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# ABITARE COLLETTIVO COME PRATICA ADEGUATA PER RISOLVERE LA FRAMMENTAZIONE DELLA CITTÀ

## COLLECTIVE HOUSING AS A GOOD WAY TO SOLVE CITY FRAGMENTATION

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Today the study of the fragmentation represents an important occasion to meditate on the city and on the evolution of the relational strategies of settlements. If we analyse in a critical way our contemporary cities, we can see several interventions of the last decades, that brought, more or less consciously, to discontinuity and isolation (gated communities to the new ghettos). In this situation the individual becomes part of a small community; but how long does it can go on? Are the public and sharing spaces, in which we can open ourselves to the city and in the same time we can develop a sense of identity and belonging, well designed? Are they at human scale? A tendency, that can be observed in the modern western cities, is the intervention as collective living and cohousing that are producing urban continuities and community relations trying to institute relationships with the outside, always keeping their own differences and identities. Anyway the architectonic results don't seem already innovative and the general quality of the interventions remains of low level. The innovative examples for collective living can certainly be considered positive for what deals with functions, topics and sense of community: spaces where liveability increases and where a rediscovered relation between Man and Environment is at the centre of the project, have been designed. So the lacking passage to completely solve, thanks to the cohousing projects, the fragmentation of the city, deals with the architectural aspect. Architects must underline the importance of the architectural results in terms of language and spatiality to increase the integration capability of the intervention. In this case the design of architecture has a fundamental role for the next development of the city and for solving all the fragmented and inclusive situations.

#### KEYWORDS

Fragmented city  
Architectural quality  
Liveable spaces  
Sense of community

## MASS INDIVIDUALISM AND FRAGMENTATION

In the historical period we are experiencing we entered into the crisis of the classical systems that allow us to know and organize our cities. So nowadays it's more crucial than ever to start a deep reflection on the ways to live and to design our contemporary cities. We must discover how, today, the society changes the needs of the citizens; what kind of spaces our society is creating and which are the features of these spaces. We need to understand what is the meaning of domestic spaces and that one of public spaces. We need to understand "where open communities set up and where ghettos and fences are created" [1].

One of the greatest territorial consequences dictated by the contemporary society is caused by a form of emergent *mass individualism* that manifests itself in the behavior of living, buying, leisure and moving into the territory. The experience that we live every day looks more and more like a sequence of spaces, shots of landscapes and places that we take during the day and we reassemble later.

The sense of identity that we develop is thus the result of this assembly of fragmented experiences, result of a territory too often organized by fragments, by compartments barely linked or that don't talk absolutely to each other.

The reality which designers have to do with is that one of the fragmented city, characterized by a discontinuity of spaces and places. This is definitely the result of a society that has been overturned by upsetting changes, and which is governed nowadays by the logics of technology and market that no longer need a city designed for Man.

Contemporary cities are also the result, however, of wrong urban decisions and improper relational strategies, where too often the urban and architectural interventions contributed to increase the fragmentation of the city and the isolation of the citizens.

Also in the last years a lot of the residential interventions succeeded to properly solve the needs of living. However the majority of those interventions, didn't create conditions for aggregation or public and usable spaces. Too often self-referencing projects have been produced. So the resultant is not a city made by exchanges and relations, but an archipelago composed by little islands and cells that can not be compared to the neighbourhood.

We are sure that, thanks to specific residential interventions, this trend should be changed. We are sure that we should think back to the city where the Man can return to being a citizen, a city that will come back to live of relationships and exchanges.

## COHOUSING AS RE-DISCOVERED TENDENCE AND NEW HOPE

The outcomes of this research is that specific interventions of cohousing can represent a very interesting practice, able to start the change and give new life to our cities. This because cohousing, if thought in a correct and complete process (that we will define later), becomes a residential intervention able to create social situations, to generate open, live and collaborative spaces and to realize places creators of community and exchanges.

How Grazia Brunetta and Stefano Moroni claim by in their book *La città intraprendente*, cohousing is one of the set of community forms characterized by common distinctive features and called "Contractual Communities".

The contractual communities can be organized according to various contractual forms and typologies: from the contractual communities of owners (of which cohousing is perhaps the most significant expression) to those of renters and co-owners. Within our discourse about cohousing and its potentialities (not yet fully expressed) to curb the trend of urban fragmentation, it seems interesting to highlight four typical characteristics.

1. Despite the contemporary discussion leads to the trivialization of considering cohousing as complete sharing of space, time and property; cohousing represents the true place where we can discover the original meaning of private property and the importance, often forgotten, of the places for the private moments;
2. The spaces occupied by cohousing, or more generally, by contractual communities, are always territorially defined and identifiable, even if it's a flat, a building or a territorial complex.
3. A basic principle for the interpersonal relations between the members of the community is reciprocity. It means that the community is based on a mutual interest of its members. Moreover the sharing of space and time, which takes place thanks to the services and functions established in the community, is not restricted to the cohouser but it's often open to non-residents, bringing benefits to the neighborhood.
4. The goods and services ensured by the community can better adapt to the local situations and to the real needs of the people, than done by the same facilities or services provided by the traditional public bodies.

A proper clarification is, of course, that not all Contractual Communities aim to create community, or to reduce isolation in the contemporary city. A negative declination of the discourse of community organization is represented by the countless cases of the gated communities that increase more and more the isolation within the city and within the community itself. Designed to give a greater feeling of security to the users, the gated communities turned into golden prisons in which contacts between neighbors have been limited; privacy becomes the organizer of the lives of the users who find solace in the Technology that watches over them.

These places, separated by walls, cameras and security guards, are described by the film "The Zone" [2] and are represented as the sad scenario of a self-inflicted segregation of people who want to get away from modern society, turning into a tight place that is closed both to the external society and to the rest of the "internal community." Arisen and developed in the United States (it is estimated that today in the United States the 5% of the population is living in these forms of reassuring isolation), now they are spreading in the European world.

### **CONTRACT, FUNCTIONS AND NEIGHBOURHOOD: THREE LEVELS OF COHOUSING**

We believe that cohousing is an important practice for its ability to deal with the issue of fragmentation of the contemporary city.

This consideration comes from the fact that the cohousing, by its nature, organizes the social structure in which is setting up with a new form of re-discovered relations and cooperation between citizens. In particular the research stresses how this innovative organization of the social structure takes shape through three different quality levels of sharing.

1. The first level is about the proper contractual aspect of the social relations. Cohousing, as form of contractual community, bases its being and its organization on a contract that is accepted by the people and which defines the rights and duties that everyone must follow. This first level is essentially the formal share of the contract that defines the social relations and that begins to outline the structure of the community itself; through this first step, which stops at a formal level, the community is outlined as "institution" that defines the sharing modalities, the selection rules of the new inhabitants and in general the rules that govern the life of the community.
2. It is clear that a community, to be called community, can not stop at the level of formal contracts and shared rules. There is the need to establish functional relationships and to allow a true sharing of spaces within the community. The cohousing projects are designed to ensure to everyone the essential environments of privacy and intimacy, but at the same time, to meet the demand of sociality. Demand of sociality that comes from the different realities for which the cohousing is structured and which can be even more characterizing in case of cohousing for particular classes of society such as elderly, disabled or students. In general it means the sharing of the supplementary services to housing: from the most traditional (laundry, tools room, kitchen, multifunctional room, children's area, etc.) to most innovative such as the social manager, the bookcrossing area, the social buying groups or the banks of time.

The community takes shape around the common management of these public spaces. The sharing of the functions and the exchange of experiences and skills increases the sense of community and leads to the development of a sense of belonging and active participation in the community life. This second step is then characterized, in substance, by a sharing of spaces and functions only inside the community of cohousing.

3. Even if maintaining its own identity and its own different characteristics, these communities establish a strong relationships with the surrounding reality: it overcomes the functional isolation of the complex and it can reduce the level of fragmentation of the city. In fact another step that characterizes almost all the contemporary experiences of cohousing is the presence, within the complex, of functions that are not reserved to the residents, but that are opened, in a more or less significant way, to the neighborhood. In order to promote their goal of connecting with the district, the spaces for the development of these activities are generally designed at the ground floor of the buildings. Typical examples of hosted functions that become focal point of the neighborhood, helping to strengthen the social structure, can be the exhibition spaces, co-working or microcredit, banks of time, gardens or spaces for training and job placement.

These features designed both for residents and for the district may be organized by the community, or they may be developed as a form of space given to social companies or to local associations, dedicated to prevention and care.

But how much are truly enhanced the communities and their different identities, if we limit the sharing just to these three levels? How strong and durable are these kinds of relationship with the outside?

Can we think to a next step of further link with the neighborhood that can limit the fragmentation of our cities?

## THE FOURTH LEVEL AND ARCHITECTURE

Our reflection starts from the consideration that, as we saw before, within these realities of cohousing there is already a functional and social innovation, but the innovation in architectural field is often lacking and the quality of the interventions could be certainly higher. So an enhancement of these realities, to improve their ability to create relationships with the city, can go one step further by developing the research design. In the contemporary architectural debate is now widely discussed on the relationship between the cost of the work and its quality.

There are countless examples of good architecture realized with restrained costs. We can think to the competition HousingContest promoted by ANCE Milan in which over two hundred projects of residential buildings have been presented: these projects combine high performance and architectural techniques to a cost of sales lower than 1,600 €/sqm.

Therefore the economic aspect can not brake the research for solutions of architectural quality. Starting from existing realities, that mend social relationships through contractual arrangements and through sharing functions oriented inside and outside the residential complexes, we should develop a further qualitative step that is based on the good architectural practice and on the technical and compositional results. In particular we should aim to increase the integration capability of the interventions, establishing as objective some significant results in terms of architectural and spatial language. This means thinking Man and Environment at the center of the project, and be able to imagine a living city, governed by relationships and exchanges.

The fourth step is, therefore, a change of perspective: no more the architecture that looks to cohousing, but cohousing but that looks to architecture.

In particular, when we intend to act on the level of architecture for the projects of residential cohousing, we mean take into account some designing aspects.

First of all we must be able to let our project dialogue at different scales with the context that surrounds the project area (be it an urban, sub-urban or rural context) and establish relationships with landscape and environment.

Moreover we should study the ground floor spaces of buildings that could be a strategic point because can host easily public functions. About this feature we should look at the north European experiences in which the ground floors are often permeable to the city. Other two points that is convenient to underline are the appropriate choice of the materials (that can increase the quality level of the spaces and link in proper way the project with the surrounding) and the reassembling of the urban fronts, creating identity and belonging to the urban reality.

Adopting those architectural aspects (technical and compositive) will allow to enhance the social features of the phenomenon of cohousing. This will support the development of new typologies of relationships among persons and among districts of the cities. So the contemporary situation of isolation and fragmentation will be ride over.

[1] Boeri, S., 2011. *L'anticità*. Bari: Editori Laterza, p. 43.

[2] *La zona*, movie, 2007, Spain and Mexico, direction by Rodrigo Plà.

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