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Housing Projects in Algeria: Which Context for which Consequences on Built Environments? Case of Zerhouni City in Algiers

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ABSTRACT

The term sustainable development includes human development, values and cultures. We are referring to sustainable human development in order to emphasize issues such as the importance of housing quality and participation in decision-making process. Offering many dwellings, the new urban spaces in Algeria are supposed to respond today's population needs, their construction capacity is important, they are aired and endowed of important facilities. But, are they really a place where people want to live, now and in the future? What about urban harmony and wellbeing in this case? Starting from the macro to arrive to the micro, we will consider, in this paper, housing projects in Algeria while analysing the old and the new built environments in Algiers, a representative example at the national scale when it comes to housing and the case of Zerhouni city in particular, one of its nearest and recent suburban area.

Keywords: housing, built environment, heritage, sustainable development, welfare

INTRODUCTION

The 21st century urban life cannot be considered without taking into account the sustainable development, "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (United Nations, 1987). This is the most widely known definition coming from the Brundtland Commission, but what does it recover in Algeria? Indeed, the evolution of the last decades generated many problems. The socio-economic development associated with the demographic expansion generated a considerable urban development with an overload in the downtown areas and tendencies of urbanization without infrastructures and services in the suburban areas. Today, changes in rhythm and scale, growth of the urban population, multiple illegal implantations, produce a blurred image and discontinuities prevail over adjustments. The result is the development of towns that answers with difficulty to the demands and aspirations of their inhabitants. But what are the actual needs of the population? And where are the prerogatives of our decision-makers?

ALGERIA: URBAN DEVELOPMENT AND HOUSING EMERGENCIES

Housing is a basic requirement for everyone. In Algeria, housing shortage gets the political powers to intervene, launching important programs of housing, achieved in the briefest delays. Residential development takes more and more extent in urban periphery. However, housing shortage is far from being resolved. According to the Ministry of Habitat and Urbanism, the first economic plan launched between 1999 and 2003 permitted the realization of 693.800 housings with almost a half million in rental public housing and social-participative housing, with an average cadence of 140.000 housings realized per year. A good performance when one knows that the independent Algeria never passed the rate of 100.000 housings per year. The supplementary programs (1999-2003) recorded more than 1.250.000 housings (32.000 for the South, 37.000 for the High Plateaux and 56.000 various). If the rate of occupation by housing decreased distinctly between 1998 and 2003, while passing from 7.2 to 5.5 people by housing, the situation stayed nevertheless critical.

To face a deficit estimated to 1.1 million of housings, the government announced a new program that spreads from 2005 to 2009 with:

1. 24.9% of rental public housing, (a group of block of flats built with public money for low-income families).

2. 20.9% of social-participative housing, (this category of housing is based on the claimant's financial participation: 30% advanced by the claimant, 30% as a banking loan and 30% as a non-refundable help from the Algerian State).

3. 10.3% of renting-sale housing, (this category of housing allows the claimant to pay his dwelling by easy terms: 10% to begin, 15% when the block of flats is achieved, and the rest payable monthly during 25 years).

4. 3.1% of promotional housing, (realized by property developers, promotional housing is characterised by its high quality, its big surface and its good finishes, the access to this private property being truly out of range for a lot of households).

5. 40.8% of rural housing, (a group of small homes built with public money to encourage low-income families to stay in the countryside instead of moving to the nearest towns).

6. Without forgetting the private housing, otherwise said, the whole individual homes constructed by Algerian citizens by using their own financial means.
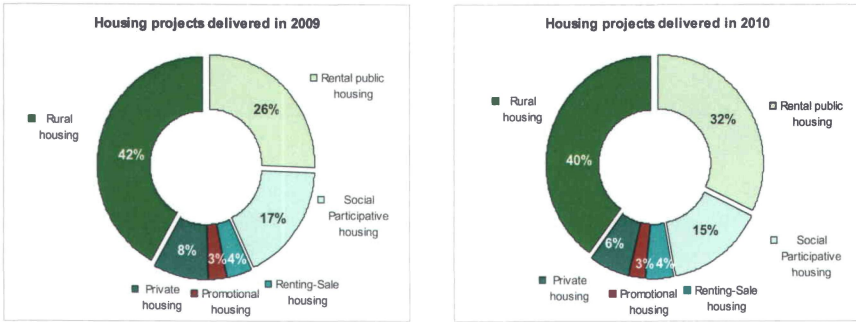
Figure 1: Housing Projects Delivered in 2009 and 2010
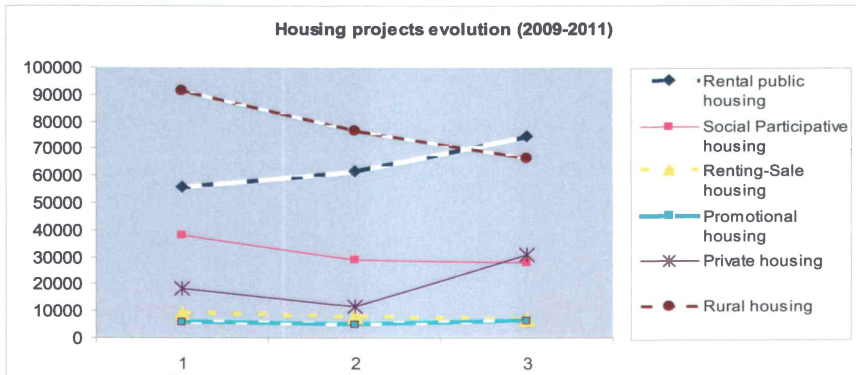
(Graphs realized on the basis of data collected by the Ministry of Habitat and Urbanism)
Figure 2: The latest housing projects achieved in Algeria

The construction of more than one million housings was expected therefore for 2009 by the Ministry of Habitat and Urbanism. The new quinquennial Plan (2010-2014) intended to reinforce the intention of the Algerian State to continue its intense answer to housing demand according to the speech of the President of the Republic. Another million of various categories of housings will be delivered during these five years. The new Prime Minister added last 16 October 2012 that a complementary program of 1.450.000 housings has been launched. In all, 2.450.000 housings will be achieved during this quinquennial.

Today, an intense real estate development advocates a collective habitat. The latter consumes less space and generates collective displacements,

articulates itself around a setting aiming all social categories, encourages the diversification of housing models and encourages the participation of citizens. However, the acuteness of the residential crisis doesn't stop persisting despite the efforts of the State to attenuate it. Indeed, 199.653 housings have been delivered in 2009, 179.112 delivered in 2010 and more of 181.829 housings delivered in 2011. In the same way, the Algerian State launches every year new housing projects. Let's mention for instance, the 324.402 housings launched in 2011. Graphs below represent the different categories of housings and therefore the different households targeted.
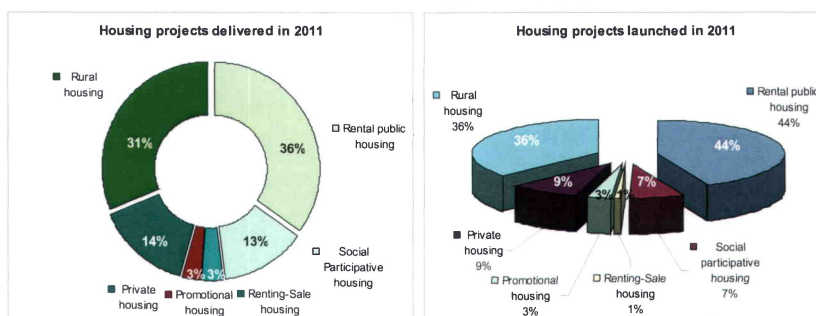
(Graphs realized on the basis of data collected by the Ministry of Habitat and Urbanism)
Figure 3: Statistics concerning achieved/launched housing projects in 2011

To build blocks of flats is, for our decision-makers, a good answer to housing shortage, despite the fact that the inhabitants denounce the formal and architectural poverty of these innumerable buildings of concrete. Certainly, housing being above all an object defined by its spatial dimension, it is characterized by three attributes: the metrics, the scale and the substance. Nevertheless, housing constitutes also the concrete matter of the social space and contains the material contexts of the social life, in its contemporary as well as historic dimension. Elementary form of territory, housing crystallizes stakes of societies and institutes itself as basis of every projection towards the future, a spatial reality at the same time material, immaterial and ideal, from where the importance of the individual, of the subjectivity, of representations, in every housing analysis.

For the present as for the future, the local authorities must learn to put the inhabitants first, not fees or speed of construction, while going beyond the

simple information of the population, while accepting to approach "topics that annoy", while admitting the contradiction and while accepting to be disavowed sometimes, because that they do want it or not, the adherence of citizens to projects that concern them is, in the present context, the key of a sustainable urban development. Creating buildings and urban environment that people enjoy living in and working in requires best practices at the same time economic, social and environmental. Building and strengthening a sustainable community imposes to improve the quality of life of the population and to consider the longer term implications of decisions. A quick survey of the medina of Algiers will help to recognize the existence of a particular context and the necessity of a set of principles for building the basis of a sustainable built environment.

OLD BUILT ENVIRONMENT IN ALGIERS: BETWEEN A HERITAGE IN STATE OF RUIN AND THE LOCAL POPULATION NEEDS

The medina of Algiers (commonly called the Kasbah) is characterised by tiny teeming streets inextricably linked and by places which are submissive to sunniness and climate. It juxtaposes spaces having each a specific function (residential, economic, religious or military) and structures the surrounding urban districts. However, its importance is related to the activities of many merchants. A powerful commercial device of old vocation, composed of a juxtaposition of stalls and shops, forms the basic principle of the central network. The creation of specialized *souk* is again a characteristic of the medina. Let's mention for example: the streets of coppersmiths. However, the localization of the different professional groups obeyed certain imperatives: servicing, presence of water, evacuation of waste and degree of nuisances.

Indeed, this heritage constitutes an inexhaustible source where one can draw teachings concerning architectural and urban production and at the level of which one finds a harmony between the society, the cultural identity, the daily practices, the lifestyle and the physical and natural environment. Let's mention for instance, its public spaces which are characterised by a traditional urban structure, associated to a big sense of community. They constitute the support of district life and have a regulating function of

pedestrian flows, in the sense where these define and filter the passers-by, make all activities linked, form the setting of their exchanges, while preserving the intimacy of the residents and while conferring conviviality between neighbours. With the hierarchy of the road network, one passes from the public to the semi-public to arrive at the private (is considered like private, the dead end giving access in quibbling to the dwelling).

The Arabic-Moslem residence becomes this way a real endogenous bubble and contrasts with the animation that spreads beyond its perimeter. This endogenous architectural conception allowed the residents, merchants and passers-by to coexist while avoiding interfering with one another. Moreover, beyond its Arabic-Moslem identity, Algiers is rich of its colonial inheritance. The French interconnected the neuralgic points of this capital by conceiving the town in a systematic way, hierarchized and interdependent. The colonial core is composed of a succession of closed islets in coherence with the Haussmann conception. A rigid street alignment is respected with a real homogeneity of construction that gives its consistency to the whole. Algiers is the expression of the culture that constructed the town, a prolongation that proves to be complex.

Figure 4: The central core of Algiers: a heritage in peril

Today, numerous are those who denounce the dilapidated state of built heritage and fight for the safeguard of these spaces which date from ottoman epoch, fissured by the absence of management and maintenance on behalf of authorities and occupants. They aim to valorise the heritage, not for commercial or touristic aspirations, but in the objective to protect a collective memory. Let's underline that the natural fragility of places, the rainwater infiltration and the dilapidation of the adduction network in drinking water, provoked landslides which damaged the foundations,

causing the downfall of a certain number of dwellings (Figure.3). Today, while construction develops along with any style, this medina stays the symbol of a previous way of life that remains meaningful. Today, for a sustainable urban development, the preservation of heritage for the future generations becomes indispensable. Improving the quality of life in the city centre of Algiers includes certainly social and economic aspects, political and institutional intervention, but also and especially cultural components, otherwise, what kind of heritage are we going to leave for the future generations?

Certainly, good housing strengthens communities and provides a better setting in which to raise families. It improves health, educational achievement and employment opportunities and provides a long-term asset to be passed on the future generations. In order to ensure a better quality of life for everyone, now and for generations to come, it is necessary to renew with larger socials problematic such as to accommodate the population. However, the action of authorities limited itself to the rehousing of some truly damaged inhabitants. Indeed, the emergencies encountered in the city centre brought the political powers to intervene, launching important programs of social housing, achieved in the briefest delays.

If it is therefore possible to rehouse, in a few months, a certain number of inhabitants, the danger that abandoned dwellings represent must be managed. Besides, the inhabitants delighted, in a first time, to find in these social housings modern comfort of which they had been deprived until then, mentioned problems of bad workmanship, not waterproof roofs and bad plumbing. Indeed, as regards finishes, the inhabitants estimate that the quality of finishes is unsatisfactory and required some works at their expense. This kind of problems comes back constantly to the centre of proceedings, and complaints are addressed to the Public Office of Real estate Management (OPGI). This fact reflects the state of emergency of construction operations and of assignment of housings. However, the appreciation of the quality of life in the new built environment cannot be associated to the only assignment of housing and to the only logic of its market, except to accept a reduction of its complexity.

NEW BUILT ENVIRONMENT IN ALGIERS: BETWEEN HOUSING PRODUCTION, SERVICES OFFER AND TRANSPORTATION MEANS, CASE OF ZERHOUNI CITY

These last years, Zerhouni city involved a major transfer of the population guaranteeing everyone the right to a home in optimal living conditions. The city of Zerhouni (called Les Bananiers, otherwise said, Banana trees) is situated in the commune of Mohammadia in the nearest periphery of Algiers (Figure.4) and symbolizes a residential zone par excellence. The figure.6 shows in the foreground private housing, in the second one promotional housing, and in the background the renting-sale housing realized by Housing Improvement and Development Agency (AADL). The agricultural vocation has been completely changed in aid of different housing projects. The city corresponded to a big place of accommodation. But did the local authorities grant a particular importance both to public facilities, to infrastructures and to their realization, in order to ensure a balanced situation on the social as well as the economic plan?

Figure 5: Zerhouni city (called Les Bananiers) in the periphery of Algiers

Impact of Urban Development on Inhabitants' Quality of Life

Zerhouni city has been achieved progressively following a general plan, in order to realize a coherent assemblage of various districts, of different types of architecture and dwellings. However, urban planners thought that a satisfactory life quality got itself thanks to a strong population density, solely capable of guaranteeing services, transportation and animation of the district. One finds thus constants features: the density of housings, the presence of facilities, the whole lot connected by public transportation; the

objective being the will to arouse a feeling of city, to create an animation. But today, as the city tries to define its role, it undergoes periodic adjustments, taking into consideration the social disparities and lifestyles, makes feel itself more and more. The worry of the proximity of trades, for instance, is raised by the modest populations, in particular by the non-motorized people. The supplying of appropriate public services implied a great concern too; let's mention the absence of a local post office, what is not practical for retired people who are obliged to go at least 10 kilometres away to get their pays. Is the new built environment badly connected with good transport services linking people to jobs, schools, health and other services?

The residential life, work, purchases, leisure and activities take place henceforth in separated places, within agglomerations always more vast. If this picture is also worth for Algiers and its suburban areas, the more active families disperse themselves daily between different places. To satisfy the basic needs of the inhabitants of Zerhouni city and to achieve a better quality of life in this new built environment, planners put in service scholar facilities since the arrival of the first inhabitants. These last, find close to them, primary schools, colleges and trades of first necessity. While moving a little away, they reach high schools. By bus they can join the banks, the universities and the hospitals. It was the diagram that prevailed in the entire city. However, the perception of this city is bound to the logics of action and interests of all concerned actors, from where the difference between inhabitants and the other users.

Indeed, in Algiers, the transport system suffers actually from overcrowding, congestion, delays, pollution and everyone can easily observe a predominance of individual vehicles demonstrating a lack of choice over how to travel, and Zerhouni city doesn't escape this rule. The inhabitants needed a step change in transport planning in order to deliver a system which meets the needs of all of them, because that one does want it or not, a good transport system is essential both for a strong economy and a better quality of life. Let's mention the presence of a new line of Tramway, linking this city to the downtown of Algiers and also to the nearest communes. A first section 7.2 Km in lengths linking Bordj El Kiffan commune to Zerhouni city (both situated in the Eastern part of Algiers) has been put in service since May 8, 2011. It has been extended with 9 other kilometres to *"The Executed"* Multimodal Station in the downtown area this time. This

second section has been put in service on the 15th of June 2012, offering principally an interconnection with the subway. In total, the tramway line spreads actually over 16.2 Km with 28 stations. A third section from Borj El Kiffan commune towards Dergana commune (always in the Eastern part of Algiers) is currently under construction and could be opened soon.

Figure 6: Tramway at Zerhouni city

For the inhabitants the displacements to Algiers are indispensable for reasons as working, shopping or visiting family, but the observation of the places which are frequented for other reasons demonstrate that it is never very distant from the district of origin. Actually, the frequent round trips between the previous and the actual place of residence don't permit to speak about two distinct territories. On the one hand, in the time, since one corresponds to the past, bygone, and the other to the present and to the future, and on the other hand, in the space, seeing that to each one correspond representations and practices spatially determined. Does the residential move hinder the inhabitants' welfare?

Impact of Built Environment on Inhabitants' Welfare

In Zerhouni city, the material and symbolic effects of the residential transfer came out to a modification of the combination that settles between, on the one hand, the relation of the inhabitants to the space, and on the other hand, the practices that take place in this space, otherwise said, at the transformation of the territorial system: a new type of housing (apartments in towers or bars), a new lifestyle, another spatial configuration of the private space, a new use of the public space, without forgetting the new geographical situation which implies new forms of reports with the district of origin.

Rehoused by the local authorities, some inhabitants are from the central districts of Algiers as well as from its shanty towns. For a lot of households, these districts are the places of their installation since their arrival to Algiers. Consequently, we analysed the city starting from its residents which besides, practise and live the space in a subjective and personal way.

The treated sample (100 people constituting a representative sample of the inhabitants) is not stratified rigorously, nor completely random. The people were interrogated because of their inscription in the considered spaces and their availability, first condition of the exchange. Indeed, at first, we interviewed the inhabitants while going from one house to the next, however we encountered multiple refusals. Therefore, we addressed our questions to different school establishments (primary schools and secondary schools), to offices, without forgetting people practising in a private capacity (doctors, dentists, pharmacists, varied shopkeepers). Let's underline that all the persons that we interrogated lived in Zerhouni city since a few years. Above all qualitative, the committed survey justifies well that it is less the static representativeness and the mathematical rigor that prevail than the capacity to seize the problems that inhabitants meet as individuals and as community in their new built environment. However, the distortions of the sample owed to absences or refusals are frequent. Cases of non-answers can also depend on the asked questions, of the implication level of the interrogated people and of their socio-cultural features. The results have been interpreted while using the software Sphinx version5.

While observing the inhabitants of Zerhouni city and what they had converging, while admitting their oddness appeared "common features" like the installation in the city, the learning and the experimentation of the new housing, but again and especially the residential stability in Algiers, from where the importance of the opinion of these persons. According to our investigation, 77% of the interrogated inhabitants find Zerhouni city troubling. According to the interviewed -let's underline that we won't unveil the identity of our interviewed in this paper, anonymity being thus respected- coming from the medina: « we find the city worrying […] the strong presence of people coming from shantytowns justify this judgment ». Indeed, this population is judged socially « undesirable » and the authorities must be attentive to the evolution of this attitude that we can qualified as hostile towards poorest inhabitants.
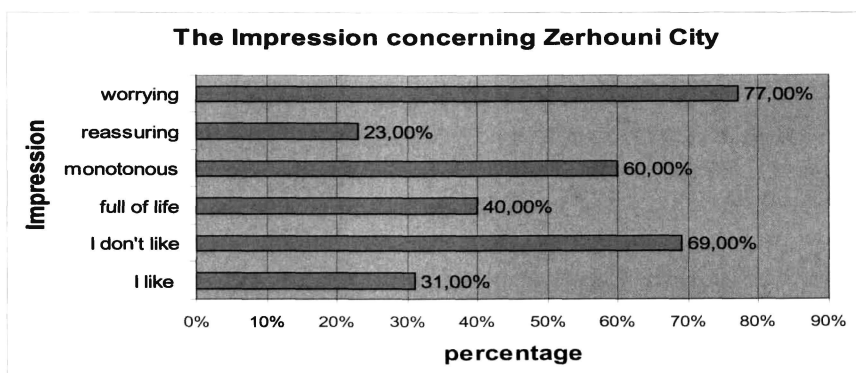
Figure 7: The impression concerning Zerhouni city

Nonetheless, this fact doesn't prevent the investigated to mention the lack of life. Indeed, the interrogated find their new district un-lively and monotonous (60% of the investigated), and when we asked them their impression concerning the city, 69% of the investigated have responded: "we don't like it". For these inhabitants, to lodge is necessary, but not sufficient. Around that, they expect to find a district, with its exchanges, a city full of life. Besides, in Algiers, a district is defined by its built homogeneity or merely by its toponym. In Zerhouni city, the built homogeneity results in some identical blocks signalling paradoxically who lives there and why and unveiling the social group heterogeneity. According to the interviewed: "the attachment to Algiers is bound to its atmosphere, its setting of life […]", which assigns to these central spaces a range of values and representations that interact on the perceptions of the inhabitants, in particular those that live there since several generations.

In this sense, the old Algiers with its history, its borders, its emblems, its social relation type, its lifestyle, constitutes the territory of reference. This territory of origin, of identity, of representations and also of practices, takes all its sense because it is constantly put in interactions with the space henceforth inhabited, also represented and lived, namely Zerhouni city. The latter defines itself therefore, from its social actors, their representations, their behaviours and their practices. Let's join Michel Pinçon and Monique Pinçon-Charlot to say that there is hardly way to be that doesn't send back, at variable degrees, to the place where the social being formed itself (Di Meo and Buleon, 2005).

Indeed, the identity forms the major tie between the human beings and their setting of life. It is a powerful motor of the production of the social space. For the inhabitants, the references of identity towards the district of origin are omnipresent in the constitution of new social relations. Space of origins, the initial district becomes a distinctiveness reference of "before the move", a place of identity; according to the interviewed: "to refer to it allows to say from where we come ourselves but also to know who the neighbour is". However, that construction process of territorial system deserves to be shaded. What we observe is an experimentation, a learning always in development, of a new city that builds itself from representations of its inhabitants: representations of oneself when it's about lifestyle, representation of the living space, representations of the new built environment (by opposition to the old centre of Algiers) and that implies, according to the inhabitants, some new norms to fit, some new behaviours to adopt.

Following the absence of a collective memory or a collective identity, this city appears like a heterogeneous territory, marked by the incoherence, at the same time spatial and social. In Zerhouni city, the planning operations are put back notably because they grant the collective space a unique vocation: the automobile circulation. Let's recall that public spaces constitute a permanent element of the urban environment, at the same time for inhabitants and passers-by. Inhabitants spread around their housing, they refer to the district, pay a particular attention to streets, places, centres and settings of their daily life. Therefore, a reflection on the space must facilitate the establishment of social relations between inhabitants and also of neighbourhood. Let's mention, for example, the extra-curricular activities in the city. According to our investigation, children remain near to their building or go to playgrounds. According to the interviewed, what was missing lies in: "places edged with boutiques [...] a garden where to stroll or to eat lunch, a market where to go shopping, places of meetings and exchanges, crowded day and night [...] well planted trees, correctly fixed lamps, ...all that has been neglected", from where the necessity of qualitative interventions and operations of planning that aim at the improvement of living conditions in this new city.

In order to make some fully-fledged life places, it is necessary to go beyond the creation of numerous parklands and varying the real estate offer,

in the aim to renew the public spaces, while distributing arcades at the ground floor level of the buildings, while creating several commercial streets, while working on the site and its landscape. The accent has to be put on these places of meeting and exchange which are the public spaces, because that one does want it or not, beyond the simple addition of housing, of services, of streets, the city defines itself by its districts and its characteristics, the animation, life that results from the combination of all these elements. That's why effective inhabitant participation will be indispensable in years to come.

CONCLUSION

The goal of sustainable urban development is to enable all people to satisfy their basic needs and enjoy a better quality of life, without compromising the quality of life of future generations. The reflection on the new built environment in Algiers leads to the definition of the pros and cons, to a hold of position towards these big housing projects and the challenge that they raised. For the inhabitants, the events that had enamelled the history of the old built environment made of it more than a space, a territory apart, probably exceptional and in any case distinctive from others, the residential history being really meaning because it is discerned by its inhabitants like a common history, an attachment founded on a collective memory. In the new built environment, one can regret a proof of identity, of anchorage in the territory and therefore the absence of a feeling of adherence in a newborn territory. "The possibility to identify us positively to a place […] to develop the pride to live in", this is the essential stake for the new residents.

Therefore, housing projects cannot conceive themselves outside of their context and must define themselves according to the existing situations, to the population needs, to the will of the local actors and their prerogatives, because they must answer first to the needs of the present. Today, for a sustainable built environment, a broad view of inhabitants' welfare is necessary, a long term perspective about the consequences of today's actions of our decision-makers is required and the full involvement of civil society to reach viable solutions is becoming more than ever imperative. For the present as for the future, the local authorities have to spread best practices to achieve economic, social and environmental objectives at the same time,

and consider the longer term implications of decisions. That's why all citizen participation must be significant, committed and constructive.

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