The Social Responsibility of Architecture in Housing Policies

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Today, new forms of social projects are characterizing Italian housing policies. They are enshrined in the national plan of residential housing passed by the government in 2008 (decree 122/2008, then law 133/2008). This trend has been summarised in the slogan "from housing to dwelling policies". In order to turn this commitment into reality, we need to take seriously the social role of architecture and urban design, and consider what part they can play in the new framework of social housing, both in terms of innovation and consciousness of the past.

The social responsibility of architecture in housing policies

'Housing for all' is a statement which has gone with Italian political history throughout the twentieth century. From the establishment of Institutes for public housing in 1903, through the so-called Ina Casa Plan in 1949, to the introduction of public land for low-income housing in 1962, the concept of right to housing has led to the improvement of quality of life for large sectors of population. This remains an unquestionable fact, although it has generated adverse outcomes, like some large public housing suburbs, which act as admonishing examples until now.

Just what someone called "trauma" (Ciorra, 2008) concerning low-income residential design, contributed to remove the topic from the political agenda, combined with the belief – or perhaps the excuse – that the high percentage of owner occupied households adverted that housing distress had reduced. These considerations overlapped with the exhaustion of funds allocated for a workers' housing program – Gescal, that means Gestione Case Lavoratori – which together marked the end of public intervention in popular housing in the late eighties.

A turnaround occurred in 2007, when the collapse of the American real estate market, due to financial speculation and the subprime mortgage crisis, triggered the global economic slowdown by which the world is still effected.

In that time, it became clear that the rent increase recorded during the previous years, especially concerning metropolitan areas, would no longer be sustainable. At the same time, it appeared that the economic crisis had been affecting the middle class too, and outlining new categories of vulnerable subjects, which had never been considered before.

The national housing plan adopted by the centre-right government in 2008 – decree law no. 112 converted into law no. 133 – was introduced as a response to housing discomfort of people who cannot afford to pay rent at market rates, but also are not eligible for Public Housing allowances. From then on, this segment of population is usually referred as "grey area", and includes separated couples with children, young couples about to leave their parents' home, people living alone, and so on. Tenants unions immediately claimed that the political choice of approaching intermediate disadvantage would risk to divert attention from the shortage of public housing for those who are in real emergency situations.

It is not an accident that the National Association of Italian Municipalities proposed to distinguish between an "absolute" and a "relative" housing distress, stating that the latter refers to situations in which «the housing issue represents an impeding factor in youth empowerment, job relocation, parenting projects and a major risk factor for unforeseen events like evictions, family separations or end a cohabitations» (Anci 2010; p. 31). Whereas the target of public housing in the past responded to consolidate socio-economic categories – therefore, it makes sense to talk about social classes – today, the fragmentation of the labour market leads to a complex social scene, in which the identification of housing needs goes with the concept of risk. Moreover, it was noticed that the area of low-income housing policy is more connoted by selectivity than the others related to public welfare (Baldini, 2008).

In this regard, far from being only a descriptive parameter, the concept of housing needs has great political clout, especially within the legislative framework produced by the above national plan, which identifies it as the foremost criteria in evaluating and financing social housing initiatives. The innate selectivity present in housing policy is fulfilled on two levels: on the one hand, in relation to proposals made by local administrations, and hence in relation to their ability to draw on economic resources allocated by the State; on the other hand, as mentioned above, in relation to the kind of population to which housing policies potentially address, that is in relation to specific persons who demand affordable lodgings.

So, the right to housing seems to depend on contextual recognition of the housing needs, and tends to lose its universalist feature.

It is true that also public housing in the past implied selectivity: for example, the Ina Casa plan in 1949, and the subsequent Gestal in 1963 openly addressed to the specific category of employees and not others. But in the past, the focus was on housing urgency: it was to provide decent accommodation to large sectors of the

population who were not able to manage it independently. Today, as we know, the homeless phenomenon and other situations of acute poverty is anything but irrelevant. However, new forms of social disadvantage are increasing and equally seriously concern the social fabric.

Italian housing policy seems to be aimed at approaching them, and to rely on better outcomes than certain low-income housing initiatives developed in the past. The new private social housing framework, emerged in recent years, summarizes this interruption in the slogan 'from housing to urban living policies', which evokes a more careful attention to local contexts and to the multi-dimensional nature of dwelling, according to Heidegger's treatment of the concept. So, the intended purpose of these policies does not only consists in a housing quantity issue, but in urban quality improvement. Actually, the idea that the private social housing sector represents an evolution from the former public initiatives sounds apologetic if we consider that, although it was marked by paternalism, the argument of variability of needs was well present in the first Italian law proposal for public housing put forward by Luigi Luzzatti in the Chamber of Deputies in 1903. He said:

«I called them popular dwellings and I added that, for me, lower classes are low-wage workers who live in lurid neighbourhoods and gloomy walls, that need to be transformed, restored or pull down; they are small farmers, rural smallholders, small manufacturers, unfortunate employees and bureaucrats (…) there are different degrees of unhappiness and the law proposal I want to introduce is not systematic, because it not compels to a unique type of buildings, because it takes account of all these nuances of pains and needs» (Luzzatti 1902, cited in Scotti 2001; p.20).

Moreover, it was observed that Italian low-income housing of the 1920s, which resulted in residential districts like the Mac Mahon in Milan or the San Saba in Rome, is to be considered as models of good architecture practises. However, even the most intensive housing developments, which characterized suburbs between the sixties and the seventies, were not exempt from the attention to the multiplicity of needs. In this regard, for example, there are some significant researches commissioned by the Istituto Autonomo Case Popolari of Trieste in the seventies. The sociologist Alberto Gasparini published parts of study results under the title "Alternative models of habitat for different social realities" (Gasparini, 1974). He distinguished between residential needs and housing needs: the first refers to the fact that spaces have to be suitable for functions, and houses have to set up with adequate rooms; the second relates to the idea that dwellings have to integrate in the urban environment. So, the concept of dwellings as a part of a broader service system is thus present in Italian low-income housing culture, earlier than emphatic representations of social housing seem to suggest, and more than some striking failures of urban and architectural rationalism allow acknowledging. In the 1940s, the interest in an emerging discipline like the sociology of housing was oriented to the relationship between spatial conformation and family conflicts, and scholars employed parameters like "litigation between spouses", "nervousness of the children", "academic performance of the children" (Riemer, 1941), which now sounds quite folkloric because of their anachronism. Moreover, social housing means to answer exactly to the crisis of traditional structures like family. Nonetheless, some concepts already employed to investigate the dialectic between space and social quality hold their own interest: for example, the relationship between private and common spaces, which is still central in the architectural design of social housing (Fondazione Housing Sociale, 2011a). Ultimately, the current scenario offers new research fields to the sociology of housing, like housing demands of immigrants, for example (Gasparini, 2001).

The sociology of housing indirectly deals with the concept of housing need, which marks the passage from a substantive to a procedural approach to housing policies; in other terms, whereas the concept of right to housing evokes something universal, the claim of promoting social housing implies a local point of view. The socio-political literature has not sufficiently deepened this complex issue until now. It seems to prefer the theoretical dimension rather than the potential practical outcomes of the dialogue between social scientists and designers.

The engagement of several banking foundations in formulating guidelines for the design of social housing initiatives joins this framework. It must be said that the private social housing promoted by the aforementioned law entails a leading role by banking foundations as private entities in partnership with the public sector. The Cariplo Foundation of Milan, with a specific Social Housing Foundation, and the Compagnia di San Paolo with the Housing Program are the most significant examples of commitment on this front. This attention to the social management of initiatives underlies the idea that social housing should be a field of experimentation both for technological, constructive innovations and for social contents (Fondazione Housing Sociale, 2011b). Once again, it is an idea that recurred in public housing policies also in the past. It was indeed observed that public housing design was to be experimental, as the fact of not having to respond to customers' tastes (Piroddi, 2001; p. 46), although the excesses that it implied in some cases. In this regard, the architect Mario Fiorentino accompanied the Corviale project, a megastructure in the suburbs of Rome which became a symbol of ghetto, with these words:

«There are two ways of making architecture [...] The first has simply recourse to tested schemes that are already accepted in public housing. The second is experimental, and this is the method to which the Corviale experience belongs. I will always remember that Ridolfi, who was my master, always told me: 'When you design for a customer – and the public is a client like any other private customers, you must always carry out experiments, without declaring them, because these are exactly the opportunities where experiments can be done'» (Fiorentino, cited in Mazzola, 2004; p. 71).

Fiorentino's words were stigmatized, but sometimes even defended because they express an idea of memorable architecture, no matter how unglued is from the real situation of inhabitants who live there. Moreover, housing design had become a meeting point between the aim to achieve decent dwellings for low-income classes and the ambition of architects to conceive a rational, advanced and industrial model for designing that accomplish their research of modernity (Ciorra 2008). Someway, housing designs practices reveal the "essential difficulty of architecture" in relation to the urban context: pursuing to achieve a synthesis between itself deepening and the realization of social tasks and purposes (Emery 2007).

The new social housing policies emphasizes this aspect. We argued that the term 'social', applied to the housing problem, can have twofold meanings: one refers to the everyone's right to housing; the other concerns the idea that dwelling has to be adequate for inhabitant's needs and aspirations. The current private social housing system seems to face the welfare crisis with this second kind of approach. It aims at using a sociological perspective to not make the same mistakes into which low-income housing fell in the past.

So, what does this framework entail? Of course, from a theoretical point of view, it refers to the concept of interdisciplinary, which is often evoked more than put into effects. Therefore it demands a renewed sense of social responsibility of architecture and urban planning .

We know that this kind of concern was very deep between the Fifties and Seventies (Ischia, 2012), that is after the second world war and before the postmodern turn, that involved these disciplines as well as every other field of knowledge. We can also note that the idea of multidisciplinary integration of competencies in urban and housing design was already present, for example, in Adriano Olivetti's thought.

«Architects know that their work is inseparable and indissoluble from its setting. In their creative interpretation they become urban planners, whether they like it or no. Urban planning and architecture become indistinct, and the first encompasses the second: nobody can elude this condition» (Olivetti 1960; p.83).

So, nothing new under the sun, we could say about current representations of social housing. Then, what difference between public housing of the past and new social housing is fair to expect? Maybe, the social administration of housing initiatives by not-for-profit organisations could provide some kind of innovation, encouraging a sense of community in the inhabitants.

But this approach would separate the architectural designing process from the social valency which it is asked to guarantee.

Building typologies, common spaces and services, spaces of relationship are not enough, if the architectural design do not tackle with inhabitants' needs. In the past, public housing assignment did not adequately regard the relationship between people and dwellings. According to the guidelines that banking foundations established for new social housing initiatives, this lack of traditional low-income housing would be quite overcome by raising and training up a community of inhabitants before they move to their new home. Above all, there is a tool that would have to boost: the post-occupancy evaluation of housing. It was introduced in America in 1960s, and mainly concerned with technical and constructive aspects of buildings, according to a strong methodology.

This kind of studies could be very useful to social housing designers for what deals with social issues too, because they bring back how inhabitants and spaces interact in everyday life. They could introduce an ethic of responsibility into architectural design, whereas it is more common an ethical approach in which intentions take priority. Public housing developed in the past has often suffered for this concept of ethic, whereby failures are attributed to unforeseeable events or to a lack of correspondence between design and buildings, but never to a lack of correspondence between design and inhabitants' needs and lifestyle. What is an ethical matter of responsibility, is also a theoretical challenge of comprehending complexity.

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