

# The Isolotto Neighborhood in Florence: Regeneration between Public Policies and Private Actions

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**Abstract:** Problems relating to the regeneration of many urban spaces, inherited from the Modern age, and the adaptation to new uses and populations have appeared following the economic crisis that hit Italy. They relate, in particular, the open spaces of the public city of the twentieth century. An incredible heritage, for vastness and quality, which seems an excellent potential strategic support for the future urban and regional regeneration, but poses huge maintenance and redesign issues. The article attempts to reflect on the critical conditions faced by some parts of the public city in the Isolotto neighborhood in Florence: spaces often inadequate compared to new ways of living, and as such largely under-utilized compared to the functions that could perform. From this hypothesis, the work aims to observe policies and projects in place for the regeneration of open spaces and understand how these actions are interlinked, colliding or converging, with modification practices of spaces conducted by the inhabitants. The Isolotto neighborhood is a very interesting context in which to observe this double action, public and private, because what remains of the original neighborhood is both the subject of new design conduct by public institutions, and of different uses operated by the settled population.

**Key words:** open spaces, urban regeneration, social housing

## 1. Introduction

This work deals with the Isolotto neighborhood in Florence. A twentieth neighborhood, extensively studied in the literature<sup>1</sup>, and often seen as a model of the Italian urbanism tradition of Modern matrix, albeit declined by the local specificity of Tuscany. The purpose of the following text, that is constructed from an observation of living spaces, from a survey about the transformations that have occurred over the past fifty years, and the study of public policies implemented during these years to improve the housing conditions of the neighborhood, and even more to connect, so progressively more stable to the city, is to reflect on the

current resistance to the transformation of a place that in time proved to be very flexible respect to the use of public and private spaces, able to adapt to changing needs of the inhabitants and which today reports a higher inertia and immobility respect to the need of transformation of some parts of it. The current economic crisis, certainly, plays a crucial role, but also the properties, the cultural and social value that this place has acquired over the years.

## 2. Birth and Organization of the Neighborhood

The INA-Casa Isolotto neighborhood has taken form between the 50s and 60s, through a plan and a project developed between the end of 1950 and the beginning of 1951, previous the Master Plan of the city of Florence in 1958, which were taken into consideration some programmatic lines then already known<sup>2</sup>. The

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<sup>1</sup> The neighborhood has been extensively studied, over time, under various points of view: historical, architectural, urban planning, sociological and anthropological. A lot of the articles, essays and books published on this neighborhood.

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<sup>2</sup> The urban project (by Pastorini, Pellegrini, Poggi and Tiezzi) provided housing and facilities, surrounded by green spaces,

whole engaged in social-organic urbanism current [1], designed by Bellucci, Del Debbio, Di Castro, Fagnoni, Michelucci, Pagani, Pastorini, Pellegrini, Poggi, Tiezzi and Vaccaro and realized in the first seven-year period of the Piano Fanfani<sup>3</sup> [2, 3], covers an area of 46 hectares - that was first occupied about half - in front of the Parco delle Cascine, which is united by a footbridge over the Arno River.

The geographical boundaries that surround Isolotto are: Lungarno dei Pioppi North, Canova street South, Pio Fedi street West and hilly area of Montagnola East. Currently the neighborhood is designed as a recognizable spatial context, that on one side is joined with the consolidated urban fabric of the historical town and on the other side creates a link with the more recent suburbs.

The articulation of the original project involved the extensive implementation of the buildings in diversified typological groupings. It ranges from detached house on lot, terraced houses of two floors, to multi-family houses with three to four floors, to finally come on the west side four flat with six floors, representing a feature of the neighborhood, also visible from the center of Florence. In the varied building complex there are two types that strongly characterize the intervention: the houses with external gallery in the middle sector of Isolotto and the so-called “big snake” at the eastern end of the neighborhood, which remember, by analogy, the name of the Ina-Casa Forte

Guezzi neighborhood in Genoa<sup>4</sup> [4]. 1,500 apartments provided by the original project, divided among 128 buildings, in total have been realized 1,450, divided into two tranches: 1005 delivered in the autumn of 1954 the remaining in 1960.

The articulation of open spaces follows a hierarchical subdivision into three types, that reflects the different degree of social aggregation provided by the original project: there are spaces between the buildings for private or semi-collective uses, linked to wider spaces which serve the lots. Finally, the latter are connected to very large green area called “the park” and arranged in a longitudinal way to the neighborhood. Behind the park will be located all the collective services: the Church, the market (in the neighborhood square), shops in the arcades, the two primary schools and kindergartens, offices, a community center equipment for sport and the BiblioteCaNova.

The spatial definition of full and empty spaces in the neighborhood creates a complex and articulated road plot, based on the separation of pedestrian and vehicular traffic, recognizable in some places by different flooring. The vehicular roads, which serve the lots, exploiting the principle of the *cul-de-sac* do not interfere with traffic to the neighborhood level. A hierarchical division of space, typical of the thought and the functionalist project, however, could be used again referring to the imperative, so much in vogue in this historical moment, of the soft mobility that in addition to the attention to safety — typical of Modern thought — combines health-conscious principles and ecological effects.

Initially conceived as an independent residential complex, result not only of the economic government budget choices and of organizational deficiencies, but above all of an idea of the neighborhood as an autonomous and self-contained communities [5], Isolotto appeared an incomplete neighborhood, due to the difficulty of implementation of primary

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and organized around elements for public use, hierarchically ordered.

<sup>3</sup> In 1949 the Italian government approved Law No. 43, better known as the Piano Fanfani, named after the Minister for Labour Amintore Fanfani who was its promoter. The plan marked a new chapter in economic and popular building of the Country. It was born with the purpose to increase the workers' jobs in the years of economic boom and private initiative in the house industry, in order to meet the serious deficiencies, in the Italian cities, of public housing for people who came from the countryside and were employed in the expanding industry. The Plan lasted fourteen years (1949-1963) and was divided in two septennia. Many important architects of the national scenery participated to the design of the buildings and public spaces. Many neighborhoods were made by this Plan, including small and medium-sized cities. For more information and details see the books of Luigi Beretta Anguissola and Paola Di Biagi.

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<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of some aspects of the Forte Guezzi' story in Genoa see the book of Fabrizio Paone.

infrastructure and some services which had never been made, and clearly separated from the city center not only for environmental limits, but also to the incompleteness of the road and the lack of a local public transport network, which is protracted for a long time<sup>5</sup>. The first hypothesis of the project of light railway/tramway were developed in the 90s, but only after two decades they have made. In 2010 the Line 1 was inaugurated. It connects the station of Santa Maria Novella to Scandicci, crossing the Arno River and licking up the neighborhood. Currently, the Isolotto neighborhood is less isolated than before. Now, in addition to the footbridge along the Arno River, there are many transport infrastructure and vehicular traffic such as the tramway, the SGC Florence-Pisa-Livorno, through which it leads to the A1 highway at Scandicci the Viadotto dell'Indiano, with which you can reach the A11 highway and the Amerigo Vespucci airport, where will settle the future Line 2 of the tramway.

### **3. Resistance to the Transformation and Some Changes of Use**

Walking through the neighborhood you have the feeling that time has stopped. However, at a closer look, you realize that isn't it. Many things have changed.

Looking at the buildings for example you realize that, apart from the "green barracks", once a wooden buildings, today a brickwork — in the past time they were the seat of the primary school, afterschool and "public school" for adult literacy and now home the circle of the elders, the CGIL<sup>6</sup>, the Community of Isolotto and its historical Archive and the Popular Education Centre<sup>7</sup> — all the buildings have been well maintained. Those for residential function, largely redeemed<sup>8</sup>, in some cases have been modified from the

original design. Fences appeared in buildings with external access, flights of outdoor stairs or ramps for people with disabilities made in terraced houses, as well as balconies and verandate lodges scattered everywhere around the neighborhood. The largest apartments have been also divided in smaller apartments. These transformations denote a subversion of the traditional living space of Modern social housing policies. It presupposes a change, conveyed by questions of taste and different needs.

Looking better at open spaces some forms of change of uses are found, but also some forms of resistance and re-appropriation and re-signification (i.e., a new attribution of meaning by the people) of space. The collective open spaces reveal a discreet care. The main changes relate to the use of semi-public spaces, which are used for private purposes for motorcycles and scooters parking, but also for cars. In the neighborhood, in fact, there is a lack of property garage inside the lots. In some places there are only some comb stalls. In the original project, unlike other INA-Casa neighborhoods, only some cellars have been provided built above ground and no garage, although even then the car owners were more than 1,200.

For the resistance you can observe the permanence of some situations almost unchanged over the years. Some areas used to green, without any kind of community facilities or street furniture, have remained unchanged over time; as for example the facing spaces the windows of the club under the arcades, in the Isolotto square. They report, as in the early years of life of the neighborhood, a good daily use, mostly due by not enough internal local space.

In terms of re-signification of the outdoor environments you can detect a special attention to the care of the gardens, the lawns and ornamental plants in the house on the ground floor; and a re-allocation of meaning and use of public space, such as the inclusion of swings in the green space that faces the concave side of the "big snake" sleeve, on the west side of the neighborhood. Otherwise to the planting of umbrella

<sup>5</sup> At the beginning the connections between the neighbourhood and the city were secured by a single tram line and a pedestrian bridge over the Arno River.

<sup>6</sup> This is an Italian workers union.

<sup>7</sup> Over time these buildings have undergone a re-assignment of uses and functions, and a replacement of building materials.

<sup>8</sup> In 1959, 54% of the apartments is redeemed, then in 1996 the percentage increased up to 85 and finally to 98% in 2016.

poles in the middle of the only present playground, recalling those of Aldo van Eyck realized in Amsterdam in the 60s. Overall, some of these forms of change and meaningful reallocation give way to an evident uncertainty between what is public or private, but also reveal a form of colonization of public space determined by the inhabitants: a right to avail [6] that goes beyond the right to property.

In the beginning, if the “planned” communities<sup>9</sup> [7] has been slow to decollate for failure of the neighborhood structures and for social economic differences among the inhabitants, today the conditions seem profoundly changed. It seems that the neighborhood has undergone a generational change, that has increased the education level, with an awareness: living in a high-quality neighborhood, as well as being a cultural and architectural heritage of the Modern. So that in the neighborhood is experiencing a commercial gentrification phenomenon<sup>10</sup> [8], although modest, in a similar way to what is happening in other social housing neighborhood.

Today 378,282 residents live in Florence<sup>11</sup>, about 69,000 units, in spite of the 6,450 inhabitants settled in the 60s, live now in the district 4<sup>12</sup>, which is composed almost equally by males and females, with a small predominance of female population and a nearly 13% presence of foreign people. The population of the neighborhood consists mostly of single-parent families or singles. The age is between 15 and 64 years, with a

lower proportion of children and adolescents up to 14 years and a fair amount of older people. There are various associations working in the neighborhood and play a part, in the wake of the idea of organized communities, to preserve the social environment as “healthy” and culturally engaged as possible, and to support those resistance forms of space uses sedimented over the years.

#### 4. Work in Progress: Actions and Policies

The richness and variety of spaces, especially open and public of neighborhood is undoubted. However, the condition in which they are not always is the best. Faced with this reality, some actions are being undertaken, others related to specific spaces are firm. Today, it is still known a public action more than in the past and the beginning of life in the neighborhood, which try to manage public land transformations. Recently, for example, the market square, within the neighborhood, was the subject of a design contest<sup>13</sup>. The project, won by the Florentine studio Rossi-Prodi, aims to rehabilitate this meeting and aggregation space. The project involves a new articulation of the spaces where the foot traffic takes priority over cars and vehicle traffic. The middle of the square will be reserved for people of all ages and their activities. The parking area will be located at the sides, as well as market activity, placed under a recently built shelter, the business will be transferred close to existing porticos; and it will be eliminated the traffic island on the Lungarno dei Pioppi. All in order to animate this space at any time of the day, although is still within a sense that divides the spaces for reasons of public security, which seems to recall the section of modern feature matrix.

A few months later a new garden of about 4,000 square meters was inaugurated in via del Sansovino, enclosed and usually open only during daylight hours, almost completely in the lawn, with paved paths and

<sup>9</sup> “Planned” community in the sense of the predetermined attribution of apartments to particular social groups.

<sup>10</sup> The specific reference to which types proposed by Giovanni Semi in his last book. In particular, the commercial gentrification is related to the presence of large commercial structures, such as the large shopping center in close proximity to the neighborhoods, that influence habits and lifestyles, as well as gentrification cultural affected by the presence of places that produce culture: cinemas, theaters, multiplexes, art galleries etc.

<sup>11</sup> Data were collected, by the author of this article, at the end of November 2015 on the site of the municipal statistics office available at: [http://statistica.fi.it/opencms/opencms/MenuPrincipale/Dati/Popolazione\\_Firenze/index.html?comune=firenze](http://statistica.fi.it/opencms/opencms/MenuPrincipale/Dati/Popolazione_Firenze/index.html?comune=firenze).

<sup>12</sup> The fourth district is the administrative unit that the City of Florence used to identify the area of Isolotto and Legnaia neighborhoods, places south-west of the metropolitan city.

<sup>13</sup> The competition was organized by the Municipality of Florence and the Association of Architects, Urban Planners, Landscapers and Conservationists of the province of Florence.

some facilities for children, an outdoor theater with 100 seats. All these spaces and activities made to cover a new underground parking in two levels, trying to solve in part, the old problem of parking in this area. Moreover, everywhere in the neighborhood there are a lot of interventions in the trees elimination damaged by recent violent weather phenomena, as well as the re-paving of footpaths interventions placed on either side of the longitudinal central park along the Viale dei Bambini. However, it would be required a redesign of some large green spaces, empty, isolated and urban poor quality furnishings, seats on the edge — almost as if they were clearings — the footpaths that line the long center of the neighborhood green stripe, last support of the Moderno attempt to find an urban continuity in the design of public open space [9].

Beside these projects, different policies, over time, have been put in place and implemented both by public institutions, and associations, communities or forms of cooperation. Some infrastructure policies of transport and accessibility, such as the connections with the city center, started in the early sixties and are still ongoing. See for example the construction of the walkway connecting the Arno, the design and construction of the fast tramway, which is part of a wider plan of reorganization of the city's transport system. In terms of the settlement policy has been the compilation of several commercial facilities around the neighborhood. In terms of administrative decentralization policy, in recent years there has been the establishment of some institutional realities in neighborhood or around it such as the administrative headquarters of the district 4, a place of the union, the site of the Misericordia. For environmental policies the main purpose aims to maintain and strengthen the green connotation of this district<sup>14</sup> both keeping the same amount of open space, and qualifying it better and enriching it with appropriate facilities to new uses. Finally, in terms of waste management, administration and the company

that manages the collection and disposal are engaged with improving the effectiveness through the insert to residents of new bins provided with opening electronic key, in order to avoid shedding and clutter that affects the urban quality of the neighborhood.

Some of the policies are moving in the direction of the identity strengthening of this urban area on the style, although still very sketchy, the eco-districts of central and northern Europe. Then there are especially social type policies, implemented bottom-majority community. The activities are varied, ranging from the migrants integration, aid to the elderly and families in difficulty, to the security support activities, exhibitions organization over local relevant sometimes national. Everything is done in the wake of a community tradition of practical help to the unit neighborhood for problems solving related to daily life, and not only, as well as environment “social housing” and of people who benefit from or live in the neighborhood.

## **5. Isolotto: An Eco-neighborhood? Maybe Yes Maybe No**

Currently the Isolotto is almost everything a private neighborhood, at least in terms of architectural works. This situation is not unusual, since the growth of housing property in Italy has been facilitated by the housing policies of the past decades, as also seen as a factor of social stability [10, 11]. However, the Isolotto is not a privately owned neighborhood, open spaces are mostly still in public ownership. Therefore, the private is not the only playing force that helps to change the neighborhood's spaces. It has been said in the previous paragraphs that many policies have been implemented by the public sector, involving the private, aiming to make neighborhood even more liveable and enhancing its green connotation. In fact the Isolotto, in some respects, can already be considered an eco-neighborhood. So there are: wide open spaces available to the public, within the built-up areas the morphological connotation already promotes a natural tendency to slow mobility both suitable for cycling

<sup>14</sup> According to many people the Isolotto is considered the greenest neighbourhood of the city, for the amount of open space in relation to population density.

and pedestrian, as well as the public transport system in recent years has been strengthened. Besides, there are also regeneration policies, revitalization and reuse of some areas, as well as use of advanced technologies for urban solid waste system. Most recent European experiences in the field of eco-neighborhood<sup>15</sup> are moving, from the architectural point of view, in the energy adjustment direction of the buildings through retrofitting<sup>16</sup>, but also of rearrangement and modification of building types and spaces of housing depending on population changes, regarding the composition of the families, the population structures and tenants requirements. However his type of operations would be individual, fragmented as most of the accommodation has become private property unlike other European cases.

The disagreement issues to transformation and change of use of the spaces are partly conflicting with this scenario that seems to be able to reconfigure the neighborhood. The reasons are diverse and only partly related to the “state of crisis” [12] which today affects the spaces of European cities. Many reasons, in fact have to do with issues of ownership as well as public and private financial resources. It is well known that, as a result of the redemption of housing, the space — especially the home — over time has changed and shaped according to the needs of the residents-owners and fragmented interventions with modifications made by the owners in almost total autonomy. Revolution of the original project, highlights the coming out and the emergence of new ideas, for a more personal and individual living space, only marginally supported by eco-friendly attitudes. This right generates wide variety of uses, certainly now far from those that claim to connect the neighborhood to a “Heritage of the Modern”<sup>17</sup>, but also not purely ecological. Within this

framework various result emerge, for example that relating to the unitary type interventions both on buildings and on open spaces strongly interrelated, even of small size, in the case of timeshare.

In terms of the lack of financial resources it is widely recognized and debated the criticality generated from the last great world economic crisis, which has produced a long recession still ongoing. The crisis which led to lack of public resources, has meant that the state is no longer able to provide enough social services and support to better welfare policies. The state seems to have become to quote the words of Bauman and Bordoni, a sort of “pest population”, no guarantor and giver of public welfare. However, the crisis also affected the private. It has weakened the so-called “middle class” and this, like other public housing neighborhood, had been made by producing strong social biases [13, 14]. Considered this condition, how can we work towards the achievement of ecological neighborhood to Isolotto? Trying to appeal to a growing self-management of spaces and public buildings<sup>18</sup> [15], through the help of a virtuous social capital, as it is happening in many European contexts? Examples of eco-neighborhood in other countries actually seem to suggest that this is not possible without a strong cooperation of all actors involved, under a public direction that finances interventions, also considering that housing in most of the European eco-neighborhoods are public and not private property, as in the case of the Isolotto. However, some interventions that attempt to the Isolotto seem to go in the direction just above exposed, as the regeneration of public collective open spaces through the involvement of population and users, such as the Market Square and

<sup>15</sup> The reference is facing north European experiences such as Vauban in Freiburg, Solar City in Linz, Hammarby in Stockholm, B001 in Malmö, Ile-Saint-Denis in Paris and Bedzed in London.

<sup>16</sup> As it happened in the social housing in Berlin.

<sup>17</sup> We must point out that here, as in other INA-Casa districts were not put constraints on the transformation of the buildings

by the Supervision of Architectural Heritage, as there isn't a classification or a list, in which fall into these types of neighborhoods.

<sup>18</sup> Design and maintenance situations self-managed have been investigated by a research conducted under the scientific responsibility of Cristina Bianchetti, between 2011 and 2013 at the DIST (Interuniversity Department of Regional, Urban Studies and Planning) of the Politecnico di Torino and called “Shared Territories” which led to the publication of the volume edited by Cristina Bianchetti.

the Via del Sansovino gardens. But this still maybe not enough to define the Isolotto an eco-neighborhood.

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