



www.planum.net
The European Journal of Planning

**UK and Italy:
elements for comparison**
Carlotta Fioretti

by *Planum*, october 2009
(ISSN 1723-0993)

Social housing estates throughout Europe (and also in UK and Italy) are sharing the same main elements of decline: residualisation, social exclusion, physical decline, management difficulties; it is true as well that each country shows specific characteristics.

It is often claimed that the crisis affecting public housing estates has been caused by the same policies that produced them. In UK and in Italy different housing policies produced different social housing systems and also different problems related to them. The main divergence between the two countries concerns the scale of the national social rented stock: Britain is one of the European countries with an higher percentage of social housing properties in the term of 20,8% in respect to all housing properties, conversely Italy is at the bottom level with 5% of social housing. These figures are referred to nowadays, but in the 1970s before privatisation policy came, the amount of British social rented stock was much more higher, and most of the council estates were built in large, separate and recognisable concentration (such as Craigmillar). The large dimension of these neighbourhoods contributed to enhance management difficulties and consequently to fasten the process of decline and abandonment. In the attempt to tackle such management problems, since 1980s the British government started a series of privatization policies (Right to Buy and Voluntary Stock Transfer, policies applied to Niddrie as well) that reduced dramatically the council stock, but also led to negative consequences: better housing typology were sold, and wealthy families leaved, thus contributing to the residualisation of the sector.

The departure of who had the choice was often replaced by an influx of immigrant families with an overrepresentation of children: mainly for this reason, council estates have been suffering of conflict situations linked with racial tensions and generation gap. Many other dwellings remained empty causing the so-called phenomenon of low-demand, typical of many areas all over UK.

In Italy the circumstances have been different and major problems has occurred because of the combination of a *per se* scarce public stock with an allocation system prioritising emergency situations: low income, serious housing hardship (eviction) and social vulnerability. Although inhabitants of social housing tend to be poorer, larger estates are formed by a mixture of tenures (also private or low-cost ownership) with the consequence of a diverse profile of the population where are recognizable micro-pockets of social exclusion. Another major problem in the Italian case seems to be related to the widespread disrepair of properties, due to the backlog of interventions in terms of maintenance and conservation that in turn derives from serious management difficulties (typical of public administration in southern countries). Furthermore a today obsolescent environment does not respond to the needs of the current population that is usually formed by older people.

Summing up the two different perspectives of the problem, it is possible to say that in UK social housing estates are perceived as large homogenous low demand areas, characterised by high turnover, concentration of social exclusion and overrepresentation of immigrants and children, while in Italy social housing estates are usually located in fragmented peripheral areas, and are characterised by low turnover, poverty, inadequate environment and ageing population.

Are the two regeneration policy systems going towards the same direction?

It is quite evident that in both countries social housing regeneration show the same trends promoted across Europe. In particular in Italy the EU influence (through the experiences of Urban programme) has been decisive to shift from a tradition in renewal exclusively physically focused, to attempts of more holistic regeneration. Confronting British experiences (such as Craigmillar) with Italian Neighbourhood Contracts (Contratti di Quartiere) it is possible to find commonalities: area-based initiatives, integration and collaboration in policy making (governance), local stakeholders (private and voluntary sector) involvement and networking, community capacity building.

However there are also substantial differences: in Britain (a historically centralised country) regeneration policy is made by overarching national strategies. For example in Scotland in 1999 was launched the Social Inclusion Strategy aimed at reducing disadvantage in deprived neighbourhoods through the appointment of local agencies (Social Inclusion Partnerships) such as the Craigmillar Partnership. Such strategy was supported by mainstream national funding (e.g. Community Regeneration Fund), allocated through a system of identification of priority areas at the national level (e.g. Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation), and coordinated by Communities Scotland, the national agency in charge for housing and regeneration (Communities Scotland was abolished on 1 April 2008 and most of its regulatory functions were transferred to the Scottish Government's Housing and Regeneration directorate). Since the devolution process, in fact, housing and regeneration policies are matter of national government: England shows a system similar to that of Scotland. That structure allows to implement more easily long-term integrated programmes, in response to the critique of isolated initiatives of the 1980s (Housing Action Areas) and of competitive bidding programs of the 1990s (Single Regeneration Budget). Conversely the Italian system is lacking of an overarching national regeneration policy, but is rather made of a series of programmes, of which just the last round of CdQ are conceived to gain more holistic regeneration. What is more the “special funding” regime and the allocation of funding through bidding procedure seems to constitute a barrier for sustainable, integrated programmes. Finally the recent devolution of the regeneration and social housing systems to Regions, even if meant more flexibility (maybe lacking in the British system) contributed to characterise the Italian experience as an addition of single specific cases that are difficult to compare and condense in a common national framework.

A reflection about practices

Italian practices have been so far more physically oriented, similarly to British experiences of the 1980s. However, differently from Italy, the most popular physical regeneration strategy in UK has always been demolition and redevelopment. That can be explained with the different cultural and environmental background of the two countries: in Britain, traditionally, multi-storey and high-rise housing has been negatively associated with the social sector, therefore practices of typology differentiation and density reduction were seen as necessary to overcome stigmatisation. Such a tactic characterised as well the early phases of regeneration in Niddrie, when tower blocks were demolished and redeveloped with lower density houses.

Even if neither today the unpopularity of certain housing typology has been completely overcome, during the late 1990s Britain saw a dramatic change in trend, away from housing-led renewal and towards community-led regeneration. This strategy is “people-focused”, directed towards issues such as education, training, health and security (see the Craigmillar Partnership objectives). For this reason measures designed to reverse social problems are today more broader and developed in Britain than in Italy.

In Britain, more recently, the persistence of the “low-demand” phenomenon in deprived neighbourhoods has led to new, more radical approaches, aimed at restructuring the housing stock of the area through demolition and redevelopment, so attracting a new influx of better-off population. The aim of this new “housing market renewal strategy” is to create a more balanced integrated community, and a more sustainable economy. This same new trend can be noticed in the Craigmillar regeneration strategy carried out by PARC. Quite the opposite, in the Italian situation, usually the social housing estates stand as isolated, deprived and stigmatised in a tenure and population diversified context. In that case the tenure and population mix in itself does not necessarily solve the problem, neither automatically lead to integrated communities. On the contrary, there are many Italian examples where social housing properties and inhabitants are easily stigmatised from the better-off neighbours and become scapegoat for every problem. So if the new British strategy can probably succeed in raising the overall profile and value of the area, does not necessarily mean that it will be successful in creating social cohesion, nor in bringing improvements in the condition of the remaining social housing residents (see the case of Niddrie and the situation of the remaining council houses).

As highlighted by many researches (such as in that of van Kempen described afterwards) a correspondence between physical and social composition and opportunities to raise life chances has not been demonstrated yet.

Reading social housing estates in the UK

Power and Mumford in *The Slow Death of Great Cities? Urban Abandonment or Urban Renaissance* (York Publishing for the JRF, 1999) light up the phenomenon known as “abandonment” or “low-demand” that invested many British residential areas, mainly (but not exclusively) made of social rented housing. Referring to four particular case studies, the authors thoroughly explain the causes and characteristics of the phenomenon, denouncing the failure of popular strategies such as demolition, and tracing future perspectives.

Bramley, Munro and Pawson in the volume *Key Issue in Housing: Policies and Markets in 21st Century Britain* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) deal with the housing question in UK, analysing in particular the transformation the sector has been going through since the 1980s. The authors discuss issues such as privatization policy and sector residualisation, stock transfer and the growing role of housing associations, the changing in government action and the increasing centrality of the market. The ninth chapter focuses on regeneration, illustrating national policy and practice, with an insight on social housing neighbourhoods.

Restructuring Large Housing Estates in Europe edited by van Kempen et al. (Bristol, Policy, Press, 2005) is the result of a research program founded by the EU and brought about by an international team of researchers, which focus on the actual situation and future perspectives of large housing estates in Europe. In respect to the major existing literature on this issue, the innovation of this work is to consider

all Europe (ten countries hosting the case studies distributed among North-western, Southern and Eastern Europe) and not only analyse the origin and decline of the neighbourhoods but the different national strategies for their rebirth as well. On tower blocks, Turkington, van Kempen and Wassenberg edited in 2004 a volume called *High-rise housing in Europe: Current Trends and Future Prospects* (Delft, UP).

More in general on never-dying environmental determinism: Coleman, A. (1985) *Utopia on Trial*, London, Hilary Shipman.

A comparison with Southern European countries, particularly about the different systems of housing affordability, is the core of the important volume edited by Barlow, Leal, Maloutas and Padovani (2004): *Housing and Welfare in Southern Europe*, Oxford, Blackwell.