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THE PLACES OF HOUSING

MIEJSCA DOMÓW

A b s t r a c t

While the house is the most private place of life, its quality results from the collective and urban space that, combined with others, it achieves. Until the nineteenth century, in the old city this place was typically the street, a place of frontage and relations, and the landscape of the house itself. The crisis of the principles of construction of the modern city requires a new definition of the nature and shape of this space and, as a consequence, of the compositional principles of housing and its settlement units. While the remarkable tradition of studies developed on this issue during the twentieth century opened the block and replaced the street with parks and gardens, the question is still pretty much open.

The essay offers some examples and proposes a meditation starting from the project for a large decommissioned area in Milan.

Keywords: aggregation of housing, collective places, elemental units, parks and green

S t r e s z c z e n i e

Podczas gdy dom jest najbardziej prywatnym miejsce życia, jego jakość wynika ze kombinacji zbiorowej i miejskiej przestrzeni. Aż do XIX wieku, w starej części miasta takim miejscem była ulica, miejsce pierzei i relacji, i krajobraz samego domu. Kryzys zasad budowy nowoczesnego miasta wymaga nowej definicji charakteru i kształtu tej przestrzeni a w konsekwencji zasad kompozycyjnych budynków mieszkalnych i osiedli.

Chociaż niezwykła tradycja badań tego tematu w ciągu XX wieku otwarła kwartał zabudowy i zastąpiła go ulicą z parkami i ogrodami, kwestia jest wciąż otwarta. Tekst pokazuje kilka przykładów i proponuje rozważania związane z projektem dużego zdemilitaryzowanego obszaru w Mediolanie.

Słowa kluczowe: koncentracja zabudowy mieszkaniowej, miejsca wspólne, jednostki elementarne, parki i zieleń

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Housing is one of the most obvious, common and apparently simple themes in architecture. Precisely for this reason, it is also particularly important, difficult and deceptive. While the house is the most private place in human life, housing makes up the larger part of our cities and literally provides their tissue, their aggregation. It organizes their shape and determines their structure. The house reflects our identity: in the house we recognize the place of our life, intimacy and affections. The house mirrors our way of being and culture, traditions, ways of life, an idea of home-living.

Therefore, what identifies the house? What architectural elements define its identity and make it recognizable?

Normal, "happy" houses, we might say by paraphrasing Tolstoy, have all the same spatial requirements, organization and inner distribution, except for a few variables. And certainly building happy houses should always be our goal. As Le Corbusier suggested, we should standardize their actual "happiness", or precision. What particularly varies, in time and in space, are the relationships established by houses with their location and, as a consequence, the places they in turn establish. What makes them recognizable is the *shape* of the places generated by their composition: an endless range of forms, all particular, and as particular as architecture invariably is, different from one another, although relatable to some precise and recognizable principles.

In historically established cities, the aggregation of housing typically produces *places* that are almost never private. Instead, these are collective and public places, urban, civil places. Up to the nineteenth century, the street was, in various ways, the *place* of the house: the place that houses, laid out in ordered and long rows, established in the city. For the house, the street was not an alien element. Quite the contrary, it was its frontage and extension, its actual landscape. It provided its inalienable connection to the world, the community, the city itself. Therefore the street was integral and essential to the house. Obviously, it was also a public, collective, urban place: a place of relation, exchange, trade, promenade, access where the house showed its public face to the city, the face its inhabitants shared, and made the individuals parts of a community. As an independent construction, the building itself had no particular value, no identity or recognizable character other than its role in building the street, the alley, the *calle* in Venice, the *carrugio* in Genoa, or the square, or any other place similar to these.

Between the street and the house's private interior there were sometimes intermediate spaces – the courtyards. Although not public, these were certainly collective spaces, and as such were theatres of life, places of identity, community spaces where relations, connections, conflicts and arguments occurred, places for the development and, through the forms of architecture, the representation of life. They were recognizably the gates to the place of living.

In both wealthy and modest houses, the *places* established by buildings concur to the value and recognisability of the house itself. The private identity of a house is defined by the identity of the generally public and collective place established by the house itself in the complex relationship between private building and urban space. Every European city has articulated this magnificent and occasionally tragic narration in its streets, with as many variables as there are regions, climate areas, habits, geographic conditions, the particular range of cultures shaped in these cities and their streets.

At the end of nineteenth century, the model of construction of the European city based on the house-street-block system, or the minimum aggregation unit of housing, was destabilized by the well-known phenomena of urbanization. During the twentieth century, many solutions were proposed to the ensuing crisis by a wide array of researches and theories, sometimes implemented, other times remaining on paper, or only carried out in part. The result is a remarkable heritage made of studies and experiments carried out in large cities with the contribution of the most brilliant minds of twentieth century architectural culture. This research effort was unexplainably interrupted around the 1970s in Italy where the construction of new urban developments, and later the redevelopment of major decommissioned areas, has since been left to the market and speculation.

That means that the problem we have illustrated is far from solved, and therefore the underlying issue research should address still requires attention.

Since the house remains the fundamental element for the construction of the city, what are the places that contribute to the identity of the house in the contemporary city, now based on principles that are different from those of the historical city? How can we define the collective and urban places that replace the street so that they still have meaning and value? What compositional principles should we apply to housing in order to create places that may match the quality, beauty and significance of the old city's blocks? How many and which forms may establish these principles? And, finally, what elements contribute to the new minimum housing units?

In order to pursue this research, a few years ago we decided to study three districts in Milan that can be seen as some of the best examples of post-war architectural culture in Italy.

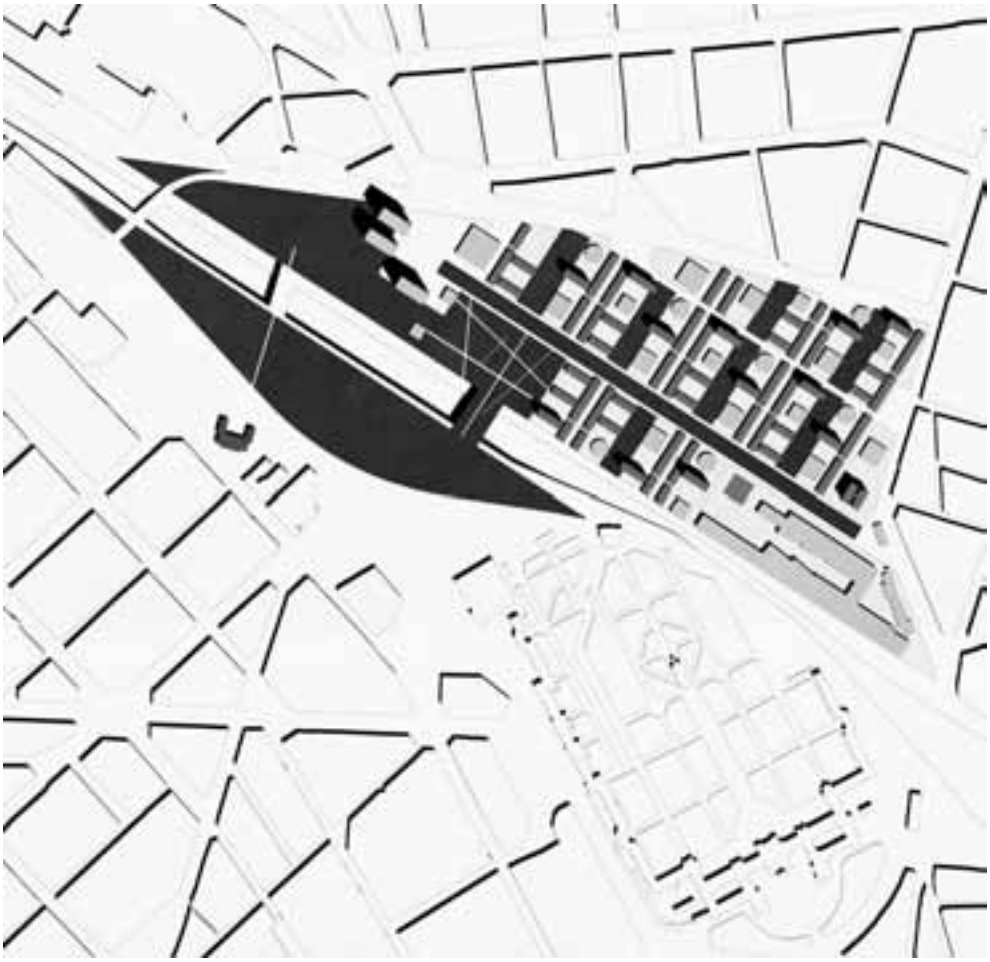
As an industrial city that underwent fast growth from the end of the nineteenth century to the economic boom of the 1960s, Milan experienced all the problems of twentieth century major European cities, from massive immigration to the development of an extensive hinterland, from the crisis of the monocentric growth model to the vanishing of its rural roots.

The examples we selected reflect three different settlement and compositional approaches to the construction of residential developments in Milan, completed in a period when architectural research and experimentation were vibrant and promoted by some of the best Italian architects of the twentieth century, and just as robust was the commitment of the public administration to the creation of new districts. What we aimed at with our research was recognizing these new settlements' basic principles, elements and types in order to establish whether they could be used again and adapted to the design of housing models for the contemporary city.

The three districts are QT8 (1946–1959), created as an experimental development during the eighth edition of the Milan Triennale coordinated by Piero Bottoni, the Harar district (1951–1955), a plan coordinated by Luigi Figini, Gino Pollini and Gio Ponti, and lastly, in chronological order, the Feltre district (1956–1963), planned by Gino Pollini. These were all team efforts since many architects contributed, sometimes to more than one project.

Although different in terms of approach, the three districts share some characteristics that effectively make them part of the city as they reflect a clear identity and a remarkable urban quality.

While located in different areas of the city, the districts are strategically connected to the road and railroad network (including the subway, then under construction) of the city and its hinterland, and therefore to the network of urban and regional transportation.



Ill.1. Raffaella Neri, masterplan for the Scalo Farini area in Milan”

A second major aspect is the fact that each district is connected to an urban-scale collective facility, to a city *centre* such as the new cemetery, the Lambro Park, the airport, the stadium, the national Racetrack, the Lido swimming pool, then the only major aquatic sports centre in Milan, the river. The connection in terms of proximity and belonging with these facilities is what saved the districts from the peripheral fate that typically affected many contemporary developments.

Another fundamental criterion was the organization of the settlement around its own centre, a common, open space designed to become the identity core of the new district and at the same time a community centre for the city at large. As such, this core obviously required the construction of public facilities for the community.

One last character the three districts share is the role of green areas as an element for the establishment of public, open and collective spaces, of the district's central spaces, of common courtyards and of the individual houses.

This is a concise review of the principles mainly adopted to develop these settlements.

QT8 is the first district and the one that is more directly related to the culture and experiments of European rationalism, especially in terms of the block's openness and of the typological solutions for housing.

Located at the north-western limit of the city, near the expressways leading to Piedmont and the Aosta Valley, the district is close to the Racetrack, the San Siro Stadium and the Lido aquatic centre. The development is organized along a central axis, a park that runs alongside the west-east waterway. The community facilities, the market, school, church and civic centre are located at the centre of the district, while the housing is subdivided into four sectors, each including houses of different types: taller line houses in the outer areas of the district, and lower row houses more protected in the inner areas. Both are organized to face the heliothermic axis and distributed so that they create common green areas and private gardens. Their layout, perpendicular to the central green spine, is such that each house includes a garden in close proximity and is related to the urban park and its facilities as well as with Monte Stella, the identity landmark of the settlement, and the real core element of the district. Monte Stella is a low man-made hill, a green architecture designed to address the problem of disposing of the rubble created by war in the city. During design development, this became the key element for the identity of the district and its residents: a tall landmark in a lowland city that would be visible either coming in or leaving the city, a major urban park, a core of meaning and use, an urban place as remarkable as the Duomo square or the Scala theatre, and still an extraordinary architectural feature for the entire city.

The Harar district is located in the same urban sector as QT8, across from it in its relation with the Stadium and the Racetrack, along a major axis that connects the centre of Milan with Piedmont. The variations in the layout, reflected in drawings and models, communicate how the designers changed their approach once they abandoned the alignment of housing along the heliothermic axis and opted instead for a more diverse and articulated approach that saw the presence of green areas at the centre as a place of construction and frontage for housing. The role and identity of green areas would be developed by articulating their shape and size in relation to the different types of housing.

The district has a well-defined core, a large, almost square green plaza, almost 200 metres per side. This space is made regular by four large line houses that define its borders, size and

proportion, and create a large urban square. This collective space, open to the city, accommodates collective facilities, the market and some schools.

The district is based on a precise hierarchy: the central core, the main urban space, opens onto other green collective spaces of an accessory nature and size. The open "turbine-like" layout of the housing facilitates the direct connection between the central core and the "islands", defined by the designers as the district's basic units. Each unit is defined by two L-shaped line houses that embrace groups of two-storey one-family houses in a protected space. These houses are also clustered so that they define small common domestic spaces protected and devoted to children's play. As collective spaces for small communities, these provide access to the private one-family houses that front onto their gardens.

This layout conveys a pursuit of hierarchy of collective spaces, from the more public and urban one to the more private one, which also affects the houses: organized as duplex units, these accommodate an interior common space that manifests its role through the size of the double height living room with a loggia open to light and nature.

The precise correspondence between nature, size and shape of the open and green spaces, and the collective nature is used to create new articulations of the complex spaces and blocks of the old city – the small common spaces, small squares, streets and through-courts that, while collective, had an accessory role compared to the urban character of the street and squares that bordered them.

While the first two districts are based on the coexistence of several types of houses, the identity of the third district results from a completely different approach. After a sequence of intermediate solutions, the final plan conveys a more drastic and absolute principle that locates the housing development over an enclosed section of the recently established Lambro Park with the additional introduction of the facilities required by collective life. This large enclosure is open to the city and sized as a large urban plaza. The clear reference is Le Corbusier's *redent*, a large courtyard here articulated as secondary courtyards that converge into the central space in order to highlight its grandeur and magnificence. As demonstrated by the current revival of studies of the traditional ways of developing the city and its territory, the solution adopted for the Feltre district somehow evokes the settlement principle adopted for the large rural farms established in the Po Valley. On the other hand, the proportions and heights of the housing developed in the district, in spite of the openings that contribute to its openness, are obviously nothing like those farms. Therefore, the most immediate reference for this large courtyard that once again includes a park, is the large castle at the border of the city, built, as Le Corbusier suggested, in the middle of the country. A district-architecture that is an indivisible unit, built by several designers, by imposing strict constraints on the design in order to protect the unitary character of the development.

And now?

The large decommissioned areas within the city propose a disciplinary problem that is similar to the one addressed many years ago. What are the places of housing? What are the compositional principles we should adopt to define places that are as complex as those of the old city? Is it possible to define basic settlement units as viable as the blocks but based on different principles, dimensions and fundamental elements?

More generally, the question is: *what* identifies the house? And, assuming that the *places* are what give identity to the house, *which places identify the house*?

We tried to address this issue by developing some alternative solutions to the project for the Farini railroad yard in Milan, an extensive decommissioned area occupied by railroad tracks and located between the centre and the suburbs in a highly accessible site at an urban and regional level.

In the first project we defined a general layout for the site, and established an orientation by following the city's fundamental axes, a central axis for the organization and distribution of the entire development, a landmark, a crossroads of different converging axes, and a system of roads of varying importance that makes the area accessible while only allowing for the traffic connected to the residents' activities.

The central axis, a tree-lined avenue we called the *rambla*, is the backbone of the entire system that distributes the housing sectors, the collective buildings, the garden and the park, and ends in the central plaza that accommodates urban scale activities, a museum, two tall office buildings and a third hotel building. This public place belongs to the city and, given the type and location of its buildings, is recognizable from a considerable distance. A large park that straddles the network of still operating rail tracks also belongs to the system of the district's urban scale collective places.

We divided the area into a system of evenly shaped, almost square lots, about 120 metres per side. These were our housing units, the equivalent of the old blocks. These units are green spaces, lawns bordered by tall line houses on two sides that establish a sort of open courtyard on the other two sides: their location is perpendicular to the central *rambla* so that the interior green space and the houses fronting on such space also front on the *rambla* itself. The district's collective facilities are located within this block.

This layout subverts the principle used for the construction of the old city: collective places and facilities are located *within* the blocks rather than along the streets that border them. Defined and measured on the relationship between the houses, the blocks are open to the city; the lawns on which the houses front are urban collective spaces, and the public commercial and recreational activities are located between the houses. The streets, with different hierarchy and role, become distribution elements. Tree-lined and shadowed, they lose their fundamental value of public urban space.

That said, the general meaning is more or less the same: the houses still draw their identity from the relationship with the public and collective spaces on which they front, and that they in turn define. Rather than streets, these are open green courtyards: rather than *outside* the block, these spaces are *within* the block. Articulation and complexity result from the variety of spaces produced by the location of the collective buildings and their relationship with the houses. Like in the old city, form and quality of the collective places are the characters that make the individual blocks and housing spaces remarkable and recognisable: the different destinations and provision of facilities give the collective spaces liveliness and character, identity and articulation, they define the different spaces and identify the units.

In this sector of the city, the identity of collective spaces changes radically, from street to open space within the block, and their nature from crossing paved paths to green and tree-lined places of rest.

All while preserving the general layout of the development, we introduced a variation in the composition of the blocks in a further version of the project: the units are made by several blocks and include several building types so that the interior space is articulated by collective facilities and housing buildings.

The blocks are bordered by lower line buildings and include other houses, open courtyards, tall buildings, etc., that shape different spaces.

Based on these guidelines, we asked several groups of researchers to test the principle by introducing some design variations, in a process that precisely mirrors the construction of an actual city.

The variations fundamentally concern the selection and composition of housing types, in relation with the collective spaces, and the varying openness of the blocks, with a resulting variation of the landscape of this new development.

The research is still ongoing.