

Talking of housing

1. Housing types and urban patterns: what is new?

1.1 Spread of residents in the metropolitan area is a common phenomenon throughout the world, although with different characters. In most countries (not in all) we notice a move from the compact city towards the surrounding areas, what goes together with a switch in building types, from condominiums to single houses, resulting in wide changes in land use, from productive to residential. Lack of services, poor relationship with urban facilities and social isolation are often translated into “no city”. Around this model, a number of new activities are actually born, invading a landscape once totally devoted to agriculture and pasture: highways, commercial centres, office parks, sport centres, technological parks, etc. Private car explosion is obviously at the roots of such developments, but it is difficult to deny that the desire for more suitable housing types is a main factor in such change.

1.2. The monoculture of sub urbanization, especially evident in the United States, is producing some kind of reaction. The so called “New Urbanism” ideology, rapidly spreading in North America and now in some European countries, is trying to recall traditional urban characters into the new developments, in order to overcome the typical anonymity of contemporary settlements. Such characters consist basically in the emphasis on density (of people and of activities), on social services as elements of collective identity (central places, public buildings), on public transport as an alternative to private car monoculture, on general design rules. If this can become a real alternative to suburban culture remains to be demonstrated, since “new urbanism” too applies to specific, middle-high income social groups: segregation is still the main element making the suburb successful as well as different from the “traditional” city (whatever that is). Moreover, all this seems to deny the reality of a post-modern city where co-existence of different life styles, emphasis on information flows, obsolescence of hierarchical order go along with the an economy based on knowledge and communication more than production. It is hard to think that the new city is not but a replica of the old one.

1.3. Housing typologies change slower than cars (which change slower than aircrafts): there is some recognised value in the permanence of the same schemes. Social models, even when actually obsolete, seem to guide the design of residential buildings: family shelter, children paradise, bourgeois order characterize most new projects. It is a striking misunderstanding, when compared with the range of new behaviours, consume models, values characterizing contemporary, globalised society, together with all its new conflicts. Life styles, family composition, incomes have changed: cultural confrontation, value homogenisation, social competition express themselves in and out the family walls. All this is being reflected in the shapeless urban landscape, more than within the house. Housing does not seem to be able to accept the challenge.

2. Private versus public housing: which one gives the line?

- 2.1. Public housing was a leader, in the past 100 years, in residential design. Reformers, planners, architects, administrators engaged themselves in the hard work of making the industrial city host to an ever increasing number of low-income people. In doing so, they explored the requirements and the characters of the new city, investigated the relationship between housing and land use, housing and public transport, housing and land value. Thinking of housing meant thinking the city: no wonder that it was around this topic that many planning instruments developed, including building and environmental regulations and legal procedures. The role of public administration was also in the agenda of public housing: what should be its role in dealing with urban growth and its influence on land values? Is the growth of land values a positive output or an obstacle to a better spatial organization? How could the administration act in order to favour the development of a housing sector accessible to low income people?
- 2.2. Localization choices of public housing did influence urban policies: transportation, facilities, public services were designing the new planned city, were a rational approach was producing a city which supposedly worked better than the one dependent from the market. Even building typologies were under thorough investigation within public housing policies. High rise apartment buildings freely scattered in the open space, single family houses organised in garden cities, apartment blocks forming city neighbourhoods, were all considered as possible models for the new city. The discussion that developed took into consideration economic aspects, environmental issues, lifestyles and moral issues. Administrators and scholars had not doubt that planned, public housing offered the most substantial way to deal with the basic issues regarding city government.
- 2.3. However, while housing reformers seemed acting as leaders in the field, the real estate sector was actually responding to the housing needs of the greatest majority of the urban population. Twentieth century cities, with the exception of those in the socialist field during the second half of the century, were mostly built through the private sector; this one took also great advantage from the growth of land values, unlike public housing, always looking for low cost building land. The private sector, driven by market demand, was able to respond to private customers wishes, more than to general urban needs. It also tried (rather successfully) to translate it into an actual model of urban morphology, where public facilities were coming after private ones. Private car infrastructures overcame public facilities, building land cancelled public open space, income segregation characterized the modern city more than it did in the past. Its impact was such as to make the inhabitants of public housing schemes aware of an inferiority status, what resulted into poor maintenance, vandalism, escape.

3. Historic centres and the post-modern urbanization

- 3.1. The contemporary city is not made up of residents only: lots of people, the city users, come everyday for business, leisure, services. This means that the city has to adapt itself to the needs of a vast population over which it has little control: congestion is induced by the outsiders more than by the local people. However, the relationship between the city and its residents remains essential under many aspects. The first one is probably land value: although it can be higher in a business centre than in a residential area, it is the surrounding people that make it interesting to investors and users. The other one is vitality: an area looks vital throughout the day when it is

used by the people without specific time limitations. Public safety is also connected to people occupying urban space: empty places are notoriously unsafe in most cities.

3.2. In the last decade Europe is experiencing a drive that is common since long in the U.S.A.: the move of commercial activities from the central city to the countryside. The growth of shopping centres, shopping malls, etc. tends to happen at the expenses of the commercial street, leaving it with few customers, less and less attracted by poor products and outdated services. Such trend is especially visible in many historic centres of the new EU countries, where rising incomes are pushing the residents towards more shining shopping establishments. Higher income means more cars, and with it the need for parking space. Central cities are structurally cut out from this kind of competition: streets become empty, people are not attracted to walk in and security problems arise. At this point the decline of real estate values is not but the mirror of a negative demographic trend: housing there has lost any interest, and people leave for safer and better serviced areas. The decline of central cities is strictly connected to the sort of the commercial structure.

3.3. There is however another threat over historic centres and their housing stock. It comes from the uneven development of tourist activity. Tourist industry can be very tough in transforming old centres into thematic parks. Everything turns to "antique": signs, products, souvenirs, services. A general falsification process invests whatever lies within the boundaries of the historic centre (and even outside). Residents are a nuisance: businessmen, shopkeepers and office employees are the only people walking around during the day, while the nights are filled by visitors looking for fun. The building stock, being turned into a resource for direct economic activities, is both heavily transformed and taken away from residential use.

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