It’s necessary to give it its dignity and its place in modern society [...] But it’s a question of a row of houses, in the city where the roads have been drawn, but in reality these are not roads, this is traffic. This massacre was necessary in order to understand that the time has come to change it” (Candilis 1970), said Candilis in 1970s, in commenting on his project for Toulouse Le Mirail, but it is evident that no change has occurred until now. The realization C. hoped for did not take place: the built environment has instead turned into an iconic monument of its own failure. European Social Housing buildings stand in a state that is both evidence and consequence of their static original plan, of their incapability of fitting with the rapidly changing society that they were suppose to serve. In particular, considering the Italian situation, it is important to underline that the original inhabitants were later offered to buy their apartments at a reduced market price: the stock of social housing building in Italy decreased from 1.4 million to 940,000 residential units, due to this privatization policy (Tagliabue, Buzzetti, Manfren 2013). As a direct consequence, alike other northern European countries, Italy is facing a major problem of consensus due to the mixed property within one single building. It becomes therefore clear that the problem of Social Housing renovation, goes far beyond architectural, engineering, technical, energetic or economical aspects.

Indeed, the title of this paper intends to answer to a provocative lecture held by C. Price in 1966, entitled “Technology is the answer, but what was the question?”. Price, asked about his opinion on user centered design, answered: “Technology enables variation that is directly related to the whims or appetites of the user - and I think that technology must be drawn on to allow for people’s appetites changing by the week and not by the year.”



Fig.1_ *The examples show the need for shade, obscuration or simple personalization of the dwellings; bottom: sociological elevation.*

It is no longer enough to develop innovative technological and efficient systems that would allow the renovation of our buildings, economical models that will help financing the process and architecture redesign that will turn the ugly duckling into the beautiful swan. All of the efforts of the past decades have been invested in technical solutions without considering the most important aspect: the feasibility of the interventions. We need to go back to the center of the problem of Social Housing, the human beings.

The human face of Social Housing buildings

Throughout the years inhabitants expressed their need in forms of appropriation and self-expression in order to respond to their basic necessities (shading, more space, storage, meeting areas ...) there where the building itself could not answer. These forms of do-it-yourself adaptation represent a great source of information for planners and designers that are approaching the renovation, it requires an accurate initial observation and it calls for a systematic revision of the process and procedures related to planning the transformation.

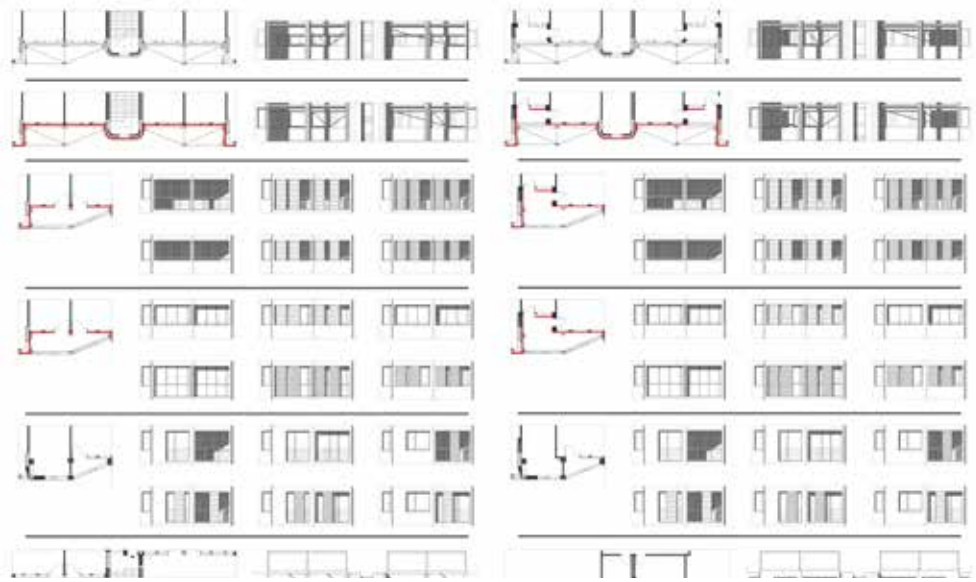


Fig.2_ *Abacus of the possible facade transformations based upon the results of the questionnaires and open dialogue with the population.*

In architecture notions of “formality” and “informality” are largely associated with two broadly defined forms of urban development. Different forms of spontaneous settlements, all types of illegal occupations, invasions, and squatter settlements are generally identified as informal, the “formal” is then considered as that which is planned through rational processes and under legal institutional frameworks (Hutchison 2010). There are also a great deal of informal actions that could be observed at the buildings scale, in the in-between spaces, in the entrances, in the facades transformations. Inhabitants have inevitably adapted, transformed, extended and changed their own dwelling, trying to personalize the outside and inside areas, appropriating it and enriching it of a personal character. It is evident the natural human tendency in craving for means and ways to express creativity and personal taste in turning a mere housing unit into a home.

Top-down actions usually ignore the dynamics of this users needs variability, and often result in standardized spaces (the formal city of the industrialized period). This corporate logic “is a consequence of an economic process in which it was ‘becoming uneconomic for the building industry to meet the specific needs of “users” for new products” (Wanzel 1969) this means the end of diversity, and the progressive alienation of users. Indeed housing must prepare itself for the inevitable fate of our cities, which will become more and more multiethnic [...] As G. De Carlo used to claim: “Housing must fully satisfy the different cultures of the community: it is Architecture that must shape itself to people, not the contrary” (Guccione, Vittorini 2005).

The fact is that the topic of Social Housing, more than any other residential typology, encapsulates the complexity of a building product that has to be modified continually, not only because it concerns a continually evolving

variety of consumers, but also because, today in particular, the socioeconomic situation is anything but stable (Sposito 2012). The starting point of the re-design of Social Housing should be how to improve, for example, a building block in Athens, originally built to host refugees from Turkey which is now mainly occupied by immigrants from Albania and Pakistan? How can an energy retrofitting intervention on a typical dutch building blocks result also socially sustainable if the 80% of the current inhabitants have a Moroccan background? And narrowing it down to the italian condition: what are the changed needs of the elderly people that are now living in the apartments of the PEEP developments in Bologna, once designed for a four-people family? Once for all: what are the differences between the needs of the inhabitants of today (mostly immigrants with different cultural and religious backgrounds) and the original ones?

Applied Sociology to redefine the participative process

Measures for user involvement are triggered by national policies and/or through proactive local initiatives. With regard to social housing, residents' involvement practices result from a mix of organizational culture and relationships with unions and associations of tenants or residents (CECODHAS EUROPE 2011).

Understanding the needs of the people and incorporate them in the re-design is the goal of our research. To do so, the research team engaged a direct involvement of the inhabitants, seeking for the individuation of those attractive nodes that could be used as incentives in the realization phase to foster the inhabitants' consensus. The first investigation started in Autumn 2012, in the PEEP Corticella (Bologna,IT), through a series of questionnaires self-guided. The aim was to test the level of attention of the inhabitants upon the subject, their degree of satisfaction regarding the energy efficiency of their buildings and their interest on possible improvements for energy savings. Before the questionnaires were distributed, there has been a preliminary phase of information and communication, through flyers, posters and letters signed by the local authorities and the University of Bologna. The objective of the research was explained, introducing the research plan we wanted to make clear the reasons and motivation of the engagement of the inhabitants. More than 500 questionnaires were returned, the participation on such a big compound was significant (more than 50% of the total number of questionnaires were returned). The second phase focused on the building scale and the questions posed to the inhabitants were concentrating on the possibility of transformations within the public spaces surrounding the buildings and the interior layout of the apartments. This second questionnaire, was made of three sections regarding:

1. The user opinion upon the current condition of the building;
2. the user opinion upon the possible transformations proposals to improve the architectural/energetic/urban conditions;
3. user's suggestions on the subject.

A small brochure has been attached in order to illustrate briefly the previous design experiments and experiences. Sketches, floor plans, elevations and images were integrated within the questions in order to facilitate the user in defining the possible suggestions to improve the living condition and the correspondence between the building and the current needs.

Once again more than half of the total number of questionnaires were filled, this time the survey was conducted by instructed and qualified persons to guarantee a deeper investigation into the subject and a better evaluation of the possible design strategies and changes that would be required by the inhabitants.

Starting from a typological analysis of the building itself, the main potential interventions have been underlined and through the questionnaires the users were directly involved in the decisional process from the very beginning. Design scenarios have been then underlined as a result of this open dialogue, taking into consideration solely what has been accepted or proposed by the users and refusing what has been rejected.

The purpose was to find out the most suitable questions, the right way to pose them and the most effective way to activate a communication/investigation dialogue among the planners and the final users. The questionnaires are not seen as minor forms of user representation but indeed to investigate inhabitants attitudes and wishes to be able in the final phase of the research to program and develop a machine able to set up an inter-active dialogue. This could become an online platform or an application for smart phone to directly become a simplified and accessible tool for the users. The inspiration for translating the dialogue in a machine came from the visionary and still contemporary work of Y. Friedman, who also developed a similar system that he called the 'Flatwriter': a computer program conceived to enable the process of self-planning. "I call this a choice machine. In practice, we say that there are an incredible number of possibilities for apartments. You can make millions and millions. And in this machine, there is a keyboard which shows the different configurations, the different forms, the different positions for the kitchen, the bathroom, the toilet, and everyone can use different keys on the keyboard, and print for themselves the apartment that they prefer. The machine at the same time, checks that this person's choice doesn't block the access to anyone else's apartment. And does not block the light and the ventilation. And so at this exhibition, ten million visitors to this exhibition will print, building a town with ten million inhabitants, which is then displayed on a television screen, in front of the people who built the town (Friedman 1969).

Instruments, abacus and multiple solutions

The proposed shift in the design practice towards a mass individualization and self-planning process combined with the industrial tendency of developing mass customized products could turn the renovation practice in a customary practice. One could argue that leaving to the inhabitants freedom in expressing their preferences brings no guarantee for the final composition of the façade and outcome of the architectural aspects of the renovation; the authors reply that the formal outcome lies in the process and not in the final result, a project without content can result only in a mediocre design, the value of the building life cycle in a longer term retrofitting scenarios can in fact be increased only neglecting the use of universal and over-imposed solutions in favor of flexibility and adaptability in the design process. Each individual imagines his own house [...] What is important is the process, not the steps of the process. As for the last step, it does not exist (Friedman 2006).



Autonomy in the design means that people involved in designing and building need to have access to knowledge of design and processes in order to discern and enact. But at the same time it means that those processes have to be open enough to increase autonomy and adaptability in time instead of limiting it or even turning it impossible. The role of the architect nowadays should therefore focus in working together with the communities and create instruments to enable people to experiment spaces before actually creating them. The presented methodology is thus based on the assumption that it is possible to develop multi-variant design and multiple criteria analysis of a building refurbishment in order to enable one to form up to 100,000 alternative versions. Architecture is an unfinished work of art and structure, a support, that leaves to the user blank spaces for participation in the decision-design process (Habraken 1972).

A formal design is still necessary to guarantee a structured and organized process that is called to respond coherently with current energy and safety regulations/requirements, fixed components (structural and functional invariants) are needed to be applied in the (re-)design processes of the buildings. It is an ordered disorder, intending that disorder reveals the conflicts and highlights the contradictions of living and inhabiting, thus returning to users an architecture on a human scale. The truth is that in order there is the frustrating boredom of imposition, while in disorder there is the exciting imagination of participation (De Carlo 1973).

The main tool used to communicate the possible variation of the re-design of the facade is an *abacus* where all the possible technological and formal solutions are grouped. This collection is not meant to be fixed and defined, it is a continuous work-in-progress made of the proposals of the inhabitants, elaborated by the architects and planners and translated in

Fig.3 Building in via Goethe, PEEP Corticella. Elevation before and after, showing one of the possible facade combination that could result from the application of the proposed method.

solution and products (proposing different materials, obscuring, shape, cladding etc) that could revise the social and energetic efficiency of the existing buildings. Since the 'letters' of this alphabet have been studied as a modular system and can be joined together in multiple combinations, the 'discourse' that it will produce from inhabitants will have a positive result (Ferrante, Boiardi, Cattani 2012).

Conclusions

Of all the 225 million houses in the EC, 12% is currently owned by Social, Public and Cooperative (SPC) housing organizations – some 27 million dwellings. The total replication potential for this proposal is estimated at around 13,5 million dwellings in Europe, of which almost 1 million dwellings in Italy (total Social Housing patrimony) (Ferrante, Boiardi, Cattani 2012). The intent of the application of this experimental design concept to different case studies of Social Housing is to investigate a modular and adaptive technological system and turn this proposal into a new definition of participative design, a socially sustainable process that could foster and activate the renovation of the residential buildings throughout Europe. From a planning point of view, the goal is to look at the building's plan as a resultant of an open transformation path, as an outcome of cyclical events [...] no longer in a temporally linear vision and, above all, based on the users' active involvement in the modification and in the built estate management (Di Silvo 2012). The existing barriers that are slowing down the process of renovation of our suburbs could be overcome by a proper transition from a merely technical approach towards an integrated socio-oriented perspective. This represents an urgent matter in defining the borders of sustainability and becomes unavoidable when referring to the Social Housing field. The highly replicable nature of the proposal and the important impact on the social benefits that could come from the multi-variant design strategy demonstrate that this is more than just a proposal: it is the right path towards an effective renovation of our cities and a step forward in defining a new paradigm of sustainability.

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