

## **THE LOCAL DIMENSION OF HOUSING EMERGENCIES\***

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Housing problems have always informed a cultural debate, transcending the sphere of formal research to that of moral and social issues on the right to housing. Today, the debate, still containing the usual topics, is enhanced by new challenges and questions, some of which have reached such a dimension, in terms of number of people interested by them, that they deserve more space in the debate. Following a brief overview of the main forms that the housing question adopts, this paper will describe two strategies, one Italian and one Spanish, that claim to tackle housing problems. As discussed in the last section, the comparison with the Spanish case reveals the Italian policy weaknesses and the missed opportunities to deal with the housing issue without committing public resources.

### **A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE HOUSING PHENOMENA**

Some challenges, such as the very high migration rate of Chinese rural population to the cities, the international agreements put in place to reduce the consumption of non-renewable energy or the need to quickly rebuild entire sections of cities after natural disasters, are dominating the debate around housing emergency. All of them are widely represented both in publications for professionals and in that purely informative.

However, there is another side of this multifaceted issue that is embracing a wide range of cases: the access to decent and affordable housing<sup>1</sup>. Its extreme expression is configured as a real social and environmental emergency: by 2030, one in seven will be living in unplanned settlements. If nothing changes, in 2050, one in three people will live in an unplanned settlement or a refugee camp<sup>2</sup>. But the lack of affordable housing takes another form in the costliest cities, where even households earning far above the median income find themselves financially suffocated by mortgage payments<sup>3</sup>.

The enlargement of the hardship area calls the attention on a new housing question<sup>4</sup>, that is not only generated by inadequate level of income: the “housing hardship” assumes a multidimensional connotation that reveals the crisis between the existing building stock, the demographic changes and the behaviours and lifestyle of the population.

Given the multiple dimensions of the several components that contribute to create the “housing hardship” in different territorial contexts, it appears clear that the concept of “affordable” must be defined in the context, but it is not enough: it should be necessary to cross the data with social dynamics, economic trends and environmental issues trying to achieve a holistic vision and not working on independent issues.

### **AN ITALIAN CASE IN POINT AND ITS SPANISH COUNTERCHECK**

According with the Eurispes (Annual Report - January 2005) nearly five million Italian families feel threatened by the continued growth of the cost of living, cost against which housing plays a major role<sup>5</sup>. They are qualified as “affected by poverty in suits”.

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On the other side, there is a stock of 40 000 social housing vacancies that remain unused because the agencies that deal with the management of public housing do not invest for the renovations<sup>6</sup>. In addition to these there are over 5,000 unoccupied private houses<sup>7</sup>.

Given these data, the Italian policy adopted in 2009, and renovated until now, represents the attitude to implement public policies without investigating the possibilities to multiply its effects and benefits through a more sensitive and strategic analysis of its multiple potentialities. Its description will be followed by the one of a Spanish strategy, generated by a private company initiative, that will highlight the missed opportunities of the Italian one.

Sixty years after the approval of the national law n. 43/1949 “*Measures to increase employment, facilitating the construction of houses for workers*”, better known as “Piano INA Casa”<sup>8</sup>, on the 1<sup>st</sup> of April 2009, the Italian Government, signed an agreement with regional and municipal administrations in order to *promote initiatives aimed at reviving the economy, to meet the housing needs of families and to introduce incisive procedural simplification measures in construction*<sup>9</sup>. Each Italian regional government would have implemented the directives in the respective regional legislative framework within the following 90 days in order to choose the most effective way to revitalize the local building sector<sup>10</sup>.

The regional laws were called “Piano Casa”, and their original mission is reminiscent to the one of the “Piano INA Casa”. This choice for a name sounds extremely bizarre considering that in Italy, in the same year 2009, a “Piano per l’edilizia abitativa”<sup>11</sup>, also known as “Piano Casa”, had been approved, to “*increase the residential real estate through the housing supply, to be implemented in accordance with the criteria of energy efficiency and reducing polluting emissions*”<sup>12</sup>.

While the national initiative was mainly a financial program to produce new houses for vulnerable social groups<sup>13</sup>, with many controversial steps, the regional plans were mainly dedicated to revitalize the economy through the building sector. The memory of the most effective conceptualization of the Piano INA Casa, and its successfully integrated goals, had been lost. While the national plan for housing has registered significant delays in implementation revealing its anti - economy<sup>14</sup>, and has not yet met its goals, the regional plans for housing had a smoother deployment. According to the agreement between State, Regions and Municipalities, the measures to be adopted were:

- Volumetric increase (to allow numerous families to earn some more square meters<sup>15</sup>, improve the architectural quality and energy efficiency of the existing buildings);
- Demolition and reconstruction with enlargement for residential buildings within the limit of 35 % of the existing volume, with the aim of improving the architectural quality, energy efficiency and use of renewable energy sources;
- Simplification of the procedures to obtain building permits faster<sup>16</sup>.

These generic indications were transposed in different ways by each Regional government. Commonly in all of them it seems to be lost, or at least deliberately trivialized, the declared aim “*to meet the housing needs of families*”. Instead of prioritizing family “needs”, they have tended to meet “some families’ privileges”. Taking as an example the Sardinian regional law<sup>17</sup> it contained “*Provisions for the extraordinary support of the economy by the revival of the construction industry and for the promotion of interventions and programs of strategic importance for the development*”. The law has been annually renewed, but keeping for the most part the same contents. Its latest draft (2015) has changed the name, becoming “*Rules for the improvement of existing buildings*”, but not the former strategy.

By limiting the analysis to the measures provided for urban residential areas, it accepts:

- Volumetric increases of up to a maximum of 20 per cent<sup>18</sup> of the existing volume for each housing unit. (The increment can reach 35 per cent if it is a first home<sup>19</sup>).

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- Recovery of the attics in existing central area through modifications of the heights of the ridge and eaves and lines of slope of the water, to ensure the achievement of an average height of 2.70 meters for dwelling accommodation.

It is specified that the volumetric increase cannot be used to generate new units.

It is evident that the highest use of the standard works in favour of the owners of top floor apartments with terrace in multi-level buildings, or in favour of single-family houses with gardens to achieve significant expansion. Considering that in the main city centres, where houses prices are highest, most buildings have a flat rooftop, the implementation of the law is limited to new volumes built on terraces.

In Spain, since 2012, it is operating a private company named “La Casa por el Tejado”, from now on LCT. It builds new houses on the Eixample roof-tops where the projected buildable area was never exhausted in compliance with current building renovation. Their strategy is pretty simple. After mapping the buildable spaces in the city centre, LCT offers to property owners the opportunity to revalue the entire building through improvements in common areas, as well as renovating and upgrading the roof-top terrace to comply with current regulations. In exchange, the owners sell or rent the buildable area. LCT, after a deep investigation of the building structure potentialities, designs the penthouses. The design team creates plans for two simultaneous construction activities: the preparation of the roof-top terrace, and the construction of the modules in a factory. Quickly thereafter, the penthouse modules are transported to the building by truck. A special crane hoists the modules onto the terrace while a team of specialists directs the operations of positioning and anchoring. Once the penthouses are in place, the finishing touches are added and the service installations are connected. In a few days’ time, the flats are ready for use<sup>20</sup>. Each unit incorporates green areas on roofs and walls and through certification systems established in Spain, such as LEED (USGBC) or VERDE (GBCe), and hence it is possible to classify the penthouses with an independent environmental rating.

## DISCUSSION

The Italian policy, generated by public initiative, not only has no bearing on the issue of the housing problems, but, in step with the last European trends, it rewards the private entities, without any even indirect benefit for the local community. Actually, as we’ve observed, the regulation favours those who already own a home by allowing them to increase its enjoyment and value. The 10 points percentage of volumetric increase bonus for energy efficiency improvement represents a very marginal success<sup>21</sup>.

The Spanish case shows that the strengthening of the construction industry, with all those involved in the process, could be pursued with a more virtuous strategy, perfectly compatible with the means and aims of the Sardinian case. Indeed in the Spanish case

- new penthouses have a smaller size than the average of the apartments in the Eixample<sup>22</sup>, so they integrate the assortment of housing supply without compromising further ground;
- execution of the housing modules at the factory enables certain times of delivery times, minimizes the generation of waste and the noise arising from processing in situ;
- it is ensured the renovation of the entire building (facades, stairwell, elevator, etc.) with the benefit extended to all tenants who hardly bear the high costs of maintenance;
- green roofs and exterior walls are designed to counter the urban heat island effect;
- the building process is required to be innovated to meet the stringent requirements of the certification LEED (USGBC) or VERDE (GBCe).

The Italian policy, as public initiative, could have been not just designed according with the Spanish principles, without betraying its principles, albeit ambiguous, but improved even further. For instance: the roof-top of social housing properties could have been given to builders to build up new penthouses to be sold or rented, at controlled prices, in exchange of common parts renovation and lift installation when necessary,

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improving the entire building conditions and facilities. It would have represented also a great opportunity to activate that social integration by grafting of young couples, with or without children, who are abandoning the expensive major urban centres in favour of the cheaper residential area in the suburbs. At regional level, according to the current law, it is not allowed to even generate independent units, but only the enlargement of existing properties. However, at the municipal level, it is allowed to fractionate the new unit generated by enlargement, provided that the additional surface is divided proportionally between the two generated by fractionation. Beside the tortuosity of such an administrative misalignment, the management of alienation or rent remains in private hands, thus subject to the rules of a market that, in Italy, forces 4 million households to use much of their income to pay the rent; while at the same time they join the lists of applicants for public housing, currently containing 600 thousand households<sup>23</sup>. It is also a source of controversy whether the building sector needed to be supported or not: according to the last housing census (Istat 2011), buildings and complexes surveyed in 2011 amounted to 14,515,795, 13.1% more than in 2001, while the proportion of the unused housing stock has slightly decreased from 5.7% to 5.2% in the same period.

The comparison between the Italian and the Spanish strategies, clearly demonstrates that it is possible to figure out win-win strategies, or at least multi-objective strategies, with consciousness in regards to the local conditions, and the ability of identifying a wider set of goals that can be satisfied at the same without any loss in effectiveness for the main objective.

\*This paper is subject to an additional copyedit for issues of English language expression.

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### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Woetzel, Jan Mischke and Ram Sangeeth, "The World's Housing Crisis doesn't Need a Revolutionary Solution," *Harvard Business Review*, December 25, 2014, accessed February 2, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Cameron Sinclair, "My Wish: A Call for Open-source Architecture," *TED conference*, February 2006 [https://www.ted.com/talks/cameron\\_sinclair\\_on\\_open\\_source\\_architecture](https://www.ted.com/talks/cameron_sinclair_on_open_source_architecture)

<sup>3</sup> Woetzel, "The world's housing."

<sup>4</sup> Alessandra Graziani, "La Nuova Dimensione del Disagio Abitativo: Statistiche e Previsioni Degli Esperti del Settore," *Studi e Note di Economia*, 3, (2004): 139.

<sup>5</sup> Alessandra Graziani, "La nuova dimensione."

<sup>6</sup> Lorenzo Bagnoli, "Emergenza Sfratti, ma in Italia ci Sono 30-40mila Case Popolari Sfitte," *Il Fatto Quotidiano.it*, Novembre 2013.

<sup>7</sup> ISTAT Census, 2011.

<sup>8</sup> Also known as "Piano Fanfani", from the name of the Minister of Labour and Social Public Assistance that proposed it. *Conceived as a as a manoeuvre aimed at boosting the economy and occupation, building affordable housing, the plan was funded through a mixed system which saw the participation of the state, employers and employees. The latter, via retention on the monthly salary - the equivalent of one cigarette a day, as he recited the propaganda of the time -* Paolo Nicoloso, *Genealogie del Piano Fanfani. 1939-50*, in Di Biagi P. ed. *La grande ricostruzione: il piano Ina-Casa e l'Italia degli anni cinquanta* (Roma: Donzelli Editore, 2001), 49.

<sup>9</sup> See more at Gazzetta Ufficiale 29 aprile 2009, n. 98

<sup>10</sup> Domenico Lavermicocca, "Certificazione Energetica in Edilizia," in *Edilizia e Urbanistica*, ed. Gian Luigi Rota et al., (Torino: UTET Scienze Tecniche, 2010): 666.

<sup>11</sup> See more at D.P.C.M. 16 luglio 2009 Piano nazionale di edilizia abitativa - Gazzetta Ufficiale 19 agosto 2009, n. 191.

<sup>12</sup> art 11. Decreto legge 25 giugno 2008, n. 112- Gazzetta Ufficiale 21 agosto 2008 n. 195 - Suppl. Ordinario n. 196

<sup>13</sup> As listed in the art.11 Legge n. 133/2008 the categories to give priorities should have been: low-income families, also single-parent or single-income; low-income young couples; older people in social or economic disadvantage; non-resident students; persons subject to enforcement procedures of release; other entities meeting the requirements of articolo 1 della legge 8 febbraio 2007, n. 9; legal low-income immigrants, residents for at least ten years in the country or at least five years in the same region.

<sup>14</sup> Valerio Gualerzi, "Abbiamo Costruito Troppo, Meglio Salvare l'usato. Il futuro è social housing," *La Repubblica* Giugno 3, 2013, accessed March 2, 2015. [http://www.repubblica.it/economia/affari-e-finanza/2013/06/03/news/abbiamo\\_costruito\\_troppo\\_meglio\\_salvare\\_lusato\\_il\\_futuro\\_social\\_housing-60228967/](http://www.repubblica.it/economia/affari-e-finanza/2013/06/03/news/abbiamo_costruito_troppo_meglio_salvare_lusato_il_futuro_social_housing-60228967/)

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- <sup>15</sup> It might seem redundant but in Italy the average number of children per woman has never overtaken 1.42 in the last 15 years, according with the ISTAT analysis.
- <sup>16</sup> See more at Gazzetta Ufficiale 29 aprile 2009, n. 98
- <sup>17</sup> Legge Regionale 23 ottobre 2009, n.4 *Disposizioni straordinarie per il sostegno dell'economia mediante il rilancio del settore edilizio e per la promozione di interventi e programmi di valenza strategica per lo sviluppo*, in BOLLETTINO UFFICIALE DELLA REGIONE SARDEGNA N. 35, 31 October 2009.
- <sup>18</sup> art. 2, Legge regionale 4/2009 comma 3 “*The adjustment and the increase in volume can be up to a maximum of 30 per cent, in the event that the revovation involves the entire housing unit with a reduction of at least 15 per cent of the needs energy...*”
- <sup>19</sup> So, for instance: an apartment of 50 square meters can be extended up to 67,5 square meters; an apartment of 90 square meters can be extended up to 121,5 square meters, and so on.
- <sup>20</sup> See more at “Summary of the construction process”. <http://www.lacasaporeltejado.eu/en/proceso-constructivo/sintesis-de-nuestro-proceso-constructivo/>
- <sup>21</sup> In the last version of the law this bonus is conditional upon planning compliance under municipal responsibility.
- <sup>22</sup> “*The proliferation of apartments for rent by airbnb, especially in the Eixample, reveals that the property can not afford to confirm them as a residence, because expensive, often without elevators and large area, compared to the average size of households*” Oriol Nel.lo, Professor of Urban Geography at the Autonomous University of Barcelona, interviewed on February, 2015.
- <sup>23</sup> UIL Servizio Politiche territoriali, “Il fabbisogno abitativo. Rinnovata emergenza, 1° Rapporto Famiglia –reddito-casa”, *Il sole 24 ore*, Marzo 2008, accessed March 12, 2015. <http://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/SoleOnLine4/Economia%20e%20Lavoro/2008/03/affitti-indagine-uil.pdf?cmd%3Dart>

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