Living and Thinking Nomadic Housing: Porta Palazzo
Temporary Residence in Turin

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Abstract: Living: today it’s often linked to temporariness; the current situation of the housing market, the need of finding housing for moving users or users in temporary housing emergency has caused the city of Turin and other institutions to think a model of Nomadic Housing that aims to be at the same time an experimentation of a new way of furnishing and living interiors and also a new way urban regeneration of areas strongly affected by social problems. Thinking: Interiors and Exhibit Design course at Politecnico of Torino tested a didactic formula to use common spaces of temporary residence as a communicative model of themes related to the area where the building is located and at the same time to induce greater sharing of common spaces through temporary exhibitions.

Key words: temporary housing, building and social renovation, public, common service and private spaces, exhibit to communicate

1. Introduction

The coexistence between different populations in the area of Porta Palazzo has been and still is partly a source of tension, but also helped to create a multicultural, creative and rich environment in terms of stories and traditions. So the choice by the Administration was not random and the temporary residence aspires to become a new polarity of the neighbourhood and a further local node capable of interacting with the network of subjects that animate it.

2. The Project Idea

“Common Places” is the name chosen to designate the project of Temporary Residence in Piazza della Repubblica in Turin: a name that represents the spirit of the initiative by the Housing Programme in collaboration with the Compagnia di San Paolo [1]. The apartments are in fact the “places” real as bricks, protective, comfortable. But they are also “common” because in and out of the apartments there are spaces where tenants can meet, learn, talk, exchange experiences, but they are also “common” because those who live in these units know that it’s not forever and every room, every piece of furniture, every furnishings, will soon be used by other people.

3. The Location and the Existing Building

Porta Palazzo, where the building is settled, is a district characterized by problems of urban decay and social tensions with a high rate of immigration coming first from southern Italy and, more recently, from abroad. The district is among those that attract the highest odds of foreigners who move within the city area. However, the substantial inflows are offset by equally large outflows, making the area a sort of transit place for many foreign immigrants. Part of this population, however, is rooted in the territory, promoting home and commercial space reuse. Coexistence between different populations of this territory has been and is still partly a source of tension, but also helped to create a multicultural environment, creative and rich in terms of stories, traditions and attractive spaces. A daily market has been taken place since 1835 (Fig. 1).
The building, built in the early nineteenth century, in the last twenty years was first owned by the University of Turin and then by the State. In the nineties it has been illegally occupied, then cleared and later the property passed to the City of Turin that sold it through a tender on free loan in 2008. The complex consists of a historic building of 4 floors on the front towards Piazza della Repubblica, bound with regard to the facade on the square, and two underground floors of cellars; on the side facing Via Priocca in a later building perpendicular to the main one, consisting of 3 floors above ground and a basement; in an outdoor courtyard open on the street.

4. The Restored Building

The proposed redevelopment of the winning group Fagnoni & Associati Architetti from Florence, has provided for the building of Piazza della Repubblica commercial units on the ground floor and housing units (studios and apartments) in the remaining three floors above ground and in the attic; for the building on the front of Via Priocca, a restaurant arranged over three levels and the manager’s office; for the courtyard, arrangement and furnishing of the open spaces towards the city and the construction of inner service areas for temporary residence (Fig. 2).

The Temporary Residence is intended for people that need a living arrangement in a short time and for a maximum of 18 months, waiting for an apartment by local councils, people experiencing housing stress, needing a new housing solution due to unforeseen events (separation, eviction for termination, change of employment or reduction in income, etc.) and that, expecting to find it, they can use these sites as a bridge between the old and the new house.

Users may be represented by students, interns, singles, single parents with children who need an apartment to rent for a period of time, waiting to be able to settle permanently; by people who travel to Turin to visit or use services, by trainees, workers and professionals from outside Turin.

A solution is offered to these people, however, it is also a proposal of a social nature with the intent to contribute to the emergence of a new housing culture. In fact the active involvement of those living in the Temporary Residence is very important, it wants to be a home for those who stay, even for short periods, enhancing mutual understanding and exchange, involving the people in the care of common areas and in the organization of different activities [2].

The project chose to use the ground floor of the building for the relevant collective spaces: multipurpose area for living room, small library, public meeting and entertainment, launderette, ironing room, storage rooms, technical equipment rooms. The common living space is divided into three large rooms, open and interconnected, in which different activities can be made: a projection room, a small library, a public meeting room and an entertainment area for residents during afternoon and evening.
The 27 housing units (13 studios and 14 apartments) are composed of a living area with kitchenette, a sleeping area or a bedroom depending on the cut of the accommodation and a bathroom.

5. Different Types of Spaces

5.1 Public Spaces

The aspect that has significantly influenced the design choices is the height difference between Piazza della Repubblica ground floor and the entrance area to the backyard (-2.50 m). The overall design of the new square has taken form from this problem: a filter space between the house and the road, but at the same time an integration space between “internal” and “external”. The courtyard design was imagined with the construction of terraces and stone seats that could accommodate in the new square all those looking for a place to stop and have a rest (Fig. 3).

On the head of the lower building it was placed a restaurant on three floors: on the ground floor, in addition to the hall, there are the kitchen and services; the first and second floor is accessed by an internal staircase, placed parallel to the window, where there are tables for customers, but also places accessible to residents from distribution galleries.

5.2 Common Services Spaces

Many experiences of cohabitation teach that, in order to develop a relationship of solidarity and collaboration within a condominium, common spaces that respond to concrete and daily necessities of the people are necessary and that should constitute a point of meeting and sharing.

The main entrance leads directly to a disengagement zone which distributes to the stairwell and elevator. Alongside a separate entrance leads to the new core which about the main building and overlooks the courtyard. This new space (80 sqm) has large windows that look out on the courtyard garden space and is a multipurpose space where are concentrated the information services of the residence. This communicates, through a series of arches on the existing historic façade (reopened during renovation) with what was once the wine cellar of the property. The perceived space is represented by the new core from a wide portion of basement. The basement is used in part to create a multipurpose space (200 sqm) where you can do activities that do not require the habitability, or to accommodate common areas: use of multimedia connections, small library, tables and chairs where you can carry out activities or where you can organize public training meetings or entertainment (Fig. 4).

The portion of the basement to the south-east of the building houses the main plants (thermal power plant). The inside leads instead to the laundry and ironing room for the use of the residence. On the opposite side of the large communal living room are the places for equipment and storage. The common living space is divided into three large rooms, open and interconnected, in which different activities can be
made: a projection room, a small library, a public meeting room and an entertainment area for residents during afternoon and evening.

5.3 Commercial Spaces

On the front of Piazza della Repubblica there were five commercial units, but during the refurbishment, it was decided to reduce the number of retail spaces, taking them down to three. Every unit now comes with toilet and a small space for the storage. These units can still easily be combined with each other in various possible combinations in order to optimize the lease. In this sense it is also possible to have one single commercial space.

5.4 Private Spaces

The type of housing consists of small temporary units (studios and apartments) as well as of dedicated service areas. The housing units are accessed by stairway surrounding a lift block placed in the corner between the two buildings with distribution to the gallery. The objective was to obtain the maximum number of apartments using the distribution logics compatible with the morphology of the buildings. Considering the constraints of various nature, it was possible to create 27 apartments, including 13 studios and 14 apartments. The studios consist of one living room (sofa bed, a kitchenette, a small table and bathroom). The apartments however are composed of two habitable rooms (living room-kitchen, small hallway leading to the bedroom and the bathroom).

Four themes were identified, divided among the 27 apartments. The chosen typologies (construction site, marketplace, between past and future, the changing) have suggested the materials and the colours to be used in each of them (Fig. 5).

6. Interior Design

The interior design of the building was carried out by Galliano Habitat in partnership with Re(f)use Lab of None and, for the textile part, with the Laboratory Fig. 5 Different tipologies of interior design.
Micca in Turin. This synergy has allowed to propose and implement a real social project within the building’s redevelopment, a project coordinated, in the modern way of approaching the integration of people, things, systems and values with a view system (systemic approach).

The furnishings of the apartments have been designed following the wider use of local ingredients wherever possible or otherwise made in Italy and, where possible, of the functional recovery of disused furnishings. Even when they were used standard products, they have tried to reinterpret the use of a non-contractual basis, as suggested by the logic of the redesign. They then selected two main types of products: the standard items supplied by companies with industrial production cycles, but strictly Italian and recovered or objects designed and manufactured from waste materials or produced locally. The use of industrial products was necessary for all components that must comply with specific warranty requirements and intensive use (kitchens and appliances, chairs, sofa beds, beds and mattresses), and where possible, especially so for products which characterize the project from the decorative point of view, it has been used waste or recovery material.

The items of furniture designed and manufactured by Re(f)use Lab were made using waste materials like samples and stock end series for the fabrics, old furniture and accessories recovered and readapted, or recreating objects with new materials but of local origin, such as the chestnut wood. The philosophy of Re(f)use Lab is to redesign, i.e., the transformation of furniture and items of furniture that combines aesthetics and functionality of the design with the challenge of psychosocial rehabilitation, starting from the preliminary draft and following all the stages of realization through to installation and commissioning at the customer(Fig. 6).

The initiative was born from the synergy between organizations that deal with mental health and social hardship and an entrepreneur who has grasped the strong design value of the idea. Within a short time, the Re(f)use Lab has become a laboratory of creative skills with ideas, potential, dexterity, a shop where furniture and objects are transformed into unique pieces in a logical and ethical operability and environmentally friendly; a nursing laboratory and education to the design, recovery and development of creativity and craftsmanship in design. One area of excellence for the training and for the apprenticeship of young people and people in need. The objective of the workshop is the recovery of things through the recovery of the people and vice versa, but also of the skills introduced in the tradition revisited with new technologies. The Re(f)use Lab craftsmen are people who, as part of a psychosocial rehabilitation path, are aimed to experiment in a real working environment to learn manual skills and planning and creative skills in a controlled progression of stimulation and tasks of different difficulty. Rehabilitation then shifts from the conventional areas of the structures in order to enter into the reality of everyday life. After a variable period of training, according to the starting capacity, once acquired some useful skills to a job, work placements are activated where apprentices can work side by side with mentoring expert craftsmen.
Breaking down the furniture and objects no longer used until you get to their essence can start a new creative design, dynamic and environmentally friendly. A piece of furniture to be changed is not scrapped or recycled, but welcomed back into the design cycle and into the virtuous design. In Re(f)use Lab does not throw anything away. Old complementary-you furniture, semi-finished and raw materials are reused.

Many disused furniture have been recovered from a parish cooperative which clears cellars and from retailers closing their businesses. Recovered items such as old chairs and tables out of fashion, has been repaired and carried forward thus realizing a true redesign. Other objects considered waste and no longer usable were instead reused by changing their original function, such as the old ladders no longer complying with regulations and now used to hang kitchen towels, wheels of bicycles and shutters revisited as headboards for beds. Many semi-finished materials were taken and extrapolated from their usual context, creating diverse and innovative furnishing accessories such as, for example, plumbing hoses assembled together to compose bathroom accessories.

7. Conclusion: From Reality to the Ideas—An Experience with the Students

Three years ago, with my colleague of “Interiors and Exhibit Design” course, prof. Marco Vaudetti, we organized a workshop for students on how the common spaces on the ground floor could be arranged into a temporary exhibition [3]. The purpose was to choose a theme strictly related with the area of Porta Palazzo to be settled for a short time in those spaces, thought as a meeting place for social occasions, spaces in which to organize special events not only for tenants but for the residents and the whole city of Turin, a sort of a showcase of the area. This exhibition places is articulated into a collection of stories, experiences, proposals, ideas and points of view that have as their object the square of Porta Palazzo and their neighborhood related to the multiethnic diversity, immigration, marketplace. The goal is to show how, starting from the idea of recycling and low cost materials, it’s possible to get results closely related to the theme of exhibition. In the first project the exhibition theme is the multi-ethnicity of Porta Palazzo developed from general to specific items through four topics: urban and cultural evolution in Turin, the historical evolution of Porta Palazzo, the migration of the Second World War from southern Italy, the recent immigration from countries such as Morocco, Romania, China, India, Philippines, Nigeria, Senegal, Peru, with the exposition of traditional clothes and spices. The market boxes of fruit and vegetables has been chosen as a model for furniture and exhibitor design (Figs. 7-8).

In the second project the exhibition themes are the market in different countries of the world — Istanbul Grand Bazar, Stuttgart Christmas market, Mae Klong food market and Mercado de Pulgas in Bogotà — the marketplace of Porta Palazzo and the market life cycle where is explained the second life of market installations. These items are presented through

Fig. 7  Ground floor plan of project 1.
pictures hanging on vertical panels or tables made from pallets which become the only expositors of the exhibition. In some of theme fruit boxes are used as drawers for exhibit small size objects. The pallets are also the chairs for the projection room dedicated to the area of Porta Palazzo (Figs. 9-10).

In the third project the exhibition runs through some steps: the first is a photo exhibition by artists but also by residents on the area of Porta Palazzo, the second is an exhibition of architecture that offers to professionals and even students to discuss the proposals and ideas of neighbourhood improvement for the future. The environmental issue has a strong presence within the exhibition. The choice of sustainable materials comes from the intention of reducing waste and costs.

The recycled paper combined with the OSB was the most suitable.
Fig. 10  Internal views of project 2.

Fig. 11  Ground floor plan of project 3.

Fig. 12  Internal views of project 3.

References