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Globalised Habitats and Local Cultural Patterns. Spontaneous Mutations of the Andalusian Patio in Seville

Elisa Bertagnini

Dipartimento di Architettura
Università degli Studi di Firenze, e mail elizber@hotmail.com

Michele Morbidoni

Dipartimento di Architettura
Università degli Studi di Firenze, e mail michelemorbidoni@hotmail.com

In the Europe of the 20th century, the housing problem has been addressed with a standardized production of habitat. Depending on the times, it was intended to meet demands of different nature (lack of housing, production cost, market and industrial needs, etc.), by defining new architectural and dwelling models exported on a global scale. The introduction of the concept of 'cultural pattern of habitat', heralded in the regionalist architectural trends after WWII and definitively proposed by the sociological critique of the '60s, helped to identify the inhabitants as promoters of a new cultural 'need', often left on the side-lines by the actual creators of the urban landscape. Since mid-century, with the increasingly globalized production of habitat, the phenomenology of the cultural patterns is mainly due to the manifestation of local dwelling needs and to the related expressive capabilities of the inhabitants in the spontaneous transformation of space.

Habitat as a cultural pattern

The notion of ‘modèles culturels d’habitat’ appears within the social sciences in the mid-sixties. In this time, which coincides with the production of mass housing and the de-structuration of popular habitat, many criticisms are raised against the functionalism and the principles of the Modern Movement published by Le Corbusier (Filjalkow, 2011). In fact, the introduction of this notion allows exceeding the vision of a dwelling conceived only in technical terms of living standards to recover its social and symbolic dimension (Segaud, 2010).

Since the Second World War and mainly in the Mediterranean area, the regionalist architectural experimentation performs a review of the design patterns for collective housing dictated by CIAM, with a special attention to local specificities. However, in this way both the living spaces reserved to the family intimacy and those for socializing at various levels (neighbours, community district, and urban sociality: Libera, 1955) are invested by imitation and homologation attempts whose effective responsiveness to user needs is entrusted mainly to the capacity and sensitivity of the designer.

The technicist approach, become pervasive and hegemonic, thus determines the progressive exclusion of settled populations from the process of production and characterization of the living space, limiting the transmission capacity of the local settlement traditions and causing incongruous effects for the quality of the urban landscape and for its correspondence with local cultural-environmental values (La Cecla, 2007). With the widespread of collective habitat inspired by rationalist principles and patterns, people are often counter to the rules of use imposed by public actors, architects, and market through the production and dissemination of new housing models. In fact, at the same time, the design of housing for an ‘anonymous’ audience requires behavioural rules related to the use of the new buildings:

« Devant la difficulté de construire pour un client anonyme, on a tenté de répertorier des besoins ‘moyens’ auxquels le logement devait satisfaire, en espérant répondre ainsi aux aspirations des habitants »¹ (Haumont, 1968: 180).

In « Habitat et modèles culturels » (1968), Nicole Haumont analyses the situation in France after the war, characterized by the spread of collective buildings on the outskirts of large cities, a solution adopted in response to the housing shortage. The sociologist finds a high degree of satisfaction among the residents of the new housing. They claim, in fact, to be in better housing conditions than the previous. Nevertheless, if placed in a situation of choice, the inhabitants themselves assert a preference for a different type of accommodation, demonstrating how the housing quality cannot be judged only by functional requirements:

«Le logement n’est pas une ‘machine à habiter’ susceptible de procurer une ‘vie harmonieuse’ par la satisfaction de besoins répertoriés une fois pour toutes, quel que soit l’individu auquel il est destiné. On ne peut pas demander à l’habitant de s’adapter à un logement qui lui es ‘attribué’ sans tenir compte de ce que signifie pour lui le fait d’ ‘habiter’»² (p. 181).

Haumont also points out how the living space is neither neutral nor homogeneous, but full of meaning closely linked to the existence of the dweller. It is the reference cultural pattern of the dweller, which determines the way in which he takes possession of the space:

1 “Given the difficulty to build for an anonymous customer, [the designers] attempted to identify the “average” needs that housing would have to satisfy, in hopes of meeting thus the aspirations of the people”.

2 Housing is not a ‘machine for living in’ that provides a ‘balanced life’ by the satisfaction of needs identified once and for all, regardless of the individual to whom it is intended. The dweller cannot be asked to adapt to housing which are ‘assigned’ regardless of what it means for him the fact of ‘living’”



« Celui-ci s'approprie l'espace habité par un marquage en référence à des modèles culturels transmis par l'éducation. C'est l'étude de ce marquage, et de sa socialisation qui devrait permettre de mieux comprendre le besoin général 'd'habiter' et la satisfaction que lui apportent des modes de logement différents »³ (Ibid.).

In the same years, the research on the transformations (Coing, 1966, Young & Willmott, 1957) on the popular habitat subject to demolition and removal of the original population, demonstrate one more time that « l'habiter ne se limite pas au logement » (the dwelling is not limited to the housing) and, instead, « des lieux dans lesquels les groupes développent une appropriation de l'espace étrangère aux normes juridiques et marchandes » (places in which groups develop an appropriation of the space alien to legal and market standards) can be identified (Filjalkow, 2011: 26). This action is not limited to the private space, but also invests common or public areas.

Immediately or with time, the lack of identity and symbolic elements, characterizing the production of mass housing, causes the reaction of the people through the direct modification of the built environment. The appropriation of the living space has as its main object the spaces of interaction - material and symbolic - between groups of people and with the whole city.

La Huerta del Carmen in Seville: collective transformations of the local habitat

The actions of collective customization made by the inhabitants of the district of La Huerta del Carmen in Seville are a remarkable case (Fig. 1). It is a complex of social housing built in 1958-1963 by the Real Patronado de Casas Baratas on an about nine acres area at the northern outskirts of the city. The original layout of the area was defined by some major roads coming out of the walled city and by minor branches belonging to the rural paths' system, penetrating the boundaries of the huertas. The twentieth century led a scattered urbanization and, since mid-century, a more intensive one through the realization of industrial plants and the construction of working-class neighbourhoods (Fernandez Salinas, 1992).

These neighbourhoods, whose toponymy reflects the rural history of the site, are conceived as autonomous and endowed with their own internal organization centred on parishes, social welfare centres, schools and shops. In this transition of the peri-urban space, the relationship between private space and public space preserves somehow the historic idea of the city of Seville. According to Barrionuevo Ferrer (2005: 243):

«la gran semejanza estructural que posee el espacio público, la calle, en el interior del Casco Murado en su cuadrante noreste, con la Extensión Norte, nos hace comprender que, si salvamos toda la distancia temporal habida, lo que supone un cambio de escala en todos los parámetros métricos y una evolución hacia los tipos edificatorios abiertos y no organizados en torno a un patio, las formas de crecimiento tienen una misma raíz»⁴,

dictated by a series of closed compartments (before, the ancient barrio and the huerta; then the industrial compounds and the *barriada*) organized in clusters around the main streets. Here, the mediations between inside and outside, public and private, modulate a progressive stratification, starting by a spontaneous occupation of the edge of the agricultural plots and ending with the planned building of the blocks.

3 "He appropriates the inhabited space by a marking in reference to cultural patterns transmitted through education. The study of that marking and of its socialisation should allow to better understand the general need of 'dwelling' and the satisfaction given to him by various housing modes".

4 "The great structural similarity between the public space, the street inside the Walled Centre in its northeast quadrant, with the Northern Extension, makes us understand that - except for the time distance, representing a change of scale in all metric parameters and an evolution toward different building types, open and not organized around a courtyard - growth forms share the same root".



Figure 1 | A period photo (about 1962) showing an aerial view of La Huerta del Carmen.

Despite the depth of the transformations, the continuity of the settlement evolution is clearly recognizable, based on a slow crystallization of the rural fabric into pre-urban and urban fabric:

«esta manera de disponer el espacio privado de la casa, respecto del espacio de carácter público urbano, la creación de un orden secuencial donde al mismo tiempo concurre la situación donde la casa está abierta al paso, pero también vinculada a la escena urbana como fondo de saco, apareciendo el espacio interior de los corrales; no cabría entenderse si no fuera expresión de una cultura del habitar que hace posible estos asentamientos, muy enraizada en la formación de la ciudad»⁵ (Ibid.).

The transmission of this settlement feature goes down suddenly with the advent of the popular *barriadas*, designed in the then dominant style of the rationalism, but will be partially resumed after their completion with the spontaneous adaptation of the architectural morphologies by the residents.

In the few years immediately following the occupation of the buildings of La Huerta del Carmen, residents of the new residential complexes, coming from areas in the historic centre of Seville, modify the built environment favouring the immediacy of a shared cultural pattern of local habitat, that of the Andalusian courtyard house.

Derived from a superposition of Romans and Arab models, the traditional Andalusian house is characterized by the exuberant and colourful courtyard exhibited to the public street. In this case, before than a home environment or a place with controlled access, the patio becomes a space for communication to the outside and self-representation of the dwellers. In this place, decorative and symbolic elements are concentrated, and the skill in to combine some recurring themes in a sort of artificial garden is displayed: the fountain, the well, the sacred symbols, the brightly coloured tiles, the luxuriant greenery. The patio is the connection

5 “It would be impossible to understand this way to arranging the private space of the house on the urban public space, and the creation of a sequential order where the house is open to the passage, but at the same time it is also bound to the urban scene as a cul-de-sac, thus showing the corrales’ interior space, if it were not an expression of a culture of living, deeply rooted in the formation of the city, allowing this kind of settlements”

between the space of the private domain and the public through a precise sequence of urban and domestic spaces and architectural elements.

In the residential blocks of La Huerta del Carmen, people inserts into the spaces at the ground floor many of the distinguishing elements of the traditional Andalusian patio: tiles on the walls, rejas on the windows, roofing tiles covering sacred images, the central well, a variety of ornamental plants and other devices aimed to enrich the ambience (Fig. 2). The decoration extends to the external façade of the separation wall from the street, customised with pedestals and devotional images different from building to building (Fig. 3). These transformations testify the skills of the dwellers both in the interpretation of the reference cultural patterns, and in the even formal transmission of their canons. As witnessed by a resident, interventions are developed and decided collectively at condominium meetings organized in this purpose. In the barrio, each solution shows, even within a constant repertoire, interesting aesthetic variations.



Figure 2 | A patio of a block in the barrio of La Huerta del Carmen, Seville.

An important impetus to the development of this behaviour by residents is also linked to the religious processions transiting near the buildings, a strong expression of Sevillian popular culture. In 1962, also in this area the ritual transit of holy images - particularly that of the Virgen del Carmen - through the streets of the neighbourhood begins, organized by the local San Leandro parish. It induces the dwellers to decorate the blocks' courtyards in a manner deemed most appropriate to the tradition, by going back thus to practices distinguishing the Sevillian identity, in an effort to integrate their neighbourhood.

Proof of this are the remarkable events occurred at an extraordinary procession of the Virgen de la Macarena, which took place in September 2010. The transit through the neighbourhood along an unusual path

caused the exposition of drapes decorated with sacred images and mantones at the windows, and the construction of makeshift additional altars on the sidewalks⁶.

The courtyards overlooking the streets more frequently affected by the procession of the Virgen del Carmen (Calle Cereza, Calle Avellana, Calle Manzana) are those showing the most comprehensive decorative apparatus, while the corresponding backyards, in the H-shaped blocks, appear as more humble but still decent ancillary spaces.



Figure 3 | A patio's entrance in a block of the barrio and different appropriation examples

The open side on the way of these access spaces places them in an exception condition when compared to the courtyards closed on four sides, and increases their capacity of communication to the outside also compared to the Andalusian patio. The direct involvement of the people can reverse the original scale of values of these spaces, enhancing the symbolic role of filter access from the street, and leaving in the background that of access to the stairwells, to the point of diminish their functionality.

6 From the website of the Hermandad Sacramental del Santísimo Cristo de la Bondad, Nuestra Señora del Carmen y San Leandro: “Las primeras salidas alcanzaron gran ambiente popular entre los vecinos, quienes adornaban los patios exteriores de sus modernos bloques de viviendas, en una simpática imagen que parecía reflejo o eco retrospectivo de la Sevilla antigua” (The first processions achieved great popularity among neighbours, who adorned the outer courtyards of their modern apartment blocks, in a sympathetic image that seemed a reflection or a retrospective echo of old Seville.). <http://www.carmendesanleandro.com/Historia.htm>

Thus, the urban space of the street and the homely courtyards are subject to a common unwritten code of conduct that specifies their use and meanings. In this way, the importance for the identification of the residents increases, through a system of urban signs, which is a re-processing of the traditional culture in adaptation to current times.

The spontaneous recovery of local traditional cultural patterns seems to perpetuate itself even when the original population of the district faces a progressive replacement by families of mainly Latin American immigrants.

Through the revival of formal elements and traditional materials, the inhabitants re-modulate the transition between interior and exterior, between public and private domain, becoming the biggest players in the transmission of meanings and local values associated to habitat and culture of urban space, ignored by the 'universal' 'modern' housing models proposed by public promoters, market economy and industrialization processes:

«Il s'agit alors de montrer, à travers les usages quotidiens du logement et de l'espace moderne, les affrontements, les résistances, les coexistences. Celles-ci apparaissent sous la forme de transformations, de créations ou d'emprunts qui indiquent la persistance ou la recomposition de différents modèles»⁷ (Segaud, 2010: 176).

New challenges for the local

The spontaneous transformations made by the people tend to establish a different relationship of use of living spaces, adopting their outward forms from local customs. In particular, the standardization of the relationship between public and private living space, assuming the form of separation or controlled transition, it is necessary only if the inhabitants are conceived as hypothetical - standardized and undefined at the same time - group of individuals who do not know each others and do not belong to any real place, culture or community:

«La séparation souvent radicale entre l'espace privé - signifié par le logement et sa fermeture - et l'espace public - signifié par la rue -, n'a pas toujours existé [...]. Il semble cependant que ce soit une des conséquences de l'urbanisation et une tendance de plus en plus généralisée. L'anthropologie de l'espace indique des sociétés où les frontières entre privé et public dans l'espace, sont floues, peu matérialisées et surtout signifiées à travers des pratiques particulières et des expériences singulières». (Segaud, 2010: 112)

With the fall of the socialist-inspired models of state intervention in the field of housing and the prevalence of liberal economic trends, the architectural standardization, initially aimed at meeting the housing needs of the lower classes by the industrialization of building processes, demonstrates itself as an appropriate and useful tool to achieve the objectives of major investors on the open real estate market.

The contemporary acceleration of globalization offers new opportunities for the large-scale production of the city, with an increasingly standardization and trivialization of the built environment. On the other side, it increases the movement of people, exchanges, and melting of different cultures.

The local, through the effective presence, neighbouring and sharing, recreates in short time specific modulations of relationships in the use of space and allows the recognition of belonging that is built locally and at a given point in time. The gradual restructuring of the populations' composition will reveal which new patterns of living and, perhaps, which new settlement traditions will be produced by greater intercultural habitats.

7 See <http://sevillanadas.blogspot.com>

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