

Housing, gentrification and socio-spatial dynamics

Houses Beyond-the-Threshold. A new paradigm of housing for the third Millennium

Nausicaa Pezzoni

Città metropolitana di Milano, nausica.pezzoni@gmail.com

Abstract: 'Houses beyond-the-threshold' is a project that has seen the transformation of public housing 'under threshold' flats in the Calvairate district of Milan into living spaces for unaccompanied foreign minors, guided in a self-recovery path of the apartment they would have lived until becoming of age. The project introduces an idea of welcoming based on reciprocity, within a cultural operation that keeps together the architectural space with site-specific artistic works created for each of the apartments. Beyond the threshold of inhabiting as an answer to the need of a shelter, an unprecedented model of encounter between art, architecture, urban and social disciplines is outlined. At the same time, this initiative acts as an interpreter of a crucial need, which underlies inhabiting conditions in social houses and which finds in a lack of cultural texture the main reason for it to remain marginal. Moreover, by triggering new forms of relationship between migrants and inhabited space, the project suggests to urban planning a perspective to deal with transiency as an issue that increasingly characterizes the contemporary city.

Keywords: housing; temporary living; social inclusion; migrants integration.



Introduction

Housing Beyond-the-Threshold are public apartments renovated after a long period of abandonment, through an innovative architectural and cultural project where a new urban population – the non-accompanied foreign minors – have been included into the building process. The project, realized between 2016 and 2017 in the Calvaire district in Milan, originates from the necessity of this particular historical condition to open the city and the territory to welcome policies able to respond to the contemporary issues. A group of 20 foreign minors was guided in a path of auto-restoration of the apartment they would have lived in until their becoming of age, within a complex program of hosting and working inclusion planned by the architect Simona Riboni of Architettura delle Convivenze¹ in collaboration with Paolo Ferrari of Centro Studi Assenza² who introduced his art and science works.

This intervention has generated a place which is not only a shelter, but which is oriented to create a wider and richer idea of inhabiting. It is a place where people can learn useful professional skills, space of knowledge and encounter with the European culture in its most innovative expressions. The 7 houses so far renovated, restored from a previous ‘under-threshold’ condition, represent the catalyst of an urban regeneration process which is at the same time the result and the trend of an effective citizenship construction.

Beyond the belonging. Living in a different place

The project of Housing Beyond-the-Threshold responds to more than one issues that are nowadays questioning urban policies.

The first issue regards the renovation of the degraded building heritage. In this contest, it assumes a strong social importance, because the apartments are located in a historical district of public social housing in Milan: these suburbs are effected by deep changes of inhabitants’ economic conditions, by the progressive degrading of physical structures, and also by problems deriving from the coexistence of people with different geographical origins (AA.VV., 2005; Di Biagi, 2006). On top of these problems typical of all the peripheral areas of our cities, we can find a local condition where in the last two decades the results of the social texture dissolution became more evident: a district originally inhabited by the working class, which breaking apart produced conflicts and discomfort, mistrust between old and new inhabitants, nucleus of deep poverty, loneliness. A number of fragilities surfaced during the

¹ Architettura delle Convivenze is a social architecture firm that realizes projects for the weak population categories (rome and sinti, homeless, Italians and foreigners at risk of marginalization, unaccompanied foreign minors) through participatory planning, self-recovery and self-construction.

² Centro Studi Assenza is a non-profit scientific-cultural association active in various fields: psychotherapy and psychiatry, philosophy, theater, art, architecture, music and literature. It deals with the relationship between art and science and care in the different variations concerning the territory (artistic-scientific-architectural installations), the species (theater), the individual (psychotherapy).

90s, were faced by the Municipality in 2004 with the «Contratto di quartiere II Molise Calvaire»³. The entrance of a foreign presence in this urban and social context – the newest of the populations arriving on the urban scene, the most fragile – with an active role in space restoration, represents the paradoxical input to a complex, radical reconstruction of that social texture (figure 1).



Figure 1: View from one the apartments in Calvaire district, Milan (Photo by Sara Magni)

The second issue regards the direct involvement of inhabitants in the restoration process, and the contribute they could bring in more general urban regeneration. The project of Housing Beyond-the-Threshold responds directly to the issues of participation through a process of appropriation (and disappropriation, as we will see), of integration and of public space care through different points of view: first, the material intervention on the building renovation, second, the immaterial action concerning the relationships generated by the restoration activity, and last the kind of the involved population.

The third issue concerns urban planning at the heart of contemporary inhabiting, because it opens glimpses on a dimension, transitory living, which is increasingly characterizing the processes of cities transformation, while urban planning tools are still linked to a sedentary perspective. That is to say, the project Housing Beyond-the-Threshold shows how a new paradigm of inhabiting, based on precise ethical issues, could be a model for a discipline which is today confronting itself with temporariness – in space uses and in the permanence of inhabitants in that space – as a distinctive and updated characteristic of its own study matter.

3 Contratti di quartiere (Neighborhood contracts) are urban redevelopment interventions to promote housing and social integration within public housing districts.

There is a fourth question, starting from here and embracing all the previous ones: it is the model of welcoming proposed by this project. An ethical model questioning itself about how to build a culture of hospitality as a condition of mutual enrichment. “What could we give – what is more beautiful, more interesting, more valid – to people arriving from other countries in our culture, in our history, in our landscape? What could we exchange?” This question was posed by Paolo Ferrari, author of the works present in the apartments, on the occasion of the public presentation of the project during the ‘Giornata del Contemporaneo’⁴.

Inside each apartment a site specific work has been inserted as an open window on the landscape, which introduces a new perspective in the architectural space: the sea horizon, the mountains outline, the track around the ricefields, the vine border (figure 2), the far end of a wood path. These are Italian landscapes in black and white taken by the camera, doubled by the painting act of the author, and even more layered with transparent graph paper with pen drawings mostly representing ancient biblical shapes. Each layer composing the work contributes to the formation of a complex system so that the landscape moves from its usual place – with its traditional shapes – to other-places, introducing an horizon where the *otherness* can enter, which is the otherness brought by young people who will inhabit these spaces, and it is the otherness living in all of us.

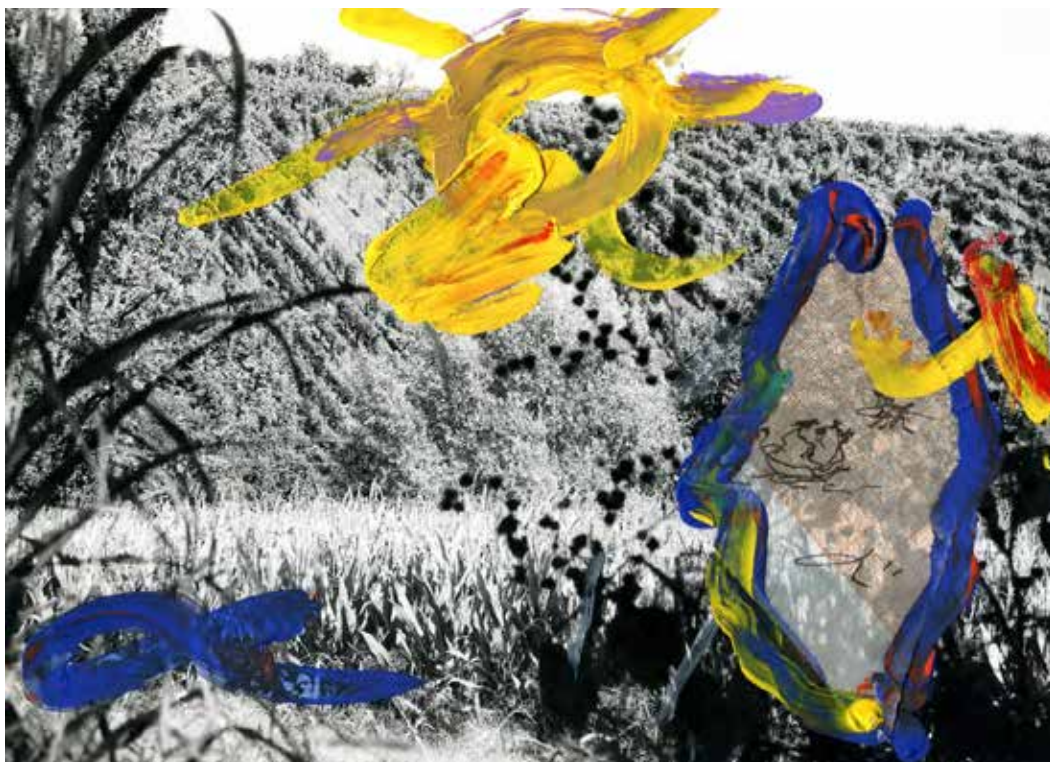


Figure 2: Paolo Ferrari's work inserted in one of the apartments.

⁴ ‘Giornata del Contemporaneo’ (The Day of the Contemporary) is an event that since 2005 AMACI (Friends of Italian Contemporary Art Museums) has dedicated to contemporary art. Every year in October the museums and all the institutions that adhere to the initiative, open their doors for free, accepting exhibitions, events, conferences and workshops (www.amaci.org). The Houses Beyond-the-Threshold have been opened to the public on October 14th 2017, during the XIII Day of the Contemporary, during which the authors explained the conception and contents of the project, with the presence of all the minors involved in self-recovery, in a meeting open to citizenship.

A welcoming policy capable of reciprocity

The Housing Beyond-the-Threshold project is based on a reciprocity idea and it applies this idea thinking of a high cultural exchange. The complex artistic-architectonical, educative and political program, where the auto-restoring process is inserted, aims to satisfy not only the primary needs, but also to create spaces which can be at the same time learning spaces generating new culture. It indicates an alternative, putting in it a radical innovation, to the European solutions which are trying to give answers to the question of immigrants welcoming: by adapting industrial buildings, ex hotels, ex discos, old people homes, as extraordinary welcoming centres.⁵ Recovering barracks, building camps, allocating dismissed areas – even a missile base –⁶ for the permanence of people in need of a place, even if temporary, where to live. Making use of places which are very often the rests of a dismissal of not residential spaces.

The ethical and cultural more than the methodological horizon towards which welcoming policies move – except in few and at the moment isolated exceptions –⁷ seems not to be able to consider the articulated process of access to the city by migrants outside an emergency logic, necessarily connected to the exclusion of those populations from the inhabiting system that the Western world has been using at least since Modern age.

Nevertheless, contemporaneity challenges us right on the field of inclusion policies in relation with an epochal migration movement. Men and women, families and individuals, of all ages, cross the world ready to change not only their existences, but also the consolidated geometries of landing spaces and the paradigms on which the inhabiting project is based.

The history of the new Millennium is the history of a walking humanity: one of the greatest revolutions ever happened, may be of the same importance of when the primates started moving from Africa and started to travel the seas and discover new lands. “It seemed that nothing should happen anymore, that everything was already done. And here is, instead, the new Millennium! Like never before a new Millennium has arrived full of future. All the western world seems to believe in the possibility to continue to breath the same air, to live on the same land, while the world has rolled in an invisible, silent, un-perceptible way in new times, as if the atmosphere of the planet, its oxygen, the burning rhythm and all the watches springs had changed” (Quirico, 2016).

⁵ In Italy, CAS (Centri Accoglienza Straordinaria) are defined by the Ministry of the Interior "temporary structures" and, according to the decree 142/2015, must satisfy the "essential needs" of welcoming. In reality they represent the base of Italian hospitality with around 3,090 structures. “They are imagined in order to make up for the lack of places in the ordinary reception structures or in the services set up by the local authorities, in the case of large and close arrivals of applicants. To date, they are the ordinary mode of reception. These structures are identified by the prefectures, in agreement with cooperatives, associations and hotel structures, according to the procedures for awarding public contracts, having heard the local authority in whose territory the structure is located. The stay should be limited to the time strictly necessary for the transfer of the applicant to the second reception facilities ” (www.openmigration.org).

⁶ The reference is to the former Cona missile base (Vicenza) used as a first reception center, in a completely isolated place.

⁷ The case of the Municipality of Riace remains the only example in Italy of urban regeneration and rebirth of an entire territory through the inclusion and work of migrants and the construction of a new model of coexistence (Cfr. Pezzoni, 2016).

The western culture not only is un-ready to this great transformation, but it opposes defensive walls controlling its borders, walls that the pressure of poverty and war keep on breaking down vigorously. It builds, within itself, surveillance and confinement devices which are not able to contain the entrances nor to territorialize those who don't belong. Trying to maintain as a whole the 'same previous land', barriers exclusions rejections produce, in an effective way, new conceptual categories that inevitably have an impact on those 'welcome measures' that should generate the inhabiting policy of the Third Millennium. In the very short time witnessing the transformation of Europe into a *Fortresse* – less than 20 years – categories like 'humanity in excess' (Rahola, 2003), or even of 'in-humanity' (Galli, 2005), became popular in the political debate and in the common perception determining the field where to face the complex challenge of coexistence.

It is necessary to change the interpretative paradigms of a fast changing reality, trying to see in the 'other' not an excess, to expel or to limit and reduce to numbers, to dimensions and to impacts, but a foreign presence who is asking to be welcomed on a ground of equality.

Under the Threshold, beyond-the-Threshold

The Housing Beyond-the-Threshold project is directed to young immigrants arrived in Italy unaccompanied, persons who are looking for new resources not only to survive with the satisfaction of primary needs, but also who are looking for knowledge sources of new models of reality, different from their origin ones.

In front of a complex question of welcoming, the project aims to respond with a multilevel program, promoting an inhabiting solution which is not located outside *our* inhabiting space, nor it can be considered a pure shelter from a hostile world to escape. It is a place open to new learning perspectives: a place for the mind, for the body and soul of people looking for dignified spaces where to live.

To introduce young immigrants into one of the historical districts of the city, one of the first examples of rationalist architecture in Milan (the architects Cesare and Maurizio Mazzocchi won in 1932 a contest to host 2250 inhabitants) means to include the new inhabitants in the heart of our architectural and housing culture (figure 3). To renovate dismissed spaces, making the old residential standards applied to plan those apartments functional to the contemporary life, through the work of the migrants themselves, means to engage people arriving from other geographical and cultural contexts in urban regeneration processes. It means also to renew and give a new life to a space originally built to host, almost one century ago, a new urban society who would have found in that environment functional answers to the different needs of modern life.

The apartments destined to the project are classified "under the threshold" as they are under-dimensioned in relation to the actual laws: Regional Lombardy rules n. 1/2004 imposes that an apartment of less than 28.80 square meters cannot be considered available for the public residential building classification and therefore it cannot be stated as inhabitable. Other apartments, with a little bigger surface, are defined "under threshold" because they are degraded, lacking in toilet services and with unfitted structures. These apartments have been empty for years and only recently the Municipality and ALER (Azienda Lombarda Edilizia Residenziale) have extrapolated them from their heritage and given them to associations or cooperatives which are in charge of their renovation. Often the renovation

is carried putting some of them together and later assigning to members with sustainable renting for those who cannot afford the private market (Molinari, Pala, 2014).

Restoring these apartments means to take away from the degrade a relevant part of the public buildings – the unrented apartments in the municipality of Milan are about 3.200 – and to make it inhabitable again by “families or singles, with a strong need of houses”, as the responsible of one of the involved cooperatives says.⁸



Figure 3: View from one the apartments in Calvairate district, Milan (Photo by Paolo Ferrari)

To this incremental and point renewal program, the project Housing Beyond-the-Threshold adds two factors that, in synergy, make it an outpost of the urban regeneration policies and at the same time of the welcoming ones. The first factor concerns the choice by Comunità Progetto – one of the cooperatives indicated by Alers to handle some under-threshold apartments – to start a welcoming path for foreign minors including them directly in the process of renovation. A choice deriving from an educative project of autonomy and from the need of keeping the costs low, so as to include in the new apartments people with specific housing needs: the economical, related to an affordable rent; the social, related to an integration on different levels – housing level, relationships, education, and job creation. The second factor is about the new conceptual language and the method applied by Architettura delle Convivenze and Centro Studi Assenza, to which the cooperative assigned the project, in dealing with this work. A conceptual language deriving from a years long research about a new paradigm of care – of the

⁸ From the description of the DAR = CASA project, one of the cooperatives involved in the processes of recovery and re-allocation of housing.

individual and of the community – as an open, and necessary disposition to the *other from oneself*. A method able to set the conditions to build an effective citizenship route.

The architectural project: hosting *the other from oneself*

“This side of responsibility, there is solidarity. Beyond, there is hospitality” (Jabès, 1991).

Beyond the Threshold is a concept with different degrees of complexity. It springs from the definition of unfeasibility based on the building regulations in respect of the condition of some apartments, and it indicates a consequent requalification project of those apartments.

In this way it answers to the first issue questioning today urban policies: the issue of an urban regeneration characterized by being selective and gradual in facing the contemporary problems (Gabellini, 2014), and that considers public residential districts as a “great opportunity to start social and spatial regeneration processes, as important and with similar impacts as those registered, in the recent past, by the intensive season of projects dedicated to the reuse of industrial abandoned areas” (AA.VV., 2009).

Beyond the Threshold refers to a housing and social inclusion program where the restoration of inhabiting spaces is realized by the users themselves: not the research of an emergency solution, nor the protection in a specific structure for minors, but skills exchange and a common work are set as necessary to build integration. Beyond the threshold of the nowadays welcome policies. According with the method of Architettura delle Convivenze, minors were taught the fundamentals of the job necessary to requalify the space where they would have lived.

A method that twists the ‘asylum seekers’ condition from a *waiting* one (where people cannot work until they are recognized as refugees) into an *active disposal condition* to build a place where to live. This means the migrants can make use of their time and their learning and job skills instead of living in a resentful limbo; whereas this means for the arrival society to use the energies and the industriousness of young people coming here to work, and to offer them a hospitality based on equality rather than charity.

Beyond the Threshold tells also about an exit from home though which the formation acquired during the restoration of their own dwelling becomes technical knowledge to use outside, in the labour world, through a learning process which is not generic but oriented to address each of them towards the individual abilities. Beyond the threshold of the economic dependence and the social services reliance.

Like in any participated intervention, the learning practice where the minors have been included generated an appropriation process of the space they were transforming. A process that allowed an identification with the place to inhabit, and therefore the recognition of a sense of belonging necessary to start a citizenship process; at the same time it has allowed a not permanent belonging, since the apartments are designed for a transitory inhabiting. The work of self-recovering, together with the construction of premises to an effective integration, is conceived as an activity for themselves and for the ones who will come later: the hosted migrants become the welcome creators. Beyond affirming their own presence in the place they took care of, they also take care of a space belonging to all the people

who will inhabit it, in this way opening to that care of the common space which is fundamental in every real plan of co-habitation.



Figure 4: Plan of the apartment in Via degli Etruschi 5, Milan.

This process of appropriation and dis-appropriation of space gives important suggestions to urban planning. In fact, the territorial government can select ordinary residential places to be transformed in a not temporary way, but in a wide perspective, into transitory inhabiting spaces within an articulated and complex program of habitability for those people who become architects of the material and immaterial requalification of the city.

Some indications for a first organic plan of transitory inhabiting have been recently introduced, in Italy, by an urban planning tool as the 'Extraordinary Program for urban regeneration and peripheries security' (ex D.P.C.M 25/5/2016). In the framework of this tool, the Metropolitan City Authority of Milan has proposed a plan called 'Metropolitan welfare and urban regeneration. Overcoming emergencies and planning new spaces of cohesion and welcoming' where the requalification of abandoned spaces is oriented to a transitory inhabiting, together with services concerning integration and formation, so as to allow "the inhabitants to feel involved in a program of renovation regarding different aspects of civil coexistence" (Città metropolitana di Milano, 2016).

This plan can show how it is possible to construct experimental planning tools aimed at contemporary issues, despite the delay of policies in order to re-define social housing as a part of an articulated range of services aimed at guaranteeing the habitability of the city (Guerzoni, 2012; Poggio, 2005; Tosi, 2004, 2016). These experimental planning tools are disposed to govern phenomena with a more rapid dynamic than that faced by ordinary planning tools, and moreover they don't premise a regulatory framework before; but they require a deep reasoning on the sense of inhabiting, so that their projects can be grounded in the processes of transformation under way.

In this perspective, the Housing Beyond-the-Threshold project stresses urban planning on the valence of house as a possible pivot of a social infrastructure for the contemporary city, open to transience. Beyond the house as a place where one can recognize himself, a new paradigm of inhabiting is proposed, where the sense of *habitus* proper of a dwelling that finds its habits in the inhabited space, is replaced by an approach intrinsically open to the other by itself (Pezzoni, 2013).



Figure 5: One inhabitant is studying in front of a landscape (Photo by Matteo Fiorini)

An opening also induced by the artistic gesture, which crosses the apartments expanding the physical space and inviting the observer to widen the gaze beyond the horizon of everyday life – to explore the new landscape that manifests itself in the heart of every home (figure 4). Each work of art replaces almost entirely the central wall, which becomes a membrane permeable to the observation and to the presence of the observer in relation to it (figure 5): placing the ulterior plane of an unknown universe, it welcomes the inhabitant and at the same time it leads him outside – beyond the threshold – unlike his own being estranged, unlike his own simple inhabiting.

A network project for Milan, a city of hospitality

The outcome of an architectural project that places at the centre of its intervention an aesthetic operation with implications on the social level – the extra space with which to “address the unexpressed wishes of the stranger” (Ferrel, McNamara, 2018) – the Housing Beyond-the-Threshold form a network of *doubled* and *dematerialized* apartments, like a writing that overlaps with the history of the Molise-Calvairate district, tracing a new narrative.

In turn, the entire installation is part of a network of interventions in the territory of Milan and beyond Milan, where other public spaces have been previously transformed through the same process: places

for work, culture, sociality, to which these houses intertwine creating a space for living that does not appeal solely to itself, but which recalls a larger project at the urban scale.

The redevelopment interventions carried out over the years through the inclusion of Ferrari's site-specific works have involved a robotized furnace, tòpos of the repetitive work of the factory, in Valenza (1997 and 2007); a Milanese cultural association - *Isolacasateatro* (2003); the interior space and the front of a restaurant - *Il Luogo di Aimo e Nadia* (2000 and 2008); the self-construction social projects *Il Dado* in Settimo Torinese and in the self-managed House in via Morigi, in Milan (2009), as well as the headquarters of the Centro Studi Assenza association (1981) which is the masterly place of all the installations. The specific sign of the works that *double* these different places becomes the presence on the territory of an artistic gesture recognizable in each of the installations, which propose to act as catalysts capable of increasing the quality of life and work in the places with which relate.

The works included in the Houses Beyond-the-Threshold are intertwined with the most recent installations that affect the historical cores and the paths of the agricultural landscape around Milan: the itinerary *A new landscape feeds the traveler*,⁹ and its development along the Navigli canals right on the shores of the Darsena (figure 6), in the heart of the city, they form the articulated weave of a transformative aesthetic project in which art becomes “constructor of world” (Verri, 2010), opening in each place “new ways - in the territories of the eye” (Altman, 1998) generative of values not only aesthetic, propulsive of a different vision of the world.



Figure 6: The façade of the municipal market on the Darsena, Milan (Photo by Paolo Ferrari)

⁹ The project “A new Landscape nurtishes the traveller” has been presented at the IX Day of Studies INU (Istituto Nazionale Urbanistica) “Blue and green infrastructures, virtual cultural and social network” on 18/12/2015.

The network formed by these ‘artistic-scientific-architectural’ operations becomes a sign of welcoming for the city, the open weave of an inhabiting condition that leads out of the habitual pattern of a pre-established reality. Marking, for those who already live there, an irreversible gap concerning the processes of identification with their own places, to be defended and preserved from an extraneousness that subverts them. Defining, for those who are new arrivals, the outlines of a new kind of belonging, given by the learning of a language – artistic, architectural, urban policies – capable of reciprocity, although not immediate, as is the project of a hospitality not enslaved to a dynamic of power but aimed at the development of the best skills of those who have to inhabit these places.

An aesthetic and ethical project at the same time, where the relationship between inhabitant and inhabited place is triggered by a reciprocity generated by an architecture that has become the interpreter of the ‘spirit of generosity’ on which its social role is based, as recently affirmed by the curators of the 2018 Architecture Biennale. Where the city takes care of all its inhabitants in leading them to the threshold – beyond the threshold – of a space that opens up to the other, tracing the path of a project through which old and new inhabitants can access what it does not belong (yet), within which it is possible to build a belonging rich in (own) extraneousness.

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