



OPTIMISTIC SUBURBIA 2

Middle-Class Mass Housing Complexes

PROCEEDINGS

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Establishing shot. Housing Complexes in Bologna and Florence

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Session: 1 – *Writing the History of Post-war Housing Complexes and Neighborhoods. A Take on Research Strategies and Methodologies.* Chairs: Gaia Caramellino and Filippo De Pieri

ABSTRACT

In the late 1950s, the development of suburbs in Bologna and Florence shows similarities in dynamics and structure. The collective residential buildings in the districts “Pilastro” (Bologna) and “Sorgane” (Florence) represent two paradigmatic examples of such a process: their location is very distant from the ancient urban fabric of the two respective towns. In these buildings, many families moving in from the country or from Southern Italy had the opportunity to find a self-contained flat with a bathroom. These two examples highlight the peculiarities of a phenomenon that rarely affects residential complexes: at first, they had risen in the context of council housing. Afterwards, the greatest part of their considerable extent turned into middle-class neighborhoods.

The aim of this paper is to highlight the different strategies used to analyze both residential units: the first step of the research focused on general aspects. Then, the focus shifted to the description of specific data. The raw material was made up of multiple layers of sources such as archival research, interviews with architects, politicians involved in the projects, and inhabitants. This tangle of threads was unraveled until it finally managed to reveal two aspects. The first one is how the social status of the inhabitants has changed over the years. The second interesting aspect is that, although the realisation of both districts involved a large number of celebrated architects, the very inhabitants explicitly asked for and obtained several changes in ongoing architectural projects and urban planning.

In addition to archival and field research, a further element for historical research is film. Certain movies – featuring Marco Ferreri, Roberto Benigni, Dario Fo, Stefano Benni – show the residential estates in the districts that were still under construction. This is a great contribution to the analysis of urban layering in both case studies.

Keywords: Pilastro; Sorgane; housing.

1. Two districts

The districts Pilastro in Bologna (1959-1984) and Sorgane in Florence (1957-1974) have a great deal in common. Although they are very different in terms of the architecture that characterises them, both were designed between the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s during a period of particular confusion in Italian public housing. Still reeling from the long wave of reconstruction, the country was late in adopting laws to deal with the problem of the uncontrolled overbuilding that our cities had been experiencing since the early 1950s.

On the title pages of the project reports for the first drafts of the two settlements, Pilastro and Sorgane are identified as "self-sufficient neighbourhoods". Both neighbourhoods are located far from the historical centre and at the same time poorly connected to the first suburbs. On the other hand, the birth of the two neighbourhoods coincided with a period of great fragility in the urban management of the two cities. Bologna's PRG of 1955 - a plan that foresaw the growth of the city to one million inhabitants - and Florence's PRG (1956) had just been adopted, and the administrations needed a large number of housing units to accommodate especially those low-income groups that had been excluded from the private allotments of post-war reconstruction.

By the end of the 1950s, the incompatibility of the two terms "neighbourhood" and "self-sufficiency" had been certified. It had already become evident during the INA-Casa experiments of the 1950s. For economic reasons, the areas to be urbanised were identified in places that did not fit in with the planned growth of the city.

The problem of the incorrect location of the new neighbourhoods, which were too far from the city centre and from the compact and well-equipped suburbs, not only caused permanent discomfort and social marginalisation for the inhabitants, but also entailed considerable costs for the municipalities, which had to bear the costs of urbanisation works (Di Biagi, 2001, 20-22). The physical and psychological isolation of the neighbourhoods triggered a veritable phenomenon of social downgrading: the buildings took on the character of anonymous dormitory neighbourhoods lacking a precise physiognomy, both social and functional. Moreover, the collective facilities, which were the indispensable condition for the much-vaunted self-sufficiency of the neighbourhoods, were not built. These problems unequivocally decreed the failure of the policy of creating autonomous urban nuclei that had been pursued throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Thus, at a time of critical reconsideration on the subject, the Pilastro and Sorgane operations were born already old, with the almost mathematical certainty of failure.

I approached the study of the two neighbourhoods for different reasons. I studied the history of the Pilastro for my thesis at the Department of Architecture of the University of Florence (Mingardi, 2011) and I studied Sorgane during a post-doctoral grant at the Raghianti Foundation in Lucca. Delving into the cultural activity of Carlo Ludovico Raghianti in the 1950s (Mingardi, 2020), I analysed his involvement in the events that led to the construction of the neighbourhood. I then examined the history of Sorgane up to the latest transformations that have taken place in the district over the last ten years.

Despite the different occasions, my methodological approach to the two case studies was the same. Using the typical cinematic technique of the Establishing shot - i.e. an opening shot that sets the context for the next scene, designed to inform the audience of where the action will take place - the choice was made to set the historical narrative with a very wide shot, useful to set the tone of the content and portray the context. First of all, I carried out a bibliographic survey. It wasn't limited to monographic publications or articles in journals, but it also included degree and doctoral theses on the cases in question or on other neighbourhoods in other cities whose planning process had similar characteristics. I then proceeded to analyse the archives in order to understand the urban development of the two urban centres.

A great number of societies contributed to the construction of the two neighbourhoods: the Bologna and

Florence's "Istituto Autonomo Case Popolari" (now "ACER Bologna" and "Case Popolari di Firenze"), the two administrations and the building cooperatives in the case of Bologna. Therefore, there was an in-depth study of the documents kept in many archives. The examined material was of various kinds: correspondence, typewritten documents (reports, progress reports on projects, resolutions of city councils and councils) and graphic material (drawings, sketches, heliocopies, models). The construction process of the two neighbourhoods was characterised by many variations on the initial project, which is why numerous planimetric drawings were produced over the course of time: their analysis formed the backbone of the research work.

In addition to the drawings relating to the urban plans, I examined the individual buildings that make up the neighbourhoods. Given the macro-structural scale of some of them, the study of the individual buildings often proved to be fundamental for the historical narrative of the neighbourhood. This assumption was valid both for buildings that had been constructed and for those that had only been planned but not built. Many architects who played an important role in 20th century Italian architecture worked on the Pilastro and Sorgane: in Bologna Glauco Gresleri, Francesco Santini, Luigi Figini, Gino Pollini, Luigi Vignali and in Florence Leonardo Ricci, Leonardo Savioli, Giuseppe Giorgio Gori, Giovanni Michelucci. Therefore, in addition to the public archives of the municipalities or local authorities that were involved in the construction of the district, the archives of the individual designers were examined in order to obtain further documentary and graphic information on the case studies.

Both neighbourhoods have had a strong internal presence of the critical voice of the inhabitants. At Pilastro, the "Comitato Inquilini" (Tenants' Committee) - formed immediately, during the first housing allocations in 1966 - was instrumental in the urban planning decisions that led to the current definition of the district. Over the years, the inhabitants have argued for the need to produce plan variants to increase the areas of public green space and to create services not envisaged by the architects' and administrators' plans.

2. "Comitato Inquilini"

In 1966, the founding act of the Pilastro's Comitato Inquilini clarified what had animated the spirit of the people since the first days of life in the village: "to safeguard, coordinate and protect the collective economic, moral and social interests of the neighbourhood inhabitants" (Mingardi, 2014, 1280). From the mid-1960s onwards, many tenants committees or neighbourhood committees were set up in the new Italian urban areas, following in the footsteps of the tenants committees that had emerged in the INA-Casa settlements. In most cases, these were spontaneous groups of citizens who wanted to discuss the problems of their neighbourhoods together, to make demands to the authorities and, through this, to rediscover social contact and a collective identity. Even though they were local episodes that arose on the basis of demands and were active in limited territories, the committees were not associations that were the result of casual relations of spatial proximity, but groups capable of originating significant social ideals (Cristina, 2017, 216)

The requests of the Committee concerned the most urgent needs for the village to become a civilised place, such as the implementation of a continuous bus service, the installation of post boxes, intercoms and equalisation of telephone tariffs, but also the implementation of certain key points of the urban plan. Given the very long time span between the construction of the first buildings and the rest of the plan, the inhabitants of the area were already living in the village when it was still being formed, with all the inconveniences that the lack of services brought. The long-standing problem of the non-simultaneous construction of residences and services was very much felt in the 1950s by INA-Casa. The authorities were only responsible for building housing, while the municipalities were obliged to provide the areas with infrastructure. However, they did not have the financial means to do this.



Fig. 1- Pilastro in 1966. Archivio ACER Bologna

The research work, particularly in the Bologna case study, was therefore not limited to an urban and architectural analysis of the neighbourhood, but also analysed the sociological aspects connected with its construction. Examining of the "local" archives of the various associations still present in the area was fundamental: photographs, period postcards and leaflets constituted precious material to reconstruct the history of the village. For the iconographic research I made use of further explorations. The collections of the Cineteca di Bologna and the Archivio Storico Comunale di Firenze contain numerous materials relating to the different phases of construction of the two neighbourhoods. From the first images showing agricultural land, which was soon to be used for other purposes, to photographs of construction sites and the inauguration of the various buildings that make up the two districts. A very effective way of retracing the design, construction, social and economic events of the two neighbourhoods was the interview (De Pieri, Bonomo, Caramellino, Zanfi, 2013, XXIV-XXV). The research work has been enriched by this indispensable tool, which has made it possible to unearth numerous stories between the folds of history that would otherwise not be found in the "official" sources. I had the opportunity to meet the people directly involved in the planning of the two neighbourhoods; for the Pilastro: Gresleri, the architects of the municipality involved in the design of the variants, and the municipal councillors who have dealt with the Bologna case study over time, such as Giuseppe Campos Venuti; for Sorgane, Marco Dezzi Bardeschi, a long-time collaborator of Leonardo Savioli, and some former collaborators of Ricci and Gori. In addition to meetings with architects and politicians, it was essential to interview the inhabitants of the neighbourhoods. Thanks to direct testimonies, it was possible to focus on those particular tenant claims that have been a constant throughout the village's history. It was possible to understand which public spaces in the neighbourhood were used by the tenants to organise their meetings and, therefore, to map and date the services built within the Pilastro during its early development phase.

The interview with sculptor Nicola Zamboni was very important. He was the author of the reinforced concrete sculptures that populate Pasolini Park in the Pilastro, in front of the district's iconic building: the Virgolone. The sculptor explained to me how he was able to carry out (and be financed for) such a large urban art project. The 'trick' was not to call them works of art, but 'special concrete castings'. So when the politician found the item "special concrete castings" in the tender specifications at very low prices, he didn't pay attention and the item was approved.

In addition to interviews, another fundamental means of understanding the complexity of the urban history of the two neighbourhoods was cinema. Not only the professional one, but also numerous family films, kept in the Home Movies archive in Bologna, through which it was possible, thanks to moving images, to focus on some particular moments of the construction of the two neighbourhoods. In some of the films I was able to see

workers at work in Sorgane in 1965, or the visit of Mayor La Pira to the district in June 1964. In the cinema, the Pilastro is often a film set. The Virgolone park was the protagonist in two film episodes: in “Chiedo asilo” (1979) by Marco Ferreri, Roberto Benigni strolls through the lunar environment of the area, which was still in the process of being defined and therefore represents a historical document of considerable value, while in “Musica per vecchi animali” (1989) by Stefano Benni, Dario Fo and Paolo Rossi star in a number of takes filmed among Zamboni’s statues in which the scenic impact of the system designed by the Bolognese sculptor is clearly understood. In addition, “Lavorare con lentezza” (2004), directed by Guido Chiesi, was almost entirely filmed in the first houses of the Pilastro.



Fig. 2 - Roberto Benigni in “Chiedo Asilo”, directed By Marco Ferreri (1979). Screenshot.



Fig. 3 - Dario Fo and Paolo Rossi in “Musica per vecchi animali”, directed by Stefano Benni (1989). Screenshot.

3. Conclusions

Due to the lack of attractive magnets, there is no public dimension of the place at Pilastro and Sorgane. There are everyday actions such as parking, walking on the porch and the spaces beside the buildings. But there is no commerce, no work, and in general no reason to go there unless you are a resident. The dense flow of daily life does not occur. However, there has always been a willingness on the part of the villagers to transform these negative elements into strengths through strong cohesion and the establishment of reference points for collective life. The unfortunate choice of the location of the villages and the lack of services was the reason for an immediate, strong brotherhood among the inhabitants who united in facing daily difficulties together. This

demonstrates how - although in more associative years than the present - the population was able to unite and propose a "participatory" management of urban and neighbourhood issues, born "from below" and certainly not from programmes carried out by the municipality. This aspect stands out as a very interesting peculiarity of the Pilastro, which could provide keys to understanding and operational proposals compared to other current attempts to redevelop ghetto neighbourhoods (e.g. Corviale and Tor Bella Monaca in Rome or Scampia in Naples), which are struggling to get off the ground.

At a time when peri-urban areas of the city have a strong appeal to the younger generation, the Pilastro and Sorgane, quiet neighbourhoods far removed from the hustle and bustle of typical city life, are a good place to live in. This is because there is no lack of community life within the neighbourhoods. In one of the four towers of the Pilastro there is still a television network operated by the inhabitants for the exclusive use of the building. Everything in the building is self-managed (from cleaning to maintenance work). Teletorre 19" not only reports on the wide-ranging initiatives in the village, but also live broadcasts the condominium meetings, the "events" organised in the communal rooms on the ground floor (e.g. the condominium billiards tournament), and - thanks to the contribution of the tenants - many films. Although it is an isolated example, Teletorre is in continuity with the path taken since 1966: a self-governing spirit and a desire to be together. These values have now partly contributed to transform the social status of the neighbourhood population. Born as working-class neighbourhoods, today Pilastro and Sorgane are registering the presence of declaredly middle-class residents: in the Virgolone there is a community of young artists and in one of Ricci's buildings in Florence - the so-called "Nave" - live several researchers and university professors from the Florence Department of Architecture, probably in search of a "contact" with the memory of the famous designer.

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