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Renovation of the Former School Complex "Antonio Pacinotti", Pontedera (Pisa)

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Antonello Boschi, Luca Lanini

New Perspectives in Social Housing

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Antonello Boschi

Luca Lanini

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Renovation of the Former School Complex “Antonio Pacinotti”, Pontedera (Pisa)

Stefanos
Antoniadis,
Antonio
Camporeale,
Pina
Ciotoli

In a historical-critical period dominated by the continual search for new values (ethical, political, aesthetic, etc.) it is necessary to consider housing as a compelling need. In fact, the study of collective housing can be considered as an investigation field on which to set new scientific research stages, by analyzing all the features related to cities and society. In order to trace the essence of human living, this study investigates the two basic entities of *oikos* (οἶκος) and *habitatio*, related to the formation of anthropic space. A housing project, built within a historical context, often involves other dynamics and problems, because the building type is able to reflect both social needs and, on a smaller scale, the complex relationship between man and society. The project in a consolidated urban fabric, as the one of Pontedera, (in the province of Pisa, Italy) entails a comparison within the structured environment, by analyzing the architectural, cultural, historical elements in order to understand the basic laws defined for the formation of the whole urban town. For this purpose, it is necessary to “interpret” the urban organism, tracking the historical stages of urban development and proposing future possibilities for the current situation.

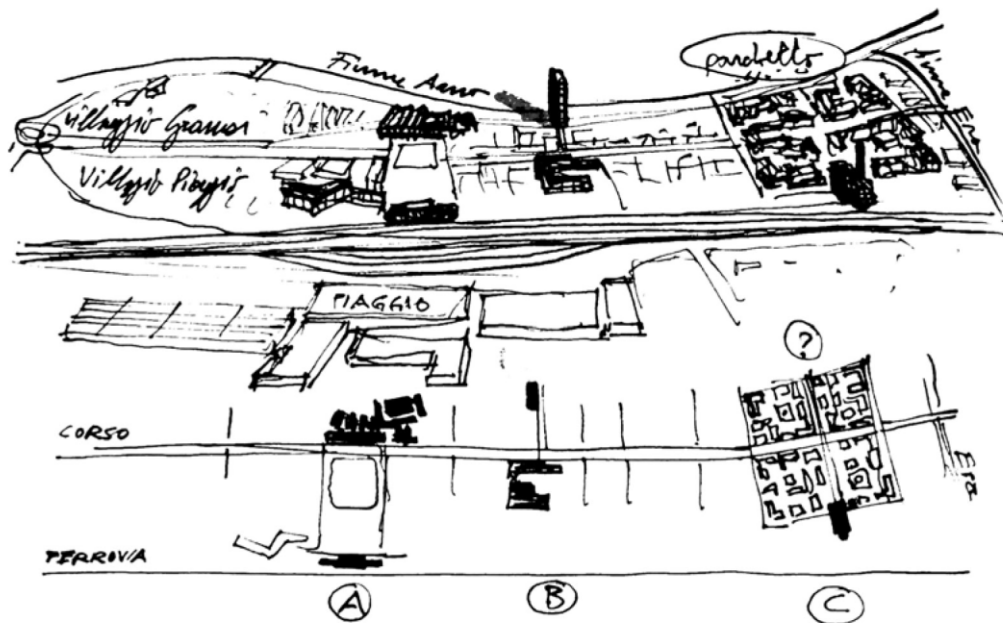
First of all, it is necessary to highlight the period of crisis that plagues the city of Pontedera. In recent years, in fact, the town has experienced several changes: until the 1990s Pontedera had a front-rank position in the automotive industry linked to the Piaggio company and the social fabric was strictly linked to these kinds of industries. The dismantlement of these factories and their transformation into new kinds of services, connected to cultural functions, has caused an alteration of the social fabric of Pontedera and the subsequent stop in population growth. Today, the social composition includes other ethnic groups, with their own habits and customs.

These dynamics, combined with the dismantlement of key areas, such as the former school complex called IPSIA “Antonio Pacinotti”, have changed the perception of housing within the city, encouraging municipal technicians to modify areas designated for social housing, which, nowadays, are considered obsolete. Among the areas intended

to host housing, the city administration of Pontedera has included the former IPSIA complex, a choice that suggests the replacement of the entire school complex with new residential buildings. This study can be considered as the result of a successful partnership between the city administration, the territorial associations (Casa Valdera, Urban Center Pontedera) and the university departments of Pisa (DESTeC) and Rome (DiAP) in promoting an academic study capable of handling the complex integration between recently built social housing units and the urban structure of the city.¹

Modifying the existing, consolidated urban fabric, presupposes the reading of the context in which the transformation is carried out. It means, ideally, moving away from the urban block including all that influences the vital rhythms of the case study area. Considering the territorial context as the larger scale allows us to link every proposed design change at the smaller scale more coherently, thus avoiding defeating arbitrary and, ultimately, prescriptive choices which are not related to the development process under way. For these reasons, it is extremely important to identify the territorial route and urban polarities which connect Pisa and Florence. Pontedera is structured on that axis at the confluence of the rivers Era and Arno, identifying a special point called node, first with a commercial and then with an industrial feature. On this structuring axis, it is possible to identify a system of specialized sets of transverse axes, orthogonal to the first, which intertwine defining the urban nodes and polarizations at the extremes: the railway station and the former craft factory connected by the public spaces of piazza Unità d'Italia, the bus station and its parking area; our former school complex, visually connected to the residential tower landmark which faces it; the church of Saints Jacopo and Filippo and the Bella di Mai public park which ultimately structure the transverse axis of the historic center. This system may be critically read considering the urban development of the city, which can be divided into successive phases: the old town transverse axis, which structures the oldest part of the city and, for this reason, identifies the first hypothetical stage of its formation, is reversed towards the west, impressing itself as a new axis that structures the expansion of the city and that coincides with via Carducci. Between these two axes, a connective

¹ The project presented here was made by Stefanos Antoniadis, Antonio Camporeale and Pina Ciotoli (DRACO PhD of University of Rome La Sapienza) tutored by Luca Lanini (DESTeC, University of Pisa) and Manuela Raitano (DiAP, University of Rome La Sapienza) as a design workshop of XXIX cycle of DRACO PhD "Architecture and Construction" of University of Rome La Sapienza (coordinator: Giuseppe Strappa).

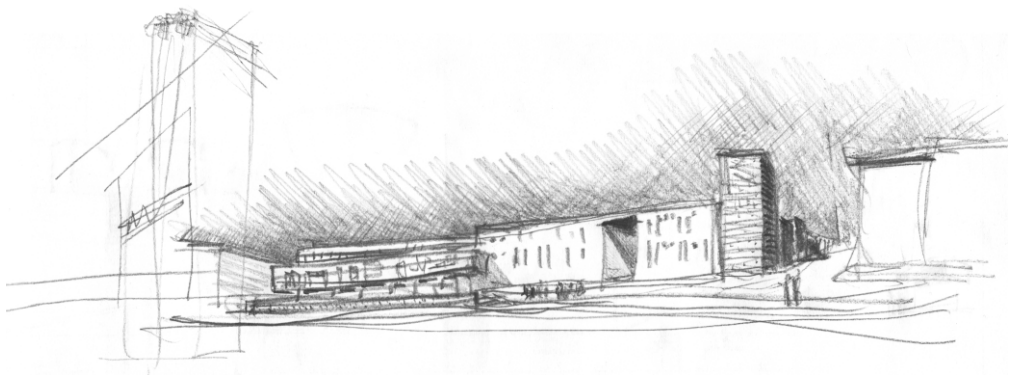


tissue for residential purposes is developed and consolidated. Having to mediate a difference in orientation, the insertion of the former professional school complex is located precisely in its rotation point thus accommodating, on the architectural scale, two different alignments, reaching the morphological congruence with the special urban location on which the (fig. 1). Pacinotti school complex stands. Moreover, it represents the solution to a difficult node within a larger scale network, not only from a purely architectural and urban profile, but also from a functional one. The school complex was, in fact, designed to accommodate students from a wider area, coinciding with the Era river basin.

1. Urban morphology of Pontedera.

A special function, the scholastic wide-ranging one, will be replaced with the social housing use, which, however, has a higher degree of complexity than the basic residential function located around the adjacent urban fabric. For this reason, the new residential function, which also requires a large common area surface, can coherently and painlessly replace the previous one by using the existing construction which will undergo a minimal transformation in spatial adaptation and will preserve the architectural character of being a special urban node.

The proposal is rather far from the citizens' fairly persistent point of view and from the intention of the public administration of Pontedera, according to which the abandoned building is seen as an inadequate “urban monster” to be demolished. Leveraging both the material and intangible potential which is permanently related to the



2. Renovation of main front of the former school.

industrial purpose of the city, as already recognized and accepted for the Piaggio Industries area, recycling the former school complex by also upgrading it is more than a legitimate solution. The time has come, even owing to the global crisis, to understand that scenarios and research results, developed by university investigation teams, probably are a viable alternative to the legal apparatus regulating the architectural production in our country. The regulatory limits, together with inevitable design and construction logics to achieve the maximum benefit, reduce the architect's work to the mere compliance to the rule book schedule and flatten the product of architectural work to standardized formal objects, showing an increasing distance from the project as a research tool. This gap can also be determined from the obvious discrepancy between the shape of many of the buildings produced in the recent decades and the variety of the repertoire of architectural forms and spaces arising from academic research.

In addition to the criticality ascertainable in the formal production, there is one more pragmatic issue: local administrations often face projects assignment tenders for key areas – which become necrotic areas, just like our case study – tainted by the narrow interpretation and by the lack of investment appeal caused by old-fashioned technical standards, which are unable to interpret and outline alternative scenarios. The positivistic legislative proliferation was neither followed by a gradual enhancement of the formal qualities of objects and urban spaces, nor by problem solutions. Instead, negative externalities gleaned from the conception and construction of the city by portions for example, according to a priori rules and zoning habits (still in place even for the new school area conceived by the city administration on the east side of the river Era). It is important to keep in mind that “paradoxically [...] the study of our current problems shows us that the rationalization on large scales has often



3. North-west view of the project, along via I° Maggio.



4. North-east view of the project, along via I° Maggio.

failed, not only in terms of experience, of psychological balance and livability, but also compared to its stated functional purposes”.²

In this context, the dialogue with public authorities who conceive and apply technical rules which now appear, so contradictory and unnecessarily restrictive, and not only to architecture scholars, seems urgent. Instead of adapting the product of the research to the existing rules, what should be addressed is the suggestion of new ways of

² Vattimo, Gianni, Introduction to *Mente locale, per un'antropologia dell'abitare*, by Franco La Cecla, XI-XII. Milan: Elèuthera, 1993.

interpretation, transformation and law-production possibilities based on experiences already tested, or introducing the theme of architectural design as legislation opportunities in the universities of architecture research activities (as in fact already happens in many other fields, such as the field of Law itself). If we carefully analyze the term *nomos* (*νόμος*), the standard is a furrow in the ground, a regulatory sign. It could be said that it is the archetype of architectural design. And it is by these signs, that we can/must take a claim, sharing and programming sources and experiences. The design for the former IPSIA has taken this spirit into account, downstream of the aforementioned cultural and territorial considerations, proposing the existing building scenario, full of identity and formal components, upgraded beyond unacknowledged lines by a series of volumes and appendices. The workshop laboratories, large existent spaces in absence of supporting elements will host contemporary living units, equipped with a service spine for domestic support; the classrooms and the common areas on the ground floor overlooking the main street of the city will re-live through new commercial functions; a new cantilever promenade rising from the grand, double in height existing niche will offer a view over the city skirting the rooftops; an addition, as a new corner solution, which will become an urban tower that will respond to the emergencies of the consolidated city, also by embodying new volumetric opportunities for investors (figg. 2-4).

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Our *Italian Houses* – public housing heritage as well as private developer settlements of the last thirties years – are expensive, inefficient, energy-consuming, too big, without a proper and/or updated lay-out, not designed for modern uses and actual-sized families. In one word: they are *old*. Starting from the 1990s, there are many examples of remodelage and renewal of social housing neighborhoods that took place in the United States as well as in some areas of Europe, where countries such as Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, France, made a widespread policy of renovation, while Southern European countries are still more vulnerable in terms of strategies. The volume focuses on Italy, on its delay and attempt to recover its buildings, adapting them to the current regulation and new contemporary living. Careful observations about social housing, new typologies, standards and technologies, without forgetting the energy retrofitting, to gear their architecture layout, to integrate them with urban facilities.

